



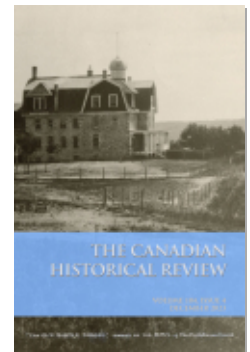
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"Not a Shred of Evidence": Settler Colonial Networks of
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ARTICLES

“Not a Shred of Evidence”: Settler Colonial Networks of Concealment and the Birtle Indian Residential School

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Abstract: *This article examines how the network of settler colonial systems in Canada worked to ensure the widespread and intentional cover-up that allowed one man to remain in the Indian Residential School (IRS) system for over two decades (from 1910 to 1932) despite overwhelming evidence of his abuse. Using genocide scholar Andrew Woolford’s metaphor of settler colonial mesh as a framework, this article details the 1930 case against Birtle Indian Residential School Principal Henry B. Currie to understand the multiple strategies of concealment used to protect him. A multitude of actors and institutions were involved in the coverup: the Indian agent and the Department of Indian Affairs, the Presbyterian Church, the court systems, and the public press. Strategies of concealment included blatant bribery, transferring accused principals to other schools, document falsification, forced marriages, and misreporting runaways, along with the IRS system itself, which kept children from their families and support systems. The article concludes with a discussion of settler claims of ignorance and the role archives play in revealing the truth about abusers within the IRS system.*

Keywords: Indian Residential School System, Birtle Residential School, Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), settler colonialism, Colonial Archives

Résumé : *L'article examine le mode de fonctionnement du réseau de systèmes mis en place par le colonisateur au Canada pour assurer la dissimulation généralisée et intentionnelle qui a permis à un homme de rester dans le système des pensionnats autochtones pendant plus de vingt ans (de 1910 à 1932), malgré les preuves accablantes de maltraitance de sa part. Utilisant comme grille d'analyse la métaphore du filet de la colonie de peuplement introduite par le spécialiste des génocides Andrew Woolford, cet*

Content note: This article focuses on a sexual abuse case against a principal at an Indian Residential School. The abuse itself is not the focus of the article nor is it described. The focus of the article is on the criminal investigation and the strategies employed to protect the abuser.

article étudie en détail le procès intenté en 1930 au directeur du pensionnat indien de Birtle, Henry B. Currie, afin de comprendre les multiples stratégies d'étouffement mises en œuvre pour le protéger. Une multitude d'acteurs et d'institutions ont été impliqués dans l'étouffement de l'affaire : l'agent des Indiens et le ministère des Affaires indiennes, l'Église presbytérienne, l'appareil judiciaire et la presse. Les stratégies d'étouffement comprenaient la corruption flagrante, le transfert des directeurs accusés dans d'autres écoles, la falsification de documents, les mariages forcés et les rapports de fugues mensongers, ainsi que le système des pensionnats lui-même, qui éloignait les enfants de leurs familles et de leurs structures de soutien. L'article se termine par une analyse de la prétendue ignorance des colonisateurs et du rôle des archives dans la révélation de la vérité sur les personnes ayant commis de la maltraitance dans le système des pensionnats.

Mots clés : système des pensionnats autochtones, pensionnat de Birtle, Commission de vérité et réconciliation (CVR), colonialisme de peuplement, Archives coloniales

On the west bank of the Birdtail River, at the top of a long hill leading down to the rural village of Birtle, Manitoba, sits the abandoned red brick building of the Birtle Indian Residential School (IRS). As with other residential schools across the country, the full truth of what happened at Birtle, and behind the scenes of its operations, is still being uncovered. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), which was concluded in 2015, played an integral role in educating Canadians about the IRS system. The truth about Birtle, however, was not fully revealed. Of Birtle's tenth principal, Henry B. Currie, the TRC's *Final Report* briefly mentions that he had some "groundless" claims laid against him.¹ However, the heinous truth of Currie's time at Birtle is much more complex than a few unsubstantiated accusations. A single file of historical documents held at Library and Archives Canada (LAC) reveals, with horrific detail, the 1930 trial against Birtle IRS Principal Henry B. Currie for sexually abusing multiple children in the institution that he ran.

Since the rediscovery of potential unmarked graves at the Kamloops IRS was widely reported in late May 2021, many Canadians have asked one another versions of "how did this happen?" or "how did we not know?" The story told by this archival file reveals some of the cognitive dissonance and willful ignorance behind these statements. Many people did know about the horrors of residential schools, and many chose to ignore them or suppress the truth. In this article, I examine how settler colonial networks in Canada worked to ensure the widespread and intentional cover-up that allowed one man to remain in the IRS system for over two decades despite overwhelming evidence of his abuse. Genocide scholar Andrew Woolford frames residential schools in Canada within a colonial mesh or "networks of destruction," contending that these institutions were one node within a complex network of other institutions, laws, and relations aimed

1 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), *Canada's Residential Schools: The History, Part 1, Origins to 1939*, vol. 1 (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015), 564.

at assimilating Indigenous peoples into European subjects.² In this network, the state has significant power, but it does not act alone. Settler colonialism requires a multitude of actors and institutions to achieve its goals.³ This framework helps in understanding the Henry B. Currie case and the pervasiveness of sexual predation within the IRS system more broadly.

It is a story that must be told for its own sake. And, in so doing, this article corrects exculpatory claims made about the Birtle principal in the TRC’s report. I argue that a multitude of actors and institutions – school staff, the courts, the settler press, the police, Indian agents, and the Presbyterian Church – worked together to suppress the truth and protect Currie at the cost of Indigenous children’s safety. In this way, the Currie case helps us to understand how the settler colonial mesh that entrapped Indigenous families also worked to conceal and permit atrocities within the IRS system. It also helps explain the pervasiveness of abuse within the IRS system, which resulted in over thirty-eight thousand claims of sexual and serious physical abuse submitted by survivors to the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement.⁴

Archival records held at LAC make up the bulk of the historical evidence used in this article. I came to these records not through intentional academic inquiry but, rather, through my personal connections with the institution at the heart of this study. I grew up in the settler town of Russell, fifty kilometres from the Birtle IRS in Treaty 2 territory. My ancestors came to this country in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from eastern Europe to homestead on Indigenous lands that Canada believed it secured for settlers through a treaty with Anishinaabe peoples. Given this geographic proximity to the Birtle school, I attended high school with many family members of the children involved in this case, and my partner’s great-grandmother was a survivor of the institution, though she was not in attendance at the time this study takes place. In September 2021, nearing the first annual National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, my partner hoped I might find his family member’s records from their time confined in the school.⁵ I was living in Ottawa and already had pandemic-required appointments at LAC for my own research, so I requested to view the administrative files from Birtle. Instead of reading the mundane administrative records I expected to view, I read a file – RG10, volume 6251, file 575–1, part 2 – containing over two hundred documents about Principal Henry B. Currie’s abuse of children under his supervision.

2 Andrew Woolford, “Nodal Repair and Networks of Destruction: Residential Schools, Colonial Genocide, and Redress in Canada,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 3, no. 1 (2013): 70.

3 Woolford, “Nodal Repair,” 73–4.

4 TRC, *Canada’s Residential Schools: The History, Part 1*, 7.

5 I situate myself in relation to this research and describe how I came to this file following the protocol of Indigenous studies and calls by scholars like Crystal Gail Fraser and Allyson Stevenson. Crystal Gail Fraser and Allyson Stevenson, “Reflecting on the Foundations of Our Discipline Inspired by the TRC: A Duty to Respond during This Age of Reconciliation,” *Canadian Historical Review* 103, no. 1 (2022): 1–31.

