

The Ugly history of native education

The school of hard knocks

MONTREAL (CUP)

CHARLIE WENJACK RAN AWAY FROM the Cecilia Jeffrey Indian Residential School outside of Sault Ste. Marie in northern Ontario 27 years ago.

Dressed in only a cotton windbreaker, he tried to walk more than 400 miles through the northern bush in late fall to return home to his father.

What caused Charlie Wenjack to run out into the freezing rain? A report released recently by the Assembly of First Nations, called *Breaking the Silence*, attempts to uncover the horrific legacies of Indian Residential Schools.

Indian Residential Schools existed in every province and territory from the end of the last century into the 1970s. Most schools were barren and forbidding structures isolated from both native and white communities. The majority of the schools were run by Catholic and Protestant missionary organizations.

Residential schools were established in order to "reclaim Indian children from their savage state." They were seen as the way to Christianize and civilize native peoples so that they could assimilate into the Canadian mainstream.

These schools would exist until, in the words of former minister for Indian affairs Duncan Campbell Scott, "there is not a single Indian left in Canada."

Breaking the Silence attempts to reclaim some of the experiences from these schools of cultural destruction. Thirteen native men and women recount stories from their lost childhoods. As the authors acknowledge, "some individuals will be shocked by its content. . . others will close their eyes and refuse to see."

In the words of the respondents, the schools emerge as institutes of extreme discipline and cruelty. Students were ruled with an iron fist, and any minor infraction of one of the multitude of rules was punished with corporal or mental abuse.

Lashings with leather straps were routine, often in front of the entire class or school. Students were usually made to drop their pants to receive the blows.

Students were also punished by being deprived of food. One student from the Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia remembers "just pure bread and water to eat, laying on the floor. . . oh, I don't know how many days."

Bed wetters were also dealt with cruelly. Another student from the Kamloops school recalls having to wrap the wet linen around her head before she was beaten.

Speaking a native language provoked similar abuse. In almost every report, students remember being punished for speaking their languages, even if they had just arrived at the school. One student remembers having her head shaved for speaking Cree. Others were

beaten or given extra cleaning duties.

The report details almost every form of abuse imaginable. Sexual abuse was common and girls and boys were raped or made to perform sexual acts for their guardians.

Another woman remembers how as a young girl she was "strapped into an electric chair and then zapped with electricity." The charge left her knuckles, hands and forearms bleeding.

Charlie Wenjack was a frail 12-year-old when he ran away from school. All Charlie Wenjack took with him for his flight home was a glass jar full of matches and a worn CNR schedule.

Cold, alone and unable to read the English schedule, he walked along the tracks as night fell and the freezing rain came up.

The acts of extreme violence towards generations of children were not random or aberrant. Rather, they were physical manifestations of an institutional system that wanted to destroy native cultures by targeting the most vulnerable section of already-vulnerable communities.

The philosophy of native education by whites was simply a blatant form of cultural genocide. Generations of colonial administrators felt that the "Indians' ignorance and superstitious blindness" was the greatest impediment towards native people becoming "useful members of society."

It was the European "duty" to "raise [the Indians] to the level of the whites." For their part, native people welcomed offers of education and training. They realized that their social and economic position was changing due to the ever-encroaching Euro-Canadian system.

Although they wanted to learn to read and write, "they had no wish to assimilate."

Part of the policy was set out in a Government of Canada commissioned report in 1847. It concluded that Indian education was not simply "training of the mind," but also had the purpose of "weaning them from the habits and feelings of their ancestors, and acquiring . . . the customs of civilized life."

Residential schools reflected the genocidal philosophies of their religious and governmental masters. Every aspect of life -- daily mass, meals, class-time -- was designed to separate children from their traditional ways, their traditional religions and their families.

As stated by a turn-of-the-century cabinet minister, "in order to educate the children properly, we must separate them from their parents."

