

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

Spring 1998

## Review of *Shingwauk's Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools* By J. R. Miller

Jennifer Pettit  
*University of Calgary*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

---

Pettit, Jennifer, "Review of *Shingwauk's Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools* By J. R. Miller" (1998). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2016.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/2016>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

*Shingwauk's Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools.* By J. R. Miller. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996. Photographs, maps, notes, note of sources, methodology and nomenclature, bibliography, index. xii + 582 pp. \$70.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

Historian J. R. Miller takes us on a long-awaited journey in *Shingwauk's Vision*. The study, based on over a decade of research, is the first scholarly comprehensive history of residential schools in Canada from their beginnings to their demise in the 1960s. Miller deserves praise for examining the motivations and experiences of all three of the parties involved—the federal government, the various churches, and the students themselves. Using both government and missionary archives and extensive interviews with former students, Miller reveals not only the policies that shaped the schools, but the internal workings of the institutions as well.

*Shingwauk's Vision* is divided into three parts, the first of which traces the history of Native education in Canada from traditional times to the expansion and consolidation of

the residential school system. The work's title comes from the story of Chief Shingwauk of Garden River who sought a "teaching wigwam" to help his people prepare for the encroachment of non-Native society. Unfortunately, his vision turned into what Miller deems an "aboriginal nightmare" in which government and religious officials at eighty or so schools forced Natives to conform to non-Native language, culture, and ways of life.

The next section, an examination of everyday life in the schools, is perhaps the book's most important and useful part. Miller documents all aspects of residential school life, including curriculum, gender issues, assimilation tactics, work, play, and abuse. No study to date has attempted such a colossal undertaking that brings so clearly to light the dark side of the residential school system.

Miller describes how children toiled endlessly to support the underfunded schools in which they became victims of abuse, as well as the institutions' inadequate health conditions and inferior instruction. One wonders, however, why the author so often insists on paraphrasing informants rather than letting their recollections stand on their own. Regardless, the one hundred photographs scattered throughout the book are telling portraits of the experiences of children who attended the schools. Unfortunately, for most students the effects of their residency did not end with graduation.

Yet, unlike many other studies of Native residential schools, *Shingwauk's Vision* is not merely a diatribe on the atrocities of the residential school system. Besides the final section in which Miller offers his personal assessment, *Shingwauk's Vision* advances a balanced examination of a school system ostensibly designed to help and protect Native peoples that went awry for the various reasons Miller aptly chronicles.

Given the scope of the study, Miller's meticulous research, and the larger implications of the work with regard to Native and non-Native interaction, *Shingwauk's Vision* is required reading not only for those who study

Native education, but for all who are interested in Canadian history and Native-state relations.

JENNIFER PETTIT  
Department of History  
University of Calgary