

A F T E R W O R D

GABEKANA

(AT THE END OF THE TRAIL)

For many generations, far too long by any estimation, knowledge about residential schools in Canada was hidden, repressed, disregarded, discounted, and discredited. In the last generation we have seen national attention, a class action lawsuit, a settlement agreement, and a truth and reconciliation process.

The reports of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) provide an overall history of the system, and investigate, on a national scale, issues such as education, language, building quality, food and nutrition, discipline and abuse, sport and the arts, resistance, and the specifics of the student and staff experience. We can now be better informed of the history of residential schools.

Knowing the historical backdrop to the residential schools is essential to the ongoing work of reconciliation that is being undertaken in Canada. The TRC has documented the policy of cultural genocide directed at Indigenous people in order to do away with the government's legal and financial obligations and to assume control over Indigenous lands and resources. In partnership with the government, churches were involved in the administration of the schools and have assumed responsibility for some of the atrocities that took place in the schools. Both in philosophy and in practical terms, the schools operated on the premise that Indigenous people and cultures were lesser than their non-Indigenous counterparts. The law gave effect to these assumptions.

From reading this volume you will understand part of that history as it is now being researched, revisited, and retold. In its Summary of the Final Report, the TRC has provided us with a thematic overview of the legacy of the schools, thoughts on the challenges of reconciliation, and calls to action. These must be read as a whole: there is no reconciliation without an understanding of the history and legacy of residential schools. Conversely, we cannot understand our need for reconciliation, nor can we carve our path forward, without grounding it in the truths of the past. As the TRC report states:

The Commission defines “reconciliation” as an ongoing process of establishing and maintaining respectful relationships. A critical part of this process involves repairing damaged trust by making apologies, providing individual and collective reparations, and following through with concrete actions that demonstrate real societal change. (see p. 154 in this volume)

We must rise to the challenge of knowing this history, and continue to acknowledge it while moving towards a new understanding of the relationships that we must rebuild.

THE ARCHIVE: OPENING THE DOOR

In its role of truth telling, the TRC was mandated to receive documents relating to residential schools from government and church archives. Throughout the process and while the TRC was completing its final report, documents were still being disclosed by parties that had agreed to provide them. These documents contain records of the schools and of more than 150,000 First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students who attended the schools. In addition, the TRC received 7,000 digitally recorded witness statements speaking about first-hand experiences of survivors, their descendants, church officials, and others whose lives were woven into the schools’ history. The intent was that all of this information would form a

more complete understanding of the truth relating to residential schools. The archive supports the re-telling of history from various and varied perspectives. The oral history created in *The Survivors Speak* (an interim report detailing personal statements to the TRC) provides an overview of the student experience as told by the Survivors themselves. Their testimonies are now preserved at the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR), along with statements of former staff of residential schools and intergenerational survivors.

The richness of the information received (documents, audio and visual recordings, and physical objects) should never be lost. The Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA) provided for the establishment of a permanent archive to hold the material received by the TRC. This archive is manifest in the form of the NCTR, which will foster dialogue and reconciliation and ensure that the permanent archive on residential schools is accessible, growing, and relevant to those who want and need to learn.

RESEARCH AT THE NATIONAL CENTRE FOR TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION (NCTR): THE DOOR WILL REMAIN OPEN FOREVER

This research centre has at its core the Survivor's experience, and it aims to ensure that a Survivor, their family, as well as community and academic researchers can continue to add to the truths that have been told and work to better understand the implications of those truths. By researching their residential school history, Survivors will have the opportunity to view documents that pertain to their experience. They will also have the opportunity to share their experience as part of the continuing collection of information for the archives. Families and communities will be able to view documents that relate to particular schools in their region and that were attended by their relatives.

