

# “[T]he teacher that cannot understand their language should not be allowed”: Colonialism, Resistance, and Female Mi’kmaw Teachers in New Brunswick Day Schools, 1900–1923

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## Résumé de l'article

Entre 1903 et 1923, les soeurs Mary, Rebecca, Martha, Margaret et Alma Isaacs ainsi que Rita Gédéon ont quitté leur foyer de Restigouche au Québec pour aller enseigner dans des externats fédéraux se trouvant sur des réserves amérindiennes du Nouveau-Brunswick. Possédant le statut “d’Indien”, ces femmes d’origine mi’kmaw faisaient figure d’exception dans le système fédéral d’externats pour Amérindiens puisque le gouvernement n’embauchait que rarement, et à reculons, des « Indiennes » comme enseignantes. Les soeurs Isaacs et Rita Gédéon se sont ainsi retrouvées dans une position ambiguë par rapport au projet colonial canadien. Devant transmettre aux élèves mi’kmaw des messages favorisant leur assimilation aussi bien à l’intérieur qu’à l’extérieur des salles de classe, elles ont participé à renforcer le projet colonial canadien. Néanmoins, elles ont aussi utilisé leur position au sein des externats pour miner de l’intérieur ce même projet. En exigeant l’emploi de la langue mi’kmaw dans les classes et en défiant les directives et les protocoles émis par le gouvernement fédéral, ces enseignantes ont mis en lumière la complexité et l’aspect contradictoire des motivations, des intentions et des relations qui ont façonné le colonialisme canadien et nous révèlent la participation peu reconnue des femmes amérindiennes à ce processus.

# “[T]he teacher that cannot understand their language should not be allowed”: Colonialism, Resistance, and Female Mi’kmaq Teachers in New Brunswick Day Schools, 1900–1923

MARTHA E. WALLS

## *Abstract*

*Between 1903 and 1923, sisters Mary, Rebecca, Martha, Margaret, and Alma Isaacs and Rita Gédéon, left their homes in Restigouche, Quebec, to teach in federal Indian day schools on New Brunswick Indian Reserves. As Mi’kmaq women, their “Indian” status not only made them anomalies in a federal day school system that only rarely and reluctantly hired “Indians” as teachers, it also placed them in complicated positions on the frontline of Canada’s colonialist project. Tasked with imparting to Mi’kmaq students an array of assimilatory messages both within and outside of the classroom, these six teachers bolstered Canada’s colonialist agenda. In other ways, however, the women used their positions in federal schools to undermine this same colonial agenda. By insisting on the use of the Mi’kmaq language in their classrooms, and by challenging the directives of federal officials and government protocol, the Isaacs sisters and Rita Gédéon remind us of the complex and competing motives, intentions and relationships that shaped Canadian colonialism and reveal that Aboriginal women were involved in ways rarely considered.*

## *Résumé*

*Entre 1903 et 1923, les sœurs Mary, Rebecca, Martha, Margaret et Alma Isaacs ainsi que Rita Gédéon ont quitté leur foyer de Restigouche au Québec pour aller enseigner dans des externats fédéraux se trouvant sur des réserves amérindiennes du Nouveau-Brunswick. Possédant le statut “d’Indien”, ces femmes d’origine mi’kmaq faisaient figure d’exception dans le système fédéral d’externats pour Amérindiens puisque le gouver-*

*nement n'embauchait que rarement, et à reculons, des « Indiennes » comme enseignantes. Les sœurs Isaacs et Rita Gédéon se sont ainsi retrouvées dans une position ambiguë par rapport au projet colonial canadien. Devant transmettre aux élèves mi'kmaw des messages favorisant leur assimilation aussi bien à l'intérieur qu'à l'extérieur des salles de classe, elles ont participé à renforcer le projet colonial canadien. Néanmoins, elles ont aussi utilisé leur position au sein des externats pour miner de l'intérieur ce même projet. En exigeant l'emploi de la langue mi'kmaw dans les classes et en défiant les directives et les protocoles émis par le gouvernement fédéral, ces enseignantes ont mis en lumière la complexité et l'aspect contradictoire des motivations, des intentions et des relations qui ont façonné le colonialisme canadien et nous révèlent la participation peu reconnue des femmes amérindiennes à ce processus.*

Between 1903 and 1923 sisters Mary, Rebecca, Martha, Margaret, and Alma Isaacs, and Rita Gédéon left their homes in Restigouche, Québec, to teach in federal Indian day schools on New Brunswick's Kingsclear, Burnt Church, Eel Ground, and Big Cove Indian Reserves.<sup>1</sup> Young, unmarried, and provincially certified, these women typified federal Indian reserve day school teachers. However, they differed from their Indian day school colleagues in one important respect: all were Mi'kmaq and thus were "Indians" under federal law. Employed by a Canadian government that, unlike its counterpart in the United States, did not overtly endorse the hiring Indian teachers and did so only reluctantly, all six women found themselves working on the front lines of Canada's colonization project as teachers in a school system designed to undermine the cultures of Aboriginal people.<sup>2</sup> Acting as what Lisa Emmerich terms "certified civilizers," these Indian teachers were, in important ways, complicit in Ottawa's assimilative agenda for their own people.<sup>3</sup> However, their place in the colonialist project was complicated. While these teachers bolstered the assimilative mandate of federal day schools, they also contested Ottawa's colonialist agenda by insisting on Mi'kmaq-language instruction and in other ways challenging school regulations and protocols. The stories of these six teachers remind us that colonization was not only a messy process featuring conflicting and conflicted motives, intentions, and relationships, but

that it was also a process shaped by women, including those of Aboriginal origin.

The experiences of the Isaacs sisters and Rita Gédéon offer an opportunity to place Aboriginal women within the larger “story” of Canadian colonialism, a tale told primarily by, and from the perspectives of, men.<sup>4</sup> The records of the federal Department of Indian Affairs (DIA), the federal department assigned the task of administering Indians in Canada, narrate a colonial relationship that anthropologist Dorothee Schreiber calls a “network of power,” a predominantly male network linking DIA bureaucrats, field workers, and, to lesser extent, Aboriginal people.<sup>5</sup> Only a very small number of women, almost all of whom were non-Aboriginal teachers, nurses, and field matrons, were part of this network; even though they worked for the DIA, their voices were sublimated to those of the men who supervised their employment.<sup>6</sup> Aboriginal men, too, occupied a limited place in this network as their gender enabled them to hold sanctioned public positions in Ottawa’s colonization projects. While Aboriginal men were subject to extraordinary controls, their formal place in this “network of power” nevertheless gave them a voice and (leverage to resistance) that Aboriginal women lacked.<sup>7</sup> Although the non-Aboriginal women hired by the state/church to direct the assimilation of Aboriginal women sometimes championed their women’s interests in ways that contradicted colonial objectives, Aboriginal women themselves were virtually non-existent within this network of power.<sup>8</sup> The very few Indian women who participated actively in the colonial project — a select group that includes the Isaacs sisters and Rita Gédéon — serve as an important corrective to the extraordinary gender and race imbalance that has shaped the telling of colonialism in Canada.<sup>9</sup>

The stories of these teachers are particularly important given that Aboriginal women were not only silenced within the apparatus of colonialism, but that their entire place in the colonialist project received slight commentary. Such silence does not, however, mean that Aboriginal women were incidental to colonialism. As many scholars have emphasized, Aboriginal women were integral to a colonial project that specially targeted their private family and sexual lives, a realm that historian Anne Stoler refers to as women’s “intimate spaces.”<sup>10</sup> In the attempt to reform Aboriginal home life, white middle-class colonizers

saw the imposition of monogamy and patriarchal nuclear family units as the remedy to a moral and social “disorder” said to result from open expressions of female sexuality and extended kinship networks that prevailed in Aboriginal communities.<sup>11</sup> As wives and mothers, Aboriginal women were highly sought after because of their capacity to act as what Beatrice Medicine calls “change agents” — individuals whose compliance with colonial undertakings was to become a powerful example to their families and communities.<sup>12</sup> Officials’ silence, however, belied the integral place of women in colonization programs. Colonizers, steeped in their patriarchal middle class values, believed that the transformations that occurred in Aboriginal women’s private lives were so “natural” as to require neither enunciation nor ideological or legal justification.<sup>13</sup> As women employed in the assimilative project that was aimed at their own people, the experiences of the Isaacs sisters and Rita Gédéon provide insight into the central place of Aboriginal women in the overall colonialist project.

The six teachers of this study are part of a small minority of Aboriginal people — and an even smaller group of Aboriginal women — whose names and life circumstances appear in DIA records. Their positions as teachers made them objects of government interest and scrutiny, and their teaching careers, and sometimes their private lives, were chronicled in government correspondence and memoranda. They also were among a minority of literate Mi’kmaw people (male or female) who, whether unaware of or unconcerned with a government proscription against their direct communication with the DIA, exchanged correspondence directly with federal officials. While their story illustrates the assimilative educational mandate that these women were hired to perpetuate, it also reveals the ways in which these women subverted the colonialist agenda. Read carefully, DIA records pertaining to and written by these six teachers testify to the ways in which Mi’kmaw women joined their male counterparts in protesting and resisting Canadian colonialism.

