
The Misery of Residential School

In Reversing Canada's Genocide of First Nations

by
Clive Linklater

Abstract

This is a story about a young Anishinabe-Saulteaux boy, Clive Linklater, who shares his personal experiences in residential school. From his first day at residential school, through the days of endless rules and punishments, he shares his experiences of institutionalized assimilation. This is his story; however, many First Nations children at the time of the Residential School era in Canada had similar experiences of being stripped of their language, culture and connection with their family and community. While this is a difficulty story, it is a true story, and it is also a story of courage, endurance, and perseverance. Although residential schools no longer exist, it is important to continue sharing the truths about this part of Canada's history. It is with pride that we celebrate the resilience of First Nations Peoples, and all Indigenous Peoples. We are still here.

Keywords: *First Nations, storytelling, education, residential school, sovereignty*

Author Bio

Clive Linklater, a proud Anishinabe-Saulteaux from Couchiching First Nation. He received his elementary education at the Couchiching residential school in Ontario, and his secondary education at the Lebret residential school in Saskatchewan. During his secondary school experience, he became the president of the student body and began to realize his capabilities as a leader. He attended teachers college in Saskatchewan and began teaching. He moved back to Ontario to continue teaching, and then became involved in First Nations politics.

In 1969, Linklater joined the Indian Association of Alberta as the education consultant. A few years later he became the Executive Assistant of the National Indian Brotherhood (now the Assembly of First Nations), and then elected as Vice-President. Linklater was actively involved in the fight for *Indian Control of Indian Education*. He was an expert on treaty rights and a skilled political strategist who took the fight to the international stage; he was particularly dedicated to community development through education.

He was the grandson of Tom and Harriet Linklater. The husband of Florence Linklater (nee Shawanda). The father of Daryl, Karen and Janice. And the grandfather of seven grandchildren – Naomi, Larissa, Hayley, Daryl J., Ember, Danielle, and Dylan – the joys of his life!

Introduction

Neeshubeek nidijinakaz, Pikwàkanagàn ashidj Couchiching nidoonjibaa, Mahingan nidoodem. I am the dànis (daughter) of Barry Sarazin and Karen Linklater. I am the granddaughter of Daniel Sarazin and Bernadette Lavalley from Pikwàkanagàn First Nation; of Florence Linklater (nee Shawanda) from Wikwemikong Unceded First Nation and Clive Linklater from Couchiching First Nation. I am their legacy. Through them, I have learned who I am and where I come from, two fundamental understandings that guide me in life. I am forever grateful to my mom and dad, ni'kokòmis (my grandmothers) and ni'mishòmis (my grandfathers) for giving me life and purpose.

This year is significant for my family as we honour someone we love and miss dearly. On July 12, 2017, it will be 10 years since ni'mishòmis, Goo'Goo'Ko (the late Clive Linklater), has been called home to join his family and ancestors in the spirit world.

Ten years have passed. As a gift in his honour, I am submitting a chapter of his manuscript, *Reversing Canada's Genocide of First Nations*, to the Canadian Journal of Children's Rights. My grandpa worked hard towards the publication of his book before he passed on to the spirit world. He wanted to share his knowledge and experiences with Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, to create dialogue about the truths and realities of First Nations peoples' experiences in Canada to further improve relations for peaceful co-existence. As the granddaughter of the late Clive Linklater, I made editorial choices to shorten the text of his manuscript, and chose to submit *Chapter 2: The Misery of Residential Schools*. In this Chapter, my grandpa shares first-hand accounts of the experiences he faced as a child in Residential School. As his granddaughter, reading these stories for the first time, was extremely difficult and heart breaking. It is by sharing these stories and truths that we continue to work toward understanding and co-existing. This is our shared history.

As a gift of love and appreciation, I wrote this letter for you mishòmis (grandpa).

Mishòmis,

Migwech (thank you) for saying the three most powerful words: I love you; from the time I was abinòdjìnjish (a baby) to the last days of your life. Around you, I never questioned my worth, my beauty or my purpose.

The love you had for our family was comforting; and the love you shared with Indigenous peoples, communities and nations worldwide was admirable. Your strength, perseverance and resilience amazes me, still.

Migwech for paving the path forward in creating better educational opportunities for First Nations peoples; and for always encouraging me to pursue higher learning, not only in the mainstream education system, but most importantly, in Anishinabeg culture, traditions, values and practices. Your leadership in advocating for Indian Control of Indian Education created a strong foundation for continuance, and the future for First Nations' education remains bright.