Researchers will be able to mine the records for additional truths about the residential schools, and might be able to address some of the non-truths that have been perpetuated since the opening of the first residential schools and throughout generations. Research has revealed that some of the schools were engaged in nutritional and psychological experimentation. Further information will come to light as the records are reviewed, and additional research can be undertaken into the thousands of students who died while in residential schools and their burial locations. And there are many more paths of research that may be followed. As the layers of documents are peeled back, more research questions will arise. As records continue to be received into the archive, new information will be available.

New research will develop a variety of themes. Histories of particular schools may be compiled, which will deepen the scope of the national history. The recreational and cultural activities in schools may be studied. Issues such as educational attainment, discipline, and quality of institutional care need further contextualization on both a regional and national scale. The health of residential school students, for example, may be further considered in relation to the broader health of Indigenous peoples in Canada. There is also much more to be done in the way of comparative international study relating to boarding schools and institutions in other countries.

Research must have a purpose. Part of the purpose of further research in the archive is to uncover more truth about the residential school experience. Research will also play an important role in reconciliation. Key elements of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation's mandate are to ensure that the public can access historical records and other materials to help foster reconciliation and healing, and to encourage dialogue on the many issues that stand in the way of reconciliation. This mandate will also require us all to pay close attention to the calls to action of the TRC.

From the church, government, and school records, to the witness statements, art, and music, the archive constitutes an important

step towards the development of a robust Indigenous archive. More records relating to residential schools will be sought out and added to the NCTR archive, including documents in the personal possession of public figures and individuals; provincial, territorial, and international archives; university and museum archives; and records of Indigenous education authorities and other Indigenous organizations.

Reconciliation cannot, however, be limited to the residential school system and its legacy. That legacy cannot be disentangled from the legacy of Canada's broader policies towards Indigenous people, which banned spiritual practices, placed them on agriculturally marginal land, failed to fulfill treaty obligations, and persecuted Indigenous political and spiritual leaders.

As part of the establishment of respectful relationships, the TRC has indicated that the revitalization of Indigenous laws and legal traditions is required. In the words of the Commissioners:

It is important that all Canadians understand how traditional First Nations, Inuit, and Métis approaches to resolving conflict, repairing harm, and restoring relationships can inform the reconciliation process. (see p. 154 in this volume)

A significant effort must be made to ensure that Indigenous legal principles and processes of decision-making are guiding the process of reconciliation, including in the interpretation and implementation of historic treaties.

Canadians must also learn about the rich contributions that Indigenous peoples have made to the history of Canada. Further materials related to Crown-Aboriginal relations, Treaties and Aboriginal Rights, and other themes identified by Indigenous people may also form part of this archive in the future. The NCTR archive is not closed or finite. And the work on reconciliation will build on what we have been able to learn about the residential school experience and its legacy to consider further steps in maintaining respectful relationships. The TRC emphasized that more research is needed to fully understand how the reconciliation process itself may work

to repair broken trust and establish more constructive relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada.

FOR THE NEXT GENERATIONS: MIKINAAK (THE PATH OF THE TURTLE)

The NCTR is physically located at the University of Manitoba, in Treaty One territory and the homeland of the Métis Nation, in a building ceremonially named One Feather (*bezhig miigwan*). A turtle rock formation guards the entranceway to the building and hosts the sacred fire of the centre. It is a home for the archive, a hub for research, and a place of commemoration.

Based on the vision of a network of partners in all regions of the country, the centre also exists wherever you are. It is in the searchable database online, it is in the education initiatives and opportunities provided in your places of learning, it is in regional initiatives and partner institutions, it is with the Survivors, inter-generational survivors, and their families.

A door has been opened, and some truth has been able to enter the national consciousness. We must collectively ensure that the doors that lead to truth will never be closed again. We must also ensure that our understanding of the history of residential schools continues to grow. Finally, we must ensure that our understanding engages action in a process of reconciliation.

Histories and legacies should not be forgotten. The reconciliation that flows from them should be honoured.

The doors to the NCTR are open to you, forever.

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