Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

of

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MA (University of Northern British Columbia, 2011)
MA (Carleton University, 2008)
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“In the Best Interest of the Indians”: An Ethnohistory of the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs, 1897-1913

Department of History

Wednesday, December 16, 2020
9:30 A.M.
Conducted Remotely

Supervisory Committee:
Dr. John Lutz, Department of History, University of Victoria (Supervisor)
Dr. Elizabeth Vibert, Department of History, UVic (Member)
Dr. Jim Miller, Department of History, University of Saskatchewan (Outside Member)

External Examiner:
Dr. Susan Neylan, Department of History, Wilfrid Laurier University

Chair of Oral Examination:
Dr. Susan Boyd, Faculty of Human and Social Development, UVic

Dr. Stephen Evans, Acting Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies
Abstract

Drawing on insights from recent ethnographic and ethnohistorical studies of bureaucracy by scholars such as Akhil Gupta and Ann-Laura Stoler, this dissertation turns the ethnohistorical lens back upon the colonial state to offer a ground-level view of how statecraft functioned on a day-to-day basis within the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs between approximately 1897 and 1913. I seek to pierce the artifice of clearly settled policy and elite micromanagement perpetuated by the official documentary record, and the tendency in both official documents and the literature to speak of “the Indian Department” and “the government” as a collective historical agent, to explore how settler privilege, Indigenous marginalization, and structural violence were enacted through the day-to-day operations of the Indian Department bureaucracy, especially its poorly-understood Ottawa headquarters. The first chapter represents the turn-of-the-century Canadian government bureaucracy through the metaphor of a house society, exploring the seasonal round, composition, and rituals of bureaucratic society. The second chapter analyzes the central role played by political patronage in the civil service – not merely hampering the efficient carrying out of the state’s Indigenous policy, but actually in some ways constituting Indigenous policy – through a close reading of the Liberal purge of Conservative officials carried out between 1896 and 1898. Chapter three explores how clerks, most of them working anonymously, attempted to create meaning and make decisions through the management of files in the Ottawa headquarters. I trace two pleas as they made their way through the bureaucracy: one from the bottom up, an Indigenous request for a new church furnace; and one from the top down, a politically connected merchant hoping to collect on an Indigenous debt. The final two chapters explore the implications of this more granular reading of the bureaucratic state for understanding two areas of “Indian policy” of more conventional interest to historians: the evolution of “Indian status,” which in important ways was shaped and improvised at the field agent level, in the absence of central control and outside of the vision of race embedded in the Indian Act of 1876; and the surrender and sale of land from reserves, which was driven by senior and ambitious officials, though often for personal advancement and profit rather than adherence to official state policies. Overall, I offer a vision of the state that moves away from abstract conceptions of “the state,” “the Indian Department,” and “Indian policy,” towards implicating and interrogating the roles played by bureaucrats and files in the day-to-day operations of the colonial state.