



Israel Wood Powell's Legacy

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Tla'amin Nation

Know History
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Image credit: Harry Rowed, "Powell River (B.C.), View of the town of Powell River, B.C.'s pulp and paper plant with a log pond in front of it," July 1944, National Film Board of Canada, Library and Archives Canada, 1971-271-NPC.

Powell River, British Columbia, was named after Dr. Israel Wood Powell.

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Executive Summary

This document presents a biography of Dr. Israel Wood Powell and a summary of historical and contemporary perspectives on his career. It is provided as an educational resource related to the legacy of Dr. Powell, after whom the City of Powell River, British Columbia is named. Throughout this document we have used archival quotes from Powell himself to illustrate his point of view, as well as quotes from Indigenous people to illuminate their perspective on the impact of Powell's actions and his legacy.

Dr. Israel Wood Powell was born in Port Colborne, Ontario in 1836. He moved to British Columbia in 1862, where he opened a medical practice and became involved in provincial politics.

Powell was appointed Superintendent of Indian Affairs for British Columbia in 1872 and spent 17 years pursuing policies aimed at assimilating Indigenous peoples into settler Canadian society. While his views on Indigenous culture and lifeways were not dissimilar to other Euro-Canadians of the time, his position of power enabled him to influence policy and the structures that governed Indigenous people's lives. Powell's push for residential schooling, his campaign to create legislation against traditional practices like the potlatch, and his role in removing sacred and ceremonial objects from communities continue to impact First Nations populations in British Columbia to this day.

Powell showed at times an interest in protecting the interests of Indigenous communities with respect to their land and water access, though this legacy is troubled by his willingness to allow for the encroachment of settlers onto Indigenous territory in the name of economic development. Ultimately, Powell's view of Indigenous British Columbians was inherently paternalistic and he supported harmful policies that stripped Indigenous communities of their traditions and land.

Biography: Dr. Israel Wood Powell (1836 – 1915)

Dr. Israel Wood Powell was born in 1836 in Port Colborne, Ontario (then Upper Canada), to Israel W. Powell Sr. and Melinda Boss. He was the fourth of eight children—seven boys and one girl. The Powells were a prominent family in the Great Lakes region, where Israel Powell Sr. worked as a merchant and later held public office as the parliamentary representative for Simcoe.¹

Powell moved to Montreal in 1856 to pursue medical studies at McGill University. It was also at this time that he first joined the Masonic order, an organization with which he was associated throughout his life.² Upon graduating from medical school in 1862, Powell sought to leave Canada for New Zealand, but was first drawn to British Columbia and the Cariboo Gold Rush that was sweeping the coast at the time. Powell's initial intention was to briefly stop over in Victoria before continuing to the Pacific Islands. Once he arrived in the capital city, however, his medical practice took off and he decided to stay.³

In 1863, Powell announced his intention to run as a representative for Victoria with the House of Assembly, the legislative body that oversaw the colony of Vancouver Island prior to its annexation into British Columbia.⁴ Running on a platform for free and public schools, an issue he was a staunch advocate for early in his career, Powell was elected and held his office until 1866, at which time the House of Assembly was abolished.⁵ Powell ran for office again for the British Columbia Legislative Council in 1868, this time unsuccessfully. It wasn't until 1872, when he was asked to serve as the Superintendent of the newly formed Department of Indian Affairs for the Province of British Columbia, that he re-entered public office.⁶

Powell went on to hold the position of Superintendent of Indian Affairs for nearly 20 years, retiring after a brief illness with typhoid in 1889.⁷ He became more active in his business

¹ B. A. McKelvie, "Lieutenant-Colonel Israel Wood Powell, M.D., C.M.," *British Columbia Historical Quarterly* 11 (1947): 33, https://www.library.ubc.ca/archives/pdfs/bchf/bchq_1947_1.pdf.

² Powell was a member of several Masonic lodges over the course of his lifetime, the first with the Elgin Lodge in Montreal at the age of 21. He became the first Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of British Columbia in 1871. Upon his retirement from the position in 1873 he discontinued active service with the order, but remained connected to it. "Dr. Israel Wood Powell," Vancouver Island Masonic History Project, Temple Lodge, No. 33, accessed August 7, 2021, http://www.templelodge33.ca/VI%20Masonic%20History%20Project/Ross%20Bay%20Cemetery/Powell-Israel_Wood.html.

³ McKelvie, "Lieutenant-Colonel Israel Wood Powell, M.D., C.M.," 34-35.

⁴ McKelvie, "Lieutenant-Colonel Israel Wood Powell, M.D., C.M.," 37.

⁵ McKelvie, "Lieutenant-Colonel Israel Wood Powell, M.D., C.M.," 44.

⁶ Robin Fisher, *Contact and Conflict: Indian-European Relations in British Columbia, 1774-1890* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014), 180.

