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Cover Story

SCAPEGOATING THE INDIAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS

The noble legacy of hundreds of Christian missionaries is sacrificed to political correctness

In the week following the Chretien government's apology to natives for residential schools, news media characterized the historic institutions as "brutal," "miserable," "genocidal" and "horrendous." They were repeating vaguely recounted and unchallenged testimony to a royal commission which concluded that the poorly funded and allegedly abusive schools bear large responsibility for the woeful present plight of many Indians. In none of the media coverage was the possibility raised that the schools were on the whole beneficial and widely supported by the Indians who attended them and voluntarily sent their children to them. Nor was the possibility admitted that the Indian leaders who now revile the schools might be motivated by the prospect of federal compensation.

On January 7 the Chretien government said it was "deeply sorry" for the treatment of natives in residential schools. The apology, part of the government's official response to recommendations of a Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, carried with it a "healing" fund of \$350 million, or \$500,000 on average per reserve.

Initiated in 1991 by then-prime minister Brian Mulroney, the commission's mandate was to examine all aspects of the federal government's relationship with aboriginal people. There were seven commissioners, four native and three white, balanced also for gender and region. By the time they had wrapped up their cross-country hearings in 1996, the aboriginal commission had become the most expensive in Canada's history, with a final cost of \$58 million and 445 recommendations, the cost of which were estimated in total at \$20 billion. While it dealt with a broad range of issues including treaty rights, self-government, social programs, education and land-claims, the commission's most damning indictment was reserved for residential schools.

Travelling in threes, the commissioners held meetings in communities all across Canada, from cities to Inuit villages and Indian reserves. At the height of its undertaking, the commission employed over 100 staff in Ottawa and countless others in local communities who encouraged people to come forward and make submissions. Paul Chartrand, a Metis commissioner from Manitoba, explains that witness testimonies were not tested for accuracy or truthfulness. "We were a body of inquiry and were not there to cross-examine people appearing before us. We were not a judicial process. We listened to submissions, applied our understanding of the issues, and came up with policy recommendations."

Mr. Chartrand concedes that not all the testimony was critical of residential schools. "The report acknowledges that attendance for many people was not an unhappy experience," he says carefully. "[And] the report doesn't contain a blanket condemnation of the schools."

Fellow commissioner Mary Sillett, an Inuit from Ottawa representing Labrador, agrees that there were positive stories. However, she believes that the negative testimony far outweighed the positive. "Residential schools hurt a lot of people very deeply. Little kids were forcibly removed from their homes, beaten, and taught to despise their families. The stories were absolutely horrifying. How can you ever apologize adequately for the abuse those children suffered?" she says. "However, it's significant that the decision-makers have shown the courage to recognize the hurt and damage that was caused by residential schools."

The commission concluded, "Tragically, the future that was created [by the schools] is now a lamentable heritage for those children and generations who came after... The school system's concerted campaign to obliterate Aboriginal languages, traditions, and beliefs was compounded by mismanagement and the woeful mistreatment, neglect, and abuse of many children... The memory has persisted, festered and become a sorrowful monument, still casting a deep shadow over the lives of many Aboriginal people and over the possibility of a new relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians."

Since the commission's report was published in November 1996, the federal government has been preparing its response. Amid sweetgrass smoke and the beating of drums, on January 7 Indian Affairs Minister Jane Stewart expressed "profound regret" for the residential schools. The apology was hailed by aboriginal leaders as a first step in recognizing the suffering of the aboriginal people over the 300 years of Canada's history. Phil Fontaine, grand chief of the Assembly of First Nations, told the Calgary Herald, "Let this moment mark the end of paternalism in our relations and the beginning of the empowerment of First Nations, the end of the official victimization of First Nations." Chief Fontaine, from Pine Falls, Man., has said in the past he was sexually molested at one of the schools, but was

travelling last week and could not be reached for an interview.

However, it remains a question, in many Indian minds as well as white, whether the general legacy of the Indian schools may actually have been quite good. While there have been some documented cases of sexual abuse over the 120-year history of the schools, a handful of which still operate, the available evidence is vague and almost entirely anecdotal.

