A Question of Scale in the Histories of Indigenous Education


In the work of any historian, decisions about scale are of central importance to the research problem; the selection and use of sources; the intended audiences; and historical description, interpretation, and argumentation. The historian’s choices about scale will include a spatial dimension, which can range across the local, national, transnational, and global scales. In this essay I have been asked to review three books, and in doing so I use scale as an interrogative thread for reflection. The three books are as follows: The second edition of John Milloy’s *A National Crime*; Helen May, Baljit Kaur, and Larry Prochner’s *Empire, Education and Indigenous Childhoods*; and Andrew Woolford’s *This Benevolent Experiment*. These monographs examine the history of Indigenous education across various colonial contexts. Milloy’s book is the most straightforward spatially, as it is national in focus, from the first page to the last, in its examination of the Canadian residential school system. May and her coauthors draw insight from the local and global scales; case studies of British-controlled India, Upper Canada, and northern Aotearoa/New Zealand are set within a global framework of English colonial education. Woolford’s study is the most complex in terms of scale, as he sets out to simultaneously capture the local school experience, the institutions of Indigenous education in the US and Canada, and also the broad North American context of Indigenous relations. After a review of each book in the order I have introduced them, I end with some reflections about scale in residential school research.

Originally published in 1999, *A National Crime* focuses on public policy in the residential school system and remains one of the most well-known and often-cited studies in the field of Indigenous education. Drawing on unprecedented access to the depth of archival material produced by Department of Indian Affairs
Milloy has produced a powerfully evidenced and sweeping narrative of national scope. This is a comprehensive reconstruction of the vision, development, implementation, and evolution of the Indian residential school system through a traditional policy analysis of governmental files. Milloy draws evidence from official policy statements, but more than this he traces the sum of actions undertaken by the DIA and all its machinery in the administration of the system, taking into consideration major policy positions and communications and bureaucracies in the DIA, intradepartmental operations and communications, and any direct interaction with schools. Cumulatively, Milloy uses the evidence to create a comprehensive reconstruction of the public administration of residential schooling. This enables Milloy, for example, to show how persistent underfunding, systemic issues of inadequate care, and the continuation of debilitating health problems—while not official policy directives of the DIA—were representative of an ongoing framework of action that is now central to our understanding of the residential school system.

Readers of the first edition of A National Crime, along with J. R. Miller’s Shingwauk’s Vision (1996), witnessed a transition in the literature toward a system-level understanding of residential schooling. The literature on residential schools, which consisted until the 1990s of loosely connected local case studies, could now be read as smaller cases within a larger Canadian narrative. Furthermore, Milloy’s institutional-level analysis offers connections and insight into other system-level operations of the DIA. For instance, his attention to the function of health and child-welfare systems that overlapped with residential schooling calls attention to patterns of ideological assumptions, mutually reinforcing processes, and Indigenous experiences across these systems. Canadian researchers and the Canadian public alike are in need of some form of readily comprehensible national stories, which require a degree of burying and silencing local stories in order to capture the larger narrative and Milloy’s study made a critical contribution on this front. In 2018, the monograph’s national story is more widely understood, in part because of this book, as such, the monograph’s current impact is more widely understood, and likely will remain for some time—no less important as it is the single best national study of residential policy based on government documentation.

A National Crime is a progressive counternarrative to that produced by colonial power, yet Milloy employs a methodology that is conservative in many ways: and I believe this methodological conservatism was helpful in legitimizing the truth of his work in the context of highly sensitive and contentious race relations in Canada. Milloy leverages a power effect in the truth of his work through a focus on written evidence rather than oral sources, the use of government documents and Indigenous sources. Milloy’s methodological choices helped to produce research that is harder to refute due to the impartiality and evidence of evidence, and interpretation that historians have traditionally viewed as more objective and rigorous. Perhaps the more controversial national discussions of cultural genocide
that were spurred on by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s commissioner, Chief Justice Murray Sinclair, have a more receptive audience on the back of the groundwork laid by more conservative and widely legitimatized methodological contributions. At the same time, this methodological conservatism is a problem. Milloy explicitly acknowledges the exclusion of Indigenous peoples and stories as sources and instead offers a critical reading of traditional policy analysis as the best approach for his production of this national story. If Milloy had included Indigenous perspectives he would have provided a more robust interpretation of policy, enhanced Indigenous agency in the telling of Indigenous peoples’ stories, and helped to challenge the longstanding exclusion of Indigenous peoples in Canadian history. *A National Crime* remains a study of central importance in the historiography of residential schooling and Indigenous history broadly. Milloy helped to frame a critical understanding of residential schooling that is national in scope—albeit a history captured from the very singular perspective of governmental files.

