

Excerpt from “Introduction” to the *Carlisle Indian School: Indigenous Histories, Memories and Reclamations*, co-edited by J. Fear-Segal and S. Rose, University of Nebraska Press, 2016.

Close to midnight on October 5th, 1879, a train drew into the railroad station in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, carrying eighty-four Lakota children from the Rosebud and Pine Ridge Indian agencies in Dakota Territory. They were the first contingent of students sent to the newly-opened Carlisle Indian School to be made the subjects of an educational experiment that would soon be extended to include Native nations across the United States and Canada.

The children had traveled over a thousand miles by river and rail and this great distance was fundamental to Carlisle’s mission. Captain Richard Henry Pratt, the school’s founder and first superintendent, was determined to remove Native children as far as possible from their families and communities, to strip them of all aspects of their traditional cultures, and instruct them in the language, religion, behavior and skills of mainstream white society. Pratt’s objective was to prepare Native youth for assimilation and American citizenship. He insisted that in schools like Carlisle this transformation could be achieved in a generation. An acting army officer, Pratt had secured government support to establish and run this first federally-funded, off-reservation Indian boarding school. Carlisle provided the blueprint for the federal Indian school system that would be organized across the United States, with twenty-four analogous military-style, off-reservation schools, and similar boarding institutions on every reservation.

The federal government was entering the final stages of Native dispossession and North American conquest. By the time Carlisle opened its doors in 1879, most of the fighting was over. With Native Nations now sequestered on reservations, Pratt and white Christian reformers, who called themselves “Friends of the Indian,” presented the policy of education and assimilation as a more enlightened and humane way to solve the nation’s intractable “Indian Problem.” Yet the purpose of the education campaign matched previous policies: dispossessing Native peoples of their lands and extinguishing their existence as distinct groups that threatened the nation-building project of the United States. These destructive objectives were effectively masked for the white public by a long-established American educational rhetoric that linked schooling to both democracy and individual advancement, and by a complementary and unquestioned commitment to the American republican experiment. Pratt’s main task therefore was to convince white Americans that his mission to transform Native children from “savagery” to “civilization” was both desirable and possible.

For Native communities, Pratt’s experiment at Carlisle initiated processes of diaspora, dislocation, and rupture deeper and more profound than he envisaged. These processes had many immediate impacts as well as long-term legacies. For all Native nations, physical and spiritual well-being was anchored not just within their communities, but also within the environment and land that surrounded them. When Native children were transported hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of miles to Carlisle, Pennsylvania, they were not only subjected to a strict “civilizing” program to strip them of their cultures, they were also forced to live in an alien place devoid of familiar cultural, spiritual, and geographical markers as well as the support and succor of kin and community.

Thousands of Native children and youth would follow that first group from Dakota over the next forty years, transported from Indian agencies across the continent on rail networks that built and connected the markets of the United States. The vast majority did not assimilate into mainstream society as Pratt had envisioned but instead returned to their reservation homes, often feeling caught between two cultures. Only 758 of over 10,700 students who were enrolled at Carlisle graduated. Some found the school traumatic and begged to go home or ran away; others completed their Carlisle schooling but lived with stress and disturbance upon their return.

A well-known account of the difficulties returned Carlisle students faced is that of Plenty Horses, who attended Carlisle from 1883 to 1888:

There was no chance to get employment, nothing for me to do whereby I could earn my board and clothes, no opportunity to learn more and remain with the whites. It disheartened me and I went back to live as I had before going to school.

Plenty Horses struggled when he returned home, trying to find his place among his people, having been stripped of his native language and cultural traditions. As historian Philip J. Deloria notes, Plenty Horses missed out – as did most of the students – on the essential teachings of his Lakota education that takes place for young people between the ages of fourteen and nineteen.¹ And he was acutely aware of the genocide imposed on his people.

