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Review Article: Canada: Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples

ROBERT J. CARNEY

One of the tasks addressed by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) was to chronicle the origins and characteristics of Native residential schools. But the phenomenon of Aboriginal residential schooling is complex and requires considerably more nuance, as well as conceptual analysis, than the simplistic historical interpretations offered in this document.

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One of the tasks addressed by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) during its five-year existence was to chronicle the origins and characteristics of Native residential schools (Indian, Inuit and Metis) and to determine the effects these schools had on the children who attended them. The results of the deliberations of the four Aboriginal and three non-Aboriginal Commissioners are contained in chapter 10, volume I of their final report entitled "Residential Schooling." Data for that chapter and for related references to education in volume 3 of the report was obtained at public hearings on a broad range of issues set out in the Commission's mandate, through round table discussions and an extensive research program.

When compared to previous federal commissions, the RCAP's report is unprecedented in terms of its cost, length and detail (five volumes amounting to 3535 pages). The report's historical framework is similar to one advanced by E. Palmer Patterson in *The Canadian Indian: A History Since 1500* (1972). The Commissioners view the context of Native-White relations in Canada after initial contact as occurring in three stages: the initial nation-to-nation relationships between Aboriginal peoples and Europeans epitomized in the Royal Proclamation of 1763; the subsequent marginalization of Aboriginal societies; and their present determination to radically update the original Royal Proclamation in order to overcome the neglect and injustices they have experienced following contact.

The historical perspective of the "Residential Schooling" chapter is based on a framework set forth earlier in chapter 3 "Conceptions of History." At this stage mention is made that the first of the Commissioners' 16 terms of reference directed them to investigate and make recommendations on the "history of relations between Aboriginal peoples, the Canadian government and Canadian society as a whole." The Commissioners begin with an account of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal historical perspectives and their relationships one to another. The Aboriginal perspective views the historical process as cyclic in nature, one

that has moved from an original state of interdependence down to a low point, and then slowly upward toward a restoration of the balance which once existed between the two communities.

A Cyclic Perspective on the Historical Relationship Between Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal People.

The non-Aboriginal historical perspective is described as a linear point of view, one in which the past is viewed as over and done with, and useful only as a benchmark for a new relationship which will be more balanced and equitable. The Commissioners have no compunction about choosing these perspectives or doubts as to their compatibility. In the Commissioners' words: "What follows is our best effort to be true to both historical traditions as well as to lay the groundwork for the rest of the report."

A Linear Perspective on the Historical Relationship Between Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal People

They proceed by categorizing the stages which reflect the historical relations between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities into three distinct periods: Contact and Co-operation, Replacement and Assimilation and Negotiation and Renewal. Each period is briefly outlined in the remainder of chapter 3; and is then given separate and comprehensive examination and titled accordingly in chapters 4, 5 and 6. Although the chapter on residential schools is only a small part of the report, it is critical to the Commission's central argument concerning what should characterize the third stage. The thesis is that Aboriginal people should achieve equal status with other Canadians and that this should occur not by a process of integration, but rather by means of separate and parallel institutions negotiated on a nation-to-nation basis.

The problem is that the Aboriginal perspective dominates virtually everything that is said. This is not surprising given that the linear perspective has been defined in such a way to exclude it from the analysis. As a result, Aboriginal residential schools are invariably cast in an unfavourable light. Whenever the schools are mentioned, they are found almost without exception to have failed to provide either acceptable care or education. The schools' objectives, policies and practices are identified as a systematic strategy of cultural repression which was accompanied by an extraordinary amount of sexual, physical and emotional abuse. This is clearly a slanted account of these institutions, and therefore should be viewed cautiously because, to cite one of its problems, it tells only part of the story.

The phenomenon of Aboriginal residential schooling is too complex and requires considerable nuance, as well as conceptual analysis, for simplistic historical interpretations to be serviceable. The Commissioners' discussion of the schools fails to place them in a given historical and social setting. Moreover, as Michael Bernstein and Norman Davies have argued, comparative analyses of past phenomena should be an essential element of any historical exercise. According to Bernstein, competing analysts of an historical event can sometimes reach agreement on the event's basic meaning; while adherents of rival interpretations, who claim theirs is the only perspective that does justice to the event totally reject the possibility of dialogue. The matters discussed in this review are based on the assumption that comparisons are a necessary part of the historian's trade. No historical event, including the era of Aboriginal residential schooling, can be understood without them. In commenting on the appropriateness of historical comparisons, Davies states that "to sympathize with those who have suffered does not mean that historians who discuss harmful experiences should abandon their critical faculties, ignore the full range of human catastrophes or avoid all comparisons." This does not imply that juxtaposing and comparing events

will necessarily lead to them being equated. It means instead, according to Davies, that "We mustn't rush to the conclusion that [an historical event] is unique before we have compared it to other events which in some ways resemble it."