In May, Kaur, and Prochner’s *Empire, Education, and Indigenous Childhoods*, the roots of early-year education are found within the emergence of schools for infants in England between the 1820s and the 1850s, which they use as a guiding framework for examining the global expansion of missionary education in the nineteenth century. A unique feature of this study is its focus on education for Indigenous infants. The authors explain that infant education was of somewhat peripheral importance to global missionary efforts broadly, yet it is precisely through this focus on such a little-known subject that the monograph contributes to our understanding of Indigenous education.

Chapter 2 outlines the approach to infant education in England that was the pedagogical foundation for colonial education abroad. The authors begin in 1816 with Robert Owen’s infant school of New Lanark, England, the first of its kind in Britain, and discuss the ideas, tools, and innovations used in this and other early infant institutions. Early infant school proponents often used geography, dance, and drill as teaching innovations. Another such advance was the implementation of infant galleries, which placed infants line upon line in successive rows so “as to place them in one mass immediately under the eye of the master” (p. 104). Infant school teachers believed in the malleability of character and that having the students gaze upon the master could produce individual and collective civilization. In comparison to much of the Canadian residential school literature, which has a very legitimate focus on colonial education as cultural decimation, this chapter emphasizes how the pedagogical ideas, tools, and strategies from Enlightenment thinking shaped the foundation of infant missionary education abroad.

A strength of May, Kauer, and Prochner is that they balance the nuances of the colonial, imperial, and Enlightenment pedagogical framework discussed in chapter 2 with independent case studies that comprise each of the three chapters that follow. Each author highlights the variance in the ill-conceived, messy, resisted, and contradictory nature of missionary efforts to transpose their religious and civilizing agendas of Indigenous education onto the colonies. The role of Indigenous language in these infant schools is one such example. In Calcutta,
teachers used the Bengali language as well as the English language together as they believed this approach would better impart their civilizing education (pp. 133-134). Likewise, a bilingual approach was also used in Upper Canada, again because local missionaries believed a bilingual approach was more effective at extending “the influence of religion and education more generally” (p. 173). Yet at other times in the Canadian context, missionaries barred the use of Indigenous languages because it was thought to counter the development and civilization of Indigenous peoples. In Aotearoa/New Zealand, the Maori communities under study were ready adapters and adoptees of the English language for their own purposes; for example, one missionary noted their use of sign posts as a novel means to, for instance, alert passers by that they were on sacred ground and therefore should refrain from eating (pp. 206-207). These rich descriptions of the ideology and use of language provide one example of the comparative case study approach working at its best, laying bare colonial variance across local contexts.

The trio of authors used archival sources that were produced by missionary individuals and organizations. The frames of reference in the sources, as always, are selective; the sources emphasize missionary beliefs and values, they are largely created by men even though missionary wives and women played an important role in infant education, and they excluded Indigenous peoples’ perspectives and experiences. The authors needed to bring together small fragments from various sources to construct their narratives, as infant school documentation was seldom the focus of the archival documents. These methodological points are taken seriously and duly noted throughout the book. May, Kaur, and Prochner provide an extended discussion of their work as “a contestable tapestry” (pp. 16-20), in order to emphasize the ways in which these narratives contribute a very partial and therefore incomplete addition to the tapestry of knowledge on the subject.

The authors of Empire, Education, and Indigenous Childhoods are strongest in the way they set up British infant education and missionary goals as a framework for education and in their use of this framework to navigate and draw lessons from three very useful case studies. It would have been imprudent of May and her colleagues to draw broad and sweeping global conclusions about missionary education, but more focused interpretation of the global trajectories of “civilizing missions,” grounded in these specific case studies, would have been a welcome addition. The dearth of discussion about the use of English and Indigenous languages in these schools, as I discussed above, is a case in point. Ultimately, this work and its emphasis on global contexts in local history is a welcome addition to our understanding of Indigenous education.

