

A SECOND LOOK AT THE LEGACY OF NICHOLAS FLOOD DAVIN



Nicholas Flood Davin 1840 - 1901
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R-A6665

Ireland-born Nicholas Flood Davin came to Regina in 1882, where he founded the *Leader* Regina newspaper. He is known for his 1885 interview with the condemned Louis Riel, though some claim that one of his employees actually conducted the interview. He was elected as an MP in 1887, and is described as "a staunch Conservative Party man," on the City of Regina web site.

Davin's legacy also includes the Davin Report of 1879,

which was influential in bringing the United States Indian Industrial School model to Canada. Davin wrote, "If anything is to be done with the Indian, we must catch him very young. The children must be kept constantly within the circle of civilized conditions." Davin claimed, "The industrial school is the principal feature of the policy known as that of 'aggressive civilization'" (p. 1).

Aggressive civilization was viewed as a necessary policy for the elimination (enfranchisement) of Indian Treaty rights, and to offer First Nations peoples a new livelihood in farming, after the buffalo had been exterminated, and Indigenous lands had been appropriated. This policy was also viewed as necessary because of what was considered the inherent nature of the 'Indian':

... as far as the adult Indian is concerned. Little can be done with him. He can be taught to do a little at farming, and at stock-raising, and to dress in a more civilized manner, but that is all. The child, again, who goes to a day school learns little, and what little he learns is soon forgotten, while his tastes are fashioned at home, and his inherited aversion to toil is in no way combated. (p. 2)

Colonial paternalism is evident in Davin's report as he attempted to describe what he viewed as the defective character of the Indian:

The Indian is sometimes spoken of as a child, but he is very far from being a child. The race is in its childhood....There is, it is true, in the adult, the helplessness of mind of the child, as well as the practical helplessness; there is, too, the child's want of perspective; but there is little of the child's receptivity; nor is the child's tractableness always found. One of the prime conditions of childhood is absent—the abeyance of the passions....He has the suspicion, distrust, fault-finding tendency, the insincerity and flattery, produced in all subject races...The Indian's stolidity is in

part assumed, in part the stupor produced by external novel and distasteful conditions, and in both respects has been manifested in white races at periods of helplessness and ignorance, of subjection to, and daily contact with, the power and superior skill and refinement of more advanced races, or even more advanced branches of the same race.

What Davin is describing as the "Indian character" is in part due to conditions produced by the loss of livelihood and way of life and in part due to European infantilization of the First Peoples as a race. But there is an element of class introduced in his statement as well, with the 'Indian' being compared to those who live subject to others, in this case a whole race, who have taken on the characteristics of the untrustworthy lower class. Too, there is a conflict of cultural values in which White society sought to distance itself from the land and all that was untamed, (what they understood to be *civilizing*) along with first peoples' societies, which sought to live in close relation to the land and its life-giving qualities. There is the assumption of the maturity, superiority, and refinement of what Davin calls the "advanced races," without evidence of that maturity and refinement in White-European treatment of the original inhabitants of the land.

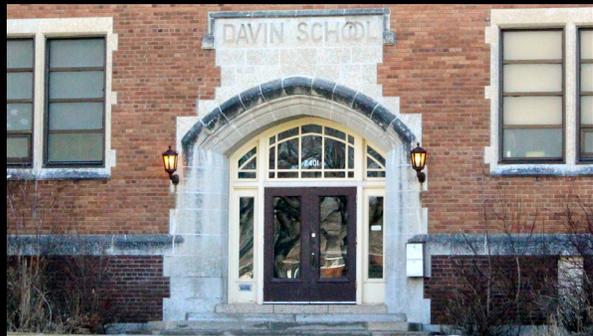
Further, there is another insidious aspect at work in Davin's argument. Davin criticizes the treaty promise of on-reserve schools in the following statement: "Guaranteeing schools as one of the considerations for surrendering the title of the land, was, in my opinion, trifling with a great duty and placing the Government in no dignified attitude...Such a guarantee, moreover, betrays a want of knowledge of the Indian character." Thus, by associating the government with undignified and inevitable failure, and by attaching a child-like metaphor to "Indian" character, Davin seems to be rationalizing the dismissal of treaty promises—as an undignified giving in to child-like demands, rather than the dignified honouring of treaty promises.

The John A. Macdonald government implemented the Indian Residential School system, and as recommended by the Davin Report, contracted with churches to manage the schools at minimal cost to the government. With churches managing the schools, bureaucratic complexities along with religious divisions created administrative blocks and gaps, which impacted where children could attend school, (sometimes forcing children to attend school out-of-province), the building and funding of too many schools with churches vying for funding and position in communities, and the prevention of protective policies regarding curriculum, limits on student labour, discipline, nutrition, admissions requirements, care of the ill and deceased, and staff credentials.

Davin later lost his seat in the commons to a Liberal, and did not live to see the full effects of his report. He took his own life in 1901.



A school in Regina bears the name of Davin and recently there has been a call to change the name of the school. Read news article: Nicholas Flood Davin's legacy needs a second look



What's in a name?: Listen to Dr. Marc Spooner and Dr. Shauneen Pete speak about the Davin name. CTV Regina Indigenous Circle May 5, 2016 (Photo credits: Shuana Niessen, 2015)

The industrial school is the principal feature of the policy known as that of 'aggressive civilization,'" wrote Davin in his 1879 report (p. 1).