As important as it is however, the problem of ill-defined historical perspectives provides only a partial reason for the report's imbalance. The other part of the equation is the reason why the Commissioners were studying the schools at all. Their interest in the history and the impact of the schools was only insofar as these institutions contributed to the marginalization of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada. It is not surprising therefore, that those aspects that were not problematic were of little interest and were therefore not included in their analysis. This perspective, though serving a worthy end in identifying avenues for reconciliation, distorts the multifaceted role and context in which these institutions operated. Unfortunately this distortion only serves to make it more difficult for dialogue and reconciliation to occur.

The chapter on "Residential Schooling" opens with an affirmation that when the federal government began addressing the constitutional responsibility for Indians and Indian lands given it in 1867, it carried on a pre-Confederation policy of "assimilation" and of using "education" to achieve this end. The government eventually chose a model based on Nicholas Davin's federally-sponsored study of American Indian Industrial schools in 1879, which recommended the establishment of off-reserve industrial boarding schools. The first of these were located in the Northwest Territories in the 1880s, and were designed "to teach the arts, crafts and industrial skills of a modern society." The Commissioners focus on the relatively short-lived existence of industrial schools in Canada, and select material from records of these institutions, not only to castigate them, but also to illustrate the iniquitous nature of Indian boarding schools generally. They say virtually nothing about the corresponding existence of Indian day schools and little about traditional boarding schools in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. To have done so might have tempered the condemnatory tone and lack of balance of their observations at this juncture and the remainder of the chapter.

Some recognition of the positive outcomes of industrial schooling would have been appropriate, such as Brian Titley's comparison of pupils' academic accomplishments at the Red Deer Industrial School with other rural schools, or Senator James Gladstone's positive reminiscence of his stay at St. Paul's Industrial School in southern Alberta, or records outlining the careers of graduates of the Mohawk Institute, which for a time was designated as an industrial school.

The work of the traditional boarding schools is similarly ignored in the chapter's introductory section. The fact is that in addition to providing basic schooling and training related to local resource use, they served Native communities in other ways. It would have been fair to acknowledge that many traditional boarding schools, in some cases well into the twentieth century, took in sick, dying, abandoned, orphaned, physically and mentally handicapped children, from newborns to late adolescents, as well as adults who asked for refuge and other forms of assistance.

The Commissioners might be excused for not examining the extent or outcomes of Indian day schooling because they were seldom mentioned during public hearings. But since day schools enrolled a majority of Indian school-age children who attended between 1867 and 1969, they surely deserved some discussion. The absence of any meaningful reference to them in the report is yet another manifestation of the narrowness of the Commissioner's perspective and of those who conducted research on their behalf.

A statement often repeated concerns Aboriginal children being "removed from their homes and placed in the care of strangers," which would lead one to assume that parents had no say about their children attending residential schools. Unfortunately, however, the chapter provides little to support this conclusion. It states that among the efforts made by church and government officials to recruit as many pupils as possible are those which proposed extraordinary measures to ensure that the maximum pupillages were achieved. These included threats to cut the rations of recalcitrant parents, to suspend family allowances and to enforce severe penalties under the compulsory attendance sections of the Indian Act. Evidence is seldom presented to substantiate statements that such draconian measures were a matter of course. And in instances where supporting information is given, it is frequently wanting in one or more respects.

A case in point is the reference to family allowances being suspended if parents did not send their children to residential schools. The fact is that allowances were suspended if their children were in attendance at the schools. School registers like the one at Aklavik, N.W.T., reveal that the penalty prompted some parents to remove their children from boarding schools. There were many instances where sick, abandoned, orphaned and other children who were deemed to be at risk were taken in, but in many cases the evidence is that parents, guardians or the communities concerned agreed to send children to residential schools. Neither the arrangement nor its frequency is mentioned in the report. As a result, basic questions pertaining to who went to schools and whether the children were sent or removed are passed over without comment.

