“To Civilize”

In the words of Sir John A. Macdonald, Canada’s first prime minister, the purpose of the country’s Indian policy was to “assimilate the Indian people in all respects with the inhabitants of the Dominion.” Schools were meant to “civilize” Aboriginal children, which meant replacing their Aboriginal culture and identity with a Euro-Canadian one.

Government officials concluded that children could not be easily civilized at day schools on reserves since they were in too close contact with their parents, who reinforced traditional cultural values. For these reasons, in 1883, the government committed itself to establishing a residential school system. At the time the federal cabinet minister Hector Langevin said, “In order to educate the children properly we must separate them from their families. Some people may say that this is hard but if we want to civilize them we must do that.”

In the schools, children were given new names, taught to worship a new god, dressed in strange clothes, live a regimented lifestyle, and speak a new language.

The destruction of Aboriginal identity remained one of the key goals of the residential school system throughout its history. In 1920, when the Indian Act was amended to make school attendance compulsory, the Deputy Minister of Indian Affairs, Duncan Campbell Scott, explained that the government’s goal was to “continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department.”