⁷ McKelvie, "Lieutenant-Colonel Israel Wood Powell, M.D., C.M.," 52.

investments after his retirement, purchasing parcels of land around what would eventually become downtown Vancouver.⁸ Powell died at his home in Victoria in January 1915.⁹

Powell's Role as Superintendent of Indian Affairs

It isn't clear what initially motivated Powell to take the position of Superintendent with Indian Affairs. One biographer, journalist and historian B. A. McKelvie, wrote in his 1947 article on Powell that he was motivated by his humane spirit and interest in the Indigenous peoples of British Columbia.¹⁰ The year before Powell accepted the Superintendent position, he was approached by Sir John A. Macdonald to come on as the first Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia. When he rejected that, an offer was made for him to take a seat in the Senate, but he turned that down as well. Powell's reasoning for rejecting both positions was that he felt he needed to focus on his growing medical practice, and devote time to his new family.¹¹ In a letter to the Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia Joseph Trutch, Macdonald wrote that he felt forced to appoint Powell to Superintendent of Indian Affairs due to pressure from members of Parliament in British Columbia, and that the Superintendent "ought to have known more about the Indians."¹² Macdonald's repeated offers to Powell for federal positions, combined with his words to Trutch, suggest the Prime Minister was more interested in Powell's previous political experience and connections to politicians in British Columbia than his knowledge of Indigenous affairs.

Powell's appointment was not popular with some of his contemporaries in provincial and federal offices. He drew criticism for attempting to administer, from the far-removed city of Victoria, the affairs of First Nations living in the remote reaches of British Columbia, and for continuing to devote time to his medical practice in neglect of his duties as Superintendent.¹³ Lieutenant Governor Trutch eventually reprimanded Powell for this negligence in 1880, and told him to terminate his medical practice and make a greater effort to venture into the field.¹⁴

In addition to his role as Superintendent of Indian Affairs, Powell was appointed Lieutenant-General of the militia, as it was thought work with Indigenous communities would require military

⁸ McKelvie, "Lieutenant-Colonel Israel Wood Powell, M.D., C.M.," 51.

⁹ McKelvie, "Lieutenant-Colonel Israel Wood Powell, M.D., C.M.," 53.

¹⁰ McKelvie, "Lieutenant-Colonel Israel Wood Powell, M.D., C.M.," 49.

¹¹ McKelvie, "Lieutenant-Colonel Israel Wood Powell, M.D., C.M.," 48.

¹² Fisher, *Contact and Conflict*, 180.

¹³ Fisher, *Contact and Conflict*, 180; Correspondence from Sproat to E. A. Meredith, 9 April 1877, Indian Affairs Record Group, RG-10, Black Series: C-10112, volume 3641, file 7567, Library and Archives Canada, <http://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/.redirect?app=fonandcol&id=2061055&lang=eng>; Cole Harris, *Making Native Space: Colonialism, Resistance and Reserves in British Columbia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), 131.

¹⁴ Harris, *Making Native Space*, 171.

might.¹⁵ Powell agreed: in one of his earliest reports as Superintendent in 1872, he described the “nation of Alits”¹⁶ living along the West Coast of Vancouver Island as a “nation of savages,” committing “the most cruel atrocities upon white traders and luckless merchantmen shipwrecked upon their coast.”¹⁷ Powell concluded his report with this recommendation:

Should it be the intention of the Militia Department to establish posts anywhere in British Columbia, there is no place where it would be attended with so much satisfaction and general utility as at Alberin, the centre of the Alit nation. The prestige and moral force of such an establishment would be felt by all coast tribes of the Province, and be productive of good alike to the Indian and settler.¹⁸

Powell felt that the previous provincial policies towards Indigenous groups in British Columbia were deficient, and that the mode of treatment to “let them alone” was a failure to “civilize” these groups.¹⁹ For nineteenth-century politicians and missionaries, the project of “civilization” was central to their work with Indigenous communities. In short, to “civilize” meant to remove Indigenous culture, religious practices, education, and government structures, and replace them with Euro-Christian ones.²⁰ Powell spent his tenure as Superintendent pursuing policies aimed at assimilating Indigenous peoples in British Columbia into Euro-Canadian society. In an 1879 report to the Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs, Powell wrote:

The Gold Harbor Indians have much need of a resident missionary who would have the sense and ability to reform them, as I consider them much behind their brethren at Massett and Skidegate. Their houses were not so clean, and a greater number of them live on the disgraceful profits derived by the pilgrimages of their women to Victoria and Puget Sound. They allowed whiskey to be brought to their camps when there was an opportunity, and I felt it necessary to deliver as severe a lecture as possible upon their evil ways.²¹

¹⁵ McKelvie, “Lieutenant-Colonel Israel Wood Powell, M.D., C.M.,” 49.

¹⁶ It is not clear what nation Powell is referring to, as Alit does not appear to be a contemporary name. Powell does go on to mention the Ahousaht peoples as part of the Alit nation, and may be referring to the Ahousaht of Clayoquot Sound.

¹⁷ Israel Wood Powell, “Report of the superintendent of Indian affairs, for British Columbia, for 1872 & 1873,” (Ottawa: I. B. Taylor, 1873), 4, <https://open.library.ubc.ca/viewer/bcbooks/1.0221711#p0z-5r0f>.

