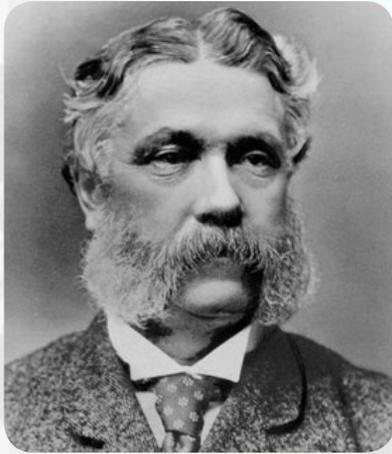


# EDGAR DEWDNEY: INDUSTRIAL SCHOOLS IN THE N. W. T.



Edgar Dewdney  
Provincial Archives of Saskatchewan/ R-B48-1

planned Canadian Pacific Railway line. In 1888, Dewdney became MP for Assiniboia East, and in 1891, he became Minister of Indian Affairs.

During the negotiations of treaties and the North-West Resistance, Commissioner Dewdney used rations as a means of control over First Nations peoples. When Cree Chiefs sought to establish a Cree homeland in the Cypress Hills, Dewdney opposed them. He wanted them to settle on smaller, separate, and more easily controlled reserves. He referred to these Cree people as "a large number of worthless and lazy Indians, the concourse of malcontents and reckless Indians from all the bands in the Territories."<sup>2</sup> Even though the Treaties allowed First Nations to select their Treaty lands, Dewdney refused to grant them the land they requested. To force them to travel north, he refused to provide promised food rations, causing mass starvation among First Nations. He even went so far as to implement a policy called "sheer compulsion," which involved "using the Mounted police to arrest First Nations leaders in order to disrupt their governance."<sup>3</sup> To prevent First Nations from joining in the 1885 North-West Resistance, Dewdney again used food: This time he was exceedingly generous with food and presents.

Indian Commissioner Dewdney was also a policy maker for the Indian Residential schools in the NWT. In 1883, Dewdney, in support of the 1879 Davin Report, wrote to Macdonald that the time had come for industrial schooling, which "might be carried on with great advantage to the Indians."<sup>4</sup> Dewdney thought the residential schools were preferable to day schools for producing workers "because the influence of home...is stronger than that of the school." He believed that what he deemed "an inherited aversion to labour" in Indigenous peoples would be offset by "being separated from their parents and properly and regularly instructed not only in the rudiments of English language, but also in trades and agriculture."<sup>5</sup> Dewdney also believed a harshly regimented schedule, which equated hard work with godliness, would work against this "aversion to labour." He felt certain that "a great end" would be "attained for the permanent and lasting benefit of the Indian."<sup>6</sup> Dewdney offered his former governor's residence at Battleford as one of three chosen locations for an industrial school. The other two would be constructed in Qu'Appelle and High River. In agreement with the Davin Report, he recommended having the churches supply the staff as a cost-saving measure. He estimated the Qu'Appelle school would cost \$6,000 to construct, and suggested an operational budget of \$6,500 annually. With government authorization and instruction to

England-born Edgar Dewdney arrived in Victoria, BC in 1859, where he worked as a surveyor during the gold rush. He was elected as a Conservative MP in 1872. A loyal devotee of Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald, in 1881, Dewdney became Lieutenant Governor and Indian Commissioner of the North-West Territories (NWT), roles he served in until 1888. In 1882, Dewdney was behind the decision to move the territorial capital from Battleford to Wascana (Regina),<sup>7</sup> where he owned real estate adjacent to the

use the Davin Report as a guide, Dewdney established the industrial schools. He oversaw the construction of the schools; however, actual construction costs far exceeded Dewdney's estimates. "By September 1884, the total construction costs of the two Industrial schools (High River and Qu'Appelle) had reached \$29,920."<sup>7</sup> Further, the problems of refitting the former governor's single family residence at Battleford into a residential school persisted throughout the life of the school. Regarding finance, Dewdney's instruction to the first Battleford principal, Thomas Clarke, was clear: "I need scarcely inform you that the strictest economy must be practised in all particulars."<sup>8</sup> Dewdney continued to underestimate operation costs for the schools. His spending cuts in 1889 and 1891 "did not take into account the actual costs of running the schools."<sup>9</sup> Despite repeated salary reductions, the schools could not survive on the per capita grant, which had been put in effect in 1895. Both the High River and Qu'Appelle schools emerged from the first year on the per capita system with deficits. Dewdney believed industrial spending was "unnecessarily high."<sup>10</sup> He believed that efficiency had to increase and schools would need to graduate more students.

Dewdney acknowledged that recruiting students was problematic in his 1884 report, writing that even after the children had been cared for in the kindest manner, "...some parents, prompted by unaccountable freaks of the most childish nature, demand a return of their children to their own shanties to suffer from cold and hunger."<sup>11</sup> Parents were expressing appropriate emotions at the taking of their children, and they were rightly concerned that the schools would obliterate language and culture, preparing children for the "white man's" life, in which they would be used as free labour. They were afraid their children would not go back to the reserves. Because Dewdney reasoned that the industrial schools would benefit "Indians," he viewed the parents as short-sighted and selfish, explaining that their resistance to sending their children to school was due to a "peculiar nature, being a creature of the present moment and failing to witness immediate results to his own benefit, as well as prompted, in many instances, by a selfish desire to retain constantly about him the slight labour which his children may afford him."<sup>12</sup> Dewdney believed attendance would inevitably become compulsory, but that it should be introduced gradually after Indigenous peoples became accustomed to the restrictions of their reserves. Dewdney thought it "highly desirable...to obtain entire possession of all Indian children after they attain to the age of seven or eight years, and keep them at schools of the industrial type until they have had a thorough course of instruction."<sup>13</sup>

Dewdney supposed the "half-day system," which meant students worked for half the day and attended class for half the day, would allow the school to become self-supporting. However, this model "came close to turning the schools into child labour camps."<sup>14</sup> Further, the model didn't work. The schools never became self-supporting.

As for the high percentage of illness in the schools, Dewdney shared the commonly held (and incorrect) view of his time. In 1886, he wrote, "A large percentage of the sickness and consequent death-rate, is directly due to hereditary disease, which had its origin at the time prior to that at which our responsibility began." He argued that the increase in death rate could be due to improved record keeping. He coldly suggested the increased death rate was part of the price that First Nations had to pay to become civilized.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/dewdney\\_edgar\\_14E.html](http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/dewdney_edgar_14E.html)

<sup>2</sup> The History, Part 1. Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 112

<sup>3</sup> The History, Part 1. Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 123

<sup>4</sup> The History, Part 1. Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 159

<sup>5</sup> The Legacy, Vol. 5, p. 12

<sup>6</sup> The Legacy, Vol. 5, pp. 12

<sup>7</sup> The History, Part 1. Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 217

<sup>8</sup> The History, Part 1. Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 162

<sup>9</sup> The History, Part 1. Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 218

<sup>10</sup> The History, Part 1. Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 218

<sup>11</sup> The History, Part 1. Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 249

<sup>12</sup> The History, Part 1. Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, pp. 247-248

<sup>13</sup> The History, Part 1. Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 198

<sup>14</sup> The History, Part 1. Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 163

<sup>15</sup> The History, Part 1. Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 387