Beginning in 1867 and continuing even after the 1928 opening of the Maritimes’ only Indian Residential School at Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia, most Mi’kmaw children who attended school did so in federally built, operated and monitored Indian day schools.<sup>14</sup> While day schooling has been the object of far less attention than the Indian

Residential School system, until the mid-twentieth century these small, reserve-centred school houses taught the majority of Canada's Aboriginal children who received educations. As Andrea Bear Nicholas has argued, these on-reserve school houses shared the residential schools' mandate of eradicating the cultures of Aboriginal people.<sup>15</sup> A cursory glance at the mandated programme for day schools confirms this fact. When the DIA outlined the lessons that should prevail in day schools in 1895, the use of the English language was paramount. Teachers were instructed to make "every effort ... to induce pupils to speak English and to teach them to understand it."<sup>16</sup> This focus on English-language training was, as Ruth Spack has observed, intended to simultaneously "control the way colonized people perceived themselves" and to undermine Aboriginal political sovereignty.<sup>17</sup> To this same end, "ethics" lessons were designed to impose deference and order on the allegedly chaotic and "uncivilized" lives of Aboriginal pupils — these included such things as "obedience, respect, order and neatness," "Indian and white life," and "the Evils of Indian Isolation."<sup>18</sup> Reflecting the importance of Roman Catholicism among the Mi'kmaq, New Brunswick day school teachers were also expected to offer Roman Catholic religious teachings.

While they were central to the federal government's assimilationist Indian education goals, Maritime Indian day schools were profoundly flawed. At the most basic level, there were simply not enough of them to educate Aboriginal children who lived in communities spread across the region. In 1901, only 14 of the 54 reserves in the Maritimes had a school and, owing to factors such as poverty and the seasonal mobility of the Mi'kmaq, just 18 percent of school-aged children attended school "regularly" according to DIA statistics.<sup>19</sup> In addition, by design day schools had a limited educational mandate, offering instruction only to grade six. Schools were also seriously undermined by DIA parsimony. In the interest of economy, day school buildings, where they existed (classes were commonly held in rented rooms of homes), were in poor condition and inadequately provisioned, conditions that impeded classroom instruction.<sup>20</sup>

Day school staffing also undermined their operation. In the Maritimes, applicants for teaching positions were vetted and selected by DIA field officials, frequently in consultation with local Roman

Catholic clergy who vouched for the “characters” of candidates. Teacher hiring, like other aspects of the schools’ operation, was greatly affected by budgetary constraints.<sup>21</sup> To save money, Ottawa preferred less-qualified teachers with second or third class teaching licences — and sometimes settled for teachers without licences at all.<sup>22</sup> Such teachers would work for less pay than those with more advanced first-class teaching licenses, who were better able to secure positions in higher-paying provincial schools. The budgetary concerns of the DIA were well-served by the nineteenth-century trend toward the feminization of school teaching in the Maritimes. By the early twentieth century, federal day schools were, like provincial schools, overwhelmingly staffed by females. By virtue of their gender, these women were not only regarded as being specially suited to the nurturing of school-aged children, but could also be paid less than men.<sup>23</sup>

The hiring of the Isaacs sisters and Rita Gédéon accorded with the tendency to employ women as school teachers. However, the hiring of Indian women ran contrary to entrenched federal practice and is explained by conditions unique to the early-twentieth-century Maritimes. In the opening decades of the twentieth century, the DIA struggled to fill positions in Maritime day schools as young female teachers left the region in droves for higher-paid teaching opportunities elsewhere in Canada and the United States, exhausting local pools of teachers for all schools.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, those would-be teachers who remained in the region favoured provincial schools which were less isolated and offered higher salaries. New Brunswick Indian School Inspector Father F.C. Ryan, who was in charge of the province’s federal day schools in the early decades of the twentieth century when the Isaacs and Gédéon held their positions, regularly cited these circumstances. He suggested that the DIA take the unusual step of employing Indian teachers only because these schools were “so far removed from white people [it] makes it hard to find a good teacher to teach” and because “the inducements [for teachers] in the West are greater than [work for] the Dept. at present seems to offer.”<sup>25</sup>

Poor conditions prevailing in reserve schools and housing also prevented the staffing of day schools with white teachers. The school

at Big Cove was in particularly rough shape. In October 1921, a report by Inspector Ryan lambasted its condition, calling it “tragic in the extreme” and highlighting the fact that the desk of the teacher — then Martha Isaacs — was “but an old table and the schoolroom but a mere woodshed.”<sup>26</sup> The teacher’s boarding conditions were little better; Ryan explained that although he had promised Martha “a good home ... all newly arranged,” she arrived to find a “teacher’s apartment ... so filthy that she was forced to get rooms in the Chief’s house.”<sup>27</sup> Local officials frequently asserted that no white woman would work under such circumstances. In 1914, Inspector Ryan predicted that hiring a white teacher at Big Cove would be difficult as the “SCHOOL HOUSE and Teacher’s house is such that no white girl would go there.”(emphasis in original)<sup>28</sup> Similarly, in 1920, when asked to comment on the hiring of a new teacher at Burnt Church, Parish Priest R.W. Dixon suggested, “An Indian school does not appeal to our white race of the Irish school of thought.”<sup>29</sup> The idea that Aboriginal women, more than Anglo-Canadian ones, were equipped to cope with harsh living and working conditions reflects the contradictory place that these Mi’kmaq school teachers filled in the DIA’s mandate. On one hand, as educated young women, they were to be an uplifting force of civilization on reserves. But on the other, the fact that they were Indians allowed for racial stereotypes that cast them as savages capable of withstanding uncivilized conditions that would be intolerable to non-Aboriginal teachers.

The Isaacs sisters — Mary (b. 1878), Margaret (Maggie, b. 1889), Alma (b. 1895), Martha (b. 1897), and Rebecca (b. 1899) — were the children of Isaac and Mary Isaacs of Restigouche, Québec, the site of an important Roman Catholic mission. Forging the way for her younger sisters, in 1895 Mary Isaacs became the first Mi’kmaq person to receive teaching certification when she graduated with a first and second class teacher’s license.<sup>30</sup> With the possible exception of Alma — for whom the record is unclear — the Isaacs sisters were all convent-educated and earned teacher certification. Rita Gédéon (b. 1898) followed a similar educational path. She attended Mary Isaacs’ day school at Restigouche, Québec, and, like the Isaacs sisters, attended convent school to earn a first- class teaching license.<sup>31</sup>



The exceptional educational attainment by these women was not typical of Mi'kmaw students. Many Mi'kmaw children lived in communities without day schools, and, as noted above, even those with access to school faced serious educational impediments. Consequently, few Mi'kmaw children made it through the day schools' six-year program, and only rarely did the DIA support the education of the brightest students beyond grade six. In the case of the Isaacs sisters, it appears that the high esteem with which the Department and ecclesiastical officials at the Restigouche mission held their father, the unfailing support of their mother, Mary Isaacs Sr., and the obvious scholastic abilities of the girls themselves, inspired Ottawa to finance their educations.<sup>32</sup> Rita Gédéon's situation is less clear, but it was probably her connection to the Isaacs (she was a pupil of Mary) and her aptitude as a student that inspired the department to fund her education as well.

These women's uncommonly accomplished educations enabled them to work as teachers at a time when employment opportunities for Mi'kmaw women were very limited. By the early twentieth century, Mi'kmaw communities were attached to shrinking land bases where resources were over-harvested and access to those that remained were marred by growing legal impediments. In these circumstances, the Mi'kmaq increasingly turned to waged labour.<sup>33</sup> Job opportunities for all Mi'kmaw people were largely unskilled and low-paying and those available to women were particularly limited. Because low-paying and stigmatized work as domestics was virtually the only wage-earning possibility for Mi'kmaw women, the prospect of teaching for annual salaries that ranged between \$300 and \$450 must have appealed to the Isaacs sisters and Gédéon. Like other young women who left home to teach school or to otherwise work for wages, their salaries were probably greatly needed by their families.<sup>34</sup> Had they been able to find work in provincial schools, positions for which they were fully qualified, they might have earned more. However, the entrenched racism of the first decades of the twentieth century guaranteed that the employment of Indian teachers in white schools was all but unthinkable.<sup>35</sup>

The six teachers considered in this study never expressed in writing their motivations, expectations, or misgivings about their

work as teachers. However, the incentive to earn a relatively high salary doing respectable work must have factored heavily in the decisions of the Isaacs sisters and Rita Gédéon to work as teachers. Practical incentives, however, seem to have dovetailed with more ideological interests. As women who themselves had succeeded in school, they likely valued the chance to share with children an appreciation of learning and to extend to students the life opportunities they enjoyed as a consequence of their own educations. As individuals who appreciated and benefited from their schooling, they doubtless appreciated some aspects of the state's educational agenda. However, based on what we know of their work in the classroom, particularly their insistence on the use of the Mi'kmaq language and their willingness to challenge federal officials and DIA protocol, these teachers also criticized the assimilative objective that was the mandate of federal day schools.

