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The policy battle that set the stage for a century of residential school death, misery, grief. Duncan Campbell Scott and Dr. Peter Bryce were on opposite sides of a policy battle that changed the course of history for residential schools where Indigenous children were forced to attend.

Ottawa historian Adam Green says Bryce's feud with Scott was ultimately about the role of government: "It was acrimonious in that they had very different visions."

The outcome of their behind-the-scenes clash in 1909 would set the stage for decades of misery, death and grief in Canada's residential schools — and an enduring national shame. That shame has been felt keenly in the past few weeks with the discovery of the bodies of 215 children at a residential school in Kamloops, B.C.

Their policy showdown was years in the making.

The son of Scottish immigrants, Bryce attended Upper Canada College, earned a medical degree at the University of Toronto, and opened a practice in Guelph. In 1882, he was appointed secretary of Ontario's board of health, where he co-authored the country's first official health code.

A health reform advocate, he pushed for better public sanitation and mandatory smallpox vaccinations for school children. His reputation grew such that in 1900 he became the first Canadian president of the American Public Health Association.

In January 1904, he joined the federal government as chief medical officer in the departments of the Interior and Indian Affairs, making him responsible for the health of immigrants and Indigenous peoples. Bryce pushed for broader European immigration — not just British — and turned a spotlight on the health crisis afflicting Indigenous peoples.

The unchecked spread of tuberculosis, he wrote in his 1906 annual report, meant that "the Indian population of Canada has a mortality rate of more than double that of the whole population."

The following year, Bryce toured 35 residential schools in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta, and found buildings that were old, overcrowded and poorly ventilated. "We have created a situation so dangerous to health that I was often surprised that the results were not even worse than they have been shown statistically to be," he concluded in a 1907 report.

The statistics he presented were appalling. Survey responses from 15 schools showed that nearly one-quarter of former students were dead from TB. Saskatchewan's File Hills Colony school reported 69 per cent of its former students had died.

Bryce recommended "radical improvements" to the schools' ventilation, heating and sanitation systems, and the establishment of tent hospitals at each site to isolate and treat TB patients. Another report the following year found that 80 per cent of students at five Alberta residential schools had TB.

The issue came to a head in 1909.

After Bryce helped examine 243 students at seven Alberta residential schools, he prepared a report that said TB was widespread. The residential school death rate, he reported, was almost 20 times higher than the national average for children between the ages of 5 and 14.

In his report, Bryce recommended that every student be treated as a probable TB patient, and given better food, milk, clothing and medical treatment. He wanted the church-run schools transformed into TB sanatoriums with nursing care overseen by full-time medical officers. Their primary purpose, he argued, should be to stop the spread of TB.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission report, published in 2015, described his report this way: “Although Bryce recommended that his new regime be phased in gradually, it represented a radical restructuring of the residential school system. It struck at both the relationship between the government and the churches, and at the purpose of the institutions.”

Bryce’s report landed on the desk of Indian Affairs’ newly-installed superintendent of education, Duncan Campbell Scott. Formerly the department’s chief accountant, Scott was tall, thin and long-faced with a fondness for cats, classical music and canoe trips.

Ottawa-born, Scott was the son of a Methodist minister who was a friend and political ally of Canada’s founding prime minister, John A. Macdonald. As a young man, Scott yearned for a career in medicine, but his family was unable to offer him the necessary financial support.

Instead, in October 1880, his father used his political connections to secure him a junior clerk’s position in the Department of Indian Affairs, where Scott would become a key architect of residential schools policy.

In his lifetime, however, Scott was best known as a poet and short-story writer — pursuits he adopted in his mid-20s based on the encouragement of his friend and fellow civil servant, Archibald Lapman. Both would become celebrated members of a group known as the Confederation Poets.

Scott’s poems were dramatic and descriptive, often dwelling on the Canadian wilderness and the plight of Indigenous peoples, whom he considered “doomed” to assimilation. He lived in a large house on Lisgar Street, and enjoyed a reputation as an important member of the city’s literati: Scott was president of the Ottawa Symphony Orchestra and the Ottawa Dramatic League.

“His interest was in culture; his job was just a paycheque,” says Donald B. Smith, a University of Calgary emeritus history professor who has written extensively about Scott.

In 1909, Scott considered Bryce’s latest report, which recommended a bold new approach to the unfolding health crisis in Canada’s residential school system.

At the time, there were more than 70 residential schools with about 10,000 students. Funded by the government and run by Catholic, Anglican, United and Presbyterian churches, the schools had been opened in the 1880s to Christianize and assimilate the country’s Indigenous population.

In a memo to the deputy minister, Scott deemed Bryce’s proposals scientific but unworkable since the churches would not be willing to give up control of the schools. “If the schools are to be conducted at all,” Scott wrote, “we must face the fact that a large number of the pupils will suffer from tuberculosis in some of its various forms.”

He flatly rejected Bryce's idea to turn the schools into sanitoriums. Instead, he recommended "common sense reforms to remove the imputation that the department is careless of the interests of these children."

Some modest changes were made in subsequent contracts between the government and churches: per capita grants were increased to allow for better food and clothing.

Still, Bryce did not give up his campaign to save Indigenous lives.

