

Indian School, Portage la Prairie - An Historical Sketch:  
An Investigation of Voice and Context

by

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For: Dr. Jennifer Brown  
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The United Church archival document that I chose for study is the "Historical Sketch of the Portage la Prairie Indian School and Mission 1886-1936 by S.C. Murray". I selected this document after conversing with Diane Haglund, the United Church archivist, about the possibility of looking at documents written by clergymen's wives. This "historical sketch" is handwritten in ink and fills three school notebooks. The archivist had previously happened upon these notebooks in a vertical file, and, after browsing through the first notebook, speculated that the sketch had been written by Reverend Murray's wife.

Reverend S.C. Murray was a Presbyterian clergyman and the United Church archivist believed these notebooks came to the Winnipeg archives in the 1940s as a result of an archival initiative to encourage clergy to deposit their memoirs and personal papers. The provenance of this particular document is unknown, but I determined to investigate the following questions. Was the author the Reverend Mr. Murray or his wife? Why was the document written? For whom was it written? When was it written? How does the text reflect understanding of and relations with native people?

The first step in my investigation was to read the document and unearth information relevant to my questions. During my first perusal, I made a list of names and places mentioned and took copious notes of clues to voice and intent of the document, as well as looking at what the text revealed about relations with and understanding of native people. In addition, I noted other questions that

arose as I read the document because I thought that finding the answers would provide another line of investigation.

The first thing I discovered in Chapter One was that the sketch was written in 1936, on the occasion of the silver jubilee of the Indian School at Portage, with the expressed purpose of stimulating fresh interest in the missionary enterprises of the church.<sup>1</sup> Further evidence of this date was provided by the author's reference sources which included a 1935 issue of National Geographic.

The writer described a group of concerned women from Knox Church in Portage la Prairie who, in 1886, wanted to start a school for native children. The minister of the church suggested that, as the Presbyterian Women's Foreign Mission Society was the body organizing these efforts, the secretary of the Knox women's group should write and ask for assistance. The phrase, "as secretary I was directed to write..."<sup>2</sup> suggested to me that the writer was the secretary and as it was a group of women, I speculated that this could be proof that Murray's wife had written the historical sketch. Who had been the secretary of the women's group at Knox Church in 1886?

Later in the document, the writer discussed how much energy local church women had put into establishing the Portage School for native children and

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<sup>1</sup> S.C. Murray, "Historical Sketch of the Portage la Prairie Indian School and Mission 1886-1936". undated. Accession number.ex. The United Church of Canada. Conference of Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario Archives. The University of Winnipeg, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 4

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 26

commented, "This story of faith, work and heroism makes interesting reading when so recently all across Canada our men have been gravely discussing whether or not women might be ordained."<sup>3</sup> The phrase, "our men", seemed to be the voice of a woman and I wondered when the discussion of the ordination of women had begun? My interpretation of the tone of the phrase was that the writer was critical of men who couldn't see that women were doing much Christian work and should be eligible to be ordained. Was the author writing with the purpose of encouraging changes to church law?

The next clue in the document was a reference to the writer as District Superintendent of Home Missions<sup>4</sup> in 1912 and a statement that, "the reports on Home Missions in Manitoba from the next eight years were prepared by myself."<sup>5</sup> My understanding of church structure is limited, but it seemed to me that if the church officials were debating whether or not to ordain women, it was doubtful that they would have hired a woman as the Superintendent of Home Missions. I was perplexed. On the one hand, we have the writer acting as the secretary of a women's group and on the other, we have the writer as Superintendent of Home Missions. Was it possible that Mrs. Murray had penned the document on behalf of her husband and slipped in some of her own commentary?

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 28

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 107

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 108

Armed with my list of names and places, and my clues and questions, I returned to the archives where I was directed to the personal papers of Reverend Andrew Browning Baird. From 1886 to 1912, Baird had been Joint Convener and Secretary of the Synodical Foreign Mission Committee which supervised all Presbyterian work among native people. I used the finding aid to locate documents referring to the names and places I had listed; however, while they made interesting reading, the correspondence and reports made no reference to S.C. Murray and did not help in answering my questions.

I then decided to pursue some of the clues I had collected from the "historical sketch" itself. My first clue was the writer's reference to Baird being the more appropriate person to write the history. The writer stated that Baird had given his blessing to the project and had even loaned to the writer, the large volume of minutes of the Synodical Committee.<sup>6</sup> Speculating that if Baird had cooperated with the author in this way and there might be some reference to the project in his correspondence or notes, I asked to see papers from the 1930 period. Unfortunately, the later papers were not indexed and the archivist suggested that such a search was beyond the scope of this project.