Upon return home, Plenty Horses grew his hair long, wore traditional dress, and participated in the Ghost Dance. He was there on the Pine Ridge Reservation when the bodies were brought in from Wounded Knee. Eight days after the massacre at Wounded Knee, on January 7, 1891, Plenty Horses joined some other 40 warriors who accompanied Sioux leaders to meet with Army Lieutenant Edward W. Casey for possible negotiations. It was there that Plenty Horses shot and killed Casey. During his trial, he said:

Five years I attended Carlisle and was educated in the ways of the white man. When I returned to my people, I was an outcast among them. I was no longer an Indian. I was not a white man. I was lonely. I shot the lieutenant so I might make a place for myself among my people. I am now one of them. I shall be hung, and the Indians will bury me as a warrior.²

In the end, Plenty Horses was not convicted of murder and was released. In order to exonerate the soldiers of the Seventh Cavalry who conducted the massacre at Wounded Knee. The lawyers and eventually the judge declared that a state of war had existed.³

This is not to say that all of the students at Carlisle had negative experiences. There is evidence in the accounts of some students and their descendants that they made good use of their Carlisle education. It seems too that Pratt was a complex man, able to win the loyalty and lasting support of some students. When he died in 1924 his status as an army officer meant he could be buried in Arlington Cemetery, and the words inscribed

on his gravestone suggest that some Carlisle students contributed to it: “Erected in loving memory by his students and other Indians.” Although the stories of Carlisle and its legacies are complex, the sources through which these can be tracked are very one-sided because the official record was created and preserved by white officials. Few students left any written records. Those who did wrote mostly for school publications that were under the scrutiny of white editors. On their return home, many students did not speak about their experiences, and oral stories that were passed down the generations often remained closely guarded within the communities; for understandable reasons they are not widely accessible. Yet it is an indisputable fact that the Indian School initiated a large-scale diaspora of Native children, and that the geo-spatial-cultural dislocation they experienced as part of settler colonialism was grounded in a new and foreign place-name that would soon become infamous in all Native communities as a major site of cultural genocide: Carlisle.

For N. Scott Momaday, the Kiowa writer, artist and Pulitzer Prize winner, the name Carlisle carries an historical significance parallel to Gettysburg and Wounded Knee within America’s national memory and history: “Carlisle, in a more subtle and obscure story than that of Gettysburg, is a place name among place names on a chronological map that spans time and the continent.”

History of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School (1879-1918)

Carlisle is a major site of memory for Native peoples across the nation and in other countries, such as Canada, whose residential schools embraced both its philosophy and curriculum. Although for many, detailed knowledge and memories of Carlisle and their connections to it have been lost or deliberately erased, the name “Carlisle” still resonates in every Native community. During its thirty-nine-year history, over 10,500 students from almost every Native Nation in the USA (as well as Puerto Rico) were enrolled at Carlisle. The first were deliberately recruited from tribes regarded by the government as militarily troublesome: Lakota, Kiowa, Cheyenne. In some cases, leaders and parents were persuaded to send their children to Carlisle, thinking it might provide them with a good education and so benefit their people when negotiating with Whites. For other children, less choice and more coercion were involved; some were sent to Carlisle as prisoners of war.

Pratt’s goal was to recruit students from every Indian agency, to universalize his experiment and facilitate the simultaneous obliteration of all Native cultures; at Carlisle, students were rarely placed with a room-mate from the same nation, so they would be forced to speak English. Young people were brought from all over the country: California and the Carolinas, New Mexico and New York, Arizona and Alaska; the nations sending the highest number of children were the Sioux (Lakota, Nakota, and Dakota) and the Chippewa (Ojibwe). Carlisle students were enrolled initially for a period of three to five years. Most did not return home during that time, and many spent far longer at Carlisle. Pratt’s goal was to immerse them in the dominant White Anglo-Saxon mainstream culture. Speaking to a convention of Baptist ministers in 1883, he used the image of baptism to explain his philosophy for transforming Native children so they could be made to emulate white men and women:

*In Indian civilization I am a Baptist, because I believe in immersing the Indians in our civilization and when we get them under holding them there until they are thoroughly soaked.*⁴

