

# Residential Schools

*The recent apology of Pope Benedict for the abuse of native children in Canada's residential schools reminded me of an editorial I wrote for the Canadian Catholic Review in October 1996.*

**R**ELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES have suffered financially for the sexual misdemeanours of their members that have been punished in secular courts. Some of the loss could be compensated for, perhaps, if the Oblates of Mary Immaculate and the Grey Nuns were to sue *The Globe and Mail* for two articles on the residential school at Fort Albany, Ontario (19, 21 October). Two large photographs accompany these articles, one of a priest standing with a group of altar boys and another of a sister presiding over a class of girls reading. The implication is that these two religious are guilty of the crimes reported in the articles. As no proof is presented and no trial has occurred, it is arguable that the *Globe* has defamed this priest and nun. A large settlement would help the Oblates and the Grey Nuns meet the cost of trials in the offing at Fort Albany. It looks as though they will need all the help they can get, for the reporter provides a formidable catalogue of crimes of which the native people accuse their former teachers. This hodge-podge of accusations makes assessment of the situation difficult, but there seem to be two main areas of concern. The first is the virtual destruction of the native culture effected by the schools; the second consists of individual cases of mistreatment and abuse.

## *The Destruction of Native Culture*

Politicians must bear some, if not most, of the guilt for the first of these, although there seems to be little prospect of their being prosecuted. *Their* photos do not adorn the article on child abuse that their policies and attitudes occasioned, nor will surviving members of parliament be rounded up and put on trial in the residential schools they established. Evidence for government involvement in the schools is becoming available, as a later article—unillustrated—in the *Globe* reports: “[Archival] papers contradict position on abuse: Ottawa claimed native school staff” (14 November). Unlike our politicians, the Church in its bishops and religious communities has been eager to apologize and rectify as far as is possible whatever damage was done to the native peoples although, when you think about it, contemporary Catholics bear about as much responsibility for the past as our political leaders do for the actions of their predecessors. The role played by the

churches in the residential schools may have been reprehensible, but their cultural crime would have been more one of implementation than formulation. Furthermore, there is a limit to the level of awareness one can expect of people, then as now. It would have been a rare person who could have foreseen that the sacrifices men and women made for the advancement of the native peoples would be repudiated with the violence evident everywhere today. An aspect of the matter continually overlooked by the media is the attitudes of the natives themselves to the education of their children. I could well imagine that the parents co-operated with the government, and for the same motive that led the religious to bury themselves in the north: the ultimate benefit to the children whose mastery of English or French, it would have been thought, would allow them to function in the Canadian nation, defending their rights and seeking justice for wrongs, as they are in fact doing today. How wise we are in looking backwards, and how blind we can be to the present. In our lament for the loss of native culture effected by the misguided policies of fifty years ago, we ignore an equal if not greater attack on native culture which is being mounted by the very media that is most vociferous about the sins of the past. Television, trials, reporters, newspaper publicity: are these the means by which we preserve the aboriginal way of life? If this were an article destined for *The Globe and Mail* I would insert here the photograph of a lawyer—any lawyer, for we all know what they’re like—and describe how “some” lawyers dangle before prospective clients the possibility of fat settlements, large enough to cover even legal fees and still have something left over. The whiff of easy money hangs around these cases and others like them for how, I ask, is the culture of the aboriginal peoples preserved by flying in a battery of lawyers and judges, social workers and psychiatrists, who, in an act grotesquely symbolic, will take their seats where the altar once stood to deliver a verdict that wise natives themselves decry:

“The police, the court and outsiders, they will only be here for a few days,” [Arthur Scott, the current chief of the Fort Albany band] said, “but we continue to live here after they are gone. How much of a set back are we going to suffer from this? . . . I don’t support the cause for reviving old wounds. My people like to move on.”

*The Globe and Mail*, 19 October 1996.

And true it is that the trial once over, those who bear this contemporary version of the “white-man’s burden” will fly off, leaving behind in a heap of new ruins discord and discontent.

### *Mistreatment and Abuse*

Whatever the limitations there may be in the responsibility of the personnel in the schools for the attack on native culture, there can be none, one knows, in the individual acts of abuse vividly described in these *Globe* articles. Certainly, anyone—native or white—who abuses children should be punished. But as I read through the article, I couldn't help wondering if everything that displeased the children then and is now being described melodramatically was really an atrocity. One horrible instrument of torture was an "electric chair," capable it seems of producing jolts that still deliver a shock today. There's something odd about that machine which was used first as an amusement for adults, who would take turns sitting in it. One person remember it as being cranked up, which brings to mind the Wimshurst machine that was used in high-school science classes to demonstrate static electricity. If a student held on to it as the discs were rotated, a large static charge would be communicated to him, causing his hair to stand on end and shoelaces or ribbons to float away from the body; but there was no shock. Could it be that this harmless science prop was used first to amuse visitors and then to discipline students, who may actually have misbehaved from time to time? Nevertheless, while saying there are goblins in the basements may have frightened some children, it is not an atrocity. The variety of charges reported reminds me of get-togethers in which horror stories are told about the tough old days in a can-you-top-this fashion, but this time, alas, with genuine cases of abuse coming out.

People commenting on the schools today should try to enter the mentality of an earlier age, when corporal punishment was taken for granted. I knew a nun who strapped naughty children because it was required of her and would then kneel down before the bemused youngster to ask his forgiveness. She was hardly typical, but the fact that such a person would use the strap indicates how unquestioningly teachers and officials accepted its legitimacy. If we were to put on trial all the teachers and parents who whipped their children, our courts might begin to resemble those crowded casinos that the native people have taken to running nowadays. Missing, too, in these accounts of cruelty in the schools is some sense of the reaction of those in charge to what could well have been isolated instances rather than set policies. Perhaps making a child eat off the floor was a routine punishment, but it may also have been an incident in which the prefect involved was quietly reprimanded for over-reacting to some provocation. Does anyone think that the principal should have called in the R.C.M.P.? Furthermore, at that time even what are now criminal offences would have been treated as moral faults, to be confessed and repented of, with the

conviction that a person really could overcome them. We now see that such a policy was ineffective, but we should not presume that no attempt was made to prevent such crimes.

It is further claimed that the children were poorly taught. That may be true, as the most gifted teachers probably did not seek employment in these schools. Again, however, one cannot expect individuals to have recognized flaws in their system that are apparent to us today. My chief recollection of grade-13 physics in our local high school is of time wasted converting measurements from the British system to the metric and *vice versa*. Nevertheless, I feel no inclination to denigrate the memory of my teachers for following the curriculum then in vogue, although I may wonder about the wisdom of the bureaucrats who designed it.

A more profound question needs to be addressed in this sad business. Why are the native people who abuse their children not threatened with court action? The answer is implied in the *Globe* article that directed attention to these matters:

The schools are blamed for suicides and alcoholism and for a significant part of the sexual and physical abuse that is endemic in many aboriginal communities. . . . Psychologists use the term “residential-school syndrome” to describe the symptoms created by loss of culture, personal identity and self worth.

I am willing to recognize the validity of this statement, but in doing so I find myself applying it as well to the men and women who ran the schools, for they too were under stress as they attempted to implement the disastrous policies that left them twenty-four hours a day amid their unhappy and frustrated charges who would not have been human if they did not make life as difficult as possible for their school masters and mistresses. The sympathy and understanding which lead us to exculpate native people today could well be extended to the religious who were in many ways themselves innocent victims of the policies they attempted to implement. ❧