Migwech for your lifetime of dedicated work which laid the foundation for building capacity within our communities, especially when it comes to education for Indigenous peoples. Mishòmis, you were a pillar of diplomacy, intellect and knowledge when it came time to create change. Your ability to be a visionary and leader blazed a path for seven generations forward. You will always be remembered as a significant leader in building community capacity through education, and furthermore for empowering Indigenous peoples toward Nationhood. You were a true Anishinabe-Saulteaux leader – humble, determined, strong-willed, dynamic, and assertive – you had untiring perseverance and relentless energy.

Through me, your legacy lives on. I promise to do my best, and continue the work you started, for our family, community and Anishinabeg.

Migwech mishòmis.

Kizagiyn.

Naomi Sarazin

Traditional and unceded territory of the Kitchissippi Omàmiwininì Anishinabeg, 2017

Reversing Canada's Genocide of First Nations:

Chapter 2: The Misery of Residential School

by Clive Linklater

edited by Naomi Sarazin

My First Day at School

I will never forget the day I first went to residential school. It was like a funeral, it was such a sad occasion. The women who brought their children and grandchildren were crying, weeping and wailing, and many of the kids were crying too. Most parents took their kids to town the week before to shop for new clothes and get haircuts, so the kids would look their best. It was also so the parents could spend time with them because they would not see them again at home every day until the next summer. I arrived with my grandmother, a friend, cousin and their mothers. There were kids from reserves nearby: Stanjikoming, Red Gut, Seine River, and Lac La Croix. The mothers and grandmothers of these other children were crying the loudest. Most of the kids from farthest away were crying too. At least those of us from the Couchiching reserve could go home for short periods every Sunday and for longer periods at religious holidays. Some of the reserve kids' homes were so close, they could actually see them from the school. But that only made them feel worse – to see their home and not be there every day. My home at Five-Mile Dock could not be seen from the school. Everyone dreaded being at school. But we all have to accept the life we lived, we cannot change what has been or what might have been.

For all my sense of dread, yet there was something exciting about trying something new and different. I really looked forward to learning how to read and write by myself.

The mothers and grandmothers eventually left. The boys and girls were separated and called to the boys' and the girls' recreation rooms. There, we were introduced to the rules and rituals of St. Margaret's Residential School, which was run by the Sisters of the Order of the Grey Nuns of Montreal (called the Sisters of Charity) and two priests belonging to the Order of Oblates of Mary Immaculate. The nuns and priests were everywhere. The first thing we did was have a bath and change our clothes. I thought changing our clothes was a strange thing to do

because my grandparents and all the other parents and grandparents had bought new clothes for us kids to wear especially for the first day of school. We never saw our new clothes again. Instead, everyone was dressed the same. The boys' clothes were brown flannel underwear, thick blue khaki pants and shirts, black socks, black boots, and one-piece navy-coloured coveralls. The girls wore dark skirts, brown cotton stockings, black shoes, and grey blouses. We knew they wore underwear called bloomers because we saw them hanging on the clothesline. While the girls would joke about their bloomers being too big, the boys never joked about their own underwear. We did joke about our coveralls being too baggy. The first day we didn't joke about anything. When we went to bed that night, we could hear boys sniffing and crying softly in their beds. It took a long time to drift off to sleep.

Rules and Punishments

The second day at school, all us boys had our hair cut – very high and very short – and had our heads examined for lice. We had no choice as to the length of our hair and we were told to comb it often, even if there was not much left to comb. We were told some of the rules. We had to wash our hands and face before and after meals, before and after classes, before and after mass and prayers, before and after going to bed, before and after going to the washroom, before and after everything. There would be no speaking our own language at any time for any reason. Anyone caught speaking Anishinabemowin (Anishinabe language, Ojibway) would be strapped – in front of the other kids as an example. Most of us became well acquainted with the strap. It was a large piece of leather like a baling strap from a baler or threshing machine. It was heavy and thick, and being struck with it hurt very much. Despite being strapped, most kids – especially those who did not speak much English in their homes – spoke our own language anyway when the nuns and priests were not around. Most kids from Couchiching spoke English as well as Anishinabemowin. We would go to certain places where we would not be heard, such as around the large trees outside the fenced play yard. The boys would gather there and speak our language, while one of the boys watched to warn us if any nuns came in sight. If so, we'd switch to English.

While we were not allowed to speak our language, the priests and nuns constantly spoke French among themselves. When they wanted to say things to each other that they did not want us to understand, they spoke in French. They never taught us to speak French and none of them

ever learned our language. We were forced to speak English at all times. I once asked one of the nuns why it was okay for them to speak French but not for us to speak Anishinabemowin. She didn't answer and I got punished for asking the question. Looking back, it would have been so much better had they encouraged us to speak our language and taught us English, and maybe French too. We would have been able to speak three languages – a great advantage in today's Canada.