Far-removed from Ottawa's corridors of power, many native people say they are bewildered by the vilification of residential schools. For example, Dora and Donald Cardinal of Onion Lake, Sask. near Lloydminster attended St. Anthony's Residential School on the reserve in the 1950s.

"It was a great, big white-frame building," recalls Mrs. Cardinal of the structure which was demolished in 1972. "I was sad to see it go; I have a lot of fond memories from that school, I really liked it there." One of her most vivid memories is of the kitchen, with big wood-burning stoves all along one wall. "There was a lot of food, we were practically forced to eat," she recalls wistfully. "Every day there was delicious fresh bread, porridge, peanut butter and lots of stew. I was a picky eater back then, and the food was always very good." Mrs. Cardinal explains that children from the reserve attended one of several area boarding schools, depending on their religious affiliation. As Roman Catholics, she and her older brother and sister were sent to St. Anthony's, operated by the Oblates of Mary Immaculate and the Grey Nuns.

Donald Cardinal adds that although speaking their native Cree was against the rules, he can not remember ever being punished for it. "It was the boys' job to look after the garden," he explains. "We chopped wood, worked on the farm, and looked after the cows while the girls learned to sew, mend, crochet." Dora Cardinal recounts that the Onion Lake reserve was very poor, and so was her family with six children. "We lived in a cabin, my dad did a little trapping; we had to survive somehow. I remember nights at home that were so cold, and we never had enough blankets. Sometimes my mother's bread wouldn't rise because it was so cold. I also remember that if we got some second-hand, old clothes, mother would cut off the sleeves and we used them for socks. Many parents at the time thought the school was a blessing."





S (BLACK & WHITE): The Edmonton Residential School as it is today and commissioner Sillett (inset): 'Horrible abuse.'

The Blood Reserve near Lethbridge had two residential schools; Catholic St. Mary's and the Anglican St. Paul's Residential School. Rufus Goodstriker, a retired pro rodeo rider and boxer, and now a rancher and herbalist, attended St. Paul's for eight years in the 1940s. A three-storey, steam-heated brick building, St. Paul's at one time had over 500 students. "We were supposed to speak English, but I spoke Blackfoot all the time anyway," Mr. Goodstriker remembers. "It was good teaching for survival in society. We learned reading, writing, history, science, as well as how to operate machinery and farm chores. I really appreciated being able to learn all that. I'm a rancher now, and I use a lot of what I learned at the school."

A typical day began at 6:45, with breakfast and chapel before morning classes. After a half-day in the classroom, boys worked on the farm or in the shop. The children often went on hikes and camping trips through the surrounding countryside, and the older students were allowed to visit nearby Cardston on Saturdays. Each Friday night there was a co-education social event, usually a dance.

Although the children often visited their parents on weekends, school was a lonely experience at first. Mr. Goodstriker recalls that once his older brother ran away. "But my father immediately loaded him up in the wagon and brought him right back and said 'you don't run away from school' although, looking back, it probably would have been better to keep the children with their parents."

For Mr. Goodstriker, the sports program was the real highlight of school. Although St. Paul's lacked an indoor gym, the students were coached in soccer and softball. In the winter they flooded a rink for hockey, and numerous social events were organized by staff and students. Notwithstanding all these pleasant recollections, indeed almost as an afterthought, Mr. Goodstriker remarks that the schools were practising "cultural genocide." Asked to elaborate, he declines.

Another former resident at St. Paul's remembers that each week began with a chore work-list, which the students worked through in groups. "We worked together on everything; repairing equipment, cleaning washrooms, sweeping dormitories. I really enjoyed my time at the school; not only did I learn to work with other people, I also learned to respect them and respect myself."

The informant, who did not wish his name to be used because he says it could cause trouble, attended the school for eight years in the late 1940s. "I was never lonely there," he says. "When I went home on holidays, I was always lonesome for the school. The staff was very supportive of the students, and there were always lots of activities organized. Besides sports there was choir, piano, even a first-aid course. I even remember the staff reading stories to the younger children."

In the 1940s, the schools were already two generations old. Following the decimation of the buffalo and the movement of the nomadic plains Indians to reserves, the first residential schools in the West were

started in 1884 by Catholic Father Albert Lacombe and Bishop Vital Grandin. With the plains steadily filling up with settlers, and game scarce, the schools were envisioned as a means of endowing native children with the skills necessary to survive in their changed world.

Initially termed "industrial schools," the facilities were established by the churches and staffed by religious workers, in an era when few white people had much sympathy for Indians. Besides core academics, various schools taught blacksmithing, woodworking, carpentry, cobbling, tailoring and farming. By the 1890s the federal government had established control over the schools, and provided enrolment grants while the churches continued running them. The number of schools peaked in 1946 when there were 76 scattered a-cross Canada, most of them in the West.

Of those schools, 45 were affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church, 19 with the Anglican Church, 10 with the Presbyterians and two with the United Church. By most estimates, over 150,000 native children were educated in residential schools between 1867 and the late 1960s.

Some schools, located on reserves, operated as day schools and the students went home to their parents at night. Others had day populations and boarders from farther afield. Some served very scattered populations and were entirely residential; prohibitions against speaking Indian were more common at these, especially where the students came from different tribes historically at war with each other. Some of the early industrial schools, for example the Dunbow School near Calgary, were established in white communities so that the students could apprentice with local tradesmen.

According to Gerry Kelly, coordinator for the National Catholic Working Group on Native Residential Schools, the Indian people themselves recognized the need for education. "In several cases, Indian bands asked the government to establish schools," he explains. "In the 1930s, the Sechelt band near Vancouver lobbied the Oblates for such a school; some aboriginal communities wanted the schools so badly that they built them themselves. It's disrespectful to the natives' history to suggest that they played no part in the system, that they were herded mindlessly along by the government. Natives exercised some authority."

Mr. Kelly points out that, often, problems resulted after the native students left the industrial schools and attempted to find work in white communities. "For instance, a boy would train as a blacksmith, but then no one would hire him, however good he was at blacksmithing." Mr. Kelly is disappointed that the residential schools have been made scapegoats for all the suffering of the Indian people. "In some cases," he argues, "the very existence of these schools saved communities, for example in the North. In times of epidemics, the institutions were there to care for people. Also, the irony is that the only [white] people who were concerned about the Indians worked in the schools."

Mr. Kelly explains that, after the Second World War, there was a growing movement to shut down the residential schools and transfer the responsibility of educating native children first to the provinces, and then to the natives themselves. "The viability of the provincial systems was growing, and there was a growing movement to integrate native children with non-native." In 1946 a joint committee of the House of Commons and Senate recommended that Indian children be schooled with non-native children wherever possible. According to the compilation of essays entitled *Indian Education in Canada*, by 1960 nearly 25% of Indian children in Canada were being schooled in provincial institutions.

However, there was also a growing desire among Indian people to control their children's education directly. In 1971, the federal government handed control of the Blue Quills Residential School near St. Paul, Alta., to local bands, making it the first federal Indian school to be run by natives. The process of turning over the schools, both residential and day facilities, to local bands accelerated during the 1970s and 1980s. By 1993, there were only seven residential schools left in Canada and these were administered solely by native bands.

By the late 1980s many natives, especially politicians, were pointing accusing fingers at the residential schools. Highly-publicized incidents of sexual abuse, coupled with white liberal guilt about cultural assimilation, transformed the old residential schools into symbols of "degradation" and "cultural genocide" where the native children were systematically stripped of their culture, forced to adopt non-native ways, and undergo physical torture and sexual abuse by the school staff.

Chief Greg Smith of the Peigan reserve told the Calgary Herald that the legacy of the residential schools was terrible. "It was appalling, I see the effects of those schools everywhere. For me to lose my language, being part of the residential school system hurt me later on. I've had to go back and learn my language because it was taken away by someone else." However, he conceded that he suffered no abuse worse than having his hair cut. Warner Scout attended St. Paul's on the Blood Reserve after his mother froze to death while drinking and his alcoholic father was unable to care for him. He also told the Herald, "A lot of us graduated from there to jails. We knew nothing else to do except get drunk."

Flora Northwest of Hobbema, Alta., attended the Ermineskin Residential School in the 1950s. She told the Edmonton Journal that the loneliness at the school was terrible. "Because of what happened, I became the alcoholic that I never wanted to be," she said. "I became a woman with no values."

Though it is true that many Indians feel this way, many others are appalled at the demonization of residential schools. Rod Lorenz, a Metis Catholic lay missionary at Lloydminster, is sceptical of the government's apology for imposing residential schools on the native people. "If you look at it historically, the priests were very well-travelled and intelligent. They realized that the natives' food supply was diminishing, and they realized that the schools were one way the natives would learn the new tools they needed to survive--and a lot of those kids did learn.

"My own mother attended the residential school in Lebret from 1909 to 1916 in Saskatchewan and she loved it. The nuns taught her everything; how to sew, cook, read and write. How would she have learned otherwise? Certainly, the European style of discipline was different than native culture, but what could you do? If you let the children leave, a lot of them would have starved. You needed discipline." Mr. Lorenz points out that, in some cases, the separation of children from their parents was difficult. "Sure, mistakes were made but there are two sides to this story and you have to look at the positive side."

Rev. Stanley Cuthand, a Cree Indian and retired Anglican priest, grew up on Saskatchewan's Little Pine Reserve, boarded at the La Ronge Residential School in 1944, and was chaplain of Saskatchewan's La Ronge and Gordon Residential Schools, and of St. Paul's School at the Blood Reserve in the 1960s. "The schools weren't terrible places at all," he recalls. "They were certainly not prisons, although the principals were a little strict."

Rev. Mr. Cuthand recalls only one incident of sexual abuse of a student, at the Gordon Reserve, where one of the staff members was later convicted and sent to prison for several years. "Most of the kids had no complaints about sexual abuse; if they did, they would have told me. However, they did get homesick and some tried to run away. There was also plenty of food; raisins, fish, potatoes, bread with lard, stew. In those days everyone lived on fish."

As for the oft-alleged conscription of unwilling students, Rev. Mr. Cuthand recalls that the only children who were "forced" to attend a residential school were orphans or children from destitute families. "The idea that all children were forced into the schools is an exaggeration," he explains. "The idea of the separation of students [from parents] came from England. Practically all the [upper class] English were brought up in residential schools. In Canada, the main idea at the time was to civilize and educate the children; and that couldn't be done if the kids were at home on the trapline."

Mr. Cuthand also scoffs at the accusation that Indians had no influence in their children's education. "The Little Pine reserve wanted its own day school, and in 1910 after petitioning Ottawa, we got our own day school. Our parents had never had schools before, but they wanted us to learn English. When the school was built, there was so much cooperation between everyone that everyone on the reserve sent their kids there." He explains that the reason the children were forbidden to speak their language was because they used to swear in Cree, and had nicknames for their supervisors. "Of course they would be punished for swearing," he says. "The kids were not saints. But generally, language was not an issue. The La Ronge school also allowed fiddle dances every Saturday night; that was the students' culture. By then, most of them had already forgotten the traditional Cree dances."

Rev. Mr. Cuthand enjoyed his time on the Blood Reserve in southwest Alberta. "It was an exciting place to live," he recalls. "The Bloods were rich and very traditional. The school was a fine place with some very good teachers." The parents were involved in the school, with some parents living there as staff members. "[Blood] Senator Gladstone sent his kids there, and many of the students from St. Paul's went on to university." Mr. Cuthand remembers that his school was particularly committed to recognizing the native culture. "One principal had tepees set up on the front lawn," he remembers with a laugh.

