

RYERSON AND THE RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

PART ONE - THE RYERSON PLAQUE

In 2018, Ryerson University unveiled a plaque adjacent to a statue of Edgerton Ryerson. It reads

“Edgerton Ryerson is widely known for his contributions to Ontario’s public educational system. As Chief Superintendent of Education, Ryerson’s recommendations were instrumental in the design and implementation of the Indian Residential School System. Children in the schools were subject to unthinkable abuse and neglect, subject to medical experimentation.”

Until recently, Ryerson was simply the name of a downtown Toronto University. Few were aware that the name referred to Edgerton Ryerson, a mid-19th-century progressive, responsible for the introduction of free universal education in Ontario. Times have changed. The little-known Ryerson of education reform is transposed to the monster described in the plaque. In June, in response to the disclosure of the unmarked graves, the statue in his honour was torn down. In September Ryerson University is to issue a report on “Ryerson’s relationship with the University” that will almost certainly recommend the removal of Ryerson in the name of the University.

It is accepted that the Residential Schools did vastly more harm than good. A recognition that has led to intense pressure to identify and sanction the individuals responsible for the establishment of the Schools. It is striking that public opprobrium has focused primarily on only two persons: Edgerton Ryerson and John A Macdonald. (An ironic explanation is that their accomplishments led to statutes and school names, thereby furnishing an opportunity for “punishment”, not available in relation to persons lacking public profiles.)

John A. Macdonald was unmistakably involved in the establishment of the Residential Schools. Judgment as to Macdonald’s degree of culpability I leave for others to assess. Allocation of responsibility to Ryerson is the subject of these notes. (In them, Residential Schools capitalized refers to the legislated Schools; uncapitalized residential schools refers to residential schools that have and continue to exist in various forms in many countries.)

The totality of the Accusations.

Returning to the text of the plaque’s indictment takes two elements. The first is the four words “recommendations”, “instrumental”, “design” and “implementation” that serve to link Ryerson directly to the establishment of the Residential Schools. The second is to link him to the horrors that occurred in the 70-year span in which the Schools continued in existence.

The second is accomplished in the sentence following the four words:

“Children in the schools were subject to unthinkable abuse and neglect, subject to medical experimentation.”

This associates Ryerson with the horrors of School operations long after his death in 1882. That it links Ryerson to medical experiments seems a little bit of overkill but once in, it might as well

go all in. After all, it is clear that paraphrasing Marc Anthony: Ryerson University “has come to **Unbundling Ryerson’s Involvement**. Returning to the plaque, it states: “*Ryerson’s recommendations were instrumental in the design and implementation of the Indian Residential School System.*” That summation would seem sufficient to warrant removal of the name and whatever other sanctions could be devised for such perfidy. Five carefully chosen words articulate the prosecutorial case linking Ryerson to the Residential Schools. They are:

- “recommendations”,
- “instrumental”,
- “design” and
- “implementation”.

Each word references a distinct Ryerson involvement in the establishment of the Residential Schools. I consider the accuracy of each word in turn.

Implementation. Legislation establishing the Residential School was enacted in 1894. Following a long illness Ryerson died in 1882 it is self-evident that he was not involved in implementing a system legislatively undertaken 12 years after his death.

Instrumental. The word is not quite as specific as implementation. Dictionaries define it as referring to a person that causes something to happen. The 1847 Report on which so much attention is focused was requested by the Official responsible for Indigenous matters. Post-delivery of the Report, Ryerson had no further involvement in indigenous education of any kind. He was fully occupied in his role as Superintendent of Education. In that capacity, he undertook the educational reforms for which, until just now, he has been acclaimed. Given the Residential Schools were established by a different level of government fifty years later surely confirms that Ryerson was not *instrumental* in the dictionary sense of causing Schools to exist.

Recommendation and Design. Although the plaque deploys both words, in practice recommendations and design generally flow from one to the other. Thus, I deal with them together.

The plaque wording refers to the Residential Schools, not to the half-century generalized consideration of the need for such schools. To properly assess the accuracy of the allegation it is necessary to consider the 19th Century events that led to the 1894 formal establishment of the Residential Schools. I detail these events in Part Two.

bury [Ryerson] not to praise him”

It is a lesser matter than the just described manipulations but leaving no stone untouched (hurled), it states:

“As Chief Superintendent of Education, Ryerson’s recommendations were instrumental.”

The Report was unrelated to his duties as Superintendent. This fact is certain to be known to the plaque authors. Deliberate misrepresentations are telltale signs of the perceived need to bolster a weak case.