¹⁸ Powell, “Report of the superintendent of Indian affairs, for British Columbia, for 1872 & 1873.”

¹⁹ Powell, “Report of the superintendent of Indian affairs, for British Columbia, for 1872 & 1873,” 10.

²⁰ Mark Francis, “The ‘Civilizing’ of Indigenous People in Nineteenth-Century Canada,” *Journal of World History* 9, no. 1 (1998): 51–87, 53.

²¹ Extract from I. W. Powell's Report on his Coast Visitation, August 26th, 1879, Indian Affairs Record Group, RG-10, C-10122, volume 3700, file part 2, Library and Archives Canada, <http://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/.redirect?app=fonandcol&id=2061740&lang=eng>.

Powell's writing on the communities he visited and Indigenous individuals he met as Superintendent tends to frame them in the paternalistic manner shown above, with much attention given to the need to save them from corrupting forces and lead them away from their traditional practices.²²

Potlatch

When Powell took office as the Superintendent of Indian Affairs in 1872, one of his first actions was to condemn the cultural practice of the potlatch, which he viewed as a major obstacle to the assimilation of Indigenous groups into settler Canadian society. The potlatch is foundational to the social, economic, and legal systems of Northwest Coastal First Nations cultures. Each coastal culture has its own unique version of this cornerstone practice. The potlatch is typically celebrated with a large feast, marking births, marriages, deaths, and other rite-of-passage occasions. Kwakwaka'wakw elder Agnes Axu Alfred speaks of the potlatch's centrality to her community's way of living:

When one's heart is glad, he gives away gifts. Our Creator gave it to us, to be our way of doing things, to be our way of rejoicing, we who are [Kwakwaka'wakw]. Everyone on earth is given something. The potlatch was given to us to be our way of expressing joy.²³

Central to the potlatch is the distribution of items of value from the hosting party to the guests in attendance, a practice that individuals like Powell focused on as a moral failing—a direct contravention of Christian values and western-capitalist concepts of work and economy.²⁴ In his first annual report as Superintendent, Powell wrote,

'Patlatches' [sic], no doubt, not only retard civilizing influences, but encourage idleness among the less worthy members of a tribe, and will, I trust, by wise administration become obsolete in time.²⁵

Powell was not unique in his disregard—and at times outright hostility—towards the potlatch. Missionaries and government agents like Powell felt the potlatch thwarted their efforts to

²² Powell, "Report of the superintendent of Indian affairs, for British Columbia, for 1872 & 1873," 16.

²³ Agnes Axu Alfred, Kwakwaka'wakw elder, speaking of the significance of the potlatch to her community. "Potlatch," *Living Tradition: The Kwakwaka'wakw Potlatch on the Northwest Coast*, Virtual Museum of Canada, accessed August 5, 2021, <https://umistapotlatch.ca/potlatch-eng.php>.

²⁴ M. E. Harkin, "Potlatch in Anthropology," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, eds. Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 2001), 11,885-11,889.

²⁵ Powell, "Report of the superintendent of Indian affairs, for British Columbia, for 1872 & 1873," 8.

assimilate Indigenous peoples, as it often required seasonal travel that kept Indigenous families outside the influence of government schools and churches.²⁶

While the historic record shows Powell was in favour of restricting the potlatch as early as 1872, it wasn't until 1883 that he assisted with the development of legislation to ban the practice.²⁷ Earlier that year, the Department of Indian Affairs received a petition purportedly from the chiefs of Coast Tsimshian and Nisga'a communities, asking the government to ban the potlatch. Historian Christopher Bracken points out that the petition was likely written by the missionaries stationed in those communities, rather than by the chiefs themselves.²⁸ Nevertheless, the document was forwarded to Powell, who gave it his endorsement, advising that "every practicable means should be adopted by the Government to put a stop to the custom."²⁹ The federal government then issued an Order in Council recommending that the Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia take steps to suppress the potlatch.³⁰ Powell felt this Order was ineffective, and that concrete law was required to genuinely dissuade groups from carrying on the potlatch, so he lobbied his colleagues in Ottawa to make it a priority for legislation.³¹ In 1884, the *Indian Act* was amended, making the potlatch illegal, with a maximum penalty of six months in jail for any person caught participating.³²

Powell's belief in the immorality of coastal First Nations traditions did not stop with the potlatch. In most of his writings about the custom, he also mentions the "Tamanawas," a dance often performed in conjunction with the potlatch.³³ Powell endorsed an all-around strengthening of

²⁶ John Lutz, "After the Fur Trade: The Aboriginal Labouring Class of British Columbia, 1849-1890," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada* 3, no. 1 (1992): 91.

²⁷ Lutz, "After the Fur Trade," 79-80.

²⁸ Christopher Bracken, *The Potlatch Papers: A Colonial Case History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 78.