There were a lot of rules and lots of punishments. Over time, we learned many rules, which seemed to be endless because new ones were added all the time. They were not written down anywhere but we were constantly reminded about them. We had such rules as:

- No talking when it is time to be silent.
- Be on time for every scheduled activity.
- Always address the nuns as “Sister” and the priests as “Father.”
- Say “Yes, Father” “No, Father” “Yes, Sister” “No, Sister” “Please Father” “Please Sister.”
- Do not answer back to the nuns or priests at any time.
- Be where we're supposed to be at all times.
- Don't be where we are not supposed to be.
- Do as we are told without any questions.
- Keep all our food on our plates at all meals.
- Do not drop any food on the table or the floor.
- Keep our coveralls buttoned and our shoelaces tied at all times.
- Keep our hands together under our heads and above our pillows every night.
- Remember that we are children of God at all times, and the nuns and priests are the messengers of God. We are to obey everything they tell us without question.

And on and on.

Breaking any rule brought us punishment of some sort. We'd get a strapping for a serious matter, such as speaking our language, talking back, or disobeying the nuns. There were lesser punishments as well, such as going without food or sitting in silence for long periods, which could be days. We could be ordered to kneel in a corner of a room or at the corner of the building outside, regardless of the weather. We could be told to stand in one place for a long time. We

could be told to write such things as "I will be a good boy" a hundred or even a thousand times. We had to wash floors, windows or toilets. We might be told not to speak or play with certain other boys including our own brothers and relatives. And on and on.

Before a strapping, the nun would push and shove us around, shake us by the shoulders, pull our hair, slap us, or hit us with knives, spoons, forks and especially rulers, the ones with a piece of metal along the edge that cut easily and quite deeply into our skin. The favourite punishment of one of the nuns was to crack you over the head with her knuckles while shouting "*Eigh, sauvage!*" The most hated punishment for us was when we were all punished for the actions of one, or a small group of boys, who had broken a rule. We all hated being punished for the actions of others and it happened often.

One time, a group of boys were being punished. I wasn't one of them, but I was among those who had to sit at our lockers while they were lined up kneeling on the floor. The principal, Father Chatelaine, came in with his strap and gave us all a lecture about whatever those boys had done. Then he told the boys kneeling in a line to put out their hands until he was finished. Then he told the rest of us: "Remember this will happen to you if you do the same thing." The strap was usually administered to the palms of the hands. It hurt very much. One way to lessen the hurt somewhat was to lower your hands just as the strap was about to land. Of course, if you lowered your hand too soon or too far, the strap would miss and you'd get more straps. We tried really hard not to cry, but of course we were usually strapped until we did cry. The priests and nuns also knew that if they hit us on the inner side of the wrist, this hurt even more. So, if a boy didn't cry, they would then hit him on the inner wrist until he did. At one point, the priest began to jump with both feet off the ground and come down with the strap held in both his hands to hit one of the boys. After that initial punishment, those boys had to wash the floor, swollen hands and all.

One cold winter day, my ears froze while playing outside. We had to come inside by groups to get our hair cut. I was getting my hair cut and one of the boys was talking to me. The nun told us to be silent. He kept talking and I answered him. The nun hit me over my frozen ear with the electric hair clippers. It hurt so much I yelled out and she hit me again. I tore off the cloth around my neck and ran into the hallway. Of course I got punished: I had to wash the sink and toilets and spend the rest of the recreation period in silence. My ear ached for a long time

and became infected. Ever since then, there has been a hard clump on my right outer ear and I have been quite deaf in that ear.

One Saturday afternoon we had been doing some work in and around the school. In the afternoon, as we were finishing our lunch, one of the priests came into the yard and said: "When you are finished your lunch you will go back to work." One of the boys said: "Holy Jeez, do we have to go to work again?" The priest attacked him. He threw him to the ground and began to punch and kick him. The boy was held down by his legs while the priest hit and banged his head to the ground. Finally, the priest let go and walked away. We didn't go back to work after all. The next day, we all went to church and then went home. That boy never returned to school that Sunday, or ever.

For me, there was the spectre of what happened to my uncle Arthur, who died after some incident at the residential school. I never did learn the full story of his death. My grandparents only agreed for me to attend the school because it was the law, according to the *Indian Act*. They didn't want the police to show up and threaten to put them in jail. The priest who was principal of the school visited parents who did not send their children to school and told them they were breaking the law. If the children still did not attend, the RCMP would take the kids to school. These were typical incidents of punishment. The worst punishment was not being allowed to go home. Residential school in Couchiching was just one long period of some sort of punishment.

