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Words Have a Past:The English language, colonialism, and the newspapers of Indian Boarding Schools by Jane Griffith

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Words Have a Past

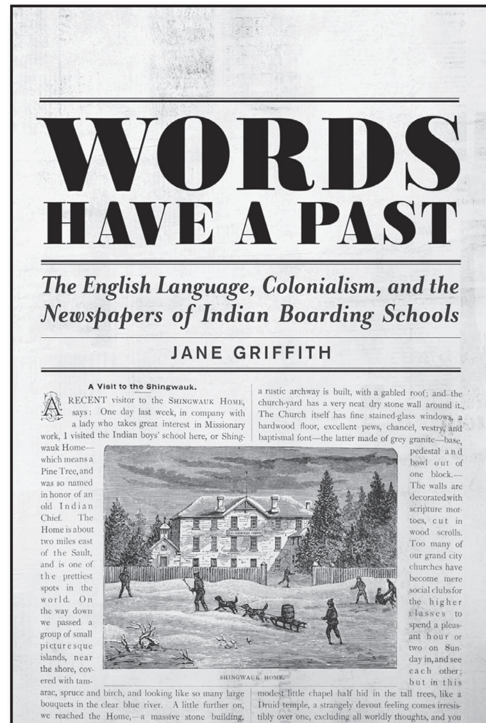
The English language, colonialism, and the newspapers of Indian Boarding Schools

By Jane Griffith

Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 2019.
328 pages. $26.95 paper. ISBN 9781487521554.
$65.00 cloth. ISBN 9781487501617.
$26.95 ebook. (utorontopress.com)

Jane Griffith's *Words Have a Past* is ground-breaking study of the newspapers published in the government-funded and church-run Indian boarding schools in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Canada. Griffith explores the history of six English language newspapers published at five Indian boarding schools in British Columbia, Assinaboia/Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario, and engages in a close reading of their content from surviving copies held at eleven different archives and libraries across Canada and the US. Griffith is transparent in contextualising her status as a settler-scholar, post-Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), and she takes care to confront the complex ethical, moral, and scholarly approaches that are necessary to hold in balance in considering the context and content of these newspapers.

A significant portion of Griffith's close reading is taken from two newspapers published in Ontario at the Shingwauk Industrial Home in Sault Ste. Marie: *Our Forest Children*, published between 1887-90, and *The Canadian Indian*, published between 1890-91. Other newspapers included in her analysis are: *The Aurora*, published at Rupert's Land Indian Industrial School in Middlechurch, Manitoba between roughly 1893 and 1895; *The Guide*, published at Battleford Indian Industrial School in Battleford, Saskatchewan between 1891 and 1899; *Na-Na-Kwa: or, dawn on the Northwest Coast*, published at Kitamaat Home in Kitamaat, British Columbia between 1896 and 1907; and *Progress*, published at Regina Industrial School in Regina, Assinaboia/Saskatchewan in and around 1894.



The newspapers were powerful political tools and were touted by school administrators as avenues for communication between the schools and interested benefactors, government officials, and white settlers interested in the Other. The readership was thus predominantly envisioned as settler-Canadian and settler-American, and a secondary (if not altogether accidental) audience was Indigenous people, mostly alumni of the schools. School newspapers were produced as part of a larger indus-

trial printing program, where Indigenous students provided the physical labour of operating the printing presses, reflecting the schools' mandated goals of assimilation and transforming 'savage' Indigenous children into 'civilized' labourers. The schools' industrial printing programs were purported to offer Indigenous students with training in English literacy and technology, which they were otherwise seen to lack. As products that could be widely disseminated, the newspapers acted as legitimizing sources—featuring writing from principals and teachers, reprinted articles from Christian and government tracts, and only a light bestrewing of writing reflecting the voices of students—which sought to influence settler opinions on the work of the Indian boarding schools. Griffith is careful, however, not to dismiss the newspapers altogether as mere propaganda. Students were occasional contributors to the content of the newspapers, and their writing speaks to either what students felt or what the schools wished readers to believe students felt. As Griffith points out, the newspapers "have the potential to contain institution-imposed narratives *as well as* the possibility of a veiled poetry of resistance" (2).

Griffith's book is ground-breaking because while Indian boarding school newspapers in Canada have served as sources in many studies, they have only rarely served as objects of study in themselves. Griffith reads the newspapers through a variety of lenses: as repositories of information about the boarding schools; as sources that reveal the student experience of resistance; and to excavate settler-colonial propaganda. The analysis throughout *Words Have a Past* is interdisciplinary in approach, taking a historian's viewpoint alongside contemporary Indigenous accounts of the residential school experience, always with a nod to the hard work required of Canadians in meaningfully addressing the calls to action of the TRC. The book is presented in six chapters, thematically addressing the material contexts for printing programs in the Indian boarding schools in the late nineteenth-century (chapter two), language (chapters three and four), time (chapters five and six), and place (chapter seven).

Griffith's book provides valuable context to both the history of residential schools and the broader history of Indigenous-settler relations in Canada, while at the same time reminding readers that the legacies of these histories remains a lived one with complex contemporary impacts. The newspapers examined in *Words Have a Past* were all published in an era during which print—in the form of books, magazines, and newspapers—was the predominant form of mass communication and the dissemination of ideas. Thus, the power that newspapers held in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century in shaping, reflecting, and solidifying ideas and viewpoints is difficult to overestimate. Newspapers and newsletters would continue to be published at residential schools throughout the twentieth century, right up to the close of the residential school era, and there remains work to be done by scholars in looking at the role such publications played and if they reflect similar themes to the ones that Griffith has identified in their nineteenth-century predecessors.

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