Between the turn of the century and the early 1920s, the Isaacs sisters and Gédéon were extremely popular; New Brunswick Mi'kmaq communities regularly petitioned to have them hired at their schools. In all, Margaret Isaacs taught in New Brunswick day schools for eight years, as did her sister Rebecca. Mary Isaacs taught for seven years, Martha Isaacs for four, Rita Gédéon for two, and Alma Isaacs for just part of a school year. During their careers they must have shaped school cultures at key New Brunswick reserves; collectively between 1903 and 1923, the women taught at the Eel Ground school for 11 years, at Big Cove for nine years, at Burnt Church for five years, at Red Bank for three years, and at Kingsclear for one year.<sup>36</sup>

The federal objective of day schools was to facilitate the assimilation of Aboriginal people, and in some ways these teachers reinforced what historian Lynda A. Curwen Doige calls the "civilizing agenda."<sup>37</sup> All six women were fluent in French and English and, having attended convent schools and grown up at the Restigouche mission, were well-equipped to reinforce the English language as well as the tenants of Catholicism. Their hiring was heavily scrutinized by the DIA, which demanded and received endorsements of the women from ecclesiastical and government field officials before hiring them. Such scrutiny continued once the women were on the job. Day school

teachers, especially women and most especially Aboriginal women, found themselves subject to rigorous community and departmental surveillance of not only their classroom work, but also of their private lives and their “moral fibre.” For example, Rita Gédéon’s first stint at Big Cove ended in 1918 after she contracted Spanish Influenza and was hospitalized. At the end of a months-long recuperation, Gédéon was dismissed. However, it was not her teaching performance, poor health, or prolonged absence that led to her firing. Instead, Gédéon was terminated because, as the local agent phrased it, she “is not of good moral character.”<sup>38</sup> Although short on detail and evidence, the agent’s accusation led to Rita Gédéon being fired at Big Cove.

The spotlight shone on Gédéon’s morality was typical. All day school teachers, and indeed all DIA employees — Aboriginal or not — were expected to model morally-upstanding behaviours. For women, the bar for appropriate decorum was set particularly high and emphasized their sexual morality; Aboriginal women faced a particularly strident version of this expectation.<sup>39</sup> While eurocentric stereotypes had long emphasized the allegedly innate immorality of Aboriginal women, this notion was invigorated in the early twentieth century. In an era during which urban reserves competed with growing Canadian cities for increasingly valuable land, the morality of Aboriginal women became a matter of expanded public discourse.<sup>40</sup> An often used tactic in securing and justifying the removal of Indians from contested urban lands across the country was to present female residents of urban reserves as dangerous deviants who threatened the very moral fabric of neighbouring urban centres.<sup>41</sup> So prevalent was this stereotype and the perceived threat posed by Indian women that in 1921 the federal minister of justice proposed that Ottawa “make it an offence for any white man to have illicit connection with an Indian woman.”<sup>42</sup>

In this climate, female Mi’kmaq school teachers found themselves especially susceptible to charges of moral failings. The fact that they (unlike their non-Aboriginal counterparts) tended to board in the communities in which they taught increased their susceptibility to surveillance and to real (or fabricated) criticisms of their behavior and morality. Rebecca Isaacs felt this first hand in 1922 when she was accused of “bringing [to the reserve] young men from surrounding

districts” and “keeping up noises till a late hour at night.”<sup>43</sup> Calling the accusations false, Rebecca asserted that the allegations made against her by the chief at Eel Ground were part of a personal vendetta to “chase me away.”<sup>44</sup> To avoid further trouble with the chief and, perhaps, also the surveillance that came with living on the reserve, Rebecca Isaacs, in a rare move for a Mi'kmaq teacher, opted to board off reserve.<sup>45</sup>

The focus on the morality of the Isaacs sisters and Gédéon reflected the fact that they were specially chosen for their suitability to impart to students appropriate moral, spiritual, and academic lessons. While we can know little of their day-to-day school activities, we do know that their work was regularly praised as matching or exceeding that being done in other federal day schools. Given that the schools held by these teachers tended to be among the most poorly equipped, this was regarded as a success.

Although precisely what went on in their classrooms remains a mystery, these teachers endorsed federal policy by following the Euro-Canadian school model and by relying on federal texts and resources. However, this was not the only way they promoted the state's assimilationist agenda. By the twentieth century, the federal government encouraged female day school teachers to take their surveillance and instruction into Aboriginal women's “intimate spaces” by entering their households. There, female teachers could offer domestic instruction — sewing, cooking, childcare, and housekeeping. They were, as historian Kathryn McPherson puts it, to “spread the gospel of hygiene.”<sup>46</sup> This objective was clearly enunciated by New Brunswick School Inspector F.C. Ryan in the summer of 1920 when he urged day school teachers to “devote some time after school hours to Domestic Science, visit families, and encourage and stimulate a new and much more vigorous life among [the Mi'kmaq].”<sup>47</sup> A similar mis-sive came from DIA Secretary J.D. McLean, who asserted that the teachers should “visit the families, especially the Indian women, and instruct them in the proper care of their homes and children.”<sup>48</sup>

The Isaacs sisters and Rita Gédéon met their employers' expectations by imparting this “civilizing agenda” beyond classroom walls. In March 1910, for example, Margaret Isaacs followed DIA instructions to buy clothing for needy students and to forward to the DIA

the names of parents who were unable to provide for their children.<sup>49</sup> Margaret also taught girls sewing at Eel Ground — lessons she extended to others on the reserve. In October of 1912, the local Indian agent proposed (and secured) a wage increase for Margaret and informed his superiors in Ottawa:

Miss Isaacs is doing efficient work not only in her school but with the band generally and that the same should be recognized. When in conversation with her some few days ago, she informed me that she intended getting the Indian women together and was going to lecture to them about cooking and dressmaking etc, in fact she has been assisting them all along in similar work. The children of her school are kept clean and are neat and tidy.<sup>50</sup>

Margaret's younger sister, Martha, also engaged in this line of extracurricular activity. When Martha took up work in 1921 as teacher at Big Cove, she was offered a regular salary of \$400 plus an additional \$100 for teaching of domestic science to students and women of the community.<sup>51</sup>

These teachers' complicity in this aspect of Ottawa's assimilative school policy should not, however, be read as an endorsement of Ottawa's colonialist agenda. As historian Anne Gere has noted in an American context, Aboriginal school teachers' fulfillment of certain school practices "did not mean embracing the official policies of cultural annihilation or of full assimilation." In important ways, these school teachers "worked actively against" such policies while "maintaining standards acceptable to their ... employers."<sup>52</sup> Indeed, a consideration of the six teachers' work in day schools in New Brunswick suggests that they challenged core values and objectives of day school policy.

The use of the Mi'kmaw language in schools was one of the key sites where the Isaacs sisters and Gédéon contested the DIA's assimilative day school mandate. When the federal government stressed the importance of English-language instruction in 1895, it informed its day school teachers that failure to conduct classes English meant that "the whole work of the teacher is likely to be wasted."<sup>53</sup> English-

language instruction was at the core of colonialism; the undermining of Aboriginal language was deemed necessary for the cultural assimilation of Aboriginal people. Somewhat surprisingly, Ottawa seems not to have considered that Aboriginal language use might support its own assimilative educational agenda or increase its own powers of surveillance by creating classroom environments in which students' Mi'kmaq speech could be understood by a state agent. Echoing Lisa Emmerich's observation of federal Indian administration in the United States, it is evident that the DIA stalwartly opposed the use of Aboriginal languages, viewing it as "a potential challenge to federal authority and evidence of an embarrassing 'return to the blanket'."<sup>54</sup> Ottawa's concern about the continued use of Aboriginal languages in Canada persisted into the twentieth century. While the Mi'kmaq were fluent in spoken English and readily communicated with their non-Aboriginal neighbours, employers, and co-workers, they continued to use Mi'kmaq at home. DIA officials surely knew this as the federal census of 1901 revealed that the Mi'kmaq language continued to be the "mother tongue" to the overwhelming majority of Mi'kmaq people.<sup>55</sup> Such a revelation would have reinforced for Ottawa the importance of English-language instruction.

Unlike Ottawa-based bureaucrats who saw Aboriginal language use being patently anathema to the state's assimilative agenda, Mi'kmaq people valued the use of their language in the classroom and lobbied for the employment of teachers who could speak Mi'kmaq to their pupils. For example, in 1915, the community at Big Cove petitioned to hire Alma Isaacs with the rationale that "Miss Isaacs speaks the Micmac language and we know that more children will attend and that those who attend will make better progress in their studies with a teacher who is able to explain the work to them in their own language than they do now when all the teaching is done in a strange tongue."<sup>56</sup> Similarly, in 1923, a community leader at Big Cove asserted, "[t]he teacher that cannot understand their language should not be allowed" to teach.<sup>57</sup>