The force and suggestion of drowning contained in Pratt's metaphor were not accidental; he believed every necessary measure should be taken to impose "civilization" through total immersion. His slogan was: *To civilize the Indian, get him into civilization. To keep him civilized, let him stay.*⁵ And this was the rationale for his "outing" program. Almost all Carlisle students experienced multiple dislocations when, instead of returning home for the summers, they were sent "out" into local communities to work for white families, typically as farmhands or maids. Some stayed 'out' much longer, and even attended local schools. Yet even after spending many years in the East, most Carlisle students eventually returned home to their reservations. Many were caught in between worlds, cultures, and languages. Cut off from the nurture of tradition, family, and community, they experienced a rupture in their affiliations, affections and identities. For many this began a legacy of trauma and disenfranchisement that would be passed down the generations.

The federal government's support for Carlisle signaled its growing involvement in Indian education. Previously, Indian schools had been run by missionaries, with the emphasis on conversion. With Native Nations in the West suffering progressive military defeat and their lands now forcibly incorporated into the United States' geographical boundaries, officials in Washington sought an effective way to break the intimate bonds that tied Native children to their communities, cultures, and homelands and to substitute a new loyalty to the American nation.

Prior to founding the Carlisle Indian School, Captain Richard Henry Pratt had spent three years at Fort Marion, Florida (1875-78) guarding a group of imprisoned leaders and warriors from defeated tribes in the Southwest: Cheyenne; Kiowa; Comanche; Arapahoe; Caddo. In a make-shift fortress school many of the young men learnt to read and write, leading Pratt to conclude that education could provide the solution to the nation's "Indian problem." After they were released, Pratt took twenty-two of the younger Fort Marion prisoners to Hampton Institute, Virginia, to continue their education. But Hampton had been established as a school for black freedmen, and Pratt was loath to have Indians associated with the racial stigma suffered by African Americans. Besides, he wanted his own school, so he requested permission from the Secretary of the Interior, Carl Schurz, to found a school exclusively for Indians:

*...give me 300 young Indians and a place in one of our best communities and let me prove it is easy to give Indian youth the English language, education, and industries that it is imperative they have in preparation for citizenship. Carlisle Barracks in Pennsylvania has been abandoned for a number of years. It is in a fine agricultural country and the inhabitants are kindly disposed and long free from the universal border prejudice against Indians.*⁶

Federal officials in Washington readily granted permission for the disused barracks to be transferred from the Department of War to the Department of the Interior. The rationale for choosing cultural rather than physical genocide was in large part

economically pragmatic. Secretary of the Interior, Carl Schurz concluded that it would cost a million dollars to kill an Indian in warfare, whereas it cost only \$1,200 to school an Indian child for eight years. Likewise, the Secretary of the Interior, Henry Teller, argued that it would cost \$22 million to wage war against Indians over a ten-year period, but would cost less than a quarter of that amount to educate 30,000 children for a year.⁷ As David Wallace Adams argued in his classic *Education for Extinction*:

*For tribal elders who had witnessed the catastrophic developments of the nineteenth century.... There seemed to be no end to the cruelties perpetrated by whites. And after all this, the schools. After all this, the white man had concluded that the only way to save Indians was to destroy them, that the last great Indian war should be waged against children. They were coming for the children.*⁸

So in 1879 the Carlisle Barracks was re-opened as an Indian School, with 120 federally funded Indian students from the West, on the very site where the Army had trained the U.S. Cavalry (1838-1871) that had recently enforced American settlement of the western part of the continent, fought the nations of the Indian students, and seized native lands, incorporating them into the United States.

In fact, there was a cruel irony in Pratt's choice of Carlisle as the site for the Indian School, for his reassurance to Carl Schurz at the Department of the Interior - "the inhabitants are kindly disposed and long free from the universal border prejudice against Indians" - neglects to mention that Carlisle was historically a key location for launching the Indian wars west of the Susquehanna River.