In March 1911, he wrote to Indian Affairs Minister Frank Oliver, complaining about Scott's inaction, and warned him that history would be their judge: "In this particular matter," Bryce said, "he (Scott) is counting upon the ignorance and indifference to the fate of the Indians. But with the awakening of the health conscience of the people we are now seeing on every hand, I feel certain that serious trouble will come of departmental inertia, and I am not personally disposed to have any blame fall on me."

The following year, in October 1912, Oliver was replaced as minister by Dr. William Roche. Bryce was convinced a medical doctor would act on the health crisis so he wrote to him, and spelled out the grim statistical picture. He met with the minister to press his case.

Bryce even used his annual report to suggest that Indian Affairs, by meekly accepting TB deaths among Indigenous students, was not living up to the standards of "civilized societies."

All the while, however, Bryce was being outmaneuvered in the corridors of Parliament Hill: His nemesis, Scott, was named deputy minister of Indian Affairs in October 1913.

Scott quickly blocked Bryce's access to all departmental medical files, and told him in the deathless prose of a victorious bureaucrat, that the doctor's services would no longer be required.

"It is true that since then (1908) we have availed ourselves of your services on a few occasions; but during the past year, so far as I am aware, you have not been called upon to do any duty for the department," Scott wrote in June 1914.

He told Bryce that a new physician had been appointed to oversee residential schools and reserves. "Under these circumstances, I do not think that you should be asked to furnish a report on the medical work in connection with Indians during the fiscal year. I must thank you cordially for the offer to again prepare a report for publication," Scott concluded.

Bryce still worked for the Department of the Interior, but Indian Affairs was closed to him. His annual reports, which he had used to bludgeon officialdom, could no longer be published.

Still, he didn't give up the fight. He lobbied for the creation of a federal health department, and to have it assume responsibility for Indigenous health. The government launched the new department in 1919, but control over Indigenous health matters remained with Indian Affairs.

Bryce applied to become the health department's first deputy minister, but he was denied the post and forced into retirement two years later at 67.

Thwarted in government, Bryce in retirement published a booklet, "The Story of a National Crime," in which he excoriated the repeated failures of federal leaders to address the Indigenous TB epidemic. He called Scott a "reactionary deputy minister" whose influence prevented "even the simplest effective efforts to deal with the health problems of the Indians along modern scientific lines."

Bryce attacked Prime Minister Arthur Meighen for his "confession of utter helplessness" in the face of the crisis — even while other parts of the country demonstrated success against TB. In Hamilton, he noted, the city's TB death rate fell by almost 75 per between 1904 and 1917.

Bryce also condemned the government for spending only \$10,000 a year to control TB among the nation's 105,000 Indigenous peoples, while the City of Ottawa alone spent more than \$30,000 on its TB patients.

That the government failed to improve the TB crisis in the years since 1909 amounted, he charged, to a "criminal disregard" of its treaty obligations to Indigenous peoples. "It is indeed pitiable," Bryce concluded, "that during the 13 years since then this trail of disease and death has gone on almost unchecked by any serious efforts on the part of the Department of Indian Affairs."

Bryce asked Parliament to reinstate him as chief medical officer at Indian Affairs, but his request fell on deaf ears: His pamphlet attracted little press coverage, and only brief mention in the House of Commons.

All the while, Scott continued to expand the reach of residential schools. In April 1920, through changes to the Indian Act, he made attendance mandatory for every Indigenous child between the ages of 7 and 16. In arguing for those changes, he said he wanted to "get rid of the Indian problem" and ensure the government did not have to continuously support and protect Indigenous peoples.

"Our object is 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," Scott said.

According to the TRC report, the "common sense reforms" Scott introduced in 1909 served primarily "to complete the tubercularization of First Nations children" by spreading the disease to new and uninfected students. In 1920, a Saskatchewan royal commission found a TB infection rate of 93.1 per cent among Indigenous children.

Scott retired in 1932 as the Great Depression took hold, an event that the TRC report said intensified the neglect of Indigenous health and residential schools.

Dr. Peter Bryce died that same year, 1932, days after burying his adult son, Henderson, who had succumbed to tuberculosis. Grief stricken, Bryce boarded a ship to the West Indies and died while on board, apparently from a cerebral hemorrhage.

In his lifetime, Scott had also known the pain of losing a child. In 1907, his 12-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, died from Scarlet fever while studying piano at a convent school in Paris.

Scott and Bryce are now buried not far from each another in Beechwood Cemetery.

In death, Bryce is now celebrated as a lonely voice of compassion during the long, dark history of residential schools, while Scott is increasingly reviled for his role in that same terrible story.

A plaque added by Beechwood Cemetery officials in November 2015, following the release of the TRC report, notes that Scott is “notorious for his 52-year career in the Department of Indian Affairs.”

A plaque added near Bryce’s gravestone recognizes him as “a courageous and early advocate of universal standards in health” who documented abuses and high death rates in residential schools.

Historian Adam Green says Bryce should be remembered as someone who tried valiantly to do the right thing as both a doctor and civil servant. His policy battle with Scott, Green contends, represents a road not taken that might have lessened the damage inflicted by residential schools.

Andy Bryce said his great grandfather was a principled man who was willing put his career on the line in his epic battle with Scott. But he insisted that Scott was not the only one who stood in the way of change.

“I think the reason Scott got away with it for so many years was that other people agreed with him,” said Bryce, 63, a teacher and former broadcaster who has made a documentary about his celebrated relative. “You can’t just lay this at the feet of Scott: I think our Darwinesque approach to this was racist in its heart.”