The importance placed by Mi'kmaq communities on the use of their own language in schools undoubtedly served a myriad of overlapping — and perhaps even contradictory — objectives. At the most basic level, the Mi'kmaq had long endorsed the schooling of their

children as a means of coping with the life circumstances that came with colonization, and it was logical to assume that students would more readily grasp school lessons if they were conveyed in a familiar tongue. The use of the Mi'kmaw language in schools would also have served a practical purpose, for it was believed that children would more readily learn if instructed in their own language. When the Mi'kmaq argued to the DIA that their children "would make better progress in their studies," they may have been seeking to appeal to Ottawa's educational objectives as they made their own case for the hiring of Mi'kmaq-speaking teachers, but they also meant it. Moreover, it was argued by the Mi'kmaq that the day schools they valued would run more efficiently and with greater order and discipline if they were conducted in their own language. For example, in 1919, Chief Peter Lewis of Big Cove asserted that the school teacher who "does not talk our language" was unable to maintain discipline. The chief recounted how in the community's school "the big boys ... are talking a lot of Blagdart [*sic*: blackguard] talk [in Mi'kmaq] to the girls in the school, and the Teacher don[']t know it." So dire was the situation that the chief reported, "if we don't get a change of Teacher, we have decided to close the School, as the language used in our School is so bad, that we, who have girls going to it, cannot stand it any longer."<sup>58</sup> In 1923, Big Cove Chief Joseph Sanipass similarly contended that a Mi'kmaq-speaking teacher must be hired in the interest of school discipline; under the previous teacher, who could not speak Mi'kmaq, the school's students "said words that should not be said by pupils of their age" and would "swear at the teacher and mock her." Sanipass continued, the teacher "only stands there and laugh[s] at them, for she do[es] not understand them; so it is very hard for her to be able to correct them." The chief had a replacement teacher in mind: Rita Gédéon, who was newly married to Peter Clare of Big Cove. Sanipass believed that since Gédéon understood "the three languages, English, French and Indian," she would facilitate the success of the school his community so valued.<sup>59</sup>

While Mi'kmaw communities clearly endorsed the educational opportunities afforded their children through the use of Mi'kmaq in their schools, it is also clear that it served the broader agenda of preserving Mi'kmaw autonomy at a time when state policies were

bearing down on their communities. It was no accident that children reached school age with a fluency in the Mi'kmaw language; parents clearly saw the Mi'kmaw language as a means of connecting children to their families, their histories, and their culture, and they wanted it to be reinforced at school. Just as the state viewed the erasure of Aboriginal language as key to assimilation, the Mi'kmaq saw its continuation as being important to their cultural survival. Like other First Nations in Canada, they recognized that the maintenance of their language assisted them in resisting the full impact of colonization. This is revealed by the way the Mi'kmaq dealt with the state in other contexts during this era. For example, when the state implemented an elective band council system in 1899, the Mi'kmaq countered this imposed political system's assimilative agenda by maintaining the use of their own language in band council elections and activities. This not only tagged Mi'kmaw political actions as their own, it also kept the prying eyes and ears of state officials (who could not speak Mi'kmaq) from understanding their political planning and allowed the Mi'kmaq to symbolically and practically temper the transformative objective of the band council system.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, Mi'kmaw children who attended the Shubenacadie Indian Residential School after its opening in 1928 used language as a tool of resistance. Students' use of the forbidden Mi'kmaw language, combined with the inability of teachers to understand it, enabled pupils to, symbolically at least, to undermine teacher authority by making them the objects of ridicule in a language only students understood.<sup>61</sup>

The Mi'kmaq received support for schools conducted in their own language from what might, on the surface, appear to be an unlikely source; local Indian agents broke ranks with Ottawa's official English-only school language policy. Although Indian agents were, as a whole, men who endorsed the federal government's colonialist agenda and whose day-to-day actions could profoundly limit the autonomy of Aboriginal people, the history of Canadian Indian policy is replete with examples of the ways in which local DIA agents also amended and tested the letter of DIA policy.<sup>62</sup> Field agents' endorsements of the use of the Mi'kmaw language in classrooms serves as just one of many examples of this phenomenon.<sup>63</sup> Agent George A. Hutchinson, for example, advocated hiring Martha Isaacs



at Big Cove in 1915 in part because she “speaks the Micmac language.”<sup>64</sup> Although Hutchinson did not offer a detailed defense of his endorsement, one can easily imagine why over-worked and under-paid Indian agents might have supported Mi’kmaq-speaking teachers. Agents were personally responsible for the staffing and daily monitoring of schools, and for dealing with the fallout of failed teachers and subsequent community discontent. Agents must have been attracted to the prospect of creating happy parents and stable schools, for such conditions would not only encourage student success, but would also ease agents’ own administrative loads.

The Isaacs sisters and Gédéon served the complex linguistic agenda of the communities in which they worked. Their use of the Mi’kmaq language fostered learning and their refusal to bend to state directives made them emblems of resistance. Not only did the teachers communicate with students in their mother tongue, they also taught the Mi’kmaq language as a distinct classroom subject. In 1909, for example, Indian Agent R.A. Irving wrote that Mary Isaacs “taught English, French, Micmac, also music, singing and knitting.”<sup>65</sup> A testimonial from Margaret Isaacs, meanwhile, emphasized her ability to “teach French and Micmac.”<sup>66</sup> Tellingly, these teachers also used the Mi’kmaq language even when specifically told not to by federal officials. In 1912, for instance, the Indian Agent at Eel Ground challenged Margaret Isaacs’ use of Mi’kmaq, suggesting that students should be “made to use English in their games and amusements” so that they “would do better in their classes.”<sup>67</sup> DIA Secretary J.D. McLean took up the cause and wrote directly to Margaret Isaacs, informing her that because students “will all use Indian at home ... they should be required to use English almost entirely while in the classroom or the vicinity of it.”<sup>68</sup> While Margaret Isaacs’ response, if she offered one, does not survive, she clearly did not stop using the Mi’kmaq language in her classroom. Indeed, the use of the Mi’kmaq language in classrooms intended to impart only English literacy remained a hallmark of the teaching approaches of Margaret Isaacs, her sisters and Rita Gédéon.

These day school teachers also challenged in other more subtle ways the assimilative imperative that underlay federal Indian school policy. The importance of having teachers who were themselves

Mi'kmaq was not lost on Mi'kmaq communities. The presence of Mi'kmaq school teachers — who could communicate to students in culturally-sensitive ways — served to reinforce the ethnic integrity of those communities at a time when the federal government was so clearly committed to eradicating Aboriginal cultures. Although these women were in a sense “outsiders,” hailing as they did from Restigouche, they also had cultural ties (in the case of Rita Gédéon, who married into a Big Cove family, kinship linkages) to the communities in which they worked. Since early twentieth-century Mi'kmaq society was fluid and mobility between Mi'kmaq communities was part of the rhythm of daily life, it is likely that before becoming teachers these women were familiar with, and had family connections to, the New Brunswick reserves on which they would teach. It is also significant that unlike their non-Aboriginal counterparts, these teachers usually lived in the communities in which they taught. The Mi'kmaq appreciated this and appeals to hire one of these women often drew on the cultural connection that existed between them and their students. In 1915, as Mary Isaacs Sr. appealed to the DIA for her daughter Martha to be hired at Big Cove, she alluded to the value that the Mi'kmaq placed on these cultural links when she noted that the community preferred “a teacher of their own race.”<sup>69</sup> Departmental officials interested in the success of day schools also endorsed the work of these teachers based on their cultural affiliation, believing that this shared connection between teacher and student would improve attendance and student work. New Brunswick Indian Agent J.J. Ryan was particularly committed to hiring day school teachers who were “more in touch with Indian characteristics.” For this reason, in 1917, he endorsed the hiring of Rebecca Isaacs and Rita Gédéon, of whom he wrote: “Being also of Indian extraction ... she may do better work on the ... Reserve than any white teacher available.”<sup>70</sup>

The hiring of these six Mi'kmaq women also served as a larger statement of Mi'kmaq resistance to DIA control. Federal Indian policy — and particularly school policy — was designed to undermine local self-determination and was premised on denying Aboriginal communities meaningful control over local affairs. However, Mi'kmaq communities saw the hiring of teachers as their rightful

prerogative and refused to surrender it to the DIA. Indeed, in 1923, band Councilor Noel Augustine of Big Cove contended that the selection of a teacher was a right specifically granted his community by the Treaty of 1752. In a letter to Minister of the Interior Charles Stewart, Augustine wrote, “By rights the Micmac Indians should be given their needs” as promised “when the treaty was made in 1752.” In this case, their need was the employment of Rita Clare [Gédéon], a “first class teacher ... of Micmac descent.”<sup>71</sup> Councilor Augustine was one of many elected band officials and concerned citizens who petitioned the DIA demanding — not asking for — the hiring of a Mi’kmaw teacher.<sup>72</sup> In 1920, the parish priest R.W. Dixon placed the lobbying for a Mi’kmaw teacher at Eel Ground within the context of a broader quest for autonomy when he informed DIA officials that “the Indians got it in their heads that ‘Self[-]determination’ should be the ideal and [so they] applied for an Indian [teacher].”<sup>73</sup> Dixon was on to something.

