

## Labour

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

## Le Travail

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



# Sean Carleton, Lessons in Legitimacy: Colonialism, Capitalism, and the Rise of State Schooling in British Columbia (Vancouver: UBC Press 2022)

Camie Augustus

Volume 92, automne 2023

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1107962ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2023v92.0022>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Augustus, C. (2023). Compte rendu de [Sean Carleton, Lessons in Legitimacy: Colonialism, Capitalism, and the Rise of State Schooling in British Columbia (Vancouver: UBC Press 2022)]. *Labour / Le Travail*, 92, 333–335.  
<https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2023v92.0022>

misogynoir in Canadian law. Backhouse's legal expertise and extensive knowledge of Canadian legal history allow her to explain the importance of *RDS*, both legally and socially. It is written in a clear and accessible style to enable those from diverse academic disciplines or interested members of the general public to follow the narrative and learn about *RDS* and racism in Canadian law.

Backhouse's analysis of *RDS* is especially timely in the current Canadian legal and social climate, when judges increasingly acknowledge anti-Black racism in their judgements, and there is increasing social recognition of anti-Black racism in policing. Many of the themes in this book continue to have pressing social importance. For example, Backhouse's account of *RDS* highlights the continued importance of diversity in the legal profession and the bench, as she describes how the backgrounds of the lawyers and decision-makers involved influenced the outcome of *RDS*. Her narrative describes how the *RDS* trial dealt with unnecessary police use of force against a Black youth partly because Small's lawyer, Burnley "Rocky" Jones, a Black anti-racism activist, could recognize the issue and raise it before a Black judge. Backhouse's account can be read as a rebuttal to those who would suggest that judicial objectivity is possible or that Canadian courts should adopt a colour-blind approach, refusing to acknowledge and consider the realities of racism. Furthermore, her description of Rocky Jones' work to defend Rodney Small and the efforts of anti-racism activists, intervenors, and African-Nova Scotian community members to support Justice Sparks provide evidence of the power and importance of community organizing and legal clinic advocacy to shine a light on racism and injustice.

Ultimately, *Reckoning with Racism: Police, Judges and the RDS Case* is a thoroughly researched historical account

and critical appraisal of a landmark case concerning racism and sexism in the law. It provides an essential new vantage point to consider *RDS* and reflect on historical and current discrimination in Canadian law.

ROBIN WHITEHEAD  
Lakehead University

**Sean Carleton, *Lessons in Legitimacy: Colonialism, Capitalism, and the Rise of State Schooling in British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press 2022)**

IN THE PAST several years, and especially since the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report in 2015, there has been a surge of literature on residential schools. Books relating to histories, memoirs, trauma recovery, and the report itself detail the history of the policy, of specific schools, and of personal experiences, all lending towards a better understanding of those histories and their legacies. Adding to this growing store of literature is Sean Carleton's *Lessons in Legitimacy*.

A book inspired by a commitment to personal learning and allyship, *Lessons in Legitimacy* ambitiously seeks to unveil the hidden connections among colonialism, capitalism, and the rise of state schooling in British Columbia (BC). Focusing on the years between 1849 and 1930, Carleton takes us through a history of state schooling in BC, covering missionary, public, common, and Indigenous schooling. He ultimately endeavours to show that state schooling was a tool for legitimizing colonial authority. He does so by examining both Indigenous and non-Indigenous schooling to provide a different perspective than previous works and to draw out the overlapping impetus of public and residential schools.

The book is organized chronologically into three sections, divided into

corresponding time periods. Each section is further subdivided into two chapters, one each on public and Indigenous schooling. The book's first section covers BC's colonial origins (1849–1871), arguing that the establishment of schools – both for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students – was in part to encourage stable settlement. The second section, covering 1871–1900, examines economic development in the post-Confederation decades. The rise of a centralized public school system was part of a continuing strategy to clinch control over the developing province, Carleton argues, while partnerships between church and state saw the continued development of day, boarding, and industrial schools to expand on assimilation programs started in the colonial era. The final section covers the years from 1900–1930, when both school systems became more established, refined, and skills-oriented. A brief conclusion and four appendices detailing enrollment statistics round out the book.

There are several points that stood out in Carleton's approach to this history. First is the underlying premise that residential schools are but one aspect of colonial policy. They were significant, to be certain, but they were one demonstration among many of a colonial mindset that sought to undermine and eradicate Indigenous ways of being. This is an important statement that speaks to all the forgotten-about parts of the history of colonialism in Canada, where residential schools as a policy of assimilation are often severed from their ideological context. Here, Carleton highlights how capitalism serves as that context, especially in relation to class creation. Both school systems, he shows, served that interest.