The School

The residential school was located at the southeast end of the reserve by the shore of the lake. It was a big white building four storeys high. On the first floor were the playrooms, kitchen, dining rooms, and laundry room. On the second floor were two classrooms, a chapel, offices, and a visiting room. On the third floor were the nun's living room, the infirmary, and the sewing room. On the fourth floor were separate dormitories for boys and for girls. In a small alcove above the boys' dormitory were bathtubs, showers, and a storage place for clothing, bedding, and towels. Then there was the attic. The attic was accessible only by a ladder from the hallway in the alcove. Up there were old clothes, old bedding, and mattresses and items very seldom used. The attic was a quiet place and very few kids or anyone else ever went there. I spent a lot of time there looking over the old items under dim lighting. I brought along some books that I read by the light of a single bulb. The attic was quiet and peaceful.

The school had a farm with a huge barn, a pigpen, a chicken coop, and a slaughterhouse. Cows, a bull, and horses stabled in the barn. Beside the barn was a huge garden and potato field. Our food came from these animals and the garden, supplemented by store-bought food. I remember the food being good, though monotonous. It was cooked in huge batches, and the menu was a repeated cycle, so we could tell what day it was by the food. But for some unknown reason, we were never served wild meat or berries.

On Sunday, children from Couchiching went home after high mass and returned at six o'clock. Some of the kids cried when they returned on Sunday, and you could hear some sobbing during the night. The kids from other reserves had to stay at school every Sunday unless they were invited to the homes of kids from Couchiching. We all went home for religious holidays and the two-month summer holidays. Every September, we returned. Most of us hated the school but we were forced to go and we couldn't wait to get out. "I'm lonesome" was a common phrase kids repeated over and over. Children coped in many ways. Some wept. Some went quiet and wouldn't talk. Some refused to take part in activities. Some became rebellious and broke the rules even though they knew punishment would be exacted.

Education

The nuns did not take First Nations children into residential schools for the purpose of educating us in the academic sense. In fact, they told us repeatedly that we were uneducable. They thought First Nations people had limited intelligence and were not able to learn and that we were only good with our hands to do manual labour. Therefore, they taught us only the most basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Half of the day was spent in the classroom, while the other half was spent doing chores around the school. We also spent a lot of time with prayer and catechism.

Our day was divided into segments that seldom varied. We were woken up at six o'clock by a bell. We said the morning prayer, then washed and got ready for daily mass. After mass we went for breakfast. After breakfast, we did chores and whatever time was left before nine o'clock was called a recreation period. At nine, we went to class. We had a break for the noon meal and another recreation period. In the afternoon, we had more chores working in the barn, the chicken coop, the pigpen, the slaughterhouse, the laundry room, or the garden. At four o'clock we had a recreation period, at five a study hour, and at six supper followed by another recreation period.

Then it was evening prayers and benediction. At eight, we went to bed, except on Fridays and Saturdays when we stayed up until nine. We said more prayers before going to bed. Then the whole cycle repeated itself.

There were only two classrooms in the school: one for grades 1 to 3 and the other for grades 4 to 8, although there was no one in grades 7 and 8. The highest grade any student had ever reached was grade 6. Most kids left school when they turned sixteen and many quit before that.

I clearly remember the first day I walked into the classroom at the age of 7. I felt excited about something new, although I did not know exactly what laid ahead. The nun who was to be our teacher greeted us at the door and we took our places in rows. We had big double desks with two students per desk. We were given books, pencils, rulers, and other supplies – and the rules were explained to us:

- There would be no talking or whispering to each other.
- We were to be silent unless we were asked a question.
- If we wanted to ask a question or say anything, we had to put up our hand.
- We would not be allowed to go to the washroom or get a drink, except at recess, the noon break or end of the day. In extreme cases, students, even the girls, wet their pants and were punished for it, even though the embarrassment was punishment in itself. No one ever teased anyone about this. It might happen to you at some time. It was one of the accepted hazards of residential school.

There were several personal incidents I remember clearly. One time, I asked one of the nuns why they were called the Sisters of Charity when they were so mean to us. Of course, I got punished. Another time, I asked another nun: “When Jesus was a kid, did Mary and Joseph treat Him the way you treat us?” Again I got punished. One of the nuns once asked us: “Why do we have to keep all the cupboards locked all the time? I want you to say whatever you think and nothing will happen to you.” No one said anything at first; finally, I blurted out: “Because you don't trust us. You think we're all thieves and robbers.” She got very angry. We all got punished. I never answered any of her questions again. What she taught me was that it's better not to talk to the nuns, because whatever you said you would likely be punished. Silence has some merit.