²⁹ Letter from I.W Powell to the Superintendent of Indian Affairs, May 19, 1883, Indian Affairs Record Group, RG-10, C-10110, volume 3628, file 6244-1, Library and Archives Canada, <http://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/.redirect?app=fonandcol&id=2060802&lang=eng>

³⁰ "Potlach custom among the Indians of British Columbia, S.G.I.A.," Order-in-Council 1883-1465, June 19, 1883, Privy Council Office, Series A-1-a, RG-2, C-3345, volume 2767, Library and Archives Canada, <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/politics-government/orders-council/Pages/item.aspx?IdNumber=23724>.

³¹ Letter from I. W. Powell to Mr. McNeill, 15 August 1883, Indian Affairs Record Group, RG-10, C-10110, volume 3628, file 6244-1, Library and Archives Canada, <http://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/.redirect?app=fonandcol&id=2060802&lang=eng>

³² Letter from I. W. Powell, February 27, 1884, Indian Affairs Record Group, RG-10, C-10110, volume 3628, file 6244-1, Library and Archives Canada, <http://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/.redirect?app=fonandcol&id=2060802&lang=eng>.

³³ Canada, "An Act further to amend 'The Indian Act, 1880,' S.C. 1884," in *Consolidation of Indian Legislation, Vol. 2: Indian Acts and Amendments, 1868-1975*, ed. Gail Hinge (Ottawa: Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, 1982), 93; I. W. Powell's Circular to Indian Agents of British Columbia, 21 April 1885, Indian Affairs Record Group, RG-10, C-10110, volume 3628, file 6244-1, Library and Archives Canada, <http://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/.redirect?app=fonandcol&id=2060802&lang=eng>.

³³ Letter from I. W. Powell, March 13, 1887, Indian Affairs Record Group, RG-10, C-10110, volume 3628, file 6244-1, Library and Archives Canada, <http://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/.redirect?app=fonandcol&id=2060802&lang=eng>. The "Tamanawas" was banned along with the potlatch in the 1884 amendment to the *Indian Act*.

surveillance of Indigenous peoples and limiting of traditional practices. In his annual report for 1882, he wrote that he instructed Indian Agents to prevent any large congregations, and in a letter written in 1883, he shared his opinion that an Agent “should be empowered by law to prevent the practice of any barbarous customs upon reserves placed under his immediate care.”³⁴

The potlatch ban lasted from 1884 to 1951, leaving a rift in the Indigenous communities that practiced it, and nearly eradicating the custom altogether. Though communities made efforts to persevere with the potlatch, they did so under the threat of imprisonment or heavy fines. In 1889, Chief See-Heel-Tum and his band petitioned to the Superintendent of Indian Affairs for a lift on the ban:

The lands of our fathers are occupied by white men and we say nothing. We have given up fighting with each other. We have given up stealing, and many other old habits, but we want to be allowed to continue the “Potlatch” and the Dance. We know the hearts of most Coast Indians are with us in this, we therefore ask you to have the law amended, that we may not be breaking it when we follow customs that are dear to us.³⁵

The ban continued despite Chief See-Heel-Tum’s plea. Barb Cranmer, member of the ‘Namgis Nation, reflects on this period of the ban and the devastating impact it had on her community:

It was a dark time for our people [...] There was a great sense of confusion. People were wondering why this was happening when this was how we had lived, historically, forever and ever.³⁶

While coastal communities have worked to repair the damage left by this and other policies aimed at extinguishing their cultural expression, the loss of the potlatch for generations of Indigenous community members remains a painful legacy.

³⁴ I. W. Powell, "Correspondence from I.W Powell to the Superintendent-General of Indian Affairs, 22 November, 1882," in *Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs for the Year Ended 31st December, 1882* (Ottawa: Maclean, Roger & Co., 1883), 252; Letter from I. W. Powell, February 27, 1884, Indian Affairs Record Group, RG-10, C-10110, volume 3628, file 6244-1, Library and Archives Canada, <http://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/.redirect?app=fonandcol&id=2060802&lang=eng>.

³⁵ Petition of the Cowichan to I. W. Powell, 26 February 1889, Indian Affairs Record Group, RG-10, C-10110, volume 3628, file 6244-1, <http://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/.redirect?app=fonandcol&id=2060802&lang=eng>.

³⁶ Barb Cranmer, member of the ‘Namgis Nation, on the impact of the potlatch ban. “Potlatch Ban,” *Living Tradition: The Kwakwaka’wakw Potlatch on the Northwest Coast*, Virtual Museum of Canada, accessed August 5, 2021, https://umistapotlatch.ca/potlatch_interdire-potlatch_ban-eng.php.

Residential Schooling

Powell's interest in promoting the assimilation of Indigenous peoples in British Columbia extended to his views on schooling and the place of the church in the Indigenous community. Early in his career as Superintendent, he took up the cause of what he viewed as the imperative to educate and "civilize" Indigenous children.

