

*Book Review*  
*The Regina Indian Industrial School (1891-1910):*  
*Historical Overview and Chronological Narrative*

ERIN SPRING  
*University of Calgary*

Stewart, D. (2017). *The Regina Indian Industrial School (1891-1910) Historical Overview and Chronological Narrative*. Regina: Benchmark Press, 155 pages, paperback, ISBN 978-1-927352-35-9, \$20.00 CAD.

Douglas Stewart's *The Regina Indian Industrial School (1891-1910): Historical Overview and Chronological Narrative* provides an in-depth examination of the Regina Indian Industrial School (RIIS), a large but relatively unknown residential school run by the Presbyterian Church of Canada from 1891-1910. Stewart offers a well-researched, accessible account of one of the 130 residential schools that operated across the country for approximately 120 years. A specialist in the philosophy of education, Stewart is an emeritus Professor of Education at the University of Regina. He received the Academic Book Prize from the Presbyterian Church in Canada's Committee on History in 2018 for this text.

Stewart's book is divided into two sections. To begin, he draws on archival material, including clippings from the RIIS newspaper *The Progress*, school correspondence documents, annual reports, extensive footnotes, maps, and photographs to provide a historical overview of the school. With the help of clear subheadings, we learn that approximately five hundred children and youth were recruited to RIIS, ranging in age from three to twenty, and that they came from forty-three First Nations communities across the prairies. Students spent mornings in the classroom, where the overarching goal was to develop the "formation of Christian moral character" (p.21). Afternoons were for mastering domestic skills and manual trades. Sundays were dedicated to memorizing the Bible and attending church services. Stewart found that a large number of students were baptized while at RIIS and "150 became members of the Presbyterian Church" (p.22). Several students were married while in attendance. According to documents found by Stewart, only twenty percent of students graduated from RIIS. Twenty-one percent died of

tubercular diseases due to poor ventilation and living conditions. It is believed that at least thirty-five children are buried in an unmarked graveyard where the school once stood. In 2016, the site was granted municipal and provincial heritage designation. The second half of Stewart's book offers a chronological narrative that maps the Presbyterian Church of Canada's involvement in the Indian Industrial School system from 1895 to 1923. The focus remains on the interplay of church, school, and government officials in the operation of RIIS. Section two draws more pointedly on records gleaned from archival material, such as attendance records, and the precise costs of clothing, food, furnishings, and salaries.

Stewart's research tells a singular story-- a fault of the colonial system rather than his own. Throughout the book, much attention is given to the three former principals of RIIS, all Presbyterian reverends. As a reader, I heard very little about the lives of particular students or community members, a limitation Stewart acknowledges early on: "I found no independently written statements by any of the students describing their experiences" (p.3). While Stewart "has drawn extensively on available archival material" (p.4), he notes that "many of the school's records have been lost or destroyed" (p.32). When information on students is traced, it is interpreted by someone else, and is therefore twice removed: "Maggie Cappo (Muscowpetung), admitted to the RIIS in August 1891, age 13, ran away, was returned, subsequently discharged and lives with former student George Cappo (Muscowpetung), who suffers from consumption and is unable to work" (pp. 58-59). These details are factual rather than emotive, and do not consider the complexities of Maggie's encounters at RIIS. While the archives provide a colonial account of the history of RIIS, Stewart does an exceptional job of reminding us of the "human costs of removing hundreds of Aboriginal children and youth during their formative years" (p.34). I appreciate that, whenever possible, students' names are given, acknowledging their identities. Additionally, Stewart turned my attention to one school, providing a glimpse into the history of a particular place rather than offering a generalized account.

Stewart's overview offers a reminder of the erasure of stories and identities as a result of colonialism and cultural genocide. A question that consistently emerged for me was: if we do not have an accurate or complete representation of history within the archive, how best can we nuance these erasures to allow counternarratives to emerge? I thought, too, about the ways in which the structure of Stewart's text, which follows a linear,

chronological approach, could have been disrupted to confront these silences more explicitly. Stewart's overview is presented in the past tense, suggesting that the history of this place is finished: "All of RIIS's buildings [...] have long since disappeared" (p.31). Might we interpret the history of this place as being very much alive in stories and through the Land?

While I would recommend this book to secondary school and undergraduate students and teachers across the curriculum, it is important to keep a critical eye. To continually ask: whose stories are recorded, how are they recorded, who are they recorded by, and where else can we find them? What are the differences between living, oral accounts and ones that are recorded through text? Stewart offers a starting point for facilitating conversations about residential schools. However, additional resources would allow for a rich discussion to unfold around truth-telling, reconciliation, and the critical intersections of history and story. I would place this text into conversation with films such as *We Were Children* (2012) and *RISS from Amnesia* by Janine Windolph and Trudy Stewart (2015), and alongside texts such as Tanya Talaga's (2017) *Seven Fallen Feathers* or Chelsea Vowel's (2016) *Indigenous Writes*. I encourage readers to listen to the oral accounts of residential school survivors offered within the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's final report (2015). Turning the spotlight to survivors' accounts will balance the narrative offered within Stewart's archival overview and chronological account.

## REFERENCES

National Film Board of Canada (2012). *We were children*.

Talaga, T. (2017). *Seven fallen feathers: Racism, Death, and Hard Truths in a Northern City*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press.

Vowel, C. (2016). *Indigenous Writes: a guide to First Nations, Metis, and Inuit Issues in Canada*. Winnipeg: Portage and Main Press.

Windolph, J. & Stewart, T. (2015). *RISS from Amnesia*.

## About the Reviewer

Erin Spring is an Assistant Professor in the Werklund School of Education. She teaches and researches in the areas of young people's texts and cultures.