Nor does the chapter, other than by way of a footnote, supply information on what percentage of school-age Aboriginal children actually went to school, or for those who did, an indication of how long they stayed. After stating "it is impossible to determine the number of Aboriginal children who attended the [residential] schools," the note mentions independent research which indicates that the number of such children ranged from 17 per cent at the turn of the century to about 33 per cent at the system's peak. But neither percentage cited in the footnote took into account the even lower residential school attendance of Metis and Inuit children. If these groups had been included in determining the 33 per cent figure, the attendance percentage would have been less.

Despite the resources available to them, the Commissioners did not come up with their own attendance count. Instead they warned that "any figures" including those cited in the footnote could be "dangerously misleading unless they are fully contextualized." For the Commissioners, however, full contextualization involved the damage done not only to children who enrolled in these schools, but also to the "communities, parents and, indeed, children later born to former students of residential schools." The Commissioners' position is that all persons and communities affected by the schools made up the institutions' enrolment. Nothing is said in the chapter about the children's circumstances prior to being sent to school, or to conditions in their homes and communities before or after they attended.

It also needs to be pointed out that detailed longitudinal enrolment, retention and departure data are available for many schools in church archives and records of religious communities. The chapter's documentation indicates that scant attention was given to these sources. The absence of such material may have prompted misgivings among some Commissioners about the thoroughness of the research conducted on their behalf. In any event, a recommendation at the end of the chapter calls upon the federal government to establish an Aboriginal-controlled national repository of residential school records, which

would also "provide financial assistance for the collection of testimony and continuing research ... on the history and effects of residential schools." The Commission's decision to limit its research agenda would have been disappointing to people like Wendy Grant, who was a spokesperson for the First Nations of British Columbia at a round table meeting on residential schools at Canim Lake in March 1993. She asked George Erasmus and Rene Dussault, the Commission's co-chairs, to make "all those kinds of school records" (such as the names and number of students and their length of stay) available as soon as possible. Her appeal that "we need [this information] desperately because we are working right now on initiatives and those would be of great service" apparently fell on deaf ears.

The Commissioners' narrow focus continues in an effort to describe the "precise pedagogy for resocializing Indian children in the schools." They fail to place their condemnatory comments in any context regarding the socializing agenda of public schools in Canada generally. They do not seem to recognize that the pedagogy that favoured Protestant Anglo-Celtic institutions and values had a detrimental effect on the language and cultures, not only of Aboriginal children, but of many other children in Canada. Admittedly, combined with the effects of the whole web of institutions and attitudes that have marginalized Aboriginal Peoples, this institutionalized assault on language and culture has had a compounding effect. Nonetheless, it would not have detracted from their central point if the Commissioners had made known the many commonalities that existed.

It would have been equally worthwhile to discuss the similarities and differences between Aboriginal residential schools and other boarding schools. Both types of schools were similar to the totally enclosed institutions described in Erving Goffman's *Asylums*, and used similar assimilative processes to shape their students' moral outlook and character. But unlike most other boarding schools whose objective was to school children in a highly controlled residential setting, Aboriginal boarding schools were multipurpose institutions that took in many children who suffered from various forms of social, emotional and physical distress. The chapter contends that these "social welfare" functions did not become prevalent until a decade or two before the schools were closed. The fact is that Aboriginal residential schools always played a major role in caring for children in need.

Basil Johnson, who attended Spanish Indian Residential School in the 1930s and 1940s, states in *Indian School Days* that most students came from broken homes or were bereft of one or both parents. Madeline Bird, who went to Holy Angels Residential School at Fort Chipewyan early in this century, gives a similar account in *Living Kindness* concerning who went to her school and why. The Commissioners spend considerable time discussing the fact that residential schools in the West in the first decade of this century were given to taking in the physically and intellectually unfit. They quote from a letter from the Anglican bishop of Caledonia that this was done "to keep up numbers." The desperate state of many children who had tuberculosis was documented by two Department of Indian Affairs officials, but the government did little to relieve the situation. The Commissioners cite the alarming TB death rates of children in school, but do not record those of children on reserves. This may be because the figures were not available. In instances where they were, however, such as for the attendance area of Sacred Heart Residential School at Fort Providence around the same time, the evidence is that deaths of children from tuberculosis were higher at the community level than at the school. Sacred Heart, like many of its counterparts, was the sole medical facility in the region where in-patient health care was available. The above accounts of the schools' many-faceted roles were corroborated in pupil records throughout the system's history. As mentioned

earlier, such information supports the contention that the schools played a major "social welfare" role during their entire existence, and not, as the Commissioners state, only in their final years.