DIA responses to community requests for Mi’kmaw teachers reveal that this lobby was a relatively powerful one. While the strength of the colonialist state was strong, on the issue of hiring Mi’kmaw teachers the DIA routinely “gave in” to community demands — a response that was disconcerting to the DIA itself. For instance, in 1910, the Deputy Superintendent General of the DIA, Duncan Campbell Scott, informed Agent R.A. Irving that Margaret Isaacs would be hired at Eel Ground because “it would appear politic to try to please the Indians in making this appointment.” Scott continued, “In the present instance, the view of the strongly expressed wish of the Chief and Councilors, who are the leaders of their people and whose influence is essential to harmonious and effective work, for the appointment of Miss Isaac[s], I am afraid that any other course on the part of the Department would nullify any efforts to improve conditions on this reserve, which are not at present what they ought to be.”<sup>74</sup> While the hiring of a teacher to work in a federal day school served as an opportunity to increase state surveillance and control over that community, the DIA was more concerned that acquiescing to community demands might undermine governmental authority. When the secretary of the DIA, J.D. McLean, informed Chief Peter Tenass of Eel Ground that Margaret Isaacs had been hired “in defer-

ence to the expressed desired of the majority of the Indians," he was also quick to suggest that this action was not precedent-setting and that it should be regarded by the Mi'kmaw as a one-time favour. Community members, McLean advised, should "show their appreciation of its action by sending their children regularly to the school."<sup>75</sup> Although the hiring of Mi'kmaw teachers in compliance with community wishes was presented as an action that did not breach the ultimate authority of the DIA, it also fed Mi'kmaq understandings that school staffing was a matter of community decision-making.

Just as whole communities challenged DIA control of educational matters by demanding the hiring of Mi'kmaw teachers, so too did the Isaacs sisters and Rita Gédéon test the limits of federal authority. None of these women could be described as shrinking violets. All six left their homes at young ages to take up teaching positions in New Brunswick, working and living under difficult physical conditions and the watchful and judgmental eyes of the DIA and the communities in which they lived. In spite of such pressures and challenges, these six Mi'kmaw teachers acted with remarkable displays of independence, often refusing to bow to departmental officials or adhere to departmental protocol. In 1915, when stricken with a lung infection that caused her to take weeks off work at Eel Ground, Margaret Isaacs broke protocol and, without DIA sanction, personally arranged for her sister, Alma, to fill in as substitute.<sup>76</sup> When illness forced Margaret Isaacs to resign at Burnt Church in 1917, she acted in a similarly independent way and, again without DIA consultation, appointed her own successor — this time, her younger sister Rebecca.<sup>77</sup> Margaret's decision to hire Rebecca was tacitly endorsed by Inspector F.C. Ryan, who reported to the DIA that the Burnt Church School "is in competent hands, as ... Rebecca Isaacs, who now has charge, seems in every way fitted for the work."<sup>78</sup>

Inspector Ryan's support of these teaching women did not last. By the early 1920s, his endorsements of their abilities had turned to criticisms. In February 1922, Martha and Rebecca Isaacs, the only two Mi'kmaw women then still teaching in New Brunswick day schools, were forced, like many young women encumbered with the obligations of daughterhood, to attend to their ill mother who was in hospital in Campbellton, New Brunswick.<sup>79</sup> Inspector Ryan,

frustrated by the women's closures of the schools at Big Cove and Eel Ground, and by the independent actions of the women who closed their schools without sanction, complained to DIA Superintendent of Indian Education Russell Ferrier:

... both the Miss Isaacs are very independent. [Martha] knows well that no other teacher would go to Big Cove. Her sister Rebecca who teaches in the Eel Ground school ... went home twice and lost about three or four weeks, and so I am informed, [as I was] never as much telephoned. She & her sister state they do their business with Ottawa. I care nothing in this respect, but I do not want the schools to suffer. The Teachers should therefore be notified that they should in each and every case let me know when called away.<sup>80</sup>

Given Martha Isaacs' prolonged absence from Big Cove, the community lobbied for Rita Gédéon — by then a resident of the community — to fill in. Gédéon's own request for the position showed her to be as independent as the Isaacs sisters; she had no qualms about lobbying for a return to her former position or about criticizing Inspector Ryan. Gédéon forthrightly informed DIA Secretary J.D. McLean, "I have the right to teach in such schools for I belong to the Reserve and my parents had taken trouble for to have me educated." As Gédéon continued, she criticized Inspector Ryan and supported the right of her community to have a Mi'kmaw teacher. "The Inspector," she said, "is against our *nation* and only wants the one he pleases to teach the Indian schools but if an Indian gets an education and [is] not able to teach there is no need of having a school on the Reserve or for the children to go to school." (emphasis added)<sup>81</sup>

The tension that existed between Inspector Ryan and the Mi'kmaw school teachers in the early 1920s foretold a new direction in day schooling in New Brunswick; the era of Mi'kmaw day school teachers was drawing to a close. This shift was the product of a number of factors. First of all, personal circumstances ended the careers of these qualified women by the 1920s. Mary Isaacs was the first to leave when she resigned her position at Eel Ground on her marriage in

1909 at age 31.<sup>82</sup> Meanwhile, poor health forced Margaret to resign in 1917 and the need to care for Mary Isaacs Sr. took Martha Isaacs from her work in 1922.<sup>83</sup> Rita Gédéon likewise found her career ended, albeit involuntarily. When Martha Isaacs left Big Cove to attend to her mother, Gédéon was employed to fill in from March until June 1922. However, her hiring was strongly opposed by Inspector Ryan and when Gédéon applied for her position to be extended in the autumn of 1922, he undermined her initiative with the allegation that her work in the previous term had been “nothing less than a huge ‘FARCE’.” (emphasis in original)<sup>84</sup> Her marriage undoubtedly also impeded her hiring; teaching was the work of single women. Despite support from the community, Gédéon was not rehired and would never again teach in a day school.<sup>85</sup>

By the 1920s, it appears that the DIA was eager to dispense, on matter of principle, with the services of Mi'kmaw teachers. Thus, in 1921, when new day school hires were being considered, Secretary J.D. McLean on several occasions insisted that “the Department is not prepared to appoint an Indian girl as teacher.”<sup>86</sup> The dismissal of Rebecca Isaacs, the last of these six teachers, illustrates this trend. In May 1922, DIA Superintendent of Indian Education Russell T. Ferrier wrote Inspector Ryan “with a view to obtaining your opinion as to the desirability of dispensing with [Rebecca Isaacs’] services at the end of the present school year.” Ferrier continued, “We have recently got rid of her sister at Big Cove School, and if you consider that a more fully qualified teacher should be secured for the Eel Ground School after the summer holidays, it might be well to make a change.”<sup>87</sup> Ryan was receptive to this idea and in his inspection report for Eel Ground he suggested, “I would be better satisfied if this school could be placed in the hands of a good white teacher .... There will have to be a change.”<sup>88</sup> That spring Rebecca was transferred to Burnt Church where she served her final year before being released and replaced by a non-Aboriginal woman.

It is not surprising that the 1920s brought the end to two decades of Mi'kmaw teachers in New Brunswick day schools. By that time, teacher availability in the Maritimes had improved and the DIA had less difficulty securing non-Aboriginal teachers to staff schools. The 1920s also saw the DIA, under the management of Deputy

Superintendent General Duncan Campbell Scott, intensify its coercive efforts in an attempt to counteract perceived failures in its assimilative goals. By the end of World War I, Canada's policy of assimilation was widely regarded as a failure. Much to Ottawa's consternation, Indian people had not rushed to voluntarily enfranchise and Aboriginal languages and cultural practices had not been stamped out.<sup>89</sup> The response of Scott and the DIA was to strengthen their coercive tactics and in 1920 the Indian Act was amended to increase government powers.<sup>90</sup> The 1920 act was an overwhelming admission of policy failure and marked a particularly aggressive assimilatory agenda by introducing a mechanism for forced enfranchisement of male Indians and mandatory school attendance for Indian children.<sup>91</sup> Heightened coercion remained a hallmark of Indian policy through the 1920s; in 1927 Ottawa interfered in Aboriginal peoples' political and legal rights in an unprecedented way when it made it an offense for Indians to donate or raise money for the pursuit of land claims.<sup>92</sup> The same decade also saw surge in Ottawa's commitment to Indian Residential Schools as new institutions were built (including the only Maritime Indian Residential School at Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia), sometimes at the expense of the day school system.<sup>93</sup> In this context, the presence in the classroom of Mi'kmaw teachers who were adept at challenging the DIA's colonialist agenda was, more than ever, something to be avoided.

It is not a stretch to connect day school hiring practices in New Brunswick to the new coercive rationale embraced by the DIA. In many ways the hiring of Mi'kmaw teachers ran contrary to the new ethos prevailing in Ottawa. Mi'kmaw teachers' widely-recognized and even celebrated use of the Mi'kmaw language clearly ran contrary to a DIA policy newly committed to assimilation (a central plank of which was the linguistic transformation of Aboriginal people). In addition, the interest that Mi'kmaw communities and their leaders displayed in the hiring of Mi'kmaw teachers — and their use of language that drew on concepts of rights and federal obligations to justify those hirings — also was anathema to the revived assimilative agenda. Also important was the extent to which the six popular teachers of this study challenged and tested the DIA administration for which they worked. The independent actions of teachers, such as the

five Isaacs sisters and Rita Gédéon, became even less palatable in a context of a strengthened assimilative mandate.