There are no content warnings in archival files: the documents within this file contain transcriptions of multiple girls' testimonies of the abuse perpetrated against them. These documents are distinctive because of the relative rarity of detailed records about an abuser within the IRS system before the mid-twentieth century, and the girls' testimonies are invaluable contemporary records of survivors' accounts.⁶ Most of the documents in the file were created by school staff, Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) employees, church authorities, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and the Manitoba provincial police. Ultimately, as Crystal Gail Fraser and Allyson Stevenson caution, these sources "frequently reproduce stereotypes of Indigenous Peoples . . . [and] reveal more about the position and viewpoints of the document creators than the Indigenous Peoples they purport to represent."⁷ In particular, racist stereotypes of First Nations girls as sexually deviant and immoral appear throughout the documents.⁸

With the nature of the documents in mind, this article deliberately centres on their creators and their actions rather than on the Dakota and Anishinaabe children involved. By stitching together the complicated narrative of this case from the newly uncovered traces in the national archives, I hope to reveal the systemic machinations that allowed abuse to continue unimpeded. I have not used the names of the children involved in this case but have left the perpetrators' names as they appear in the archival record. Rather than working against the unequal power dynamics inscribed in these records, then, I use the colonial archive to directly examine these unequal relations and their consequences.⁹ This examination of settler networks of suppression and specific strategies of concealment reveals not only how Principal Currie secured an acquittal in this specific case but also how abuse continued within residential schools despite evidence of its occurrence. Following a brief overview of the institution's history and the basic chronology of the case against Currie, I detail strategies of concealment and other aspects of settler colonialism, followed by an examination of settler claims of ignorance and the insufficient discussion of the case in the TRC.

6 According to John Milloy, the lead research on schools for the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples and briefly director of research for the TRC, "the voices of children, now adult survivors, appear infrequently in the written record." John Milloy, "Doing Public History in Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission," *The Public Historian* 35, no. 4 (2013): 15.

7 Fraser and Stevenson, "Reflecting on the Foundations," 7.

8 For more on the relationship between colonialism, sexism, and racism as it pertains to dominant stereotypes about Indigenous women and girls, see: Jean Barman, "Taming Aboriginal Sexuality: Gender, Power, and Race in British Columbia, 1850–1900," *BC Studies* 115–16 (1997): 237–66.

9 Krista McCracken, "Challenging Colonial Spaces: Reconciliation and Decolonizing Work in Canadian Archives," *Canadian Historical Review* 100, no. 2 (2019): 188.

BIRTLE IRS AND HENRY B. CURRIE

The Presbyterian Church established the Birtle IRS in 1888 and operated it until 1970.¹⁰ This school was but one in the IRS system that operated across Canada, designed and funded by the Canadian government and administered by religious organizations. The IRS system sought to assimilate Indigenous children into dominant Canadian settler society and to further land dispossession by removing children from their families and communities. The parents of the children at Birtle, primarily from Waywayseecappo and Birdtail Sioux First Nations, consistently petitioned the government to open on-reserve day schools to keep their children at home, but the DIA refused to do so for decades. At the time of this case, in 1930, there were eighty-five children on the rolls at Birtle IRS (see Figure 1).¹¹



FIGURE 1 The Birtle IRS in the 1920s.

Source: G-377-MC, Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives.

- 10 It began as a day school in 1883. On the Presbyterian Women’s Missionary Society and residential schools, see John Webster Grant, “Two-Thirds of the Revenue: Presbyterian Women and Native Indian Missions,” in *Changing Roles of Women within the Christian Church in Canada*, ed. Elizabeth Gillan Muir and Marilyn Fardig Whiteley (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 99–116; Elspeth M. Reid, “Women’s Missionary Society Records in the Presbyterian Archives,” *Archivaria* 30 (1990): 171–9.
- 11 Dominion of Canada, *Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs for the Year Ended 31st December, 1929* (Ottawa, 1930); Letter from R. Webb to A.G. Smith, 7. October 1944, file 575–1, pt. 3, vol. 6251, RG10, Library and Archives Canada (LAC).

There have been relatively few historical studies of the Birtle IRS, and none that address Henry Currie's time as principal, which began in 1927.¹² Originally from Ontario, Currie moved west in 1910 with his daughter and his wife, Mary Jane Currie (née Simpson), to begin a principalship at the Alberni IRS in British Columbia.¹³ As was the case with many principals in the IRS system, Currie was woefully underqualified. He held no teaching certificate, but the Presbyterian Women's Missionary Society (WMS) assured the DIA that he was "a very likeable young man."¹⁴ His lack of qualifications was quickly noticed by an Indian agent who raised concerns in March 1910 about Mr and Mrs Currie, writing: "[They] have no knowledge of school management, or of nursing, or of handling Indians."¹⁵ Through DIA staff routinely addressed him as Reverend Mr Currie, he was not ordained. Currie never corrected them (see Figure 2).¹⁶

The sexual abuse case against Currie at Birtle centred on the testimonies of four girls. At the time of the trial in 1930, the youngest girl was fourteen and the

- 12 Verna Kirkness wrote about her time teaching at Birtle from 1959 to 1961. Verna J Kirkness, *Creating Space: My Life and Work in Indigenous Education* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2013), 29–33. On the Birtle Indian Residential School (IRS) from an architectural perspective, see Magdalena Milosz, "'Don't Let Fear Take Over': The Space and Memory of Indian Residential Schools" (Master's thesis in Architecture, Waterloo, University of Waterloo, 2015). On sports within the school, see Simon John Barrick, "'Recreation as Re-Creation?': Analyzing How Aboriginal Students Experienced and Reported Their Recreation within Two Canadian Residential Schools," *Illuminare: A Student Journal in Recreation, Parks, and Leisure Studies* 13, no. 1 (2005): 11–25; Andrew Narraway, "Settler Colonial Power and Indigenous Survival: Hockey Programs at Three Indian Residential Schools in Northwestern Ontario and Manitoba, 1929–1969" (Master's thesis, Ottawa, Carleton University, 2018). Denise Hildebrand examined the perspectives of staff at Birtle IRS. Denise Hildebrand, "Staff Perspectives of the Aboriginal Residential School Experience: A Study of Four Presbyterian Schools, 1888–1923" (Master's thesis, Department of Sociology, Winnipeg, University of Manitoba, 2003). Shirley Myran interviewed other survivors, including from Birtle from 1954 to 1969. Shirley Myran, "The Educational Experience of First Nation People in the Indian Residential School System in Canada" (PhD diss., Grand Forks, University of North Dakota, 2008). Raymond Mason shares his experiences in residential schools, including Birtle from 1953 to 1958. Raymond Mason, *Spirit of the Grassroots People: Seeking Justice for Indigenous Survivors*, ed. Jackson Pind and Theodore Michael Christou (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020). For an excellent examination of the relationship between Waywayseecappo First Nation and its neighbouring settler town of Rosssburn, see Andrew Stobo Sniderman and Douglas Sander-son (Amo Binashii), *Valley of the Birdtail: An Indian Reserve, A White Town, and the Road to Reconciliation* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 2022).
- 13 Letter from J.D. McLean to Rev. R.P. MacKay, 28 February 1910, file 877–1, pt. 1, vol. 6431, RG10, LAC.
- 14 Letter from R.P. MacKay to Duncan C. Scott, 25 February 1910, file 877–1, pt. 1, vol. 6431, RG10, LAC.
- 15 "Extract from Agent Neill's report on the West Coast Agency for the month of March, 1910," file 877–1, pt. 1, vol. 6431, RG10, LAC.
- 16 Letter from Russell Ferrier to Dr. Scott, 28 January 1931, file 575–1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.



Mr. H. B. Currie, Principal



Mrs. H. B. Currie, Matron

FIGURE 2 Principal John Currie and Mrs Currie, pictured here in a WMS pamphlet, December 1931.

Source: File 575-1, pt. 2, vol 6251, RG10, LAC.

oldest was eighteen.¹⁷ The first documented instance of the girls coming forward about the abuse was within a year of Currie’s arrival at Birtle in 1927, but the accusations were not seriously investigated until 1930.¹⁸ On 9 June 1930, two Manitoba provincial police officers and an RCMP officer recorded the girls’ complaints. They are detailed and horrific.¹⁹ I will not recount each girl’s harrowing testimony, but they were consistent with one another and made clear that Currie used a characteristic form of extreme force to rape female students.²⁰ One girl reported that

¹⁷ Letter from Crown Attorney to Duncan Scott, 23 October 1930, file 575-1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC; “Statement of [redacted],” 10 June 1930, file 575-1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

¹⁸ Letter from P.G. Lazenby to W.M. Graham, 11 June 1930, file 575-1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

¹⁹ Ibid. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police’s (RCMP) report on its role in the IRS system claims the force did not know about the physical or sexual abuse occurring in the schools and makes no mention of the Currie case in their table of RCMP actions in the IRS system. Marcel-Eugène LeBeuf, *The Role of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police during the Indian Residential School System* (Ottawa: Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2011), https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2011/grc-rcmp/PS64-71-2009-eng.pdf.

