

## Nii Ndahlohke: Boys' and Girls' Work at Mount Elgin Industrial School, 1890-1915

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## Book Review

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### **Nii Ndahlohke: Boys' and Girls' Work at Mount Elgin Industrial School, 1890-1915**

By Mary Jane Logan McCallum. Altona: Friesen Press, 2022. 92 pp. (softcover): ISBN 978-1-03-913683-0, ebook ISBN 978-1-03-913685-4.

#### **Reviewed by:**

David Calverley, Nipissing University

*Nii Ndahlohke* is a Lunaape word that translates as “I work” in English. It is an appropriate title for this short but informative book about student life and child exploitation at the Mount Elgin Industrial School. Residential School histories are being written with increasing and welcomed frequency. Works like *Nii Ndahlohke* help elucidate this national history by showing how schools operated and impacted Indigenous people in specific areas. Focusing on how children at Mount Elgin were forced to provide free labour to maintain the school, McCallum illustrates how this school not only failed to provide Indigenous children with a useful education but also exploited those children to support the same school that was, in turn, harming them.

The history McCallum recounts is made more poignant when she relates that it was First Nations living at what is today the Chippewa of the Thames First Nation who wanted the school built. As was the case with other Indigenous requests for European schooling, the parents' original intent to help their children was quickly perverted by missionary groups and government officials. Children became the victims of underfunded, poorly run, badly supervised, utterly inadequate schools that provided inadequate education to the students even by late nineteenth and early twentieth century standards.

Mount Elgin was classified as an “industrial school” with local students attending as day students and other students from as far north as Wausauksing First Nation (near Parry Sound), as far east as Curve Lake First Nation, and as far west as Walpole Island

(Bkejwanong First Nation) living at the school as boarding students. McCallum focuses on the education received by the students; however, 'education' is an inaccurate word, as students received only three hours a day of instruction. Five hours or more each day was devoted to student labour to maintain the school and raise money for the school's operation. McCallum notes that in 1904, school expenditures on salaries, food, etc. totalled \$23,625.38. Indian Affairs provided \$8,395 in funding, and the Missionary Society only \$210. The school's sale of livestock generated \$11,527.96 in revenue (approximately 57% of the school's budget), but the school still ran a deficit of almost \$3500 (p. 11). Indian Affairs officials and Christian missionaries, who proclaimed such interest in the welfare of Indigenous children, were unwilling to spend the money to fund these institutions adequately.

After providing a general overview of Mount Elgin School, McCallum divides the book into several sections: boys' work, girls' work, and, sadly, those who did not survive Mount Elgin. Boys were supposed to learn farming, blacksmithing, carpentry and other 'male' skills, while girls learned domestic skills related to maintaining a household. However, most of a student's day was spent supporting the school. For the boys, this meant hard manual labour in the fields or with the large number of livestock the school kept. These chores were not instructional labour: teachers with expertise handled all skilled jobs while the boys were left to toil. So little instruction was provided that one Indian Affairs official complained that none of the boys knew how to handle a plow or drive a harrow, fundamental skills a future farmer required. Girls faced similar exploitation: they tended chickens, milked cows, cooked meals, cleaned buildings, laundered and mended clothes, and tended to gardens and orchards. The main goal was to prepare the children for lives as either labourers or domestic servants. Preparing students to run and operate their own farms was never the goal.

With 1000 acres under cultivation, one would assume the children ate well. McCallum notes this was not the case, as most of the farm's produce was sold. Students referred to the school as the "mush hole" for their bland meals, which only improved when visitors arrived. Parents were aware of the extreme conditions at the school. McCallum recounts incidents of the Chippewa of the Thames Band Council writing formal complaints to the school about the strenuous work performed by children. Deniers of residential/industrial school histories may counter that hard work was part of farm life then, and the students' experience was not unique; it is a claim with a bit of truth, but which lacks

context. Child labour on a family farm benefitted one's family, while Indigenous students and their families reaped no similar benefits. Furthermore, non-Indigenous students in Ontario's public system didn't provide free labour to fund their schools. It's unlikely that parental complaints about school conditions in non-Indigenous schools would have been so easily ignored.

McCallum's final section addresses health issues at Mount Elgin. Infectious diseases were common in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and treatments were either few or non-existent. However, doctors understood how transmission worked, the need to isolate the ill from the healthy, and they appreciated that rest and good food helped children overcome infections or avoid illness altogether. None of this knowledge helped the children at Mount Elgin. McCallum managed to identify twenty-three child deaths at the school between 1890 and 1915; of these, twelve were from tuberculosis, and five were from other infectious diseases. Parents were not notified when their child became ill as a withdrawn student meant a reduction in government funding.

*Nii Ndahlohke* is an engaging book. By highlighting a single school, McCallum explains much that was wrong with residential and industrial schools for Indigenous people. Her conclusion provides a poignant summary of one of the lasting legacies of Mount Elgin. McCallum, a member of the Munsee-Delaware Nation, recalls her grandmother, who worked on neighbouring farms for non-Indigenous families for many years. These families, McCallum says, were friends and neighbours, but they had opportunities her grandmother lacked. They could acquire farms, improve their lives, and build generational wealth. These same opportunities were denied to her grandmother and other Indigenous people by all levels of government that passed laws that infringed on treaty rights and sovereignty. Mount Elgin Industrial School's mistreatment of children was part of a larger system that denied Indigenous peoples the same opportunities offered to others.