From the start, Pratt was acutely alert to the promotional powers offered by the new medium of photography and worked closely with local photographer, J. N. Choate, to create visual 'proof' of his experiment's success. Thousands of Americans who never set foot in Carlisle became familiar with photographic images of apparently civilized and educated Indian children. From the day the first students were brought in, Pratt made them subjects of the camera's lens, which recorded their arrival in traditional clothing with moccasins and feathers, and subsequent transformations into scrubbed, brushed, uniformed Carlisle students. With cropped hair, tidy uniforms, and skin that was photographically enhanced to look whiter, the assumption was that these external changes had been matched by a parallel intellectual and moral transformation. These photographs were used to garner support for the school and substantiate Pratt's claim that "savage" Indians could indeed be "civilized," a radical idea for many Americans just three years after the Battle of the Little Big Horn.

During his time as superintendent (1879-1904) Pratt made the Carlisle campus a stage on which to present Indians living and working in a "contemporary" environment. New and modernized buildings and the installation of a sophisticated heating and lighting system contributed to his strategy of demonstrating to Whites that Indians were fully capable of taking their place in modern America. As Deloria notes, the image of the "savage" Indian so prevalently promoted in previous years was replaced with the notion of the less threatening, "docile, pacified Indians" on their way to civilization.⁹ Pratt took every opportunity to make strategic public displays of Carlisle students. The Carlisle band played at the opening of the Brooklyn Bridge in 1883, a contingent of students was

sent to march at the Chicago 1893 World's Fair, and individual students whom Pratt regarded as exemplary were given posts where their so-called progress could be observed. A graphic example of this is given by Carlisle student Luther Standing Bear, who recounts how when he was sent to work at Wanamaker's in Philadelphia, he was placed on open display in the store while he was pricing jewelry:

So every day I was locked inside this little glass house, opening the trunks, taking out the jewels and putting price tags on them. How the white folks did crowd around to watch me! They were greatly surprised that John Wanamaker could trust an Indian boy with such valuables.¹⁰

Pratt's dismissal in 1904 signaled the start of an era when the viability of the Carlisle experiment would be increasingly brought into question. The expense of running a boarding school located in the East had always been a contentious issue and it became increasingly controversial. Accompanied by the eugenics movement that promoted the "science" of racial inferiority, there was a growing doubt, even among American reformers, that Indians were capable of taking their place as equal to Whites within the nation. Most important of all, the passage of the Dawes Allotment Act in 1887 had guaranteed that the vast Native homelands of the West could gradually be transferred into white settler ownership. Native peoples were no longer a threat to nation-building. Within a short decade, 1889-1896, the West had entered the Union as seven new states: North and South Dakota, Montana, Washington, Idaho, Wyoming, and Utah. In response to the new situation, the turn of the century ushered in a change of policy in Washington. The goal of rapid assimilation, fiercely championed at Carlisle and closely linked to the perceived need to subjugate Native peoples and possess their lands, was replaced by a national Indian schooling program with a slower pace, more lowly ambitions, and requiring a much smaller budget. Reservation schools, teaching a simple and basic curriculum, were now deemed to be the best way to accommodate Indian "incapacities." The campaign for Indian citizenship was suspended.

Reflecting on the impact of boarding schools, in 2013 attorneys for the Native American Rights Legal Fund wrote:

Cut off from their families and culture, the children were punished for speaking their Native languages, banned from conducting traditional or cultural practices, shorn of traditional clothing and identity of their Native cultures, taught that their cultures and traditions were evil and sinful, and that they should be ashamed of being Native American. Placed often far from home, they were frequently neglected or abused physically, sexually, and psychologically. Generations of these children became the legacy of the federal boarding school policy. They returned to their communities, not as the Christianized farmers that the boarding school policy envisioned, but as deeply scarred humans lacking the skills, community, parenting, extended family, language, and cultural practices of those raised in their cultural context.¹¹

