

# Toppling Colonialism: Historians, Genocide, and Missing Indigenous Children



by Erin Millions

Artifactual Editor / Research Director, Manitoba Indigenous Tuberculosis Photo Project, University of Winnipeg  
& Mary Jane Logan McCallum  
Canada Research Chair in Indigenous People, History and Archives,  
University of Winnipeg

On 1 July 2021, the Canadian Historical Association, the representative body for historians practising in Canada, issued a statement on Indigenous history and the term ‘genocide.’ The Canada Day Statement responds to the recovery of more than 1500 (and counting) unmarked graves at former residential school sites across western Canada and the #CancelCanadaDay movement that followed. The statement, authored and supported unanimously by the CHA Executive and Council, contends that the “violence and dispossession Indigenous peoples experienced in what is now Canada” is also a “history of genocide.” Referring to the United Nations definition of genocide embedded in the UN *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide* (1948), the CHA Council maintains that genocidal intent has been amply established in the historical scholarship and by the words of policymakers at the time. In addition, the Council also provides critical disciplinary reflection, arguing that, “As a profession, historians have . . . contributed in lasting and tangible ways to the Canadian refusal to come to grips with this country’s history of colonization and dispossession.”

Although the CHA has in the past advocated for issues relating to the study and practice of history in Canada, this is the first statement in the Association’s 100+ year history that challenges how historians “do” history. And the profession is by no means united on the matter of genocide; indeed, several leading Indigenous historians have found the statement’s focus on genocide

disappointing while some non-Indigenous historians take umbrage at the supposed lack of ‘objectivity’ and disruption of the narrative of Canada as a nation. Perhaps the most solid of these critiques rests on the matter of law; perpetrators cannot be held accountable in national or international courts on a charge of genocide.

The genocide debate is not a new one, but what is new is the professional make-up of the Council itself. For the first time in its history, the ten-person Council includes five BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) scholars, or 50 per cent of the Council membership. The CHA statement gives voice to people who have been trained and employed in Canada as historians, some of whom are personally and professionally impacted by the history and legacy of negligent and violent Indian policy, as well as ongoing federal negligence and mismanagement that impacts the lives of our families, communities, and nations. History is a disciplinary field that remains shockingly white. We have what historian Laura Ishiguro has called “a serious race problem.” This statement represents a remarkable shift and one that reflects the potential transformation of a discipline that is also seeing expansion in the fields of Indigenous and critical settler colonial history.

As the CHA Statement was making the rounds on social media on 1 July, thousands of people across Canada turned out for Every Child Matters public marches. There was a sea of orange across Canada as protesters and mourners engaged in community-led remembrance



Two children climb on a toppled statue of Queen Victoria on the grounds of the Manitoba Legislature. One commentator wrote in response to media coverage that, “We came for your statues. You came for our children.” *Marina von Stackelberg / CBC*

and protest that reflected on residential school histories, policies, and violence. The event that received perhaps the most coverage, however, was the toppling of a 117-year-old statue of Queen Victoria on the grounds of the Manitoba Legislature. The statue was first painted with hundreds of red handprints, symbolizing the students who died, and then pulled off its base. In front of the statue, a public art installation of orange flags reminded onlookers of the children who never came home from residential schools.

The media coverage devoted to the Queen Victoria statue reflects the racism in media that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (TRC) Calls to Action pinpointed in 2015. The media made little effort to contextualize the statue’s downfall within the long histories of violence and colonialism towards Indigenous peoples. Instead, the protestors’ actions were variously described as ‘vandalism’ and ‘violence.’ The term genocide quickly fell from media coverage in the wake of such ‘criminal activity,’ even though critics were quick to point out that the real violence was the death of thousands of Indigenous children. Sadly, the alterations to the statue were shamed by non-Indigenous and some Indigenous leaders across the province as having apparently “set back” reconciliation.

We contend, however, that the up-ending of the statue is best interpreted as part of a reckoning with colonial violence. This does not mean that we declare ‘open season’ on Canadian statuary, but rather urge Canadians and historians to consider the context in which acts of protest centred around statues are occurring. As one social media commentator observed on 2 July: “We came for your statues. You came for our children.” The Manitoba Conservative Party remains stubbornly ignorant of this context. As we write this, Premier Brian Pallister insists on cleaning, repairing, and returning the statue of Queen Victoria to public space rather than engaging with Manitoba’s own histories of violence and colonialism that led to the 1 July events. In its altered form, the statue was at least a poignant piece of activist art.