Second is the relevance of the larger settler context to understanding a more complex impetus for residential schools. The author's response to a call from Keira Ladner to 'restory' the narrative beyond

the assimilation narrative, Carleton seeks to problematize our understanding of residential schools by situating it in the broader history of settler colonialism with an eye to all schooling. While he contends that schools were indeed tools for assimilation, he also offers that they were projects in settler legitimacy (considered a force separate from assimilation), capitalism, and land ownership. That is, education was the means of reproducing the settler hegemon's own legitimacy in dispossessing Indigenous Peoples of their lands and their political and social power.

Finally, there is the commitment to interrogating colonialism and its effects through the telling of critical histories. As the author notes, this is a necessary part of the truth-telling that must precede reconciliation. While those critical histories must also continue to be understood alongside the continuing lived experiences and effects of residential school survivors, their families, and their communities, they remain essential to the truth-telling Carleton points to.

Given that mandate, it is not surprising that the book's research is based on archival resources. Carleton engages public school and DIA records, Colonial Office correspondence, church records and missionary accounts, residential school records, and educational materials. He employs the 'critical reading' approach laid out by well-known scholars and historical methods that have come to define "doing" Indigenous history. Citing works by Linda Tuhiwai Smith as well as Mary-Ellen Kelm and Keith D. Smith, Carleton aims to "challenge the colonial common sense" of the archive and "read against the grain" of these resources, much as has become commonplace in historical methodologies.

The book is less integrative of the two streams of schooling that it perhaps hopes to achieve. The fact that settler and

Indigenous education are systematically discussed in separate chapters has the effect of producing two parallel histories rather than the integrated one Carleton claims the work to be. In fairness, it's difficult to conceive of an alternative that would not produce a highly complex and difficult-to-read history, but then, the book's premise is complex and difficult. Such is often the challenge of research that seeks to cover so much in so little space.

I am also less convinced of the fundamental claim that this is a retelling of the assimilation narrative. The focus remains on education as a tool of assimilation and not on Indigenous perspectives, responses, or experiences. I think more could have been done here, though perhaps the greater issue lies with the misalignment between the author's stated goal and result. That is, the goal here seems to be to provide a deeper analysis of the assimilation narrative, not necessarily to alter or restore it. That is not to dismiss the value of the research Carleton offers here, but rather to suggest that this might not be a useful means of thinking about the book's methodology.

What the book does offer, though, is a unique opportunity to view the onset, expansion, and eventual dominance of colonialism in BC exclusively through the lens of education – or more accurately, the establishment of schools. What this brings to the conversation is that education, both common public schooling and residential schools, was instrumental in reproducing the colonial mindset and was an integral factor in colonialism. Like other institutions, it was, as Carleton, quoting Ned Blackhawk, describes, one of the “mechanics of colonial rule.” In this argument, education was used not only as a tool for assimilating Indigenous Peoples but also as a tool of encouraging and propagating colonial settlement.

This book's contribution to residential school scholarship is its capacity to

embed residential schools in a broader educational, historical, social, and economic context. That is a tall order, especially considering the length of the book. And while exploring those connections between colonialism and capitalism is not new in itself, its application to BC education history is. Ultimately, Carleton helps us see the bigger picture of how residential schools were an instrument in a larger project of power and privilege. Doing so in terms of residential schools in BC offers a deeper theoretical critique that will pair well with settler colonial theory and offer an alternate perspective to personal testimonials and commissioned reports. It will be especially relevant to scholars and graduate students of history and education in BC and to those who appreciate the underlying socio-economic theory that informs much of it. It is not, though, a book of general interest or a comprehensive history of residential schools in BC; only those with a deeper interest in critical history or expertise in the topic of education, the book's geographical focus, or the economic considerations of colonialism are likely to appreciate it.

CAMIE AUGUSTUS

Vancouver Island University

**Lola Zappi, *Les visages de l'État social, Assistantes sociales et familles populaires durant l'entre-deux-guerres* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 2022)**

CET OUVRAGE FAIT suite à la thèse de doctorat de l'autrice à propos du Service social de l'enfance (SSE). Situé dans la région parisienne, le SSE a une action en deux volets : l'enquête et (au besoin) l'intervention auprès des familles. Son travail se fait en partenariat avec le tribunal pour enfants. C'est pour sa qualité de « laboratoire de l'action sociale » (19) que le SSE a été choisi comme terrain d'enquête. L'autrice positionne