According to the report, the residential school's curriculum followed a half-day system, involving academic studies and out-of-class training until after the Second World War. The statement unfortunately overlooks instances where the half-day arrangement did not apply. For example, the daily schedules of residential schools along the Mackenzie waterway reveal that academic instruction was given on a full-time basis. Younger children at other schools, such as the one operated by the Jesuits at Spanish, were in class in the morning and afternoon. Instances of full-time high school programs began at the Mohawk Institute as early as the 1860s when older students attended the grammar schools at Brantford. A similar arrangement was underway at Coqualeetza in the early 1920s, when boarders enrolled in a nearby high school. Yet another initiative occurred at the Spanish residential school when a grade 9 to 12 academic program was set up within the school in the mid-1940s. It might also have been noted that Indian Affairs officials were invariably against Aboriginal children having access to secondary school opportunities like these.

The tendency in this chapter to ignore any positive aspects of the schools' work is also evident in its discussion of the curriculum, which it wrongly assumes was rigidly followed in these institutions. In singling out the ethics course in the 1897 Indian Affairs curriculum, the Commissioners state that such topics as "cleanliness" and "thrift" were chosen because they represented "the values of the society they [the children] were destined to join." This seems not an unreasonable objective if done without denigrating the children's own culture and, in this regard, many teachers' accounts indicate that their lessons were planned with this in mind.

The textbooks initially authorized for schools in Canada West, the Irish National Series, lacked any reference to Aboriginal societies. By the 1880s however, generally positive references to Aboriginal groups or individuals began to appear in school books. It is true that children were punished for speaking their own language and those in residential schools were burdened with this prohibition even outside of the classroom. It is also true that, in some cases, punishment to enforce this policy was entirely indefensible. The fact is, however, that many Aboriginal boarding schools did not comply with the federal ban on speaking Native languages outside of class time, and some used Native languages as the medium of instruction in catechism classes and other school and chapel activities. Nor did the Commissioners square their conclusions on the enforcement of an English-only language policy with the fact that, with the exception of some in southern British Columbia, the Catholic personnel involved, especially the Oblates, were almost all French and many were more comfortable themselves in Aboriginal languages than in English.

Gabriel Breynat, Oblate bishop of the Mackenzie Vicariate, presented arguments to the Department of Indian Affairs in 1935 and regularly thereafter, that the only way to prevent "Indian languages and Indian life ... from passing into oblivion would be to introduce Native languages in the Indian schools together with courses in syllabics." Needless to say, his proposals and those of other like-minded churchmen were rejected by the Department, who were convinced that provincial courses of study were the ones for Aboriginal schools to follow. Given the Commissioners' propensity to blame the churches and the government for the ills of many Aboriginals, they might have relented in this instance to give the churches some credit for attempted to change the government's mind. The same disregard for what Anglican and Roman Catholic missionaries did with respect to using Inuktitut as the language of instruction in day

schools in the Arctic especially from the 1930s on is evident in the chapter's discussion of the introduction of federal schools and hostels in the North in the 1950s. Here again nothing is said about the northern and other missionaries' sensitivity in matters relating to Aboriginal language use.

Insofar as maternal language loss or retention among former residential pupils, the chapter does not refer to research that has been done, such as interviews with 44 adults who attended the school at Fort Chipewyan from 1900 to 1930. Nearly half the respondents indicated they could communicate in four languages: Chipewyan or Slavey, Cree, English and French. Were there similar outcomes elsewhere at the same time or later? And if so, might the schools have played a role in this regard? The Commissioners did not pursue these and related questions.

Aboriginal residential schools were organized along lines similar to other boarding schools. This fact apparently formed no part of the Commissioners' deliberations. Had this been otherwise, they might have acknowledged that their descriptions of Aboriginal schools as "places where boisterous and unorganized games" were forbidden and where there was "employment for every moment" were equally applicable to upper class boarding schools like Upper Canada College. In referring to the "repetitive chores" assigned pupils in Aboriginal schools, the chapter does not mention that they were much the same as the ones children faced daily in isolated rural areas and reserves. But such comparisons would have led to competing analyses and opposing interpretations of residential schooling as an historical event, an outcome which the Commissioners evidently wanted to avoid. Hence nothing is said about the training given Aboriginal children in their home communities being regarded as arduous and unappreciated by some of those on the receiving end.

Nor do the Commissioners recognize that more than a few residential school pupils valued the schools' work and training schedules very highly. As one graduate put it: "The things I learned about working I found useful and I appreciate. The school reinforced the teachings of my parents." Even though the testimony of many former students indicates that they benefited from the "discipline" associated with schooling, this does not mean that many have absolved the schools or their parents and communities for their loneliness and ill-treatment wherever it occurred.

The chapter says nothing positive about the care and instruction that Indian school teachers provided other than to concede that they worked "under the most difficult conditions." The system's deficiencies, on the other hand, were invariably highlighted. A statement from a 1968 Indian Affairs study, for example, was quoted to show that Indian schools were far behind the times as late as 1950: "over 40 per cent of the teaching staff had no professional training. Indeed some had not even graduated from high school." The 1968 statement's source was based on a 1958 Indian Affairs Branch report which gives a laudatory account of the progress made in education and other programs during the previous decade. Had the level of professional training of Indian day school teachers (which was around 84 per cent in 1950) been taken into account in the 1968 study, the number of Indian school teachers without any professional training would have dropped to about 20 per cent. This would have meant that their level of professional training would have been equivalent to the average of teachers in the country as a whole. Moreover, had teachers in Indian schools been eligible for emergency teaching credentials (letters of authority and special certificates) issued in provinces like Alberta to meet acute teacher shortages after the War, their level of professional training would have exceeded the national average.

Well into the 1950s professional training programs for teachers usually consisted of four components: practice teaching, courses in teaching methods, academic upgrading at the pre- and post-matriculation levels and some foundational studies. Ordinarily a year's attendance at normal school or university in such a program was deemed sufficient, although teachers were encouraged to take additional courses which led to permanent or higher certification. Yet it was still possible to obtain temporary certification by taking one or two summer courses, and even to obtain a license to teach without any professional training or without having completed high school. What is more, none of the teacher education programs at the time provided special preparation to teach in Native schools or in those which enrolled other cultural and religious minorities.

Insofar as Aboriginal school teachers were concerned, they faced a formidable task in adapting standard curricula and teaching strategies in line with their pupils' backgrounds and interests. In addition to being ill-prepared by existing teacher education programs, they were not helped by university and other research in the 1960s which had been initiated to improve the methods and courses of study in Aboriginal schools. The Commissioners claim that this research and related appeals for "a change in pedagogy to one that would be more familiar to the children ... did not find its way into the classrooms of residential schools." The assumption is that teachers would have found this research useful and pertinent. A review of studies of this nature suggests otherwise, and would lead one to conclude that they were not welcomed because on the whole they were either ill-suited for use with specific cultural communities, or dependent on resources which were not available.

Since neither professional training nor the advice of outside consultants was helpful, it meant that Aboriginal school teachers were essentially left to their own devices. Former pupil testimonies, teacher recollections and inspector reports made it clear that classrooms which exhibited a good cross-cultural teaching environment had certain characteristics. Three of the most important were positive pupil, parent and class visitor assessments; length of teacher service; and the continuity of teacher service in the same school. It would have been worthwhile if the chapter had examined the adaptations teachers made to the standard curriculum and what their pupils accomplished under such circumstances. A goodly number of teachers, members of religious congregations especially, were in this category. Most of their pupils gained a basic education in the 4 Rs during their short stay at school, which on average was four years for girls and three for boys. There were, of course, exceptions to this standard of teacher performance in the classroom, and it is appropriate that the chapter examines in detail those who did not meet these standards. At the same time, it would have been fair for the Commissioners to acknowledge and give examples of the good work of many teachers, domestic and child care workers. The absence of such praise is not surprising, given the text's tendency to describe the schools' pleas for additional funds as another manifestation of "the appetite of the churches" for their own needs rather than those of the children.