The convergence of the CHA statement, #CancelCanadaDay, the Every Child Matters marches, and the toppling of a queen’s statue are reminders that the histories of colonialism and Indigenous peoples in Canada—including residential schools, segregated Indian hospitals, and the child welfare system—are histories that are very much a public concern and public policy. This intersection might also be helpfully understood in a more global context of statue protests of slave traders and racists across the British colonial world, and



This Every Child Matters march in downtown Edmonton was just one such event in memory of residential school children held across Canada on 1 July 2021.” Hamdi Issawi, *The Sprawl*

efforts to draw public attention to histories of BIPOC people that have hitherto been ignored, sidelined, erased, and not taken seriously. These histories of race hatred, of white supremacy, of slavery and indeed of genocide have enormous repercussions and legacies for us all today. Historians are and will be an important part of piecing this history together, bringing names to places where they had been forgotten or never cared about, bringing numbers to “masses” who starved, teaching topics and research methods that were never considered “real” history, and making meaning of this for the kind of place we want to live in going forward.

Our research on modern Indigenous histories of tuberculosis in Canada is doing this kind of work with individuals, communities, and the public more generally. The authors engage with hitherto highly restricted information about the management of a segregated and substandard system of health care for First Nations, Inuit, and some Metis people. We are regularly contacted by individuals searching for information about their missing relatives—both in relation to residential school children who went missing and Indigenous patients who were sent to segregated federal Indian hospitals and sanatoriums. Administrators in both settings were negligent in failing to inform parents, leaders, and home communities of the deaths of patients and students. A 1952 report by an Indian agent in the North-West Territories addresses this failure directly. When the Fort Good Hope band requested that the bodies of band members who were sent to southern hospitals be returned home, they were informed that this was not Department of Indian Affairs policy because the cost was too high. Specifically, the Indian agent recounted,

the cost to ship a body was twice the cost of transporting a live patient.

This refusal to accord Indigenous families the basic decency of communicating the circumstances of their loved ones’ deaths, let alone returning the dead to be buried at home, is being repeated in present-day efforts to erect barriers to access archival records that allow families, communities, and researchers to retrieve these histories. Community members and researchers need unrestricted access to public records, including the church records for publicly funded residential schools, many of which have yet to be disclosed, and hospital records from Indian hospitals and sanatoriums. Tuberculosis patient files and other historical health records, for example, are protected from public scrutiny by privacy laws and procedures. Without access to these health records, we cannot know how many residential school students died in segregated Indian hospitals. Provincial and federal governments need to prioritize finding missing students and patients by providing access to historical records rather than protecting, under the guise of privacy concerns, the documents that show death and the failure to care for Indigenous people in publicly funded schools, hospitals, and sanatoriums.

In the wake of the #CancelCanadaDay movement and announcements about the recovered student graves, we hope that Canadians will ponder the “hard truths” about the past and take concrete action to hold their political leaders accountable to these histories. There is still much work to be done to bring peace to the families and communities whose loved ones have never returned from residential schools and Indian hospitals. We call on all Canadians, and particularly historians and heritage practitioners, to step up and support the work of critically investigating these truths. ■

## Notes

1. Canadian Historical Association, “Canada Day Statement: The History of Violence Against Indigenous Peoples Fully Warrants the Use of The Word ‘Genocide,’” 1 July 2021, <https://cha-shc.ca/news/canada-day-statement-the-history-of-violence-against-indigenous-peoples-fully-warrants-the-use-of-the-word-genocide-2021-06-30>.
2. A. V. Cottrell, Assistant Superintendent Fort Norman Agency, to Director of Indian Affairs Branch, 12 August 1952, RG 10, vol. 6879, file 191/28-3, pt. 2B, Library and Archives Canada, [https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac\\_reel\\_c7991/2283?r=0&s=3](https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac_reel_c7991/2283?r=0&s=3)