Residential schools, created to eradicate Indigenous identity, were very often places of violence and abuse and their impact persists in Indigenous communities to this day. Powell focused on the importance of establishing industrial education schools in isolated areas, to turn Indigenous children into what he referred to as "useful members of society."³⁷ In his annual report for 1882, Powell outlined what he saw as the central issue of educating Indigenous children:

[The] opposing impressions and vicious allurements incident to the daily return of the child from school to un-civilized camp life, and the failure of the system to accomplish much in the way of education may be readily understood. The only scheme for meeting the difficulty appears to me to be the establishment of two or three industrial boarding schools in the Province, where, separated from native customs and modes of living, children would have opportunities of putting in practice what they are taught in school. [...] Boys could then not only be taught various trades, but native teachers might be prepared, who would become effective civilizers on returning to their own people.

Powell also went on to suggest the creation of a school in Kamloops to address the communities in the interior of the province.³⁸ In fact, a school opened in Kamloops the year after Powell's retirement in 1890, and became one of the largest residential schools operated by Indian Affairs.³⁹

In a report written in 1879 following a trip up the coast, Powell argued that isolated communities should not be surveyed into reserves until the department could establish what he referred to as the "machinery of the Government to supercede [sic] their own time honored customs."⁴⁰ This machinery included schools. Powell advised that the government consider modeling their

³⁷ Powell, "Report of the superintendent of Indian affairs, for British Columbia, for 1872 & 1873," 9.

³⁸ Powell, "Correspondence from I.W Powell to the Superintendent-General of Indian Affairs, 22 November, 1882" 263.

³⁹ "Kamloops (St. Louis)," National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, accessed August 31, 2021, <https://nctr.ca/residential-schools/british-columbia/kamloops-st-louis/>.

⁴⁰ Extract from I. W. Powell's Report on his Coast Visitation, August 26, 1879, Indian Affairs Record Group, RG-10, C-10122, volume 3700, file part 2, Library and Archives Canada, <http://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/.redirect?app=fonandcol&id=2061740&lang=eng>.

approach after Anglican minister William Duncan's industrial settlement established in Metlakatla,⁴¹ and the American system of using missionaries to serve as arms of government control over Indigenous communities.⁴²

Powell underscored on more than one occasion in his writing that the church was an integral agent in the project of assimilation, and that "many of the missionaries are most enthusiastic in their endeavors to ameliorate the condition of the natives."⁴³ In his annual report for 1874, Powell reported on the new granting structure used to incentivize Methodist groups to bring in more children to their schools:

[N]o doubt the various Mission Societies already established in the Province will take measures to increase the number of schools, and take advantage of the material assistance afforded by the Government in granting a sum of money to every school which can show a certain average attendance of Indian pupils.⁴⁴

Schools had to have a minimum class size of 30 to qualify for a \$250 grant.

While only two residential schools opened in British Columbia during Powell's time as Superintendent,⁴⁵ his encouragement of the residential school system and of the creation of a funding structure that incentivized high enrollment continued to have an effect well after his retirement. The devastating legacy of these schools and their detrimental impact on the well-being of British Columbia's Indigenous communities are still being dealt with today.

⁴¹ William Duncan's "industrial village" at Metlakatla operated under the idea that civilization can be achieved through economic development and material prosperity. Duncan kept order over the community through a series of explicit social and religious rules, including mandatory education of children, a ban on any acts of giving away property and painting faces, and instructing residents to be clean, industrious, and peaceful. Richard Daly, "Being and Becoming in a World That Won't Stand Still: The Case of Metlakatla," *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice* 49, no. 1 (2005): 24; Mique'l Icesis Askren, "From Negative to Positive: B.A. Haldane, Nineteenth Century Tsimshian Photographer" (MA thesis, University of British Columbia, 2006), 77.

⁴² Extract from I. W. Powell's Report on his Coast Visitation, August 26, 1879, Indian Affairs Record Group, RG-10, C-10122, volume 3700, file part 2, Library and Archives Canada, <http://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/.redirect?app=fonandcol&id=2061740&lang=eng>.

⁴³ I. W. Powell, "Report of I.W. Powell to the Department of the Interior, February 4th, 1875," in *Annual Report of the Department of the Interior for the Year Ended 30th June 1874* (Ottawa: Maclean, Roger & Co., 1875), 130.

⁴⁴ I.W. Powell, "Report of I.W. Powell to the Department of the Interior, February 4th, 1875," in *Annual Report of the Department of the Interior for the Year Ended 30th June 1874* (Ottawa: Maclean, Roger & Co., 1875), 130.

⁴⁵ One being the Crosby's Girls Home in Port Simpson in 1879, and the second a day school in Coqualeetza in 1886.

Land Question

Shortly after establishing the British Columbia branch of Indian Affairs and instating Powell as Superintendent, the federal government set about solidifying reservations for the First Nations population in the province. While Powell's position as Superintendent did not give him direct control over matters such as reserve size and placement, he did wield a considerable amount of influence over the decisions made in Victoria and Ottawa. Throughout the 1870s and 1880s, Powell found himself playing the role of advocate for larger reservations, in opposition to the provincial government.