Until the 1940s, children in Aboriginal boarding schools spent about a quarter of each weekday in class. Most of their lives were spent in structured group-based periods of work, play, rest and prayer. The Commissioners maintain that the level of care associated with these activities, including clothing and medical services, "fell below acceptable standards" throughout the system's history. It is not clear what standards the Commissioners had in mind. What is said would lead most readers to conclude that their criteria for determining the acceptability of child-care arrangements in the schools are largely based on today's conventions, rather than on what past societies deemed to be acceptable and normative. It is reasonable to expect, therefore, that the commissioners would have commented on the nature and

suitability of contemporary Canadian Aboriginal residential schools. Had this been done here or in a later discussion on education in volume 3, it would have revealed what they meant by acceptable standards, and might also have tempered the condemnatory tone that permeates what they have to say. They note, for example, that Aboriginal-control led boarding schools are presently operating in Saskatchewan, but do not discuss or offer any judgments about their programs.

Recent research on Indian boarding schools and dormitories in the United States suggests what could have been done in this regard. For example, a 1994 Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) study of academic and residential standards and the level of compliance with them found that 53 per cent of the 70 BIA-funded residential schools and dormitories surveyed did not meet all the academic standards. Even more significant is that the levels of compliance with such key residential standards as dormitory conditions including space and privacy arrangements, and certified counsellors, paraprofessional and homeliving staff-student ratios averaged at a low of 22 per cent. This demonstrates that although a greater range and more rigorous standards have been set than in the past, many present-day boarding institutions continue to be bedevilled by the same problems faced by their predecessors.

In outlining the terms and regulations of the 1911 residential school contracts between the government and the churches, the Commissioners argue that even if both parties had adhered to the contract, the schools, by virtue of their assimilative intent, could be nothing more than repressive institutions. This contention is clearly in line with their overall position that any attempt to provide schooling and other programs to Aboriginal communities was doomed unless these programs were controlled and operated by the communities concerned. Needless to say, the Department of Indian Affairs never countenanced such a possibility until it was forced to take steps in this direction in the 1970s.

Nor, do the Commissioners appear to recognize the fact that those responsible for monitoring Aboriginal school programs, Indian agents, provincial and department school inspectors and senior Indian Affairs officials, focussed mostly on the instructional rather than the child-care component during their infrequent visits to these institutions. Given their familiarity with public schooling programs and activities, these observers felt at ease in classrooms. They watched the children go through their paces in lessons, recitations and group presentations; and as most of their extant reports indicate, they invariably commented favourably on what they saw. The complexities of looking after large groups of children of all ages were largely beyond the ken or interest of government officials who were charged with monitoring the schools' child-care component. Indian agents and school inspectors' reports occasionally referred to the day-to-day tasks faced by the schools' staff in heating, clothing, and nourishing the boarders as well as ministering to their other needs. Yet in most instances their inspection reports were perfunctory and noncommittal with respect to the adequacy of services in these areas.

Those who gave much or most of their time fulfilling out-of-classroom duties were not encouraged by the inspectors' indifference. Their work was viewed as an auxiliary, rather than a primary function of the schools, one that was essentially custodial rather than parental in nature. Child-care workers never had the level of support nor indeed the scrutiny given classroom teachers who were seen as the principal change agents in Aboriginal residential schools.

After a brief look at employment conditions and child-care standards in church-operated schools in the mid-1950s, the federal government decided to separate the classroom from the residential component and

to establish separate facilities for each. Not enough was done, however, to upgrade the programs or the facilities of what became known as pupil hostels or dormitories. Those responsible for these institutions were expected to emulate the parsimonious child-care practices of the earlier residential schools, and were given much the same levels of financial support and staff scrutiny, as had previously been the case.

In the Commissioners' discussion of the discipline enforced and the punishments exacted in Aboriginal boarding schools, one would have expected that there would have been some reference to how such measures were addressed in non-Aboriginal boarding schools. It would also have been valuable if they had given due regard to the historical context in which these institutions were situated, and some indication of the extent to which they operated along similar or different lines. In his recent study of Native residential schooling in Canada, J.R. Miller notes that former students of these institutions would probably not be consoled to know that "problems of harsh treatment, emotional deprivation, and inadequate food were experienced by inmates of most custodial educational establishments, such as private boarding schools for non-Native children in Canada, the United Kingdom and elsewhere." That former boarders of Aboriginal schools would not have benefited from such information is questionable. It was surely within the scope of the Commissioners' terms of reference to let former pupils and Aboriginal communities know that many other children had similar boarding school experiences.

