
**Indian Residential Schools in Canada – some historical facts**

In 1883 the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA)\(^1\) created the first three *industrial schools* for children of aboriginal descent, who were taken there by Indian agents to “escape the influence of their ‘unimprovable’ parents” (Frank). From 1883 to 1923 the DIA sponsored both *industrial* and *boarding schools* (Miller, 1), which were later given the common name of *residential schools*. About 130 schools existed through this period. Canadian Indian Policy specified in the *Indian Act* (1876) and its numerous amendments were commented on by an American Bureau of Indian Affairs official as a program whose aim was “the extinction of the Indians as *Indians*” (Harper, 127).

Over time the partnership between the crown and the altar against the Aboriginal Peoples included the Canadian Government and four churches: the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of England, the United Church, and the Presbyterian Church. The purpose of establishing Indian Residential Schools was, on the one hand, religious (through the churches’ influence), on the other – financial (maintaining oneself economically). However, it was later stated that Indian children “[…] were educated to fulfil the roles of servants and farm labourers in Canada. […] Ultimately, they were not educated to think; that was the role of the nuns and priests” (Murphy, 59).

According to the *1991 Aboriginal Peoples Survey* it is estimated that there are about 90,600 people in Canada who once attended residential schools, about 15% of whom have issued claims relating to physical and sexual abuse. The Canadian Government claims that not all Indian Residential

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\(^1\) The Department of Indian Affairs was established in 1880 (Canada).
School students suffered from abuse. Here is what Phil Fontaine\textsuperscript{2}, one ex-student, said:

Some people say that residential school was the best thing they could have had because it taught them to work, it taught them discipline, and it helped them establish friendships. For those people, I think residential school represented important part of their lives and one shouldn’t take that away from them. They deserve to remember residential school for the good things that it may have brought to their lives. But for the many other that remember residential schools for the hell-holes they were, they should be given an opportunity to re-examine those negative experiences so they can put them to rest. When you put something to rest it doesn’t mean you forget about it. You remember it in different ways, in ways that give you strength (Jaine, 62-63).

The last federally-run Indian residential school, The Gordon Residential School, was closed in Saskatchewan in 1996\textsuperscript{3}. Two years later the last band-run school, St. Michael’s Indian Residential School, was shut down, and the Aboriginal Healing Foundation was established. In January 2001 the Government of Canada recognized and apologized to those who experienced physical and/or sexual abuse at and acknowledged its role in the development and administration of residential schools. In the “Statement of Reconciliation” one reads that Residential School system:

[...]

June 2001 saw the founding of a new department – Indian Residential Schools Resolution Canada\textsuperscript{4}. In February and March 2003 respectively the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{2} In 2003 Phil Fontaine was elected national chief of the Assembly of First Nations (Canada).
  \item \textsuperscript{3} First Nations children were forced to attend Indian Residential Schools from 1876 (the first Indian Act) till approximately 1973 - when “native leaders reclaimed their rights to educate their children through their culture” (Ward).
  \item \textsuperscript{4} Indian Residential Schools Resolution Canada is a “federal department dedicated
\end{itemize}
Basil H. Johnston’s Indian School Days

Basil H. Johnston, an Anishnabe writer, ethnologist and scholar, attended an Indian residential school in two periods, 1939-1944 and 1947-1950. His experiences as a student at the Spanish Indian Residential School5 were the basis of his autobiographical account Indian School Days published in 1988. It is the story of a ten-year-old Basil, who, along with his four-year-old sister Marilyn, were involuntarily removed from his grandmother’s house on the Cape Croker Reserve and taken to boarding school; Marilyn was left at St. Joseph’s while Basil found himself at St. Peter Claver’s school, a Catholic Spanish boarding school in the Canadian province of Ontario.

In 1973 Basil H. Johnston met some of his former “Spanish”6 colleagues. As he described, “It was an evening of recollection, of reliving the days in Spanish by recalling not the dark and dismal, but the incidents that brought a little cheer and relief to a bleak existence” (Johnston, 11). Then he continued, “I share some of these with you [– the reader]” (Johnston, 12). Through the story-telling technique, Johnston’s tragi-comic account of life at “Spanish” brings the reader closer to the way in which he and his schoolmates of Ojibway, Mohawk, and Cree origin, united against the staff of Jesuit priests and brothers. This first-person narrative consists of a series of humorous episodes which describe the day-to-day life in “Spanish”, its discipline, to strengthening and partnership within government and with Aboriginal people, religious denominations, and other citizens to address and resolve issues arising from the legacy of Indian residential schools” (Canada).

St. Peter Claver’s Indian Residential School was established in 1825 at Wikwemikong on Manitoulin Island by Roman Catholic Church. Then, about 100 years later (after a fire in 1913 or 1914) in order to “be removed from the Reserve and from the parents” (Johnston, 9) it was transferred to the village called Spanish, giving the school the name Spanish Indian Residential School. In 1946, when a high school was open, St. Peter Claver’s changed name into the Garnier Residential School. The school was closed in 1958 (Johnston, 9).

5 St. Peter Claver’s Indian Residential School was established in 1825 at Wikwemikong on Manitoulin Island by Roman Catholic Church. Then, about 100 years later (after a fire in 1913 or 1914) in order to “be removed from the Reserve and from the parents” (Johnston, 9) it was transferred to the village called Spanish, giving the school the name Spanish Indian Residential School. In 1946, when a high school was open, St. Peter Claver’s changed name into the Garnier Residential School. The school was closed in 1958 (Johnston, 9).

6 “Spanish” refers to Spanish Indian Residential School otherwise known as St. Peter Claver’s Indian Residential School.
restriction, but also the students’ desire for freedom. At “Spanish”, as at all
of the other boarding schools for offspring of Indian descent, the children’s
cultural inheritance was rigorously suppressed by self-righteous faculty and
staff. Johnston’s autobiography, however, is primarily about the boys’ refusal
to be victimized. In fact, as Johnston said in the interview with Hartmut
Lutz, “[…] the former inmates of Spanish were the ones who suggested
which stories were to be included” (Lutz, 237).

Johnston’s autobiography can be divided into two major parts: the first
eleven chapters are devoted to his stay at St. Peter Claver’s (1939-1944) and
the last four chapters describe his stay at Garnier (1947-1950). The account
provides some details concerning the school’s history (Introduction) as well
as a glossary of terms and an appendix, which lists the names of the boys
and girls who attended “Spanish”, their nicknames and present situation, if
known. The school, as Johnston claims, existed for two reasons:

One was to train Indian youth for some vocation: tailoring, milling,
blacksmithing, shoemaking, tinsmithing, painting, carpentry, baking,
cooking, plumbing, welding, gardening, sheep and swine herding,
animal husbandry and poultry care. […] The school’s other purpose
was to foster religious vocations by frequent prayer and adoration. […]
The school produced neither tradesmen nor priests (Johnston, 26-27).

Johnston also explains that a number he was given, forty-three, often became
primary to his own name – Basil:

- ‘Number forty-three!’
- There was no answer.
- Number forty-three! A little louder.
- Silence.
- ‘You! Johnston!’
- ‘Yes, Father!’
- ‘You are number forty-three! Do you understand?’
- I nodded.
- ‘You answer, when I call you forty-three!’
- ‘Yes, Father!’ (Johnston, 34).

Also Jack Funk draws upon the ideology of numbering students:

This number determined the order in which [students] lined up for
anything and they lined up for everything: classes, prayers, food,
dismissal, bedtime, toilets, and washing in the mornings, noon, and night. Often the students were called by number rather than by name (Jaine, 72).

Calling the students by numbers was not the only way of depriving them of identity. The most drastic, perhaps, was the order not to speak one’s native language but only English.

The most obvious way to destroy a culture and enforce silence is to destroy language. Language is an essential component of every culture, and its cultural transmission from one generation to the next ensures historical and cultural continuity. [...] First Nations children were cruelly punished for speaking their language; in some schools, children had sewing needles pushed through their tongues (Murphy, 58).

Many students were supposed to learn English from priests and nuns who did not speak good English themselves. Johnston himself experienced a German and French version of English as priests who worked at his school were either of German or French descent. Here is his comment: “ [...] Having at the school German and French priests and brothers who also had problems pronouncing the ubiquitous ‘th’ did not help [to learn good English]” (Johnston, 9). It was similar in other schools. At L’École St. Henri (the Delmas Boarding School) the students were taught:

[...] English by Sisters who came from Quebec and spoke only French. [...] They were punished for speaking Cree and punished if they made mistakes in English. To overcome these situations the children adopted two lines of defence. They would cast their eyes down and say nothing or they learned to use the Indian sign language so they would communicate among themselves (Jaine, 75-76).

Contradictory to the ban of not speaking one’s aboriginal language was the order to help priests translate the Bible into native languages (Johnston, 181). Other traumatic experiences included constant cold and hunger at school plus depriving the pupils of their dignity e.g. through cutting students’ hair as well as corporal punishment. The children’s mental, spiritual, and

7 Control over language is one of the main features of imperial oppression (Ashcroft et al., 7).
8 Adequate funds from the administration of DIA were never provided.
emotional growth was ignored. Being away from their families, the children felt forgotten and abandoned. Humiliation, embarrassment, degradation, the loss of traditional ways – all these negative results of being at the Indian Residential School were covered by a tale of things-that-happened and Johnston never described these experiences as traumatic.