²⁰ “Statement of [redacted],” 10 June 1930, file 575-1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC; Letter from A.B. Allard, Shoal Lake Detachment, “Re: – Henry B. Currie,” 11 June 1930,

this had been happening “nearly every month since he first did it to [her].”²¹ Police officers arrested Currie based on the girls’ matching testimonies.²²

Currie’s preliminary hearing was held at the Birtle Town Hall on 18 June 1930, and the girls again described the abuse they had endured. The judge charged Currie with crimes against three pupils (as the fourth known victim had died just months before the trial): three counts of illicit connection, two counts each of seduction of a ward and indecent assault, and one count of carnal knowledge of a girl.²³ Another charge of rape was later added.²⁴ Five months later, the jury trial was held in Minnedosa on 11–12 November 1930. At this trial, however, the girls testified that Currie had not committed offences against them. Instead, they stated that they had given false evidence to the police in their original interviews and at the preliminary hearing. The jury found Currie not guilty, and he received an honourable acquittal on all charges.²⁵ He then returned to his principalship at Birtle. What happened to change the girls’ accounts and secure Currie an acquittal? The records reveal a complex web of settler systems and strategies that compounded to protect the IRS principal regardless of evidence of criminal abuse.

THE RESERVE SYSTEM AND INDIAN AGENTS

In 1928, just months after Currie’s arrival at Birtle, one of the girls managed to tell her father about Principal Currie’s abuse. Once a child was confined at the school, the Indian reserve system – a central node in the settler colonial network – made it a formidable task for children and their families to address abuse suffered within the institution.²⁶ School administration designated a limited number of days where parents could have supervised visitation with their children. To report abuse to their parents without school authorities present, children had to wait until summer holidays or try to run away back to their home reserve.²⁷ Once the girl’s father learned about what Currie was doing, he reported the abuse to the

file 575–1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC; J. Kirk, Shoal Lake Detachment, “Principal Currie,” 15 June 1930, file 575–1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

21 A.B. Allard, Shoal Lake Detachment, “Re: – Henry B. Currie,” 11 June 1930, file 575–1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

22 Historians of sex crimes in Canada, specifically against children, have found that Canadian authorities most often doubted the validity of children and women’s testimonies. Constance Backhouse, *Carnal Crimes: Sexual Assault Law in Canada, 1900–1975* (Toronto: Osgoode Society for Canadian Legal History, 2008), 190.

23 Letter from P.G. Lazenby to W.M. Graham, 20 June 1930, file 575–1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

24 Letter from P.G. Lazenby to the Assistant Deputy and Secretary of the Department of Indian Affairs, 15 November 1930, file 575–1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

25 Ibid.

26 Attendance at Birtle IRS was mandatory. The local Indian agent, with the help of local police, forcibly removed children to be confined at Birtle through the compulsory clause of the Indian Act. Letter from Duncan C. Scott to W.M. Graham, 28 July 1926, file 575–1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

27 TRC, *Canada’s Residential Schools: The History, Part 1*, 584–5.

only government employee to whom he had access: the Indian agent of the Birtle Agency, Percy G. Lazenby.

Agent Lazenby, like all Indian agents employed by the DIA, was tasked with enforcing the Indian Act on reserves.²⁸ Indian agents presided over band council meetings, directed farming operations, inspected health and schools, and acted as justices of the peace.²⁹ In a study of Indian agents in two Ontario communities, historian Robin Jarvis Brownlie found that Indigenous peoples remembered those officials as agents of “government-sponsored tyranny” and vehicles of “oppression, neglect, and injustice.”³⁰ Indeed, after hearing the father’s complaints, Agent Lazenby questioned the girls but refused to help, instead forcing each girl to sign a statement saying that their principal had never touched them.³¹ Lazenby did not inform his superiors in the DIA of these complaints, and no other action was taken.³²

Undaunted, the girl’s father continued to try to report Currie. Perhaps knowing he would not be taken seriously if he again reported the issue himself, he asked a white farmer who lived near the Birdtail Indian reserve to report the matter for him. The strategy worked. The white farmer wrote a letter to a lawyer in Brandon, who passed the letter on to the crown prosecutor who, in turn, passed it on to the Manitoba provincial attorney general. The attorney general then instructed the Manitoba Provincial Police to investigate the complaints. The father’s persistence and the string of letters it generated underline the holes in the metaphorical settler colonial mesh. Woolford’s framework importantly accounts for agency and moments where individuals find the tears or weak spots in the mesh, which is how the girls’ testimonies made it to trial at all. Police investigations into abuse at residential schools were rare. As had been the case with Lazenby’s handling of the complaint two years earlier, school and reserve staff rarely reported such complaints to the police. And, if they were reported, the TRC’s *Final Report* explains that, in the period before 1939, “investigations amounted to little more than seeking out and accepting the denials of the accused school official.”³³ The ensuing months-long police investigation into Principal Currie is a testament to the girls’ and their father’s determination.

28 Indian Act, SC 1876, c. 18.

29 E. Brian Tittley, *A Narrow Vision: Duncan Campbell Scott and the Administration of Indian Affairs in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1986), 13–14.

30 Robin Jarvis Brownlie, *A Fatherly Eye: Indian Agents, Government Power, and Aboriginal Resistance in Ontario, 1918–1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), x.

31 Letter from P.G. Lazenby to W.M. Graham, 11 June 1930, file 575–1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC; Letter from C. Batch to the Commissioner of the Manitoba Provincial Police, 23 June 1930, file 575–1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

32 Letter from W.M. Graham to Duncan C. Scott, 7 July 1930, file 575–1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

33 TRC, *Canada’s Residential Schools: The History, Part 1*, 560.

CHURCH AND GOVERNMENT SUPPORT

As soon as the investigation began in June 1930, and at every stage of the investigation, the staff of the Presbyterian Church's WMS and the DIA defended Principal Currie, even in the face of the growing evidence of his crimes. In fact, church and government support for Currie to remain a principal within the IRS system despite complaints of abuse extends even before his time at Birtle and highlights a deliberate strategy that allowed for the continuation of sexual abuse. Currie abused children during his first appointment at the Alberni IRS. Although less well documented than his later years at Birtle, the Allied Tribes of BC asked the DIA in 1922 to remove Currie as principal of the Alberni school "in the interest of Christianity, morality and good character of the Indians in general."³⁴ They explained that several girls had become mothers due to the lack of supervision at the school and wrote that Currie "unmercifully" whipped, hit, and choked boys "for the purpose of correction."³⁵ In response to these concerns, the DIA advised Principal Currie simply to lock the windows and put wire around the verandah to prevent the boys from escaping into the girls' room. The DIA did not remove Currie as principal or even reprimand him for his actions. Their suggestions instead focused on ways to make the institution even more carceral.³⁶ Currie did not deny the accusations of corporal punishment. Instead, he argued that "certain offences must be dealt with firmly, yes severly [*sic*]." He claimed that because First Nations' parents did not punish their own children, "the rresult [*sic*] is that when the teacher does it they magnify the thing to appear that the child was being murdered."³⁷

Despite these complaints and his own admissions of physical abuse, Currie stayed as principal at Alberni another five years. By March 1927, the reports of "trouble and friction" at the Alberni institution became too much for the United Church of Canada Board of Home Missions to ignore. United Church officials reported to the DIA that they had "decided unanimously that, in the interests of the work, [they]should retire Mr. Currie, the Principal, and the whole staff, this to take effect June 30th."³⁸ No explanation was given for why church officials chose to retire an entire residential school staff, a course of action not usually taken. Yet Currie did not retire. Instead, he and the Birtle IRS's principal, Reverend Pitts, swapped positions.³⁹ Reverend Pitts had been at Birtle since 1921,

34 Letter from Andrew Paull to Mr. W.E. Ditchburn, 21 August 1922, file 877-1, pt. 2, vol. 6431, RG10, LAC. Currie had also been reported for administering "a most brutal beating" to a boy four years previous. Letter from J.D. McLean to Chas. A. Cox, 24 January 1918, file 877-1, pt. 1, vol. 6431, RG10, LAC.