The Royal Proclamation of 1763, issued by King George III to claim British territory in North America, set the groundwork for the treaties and reserves that were created in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Canada. The Proclamation declared all land to be owned by Indigenous peoples until it had been ceded through treaty and purchased by the Crown.⁴⁶ Prior to confederation, British Columbia had a number of treaties established by the Governor of British Columbia James Douglas. When Douglas retired, James Trutch took over, reducing the size of several of the reserves established by Douglas's treaties. This set a precedent for small reserve sizes in the province.⁴⁷

When British Columbia joined Canada in 1871, the creation and negotiation of reservations fell into the hands of the federal government.⁴⁸ In 1873, Canada issued an Order in Council for the British Columbia government to set aside 80 acres for every First Nations family of five. The Province felt this was excessive and would limit economic growth, countering with 20 acres per family.⁴⁹ Powell disagreed with the Province's stance and made known his feelings that 20 acres would severely limit prosperity for First Nations.⁵⁰ While eventually the federal government amended the Order in Council to be 20 acres, Powell continued to challenge the provincial government on reserve sizes into the 1880s. In 1882, he wrote,

[I]t would appear desirable, and only justice, to afford Indians, who are clamoring for lands and who are deprived of proper reserves, every encouragement to obtain them. Certainly the natives of those portions of the Province just referred to, are in great want of allotments, and as the

⁴⁶ "Royal Proclamation, 1763," Government Policy, UBC Indigenous Foundations, accessed September 7, 2021, https://indigenousfoundations.arts.ubc.ca/royal_proclamation_1763/

⁴⁷ "Background: Indian Reserve Creation in Colonial British Columbia," Our Homes Are Bleeding, Union of BC Indian Chiefs, accessed September 7, 2021, http://ourhomesarebleeding.ubcic.bc.ca/narratives/Background_2.htm.

⁴⁸ "Confederation Onward: Dominion/Provincial Disputes," Our Homes Are Bleeding, Union of BC Indian Chiefs, accessed September 7, 2021, http://ourhomesarebleeding.ubcic.bc.ca/narratives/Background_3.htm.

⁴⁹ David Laird, "Memo to the Department of the Interior, November 2, 1874," in *Papers Connected with the Indian Land Question, 1850-1875* (Victoria: Richard Wolfenden, 1875), 312.

⁵⁰ Harris, *Making Native Space*, 93.

Commissioner can find no Crown Lands for the purpose, requisite appropriations will have to be made in some way for purchasing them. It is to be regretted that the Indians were not suitably provided for in the early history of the Colony, and before available locations were alienated from the Crown.⁵¹

Powell also sought adequate water rights for reservations, seeing access to water as an essential tool for improving the land. In 1886, when the Commissioner of Indian Affairs gave First Nations bands or their agents permission to apply for water records and claim water rights on their lands, Powell immediately saw to it that applications were submitted for most of the groups in the Upper Fraser Canyon.⁵²

This relatively generous position on land and water rights was in line with Powell's paternalistic view of Indigenous communities. In his annual report for 1875, he endorsed moving the Songhess band to reserves with valuable fishing stations and ample land. While there were benefits for the Crown to keep the Songhess close to Victoria, Powell reasoned that by allowing them to maintain access to their traditional harvesting areas, Canada would keep the Songhess people happy and ensure their assimilation into Euro-Canadian society:

Should difficulties occur they are at any season easily reached, either for the purpose of satisfying their complaints or punishing their misdeeds, and hence they are not wanting in respect or admiration for Her Majesty's law and power. Notwithstanding this however, it is important that Reserves which may include many of their most valued fishing stations should be set aside for them without delay, in order to prevent possible intrusion and consequent disturbance. Justice and fair dealing with a due allowance for the perplexity possible to their primitive nature in regarding our different roadways to attaining the superiority of the Christian Race, and civilizing habits, will then render them contented, law-abiding - in most instances industrious and useful citizens.⁵³

⁵¹ Powell, "Correspondence from I.W Powell to the Superintendent-General of Indian Affairs, 22 November, 1882," 259.

⁵² I. W. Powell, "Correspondence from I.W. Powell to the Chief Commissioner of Lands and Works, 23 March 1886," in *Annual Report of the Department of Indian Affairs for the Year Ended 31st December, 1886* (Ottawa: Maclean, Roger & Co., 1887), 230; Harris, *Making Native Space*, 198.

⁵³ I. W. Powell, "Correspondence from I.W. Powell to the Superintendent-General of Indian Affairs, October 1, 1875," in *Annual Report of the Department of the Interior for the Year Ended 30th June 1875* (Ottawa: Maclean, Roger & Co., 1876), 168-169.