PART TWO - ESTABLISHMENT OF THE RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

The 1876 establishment of the Residential School system is a hallmark in Canadian history. It is also one of the events in the centuries-long evolution of the settler/indigenous relationship. In its 18th century and early 19th-century phase, Indian tribes and the British government were allies, as in the war of 1812 war with the Americans. By the 1840s, the partner relationship shifted to a paternalistic one in which the governments sought to “civilize” the Indians by persuading them to abandon traditional ways and to adopt sedentary and agricultural lifestyles. An element of this shift was a sense of societal responsibility for the welfare of Indians.

In Ontario, a landmark event was the 1842-44 Bagot Report. It was the first official government document to propose residential schools to achieve Indian assimilation and self-sufficiency goals. Its proposals were an early residential school template. In 1847, the Head of the Indian Affairs Department requested Ryerson to write a report respecting indigenous education. Nothing specific resulted from these mid-century reports. Almost 40 years later, at another level of government, the Residential Schools came into being.

Pre Confederation, Ontario (then known as Canada) was responsible for its Indigenous population. Under section 92(24) of the 1867 British North America Act (Confederation) responsibility for Indians and their education became a federal government responsibility. The Indian Act was passed in 1876, granting the government sweeping powers to regulate Indians Canada wide including education.

As the federal government came to focus on its Indigenous education responsibilities, it became apparent that the United States was well ahead of Canada in dealing with the issue. Pursuant to legislation passed in 1869, the US had long since established residential schools for indigenous education. Aware of this, in 1879, John A. Macdonald asked Nichol Flood Davin, a Conservative MP, to visit the United States, inspect the schools and provide a report and recommendations. Davin’s Report on Industrial Schools for Indians and Half-Breeds made 13 specific recommendations as to the establishment and operation of residential schools. The report concluded, “*the best way to assimilate Indigenous peoples was to start with children in a residential setting, away from their families.*” “*The day school did not work because the influence of the wigwam was stronger than the influence of the school.*”

Macdonald implemented the Davin Report Residential School recommendations through 1876 amendments to the Indian Act. In 1893, the Government and the churches entered into a formal partnership agreement respecting the operation of residential schools. Parliament then authorized funding for three schools. An amendment to the *Indian Act* in 1894 made attendance at schools compulsory for indigenous children. By 1900, there were 61 schools in operation.

PART THREE - RYERSON INDIGENOUS INVOLVEMENT

Ryerson Personal Involvement. Ryerson was involved with the lives and education of Indigenous peoples. At 23, he decided to reach out to a band of Credit Mississaugans. Here is his initial experience:

"I was at that time a perfect stranger to Indians and little acquainted with their customs. But the affectionate manner in which they received me and the joy they appear to feel removed all the strangeness of feeling and enabled me to embrace them as brethren and love them as mine own people."

He learned the Ojibwe language. He worked with them in their fields. In 1826, the band "adopted" Ryerson giving him the name of a deceased chief: "Checkhalk", meaning Bird on a Wing. In the course of his career, Ryerson secured employment for Indigenous men. He was a founding member of the 1835 established Aborigines' Protection Society. In the 1840s, in the course of travel to England, he lobbied government officials on the support of Indigenous title claims.

In 1846, at Orillia, he met with thirty Indian Chiefs to consider the educational needs of Indigenous youth. The meeting agreed on the desirability of establishing residential schools focused on teaching agricultural skills. The schools would enable Indians to achieve some degree of economic self-sufficiency. An outline of school objectives and the curriculum was agreed upon. The Chiefs offered to contribute a portion of their Treaty allowances to assist with the costs of school operation. In the event, two schools were established. For various reasons, primarily lack adequate government funding, the schools were unsuccessful.

Given the efforts to link Ryerson to the Residential Schools, it is surprising how little mention is made of his residential school's involvement. The fact the schools were undertaken in company with the Indian Chiefs does not assist in building the case he sought to undermine Indian culture. I would summarize this purposeful inattention as -- The Inconvenient residential schools.

A cornerstone of the Ryerson indictment is that he was "involved", "linked" "associated" or whatever, with the Residential Schools. In turn, the evidence centers on the 1847 Report undertaken at the request of a government official.

The environment which Ryerson took into account in writing the Report included:

- The 1842-44 Bagot Report that advocated the creation of manual labour or industrial schools;
- The Swiss Hofwyl School model that Ryerson encountered in Europe in 1826. The schools were established to educate the rural poor in agricultural production practices, thereby providing employment and a degree of self-sufficiency.
- Ryerson's engagement with the Orillia Chiefs resulted in an agreed residential school model and school curriculum.
- Ryerson's 1846 Report on a system of public elementary instruction for Upper Canada. The recommendations in this historic Report fundamentally restructured education in Ontario.