During my first year in the “little class” (grades 1 to 3), I sat and listened to the nuns teaching grades 2 and 3 as well, and did all the work for all the grades. That way, I learned how to read and write very quickly. By my second year at school I had completed all the work for grades 1, 2, and 3. When I was promoted to the “big class” (grades 3 to 6) at the age of 9, I did the same thing and, by the second year, I completed the work for grades 3 to 6. I spent the rest of the time feeling frustrated and bored and usually got into trouble of some kind. I learned that no student had ever reached grade 8. In the next year, I did the work for grades 7 and 8. I had successfully completed the work for all grades and the school had no choice but to advance me to grade 8.

In my back pocket, I used to carry around a little red dictionary. I read it from A to Z and developed quite a vocabulary. The boys used to tease me about it but I didn't care; I just went on reading it. I also read an entire encyclopedia from beginning to end. These were things I did on my own. I learned that words are powerful. I also enjoyed reading the *National Geographic* magazine. I memorized the territories and provinces of Canada and their capital cities. I used to tell the guys I would someday visit all of them, and I would visit big cities such as New York, Chicago, Hong Kong, Paris, and London, England. I said I would go to South America, Europe, Australia, and other places. The nuns and the other kids laughed and made fun of me. They said it would never happen and that I was a crazy fool to think such things. Well, I have been to all those places and more. I travelled the world and met people of many cultures, beliefs, and practices. That was a far greater learning experience, and it started with a determination born in residential school. Of course, I had good fortune for the opportunities to travel and enrich my life so tremendously.

Learning Christianity

At residential school, we prayed. We prayed as soon as we woke up, before and after meals, before and after classes, before and after recreation periods, before and after special activities, and before we went to bed at night. We memorized the Lord's Prayer, the Hail Mary, and the Credo. We studied the catechism, first thing every day. We attended mass every morning and benediction most evenings. And of course some of our punishments involved prayer, reciting or writing out different prayers a hundred or even a thousand times. Parents sometimes expressed strong reactions to what was happening to their children in residential school. I remember one

father coming to the school to get his children and take them to town with him that day. He was refused because there was a special novena that day. Extremely upset, he got into an argument with the nun and said: "That's the trouble with this damn school. The kids are always praying. It seems that's all they ever do is pray, pray, pray. They over-pray!" The nun got very indignant. He gathered up his two boys and put them in the taxi, and drove off to town. The rest of us went to the novena. The boys did not return until the next day, when the Couchiching students returned from having Sunday afternoon at home.

The way my grandparents taught me to pray was very different from the type of prayer we were taught at residential school. They told me to listen to the waters, the winds, the fires, the trees, and the birds as well as to my heart so that I may learn the meaning of life. They told me the Creator gave life to all creatures and all creation. The plants, the animals, the birds, the trees, the fish are all living creatures, our brothers and our sisters. They have as much of a right to life as we humans do. We must respect their right to life. For these prayers, I did not have particular words to memorize and recite. What is important is that we put ourselves in a condition that the Creator and the spirits will enter our hearts and souls. It is important that we connect and *be with* the Spirit, that we *become part of all creation*, and that we *be part of the Creator*.

I once asked my grandpa Tom what was a heathen and pagan. He looked at me a long time, took a long puff on his pipe, which he seldom smoked, then gave me a hug and said: "I hope that's what you will be when you become a man." That was reassuring enough that we didn't have to discuss it further.

Once a year at the school, we underwent a retreat – two or three days of prayer, silence, meditation, and sermons. At one retreat the visiting priest conducting the sermons went on and on about the heathen practices and pagan beliefs and superstitions of the Indians. He went on to teach us that the physical body of Jesus Christ, including His blood, was to be found in the host Catholics take as communion in mass. After the sermon, I met him in the hallway and I asked him: "Father, don't you think that believing that Jesus' body in the host is a superstition?" He got so angry, he reported me to the principal and I got a good strapping. To me, life all around us is a mystery and a miracle. We all know we came from a Creator. I believe in Kitchi-Manitou (the Creator)! I believe the Creator is all around us and within us and beyond us. I believe the Creator *is* in the clouds, the waters, the rocks, the fire, the winds, and – above all, in our soul and in our spirit.