Returning to the question of who was the secretary of the Knox women's group in 1886, I learned that it was Mrs. A. D. McKay.<sup>7</sup> This served to further

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 2

<sup>7</sup> personal conversation with Diane Haglund, United Church Archivist. United Church Archives, The University of Winnipeg. Winnipeg, Manitoba, October 26, 1995.

complicate the issue of voice....why had the writer referred to being the secretary?  
I returned to the finding aid for the Baird Papers and proceeded to locate and peruse all of the correspondence, accounts and reports related to Knox Church, the Women's Foreign Mission Society, the Indian School at Portage la Prairie, the Neepawa Church and the Home Missions. There was no evidence linking Mrs. Murray with the group of women at Knox Church in Portage la Prairie.

The second area of investigation I pursued was a review of the various autobiographical dictionaries in The University of Winnipeg reference room. I was disappointed to discover no information in the first six publications I reviewed; however, the 1898 edition of Canadian Men & Women of Our Time, did have a reference to the elusive Murray.

Samuel Crothers Murray was born in Westmoreland County, New Brunswick on July 26, 1857, received a BA from Mount Allison University in 1881 and graduated from the Princeton Theological Seminary in 1885, just prior to being appointed as a Presbyterian missionary for Neepawa, Manitoba. Murray moved to Neepawa with his new wife, Jessie Ella Phiney, in 1885 and remained there until 1893, when he became the Pastor at St. Paul's Church in Port Arthur, Ontario. In 1911, Murray became the Supervisor for Home Missions in Manitoba and he remained in this post until 1920, when he took over the Pastorship at High Bluff and Prospect, Manitoba. Murray retired in 1928 and was the secretary for the

Portage la Prairie Presbytery from 1925 to 1936 while residing in Kelwood, Manitoba.<sup>8</sup>

Reverend Murray was the Supervisor of Home Missions referred to in the document, and Mrs. Murray lived in Neepawa while the Indian School was being established at Portage. Would it have been practical for her to have been involved with a women's group at Knox Church at Portage in 1886 when the school was started? It would have been unusual for a woman to travel from Neepawa to participate in a church group at Portage la Prairie<sup>9</sup> and I was perplexed in regard to Mrs. Murray. I needed to find clues regarding her activities and interests, and I hoped that her obituary would be helpful. What I found was most interesting. Jessie Ella Phiney Murray had died at Dauphin hospital on June 13, 1929.<sup>10</sup> Mrs. Murray could not have written the document in 1936 because, at the time, she was buried in the cemetery at Kelwood, Manitoba.

I returned to the original document for a third perusal. This time I picked up a very important clue I had missed on other readings. No wonder there was a strong woman's voice...ten pages relating the story of the establishment of the

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<sup>8</sup> Henry James Morgan, ed., Canadian Men and Women of the Time, 1912. (Toronto: William Briggs, 1898. 819) Text-fiche, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985.

<sup>9</sup> personal conversation with Diane Haglund, United Church Archivist. United Church Archives, The University of Winnipeg, Winnipeg, Manitoba. October 26, 1995.

<sup>10</sup> Winnipeg Free Press (Winnipeg), 23 July, 1932. Presbytery Minutes and Records, Biography File. S.C. Murray 1899-1918 A-5A B9b. The United Church of Canada. Conference of Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario Archives. The University of Winnipeg. Winnipeg, Manitoba.

school had been transcribed from Mrs. A.D. McKay!<sup>11</sup> I had missed the quotation marks that had not been reproduced well on my photocopy of the document and had not realized that the early history of starting the school had been given to Murray by Mrs. McKay, who had been the secretary of the Knox women's group.

This finding negated all the assumptions, made by the United Church archivist and myself, that Mrs. Murray had written the document. It seemed that Reverend Murray had been the author, but rather than make another false assumption, I thought it prudent to ascertain this by comparing handwriting samples. Searching in the Neepawa Church Collection, we found another handwritten manuscript called, "Brief Sketch of the History of the Presbyterian Church in Neepawa and Surrounding Country," by Rev. S.C. Murray, DD.<sup>12</sup> Both this document and the historical sketch of the Indian School at Portage were written in the same hand. This suggested that the retired Reverend Murray had occupied himself with researching and writing at least two historical sketches. This was the final evidence for my conclusion that it was Reverend Murray who wrote