When the Carlisle Indian School closed its doors almost a century ago, the institutions it spawned and its resolve to obliterate Native cultures did not die with the school. In the United States, despite a brief period of apparent if romanticized respect shown Native cultures during the 1930s, the post-World War II years witnessed renewed federal determination to terminate tribal sovereignty and assimilate all Indians into the

mainstream. In the face of threats to both community and culture, the boarding school memories of many survivors remained silenced and hidden. However, the late 1960s marked the beginning of a new era of Native cultural and political renaissance and resistance. This was signaled by the political activism first demonstrated at Alcatraz by the Indians of All Tribes (1969), and paralleled in literature by N. Scott Momaday's publication of *House Made of Dawn* that was awarded the Pulitzer Prize (1969), and the beginning of what is described as a Native American Renaissance.¹² In Native communities across America, however, it would take time and courage to allow information and stories about Carlisle and its institutional legacy to surface and become acknowledged as part of a shared and painful inter-tribal and inter-cultural history. Slowly, survivors, descendants, and the wider Native community began openly to address and claim these historical experiences and confront their enduring legacies as well as those responsible for implementing them.

In 2002, a coalition of Indigenous groups organized the Boarding School Healing Project that continues to document "through research and oral history the extensive abuses that go beyond individual casualties to disruption of Indigenous life at every level".¹³ In *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz recounts the story that Sun Elk, the first child from the Taos Pueblo to attend the Carlisle Indian School (1883-1890), tells about how lessons taught at Carlisle affected him on his return to Taos society:

*They told us that Indian ways were bad. They said we must get civilized. I remember that word too. It means 'be like the white man.' I am willing to be like the white man, but I did not believe the Indian ways were wrong. But they kept teaching us for seven years. And the books told how bad the Indians had been to the white men – burning their towns and killing their women and children. But I had seen white men do that to Indians. We all wore white man's clothes and ate white man's food and went to white man's churches and spoke white man's talk. And so after a while we also began to say Indians were bad. We laughed at our own people and their blankets and cooking pots and sacred societies and dances."*¹⁴

A number of articles and books have documented the abuses that occurred at Indian boarding schools in the United States, including physical and sexual violence and corporal punishment that affected not only the children at the time but future generations as well. These schools were run by the government through the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The Assistant Secretary of the Indian Affairs Department of the Interior, Kevin Gover (Pawnee),¹⁵ made the following comments at a ceremony acknowledging the 175th Anniversary of the Establishment of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, on September 8, 2000:

This agency forbade the speaking of Indian languages, prohibited the conduct of traditional religious activities, outlawed traditional government, and made Indian people ashamed of who they were. Worst of all, the Bureau of Indian Affairs committed these acts against the children entrusted to its boarding schools, brutalizing them emotionally, psychologically, physically, and spiritually. Even in this era of self-determination, when the Bureau of Indian Affairs is at long last

serving as an advocate for Indian people in an atmosphere of mutual respect, the legacy of these misdeeds haunts us. The trauma of shame, fear and anger has passed from one generation to the next, and manifests itself in the rampant alcoholism, drug abuse, and domestic violence that plague Indian country. Many of our people live lives of unrelenting tragedy as Indian families suffer the ruin of lives by alcoholism, suicides made of shame and despair, and violent death at the hands of one another. So many of the maladies suffered today in Indian country result from the failures of this agency. Poverty, ignorance, and disease have been the product of this agency's work.¹⁶

The 2007 UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples recognized the many abuses committed against them through “colonization and dispossession of their lands,” and outlined their rights (in 46 separate Articles) as well as recommendations for next steps. The Declaration was heralded as a “triumph for justice and human dignity” after more than two decades of negotiations between governments and indigenous people’s representatives. It was adopted by a majority with 143 states in favor, 4 against (Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States) and 11 abstentions.¹⁷

While Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States voted against the Declaration, they have to various degrees offered apologized for their countries’ abuses against indigenous people, in part through government-run boarding schools. Formal, governmental apologies in the United States, however, do not compare to those given by New Zealand and Canada (and even Australia), both of which have established Truth and Reconciliation Commissions to investigate abuses against indigenous peoples and children sent to government-run boarding schools. While U.S. President Barack Obama did issue an official Apology to Native people on Saturday, December 19, 2009 when he signed the Native American Apology Resolution into law, it was closed to the media. A public reading of the Apology wasn’t held until May 20, 2010, when Sen. Brownback read the resolution during an event at the Congressional Cemetery in Washington, D.C. Only five tribal leaders were present, however, representing the Cherokee, Choctaw, Muscogee (Creek), Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate and Pawnee nations.