However regrettable it may have been, corporal punishments involving blows to the body by straps and other means in most non-Aboriginal boarding schools like Upper Canada College were equally prevalent in Aboriginal residential schools. The Commissioners briefly mention this in referred to contemporary "standards" of discipline, and to punitive practices which were "the norm, more or less, in every boarding school in the country." But they do not indicate what the standards and practices were or why they were generally tolerated. Nor is any attempt made to place these measures in the legal, sociocultural contexts of the time in which they occurred.

An example of the Commissioners' narrowness in discussing physical abuse can be found in their comments on how incidents of bed-wetting or enuresis were dealt with in Aboriginal residential schools and the steps taken to curb them. They do not mention that the management of bed-wetting in many homes and institutional settings until fairly recently emphasized punishment, humiliation and other forms of negative feedback. Today it is accepted that enuresis is best addressed through affection, understanding and positive support. Diagnostic and treatment procedures including medication and conditioning devices have since become available to help address the problem. Recent research, which would have been of interest to boarding school caregivers, indicates that high correlation exists between enuresis and the bullying of children at the primary school level. The fagging system fostered in many private boarding schools would have undoubtedly exacerbated the problem, and it is fortunate that Aboriginal schools did not adopt the practice.

A similar narrow focus is evident in the comments on how "runaways" were apprehended and treated when they returned to school. While the Commissioners rightly condemn the sometimes draconian measures taken to punish those who broke the rules, their task was surely broader than this. As in other sections of the chapter, they fail to present a full explanation of the range of reasons why incidents such as leaving the school without permission occurred. Among the basic questions they leave unanswered are who went to these schools and why. As stated earlier, the overwhelming evidence is that a majority of children who attended Aboriginal boarding schools were those who were considered to be at risk or who

were from families who used the schools as a means of surviving a temporary social or financial crisis. The Commissioners do not recognize that most Aboriginal parents did not meekly accept the schools, but used them for purposes other than what existed in the minds of those who established them.

The Commissioners do not identify the pre-school experiences of many of the children, nor do they link them with the loneliness, foreignness and regimentation of boarding school life. Consequently, the report's discussion of runaways or deserters is of limited value. Unlike the child care and savings homes for non-Aboriginal children which existed at the time, the objective of Aboriginal boarding schools was to return the children to their homes and communities. Non-Aboriginal institutions favoured reassigning children to "stable" foster care or adoptive families. Native parents clearly favoured having their children home, but often had mixed reactions about their children's decision to desert the school, because this did not always occur at a time which was suitable for the parents or their children. Insofar as most runaways were concerned, the decision to leave the premises without the parents' or schools' consent was the best possible choice.

Chapter 10's epilogue raises "the deepest secret of all - the pervasive sexual abuse of [boarding school] children." Apart from comments about sexual activity among children, researchers for the Commission found few references to the "sexual behaviour" of adults, and those suggesting this "were encoded in the language of repression that marked the Canadian discourse on sexual matters." The phenomenon of sexual activity among children was not commented upon further, other than some disparaging observations on the efforts by residential school employees to prevent such occurrences. Otherwise the Commissioners are mute as to the nature of the earlier discourse, and are equally silent about the legal and administrative sanctions in place prior to the recent changes in civil law and the criminal code concerning child abuse. It should also be noted that they give much attention to "major" reports by Bryce (1907), Paget (1908) and Caldwell (1967), and while the Commissioners fault the authors of these reports for not considering the matter of sexual abuse, they accept without qualification the authors' criticisms of every other aspect of the schools.

In terms of understanding what the Commissioners meant by the discourse on sexual issues, it would have been far more instructive if they had discussed in depth the broader and more significant post-World War II studies and parliamentary hearings. These would have included the *Minutes and Proceedings* of the Special Joint Committee of the Senate and the House of Commons on the Indian Act (1946-1948); the *Minutes and Proceedings* of the Joint Committee of the Senate and the House of Commons on Indian Affairs (1960-1961); Report of the Special Committee of the House of Commons, *Indian Self-Government in Canada* (1983); and most important of all, such Aboriginal-directed studies as Citizens Plus (1970) by the Indian Chiefs of Alberta, the National Indian Brotherhood's *Indian Control of Indian Education* (1972), and the Assembly of First Nations' *Tradition and Education: Towards a Vision of Our Future* (1988). Had materials such as these been examined, they would have revealed that they had little or nothing to say about the sexual and physical abuse experienced by those who attended residential schools. More than anything this would have underlined the complex nature of these issues and how, until recently, they have been addressed. It is reasonable to expect that the Commissioners would have discussed, at the very least, why sexual and physical abuse were ignored in these documents.