That principal, Archdeacon Samuel H. Middleton, with the support of the tribal leadership, was a resourceful school promoter starting in the 1920s. "He started the honorary Kainai chieftainships," explains Mr. Cuthand, whereby prominent people were named as honorary chiefs to support the school. It was an exclusive club: the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VIII, and John Diefenbaker, to name only two. It also came to include three former principals and three former superintendents. Mr. Cuthand remembers the archdeacon, who spoke Blackfoot, changing the Sunday School curriculum to make it more relevant to native culture. "The school was well respected by the Bloods," Mr. Cuthand says. "We used to take students climbing up Chief Mountain because the Indians there believed it was a sacred place." Though not universal, respect for native culture was fostered elsewhere: for example, at the Blue Quills Residential School near St. Paul, religion classes were often conducted in Cree and Chipewyan.

Father Antonio Duhaime of the Oblates was principal at the Duck Lake Residential School from 1962 to 1968, and then principal at St. Mary's Residential School on the Blood reserve from 1968 to 1980.

Given the name Black Eagle, Fr. Duhaime speaks some Blackfoot and in 1988 was made an honorary chief of the Blood. "The parents brought us their kids in September, and said 'Father, I want my children to learn English' and now they're accusing us of forbidding them to speak their native languages," he says, shaking his head. "If some of the natives are successful today, they can thank the residential schools. No one else was interested in the Indian people back then."

Fr. Duhaime remembers the schools as a defence against assimilation, not a promoter of it. "At the time, there was a low budget for each school. The federal government was insisting on assimilating the natives, and they were pressuring the children to attend non-native schools off the reserve." However, the sports program at St. Mary's remained an attraction. "We had two provincial high-school basketball championships," he says proudly. "Our teams travelled all over the world; Ireland, Mexico City, Europe. The kids loved to play because on the basketball courts, they were equal or superior to whites."

Dora Cardinal can recall only one instance of physical punishment at St. Anthony's School at Onion Lake. "One time one of the older girls was strapped because she had run away. But the nuns were generally very caring, and a lot of fun," she says. "My Grade 1 teacher in particular was always trying to cheer me up, and she never yelled at us. The way I see it, kids were better off then than today," she says firmly. "Kids today get away with everything; they have no respect for anyone. When I was at the school, I learned a lot about patience and self-discipline, and I learned to persevere."

That Indian reserves today are riven with social problems is everywhere admitted. According to Statistics Canada, the suicide rate among natives is five to eight times the national average, infant mortality is almost double the Canadian average, poverty is three to five times more common, and 60% of reserve residents depend on welfare. In Saskatchewan, the mortality rate on Indian reserves is an annual 5.0 per 1,000, compared to a provincial rate of 3.5. In 1995-96, 22% of all inmates sentenced to prison in Canada were aboriginal, about five times their share of the Canadian population.

But can the residential schools be blamed for this horrific misery? Rita Galloway grew up on the Pelican Lake Cree reserve in Saskatchewan. Today she is a teacher and president of the Saskatchewan-based First Nations Accountability Coalition. "I had many friends and relatives who attended residential schools," she comments. "Of course there were good and bad elements, but overall their experiences were positive. Today those people are now productive citizens; professionals, consultants, and business people. They learned the ethic of hard work."

Mrs. Galloway believes that it is unfair to blame residential schools for the conditions found on many reserves. "The suicide rates are very high, there is a lot of sexual abuse on the reserve; some of my siblings were sexually abused by band members. But my parents never attended a residential school, and they still had problems; my father lost his logging business because of drinking. A lot of these problems were present before the schools. When you put a group of people together in a small area like a reserve there will be problems. But it's always easier to blame others.

"The real problem is lack of financial accountability," insists Mrs. Galloway. "Each year, Indian Affairs doles out \$13 billion to 680 reserves across Canada; and we don't know where a lot of it goes. And now, with this apology, the government is handing out another \$350 million. When that money is gone, we'll be having the same discussion in 10 years, and there will be the same excuses for more money.

But more money doesn't solve anything. Someone has to have the guts to say we need accountability; only then will you see real changes and growth."