There are some similarities between the beliefs taught by the Catholic priests and nuns and those taught by my grandparents: belief in the Creator, love and respect for other human beings, and the eternal nature of life. There are differences too. We were never taught about eternal damnation in hell for those who lived with sin. For myself, I believe that we are from a Spirit, we are a Spirit, and that we will return to a Spirit. If that makes me a pagan and a heathen, then I am a pagan and a heathen. My grandfather Tom's wishes have come true: I have grown up to believe in the Creator. I thank my grandpa Tom and my grandma Harriet for that.

Civilizing us Savages

The nuns and priests told us endlessly that we were savages, pagans, and heathens. They were relentless in savaging us as people whom they considered to be superstitious because we pray to trees and rocks; because we believe God speaks to us through the wind, the fire, and the animals; because we believe we see God in all natural things around us. They told us that we were not civilized because we knew nothing about the "one true" God. They shouted the phrase "*Eigh, savage*" at us over and over! It was extremely insulting to be called "*savage*" all the time and to be constantly told that we were dumb and uneducable. Even at that early age I did not think that I was incapable of learning. I learned very well. I often thought that I and the other students learned lessons the nuns did not intend us to learn: that is, we came to conclusions other than those they wanted us to think or believe. For example, my grandparents taught me that all humans come from a Spirit and that all people are basically good but sometimes do things that are wrong.

The priests and nuns taught us that all people are basically evil sinners and they must be redeemed through following the teachings of Jesus Christ. I once asked: "If Jesus was really human, then mustn't He have been a sinner and evil like the rest of us?" For asking questions like this, we were punished. I remember one time a boy had to write out the Lord's Prayer a thousand times while remaining totally silent; it took him several days. When I later spoke to him about it, he said: "When I leave this damn school, I will never say the Our Father again, as long as I live!" This is a perfect example of how the teaching method of the priests and nuns resulted in the wrong lesson.

The nuns and priests had a very clear vision of what they wanted to do with us. The constant punishments we received were not really for the rules we broke or the things we did

wrong; we were really being punished for *who we are as Anishinabe-Ojibway*. They forced us into residential school away from our parents, families, homes, and the influence of our elders and community members. Their goal was to remake us into something we were not. This is forcibly transferring children of a group to another group, which is one of the criteria for genocide under the United Nations definition. Then at the school, they tried to destroy our languages, our ideas about family, our beliefs, our customs, our respect, and our allegiance to our parents and grandparents. Clearly, these are all acts that promote genocide. Why genocide? The churches made a deal with the government. The churches helped the government to deny and destroy our existence as Peoples. They declared us to be savages, pagans, and heathens not worthy of earthly possessions. While they tried to destroy our identities and remake our beliefs, it was suggested that the government would create laws that would attempt to destroy us even more as Peoples. Together the church and government said they did this for own good. That was the nature of the pact between the churches and the governments. The destruction of First Nations as Peoples was the goal of the residential schools. Education was the means to that end. So were the efforts to educate and convert the Indians in residential schools a success or a failure?

Run, Sister, Run

Then there was Sister Fontaine. She was unlike the other nuns. She had a very pretty face under her heavy black veil, a warm sense of humour, and a dazzling smile. When she was in charge, she'd often join us playing games. She chased the little ones around in circles, played on the teeter-totter, and liked to play hopscotch, skip rope, roll marbles, or just have fun, laugh, and joke with the boys. She seldom punished anyone.

In the dormitory at night, we were not allowed to talk. One night, when she was in charge, she surprised us by saying: "Now, boys, when you're all ready for bed and I shut off the light, you cannot talk to each other, but you can whisper." The whispering was fast and furious and you could hear muffled laughter. When she clapped her hands, we knew without her having to say that it was time to be silent again. When boys were in punishment before Sister Fontaine came on duty, she'd find some way to make the punishment easier. One time, I was kneeling in the corner during the afternoon recess, from four o'clock to the supper break. When she came on duty, Sister Fontaine came over and said: "Clive, you have to stay in the corner but you can sit

down while you're kneeling. And I give you my permission to go to the toilet if you need to." At first, I couldn't for the life of me understand how I could sit down and kneel at the same time. Then I figured what she really meant was that I could sit on the floor from time to time instead of kneeling. She did likewise for other boys.