He believed that parents would be a bad influence on their children, causing them to forget their Christianity and civilisation. He concluded that to have any beneficial effect, "we must catch [them] very young."

Forced isolation from their culture did

not end when native children were taken from their communities. As Egerton Ryerson observed, "nothing can be done to elevate his [or her] character without religious feeling."

Religious instruction was mandatory at most schools. Children were taught that their parents were pagans, and that they would be sent to hell.

As a former Kamloops student remembers: "This made me ashamed of my parents." The message to students was that "it was evil for us to practice any of our cultural ways."

The students were told they would "go to Hell and burn for eternity if we did not listen to their way of teaching."

The curricula of the schools was another form of attack on native values. The method of instruction itself was alien to the native children, as were the subjects taught.

Native people were excluded from the curriculum, made invisible in the history of the "discovery" and "exploration" of the "New World." As one student remembers, there was "no history about B.C. . . we learned about Henry the Fifth and Eighth, and all those guys."

Afternoons in most residential schools were spent teaching the students trades and crafts. Or, in the words of one student, trying to create "white people with brown skins."

Skills included farming and carpentry for boys and cooking and sewing for girls. Although this instruction may have imparted a more practical education than discussions of the Tudor Dynasty, the underlying lesson was still one of native inferiority.

Another student remembers being taught how to wash and wax a floor, despite the fact that none of the students came from homes with wooden floors. The woman remembers the underlying message that the European way was right -- that a home without a wooden floor was simply not a home at all.

They found Charlie Wenjack's body on Oct. 23, 1967. He was lying four feet from the train racks. The map was gone and the matches were unopened. The coroner determined the cause of death as exposure and exhaustion.

The sense of puzzled grief was summed up by a CNR worker: "We tell this man he has to send his son to one of our schools, then we bring his boy back in a luggage car."

During the 1960s and 1970s, residential schools were eventually closed. This was due to a combination of government stinginess, reformed political climate, and native resistance.

The government grew tired of supporting a system which did not produce the products it had hoped for. Those schools not taken over by local native band councils have been left derelict across the country.

Native resistance to the schools was always a factor in the system. Many parents

refused to surrender their children, or moved out of the range of the missionaries -- to hunting or fishing camps.

The children would also resist, by running away continually, or by even attempting to set fire to the schools.

This resistance was eventually politicized by native leaders. In 1970, the Blue Quills Indian Residential School in northeastern Alberta was occupied by local native people and became the first school to be completely administered by native people.

The legacy of residential schools continues to be influential to the present day. The legacy is felt not only in the current revival of native forms of education, such as at Blue Quills, but also in native communities across the country.

As J.R. Miller points out in his book, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens*, most of the current native leaders, such as Ron George and Ovide Mercredi, came from residential schools.

Although both men used their residential education to attend universities, Ron George has pointed to residential schools and the abuse and isolation he suffered there as a key factor in his later struggles with alcohol and domestic abuse.

Veronique Thusky, of the Montreal Native Friendship Centre, sees many former students who "have problems having healthy relationships with their communities."

Due to the cultural attacks of the school, many students are confused as to which "values to follow." She feels many students have struggled to maintain a balance between traditional culture and their experiences at residential schools.

Thusky believes that many students have kept "the violence within themselves," thus perpetuating the violence and abuse of residential schools.

The authors of *Breaking the Silence* believe that "scores of individuals [have been] lost," and have turned to alcohol and other forms of abuse in order to "cope and/or forget."

Educational renewal is occurring with programs that reflect native culture and traditional practices. A recently-announced program at the University of Saskatchewan is an example of the new direction of education.

The Assembly of First Nations hopes *Breaking the Silence* will support its demands for compensation of abuse victims, as well as an inquiry into the school system. Jean Chretien, former Minister for Indian Affairs under Pierre Trudeau, has not made any moves in this direction.

The main auditorium of Trent University is named after Charlie Wenjack. The University of British Columbia, the University of Saskatchewan and Trent University all offer programs in Native Studies.