35 Ibid.

36 Letter from W.E. Ditchburn to Duncan C. Scott, 6 November 1922, file 877-1, pt. 2, vol. 6431, RG10, LAC.

37 Letter from H.B. Currie to Mr. C.A. Cox, 9 September 1922, file 877-1, pt. 2, vol. 6431, RG10, LAC.

38 Letter from [?] Ed[??]son to Duncan C. Scott, 28 March 1927, file 877-1, pt. 2, vol. 6431, RG10, LAC.

39 This pattern of swapping abusive principals has been documented elsewhere. See, for example, Sniderman and Sanderson, *Valley of the Birdtail*, 44.

and, like Currie, he faced serious allegations of abusing children under his supervision.⁴⁰ Both principals kept their positions by the Presbyterian Church switching the locations of their work, and both principals faced new complaints of abuse at their new assignments.⁴¹

When the news of Currie’s charges at Birtle reached church and government offices, officials worked to bolster the reputation of the accused principal. Indian Agent Lazenby, for instance, despite being made aware of Currie’s abuses two years earlier, told the police in their 1930 investigation that “Mr. Currie was a man of unimpeachable character.”⁴² Lazenby also refused to cooperate with the investigation. One sergeant described him as “a close friend” of Currie’s who was unwilling to “give any information that might be detrimental to [the principal].”⁴³

Lazenby’s superiors within the DIA also helped cover up the truth by discrediting the girls and their family members. The father of the girls was known to the DIA. He was one of many Indigenous parents across Canada who advocated for the proper education and treatment of their children. He had sent multiple petitions and letters of complaints to the DIA.⁴⁴ Upon hearing the news of Currie’s charges, Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs Duncan Campbell Scott characterized the girl’s father as “a trouble maker.” Scott surmised that the father was causing trouble because of having “become embittered recently” when his other daughter died while running away from the school. Scott assured his correspondents in the Presbyterian Church: “I have always had much confidence in Mr. Currie and . . . I am very pleased to learn that the staff are supporting Mr. Currie in his difficulty.”⁴⁵ Scott, the head of the department supposedly working for the interest of First Nations, also urged the WMS to “make a special grant [of] financial assistance” for the preparation of Currie’s defence.⁴⁶

40 Letter from A.G. Hamilton to W.M. Graham, 5 November 1926, file 575–1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

41 Peter Bush, “The Presbyterian Church in Canada and Native Residential Schools, 1925–1969,” *Historical Papers: Canadian Society of Church History* (1993), 182, <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2ahUKEwjr0ILg6IyCAxUnmIkeEHTqDD3IQFnoECBcQAQ&url=https%3A%2F%2Fhistoricalpapers.journals.yorku.ca%2Findex.php%2Fhistoricalpapers%2Farticle%2Fdownload%2F39471%2F35793%2F0&usg=AOvVaw1ez0fuskLnGfe5k6eXfjp6&opi=89978449>.

42 Letter from C. Batch to the Commissioner of the Manitoba Provincial Police, 23 June 1930, file 575–1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

43 Ibid.

44 For more examples of parent advocacy during the IRS system, see Trevor John Williams, “Compulsive Measures: Resisting Residential Schools at One Arrow Reserve, 1889–1896,” *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 34, no. 2 (2014): 197–222; Agnes Grant, *No End of Grief: Indian Residential Schools in Canada* (Toronto: Pemmican, 1996), 209–20; Elizabeth Graham, *The Mush Hole: Life at Two Indian Residential Schools* (Waterloo, ON: Heffle, 1997), 31–4; TRC, *Canada’s Residential Schools: The History, Part 1*, 669–74.

45 Letter from Duncan C. Scott to Mrs. D.T.L. McKerroll, 26 June 1930, file 575–1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

46 Letter from Duncan C. Scott to Mrs. D.T.L. McKerroll, 6 September 1930, file 575–1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

Members of the Presbyterian Church, too, maintained their commitment to the principal. The national WMS's secretary Mary McKerroll reassured the DIA: "We as a Board have great confidence in him and feel that there can be nothing in the charges."⁴⁷ A support letter signed by school staff contended that "Mr Currie is clean through and through . . . everyone who has had dealings with Mr Currie knows he is 'Honor bright.'"⁴⁸ Nobody within the DIA or the church let the police know about the prior accusations documented against Currie during his principalship at Alberni in the years before his arrival at Birtle. The institutions that ran and funded the school – the Presbyterian Church and the DIA – worked to allow an abusive principal to remain within the IRS system by switching his job location in response to complaints of abuse and by valuing his supposed reputation over the credibility of Indigenous complainants.

BRIBERY AND CAPITALIZING ON IMPOVERISHMENT

The most direct and explicit strategy employed by Currie and his supporters was bribery and threats to silence the student victims. The girls told the police that, after sexually abusing them, Currie gave them candy or small gifts like face cream, powder, a glass, or a comb in exchange for silence.⁴⁹ On the day that the police arrived at the school to investigate in June 1930, one girl reported: "Today, when I was coming across the school yard to see the police Mr Currie told me when the police question me you dont tell them what I did to you."⁵⁰ Despite these bribes and warnings, the girls gave police their matching testimonies.

As the investigation continued, Currie continued to use a combination of bribery and threats to convince the girls to recant their stories. Currie was put on temporary paid leave when he was charged, and an acting principal, Reverend D. J. Graham, was instated. Despite the replacement, though, Currie continued to live at the Birtle IRS while awaiting his trial.⁵¹ Mrs Currie also remained as school matron and continued to interact daily with the children. The provincial police and the DIA had instructed Currie to leave to ensure he could not "tamper with these girls and their evidence, but Currie refused."⁵² Faced with his refusal, the school opted to send the children home for the summer.

47 Letter from Mary C. McKerroll to Duncan C. Scott, 3 July 1930, file 575-1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

48 Letter from Helen MacKay and other school staff to Duncan C. Scott, June 1930, file 575-1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

49 "Statement of [redacted]," 10 June 1930, file 575-1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC; A.B. Allard, "Re: – Henry B. Currie," 11 June 1930, file 575-1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC; J. Kirk, "Principal Currie," 15 June 1930, file 575-1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

50 "Statement of [redacted]," 10 June 1930, file 575-1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

51 Letter from Duncan C. Scott to Mrs. D.T.L. McKerroll, 11 June 1930, file 575-1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

52 The Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) then temporarily closed the school while the new building was being constructed. Letter from Crown Attorney to the Superintendent of the DIA, 24 June 1930, file 575-1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

On 23 July 1930, in the period between the preliminary hearing and the November trial, the crown attorney raised concerns that Currie had been visiting people on the Birdtail Indian reserve and had “made some attempts to get in touch with relatives of the four girls who made the charges and is endeavoring to persuade the girls through friends, to change their story.”⁵³ Although the DIA refused to interfere with Currie’s visits, the RCMP did investigate Currie’s interference with the witnesses.⁵⁴ These investigative reports reveal extensive bribery and coercion to force the girls to recant their stories. A RCMP constable went to Birdtail reserve to speak with one of the girls who was living with her older sister and brother-in-law. The girl reported that Principal Currie had given her brother-in-law cash on two separate occasions and that Acting Principal Graham had given her sister clothes and a quilt. She also recalled that Graham had brought a typed paper to the house for her to sign, just like Indian Agent Lazenby had forced the girls to do two years prior.⁵⁵ The girl reported that her caregiver sister who had accepted the bribes made her change her story and threatened to “get a stick and beat [her]” if she did not sign the paper. She complied and signed the document that rescinded her accusations against Currie.⁵⁶ The Indian Commissioner later remarked about the use of signed statements in this case: “If Indian children think they are going to get into trouble they can be made to sign anything to avoid it.”⁵⁷

Hearing this clear suggestion of bribery, the police questioned the older sister who admitted to it all. She added that after the preliminary hearing, Currie gave them ten dollars and a sack of flour. She explained: “He had told us before this that if we helped him out that he would help us out later on. Then Mr. Currie told me to try and get . . . my sister, to change her story from what she had told in Court before.”⁵⁸ According to the sergeant, this family was “living in absolute poverty, which condition is evidently being taken advantage of by Currie and his friends to get her to use her influence with her sister.”⁵⁹ The police investigation revealed that Principal Currie, Acting Principal Graham, and Indian Agent Lazenby all capitalized on the poverty and economic marginalization of the Indian reserve system to coerce abuse victims’ families into aiding the concealment of Currie’s violence.

