

The Sleeping Giant Awakens: Genocide, Indian Residential Schools, and the Challenge of Conciliation by David B. MacDonald

Jane Griffith

Volume 112, Number 1, Spring 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1069020ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069020ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Griffith, J. (2020). Review of [*The Sleeping Giant Awakens: Genocide, Indian Residential Schools, and the Challenge of Conciliation* by David B. MacDonald]. *Ontario History*, 112(1), 122–124. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1069020ar>

The Sleeping Giant Awakens Genocide, Indian Residential Schools, and the Challenge of Conciliation

By David B. MacDonald

Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 2019. 234 pages. \$24.95
Paper. ISBN 9781487522698 (<https://utorontopress.com/>)

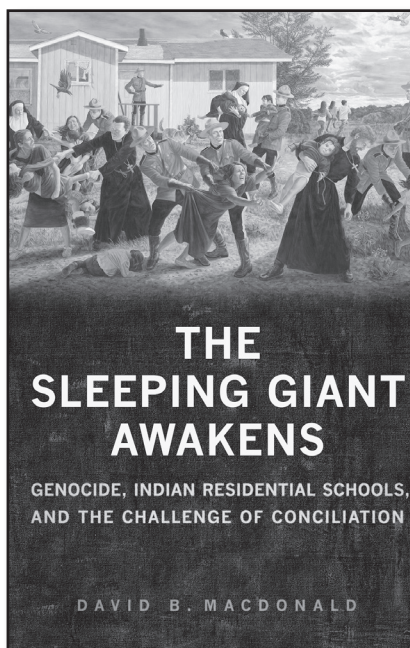
On 9 June 2019, Michael Enright began his CBC Radio show on the National Inquiry into Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG). He used his platform, like other journalists, to criticize the use of the term genocide.¹ Enright stated: “What happened to those murdered and missing women is a tragedy of staggering horror. What it was not, is a genocide.” How was Enright so self-assured? And what do such investments in defining genocide reveal?

Genocide was also debated after the conclusion of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in Canada in 2015. Recent publications (Tamara Starblanket’s *Suffer the Little Children: Genocide, Indigenous Children, and the Canadian State* and Andrew Woolford’s *This Benevolent Experiment: Indigenous Boarding Schools, Genocide, and Redress in Canada and the United States*) define residential schools as genocidal.² David B. MacDonald’s excellent *The Sleeping Giant Awakens: Genocide, Indian Residential Schools, and the Challenge of Conciliation* now enters the conversation.

Using interviews, testimony, and memoir, the book centres survivor understandings of residential school as genocidal. MacDonald examines the conundrum facing the TRC, using interviews with its commissioners: many survivors call their experiences genocide, but the TRC’s mandate was post-judicial. Throughout, MacDonald explores not *reconciliation* but *conciliation*—a desire to create a relationship that never existed previously. The book makes clear how genocide helped to form Canada despite denial today, highlighting how settler states including Canada committed (are committing) genocidal

acts while also serving as arbiters of what constitutes genocide. MacDonald, who clearly situates his own subject position, is a genocide studies scholar and political science professor at the University of Guelph, and served as an academic consultant for the TRC.

The book comprises nine chapters. The first two chapters define genocide as legalist, informed by the United Nations Genocide Convention (UNGC) and international case law; and pluralist, informed



by Indigenous peoples. Chapters 3 and 4 offer the history of residential schooling and its extension, the Sixties Scoop. Chapters 5 and 6 describe the TRC and its engagement with the term genocide. Chapter 7 focuses on perspectives on genocide, and Chapter 8 uses the Canadian Museum for Human Rights as a case study on public-facing definitions of genocide and education. Chapter 9 concludes with observations on ways forward.

MacDonald carefully defines his terms and walks the reader through important concepts in genocide studies such as the drafting of the UNGC, Raphael Lemkin, the term cultural genocide, the so-called “core” genocides, and who/what can be charged with genocide. MacDonald’s analysis gets more specific in terms of Canada, arguing throughout that genocide of Indigenous peoples in settler states is not the same as elsewhere.³ MacDonald discusses how despite the UNGC’s post-WWII editing out of language, religion, and exile, that today’s definition still includes the forcible transfer of children—a key policy of residential schooling.

