

Documents of the Mohawk Institute: The Journals and Reports of Robert Ashton, 1872–1876 and the Diary of Alice Ashton, 1877, Introduction and Edition by William Acres

Natalie Cross

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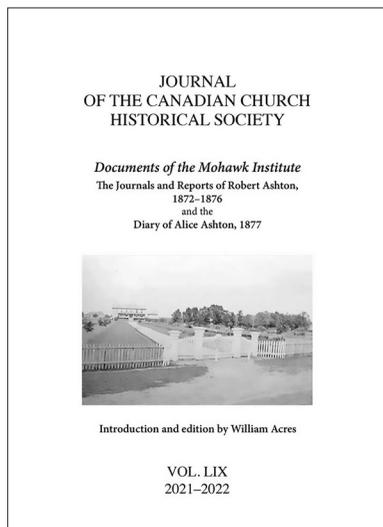
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Documents of the Mohawk Institute: The Journals and Reports of Robert Ashton, 1872–1876 and the Diary of Alice Ashton, 1877

Introduction and Edition by William Acres

Toronto, Ontario: Journal of the Canadian Church Historical Society, Volume LIX, 2021–2022.
375 pages. \$25.00 paperback, inquire at archives@national.anglican.ca



The historical reports of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) and the Office of the Independent Special Interlocutor for Missing Children and Unmarked Graves (2024) have made noteworthy strides in contributing to historical research surrounding residential schools, though much work remains to uncover these histories. For the longest-running residential school in Canada—the Mohawk Institute in Brantford, Ontario—this task has been undertaken. William Acres has made a significant contribution to the Institute’s history through *Documents of the Mohawk Institute*. In

this special edition there are two sections of documents transcribed and paginated by Acres: the journals and reports of the Mohawk Institute superintendent, Robert Ashton, and the diary of his wife Alice Ashton, Lady Matron of the Institute. Acres has made a substantial effort to make these documents more readily accessible to the public.¹

The documents are prefaced by a stunningly detailed introduction from Acres which provides essential context to how one of Canada’s earliest residential schools was maintained and operated by the British missionary organization, the New England Company (NEC), and its affairs amongst the Haudenosaunee at Six Nations of the Grand River. Acres expertly walks through the history and governance structure of the NEC in the mid-late nineteenth century, alongside the

1 The original texts are currently held at the Anglican Diocese of Huron Verschoyle Phillip Cronyn Memorial Archives, located at Huron University College in London, Ontario.

complicated history of its mission at Grand River. Specific to the administration of the Mohawk Institute, a Special Committee of the NEC would oversee Ashton's work upon his appointment as superintendent in 1872. This Special Committee that Ashton reported to—thousands of miles away in London, UK—controlled administrative decisions of the school. Its members believed in an educational philosophy that focused on “adapting” pupils’ “unconscious,” thereby eradicating Indigenous cultures. The Company’s vision for the Institute was informed by its late nineteenth century Victorian values and scientific statistical reporting methods at work throughout the British Empire (directly influenced by the work of Florence Nightingale) to demonstrate the progress of civilizing Indigenous peoples across the colonies. Acres helps situate the ways in which the Ashton documents were specifically structured to document students’ “progression” in order to serve colonial systems of monitoring the civilizing mission.

The Ashtons arrived at the Mohawk Institute at a time of institutional reform for the school desired by the Company. A former employee of the Middlesex Industrial School in Feltham, UK, Ashton would become the NEC’s vehicle until the end of his tenure in 1911. Acres draws parallels between Feltham and the Mohawk Institute, particularly the militaristic-like daily schedule, industrial training, and systems of discipline. Further, in 1872, the NEC implemented new regulations that controlled the way that its Grand River Mission was to be administered: the Institute was now to be separated from missionary affairs and under direct oversight of Ashton. As such, he was well-placed to overtake the work needed to isolate the school as a site of control and civilizing amongst the Six Nations. Indeed, in addition to positioning the Ashtons, Acres highlights the local diocesan politics and control of various religious posts amongst the Haudenosaunee at place in Six Nations throughout the 1860–70s. While the complexities of the Grand River mission affairs at the time of Ashton’s tenure require Acres’ extensive explanations about these settler colonial relationships for readers, the documents also bring light to Indigenous presence and navigation of these networks. Indigenous teachers and missionaries such as Isaac Barefoot and Albert Anthony became entangled with the Institute’s affairs. Acres also points to how the Institute was served by the social networks that existed between Six Nations, Tyendinaga, Bay of Quinte, and Muncey (home of the Mount Elgin Institute) that brought students to the Mohawk Institute when attendance was low, ultimately isolating children from their home communities. Though primarily focused on profiling the Ashtons and

the NEC's role, Acres makes clear that the Ashton documents are situated in a system of cultural genocide that was navigated by the Haudenosaunee and other Indigenous communities across Southwestern Ontario.

Robert Ashton's journals and reports (1872–76) document the operations of the Institute and the educational progress of pupils. Immediate challenges arose for Ashton, plaguing the reports: inadequate buildings, poor ventilation, drainage issues on the farm, and legal issues regarding the lands upon which the Mohawk Institute was situated. As some issues were reconciled over time, the reports record expenditures and some profits turned from the farm. When discussing students, there is significant attention given to tracking attendance and student conduct. Of particular note are the transcribed tables of student progression in subjects taught at the Institute. While evaluated upon colonial assimilative standards, full names of early students are listed in these tables, and in some passing references throughout Ashton's reports. Indeed, instances of resistance trickle throughout: Ashton noted numerous instances of students running away, parents retrieving their children, or keeping them from returning following vacation. Ultimately, the documents serve as early evidence of how the Mohawk Institute became a settler-controlled site of Indigenous assimilation under the Ashtons, well before the formal residential school system was implemented by the federal government in 1883.

Alice Ashton's diary consists of brief, daily entries from January to December 1877. While documents created for administrative purposes by residential school superintendents are standard, Alice's *Lady Matron* diary provides a different perspective of the quotidian administrative experience of a residential school. The entries record the activities of staff, varying from administering the farm, attending business in town, or noting sermons delivered by those in the missionary network around Six Nations and Brantford. Students' routines are described; short references are made to admittance and discharge of students, their training (such as sewing for the girls), church attendance, and food. Sickness was also abundant amongst pupils and staff. Within the year, there were numerous accounts of visitors to the Institute—both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. Either accompanied with Acres' introduction or standing alone, the diary serves as a unique document recording daily life at a residential school, though solely from a settler colonial perspective.

By transcribing these early residential school documents and providing an impressive depth of detail in its introduction, Acres has provided a valuable edition that contributes to the history of the Mohawk Institute, and of the early residential

school system in both Southwestern Ontario and Canada. It is of note that Acres' transcriptions of these documents intersect with various upcoming book projects and digitization efforts emerging from Acres, the Survivors' Secretariat of the Six Nations, the Woodland Cultural Centre, Six Nations Public Library, and the Mohawk Institute Research Group.

Natalie Cross

Historian, Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada.