

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Victims of Benevolence. By Elizabeth Furniss.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/65r5d8w2>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 20(2)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Berg, S. Carol

Publication Date

1996-03-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

political resurgence. Contributing to many of these dynamics has been the claims process, whereby Native Americans have sought a second compensation for lands that had been taken from them without consent or at an unfair price in the nineteenth century. This process involves

an explicit reevaluation of the government's past dealings with the Indians; as such it yields an official conclusion as to whether the United States, to paraphrase a statement made by Commissioner Edward Smith in 1875, having taken from the Indians the possibility of living in their way, gave them in return a genuine opportunity to live as Americans. (p. 239)

Wishart goes on to develop a clear, extensive presentation of the claims process and cites several "mixed results." In some claims, the lawyers made out much better than individual Native Americans, and, "No doubt the awards were a boon in hard times, but like the nineteenth-century treaty payments, they had as much to do with appeasing the American conscience as with fair treatment of the American Indians" (p. 245). I am puzzled, however, as to why Wishart makes no mention of the very recent Blackbird Bend land dispute involving the Omaha, the state of Iowa, and the U.S. government.

Overall, I find this book by David J. Wishart a "must," a necessary addition to any library or individual collection seeking good documentation of the "unspeakable sadness" and unspeakable injustices experienced by Native Americans in the dispossession of their lands and cultures.

Stephen G. Cobb
Messiah College

Victims of Benevolence. By Elizabeth Furniss. Vancouver, British Columbia: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1995. 128 pages. \$12.95 paper.

Although set in British Columbia, Elizabeth Furniss's book *Victims of Benevolence* tells a story that in many ways is a carbon copy of stories about Indian residential schools in the United States. She describes life at St. Joseph's residential school in Williams Lake, British Columbia, between 1891 and 1981, focusing primarily on the years 1891 to the 1920s.

It is a dreary tale overall, one that has become increasingly familiar to readers of Indian history these past ten years. There has been an outpouring of chronicles dealing with Indian boarding schools, much of the reporting being done by former residents of these schools. Furniss's book is based heavily on native recollections of life at the Williams Lake School. With good reason, the book is subtitled *The Dark Legacy of the Williams Lake Residential School*.

The school's roots are traced clearly and concisely. Furniss begins with an analysis of the earliest European attitudes towards North American Indians. Viewing them as "a childlike, savage race," Europeans believed it their duty to transform Indians in every way. In seventeenth-century New France, this meant that Roman Catholic missionaries—and missionaries all over the Americas—worked to Christianize and "civilize" native peoples. Education became the major tool in this endeavor.

British sovereignty in the eighteenth century allowed other Christian denominations to compete with one another in the quest to establish missions among the tribes in Canada. By the mid-nineteenth century, Roman Catholic missions dominated the interior of British Columbia, with Anglican and Methodist missions dotting the northern coast; the Presbyterians joined them on the south coast.

In both Canada and the United States during the nineteenth century, church and state collaborated to "manage" Indians and Indian lands. Somewhat earlier than did Canada, the United States adopted a "peace policy" in 1869, under which church denominations could contract with the federal government to establish and operate residential schools for Indians, providing them with basic academic as well as agricultural and domestic skills. In Canada, this collaboration began after the creation of the Department of Indian Affairs in 1880.

The Canadian residential schools, like those in the United States, gave missionaries a "captive audience" of Indian students segregated from their families and from tribal culture. However, Canada retained the residential schools and the church-state partnership long after the United States government dissolved its system; Canada phased out the old in the 1950s, whereas the United States had done so by 1912.

Furniss's study of the Williams Lake residential school relates how the Shuswap bands had been suffering serious disruptions to their cultural values and customs even before the establishment of

the school in 1891. Discovery of gold in the 1860s brought a flood of whites into Shuswap territory; with the miners came farmers and other waves of settlers, bringing new government structures. The 1870 Land Act allowed white settlers to gain free land grants of up to 320 acres, while Indians could not pre-empt land. Loss of traditional hunting, trapping, and fishing grounds weakened Shuswap community life drastically.

The Oblates of Mary Immaculate, a Roman Catholic French order, established the Williams Lake residential school in 1891, some twenty-five years after their arrival among the Shuswap. The missionaries saw themselves as benevolent protectors of the native peoples, intermediaries between them and nonnative society. This stance gave the oblates virtual autonomy in their handling of the school.

Furniss outlines the philosophy and program that shaped the school, highlighting the emphasis on "strict discipline, regimented behavior, submission to authority, and corporal punishments [as] central characteristics of the Oblates' educational system" (p. 40). The school enrollment increased throughout the 1890s and early 1900s, from fifty in 1896–97 to sixty-four in 1915–16; many students, however, were there unwillingly.