53 Letter from Crown Attorney to A.S. Williams, 23 July 1930, file 575–1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

54 Letter from Duncan C. Scott to Crown Attorney George A. Eakins, 1 August 1930, file 575–1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

55 T.P. Kirk, “[??] Currie, Principal Indian School,” 28 September 1930, file 575–1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

56 Ibid.

57 Letter from W.M. Graham to Duncan C. Scott, 7 July 1930, file 575–1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

58 Ibid.

59 Letter from C. Batch to the Commissioner of the MB Provincial Police, 7 October 1930, file 575–1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

MISHANDLING OF STUDENT “RUNAWAYS”

As police investigated the case against Currie and the ongoinings at Birtle IRS, their investigation also revealed details surrounding the tragic death of one of Currie's victims just months before the sexual abuse investigation began. According to classroom teacher Helen MacKay, on the evening of 11 March 1930, a fifteen-year-old girl climbed out the window of the school.⁶⁰ Her body was found several weeks later, frozen and partly eaten by animals. She had travelled some eight miles from Birtle in an effort to reach her reserve.⁶¹ Officials outside Currie's inner circle raised concerns about the school's suspicious handling of the runaway and her death. Police investigative reports note that the girl “was to be whipped just previous to her leaving the School” and that the school made no effort to find her for eleven days after her disappearance.⁶² The provincial police were not informed of the missing girl until over a month after she left. This timing meant, of course, that her body did not show any signs of abuse or even the cause of her death. In fact, when her body was found, the coroner was not brought in to perform a post-mortem examination, nor was there an inquest into her death.

The commissioner of the provincial police, learning about the death only through the investigation into sexual abuse months later, believed that “in circumstances such as obtained at the School the fullest examination and enquiry should have been conducted.”⁶³ The Indian commissioner at Regina raised his concern to the DIA in Ottawa, noting: “I have seen the letters from the Department to the parents of the girl more or less exonerating the Agent and the Principal but the feeling persists that more should have been done at the time to locate the girl.”⁶⁴ Remarking that the girl “was another one of his [Currie's] victims,” the police magistrate recommended a full investigation into why he did not try to find her.⁶⁵ Despite these concerns voiced by officials at the time, the superintendent of Indian education recommended no formal investigation into Currie's handling of the girl's disappearance and death because of the “serious criminal action pending in his case and, if he is found guilty even in part, there would be no merit in charging him with negligence in the case of [this student's death].”⁶⁶ In other words, the superintendent of education

60 Letter from Helen MacKay and other school staff to Duncan C. Scott, June 1930, file 575-1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

61 Letter from H.P. Reed to the Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, 8 August 1930, file 575-1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC. The deceased girl's father was the parent who reported the abuse through the white farmer, and her death was what Campbell Scott suggested made her father “embittered.”

62 Letter from H.J. Martin to W.M. Graham, 28 June 1930, file 575-1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC; Letter from H.P. Reed to the Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, 8 August 1930, file 575-1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

63 Letter from Reed to the Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, 8 August 1930.

64 Letter from W.M. Graham to Duncan C. Scott, 7 July 1930, file 575-1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

65 Letter from Reed to the Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, 8 August 1930.

66 Letter from Russell Ferrier to Dr. Scott, 25 August 1930, file 575-1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC. I have found no evidence that charges of negligence regarding this case were considered after Currie was fully acquitted on the sexual abuse charges.

believed that there was no reason to investigate the suspicious handling of the girl’s death because of the more serious sexual abuse charges against Currie. I have not found any indication that her death was investigated after Currie was acquitted in the sexual assault case. Failing to punctually report the truancy of abuse victims was another way to prevent them from speaking to authorities about the abuse inside the school. The apparent escape of this girl was not reported properly to authorities nor was her death investigated when her body was found. The subsequent sexual abuse investigation revealed the important context that she, too, was a victim of Currie’s abuse.

THE PRESS

Despite the shocking nature of the allegations against Currie, the local press had very little to say about the case before, during, or after the trial. Mrs Currie was aware, and seemingly relieved, about the absence of press coverage. She wrote in a letter to her daughter that all that had been reported on their case in any newspaper was “King vs. Henry Currie – the accused was acquitted after witnesses had denied all former statements.”⁶⁷ The press’ silence helped ensure that Currie’s reputation as principal remained unscathed among the local settler population. Teacher Helen Mackay remarked that the trial “only served to reveal the truly great man our Principal was and is.”⁶⁸ There was no contemporary reckoning with what went on at the Birtle IRS and, thus, no widely known collective narrative of this abuse.

One of the few newspaper articles that I have been able to find about Currie omits all mention of his employment at Birtle. The *Victoria Daily Colonist*’s full-page article was published in 1972, just months before Currie died. Interviewed for the article, Currie essentially rewrote his life’s history. The article is titled “A Good Life” and details his life, including his involvement with the Alberni Industrial School, but it never once mentions his employment at Birtle.⁶⁹ Even decades after his time in the IRS system, the press worked to glorify the abuser and the supposed “good” he did working with Indigenous peoples. Currie was able to further disassociate himself from his sexual crimes at Birtle through this press coverage decades later by conveniently omitting any indication of his employment in Birtle. (see [Figure 3](#)).

FORCED MARRIAGES

Currie could not hide all evidence of his abuse through church and government support, bribery, victim truancy, or with favourable press coverage or silence. For those victims whom he impregnated, he had to find a way to conceal or explain away the girls’ pregnancies. The documentary record reveals a

67 “Extracts from Mrs. H. B. Currie’s letter,” 18 November 1930, file 575–1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

68 “Extracts from Miss Helen Mackay’s letter to Mrs. McKerroll,” 21 February 1931, file 575–1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

69 Farmer Tonkin, Doris, “A Good Life,” *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 13 May 1972, 16.



FIGURE 3 Henry B. Currie at ninety-eight years old.
 Source: *Victoria Daily Colonist*, 13 May 1972, 16.

disturbing pattern of forcing his abuse victims to marry outside men after impregnating them. The DIA's involvement in arranging marriages between graduates of residential and industrial schools is well documented and was undertaken between 1890 and 1920 to promote the creation of families by assimilated graduates.⁷⁰ The Currie case shows that, while it was no longer government policy to arrange marriages after the early 1920s, the practice continued at the Birtle agency for reasons related to the concealment of sexual abuse. A man from Birdtail reserve told the RCMP investigators that he had not impregnated his wife, a former Birtle IRS student. He said that Agent Lazenby had "ordered, or induced" him to marry her when she was already pregnant by the principal. The man and student were married by the Presbyterian missionary on the reserve, and his new wife gave birth three months after their marriage.⁷¹

Another report of forced marriage as a tactic to conceal Currie's sexual abuse came from one of the girls at the centre of the trial. She told the RCMP investigators that, after Currie was charged and suspended as principal, Acting Principal Graham pressured her to marry a local man. Graham threatened that, if she did not

⁷⁰ Sarah Carter, *The Importance of Being Monogamous: Marriage and Nation Building in Western Canada to 1915* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2008), 235–42; see also TRC, *Canada's Residential Schools: The History, Part 1*, 654–8.

⁷¹ Letter from H.J. Martin to W.M. Graham, 28 June 1930, file 575–1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC. Constable Kirk believed the mother was not being truthful and was "holding something back" when she denied her child was Currie's in her interview. J. Kirk, "Currie, Principal Indian School," 15 June 1930, file 575–1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

marry this man, he would have her sent to a reform school in Ontario. She pleaded: “I do not want [name redacted] to marry me as I am too young as I am only 14 years old.”⁷² Graham married them anyway right at the school. When the constable asked Graham why he forced the marriage, Graham “informed [him] that it was none of [his] business what he did as he was a Minister of God and he would marry who he wished.”⁷³ The constable also questioned the marriage license issuer in Birtle who said that Graham had lied to him about the girl’s age and that “the Rev. Grahame [sic] seemed to be anxious to have these two people married, and wished it to be hurried along.”⁷⁴ The girl described the forced nuptials as follows:

Mr. Grahame asked [name redacted] if he would take me for his wife, and he said yes, and then Mr. Grahame asked me if I would take [name redacted] for my husband, and I said no, and then Mr. Grahame wrote down I will. . . . Then after that Mr. Grahame told [name redacted] and me that we were married. . . . I do not want to live with [name redacted] as he is a bad man, and he was not good to me.⁷⁵

The motive to marry this fourteen-year-old student, one of Currie’s outspoken victims, is not stated in any of these documents. Perhaps Principal Currie and Acting Principal Graham knew or feared that she too had been impregnated as a result of Currie’s abuse.⁷⁶

THE COURTS

On 11–12 November 1930, the criminal trial against Henry B. Currie was held in Minnedosa. The courts, church, and the DIA failed to protect the children and evidently did not deem the police’s findings of witness tampering and bribery as a sufficient reason to postpone the jury trial. The bribery worked, and the girls ultimately discounted their original testimonies, and Currie was acquitted. It is not clear if the bribery even came up in the trial for the jury to hear. Although trial or court records are not available, there are some documentary instances that give a sense of the court’s approach to the whole affair. For example, rather than holding Currie at the Minnedosa jail overnight after his arrest as was the norm, Currie was sent with the constable who had arrested him to Shoal Lake where Currie

72 T.P. Kirk, Shoal Lake Detachment, “Currie, Principal Indian School,” 28 September 1930, file 575–1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

73 Ibid.

74 Ibid. The official who issued the marriage license also reported that her older sister signed a guardian declaration form for the marriage to take place despite her grandmother being the girl’s legal guardian.