The appearance of the Isaacs sisters and Rita Gédéon in New Brunswick's federal day school history is important. They stand among very few individual Mi'kmaw women whose names and experiences emerge from the male-dominated archive of the DIA; their presence there offers a rare glimpse into the life opportunities and limitations experienced by Mi'kmaw women in the opening decades of the twentieth century. Their accomplished educations and careers as school teachers placed them in interesting and, at times, difficult positions in their communities. As they imparted to students the federally-ordained day school program and as they reached into communities to facilitate a broader "civilizing agenda" through such seemingly mundane actions as teaching sewing and knitting, these teachers did the bidding of the colonialist state. More important, however, are the ways in which these teachers subverted state policy. By using and teaching the Mi'kmaw language in the classroom, and by refusing to yield to DIA authority, they challenged the very essence of the Canadian colonialist project. Indeed, their very presence as a teaching alternative served to empower Aboriginal communities who demanded Mi'kmaw teachers as a matter of right. In this manner, the Isaacs sisters and Rita Gédéon illuminate rarely-seen ways by which Aboriginal women joined men in resisting colonialism. However, this study also reveals the powerful colonialist forces that these teachers were up against. The ousting of Mi'kmaw women from teaching positions in the early 1920s reflected a renewed Canadian commitment to its assimilative agenda.

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### Endnotes:

- 1 This paper uses the terms "Mi'kmaq," the undeclined plural form of the name for the Mi'kmaw people, and "Mi'kmaw," which serves as either an adjective or as the singular version of the noun "Mi'kmaq."
- 2 On the United States' experiment with employing Indian teachers, see William H. Ahern, "An Experiment Aborted: Returned Indian Students in the Indian School Service, 1881–1908," *Ethnohistory* 44, 2 (Spring 1997): 263–304, and Anne Ruggles Gere, "Indian Heart/White Man's Head: Native-American Teachers in Indian Schools, 1880–1930," *History of Education Quarterly* 45, 1 (Spring 2005): 38–65. In the United States, Aboriginal women also served as field matrons hired to instruct Aboriginal women in the domesticity that was deemed essential to their assimilation. See Lisa E. Emmerich, "Marguerite LaFlesche Diddock: Office of Indian Affairs Field Matron," *Great Plains Quarterly* 13, 3 (Summer 1993): 162–71. In contrast, the Canadian government had no such mandate to hire Indian teachers and the employment of Aboriginal teachers for federal schools (or for any Indian Affairs program) was rare. Before 1900, just two Mi'kmaw men taught briefly in Maritimes federal day schools. Martin Francis taught in his home community of Lennox Island, P.E.I., until 1878, and Victor Christmas of Eskasoni taught at Whycomomagh, N.S., between 1892 and 1894. W.D. Hamilton, *The Federal Indian Day Schools of the Maritimes* (Fredericton: The Micmac-Maliseet Institute, University of New Brunswick, 1986), 14–15. Between 1903 and 1923, two other Mi'kmaw men, Charles Bernard and Jacob Sark, taught at Burnt Church (1903 and 1905) and Lennox Island (1919), respectively. Their abilities were sharply criticized and both men lost their schools within two years of being hired. Library and Archives Canada (hereafter LAC), RG 10, vol. 6061, file 276-1, part 1, Charles Bernard to W.D. Carter, 24 June 1903; *Ibid.*, vol. 6060, file 275-1, part 1, J.J. McLaughlin, P.P. to F.C. Ryan, 1 August 1919.
- 3 Lisa E. Emmerich, "Right in the Midst of My Own People': Native

- American Women and the Field Matron Program," *American Indian Quarterly* 15, 2 (Spring 1991): 201–16.
- 4 Here I borrow the idea of Michel-Rolph Trouillot who sees history as consisting of both the past (facts and archival remains) and the story of that past (the narrative by which these facts and archives are strung together). The DIA's archive was designed to tell a particular story that justified its policies. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).
  - 5 Dorothee Shreiber, "A Liberal and Paternal Spirit': Indian Agents and Native Fisheries," *Ethnohistory* 55, 1 (Winter 2008): 90. The federal Department of Indian Affairs existed as a distinct department from 1880–1936.
  - 6 For more on the work of non-Aboriginal women in joint state-church colonizing efforts in Canada, see Margaret Whitehead, "Women were made for such things: Women Missionaries in British Columbia," *Atlantis* 14, 1 (Autumn 1988): 141–150; Kathryn McPherson, "Nursing and Colonization: The Work of Indian Health Service Nurses in Manitoba, 1945–1970," in *Women, Health and Nation: Canada and the United States Since 1945*, eds. Gina Feldberg, Molly Ladd-Taylor, Alison Li, and Kathryn McPherson (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press), 223–46. Although a formal hierarchy that privileged men operated in church and state colonization undertakings, women who served the colonial state challenged that hierarchy. Myra Rutherdale, for example, emphasizes that "despite an effort to maintain the feminine ideal in the mission field, there were moments when women fleetingly and unpredictably escaped its confines." Myra Rutherdale, "I Wish The Men Were Half As Good': Gender Constructions In The Canadian North-Western Mission Field," in *Telling Tales: Women In Western Canada*, eds. Catherine Cavanaugh and Randi Warne (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 2000), 34. Similarly, Kathryn McPherson reveals that non-Aboriginal women who worked in the Indian Health Service as nurses after World War II enjoyed considerable autonomy in the field. McPherson, 235.
  - 7 It is important not to overstate the power and presence of Aboriginal men in this "network" given that very *raison d'être* of colonialism was to undermine Indian autonomy. However, the state-sanctioned spaces that Indian men occupied in colonial undertakings gave them a level of access (albeit limited and even unintentional) to this "network of power" that Aboriginal women simply did not have. For example, the fact that Indian men could vote and hold office in federally-ordained band councils gave to men (even if unintentionally) a formal voice that was denied women who were barred from running for office or voting in band council elections until 1951. Although band councils were intended as a means of undermining

Aboriginal political strength, they also connected Aboriginal men to DIA officials and became the sources of Aboriginal political resistance. For more on how band councils were used by Mi'kmaw people of the Maritimes, see Martha E. Walls, *No need of a chief for this band: The Maritime Mi'kmaq and Federal Electoral Legislation, 1899–1951* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010).

- 8 Some scholars have proposed that there were limits to female missionaries' commitment to the colonial project and that such woman sometimes identified with and defended Aboriginal women in ways that contradicted their own mandate as colonizers. Myra Rutherdale, for example, proposes that while missionary women arrived in Canada's north with strong senses of their own spiritual and cultural superiority, racial barriers eroded as their friendships with Aboriginal women and knowledge of their cultures sometimes led missionary women to defend the Aboriginal cultural practices that they were supposed to be displacing. Myra Rutherdale, *Women and the White Man's God: Gender and Race in the Canadian Mission Field* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2002), 42–6.
- 9 Few Canadian Aboriginal women were assigned formal roles as colonizers in missions or in DIA field work and the experiences of those who were, have received scant scholarly attention. There are, however, notable exceptions. For the work of female Aboriginal missionaries, see Rutherdale, *Women and the White Man's God* and Margaret Whitehead, "A Useful Christian Woman': First Nations' Women and Protestant Missionary Work in British Columbia," *Atlantis* 18, 1 & 2 (Autumn, 1993): 141–50. As Susan Neylan considers the ways in which Tsimshian converts in British Columbia embraced Protestantism, while also using Protestant teachings to critique the very process of missionizing, she cites examples of female converts. Susan Neylan, *The Heavens are Changing: Nineteenth-Century Protestant Missions and Tsimshian Christianity* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003).
- 10 Ann Laura Stoler, "Intimidations of Empire: Predicaments of the Tactile and Unseen," in *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 4. For an exploration of this concept in a Canadian context, see Cecelia Morgan, "Private Lives and Public Performances: Aboriginal Women in a Settler Society, Ontario, Canada, 1920s–1960s," *Journal of Colonialism and History* 4, 3 (2003) <[http://muse.jhu.edu/www.msvu.ca:2048/journals/journal\\_of\\_colonialism\\_and\\_colonial\\_history/v004/4.3morgan.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/www.msvu.ca:2048/journals/journal_of_colonialism_and_colonial_history/v004/4.3morgan.html)>, (viewed 30 January 2012).
- 11 See Sarah Carter, *The Importance of Being Monogamous: Marriage and Nation Building in Western Canada to 1915* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2008). Central to this process was the application of laws that divested Indian women (like their non-Aboriginal sisters) of their individ-