The Ryerson proposed model is fundamentally different from the Gavin Report model adopted by Macdonald forty years later. It differed in the following respects:

- Attendance was voluntary;
- Students could speak their own language;
- Curriculum focused on agricultural education;
- Teachers were to be knowledgeable in their fields, not clergy;
- The schools were government-supervised;
- The schools were established in conjunction with Indigenous leaders;
- The overarching purpose was Indigenous self sufficiently.

In light of these differences in perspective, it is certain that if alive in 1990a, Ryerson would have vigorously opposed elements of the Gavin/Macdonald School model. Because Ryerson, unlike his peers, was empathetic with Indigenous education, he is vilified for the 40 years later Residential Schools initiative with which he had no involvement. "No good deed goes unpunished."

Why do we need to vilify reformers by linking them to the evils they seek to redress.

PART FOUR - RYERSON ON RYERSON

The following materials related to Ryerson are posted by Ryerson University on its website. As is apparent, there is a startling lack of consistency in their views of Ryerson's relationship to the Residential Schools. They range from the academic to the prosecutorial.

The academic study is remarkably benign. It keys the mid-century indigenous schooling initiative to the Bagot Report rather than to Ryerson's Report. It acknowledges that residential schools for Indians were a discussion commonplace at the time. It minimizes Ryerson's involvement by noting that he had no further involvement with residential school matters after 1847

The gap between the assessments is impossible to reconcile. Which Ryerson University are we to believe.

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Report on Egerton Ryerson, the Residential School System and the Truth and Reconciliation, issued by Ryerson University's Aboriginal Education Council

"The Bagot Report of 1842 is viewed as the starting point for the residential school system. In 1847, five years after the publication of the Bagot Report, Egerton Ryerson was asked by the Department of Indian Affairs for his suggestions on "Industrial Schools for the benefit of the aboriginal Indian tribes" ... By this point, the Canadian government had already decided that such schools were going to be implemented throughout the country. ... Egerton Ryerson contributed to the concept of the residential school system. However, there is no record of anything further about education for Aboriginal children by Egerton Ryerson after his letter of 1847."

President of Ryerson University, Mohamed Lacki, statements:

July 2020

“As Chief Superintendent of Education, his [Ryerson’s] recommendations were instrumental in the design and implementation of the Indian Residential School System.”

July 2018

“Egerton Ryerson believed in a different system of education for Indigenous children. These beliefs influenced in part the establishment of what became the Indian Residential School System.

Ryerson University Task Force.

The Task Force was originally created was named The Egerton Ryerson Presidential Task Force. In 2020, the University changed the Task Force name to an indigenous name: Mash Koh Wee Kah Pooh. The Spirit Name in English is Standing Strong. In November 2020 the University appointed 13 persons to the Task Force.

The Task Force is mandated to;

“Examine and more fully understand Egerton Ryerson’s relationships with Indigenous peoples, education and the residential school system, and consider how that legacy aligns with Ryerson University’s values and mission.”

In November 2020, Ryerson announced the names of 13 members of the Task Force. The Report and recommendations are to be submitted to the University in September 2021

PART FIVE - CONCLUSION

A premise of these comments is that in September the Ryerson Committee tasked with Ryerson’s fate will recommend his name be removed from the University name..

As announced, Ryerson has established the Mash Koh Wee Kah Pooh Task Force. (Originally named the Egerton Ryerson Presidential Task Force) to examine Edgerton Ryerson’s relationship with indigenous schools. Its report is to be submitted in September 2021. The reality is that all attention will focus on one recommendation - the removal of Ryerson’s name from the name of the University.

It seems to me the result is a foregone conclusion. The die is loaded. The plaque concluded that Ryerson was “instrumental “ in the establishment of the Residential Schools. The President of the University issued a statement to the same effect. This doesn’t seem to leave much leeway for the Task Force to determine.

I have focused on the wording of the plaque because it is not merely the view of individuals but is text approved by Ryerson University for inclusion in the plaque, and thereby carries with it the authority of a respected academic institution. The view of Ryerson that it projects is increasingly accepted as factual in the broader society. Therefore it is unlikely the decision will be met with opposition. Further, it will be seen as resolving a contentious and unwelcome controversy.

The Ryerson plaque is worded not to honour but to dishonour Ryerson. it was drafted to be placed beside the statue erected in Ryerson's honour. That is beyond ironic.

I have attempted to demonstrate that Ryerson's connection to the Residential Schools was tangential at best. Factually, there are only two points of contact: Ryerson's 1847 Report and the 1846 agricultural schools initiative. Forty years thereafter a model adopted directly from US experience brought the Residential Schools into existence. It is likely that Ryerson would have opposed a number of elements of the Residential School model that was adopted.

Harry Malcolmson

August 2021