During periodic epidemics of things like measles, mumps, chicken pox, and the flu, almost all the boys and girls would be sick in their separate dormitories. Once, the nuns were in retreat when such an epidemic occurred. After breakfast, Sister Fontaine came into the recreation room carrying a small paper bag. Holding up the bag, she announced: "Now, boys, I'm going to be with you by myself for the whole day until you go to bed tonight. I will give the apples in this bag to the boys with the best behaviour." Of course, we were all on our best behaviour; I don't think there was a single infraction of the rules that day. When we came back from supper break, some of us saw at the back of the platform in the recreation room something about 6 feet long and about 2 feet wide, covered with a white bed sheet. We wondered what it was. We went out to play and, about fifteen minutes before the normal time, Sister Fontaine clapped her hands. We all came inside and she told us: "Now boys, I said I would give apples to the ones who had the best behaviour today. You've all been so good, I am going to give each one of you an apple." She uncovered the mysterious object on the platform: boxes full of apples. Then she went around passing out the apples to all the boys – and even ate one herself. She richly deserved it!

I remember Sister Fontaine best for the day she hit a home run in a softball game. When she has asked if she could join in, we said: "Okay, as long as you don't cheat!" She joined the team we were playing against. I was playing catcher, so I had a good view of what was happening on the field. She really didn't know how to play the game but what she lacked in skill, she made up with enthusiasm. The first time she came to bat, she whiffed out in no time flat. In the field, she didn't know how to catch a ball or what to do with it if she did. The funniest part was hearing her take part in the infield chatter. She'd bounce up and down on her feet, pound her fist into her gloved hand, and yell very loudly at the pitcher "Way to go baby! Fire that old ball in there, baby!" Some guys fell down and rolled around on the ground laughing.

The next time she came to bat, the pitcher lobbed her a powder puff. She hit the ball but just stood there at home plate, frozen and looking at the wonder of it. Her teammates yelled "run, Sister, run!" and she took off – toward third base! Her teammates yelled "The other way, Sister, the other way" until she turned and ran across the pitcher's mound toward first base. She should

have been out for that, but no one complained. Just as she was getting to first base, the first baseman caught the ball from the fielder. But, instead of touching the base as he should have done, he tried to tag her out. He thought he had her flat-footed, but he missed her. Then she somehow got around him and took off to second base. The first baseman threw the ball to the second baseman, who stood with the ball absolutely sure that, this time, they had her out. Just like a pro would, she turned and ran back toward first base. She raced back and forth between the bases as they tried to tag her out. In the meantime, her teammates were howling their heads off “run, Sister, run!” Finally, they tagged her out. When she came off the field, she was puffing and laughing, with a wild look of excitement in her eyes.

When she came to bat the third time, the pitcher threw her another powder puff. She hit it and, this time, immediately took off for first base. The fielder overthrew the ball at first, so she raced off to second base. The first baseman retrieved the ball and threw it to second base. The second baseman caught the ball but she ran around him and flew off to third base. As she was running, she held her long robes with one hand, her veil was snapping and getting all out of shape, and her teammates were still shouting, “run, Sister, run.” Just as she was reaching third base, the second baseman threw the ball dead on to third base. But the fielder missed it and it rolled under the outdoor toilet behind third base. She tore off toward home plate. By this time, even the opponents and what few bystanders were watching the game were all screaming, “run, Sister, run.” The third baseman had to go into the toilet to get the ball and, by the time he did, she was nearing home plate. When she realized she was going to reach home safely, she pumped her arms up and down over her head. When she crossed home plate, all bedlam broke loose! Boys were jumping up and down, whooping and hollering. A home run! She was beaming and kept pumping her arms. Her team gathered around to thank her; some were half crying and half laughing. We were all milling about, shaking hands, and congratulating each other as if we'd just won a great championship. Years later, I asked another guy if he remembered the day Sister Fontaine hit a home run. He choked up and said: “That was even better than the World Series!”

During that year we were told she would be leaving the school. Later that summer, I was at home when people from town drove by in an open convertible. When they passed by, someone yelled “Hey, Clive!” It was her. I've never seen or heard of her since. Many years later, while visiting the reserve, one of the guys and I were reminiscing about our residential school years and I asked him if he remembered Sister Fontaine. His head jerked up, he stared into space for a

while, his eyes watering, and he said: "She's probably the only good thing I'll ever remember about residential school. She sure brightened up our days!" Here's to you, Sister Alice Fontaine, wherever you are, the Heavenly Apples Award for being so generous and good-hearted, for your love of fun, and for that dazzling smile. If only the other nuns had been like you, residential school might have been a happy and joyful experience.

"Run, Sister, run!"