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<sup>11</sup> S.C. Murray, "Historical Sketch of the Portage la Prairie Indian School and Mission 1886-1936". undated. Accession number.ex. The United Church of Canada. Conference of Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario Archives. The University of Winnipeg, Winnipeg, Manitoba. 21

<sup>12</sup> Rev. S.C Murray, DD, "A Brief Sketch of the History of the Presbyterian Church in Neepawa and Surrounding Country". Neepawa United Church Collection. Accession number 86-39. The United Church of Canada. Conference of Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario Archives. The University of Winnipeg, Winnipeg, Manitoba.



the "Historical Sketch of the Portage la Prairie Indian School and Mission 1886-1936".

Murray had ample authority to write this history, by virtue of his frequent visits to the school, his friendship with Mrs. McKay and his role as the secretary of the Portage Presbytery following his retirement.<sup>13</sup> Reverend Baird's encouragement and Murray's own position as the District Superintendent of Home Missions from 1911 to 1920, which gave him responsibility for the Indian School at Portage la Prairie, served to strengthen his authority.

Of the many questions still surrounding this document, two are of particular interest for me. Why did the author sign himself S.C.Murray in the Portage history and Rev. S.C. Murray, DD in the Neepawa history? Was Murray acting, in part, as an advocate for the ordination of women in penning the history of the Portage School?

Murray's juxtaposition of the way Presbyterian men and native men treated women<sup>14</sup> was interesting, because it seemed unusual for a clergyman of the time to draw this parallel. On the one hand he recognized the value of the work undertaken by a group of women operating outside the structure of the church.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> S.C. Murray, "Historical Sketch of the Portage la Prairie Indian School and Mission 1886-1936". undated. Accession number.ex. The United Church of Canada. Conference of Manitoba and Northwestern Ontario Archives. The University of Winnipeg, Winnipeg, Manitoba. 1 and 2

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 28

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 4

On the other hand, his text is rife with a view of native people as unfortunates who had been wronged and needed to be remade in a Christian image.<sup>16</sup> This paternalistic attitude is evident throughout Murray's sketch and generally tells more about Presbyterians than about native people.

Despite this fact, the document is useful in helping to add to our knowledge of native life and to our understanding of relationships between Presbyterians and native people around Portage la Prairie. By piecing together comments made in the course of Murray's writing, we can determine that one half of native people living around Portage la Prairie accepted land on a reservation near Griswold and the other half stayed in Portage la Prairie because it had become home to them.<sup>17</sup> Murray's document did not make it clear whether the native people he referred to were Ojibwa or Sioux and the document describes only native people who remained in the vicinity of Portage la Prairie who were not living on the reserve.

Murray writes of native people afflicted with scurvy and tuberculosis, living in log huts on the banks of the Assiniboine River, three miles south of town, during the winter and moving east of town to live in teepees during the summer. Some native men worked in the grain fields while native women earned wages by washing clothes, scrubbing stoves and doing other odd jobs, like picking

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 134

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 9

potatoes.<sup>18</sup> He paints a portrait of a subsistence economy, with native people dependent on scavenging and Christian charity during lean times, with the possibility of earning wages by doing seasonal work or odd jobs for white settlers.

Murray's portrait of native people around Portage la Prairie is narrow and simplistic, and it is coloured both by Murray's Christian perspective that native people had no spiritual belief of their own,<sup>19</sup> and the evidence that he was writing based on memories and reminiscences.<sup>20</sup> Despite these limitations, Murray's portrait does help to give us a little more knowledge of what life may have been like for native people living there at that time.

When Murray described difficulties faced by the Presbyterian women in attracting students to the school he also gave us a glimpse of native perspective. The descriptions of resistance to Christian teachings from medicine men afraid of losing their influence,<sup>21</sup> and of parents suspicious and reluctant to send their children to the school,<sup>22</sup> provide a hint of what some native people were thinking.

What else did native people, living in Portage la Prairie in 1886, think about the education of their children? Did they eventually send their children to the Indian School at Portage because they wanted them to take advantage of

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 11

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 2

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 40

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 33

opportunities to learn skills that would help them deal with non-native people? Or were native people worn down by the relentless paternalism of the missionaries? How did Presbyterian paternalism affect native people's participation in the local economy? How were native families affected by the appropriation of their children by white Presbyterians? Murray's sketch of the Indian School at Portage la Prairie gives only a few clues about the role of native people in this community and raises many questions. There is much work to be done in finding the answers.

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