Mrs. Galloway taught at the Prince Albert Indian Residential School from 1988 to 1990, when the school was operated by the Prince Albert tribal office. "Within the last five years, there was a police investigation for sexual abuse," she reports. "They didn't run a clean school themselves, and they're pointing the finger at others. As aboriginal people we have to be aware that other aboriginal people are abusers, and it's an oversimplification to blame the residential schools."

Mrs. Galloway also believes that residential schools still have a vital role to play. "Nowadays, there's lots of children who don't even attend school," she points out. "There is a very high drop-out rate among native children who attend school off-reserve. It's attributed to racism, but the deeper problem is that these kids don't get the support at home that they need. There are too many distractions, and many reserve homes are overcrowded. The morning after welfare day, children come to school tired because their parents were partying all night. We have to give these children some normalcy in their lives. When I taught at the Prince Albert school, I was able to give the students the academics they needed, and they were able to focus on their studies."

One of two residential schools still operating in Saskatchewan is the Whitecalf Collegiate in Lebret. Formerly the Oblate-run Qu'Appelle Industrial School, in a 1983 land claims deal the school and 55 acres of surrounding land were ceded to the nearby Star Blanket Cree Reserve. Verne Bellegarde, today executive director of the collegiate, attended the school for Grades 1 to 12, from 1947 to 1959. Mr. Bellegarde says that the band now operates the school with a great deal of success. "For only 200 positions, we have over 500 applicants from Indian reserves all across western Canada." The school's attraction, he believes, is its solid academic record plus its strong emphasis on sports. "Nearly 90% of our graduates go on to some form of post secondary education; with 50% of our grads attending university."

Mr. Bellegarde believes that most parents feel their children would be better-educated at the collegiate than in reserve-based schools. "I would definitely say that we don't have an absentee list," he points out, "and we can isolate them from home to some extent." Mr. Bellegarde points out that, while he was a victim of sexual abuse himself, he doesn't believe that such abuse was widespread through the residential school system. "You can't dwell on that," he reflects. "I've put it behind me, because I can forgive." He prefers to remember his positive experiences. "I learned discipline, and the 3 Rs. Through my experience that I could compete against non-Indians." Through my experience with sports I realized that I could compete against non-Indians.

Rod Lorenz agrees. "There can be a lot of distractions on the reserve," he says. "I think boarding school can be a great way to study and apply yourself. My own son is attending a residential school; but it's a Ukrainian residential school in Manitoba. Residential schools--or boarding schools--have a lot of resources and can be a real advantage to young people. They're a good idea for the advanced grades, but not the younger children. They need mom and dad."

Mr. Lorenz believes that it is convenient for the native political leadership to overlook the positive side of residential schools. "Victimhood gets money," he says simply, "and there are certain vested political

interests who have no reason to say anything good about residential schools. If you're trying to get money, balance is not what you want." Mr. Lorenz also believes that adherents to native religions like to discredit Christianity by smearing the residential schools. "There are definitely some people who see Christianity as a rival religion. Those who spearhead the native spirituality revival are very hostile. If they can use the schools as a stick to beat the Catholics, they're going to use it. If someone says that the schools weren't so bad, they become pariahs; they sold out to the whites."

The churches have been brow-beaten into line. In 1992, the Oblate order issued an apology for "certain aspects of their ministry" including "recent criticisms of Indian residential schools." The wordy document, delivered by Father Doug Crosby, then president of the Oblate Conference of Canada and now Bishop of Labrador, apologized for imposing "cultural, linguistic and religious imperialism over the native people."

Retired Oblate priest Duhaime believes that the smear of residential schools cheapens the sacrifices of many lay workers and missionary priests over the years who gave their lives in the service of Indian children. "It's very disappointing," he remarks. "All the years we worked in these schools, trying to make a difference, and all you hear today is negative. It's very hard to take."

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Residential school: Many memories are happy.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Teacher Galloway: It's always easier to blame others.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Residential school Santa: Hikes, sports, dances and parental approval.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Teaching nuns: Discipline was needed.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Anglican Cuthand: One myth piled on another.

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By Patrick Donnelly

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