At other Indian boarding schools there were frequent run-aways. But tragedy struck at Williams Lake in February 1902 when nine boys ran away and one of them, an eight-year-old, died. Indian agent Bell, ordered to investigate the incident, decided that the problem was caused by the "wild nature" of the Indians and a lack of sufficient discipline by the oblates. An inquest, with evidence given by both Indians and non-Indians, tried to determine the circumstances of the boy's death. Testimony quoted at some length by Furniss kept referring to their "being inadequately fed and excessively whipped" as major reasons for the children's behavior (p. 78). The students and the oblates gave conflicting evidence, but the Department of Indian Affairs closed the issue in the oblates' favor. Furniss argues that collusion between church and state was to be expected. Given the fact that both shared the view of natives as inferior, one should not be surprised that it was the Indians who were blamed for any problems.

A student suicide in the summer of 1920 brought more unfavorable attention to the Williams Lake school. Nine boys ate poisonous water hemlock, and one of them died as a result. Once more, the Department of Indian Affairs investigated, sending an inspec-

tor to look into the matter. Like the earlier incident, this one was covered up, and conditions at the school failed to improve. The church and the government engaged in another "conspiracy of silence" (p. 109).

Throughout the next three decades, the school continued its harsh system and resisted the growing movement to end denominational residential schools and integrate them into the public school system. But by the 1950s this policy was slowly taking hold, and in 1964 the federal government took charge of the Williams Lake school, although many oblates continued to staff it. The mission school closed in 1981, but in the late 1980s charges of sexual abuse were leveled at the oblates by several former students. One priest pleaded guilty in 1989 to sexual assault. In 1992 charges were still pending against a former school principal.

In August 1994, the Assembly of First Nations, a national political organization that represents Indians in Canada, published a report on residential schools, documenting physical and sexual abuses and their effects on the students and their families. A provincial Royal Canadian Mounted Police investigation was set to begin in the spring of 1995. Native peoples of Williams Lake and across Canada are speaking out about the bitter past, raising their own and others' historical consciousness. In the process, they are creating a "critical new awareness of . . . Indian-white relations in Canada" (p. 120).

Furniss tells her story well. A helpful appendix provides the opening address, 18 June 1991, by Chief Bev Sellers to the First National Conference on Residential Schools. It is a powerful speech, summarizing what the oppressed native peoples endured for most of this past century. Chief Sellers emphasizes that the problem has to be acknowledged before the task of reviving the peoples' values and culture can begin.

A complementary study to Furniss's work is that of K. Tsianina Lomawaima, *They Called It Prairie Light*. Published in 1994, this book traces the history of Chilocco Indian School in Oklahoma, a residential off-reservation school (1884-1980) which, although not church-run, operated in the same style as did the Williams Lake school. Lomawaima gives much space to alumni reminiscences of life at the school. Although sexual abuse does not figure in the Chilocco story, the two histories share common elements as they narrate the tragedy of Indian students robbed of their individual and tribal heritage and identity. Other solid sources for research include Basil Johnston's *Indian School Days*, Luther Stand-

ing Bear's *My Indian Boyhood*, Robert A. Trennert's, *The Phoenix Indian School: Forced Assimilation in Arizona, 1891–1935*, and Francis Paul Prucha's *The Churches and the Indian Schools, 1888–1912*.

S. Carol Berg
College of St. Benedict (Minnesota)

William Bartram on the Southeastern Indians. Edited and annotated by Gregory A. Waselkov and Kathryn E. Holland Braund. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. 341 pages. \$45.00 cloth.

William Bartram was an eighteenth-century naturalist who, as a young man, traveled throughout the southeastern United States. Bartram had shown an early aptitude as a naturalist and illustrator and had accompanied his father, botanist John Bartram, on a scientific expedition in east Florida. Later, after having tried and failed as a merchant and then a Florida planter, Bartram persuaded London physician and horticulturist Dr. John Fothergill to sponsor him on a botanical expedition through the newly acquired British lands in the Southeast. For four years, Bartram traveled through the Southeast, visiting northern Florida, the southern Atlantic coast, and the interior Cherokee, Creek, and Choctaw lands. He proved to be an excellent botanist and zoologist and also turned out to be an astute ethnographer of southeastern Indian life. Afterward, he returned to his home in Philadelphia and several years later compiled his notes and drawings into *Travels through North and South Carolina., Georgia, East and West Florida, the Cherokee Country, the Extensive Territories of the Muscogulges, or Creek Confederacy, and the Country of the Chactaws*, which was first published in 1791.

Bartram's writings have been an important primary source for scholars and historians of the southeastern Indians, as well as those interested in the environmental history of the Southeast. *Travels* has also garnered a large popular audience. Since its first publication, it has gone through several reprints, the most noteworthy of which is Francis Harper's 1958 *Naturalists Edition*. In this, Harper edited and heavily annotated Bartram's *Travels*, with special regard to his descriptions of southeastern flora and fauna. Waselkov's and Braund's volume is a much-needed companion piece to Harper's edition, since this volume concentrates on Bartram's writings about the southeastern Indians.