Woolford’s objective for This Benevolent Experiment is to “explain how settler colonial and genocidal processes intensify and weaken across multiple social layers, spaces, and times and through the actions of a variety of actors” (p. 12). Such an ambitious, broad, and complex purpose required innovative methods, and ultimately he provides highly convincing evidence and argumentation to support his insights into the study of Indigenous boarding schools. The author centers the research on the Portage La Prairie and Fort Alexander Indian residential schools in Manitoba, and the Albuquerque and Santa Fe Indian Schools in New Mexico. Each
school is set within its particular cultural, social, and geographic context, which yields a strong basis for comparative understanding across primarily national lines. Yet Woolford’s principle contribution, as per his purpose, is the broad and rigorous, yet essentially flexible, framework for understanding boarding school systems that is applicable to the diversity of school experiences and outcomes in North America.

Genocide is the focus of chapter 2, and it is the author’s approach to how genocide takes place that is its primary contribution. Woolford rejects straightforward notions of genocidal intent, application, and effect; there is no smoking gun, no policy capturing the full extent of Indigenous genocide, and no colonial administrator in complete control of the complexity of threats to Indigenous cultures and nationhood. As such, Woolford expressly avoids any attempt to leverage such an approach and rejects an overemphasis on the likes of General Pratt’s chilling refrain, “to kill the indian in the child” (p. 94). Instead, Woolford asserts that the complexity of genocide is manifest in the overwhelmingly diverse set of contexts of residential schools. The types of variance the author examines include: the different social contexts of residential schools; political differences across and between the US and Canada; the myriad of people and organizations involved in residential schooling (bureaucrats, administrators, church representatives, teachers, Indigenous communities, and so on); the varying abilities of Indigenous students and communities to resist; and over one hundred years of existence and evolution of residential schooling in North America. Given this complex context, Woolford makes a convincing case for understanding genocide as something other than the simple effect of sustaining an originary genocidal intent. Instead Woolford suggests that if the actions and processes of those involved in residential schools cohere around a common action frame—a connected framework for action—the diversity of social action could culminate in genocide. The author’s use of this approach connects residential school experiences in a way that highlights common colonial trajectories and practices, yet enables local variation: its flexibility can incorporate different genocidal effects across residential schools; it can accommodate the variance of motivations and ideologies of individuals, organizations, and governments; and it allows for differences in the experiences of cultural termination. What is important to Woolford is that all actors involved in implementing these schools both believed in the need to terminate Indigenous communities and participated in the residential school systems to effect assimilation and civilization on their own terms. Woolford thus moves away from legalistic approaches of who is to blame for genocide in order to emphasize a more sociological understanding of how genocide was put into effect over time.

Another central contribution of the book is Woolford’s development of the “settler colonial mesh” that guides his analysis of genocide and frames the chapter progression. Central to the mesh is the integration of multiple levels of scale. At the macro-societal level is the broad social, economic, and political environment in both the US and Canada. Below that, the meso level is broken into two components; the upper-meso level targets the institutions of the settler colonial
mesh (e.g., government departments of education, welfare, health, and policing),
while the lower-meso level addresses networks of schools. The micro level has a
focus on specific school stories and experiences. Woolford focused chapter 3 on
the macro and upper meso scales, connecting these two scales through the lens
of the “Indian Problem.” In chapter 4, he covers a brief description of each of
the four case studies, before organizing a discussion of the case sites that include
staff, students, parents, and local Indigenous communities. Woolford shifts gears
in chapters 5, 6, and 7, where his conceptual contributions to rethinking genocide
and the integrated scales of the settler colonial mesh come to the fore. The author
finishes the monograph with an analysis of contemporary residential school
redress in chapter 8 before offering conclusions in chapter 9.