The first 11 chapters of his autobiography are full of funny situations (though painful), verbal jokes and challenges, as humour is used as a means of survival. Johnston was definitely not the first to use humour while describing genocide, be it cultural or otherwise. What Charlie Chaplin did in 1940 in his “The Great Dictator” is what Basil H. Johnston manifested in Indian School Days. Through the usage of comic scenes they both depicted the regime, in Europe that of the Nazi, in Canada that of the imperial oppression conducted by the French and the English against the Aboriginal Peoples of Canada. On the surface, one laughs when watching the film or reading the book; inside, one cries. The purpose of using laughter was explained by Phil Fontaine, whose parents, all of his older brothers and himself attended the Fort Alexander Indian Residential School:

My mother can laugh about many of the things that happened to them, even the sad things. What that tells me and should tell others is not that these incidents were funny but that it is often a way of saving face and making light of something that is really sad. […] This still happens today whenever my brothers or other people talk about residential school experiences. But underneath all this laughter there is some real sadness (Jaine, 53).

What is striking about Indian School Days, a native autobiography, is the lack of personal information. Apart from basic facts about Johnston’s family, which are given at the beginning of this literary work, the writer never provides us with additional information. During all his stay at school he describes meeting his sister Marilyn only once, saying:

Other than ‘Ahnee’ (‘Hi’), I had nothing to say to my sister Marilyn, and she nothing to me. […] For the few moments, all Sis did was look

Sterling, in her autobiography, recalls that when she wet her bed, Sister forced her to wear the wet sheet over her head (Sterling, 84).

Segregated by gender, the siblings from St. Peter Claver’s Indian Residential School and St. Joseph’s Indian Residential Schools were allowed to meet once a month for one hour (Johnston, 71).
up at me, her eyes black and misty with sadness and bewilderment at being wrenched from her mother and sisters and transported to an alien place where ‘suffer the little children to come unto me’ was largely forgotten by sisters and priests. After the greeting of ‘Ahnee’, and some questioning glances between us, Sis snuggled up against my leg. An hour later we said ‘Bye’ (Johnston, 72).

Disintegration of family ties was one of the drastic results of the Indian Residential School politics. What followed was the loss of language and knowledge of the past:

The legacy of this destruction of language was, and still is, far-reaching. Children from the residential schools found that they could no longer communicate with their parents and grandparents; the transmission of culture from generation to generation was silenced (Murphy, 58).

Depriving Aboriginal peoples of their voices and, therefore, culture, led to many personal tragedies. Johnston describes a situation in which a young Aboriginal couple wanted to get married in a Christian way. They had one doubt, however – they had the same totem (which, according to Aboriginal beliefs meant they came from the same family). The priest, following the church’s dualist ideology of God and Devil, ignored their doubt completely: “‘Don’t worry about it. Just part of old pagan primitive beliefs and practices […]’ and with a wave of his hand […] dismissed several thousand years of Anishinaube history” (Johnston, 129).

The situation at the Spanish Indian Residential School changed a lot after WWII. The need for secondary education became obvious and in 1946 the Jesuits and Daughters of the Heart of Mary initiated it by providing limited secondary facilities11. In 1947 Johnston decided to go back and continue his education at Garnier. In the “Introduction” to Indian School Days he wrote, “Some who attended Garnier after 1946 have said ‘It was probably the best thing that could have happened to me’. However, for those going to St. Peter Claver’s in the pre-Garnier days, it was ‘the worst possible experience’” (Johnston, 12).

11 It was the first high school for students of Aboriginal descent in Canada; at the beginning of its functioning there were only 2 teachers with teacher’s certificates – Mr. Sammon and Mr. Wheeler (Johnston, 182).
The last four chapters of his autobiography differ greatly from the previous ones. Apart from a description of the changes the school had undergone, which included better meals, the right to go shopping, and better treatment of students in general, the new headmaster of the school, Father R.J. Oliver, S.J. also replaced the industrial trades program with an academic one. This section of the book lacks funny situations, verbal challenges and rebellions. While the first part is dominated by dialogues and frequent enumerations of people’s names, objects, occupations, etc., in the later chapters Johnson provides us with his thoughts and fears for the future, which are more descriptive in nature. Still, in neither of the sections is he moralizing. In the conclusion, one could ask many questions like e.g. what was the real purpose of Indian Residential Schools, since “[...] First Nations children were taught that every aspect of their culture was inferior to that of Europeans; in order to ‘progress’, they had to abandon their ‘savage’ past and re-invent themselves as Europeans” (Murphy, 58). The priests and nuns teaching at Indian Residential Schools had no experience as parents. Errors were forbidden; when made, they were severely punished, which in turn caused inferiority complexes and phobias in children, and provoked such reactions as bed wetting. “The politics of oppression [led] inevitably to what Paolo Freire termed the ‘culture of silence’ of minority groups” (Murphy, 58). Now the time has come for First Nations people to speak, and Johnston’s book is a first step.

Works Cited