75 Ibid.

76 Lazenby’s document falsification is further evidenced by the recent release of the 1931 Census of Canada, wherein he, as the Census enumerator on the Birdtail Indian Reserve, falsified the girls’ ages and their relationship to the heads of households (the men they were forced to marry). *Seventh Census of Canada*, 1931, RG31, LAC.

stayed overnight at the constable's own house. The constable brought Currie back to the jail the following day where Currie was "released" on bail.⁷⁷

The acquittal itself is not surprising. Even without the girls recanting their stories, a conviction would have been unlikely in this context. Historian Lesley Erickson has found that very few sexual assault victims from marginalized communities were able to convince settler courts of the truthfulness of their testimonies.⁷⁸ The courts remained almost entirely white and male until the 1960s.⁷⁹ The fact that the man accused was employed by the government made a conviction even less likely.⁸⁰ The TRC identified fewer than fifty convictions of residential school abusers across the IRS system's entire history.⁸¹

The court in this case did impose a conviction related to this case but not on Currie himself. In a continuation of the terrible treatment of victimized residential school students, the girls were charged with perjury because their stories changed between the preliminary hearing and the trial. They were tried as adults because of the seriousness of the charges. Duncan Campbell Scott, who had recommended that the WMS provide a "special grant" for Currie's defence, said the DIA would not employ counsel for the girls, which he explained the DIA only did for status Indians in murder cases. Scott said the girls would be treated like white people and have counsel appointed by the court.⁸² That did not happen. On 26 January 1931, three of the girls were tried at court in Birtle with no defence counsel present.⁸³ The girls pled guilty to perjury. Importantly, though, they admitted to lying to the courts not at the preliminary hearing where they detailed Currie's abuse but at the trial where they said Currie had not hurt them. The girls explained what the police had uncovered before the trial: that they had been pressured by family members whom Currie paid to recant their stories.

Two of the girls were sentenced to two-year prison terms in the Salvation Army Home's juvenile detention centre in Winnipeg. Police Magistrate Reed of Russell, Manitoba, admitted that Currie was acquitted on perjured evidence. In

77 J. Kirk, "Henry B. Currie," 22 June 1930, file 575-1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

78 Lesley Erickson, *Westward Bound: Sex, Violence, the Law and the Making of a Settler Society* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), 12. Terry Chapman's analysis of sex crimes in Western Canada from 1890 to 1920 similarly concluded that sex crimes were weakly enforced and rarely resulted in conviction. Terry L. Chapman, "Sex Crimes in the West, 1890-1920," *Alberta History* 35, no. 4 (1987): 9, 16.

79 Erickson, *Westward Bound*, 35.

80 According to Sarah Carter, Indigenous women's claims of abuse against government employees and police were often dismissed as attempts to blackmail or discredit the men. Sarah Carter, *Capturing Women: The Manipulation of Cultural Imagery in Canada's Prairie West* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 181-2.

81 TRC, *Canada's Residential Schools: The History, Part 1*, 7.

82 Letter from Duncan C. Scott to George A. Eakins, 19 January 1931, file 575-1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC. Scott's decision here is unsurprising in the context of his efforts in the 1920s to have status Indians' access to legal representation severely limited. Titley, *A Narrow Vision*, 59.

83 Letter from P.G. Lazenby to the Secretary of the DIA, 27 January 1931, file 575-1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

other words, the courts acknowledged that the girls had been dishonest when recanting their original stories, not when they reported the abuses. Yet Reed remarked that “the two accused had apparently learned little or nothing about morality or discipline at the Indian school at Birtle,” and he hoped that “their stay at the Salvation Home in Winnipeg would have better results.”⁸⁴ Scott explained that, rather than push for the girls’ release, he was “inclined to let them finish their sentence [because the] ages of these girls and their recent experience would make them rather disturbing influences in one of our own schools.”⁸⁵ The characterization of the girls as immoral is in line with contemporary discourses about Indigenous women and girls as sexually available, hypersexual, rebellious, dangerous, and dissolute.⁸⁶ It was not uncommon in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Canada to punish the victims of sexual abuse by sending them to training schools because they were seen to have been “morally polluted.”⁸⁷ It was also not uncommon for Indigenous children to be criminalized for their acts of resistance and survival while confined in residential schools.⁸⁸ The fate of these girls undoubtedly sent a clear message to other children confined at Birtle that reporting the abuses they suffered would result in their own punishment, not their abuser’s.

Currie was never tried again despite the admission by the courts that he was acquitted on perjured evidence because, according to British law, a person acquitted for an offence cannot be tried again for the same offence. Despite the overwhelming evidence of Currie’s abuse and cover-up, and the numerous actors and institutions made aware of this fact, Currie was reinstated as principal in 1931 in the brand-new building that still stands today.

THE SETTLER STATUS QUO AND CLAIMS OF IGNORANCE

One year after his sexual abuse case, Currie was on hand to mark the official dedication ceremony of the newly constructed Birtle school in 1931 (see [Figure 4](#)). He addressed a crowd of over seven hundred people assembled for the event and expressed his “hope that under his guidance as Principal, the boys and girls would go from the School well fitted and with a sincere desire to work for the Kingdom of Christ.”⁸⁹ The Presbyterian Church pamphlet entitled “Glad Tidings” explained that, with more space in the new school (built for 126 pupils and later filled to

⁸⁴ Reed’s remark was in a letter from Lazenby to the Secretary of the DIA, 27 January 1931.

⁸⁵ Letter from Duncan C. Scott to W.M. Graham, 12 February 1931, file 575–1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

⁸⁶ Erickson, *Westward Bound*, 58, 63; Carter, *Capturing Women*, 159, 162; Canada, *Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*, vol. 1a: *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls* (Ottawa: Privy Council Office, 2019), 255, 266.

⁸⁷ Joan Sangster, “Incest, the Sexual Abuse of Children, and the Power of Familialism,” in *Histories of Canadian Children and Youth*, ed. Nancy Janovicek and Joy Parr (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2003), 175.

⁸⁸ Children were prosecuted for arson of residential school buildings, assault against their teachers and supervisors, and theft of school property.



FIGURE 4 The newly constructed Birtle IRS in 1931.

Source: G-4457-FC-18, Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives.

overcapacity), “the reserves of Rolling River, Okanese, Lizard Point (Waywaysee-cappo) and Birdtail, are the recruiting ground for the Birtle School.”⁹⁰

Surviving evidence suggests that these communities were also the “recruiting ground” for Currie’s continued abuses. In May 1932, a father from Waywaysee-cappo reported to the Indian agent that Principal Currie “had done something to [his daughter] which had ‘made her very shamed.’”⁹¹ The girl’s mother later clarified that what Currie had done was “the same sort of thing that he was [charged with] some time ago.”⁹² The DIA denied parents’ requests for their children to be transferred or for Currie to be removed, explaining: “The Department is inclined to the opinion that these Indians may be taking advantage of the recent difficulty which Mr. Currie had.”⁹³ Currie remained as principal of Birtle IRS until he retired on his own accord in 1933.⁹⁴ He moved back to British Columbia and lived to be ninety-eight years old.

89 Presbyterian Church Missionary Society, “Glad Tidings,” December 1931, 4, file 575–1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

90 *Ibid.*, 1.