The Sleeping Giant Awakens focuses on a going-forwardness not of forgetting and ensuring a settler future but of centring “Indigenous peoples and their own understandings of group composition, identity, and destruction” (59). MacDonald calls for the full adoption of genocide into Canada’s criminal code and to make the UNGC retroactive. MacDonald further highlights the importance of land return and other processes that ensure Indigenous self-determination. The text could go further with the title, which comes from a speaker at an Aboriginal Healing Foundation gathering in New Brunswick who receives advice from an Elder to gently awaken a “sleeping giant.” The concept is powerful, and returning

to the concept throughout even more so. Another area to return to throughout the book would be gender and sexuality given the heteropatriarchy of residential schools. Elaborating on Indigenous critiques of the TRC would also be helpful. As well, more could be drawn from scholarship on genocide education.

The first person plural pronouns in the book imply a Canadian audience, and *Ontario History Review* readers may be particularly interested in parts that highlight Ontario history (though the book examines Canada broadly). The book describes the early history of Ontario residential schools in Brantford, Muncey, Sault Ste. Marie, and Wiikwemkoong. It draws on survivor testimony about Fort Albany and Sioux Lookout. The book also discusses the class action lawsuit of Ontario Sixties Scoop survivors, the rolling back under Doug Ford of TRC curricular commitments, and land repatriation in Peterborough. *Ontario History Review* readers engaged in history education, museums, and heritage studies may also be interested in MacDonald’s discussions of the politics of memory, recognition, and remembering.

The *Literary Review of Canada* hosted a debate initiated by *The Sleeping Giant Awakens*, with historians Donald B. Smith and J.R. Miller stating residential schools were not genocide and Harry S. LaForme (former TRC chair) stating they were.⁴ Momentarily putting aside the harm of considering genocide as yay/nay, I turn to Smith and Miller’s critique that the book views the past exclusively through the prism of the present. MacDonald’s work does not do so, but in places might not this technique be essential in a post-TRC Canada? I am inspired by residential school survivor Theodore Fontaine and Holocaust survivor Nate Leipciger, who host conversations on their distinct but

overlapping experiences. It is such voices that redirect attention away from definitionalism. In addition to residential school survivor memoirs, the superb *The Sleeping Giant Awakens* should be mandatory read-

ing for all Canadians.

Jane Griffith

Assistant Professor, School of Professional Communication, Ryerson University

¹ Michael Enright, "The Sunday Edition," CBC, accessed 9 June 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thesundayedition/the-sunday-edition-for-june-9-2019-1.5165327>; David Webster, "Canada's Non-Conversation about Genocide," *Active History* (blog), 14 June 2019, <http://activehistory.ca/2019/06/canadas-non-conversation-about-genocide/>.

² Tamara Starblanket, *Suffer the Little Children: Genocide, Indigenous Children, and the Canadian State* (Atlanta, GA: Clarity Press, 2018); Andrew Woolford, *This Benevolent Experiment: Indigenous Boarding Schools, Genocide, and Redress in Canada and the United States* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2015).

³ See also: Jeff Cornassel and Cindy Holder, "Who's Sorry Now? Government Apologies, Truth Commissions, and Indigenous Self-Determination in Australia, Canada, Guatemala, and Peru," *Human Rights Review* 9:4 (2008), 465–89; and Sheryl Lightfoot, "Settler State Apologies to Indigenous Peoples: A Normative Framework and Comparative Assessment," *Native American and Indigenous Studies* 2 (2015), 15–39.

⁴ Harry S. LaForme, "Yes, Genocide: Overruling Tepid Language," *Literary Review of Canada* (blog), October 2019, <http://reviewcanada.ca/magazine/2019/10/yes-genocide/>; Donald B. Smith and J.R. Miller, "No Genocide: It's Not the Right Word for the History Books," *Literary Review of Canada* (blog), October 2019, <http://reviewcanada.ca/magazine/2019/10/no-genocide/>. MacDonald responded to Smith and Miller's review, accessible through the same link.