He also wrote of the importance of allotting appropriate reserves in order to protect “White” settlers:

Fortunately too, for the past security of the Whites, Indians are divided into small bands under as many chiefs, and I am not aware of any instance where the different tribes of one nationality or tongue, have been able to combine in any united movement under one Chief, or head, either to act on the offensive or defensive. No doubt present complaints among them on account of the deficiency of the Reserves chiefly exist among the Indians of the Interior, who depend for support almost solely on pastoral lands and small cultivable contiguous areas. From those people, I have had frequent evidence of the serious dissatisfaction which prevails amongst them, and which if not allayed, may possibly culminate in something more to be dreaded and of greater difficulty to control.⁵⁴

In Powell’s view, good relations with the First Nations population must be cultivated through “forming Reserves at the favorite [sic] places of resort of the several tribes,” otherwise risking a dispute “more disastrous than any calamity to which the colony is liable.”⁵⁵

While Powell took issue with settler incursion on Indigenous lands in some of his writings, at times he made exceptions to this stance.⁵⁶ One notable case is the dispute over a 15,000 acre parcel of land known as Lot 450, situated on traditional Tla’amin, Klahoose, and Homalco territory, and encompassing several traditional villages and seasonal sites.⁵⁷ In 1874,⁵⁸ land speculator and Victoria politician Robert Paterson Rithet purchased the timber lease to this land under what some authors and academics have called dubious circumstances.⁵⁹ The Tla’amin expressed their concerns over logging around their villages to Indian Land Commissioner

⁵⁴ Powell, "Correspondence from I.W. Powell to the Superintendent-General of Indian Affairs, October 1, 1875," 168-169.

⁵⁵ W. Spragge, "W. Spragge's Abstract of the Report of J.W. Powell [sic], 11 January, 1873," in *Annual Report on Indian Affairs for the Year Ending 30th June, 1872* (Ottawa: I.B. Taylor, 1873), 12.

⁵⁶ I. W. Powell, "The Superintendent of Indian Affairs to the Lieutenant Governor, June 21st 1872," in *Papers Connected with the Indian Land Question, 1850-1875* (Victoria: Richard Wolfenden, 1875), 276.

⁵⁷ Dean Unger, "Historical Notes: Conclusions from Research Compiled During the Production of A Garden of Thieves" (no publication information), 2; Colin Osmond, "Tla’amin History from the Crossroads of Colonialism: Part One—Protest," *Nehmotl*, February 2018, <https://www.tlaaminnation.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/1802-February.pdf>.

⁵⁸ This date is disputed, with some researchers placing it as 1873, and others 1878.

⁵⁹ Rithet was allowed to purchase the timber lease under the condition that a mill be built on the site, which he failed to do before fully purchasing the lot in 1878. Rithet also came to know about the land while on a speculative visit with a business associate under false pretenses. The resulting sale came before an inquiry and was known as the Texada Scandal. City of Powell River, "City of Powell River Sustainable Official Community Plan," Bylaw 2370 (no publication information, 2014), 131.

Gilbert Malcolm Sproat. Sproat agreed that the government should cease sales of the Tla'amin territory before official surveys could be made of their reserves. When Sproat brought these complaints forward to Powell, the Superintendent was dismissive of Sproat and the Tla'amin's concerns, and dissuaded the Commissioner from visiting the Tla'amin to attempt to reach a compromise.⁶⁰

Some authors have suggested that Powell's inaction on the issue is because he and Rithet were personally associated.⁶¹ While no official record linking these two men has been found, both were members of the Masonic order and belonged to the Vancouver and Quadra Lodge no. 2, and were very likely acquainted with one another as members of Victoria's upper class.⁶² Even if his laxity was unrelated to knowing Rithet personally, Lot 450 and the lands of the Tla'amin, Klahoose, and Homalco Nations were highly sought after for their economic potential and probably represented areas of potential industry to Powell, who was strongly in favour of the "civilizing" effects of industry on Indigenous peoples (see [Residential Schooling](#)).⁶³

Collecting

During his time as Superintendent, Powell completed several tours of inspection up the Northwest Coast to the Indigenous communities living there.⁶⁴ While the official reason for these visits was for Powell to acquaint himself with the people his office oversaw, Powell had an ulterior purpose: the collection of cultural belongings.

The removal of sacred and ceremonial objects from Indigenous communities has a long history in Canada and British Columbia. Colonists and collectors alike roamed the Northwest Coast in the nineteenth century seeking cultural objects to add to ethnographic collections and museum displays.⁶⁵ The re-housing of these objects in non-Indigenous museums and galleries has created painful legacies for Indigenous communities. Grand Chief Ed John explains,

These drums carry a spirit. They tell the stories of the maker. They become more than objects. They have a spirit in them. It belongs more than just a cultural object, they become part of who we are as indigenous people ...

⁶⁰ Osmond, "Tla'amin History from the Crossroads of Colonialism: Part One—Protest," 1.

⁶¹ Unger, "Historical Notes: Conclusions from Research Compiled During the Production of A Garden of Thieves," 2.

⁶² Temple Lodge, No. 33, "Dr. Israel Wood Powell"; "Robert Paterson Rithet (1844-1919)," Vancouver Island Cemeteries and Masonic Interments, Temple Lodge, No. 33, accessed August 11, 2021, <http://www.templelodge33.ca/robert-paterson-rithet/>.

