

DUNCAN CAMPBELL SCOTT: A MORE COMPULSORY APPROACH TO ATTENDANCE AT SCHOOL



Ottawa-born Duncan Campbell Scott has a mixed legacy. Scott's career with Indian Affairs started when, during an interview with Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald in 1879, he was employed by him as a copying clerk. By 1913, he had attained the position of deputy minister of Indian Affairs, the highest non-elected position in the department.

Duncan Campbell Scott, Dupras & Colas, Library and Archives Canada/C-003187

put in place a more compulsory approach to enforcing attendance in day, boarding, or residential school for Indigenous school-aged children. On paper, "school-aged" included children up to the age of 16, but in practice Scott directed that children were not to be discharged until the age of 18. Before a parliamentary committee examining proposed amendments to the *Indian Act*, Scott outlined the department's long-term goals: "I want to get rid of the Indian problem. I do not think as a matter of fact, that this country ought to continuously protect a class of people who are able to stand alone. That is my whole point. I do not want to pass into the citizens' class people who are paupers. That is not the intention of the Bill. But after one hundred years, after being in close contact with civilization it is enervating to the individual or to a band to continue in that state of tutelage, when he or they are able to take their position as British citizens or Canadian citizens, to support themselves, and stand alone. That has been the whole purpose of Indian education and advancement since the earliest times. One of the very earliest enactments was to provide for the enfranchisement of the Indian. So it was written into our law that the Indian was eventually to become enfranchised. ...our object is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department that is the whole object of this Bill." Scott was clearly committed to the

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colonial project.¹ Accordingly, throughout his term, Scott worked on amendments to the *Indian Act*, which increased the power of the department over First Nations.

Scott seemed intent on covering over residential school issues that became public. In response to a reporter who questioned him about cruel treatment and a lack of food after a student complained at St. Barnabas Indian Residential School (Onion Lake), Scott made the incredible statement that "ninety-nine per cent of the Indian children at these schools are too fat."² In reality, Scott was aware that there had been ongoing concerns about the quality of food at St. Barnabas Indian Residential School. As a government official, with churches operating the schools, Scott did not, however, have authority to fire principals or staff.

Scott is also considered one of Canada's major poets, and his poetry is included in the *Saskatchewan curriculum*. Some of his poems portray a sensitivity to experiences of Indigenous peoples that seems to contradict his colonial ideals. (i. e., "A Scene at Lake Manitou" written in 1933, explores the thoughts and feelings of an Indigenous woman struggling to deal with the effects of 'civilization' on her dying family. Also, his poem "Forsaken," is about an Indigenous woman who has fulfilled her purpose as a mother and is left behind to die: He wrote, "Then there was born a silence deeper than silence, Then she had rest.")³ Scott's poetry conveys deep feeling about the plight of the First Nations people he governed, yet his firm belief in assimilation as the "solution," and perhaps a belief in the myth that there was nothing to be done for a disappearing people, seems to have blinded him to the effects of colonization, and to his own contributions to their suffering.

¹ The History, Part 2: 1939 to 2000, Vol. 1, p. 289

² The History, Part 1. Origins to 1939, Vol. 1, p. 508

³ Scott's poems could be used to explore the complexity of issues of assimilation and Indian residential schooling. For instance, "Healing the Wound: Cultural Compromise in D. C. Scott's 'A Scene at Lake Manitou'" explores the poem critically.

School benches at site of Qu'Appelle Indian Industrial School, 2016, Shuana Niessen

"The time I had devoted to reclaiming Michif language and learning about Métis history was spent on a bench that once stood in a residential school." ~Tricia Logan, whose grandmother and several members of her Métis family attended the Qu'Appelle Indian Residential School. (From Truth to Reconciliation, p. 72)