– The Boys

Aftermath

Residential schools of the kind I attended no longer exist. They cannot harm our children any more. We have gotten rid of them. We have not gone, however. We are still here. Today, First Nations people are openly and actively speaking our own languages and practising our traditional beliefs and customs. We understand now that church rules and government laws and regulations were intended to do away with our languages and traditions, and to eradicate our existence as Peoples. Though residential schools did hold sway over First Nations students for a time; they did not stay silent and subservient. What the government and churches were doing was exposed in the 1960s and 1970s. No longer could they systematically and deliberately destroy our people, take away our lands and resources, deny us our fundamental rights, nor deny that we are Peoples. Among other actions we have taken, First Nations moved to take over the education of our children (which I describe in later chapters). In the 1980s and 1990s, First Nations people began court proceedings that sought compensation for physical and sexual abuse, loss of language and culture, and other crimes committed in residential schools.

Residential schools were created by the government of Canada for the purpose of assimilation. The passage of the *Gradual Civilization Act of 1857* by the British Parliament and the *Indian Act* of 1876 gave control over First Nations education to the government of Canada. The goal was to assimilate us into White society by taking us away from our families and communities, and placing us in an environment where we would lose contact with our Anishinabe ways of life.

The first residential schools were started in the 1840s in Ontario and they gradually spread throughout the country as First Nations territories became absorbed into Canada through treaties. In the 1920s the Department of Indian Affairs made it mandatory for First Nations

children to attend school up to age sixteen. Parents who did not send their children to school were threatened with jail. Because no attempt was made to establish schools in all First Nations communities, most of the schools were residential. These schools operated ten months a year with students in residence during that time. Most schools taught only the most basic academic skills, with a greater emphasis on religious teaching. Academic teaching occupied only half a day, the other half being for industrial training, mostly manual work in and around the school. More than 150 years after the government of Canada started the schools, it did issue a half-hearted apology for some of the harms done to us. It also established the Aboriginal Healing Foundation in an attempt to compensate or reconcile our pain and suffering. Only those whose physical and sexual violence has been “proven” according to a set of criteria established by government were eligible for this reconciliation. The government refuses to accept that the intention was the deliberate destruction of First Nations ways of life. As I discussed earlier in this book, the creation and operation of residential schools provide evidence of many instances of genocide, as defined by the United Nations, by the government of Canada against First Nations. Its refusal to accept blame for our loss of languages and cultures and our ways of life is perhaps understandable, if you accept that these losses are central to the continuing genocide. Until the government and churches acknowledge their very acts of genocide, there will be no justice, and so the genocide continues.

I personally have not taken part in these “reconciliation” measures. I consider any such compensation to be hush money. Essentially, the government has said, when you accept this money, you give up your rights to any further claims against government of damage or harm done by residential schools. I reject this reconciliation. It cannot compensate in any way for the genocide of First Nations Peoples. I may reconsider my position when the government of Canada recognizes that its residential schools were deliberate institutions of genocide. I fully expect to die before I hear that.

I resent the labels, “victim” or “survivor” of residential schools. I am not a victim or a survivor of residential school. I am a conqueror, a victor, and a winner! Horrible things happened to me at the residential school in Couchiching, but that was not my only residential school experience; many good things happened to me in my residential high school in Lebreton, which I describe later. As result of attending these schools, two powerful forces shaped the direction of my life. One was that I got a decent education into my head despite the constant pounding on my

skull from nuns and priests who screamed at me that I was a heathen, a pagan, a stupid and uneducable savage! I proved to them, to myself, and to other First Nations that I and we are none of these things. The second was learning about the many places on this earth, which stimulated my lifelong interest in travel. My travels have broadened my perspectives on the world and the many peoples, languages, cultures, beliefs, and differing political and social systems. I learned that First Nations Peoples and all Indigenous Peoples worldwide are not inferior or of less value than other people. I will never accept that we are subservient, subjugated, colonized vassals of other people whose rights, cultures and beliefs are to be trampled on and discarded on the waste heap of so-called civilization. We are people entitled to our cultures, our spiritual beliefs and practices, our languages, and our rights to exist as Peoples. While others study the civilization of savages, we study the savagery of civilizations.

We must never allow anyone, at any time, for any reason ever to take our traditions and cultures away from us. We have all the rights to which we are entitled by virtue of the historical fact that we are sovereign Peoples. The residential schools, try as mightily as they did, did not extinguish our sovereignty nor our identity as First Nations. We must assert and exercise our sovereignty. On the contrary, many people and many governments, especially Canada, will oppose us. Never mind. We must press on. We must never surrender our precious sovereignty as First Nations.

The word "sovereignty" is not scary: it simply means that we will maintain our own authority over our cultures, our languages, our families, our children and grandchildren, our spiritual beliefs and customs, our lands and resources, and our political and social systems.

Go and exercise your sovereignty over your personal lives as proud First Nations.
Let no one stop you.