⁶³ Osmond, "Tla'amin History from the Crossroads of Colonialism: Part One—Protest," 1.

⁶⁴ Carol Williams, *Framing the West: Race, Gender, and the Photographic Frontier in the Pacific Northwest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 73.

⁶⁵ Douglas Cole, *Captured Heritage* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2014), 212.

Sometimes when it is housed in a place like as beautiful as it may look, you know, those spirits are feeling locked up.⁶⁶

Powell was a somewhat prolific collector of Indigenous cultural belongings, for both his own collections and those of institutions.⁶⁷ He showed interest in collecting as part of his official duties early in his career as Superintendent, recommending on a visit to Haida Gwaii in 1873 that the province begin amassing Haida art to form the basis of a provincial collection.⁶⁸ One of Powell's first collection assignments was for the Montreal Geological and Natural History Museum in 1879, for which he accumulated over 350 cultural belongings while completing an inspection tour as part of his duties as Superintendent on the naval ship HMS *Rocket*.⁶⁹

Powell's largest collection effort came later in his career, in service of the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York. Powell was offered a contract by a museum representative while on a visit to Victoria in 1880.⁷⁰ The director of the museum, Albert Bickmore, sent Powell a laundry list of items that they wished for him to gather on his official visits, including skulls, objects of worship, and old stone tools. Bickmore emphasized in his instructions to Powell that the museum wanted objects that were used for worship, rather than those made for sale.⁷¹ Powell collected Bickmore's requested objects between 1880 and 1885, with most of the cultural belongings arriving in New York in 1882.⁷² How he acquired these items is unclear, though doing so while under the official title of Superintendent may have facilitated the process.

In total, Powell's collection for the AMNH numbered 791 pieces, including a 68-foot-long war canoe from the Haida Gwaii islands.⁷³ This canoe remains in the AMNH collection, despite

⁶⁶ Grand Chief Ed John on the removal of sacred objects from the community context. Richard Zussman, "B.C. Demands Return of First Nations Artifacts," *CBC News*, June 21, 2016, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/bc-first-nations-artifacts-1.3646204>.

⁶⁷ Powell is noted as being very interested in art and cultural relics while on vacation in Europe. McKelvie, "Lieutenant-Colonel Israel Wood Powell, M.D., C.M.," 51.

⁶⁸ Williams, *Framing the West*, 79.

⁶⁹ Williams, *Framing the West*, 79. Though the Montreal Geological and Natural History Museum no longer exists, the museum's collections were transferred to Ottawa in 1881 and appear to have been eventually absorbed into the collection of the Canadian Museum of History in Ottawa. Natural Resources Canada, *List of Publications of the Geological and Natural History Survey of Canada* (Ottawa: Mclean, Roger & Co., 1884), 27; "Masks," Haida Art, Canadian Museum of History, accessed August 10, 2021, <https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmhc/exhibitions/aborig/haida/haama03e.html>.

⁷⁰ Ira Jacknis, "A Magic Place": The Northwest Coast Indian Hall at the American Museum of Natural History,' in *Coming to Shore: Northwest Coast Ethnology, Traditions, and Visions*, eds. Marie Mauzé, Michael Eugene Harkin, and Sergei Kan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 222.

⁷¹ Cole, *Captured Heritage*, 82-83.

⁷² Cole, *Captured Heritage*, 82-83. It is likely that, after one of these inspection tours/collecting trips, the commander of HMS *Rocket* named Powell River and Powell Lake in Powell's honour. McKelvie, "Lieutenant-Colonel Israel Wood Powell, M.D., C.M.," 50.

⁷³ Cole, *Captured Heritage*, 83-84.

requests from the Haida for its return, just one of many repatriation efforts spearheaded by Indigenous communities to correct misappropriations of their cultural belongings.⁷⁴

Conclusion

Israel Wood Powell's career with the Department of Indian Affairs was characterized by his advocacy of assimilationist policies designed to "civilize" the First Nations of British Columbia and create what he viewed as economically productive citizens. While Powell's work at times aligned with the interests of Indigenous groups, namely in the defense of larger reserve sizes, his support for increased surveillance over First Nations, the creation of residential schools, and banning traditional practices often worked against Indigenous communities in the province by limiting their personal and communal freedoms.

In his 17-year tenure as Superintendent of Indian Affairs for British Columbia, Powell drove these harmful policies forward through his reports to Ottawa and correspondence with federal and provincial lawmakers. He believed these policies were to the benefit of First Nations, but his work and legacy were ultimately part of a system whose primary goal was to extinguish Indigenous culture and identity.

⁷⁴ Chris Lackner, "Haida Calls for Return of Rare Canoes," *Vancouver Sun*, November 22, 2006, accessed August 10, 2021, <https://www.pressreader.com/canada/vancouver-sun/20061122/281758444793624>; Zussman, "B.C. Demands Return of First Nations Artifacts."

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