- ual legal and political rights and made them, under law, extensions of their male spouses and fathers. The 1850 Lower Canada *Act for the Better Protection of Lands and Property of the Indians* defined, for the first time, who could (and who could not) acquire Indian Status — and it attached gender to this qualification by dictating that non-Aboriginal men who married women who were Indians under the law could not assume Indian status, while non-Aboriginal women who married Indian men could. Seven years later, the *Gradual Civilization Act* stipulated that the wives of enfranchised Indian males — those men who had exchanged their rights as Indians for Canadian citizenship — would automatically share their husbands' enfranchised status. The first Indian policy legislation passed after Confederation, the 1869 *Gradual Enfranchisement Act*, mandated that Indian women who “married out” would automatically lose their status as Indians. Julia V. Emberley, “The Bourgeois Family, Aboriginal Women, and Colonial Governance in Canada: A Study in Feminist Historical and Cultural Imperialism,” *Signs* 27, 1 (Autumn 2001): 74–5. Indian women were in other ways limited by an assimilationist agenda fuelled by paternalism. For example, only where land was inherited could Indian women own it outright and, even then, a widow could only own land if male officials endorsed her moral soundness. Furthermore, when Ottawa introduced “location tickets” in 1869, enabling reserves to be subdivided and plots allocated to individual farmers, only men could claim allotted land and were, as in the past, able to attain land only through inheritance. According to Jo-Anne Fiske, this created “male land owners versus landless females.” Jo-Anne Fiske, “Fishing is Women’s Business: Changing Economic Roles of Carrier Men and Women” in *Native People, Native Lands*, ed. Bruce Alden Cox (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1987), 192.
- 12 Beatrice Medicine, “North American Indigenous Women and Cultural Domination,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 17, 3 (1993): 123.
  - 13 Julia Emberley suggests that as the “bourgeois patriarchal family” emerged in the nineteenth century it very quickly came to be viewed as “natural” and any deviation from it as “unnatural.” Shaped by Darwinian notions of human evolution, this family unit came to be regarded as the pinnacle of human development — one that all people, Aboriginal people included, would eventually, naturally, attain. Emberley, 59–60.
  - 14 Day schools operated in the Maritimes as early as the 1780s, when the London-based New England Company set about “civilizing” the Mi’kmaq and Wolastoqiyik (Maliseet) of New Brunswick using English-language day schooling, apprenticeship-based vocational training, and conversion to Protestantism. Between 1791 and 1826, the only school for Aboriginal children in the region operated at Sussex Vale, N.B. Its closure ended educational opportunities for Maritime Aboriginal people. Judith Fingard,

- “The New England Company and the New Brunswick Indians, 1786–1826: A Comment on the Colonial Perversion of British Benevolence,” *Acadiensis* I, 2 (Spring 1972): 29–30. Reflecting the essence of a Maritime colonial rule that ignored the region’s Aboriginal population, few colonial administrators (and fewer colonial dollars) heeded Aboriginal demands for the provision of state-funded schools. L.F.S. Upton, *Micmac and Colonists: Indian-white Relations in the Maritimes, 1713–1867* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1979).
- 15 Andrea Bear Nicholas, “Canada’s Colonial Mission: The Great White Bird,” in *Aboriginal Education in Canada: A Study in Decolonization*, eds. P. Binda and Sharilyn Calliou (Mississauga, Ont.: Canadian Educators’ Press, 2001), 13.
  - 16 Canada, *Sessional Papers*, 1896 (hereafter SP), Department of Indian Affairs (hereafter DIA), Annual Report, 1895, “Programme of Studies for Indian Schools,” 348–51.
  - 17 Ruth Spack, *America’s Second Tongue: American Indian Education and the Ownership of English, 1860–1900* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2002), 14–15.
  - 18 SP, 1896, DIA Annual Report, 1895, “Programme of Studies for Indian Schools,” 348–51.
  - 19 *Ibid.*, 1902, DIA Annual Report, “Census Return of Resident and Nomadic Indians,” 153–8. As Agent R.L. McDonald of Richmond County, N.S., reported in the spring of 1912, “at this season, after planting, many of the Indians move out — some to fish, and others to work in the towns and industrial centres.” He continued, “whole families thus leave, which accounts for the small attendance at the school.” LAC, RG 10, vol. 2910, file 185,723-8B, Report of R.L. McDonald, May 1912. Potato and other harvests led to similar mobility that often conflicted with school schedules. The teacher at Eel Ground made the connection between want of clothing and school attendance when she wrote, “the only cause of irregular attendance is when they are in need of some clothing.” *Ibid.*, vol. 6062, file 277-1, pt. 1, Extract from Teacher’s Report, Eel Ground School, for year ending 31 March 1910.
  - 20 In 1910, Nova Scotia Indian Superintendent A.J. Boyd reported, “I have been doing my best in the matter of repairs to Indian school buildings in Nova Scotia; but it has been impossible for me to overtake all the work of that kind that requires to be done.” *Ibid.*, vol. 6024, file 42-1-5, pt. 1, A.J. Boyd to J.D. McLean, 29 September 1910.
  - 21 When Nova Scotia Indian Superintendent A.J. Boyd complained of the calibre of teachers employed by the DIA and suggested that “the Department ... insist on the employment of only Normal School graduates as teachers in Indian schools,” the idea was dismissed by his Ottawa superiors as being unfeasible. *Ibid.*, vol. 6024, file 42-1-1, pt. 1, Report of A.J.

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- Boyd, 3 October 1908; *Ibid.*, S. Stewart to A.J. Boyd, 15 October 1908.
- 22 In 1903, Joseph McDonald, a teacher who was “untrained and inexperienced,” was hired at Chapel Island. Hamilton, 48. Similarly, in 1912, a provincial school inspector was appalled when a “young man having neither license, experience, nor professional training” was hired to teach a reserve day school. *Ibid.*, vol. 6014, file 1-1-6-NS, pt. 1, J.T. MacNeil to J.D. McLean, 12 December 1912.
- 23 On the feminization of school teaching in Nova Scotia, see Janet Guildford, “Separate Spheres”: The Feminization of Public School Teaching in Nova Scotia, 1838–1880,” *Acadiensis* XXII, 1 (Fall 1992): 44–64.
- 24 See Patricia Thornton, “The Problem of Out-Migration from Atlantic Canada, 1871–1921: A New Look,” *Acadiensis* XV, 1 (Fall 1985): 3–34. See also Jean Barman, *Sojourning Sisters: The Lives of Jessie and Annie McQueen* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).
- 25 LAC, RG 10, vol. 6060, file 275-1, part 1, F.C. Ryan to J.D. McLean, 19 August 1919; *Ibid.*, Extract of Report of Inspector F.C. Ryan re: Big Cove, 3 June 1920.
- 26 *Ibid.*, file 275-5, part 1A, F.C. Ryan to DIA, Inspector’s report re: Big Cove, 25 October 1921.
- 27 *Ibid.* According to her mother, Rebecca Isaacs’ experiences at Burnt Church were similar. Mary Isaacs Sr. complained to the department that Rebecca had a “miserable” two mile commute from her boarding house because the community had “no suitable place to board a teacher.” Rebecca’s trek to school was especially bad when, after snowfalls, she would “be the first to break the roads.” Angered at the conditions under which her daughter lived and worked, Mary Isaacs Sr. insisted, “I want the Indian department to provide a hack at once!” *Ibid.*, vol. 6061, file 276-1, part 1, Mrs. Mary Isaacs to DIA Secretary, 19 March 1920.
- 28 *Ibid.*, vol. 6060, file 275-1, part 1, F.C. Ryan to Mr. Ferrier, 23 February 1922.
- 29 *Ibid.*, R.W. Dixon to Father Ryan, 25 August 1920.
- 30 SP, 1896, DIA Annual Report of J.A. Venner, 20 August 1895, 31.
- 31 In August 1915, Rita Gédéon was awarded an elementary school diploma. LAC, RG 10, vol. 6060, file 275-1, part 1, Louis P.A. Robichaud, Barrister & Notary Public, to DIA, 2 August 1923.
- 32 The Isaacs family was headed by farmer Isaac Isaacs. Reports of Indian agents from Restigouche suggest that they were highly regarded by the DIA. In 1894, a year after the Isaacs family farm fell victim to a fire that destroyed the local mission, the DIA’s annual report noted, “Isaac Isaac[s], who lost a very fine new house, with barn, stable, and agricultural implements, was able, thanks to his courage and industry and the help which his honesty afforded him, to build for himself again a much larger barn —

- where he has been able to store away his harvest in time — and part of a house large enough to accommodate his family last winter and which will serve as a kitchen afterwards.” SP, 1895, DIA Annual Report, Report of V.J.A. Venner, 30 August 1894, Restigouche, Québec. In 1915, Mary Isaacs Sr. indicated that she was “grateful” for the DIA’s financial support of her daughters’ educations. LAC, RG 10, vol. 6060, file 275-1, part 1, Mrs. I. Isaacs to Secretary DIA, 1 August 1915.
- 33 Bill Parenteau and James Kenny, “Survival, Resistance, and the Canadian State: The Transformation of New Brunswick’s Native Economy, 1867–1930,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 13, 1 (2002): 49–71.
- 34 Barman, 26–7. See also Betsy Beattie, *Obligation and Opportunity: Single Maritime Women in Boston, 1870–1930* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2000).
- 35 For example, in 1910, Mi’kmaw residents of Red Bank New Brunswick refused to send their children to a nearby provincial school, claiming that their children were “not used right” there. LAC, RG 10, vol. 6060, file 282-1, part 1, 15 November 1910. Similarly, a 1914 dispute between the DIA and non-Aboriginals at Rice Point, P.E.I., ended with the ratepayers, who funded provincial schools, refusing to admit Mi’kmaw pupils. *Ibid.*, vol. 6026, file 57-2-1, part 1, Rev. John A. McDonald to DIA, 9 December 1914. The racism that accompanied public schooling in the Maritimes is no anomaly. Historian Robin Jarvis Brownlie, drawing on the oral testimony of Tyendinaga women, illustrates that Aboriginal girls who attended public schools in southern Ontario in the 1920s and 1930s often experienced racism. Robin Jarvis Brownlie, “‘Living the Same as the White People’: Mohawk and Anishinabe Women’s Labour in Southern Ontario, 1920–1940,” *Labour* 61 (Spring 2008): 65–6.
- 36 Compiled from numbers provided in Hamilton.
- 37 Lynda A. Curwen Doige notes that day schools were not merely committed to imparting the English language, but, more generally, “civilization.” Lynda A. Curwen Doige, “Literacy in Aboriginal Education: An Historical Perspective,” *Canadian Journal of Native Education* 25, 2 (2001): 122.
- 38 LAC, RG 10, vol. 6060, file 275-1, part 1, John Sheridan to DIA Secretary, 27 December 1918.
- 39 Vic Satzewich, “Patronage, Moral Regulation and the Recruitment of Indian Affairs Personnel, 1879–1900,” *Canadian Review of Sociology & Anthropology* 33, 2 (May 1996): 226.
- 40 In 1911, an amendment to the Indian Act allowed for the forced removal of Indians from municipalities of 8,000 or more people. This legislation was applied across Canada, including the Maritimes, and Aboriginal communities were uprooted against their wishes. For example, see Martha Walls, “Countering the ‘Kingsclear Blunder’: Maliseet Resistance to the