Lise Balk King poignantly notes in her article for *Indian Country Today*, “A Tree Fell in the Forest: The U.S. Apologized to Native Americans and No One Heard a Sound,” that a key difference between Obama’s apology and Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s on Wednesday June 11, 2008 was the *public* nature of the apology. “Prime Minister Stephen Harper asked his 30 million Canadian citizens to tune in to Parliament for a live, nationally broadcast Apology to their country's First Nations... He specifically addressed the government’s role in assimilating Native children through church-run residential (boarding) schools, and sought a turning point in the troubled history between Native peoples and the Canadian state.”¹⁸ When Harper publically apologized for the creation and excesses of the residential school system in 2008, he brought the abuses of all Indian residential and boarding schools under international scrutiny. And the other key difference is that detailed action steps were identified to move towards repair and healing.

In 2015, after years of investigation and hearings, the Canadian Truth and

Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) Report accused the residential schools of multi-generational *cultural genocide*. This Report has initiated a discussion that reaches far outside Canadian boundaries. Many people both in Canada and internationally believe that this accusation should be stronger and that what happened in residential boarding schools should openly be named as genocide; some feel that there can never be full reconciliation. But the Canadian TRC findings mean that the mission and history of Carlisle are now framed within a wider international context and conversation.

¹ Philip J. Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*. (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2004), 28.

² Quoted in Utley, "The Ordeal of Plenty Horses," 16.

³ Gary D. Solis: *The Law of Armed Conflict: international Humanitarian Law in War* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 33.

⁴ Robert M Utley, ed., *Battlefield and Classroom: Four Decades with the American Indian, 1867-1904*, by Richard Henry Pratt (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), xxiii.

⁵ Utley, ed., *Battlefield and Classroom*, 283.

⁶ Utley, ed., *Battle field and Classroom*, 215-216.

⁷ Robert. Trennert, "Educating Indian Girls at Nonreservation Boarding Schools, 1878-1920, *The Western Historical Quarterly* Vol. 13, No. 3 (Jul., 1982), 54.

⁸ David Wallace Adams, *Education for Extinction - American Indians and the Boarding School Experience 1875-1928* (Lawrence, Kansas University Press of Kansas, 1995), 337.

⁹ Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places*, 35-36.

¹⁰ Luther Standing Bear, *My People the Sioux* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 184.

¹¹ Donald R. Wharton and Brett Lee Shelton, *Let All That is Indian Within You Die!* Native American Rights Fund's Legal Review, Summer/Fall 2013.

<http://www.narf.org/cases/boarding-school-healing/>

¹² Kenneth Lincoln, in *Native American Renaissance* (University of California Press, 1985), was the first to coin this term, and to identify N. Scott Momaday as the originator of the movement.

¹³ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous People' History of the United States* (Boston, Beacon Press, 2014), 212.

¹⁴Quoted in Dunabar-Ortiz, 2014, 212.

¹⁵ Since 2007 Kevin Gover has been Director of Nation Museum of the American Indian.

¹⁶ Christopher Buck, "Never Again": Kevin Gover's Apology for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. *Wicazo Sa Review*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Spring, 2006), pp. 97-126. University of Minnesota Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4140301>

¹⁷ United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) (*Adopted by the General Assembly, A/61/L.67 and Add.1, 13 September 2007*)

<http://www.un.org/press/en/2007/ga10612.doc.htm>.

¹⁸ Lise Balk King, “ A Tree Fell in the Forest: The U.S. Apologized to Native Americans and No One Heard a Sound.” *Indian Country*, 12/3/11
<http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2011/12/03/tree-fell-forest-us-apologized-native-americans-and-no-one-heard-sound>.