Chapters 5 and 6 provide good examples of the conceptual contributions of
this book. The author’s two-pronged focus of chapter 5 is discipline and desire;
the former builds from Michel Foucault’s understanding of technologies of
domination and the latter is understood as a technology of the self. Woolford’s
conceptual analysis provides researchers of residential schools with useful
insights, such as the delineation between monastic discipline—in which strict
daily routines were deemed necessary to save Indigenous souls (pp. 142-143) –
and martial discipline—for instance, military drill was useful to instill discipline
in the students (pp. 145-146). Desire, on the other hand, is a form of discipline
that is self-imposed by students, and therefore students actively participate in
the regulation of their thoughts and behaviors for “civilization.” Woolford notes
how “cowboy and Indian” movies were often recalled as positive memories by
students, yet the films served to socialize students through Indigenous stereotypes
and Indigenous cultural denigration (p. 165). In chapter 6, Woolford shifts the
analysis to knowledge and violence, which he argues were used when discipline
met Indigenous resistance. Again, this chapter offers insight into the ways in which
assimilation took place; for example, the conceptualization of symbolic, cultural,
and physical violence as features of residential schools are conceptually useful in
understanding the types of violence they produced. Woolford’s analysis is rich in
offering insightful ideas that add to our toolbox for interpreting and understanding
the function and experience of residential schooling.

Woolford’s deft analysis of the American and Canadian contexts creates a
compelling comparative history that is woven through all of the case study sites.
Readers may reasonably expect that rich individual school descriptions would flow
in a study of four case sites, yet the school-specific narratives are relatively weak.
A devaluation of the local may seem counter-intuitive to the explicit importance
of the multiple levels of analysis inherent to the settler colonial mesh. But,
ultimately, Woolford uses the multiple levels of scale to contribute to a broad and
multi-scale framework, rather than a primary focus on elucidating the lives and
experiences of the students, teachers, administrators, and communities of the local
case sites. Woolford’s book is most compelling in his conceptual contributions to
genocide and the settler colonial mesh, and thus this excellent study offers fruitful
and innovative ways for understanding residential schools across North America.
Historical researchers will emphasize (and therefore deemphasize) particular arrangements of scale in their work, as can be seen in all three books under review. The local, national, and global scales, along with all scales in-between, are each important in their own right. In addition, scholars are finding it productive to think through the historical relationships between scales, using, for instance, multiple scales simultaneously—as exemplified in Woolford’s monograph—or one scale to inform another—as May, Prochner, and Kaur have done in using a global framework for local interpretation. *A National Crime* played an important role in supporting Canadians to develop a national story of the history and legacy of residential schooling. The way in which researchers use scale is not without its challenges. For instance, an overbearing push for an all-encompassing Canadian storyline will oversimplify and therefore obfuscate Indigenous lives and histories. On the other hand, researchers are challenged by the need for local histories and storytelling, Indigenous agency, and Indigenous methodology, while also finding ways to contribute to national dialogues about Indigenous history and politics that engage non-Indigenous peoples.

Within a broad recognition of the need to benefit from all scales of history, I believe the local scale has particular resonance with many approaches and trends in Indigenous methodology. Indigenous languages, cultures, and principles are always connected to particular peoples and locales, which opens spaces to enhance research through the use of Indigenous knowledge in local history. Likewise, Indigenous customs, practices, and ceremonies as historical methods also lend themselves to local knowledge gathering processes. The importance of land and connection to land, while potentially national or international, generally emphasizes local place in research. Oral histories of residential school survivors and their families, or teachers, principals, and staff of schools, largely point to local experiences. An emphasis on the lived experience and effects of residential schooling—while potentially shaping, and being shaped by, national or global processes—is local at its core. Community based participatory research and community driven research—in which varying degrees of Indigenous community autonomy, leadership, and engagement drive the research—emphasize local residential school histories. My point is not that the connectedness of Indigenous knowledge to local peoples and places, for example, should not inform national discussions and histories, because it most certainly can, but rather, that there is a coherence between the priorities and experiences of Indigenous communities and local-scale research that those communities could successfully leverage. The recent expansion of Indigenous-authored residential school monographs focused on local history may indicate a preference for the local scale. Indigenous leadership will be critical in guiding how arrangements of scale are used productively in research for the betterment of individual communities, of Canadian society broadly, and of Indigenous peoples across the world.

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