91 Letter from P.G. Lazenby to the Secretary of the DIA, 21 May 1932, file 575–1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

92 *Ibid.*

93 Letter from P.G. Lazenby to the Secretary of the DIA, 21 July 1932, file 575–1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC; Letter from A.F. MacKenzie to P.G. Lazenby, 2 June 1932, file 575–1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

94 Letter from M.C. McKerroll to Dr. H.W. McGill, 17 July 1933, file 575–1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

As this case suggests, children in the IRS system and their families were forced to work through and against an extensive mesh of colonial systems and strategies working to suppress the truth about abuse within residential schools: the DIA through the Indian agent and school staff; the Presbyterian Church through the WMS; the RCMP and the Manitoba Provincial Police; and the Manitoba courts. And these nodes, or “planes of colonial netting,” worked alongside other forces like the settler colonial press, the segregationist reserve system, and the impoverishment and lack of social welfare available to reserve communities.⁹⁵ Woolford argues that these series of nets worked together to try and destroy Indigenous peoples. In the case of abuse at Birtle IRS, they also worked together to protect the perpetrator of the abuse instead of the children he was abusing.

Brownlie argues that, before the mid-twentieth century, mainstream Canadians largely ignored Indigenous issues and that the DIA could assume the general public was not aware of its actions.⁹⁶ However, what I hope this case makes clear is that there was no neat dividing line between the “general public” and those involved in the extensive cover-up of sexual abuse in a DIA institution. In a small town like Birtle, “mainstream Canadians” and “the public” were deeply intertwined with the IRS on the outskirts of town. This clarification is even more important in light of growing residential school denialism and claims of public ignorance.⁹⁷

A 2013 newspaper article published in a local paper by a Birtle settler resident claimed that “Birtle was probably one of the better schools but obviously had its dark secrets, unknown to those of us who lived in the same community.”⁹⁸ Yet the institutions and authorities connected to the residential school were part of the same community. Currie’s defence lawyers were Nettleton Whitby Kerr of Brandon, Manitoba, and John William Pratt of Birtle, a prominent resident who represented Birtle-Russell in the provincial legislature at this time and who would go on to become the mayor of Birtle.⁹⁹ The local history text, *A View of the Birdtail*, lists settler families of Birtle and their occupations, indicating several who were staff at the Birtle IRS, who performed construction and maintenance on

95 Woolford describes the different levels of colonial netting. Andrew Woolford, *This Benevolent Experiment* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2015), 4

96 Brownlie, *Fatherly Eye*, xi.

97 Historians Sean Carleton and Thomas Peace have challenged Canadian claims to innocence by documenting historical press coverage and public whistle-blowers within the IRS system. Sean Carleton, “Chanie Wenjack and the Histories of Residential Schooling We Remember,” *Active History*, 23 October 2018, <https://activehistory.ca/2018/10/chanie-wenjack-and-the-histories-of-residential-schooling-we-remember/>; Thomas Peace, “If We Had Only Known . . . Whistle Blowers, Florence Nightingale, and Residential Schools,” *Active History*, 10 February 2020, <https://activehistory.ca/2020/02/if-only-we-had-only-known-whistle-blowers-florence-nightingale-and-residential-schools/>.

98 Jack Dodds, “Memories of the Birtle Residential School,” *Crossroads* (Shoal Lake, Manitoba), 27 September 2013, 5. These claims are repeated in a publication on the Birtle Community Heritage website, a history project that was funded by the Manitoba Heritage Grants Program. Nathan Hasselstrom, “Pivotal Events: Birtle’s Significant Historical Themes and Events,” *Prairie View Municipality*, 2018, 49–189.

99 Marion Abra, *A View of the Birdtail: A History of the Municipality of Birtle, 1878–1974* (Birtle, MB: History Committee of the Municipality of Birtle, n.d.), 71–2.

the school buildings, or who were otherwise employed by the DIA.¹⁰⁰ The local doctor in the town of Birtle was paid annually by the DIA to provide services to the residential school, while, in 1920, the Birtle hospital denied treatment to residential school students who needed operations on their tubercular glands.¹⁰¹ In response to a labour shortage during the First World War, farmers in the area asked the residential school for help from the older students, with one teacher remarking in 1916: “There is an almost daily request for the help of an Indian boy.”¹⁰² The same settler resident who denied knowledge of the institution’s abuses in the 2013 newspaper article remembered settler families visiting the residential school grounds in summer months in the 1940s.¹⁰³ The IRS building itself was impossible for the community of Birtle to ignore, described as “the most imposing [building] in the town of Birtle” in the 1901 *Annual Report of Indian Affairs*.¹⁰⁴ As these examples suggest, there simply was no clear separation between the settler community of Birtle and the Birtle IRS (see Figure 5).

As we work to reckon with this nation’s history and its legacies, we must first know the truth before any hope that conciliation might be achieved. The 2015 *Final Report* of the TRC is a starting place, a colossal 3,321 pages of history about the IRS system. Directed to reveal the truth about residential schools, the *Final Report* says the following about the Currie case:

In 1930, Birtle, Manitoba, school principal H. B. Currie was reported by officials of the Presbyterian Church to have been ‘honourably acquitted at his recent trial.’ It was the opinion of Presbyterian Church official H. R. Horne that the charges of “immoral conduct” against Currie were “absolutely groundless.” Three of the four charges were not sent to the jury. After acquitting Currie, the jury was reported to have recommended “that an investigation should be made to see who was responsible for starting such absolutely groundless charges.” Currie’s successor, J. F. Lockhart, wrote of the event in 1940, saying that two of Currie’s accusers were given prison terms and a third was relieved of her teacher’s certificate. In its review of documents, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada could locate no further information on this case.¹⁰⁵

The website for the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation’s offers no more clarity. Birtle’s “School Narrative” produced by the Government of Canada provides a description similar to the one in the TRC’s *Final Report*, adding that a Presbyterian Church report noted that “there was not a shred of evidence in support of any of the charges.”¹⁰⁶

100 Abra, *View of the Birdtail*, 295, 403.

101 Ibid., 64; Dominion of Canada, *Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs for the Year Ended 31st December, 1929* (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 1930); Letter from Dr. Philip W Head to the DIA, 6 September 1920, file 575–1, pt. 1, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

102 Letter from Mrs. S Marshall to G.H. Wheatley, 29 November 1916, file 575–1, pt. 1, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

103 Dodds, “Memories.”

104 Dominion of Canada, *Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs for the Year Ended 31st December, 1900* (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 1901).

105 TRC, *Canada’s Residential Schools: The History, Part 1*, 564.

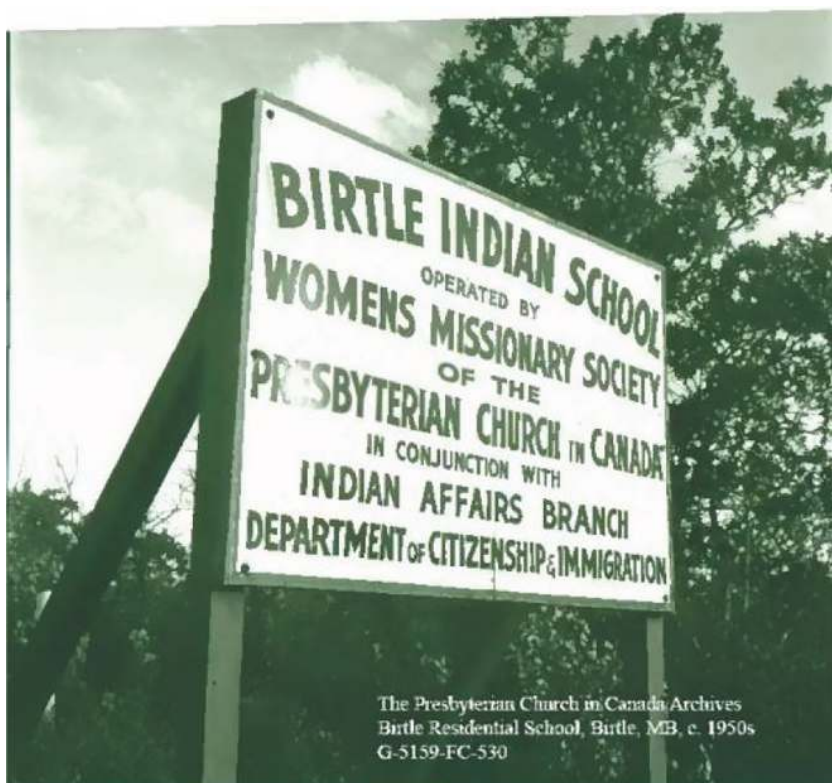


FIGURE 5 A sign for the Birtle IRS clearly displayed on the nearby public road, 1950s.
Source: G-5159-FC-530, Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives.