In commenting on the aftermath of the dissolution of the church-state partnership in Aboriginal education in 1969, the Commission charges the churches with having "boxed the political compass" by supporting

Aboriginal aspirations and by displaying "a new-found tolerance for Aboriginal spiritually." Such statements can be found throughout the report, and only serve to make it more difficult for dialogue and a new relationship.

In the concluding section of the chapter on "Residential Schooling," the Commissioners indicate that because of the range of the terms of reference assigned them, they were unable to perform the necessary investigative and interpretive functions "to do justice to those harmed by the effect of Canada's residential school system." The best they could say about the chapter was the "hope" that it opened "a door on a part of Canadian history that has remained firmly closed for too long." As stated in the chapter's recommendations given below, the Commissioners recommended that the government of Canada start over by establishing a public inquiry into "Canada's residential school system." In so doing, the Commission left the wounds caused by the system to be further unattended, and in the hands of yet another agency which might do the same. There is evidence that some Commissioners had this course of action in mind as early as March 1993. At the very least, they should have made it known then, that this would likely be their recommendation. Shortly after the report's release, J.R. Miller, author of *Shingwauk's Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools* (1996), voiced his anger and disappointment with the recommendation of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples for a public inquiry into Aboriginal residential schools. As he stated, the Commissioners "in calling for an inquiry to answer the question they were supposed to answer," had done "a disservice because an inquiry could mean a further delay of five or six years."

Recommendations

The Commission recommends that Public Inquiry **1.10.1**

Under Part I of the *Public Inquiries Act*, the government of Canada establish a public inquiry instructed to (a) investigate and document the origins and effects of residential school policies and practices respecting all Aboriginal peoples, with particular attention to the nature and extent of effects on subsequent generations of individuals and families, and on communities and Aboriginal societies;

(b) conduct public hearings across the country with sufficient funding to enable the testimony of affected persons to be heard;

(c) commission research and analysis of the breadth of the effects of these policies and practices;

(d) investigate the record of residential schools with a view to the identification of abuse and what action, if any, is considered appropriate; and

(e) recommend remedial action by governments and the responsible churches deemed necessary by the inquiry to relieve conditions created by the residential school experience, including as appropriate,

- apologies by those responsible;
- compensation of communities to design and administer programs that help the healing process and rebuild their community life; and
- funding for treatment of affected individuals and their families.

Aboriginal Majority **1.10.2**

A majority of commissioners appointed to this public inquiry be Aboriginal.

National Repository **1.103** The government of Canada fund establishment of a national repository of records and video collections related to residential schools, co-ordinated with planning of the

recommended Aboriginal Peoples' International University (see Volume 3, Chapter 5) and its electronic clearinghouse, to

- facilitate access to documentation and electronic exchange of research on residential schools;
- provide financial assistance for the collection of testimony and continuing research;
- work with educators in the design of Aboriginal curriculum that explains the history and effects of residential schools; and
- conduct public education programs on the history and effects of residential schools and remedies applied to relieve their negative effects.

Epilogue

A year after the release of the Commission's final report, it appears that the federal government has agreed with Miller's assessment. On January 7, 1998, the Honourable Jane Stewart, Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development announced the framework of the response to the many recommendations in the report, the first step toward the goal of renewing the relationship with Aboriginal Peoples, she issued a Statement of Reconciliation on behalf of the government by announcing the establishment of a \$350 million healing to address the lasting effects in the residential schools.

The entire Aboriginal Plan, which the Government has called *Gathering Strength*, was given a lukewarm reception by Aboriginal leadership mostly because it lacked a clear implementation strategy. However, the announcement represented a change of policy for the Government which has managed to maintain an amazing silence regarding its primary role and responsibility for the system ever since it became a matter of public concern.

The Statement of Reconciliation, though carefully worded to limit the risk of liability, acknowledges that Indian residential school policy was entrenched in Canada's social policy regarding Aboriginal Peoples. The question of responsibility was one that the Royal Commission had undertaken to uncover, but failed to do so. It may be that, by breaking its silence, the government of Canada has decided to act without acceding to the Commission's call for another public inquiry.

Robert J Carney
Professor Emeritus
University of Alberta and
Gerry Kelly
Coordinator
National Catholic Working Group on Native Residential Schools

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The Author

Robert J Carney is Professor Emeritus University of Alberta.

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