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[A national crime: the Canadian government & the residential school system, 1879 to 1986]

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Full text: In the late 1960s, my involvement with a church camp and, on a different occasion, a cross-country trip, required me to spend a total of three weeks in Indian residential schools in the Yukon and Northwest Territories. The experience was, for a middle-class, non-aboriginal child, shocking in the extreme. The combination of bland food, ridiculous regulations, an intense subculture of rule-breaking, constant supervision, a high level of prudishness (we had to shower in our underwear), and authoritarian nuns and school officials seemed intolerable after only a very short stay. The stay produced a new spark of rebelliousness and a strong disrespect for authority figures. For us short-timers, the experience was unusual and quirky; it was difficult to imagine how the hundreds of students in each of those schools survived the years that they spent in residence. Now we know. In a series of high-profile cases, First Nations people won court battles with the Canadian government relating to the sexual abuse that they experienced in residential schools. The federal government, for its part, issued a formal apology for what happened in the schools and established the Aboriginal Health Foundation, with a budget of \$350 million, to help individuals and communities cope with the legacy of the residential schools. All this relates to a program undertaken with considerable idealism and with the hope that residential schools would be "the" solution to the late-nineteenth century "problem" of integrating First Nations people into Canadian society. There are few issues in Canada that are more emotional than this one, and few other examples of how potent historical processes and historical interpretations can be in the contemporary political world.

The political, legal, and cultural issues are of enormous importance for Canada. There are now over three thousand lawsuits, some combined into group actions, pending against the Canadian government and the sponsoring churches. Lawyers have been visiting reserves across the country to sign up clients, typically taking the cases on a contingency basis (usually in the range of 40-45 percent of the final settlement). First Nations leaders, having pressed for government and court action to settle the residential school issue, now worry openly about the exploitation of their people by unscrupulous lawyers and fear that the victims of the residential school experience might well be victimized again. First Nations rhetoric on this issue is excessive, and often strays far from the reality. As a Micmac leader in New Brunswick recently observed, "Definitely what happened is no different than what happened in the days of Hitler and the Jews. It was genocide. They tried to kill us off at the same time they were stealing our land" (Saint John Telegraph Journal [10 July 1999]).

Scholarly assessments of the history and impact of residential schools have been around for two decades. Milloy is not the first to venture into the field. In 1996, J.R. Miller published a book-length study of residential school education, *Shingwauk's Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools*. During the lengthy Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, which released its final report in 1996, the anger surrounding residential schools surfaced in a major way. At community meeting after community meeting, First Nations people came forward with tales of difficulties encountered at the church- and government-run institutions, producing a blistering attack on the manner in which the school system disrupted individual lives and affected whole communities. The residential school experience was, it seems, being held responsible for many of the social, economic, and cultural woes of First Nations people across the country and had become one of the focal points for First Nations protest.

John Milloy, an historian with a solid record for careful, scholarly analysis, worked for the Royal Commission as a consultant, and the sections of the final report relating to residential schools reflected his input. A National

Crime builds on this earlier work and provides a well-reasoned and well-documented account of the history of the Indian residential experience in Canada. He followed a fairly traditional research path, relying largely on the records of the Department of Indian Affairs held in the National Archives of Canada although, as a result of his work on the Royal Commission, he was able to gain access to files not yet opened to other researchers. Milloy does not cite the oral testimony presented to the Royal Commission, which included many comments on residential schools, and did not conduct interviews with students, teachers and administrators, believing that to do so without providing post-interview support would be "unethical" (viii). (The latter, incidentally, is one of many strengths of Miller's *Shingwauk's Vision*.) The author's intent is to consider the government's intentions, to examine its methods and then, using the standards that the government set for itself, to judge its activities in the field of residential school education. The volume is divided into three parts: a review of the founding principles and the original vision of First Nations residential schools, an examination of the system in operation, and a largely political study of the post-World War Two debate about the future of the schools. A short epilogue deals with the legacy of the schools and, in particular, with the work and recommendations of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples.

Milloy pulls no punches in his interpretation of the impact of residential schools: "[I]t is clear that the schools have been arguably, the most damaging of the many elements of Canada's colonization of this land's original peoples and, as their consequences still affect the lives of Aboriginal people today, they remain so" (xiv). The author does not actually prove this point, in that he does not attempt a comparative investigation of the many other aspects of newcomer domination of First Nations people. Instead, he offers a comprehensive, biting, and angry analysis of the ideology, pedagogy, politics, financing, and social impact of residential schools. To Milloy, the federal government's intention in establishing and expanding the system was to ensure the incorporation of First Nations people into the Canadian mainstream, and they attacked this goal with enthusiasm. To the author's dismay, the government proceeded along this line with bullheaded determination, even when faced with intensely critical internal reports about the functioning of the system. Milloy documents, better than anyone has before, the degree to which the federal government was aware of the shortcomings, the often-deplorable conditions, and the seriously disruptive social impacts of the residential schools.

Milloy writes with sorrow and deep engagement with his subject, to the point, on occasions, where his objectivity comes into question. The author is angry about Canada's actions, angry about the subterfuge, frugality, and racism that underlay the government's actions, angry about the self-interested churches that used the government-funded schools for their own religious purposes, and angry that Canadians paid so little attention to the "crime" that was conducted in their name. While the passion is evident and understandable, it often gets in the way of Milloy's understanding of the impacts. Communities that did not send dozens of students to residential schools experienced similar social pathology to those that did. While many First Nations people have reported horrendous experiences in residential schools, others reported that they were treated well, by teachers and administrators who cared for them a great deal. Further, Milloy is not always consistent in judging the residential schools by the standards of their time -- instead of ours -- a habit that results in a presentist orientation in the book. To be fair to Milloy, he wrestles valiantly with this difficulty. In the chapter on neglect and abuse, for example, he emphasizes examples where observers at the time considered situations to be abusive, not ones that he would, using contemporary standards, label that way.

This is not to suggest that *A National Crime* is ruined by bias or is completely one-sided. Milloy does an excellent job of documenting how community difficulties accounted for the placement of many of the students in the residential schools and how the inability of many families to care properly for their children resulted in pressures to keep the schools open. And the author is similarly clear in pointing out that some of the most severe criticisms of the residential school system came from within -- from teachers, administrators, and government officials who were appalled with local conditions and who expected better from their government. In fact, one of the themes running through the book is how the schools failed to meet government standards -- a

reality that only exacerbated the shortcomings of the culturally insensitive and socially disruptive institutions. As a study of the administrative workings and internal dynamics of the residential school system, this work makes a very valuable contribution.

The historical and historiographical debate about federal residential schools in Canada is far from over. Emotional court cases, many of which will repeat stories of scandalous abuses of power, sexual misconduct, and deplorable treatment of children, will ensure that the issue remains in the public eye. The involvement and potential financial liability of the mainline churches -- particularly Anglican, Catholic, and United (Protestant) -- broaden the debate and anguish beyond a mere critique of former government policy. Further, the fact that the "mission school syndrome" has entered the political vocabulary of First Nations politicians across the country means that Canadians will hear about the subject on a regular basis. The availability of two substantial monographs, Miller's excellent *Shingwauk's Vision* and Milloy's substantial and strongly argued *A National Crime*, has elevated the quality of the debate and has provided benchmarks for future studies. Many questions remain unanswered, and a concerted effort will be required to move beyond the justified anger and the political rhetoric that now surround the discussion of the residential school legacy.

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