The TRC’s description of this case severely understates the extensive evidence of abuse and concealment. How could the TRC have missed this information? I cannot say conclusively, but neither the TRC’s *Final Report* nor the documents on the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation’s website cite the LAC file containing the records for the Currie case. I believe the reason lies in decades-old archival decisions: volume 1 and 3 of this LAC file were microfilmed, while volume 2 (containing records of the abuse) was not.¹⁰⁷ LAC was legally required to gather and transfer to the TRC “all relevant documents in their possession or control.”¹⁰⁸ When LAC provided reproductions of its IRS documents to the TRC, perhaps it used its microfilmed copies to create digital reproductions (as

¹⁰⁶ Government of Canada, “Birtle Indian Residential School IAP School Narrative,” September 2012, 12, <https://archives.nctr.ca/NAR-NCTR-033>.

¹⁰⁷ The LAC archivists explained that they had no record as to why part 2 was not microfilmed with the rest of the file, which occurred some time ago, but that it was plausible it was because of the higher sensitivity of its contents. Personal email correspondence from LAC archivist Catherine Butler to author, 16 December 2021, and from LAC archivist Bérénice Giasson to author, 5 April 2022.

opposed to going to the physical copies from which to make reproductions), thus missing the part of this file that was never microfilmed.¹⁰⁹ Whatever the reason, the TRC never received this file from LAC. Also relevant to the incomplete record of this case in the TRC's *Final Report* is the commission's huge mandate, gargantuan source base, limited budget and timeline, and lack of executive historical oversight throughout the process.¹¹⁰ These concerns may help explain how this file came to be excluded from the process. If my assumptions are correct, how many other files did LAC fail to compile and send to the TRC because of decades-old decisions about which file parts to microfilm? How many historians relying on microfilmed records have unknowingly missed crucial documents relating to the residential schools they are studying? And how will LAC ensure researchers and survivors have access to, and knowledge of, these documents that did not make it to the TRC researchers?

The most direct consequence of not having the Currie abuse file during the TRC process is of course the resulting *Final Report* description cited above in its entirety. Another outcome is the description of Currie's victim who died. Because her runaway and death were reported in the *Winnipeg Free Press* at the time, her death was included in the report. However, this incident was included in the subsection "Truancy: 1867–1939," with no context of Currie's abuse. Instead, the *Final Report* reads: "According to the Presbyterian Church records, 'All possible search was made, the Indian Agent was notified shortly after 10 p.m., the same night [that she had disappeared] and no blame attached to the superintendent.'"¹¹¹ This is, of course, simply untrue. The extensive provincial police, RCMP, and DIA reports show the complete negligence on the part of school officials following her disappearance. The TRC writers used this runaway case to show how a lack of policy direction from the federal government about how principals should report runaways led to several student deaths. However, the entire context of this student's death (that is, that she was a victim of ongoing sexual abuse) shows that a lack of federal policies about reporting truanancies was not the likely reason the principal failed to

108 Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement between Canada and the Plaintiffs of the National Class Action on Indian Residential Schools, 8 May 2006, <http://www.residentialschoolsettlement.ca/settlement.html>

109 It is also notable that, in John Milloy's research on the IRS system for the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in 1996 and his book *A National Crime* (1996), he also cited part 1 but not part 2 of the file, indicating that he too may have been working with the incomplete microfilm of this archival file and not the physical records. J.S. Milloy, "'Suffer the Little Children': The Aboriginal Residential School System 1830–1992," submitted to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, May 1996; John S. Milloy, *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879 to 1986* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1999). LAC first declined to produce all records, requiring the TRC to seek judicial guidance. See J.J. Ghaddar, "The Spectre in the Archive: Truth, Reconciliation, and Indigenous Archival Memory," *Archivaria* 82 (2016): 3–26.

110 Brian Gettler, "Historical Research at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada," *Canadian Historical Review* 98, no. 4 (2017): 653, 655–6; Milloy, "Doing Public History," 13.

111 TRC, *Canada's Residential Schools: The History, Part 1*, 591.

report the runaway. She was a victim of his abuse, and reporting her as a runaway would have threatened his security. This discrepancy also poses the question of how many more cases of “truancy” in the *Final Report* had similarly complicated contexts and suspicious handlings.

A final barrier to accessing the full truth of the IRS system in Canada remains in the accessibility of these documents. When I first viewed these records in September 2021, the file was open (Code 90), and so I viewed them through the basic file requesting process. When I emailed LAC in March 2022 requesting more information about the file’s provenance, I was told that the file was now restricted (Code 32) and that it had only been accidentally opened in 2019. Now, anyone else wishing to view the file must submit an access-to-information-and-privacy (ATIP) request, a process with a long waiting period.¹¹² It is made even longer because, as per a recent email communication to me, “LAC ATIP is operating at limited capacity and is prioritizing urgent requests related to medical benefits, social services, class actions, and legal proceedings,” categories that do not include residential school history research.¹¹³

The case of the abuse and cover-up at Birtle IRS in 1930 is but one of many stories left incomplete about Canada’s IRS system. We can appreciate the TRC’s monumental work while acknowledging that it was but one step in uncovering the full extent of abuses within the IRS system. This truth has been made especially clear in recent months as ground-penetrating radar equipment has revealed the locations of potential unmarked graves at IRS sites across the country. On 25 January 2022, Williams Lake First Nation held a press conference to share the initial geophysical results of the St Joseph’s Mission investigation. Chief Willie Sellar shared:

For decades, there were reports of neglect and abuse at the St. Joseph’s Mission, and worse, there were reports of children dying or disappearing from the facility. For the bulk of St. Joseph’s Mission’s history, these reports were, at best, given no credence. At worst, there was something darker going on in an effort to suppress the emergence of the truth.¹¹⁴

The research for this article confirms that there was something darker going on at Birtle. The abuse at the hands of Principal Henry Currie was allowed to continue because of extensive strategies of cover-up by the Indian agent, the Presbyterian Church, and the DIA, including blatant bribery, transferring accused principals to other schools, document falsification, forced marriages, and failing to report runaways. These strategies were on top of the system itself, which was

112 Tom Cardoso, “Federal Watchdog Flooded with Record Complaints About Access to Information,” *Globe and Mail*, 15 June 2022, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-federal-watchdog-flooded-with-record-complaints-about-access-to/>.

113 Personal email correspondence from ATIP and Litigation Response Division, Library and Archives Canada, with author, 9 June 2022.

114 Phase 1 revealed a potential ninety-three graves. Chief Willie Sellars, St. Joseph’s Mission Phase 1 Geophysical Results, 25 January 2022, video posted 27 January 2022, <https://videomedia.wlfn.ca/en/c/st-josephs-mission-phase-1-geophysical-results.270>.

designed to keep children from their families. The abuse, even once in public courts, was kept from broader settler society thanks to the local press and the general trust of the public for settler colonial institutions. Except for a brief record of Currie's acquittal, the Presbyterian Church either no longer holds their records regarding the abuse in their school or failed to make those records available to the TRC, highlighting the limitation of working with church records alone.¹¹⁵ And then, whether intentional or not, LAC contributed to the ongoing support of Principal Currie when they chose to microfilm the Birtle administration records but exclude the file containing all evidence of his abuse.

I naively assumed that the churches and federal government had done a better job at destroying their documents or not reporting the abuse in the first place and that this explained why it took survivors speaking out publicly and a court-mandated inquiry to bring Canadian-wide awareness to this history. But there was ample evidence in the archive – the traditional source of Western historical knowledge – of Currie's abuse at Birtle IRS. This file is sitting in Ottawa in the physical stacks of LAC. This case underscores the calls from IRS Survivors and historians of the IRS system to continue uncovering the truth about the IRS system in Canada.¹¹⁶ There are still documents at LAC with stories left to be read to fully understand the systems of secrecy that contributed to the ongoing abuses in residential schools, especially for the periods before the testimonies of living survivors. Access to physical archives is essential, and it is incumbent on the federal government to provide sufficient funding for these records to be accessible, including comprehensive digitization to support community-level research. Moreover, communities need to be informed of the existence of these remaining documents instead of relying on happenstance encounters like mine to lead to their recovery.

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115 We know that the Presbyterian Church once held these records because of their significant correspondence with the DIA in the school's file at LAC. File 575–1, pt. 2, vol. 6251, RG10, LAC.

116 See, for example, Mary Jane Logan McCallum, "foreword," in *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System*, John S. Milloy (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2017), xxvii.

process and residential school files in general and to generous colleagues who provided feedback and guidance along the way.

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