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- Kingsclear Relocation Plan, 1945–1949,” *Acadiensis* XXXVII, 1 (Winter/Spring 2008): 3–30.
- 41 Writing of the 1911 removal of the Songhees Reserve from the city of Victoria, B.C., Renisa Mawani writes, “Native women were commonly characterized through racial narratives of sexual excess and prostitution” and that non-Aboriginal residents of Victoria “used fears of prostitution to expel Native women from the city limits.” Renisa Mawani, “Legal geographies of Aboriginal Segregation in British Columbia: The Making and Unmaking of the Songhees Reserve,” in *Isolation: Places and Practices of Exclusion*, ed. Carolyn Strange and Alison Bashford (London: Routledge, 2003), 167. When the Mi'kmaq Indian Reserve at Kings Road in Sydney, N.S., was relocated in the 1920s, similar arguments about the moral peril posed by Aboriginal women were made by city officials. Martha Walls, “‘with their hair hanging down their backs and dressed more or less dishevelled’: Gender and the Forced Relocation of the Mi'kmaq from Kings Road, Sydney,” Annual Mi'kmaq History Month Lecture, Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, N.S., 24 October 2011.
- 42 Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, Session 1921, vol. IV, 26 May 1921, 3908.
- 43 LAC, RG 10, vol. 6062, file 277-1, part 1, Chief Daniel Paul to Russell Ferrier, 19 May 1922.
- 44 *Ibid.*, Rebecca Isaacs to Secretary Indian Affairs, 7 May 1922.
- 45 *Ibid.*, Rebecca Isaacs to Mr. Sheridan, 7 May 1922.
- 46 McPherson, “Nursing and Colonization,” 228.
- 47 LAC, RG 10, vol. 6061, file 276-1, part 1, Inspector F.C. Ryan, Report re: Burnt Church Indian Day School, 2 June 1920.
- 48 *Ibid.*, vol. 6060, file 275-1, part 1, J.D. McLean to F.C. Ryan, 20 July 1920.
- 49 *Ibid.*, Margaret Isaacs to Secretary DIA, 17 March 1910.
- 50 *Ibid.*, vol. 6062, file 277-1, part , R.A. Irving to Secretary DIA, 7 October 1912. This request for a wage increase was granted. *Ibid.*, J. Stewart to R.A. Irving, 15 October 1912.
- 51 *Ibid.*, vol. 6060, file 275-1, part 1, J.D. McLean to F.C. Ryan, 24 June 1921.
- 52 Gere, 46.
- 53 SP, 1896, DIA Annual Report, 1895, “Programme of Studies for Indian Schools,” 348–51.
- 54 Emmerich, “Marguerite LaFlesche Diddock,” 168.
- 55 Cited in Walls, *No need of a chief for this band*, 32.
- 56 LAC, RG 10, vol. 6060, file 275-1, part 1, Petition of Big Cove, 9 August 1915.
- 57 *Ibid.*, Noel Augustine, Councilor to Charles Sifton, Minister of Finance, 27 August 1923.



- 58 Ibid., Peter Lewis, Chief, Big Cove to Col. Sheridan, 15 April 1919.
- 59 Ibid., Joseph Sanipass to Russell T. Ferrier, Superintendent Indian Education, 2 August 1923.
- 60 Walls, *No need of a chief for this band*.
- 61 For example, see Isabelle Knockwood and Gillian Thomas, *Out of the Depths: The Experiences of Mi'kmaq Children at the Indian Residential School at Shubenacadie Nova Scotia* (Lockeport, N.S: Roseway, 1992).
- 62 Dorothee Shreiber emphasizes the impact of seemingly innocuous agent actions and decisions in the creation on Indian reserve climates in which Aboriginal autonomy and rights were subtly undermined. Shreiber, 91. Although this is an important recognition, it is also true that Indian agents had the capacity to undermine DIA policies when personal predilections and/or local exigencies demanded. For more on Indian agents' impact on DIA policy, see Robin Jarvis Brownlie, *A Fatherly Eye: Indian Agents, Government Power, and Aboriginal Resistance in Ontario, 1918–1939* (Don Mills, Ont.: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- 63 Regarding the hiring of day school teachers in Ontario, Brownlie notes that “there were differing views about the advisability of hiring Aboriginal teachers for day schools.” Ibid., 134–5.
- 64 LAC, RG 10, vol. 6060, file 275-1, part 1, George A. Hutchinson, Acting Agent to Secretary of DIA, 13 July 1915.
- 65 Ibid., vol. 6062, file 277-1, part 1, R.A. Irving to J.D. McLean, 15 April 1909.
- 66 Ibid., Testimonial from Margaret Isaacs, 24 December 1909.
- 67 Ibid., Extract, Report of J.J. Ryan, 27 July 1912.
- 68 Ibid., J.D. McLean to Miss Margaret Isaac[s], 6 August 1912.
- 69 Ibid., vol. 6060, file 275-1, part 1, Mrs. I Isaacs to Secretary DIA, 1 August 1915.
- 70 Ibid., Report on Big Cove School, 5 February 1917; Ibid., J.J. Ryan to J.D. McLean, 13 November 1917.
- 71 Ibid., Noel Augustine, Councilor, to Charles Stewart, 27 August 1923.
- 72 Ibid., vol. 6062, file 277-1, part 1, R.A. Irving to Rev. Father Ryan, 27 November 1909.
- 73 Ibid., vol. 6060, file 275-1, part 1, R.W. Dixon, Parish Priest, to Father Ryan, 25 August 1920.
- 74 Ibid., vol. 6062, file 277-1, part 1, D.C. Scott to R.A. Irving, 18 January 1910.
- 75 Ibid., Assistant Sectary to Chief Peter Tenass, 27 January 1910.
- 76 Ibid., Margaret Isaacs to DIA, 2 February 1915.
- 77 Ibid., vol. 6061, file 276-1, part 1, J.D. McLean to J.J. Ryan, Superintendent Indian Schools, 19 November 1917.
- 78 Ibid., Extract of letter from F.C. Ryan, Superintendent of Indian Schools, 26 November 1917.
- 79 Barman, 31.

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- 80 LAC, RG 10, vol. 6060, file 275-1, part 1, F.C. Ryan to Mr. Ferrier, 23 February 1922.
- 81 Ibid., Mrs. Peter Clare to J.D. McLean, 5 April 1923.
- 82 Ibid., vol. 6062, file 277-1, part 1, J.D. McLean to R.A. Irving, 7 December 1909.
- 83 Ibid., vol. 6060, file 275-1, part 1, Martha Isaacs to DIA, 10 March 1922.
- 84 Ibid., F.C. Ryan to DIA, 5 September 1922; Ibid., A.F. MacKenzie to Chief Joseph Sanipass, 28 August 1923.
- 85 Ibid., Extract of letter from Big Cove, 25 September 1922.
- 86 Ibid., vol. 6062, file 277-1, part 1, J.D. McLean to Chief Daniel Paul, 19 April 1921. McLean also informed Inspector Ryan that “the appointment of an Indian girl cannot be considered.” Ibid., J.D. McLean to F.C. Ryan, 19 April 1921.
- 87 Ibid., Russell T. Ferrier to Rev. F.C. Ryan, 11 May 1922.
- 88 Ibid., Extract of report of Inspector Ryan on his Inspection of Eel Ground School, 25 May 1922.
- 89 By 1920, only 250 Indians across the country had opted for enfranchisement. J.R. Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian-White Relations in Canada* 3rd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 255.
- 90 Andrew Nurse, “But Now Things Have Changed”: Marius Barbeau and the Politics of Amerindian Identity,” *Ethnohistory* 48, 3 (Summer 2001): 455.
- 91 The object of much protest both within and outside of Aboriginal communities, the enfranchisement amendment was never implemented and in 1922 was repealed. J.R. Miller, *Compact, Contract, Covenant: Aboriginal Treaty-Making in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 234. The 1920 amendment that made school attendance mandatory for Indian children between ages seven and 15 was, however, longer lasting. As J.R. Miller notes, “the coercive aspects of the attendance provisions stood unaltered in substance by the overhaul of the Indian Act of 1951.” J.R. Miller, *Shingwauk’s Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 170.
- 92 Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens*, 279.
- 93 Martha Walls, “‘part of that whole system’: Maritime Day and Residential Schooling and Federal Culpability,” *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 30, 2 (Winter 2010): 361–85.