



Finding good in the evil of residential schools

Trevor Lautens

Special To North Shore News

Friday, June 20, 2008

There has been much breast-beating -- Canada is lobbying for it as a demonstration sport in the 2010 Olympics -- about how the residential schools, established in the 1880s, evilly destroyed Indian culture.

Which was?

I wonder how many of the apologists on an ethical free ride grovelling about the wickedness of the schools have a clue.

I'm no expert. But I flatter myself that I can conjecture about Indian realities then, and the hearts and minds of the dead, as well as anyone. No, better.

First, the arrival of the palefaces was utterly destructive to the native people. Their belief centre collapsed, leaving little but memories of a paradise lost. Imagine technologically wizard Martians landing on earth. We'd die long before we died, so to speak. On this coast there is an oral tradition that when the European ships appeared under their white sails the natives thought they bore gods.

The Atlantic seaboard Indians who encountered the smelly whites were shrewdly hospitable and exploitative in turn. The Europeans were very useful in their wars as well as vice-versa.

Francis Parkman was a great 19th-century American historian with the attitudes of his time and place. His vivid account of a French-Indian assault on the New England village of Deerfield in 1704 is a horrifying example. Names lend credibility. The attackers "seized Mercy Sheldon, a little girl of two years, and bashed out her brains on the door-stone." The now-forbidden word "scalped" occurs. Prisoners were ransomed or forced to follow Indian ways. Assimilation. Amazingly, it's not a one-way street.

Power reigns, power shapes. The Indians on the losing side of the American rebellion lost theirs after 1783 (and, given land by the British, currently paralyze Caledonia, Ont.). They lost power after the brilliant general Tecumseh's death in the War of 1812. They lost when the buffalo all but died, which truly clutches at my heart, and when Métis leader Louis Riel's rebellions failed.

Read the review in the New York Review of Books, April 2007, by Charles Taylor -- yes, Canada's world-class philosopher and co-author of the recent report on integration of immigrants in Quebec -- of Jonathan Lear's study of the Crow Indians. In the 1920s their oddly named great chief, Plenty Coups, said: "When the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened."

"Nothing happened"? What does that mean?

This: The buffalo and war were the Crows' culture. The latter, Lear writes, "was not a concern of a class nor even of the male sex, but of the whole population. Women danced wearing scalps, derived honor for their husbands' deeds and a woman's lamentations over a slain son was the most effective goad to a punitive expedition."

"We find it hard," Taylor notes, "to grasp the full, devastating impact of this kind of culture death." That awareness should crash through the cheap romanticizing, apologies of dubious sincerity and easy tsk-tsking of current fashion, and throw open a daring premise: Canada's lawmakers of 130-odd years ago were sincerely trying to rescue Indian children from a collapsed, decadent, utterly demoralized culture (right, which Europeans had caused) through assimilation.

Yes, they were Brits, Britain then bestriding the world, smug in their sense of superiority. Surprise: All self-defined groups in their secret hearts think they're really, really the best, whether English, Scottish, French, Jewish, German, Jamaican, Anglican, British Columbian, or West Vancouverite. Such "bigotry" goes with the neighbourhood and is the oldest "prejudice" on earth.

Enough history? Now, nearer in time: University of B.C. professor Paul Tennant, in his very influential book *Aboriginal Peoples and Politics: The Indian Land Question in British Columbia, 1849-1989* (UBC Press, 1990), supported the land claims and rebuked provincial Liberals who -- before the abrupt epiphany of Gordon Campbell a decade or so later -- opposed them.

Tennant confirmed what is now widely accepted: The punishment and stigma when the children spoke their native languages, sexual and physical abuse -- a dormitory supervisor, the revolting boy-rapist Arthur Henry Plint, was sentenced to 11 years in prison and should have served it without parole in hell -- and especially forced separation from their parents.

(Put aside, but keep handy, that the viciousness wasn't universal. Many kind-hearted teachers must feel angry -- at least one wrote a book to that effect -- about present stereotypes. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission predictably will hear far more from the aggrieved than from those feeling little grievance.)

So Tennant is a persuasive witness when he also writes: "By bringing together children from different tribal groups and widely separated communities and keeping them together for long periods away from traditional influences, while at the same time isolating them from white society, the schools promoted a new and wider Indian awareness and identity. Schooling thus promoted pan-Indian awareness and provided future leaders with essential political resources.

"They could not have formed and maintained organizations had they not had the lingua franca that English provided, had they not been able to read and write, and had they not had networks of personal contacts composed of former schoolmates."

Talk about unintended consequences, about good out of evil. Many of today's Indian leaders attended residential schools and went on to become lawyers and other professionals. Grand irony: Assimilation worked.

Would British Columbia's 200-odd tribes have been better off in the linguistic ghettos of their many languages and dialects? Would those leaders have been better off with their parents' culture? Questions answerable only in their hearts, and quite possibly not for public consumption.

I've used the term "Indian" above. Why, when the current so-called politically correct terms are "First Nations" -- which is losing its capital letters -- and "aboriginals"?

"First Nations" is straight from the forges of political and ideological hype. The imprimatur for "aboriginal" baffles me. Far from somehow being respectful, it raises a picture of paint-smeared naked bodies swinging from vine to vine. It sounds like the dry academic language of Margaret Mead and other anthropologists, studying primitive people as detachedly as if they were insects.

A woman -- white and older and very indignantly correct, I'd guess -- called in to Bill Good's show a while ago and asked why "Indian" was being used by Good's guest, Hemas Kla-Lee-Lee-Kla. He's a favourite of mine. His business card says in smaller print: "(Chief Bill Wilson, B.A., LL.B.)".

Wilson referred to the well-known clumsiness of European explorers who stumbled on the New World and thought they'd reached India. Then he wittily said: "It's a good thing they didn't think they'd hit Turkey." Ha, ha! In which case they'd have called the inhabitants Turkeys, get it?

Those annoyed by the word Indian, including some journalists of my acquaintance, should pressure their government, which persists in the usage "Department of Indian Affairs" and its permutations. Then go higher and tackle the militant Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs. Case closed.

- - -

The North Shore News had the scoop. The Vancouver Sun trailed with a follow-up. Still no explanation of how kicking in \$1 million to the 2010 Olympics machine for "venue city" status benefits West Vancouver, beyond parish-pump puffery, bragging rights for the rich donors, and a Cracker Jack prize.

(Editor's note: We believe everyone has the right to be addressed as they choose. Representatives of both the Squamish and the Tsleil-Waututh have told us that they prefer, in formal use, the term "First Nation," so that is the term the North Shore News uses.)

© North Shore News 2008

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2008 CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc. All rights reserved.
CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc. All rights reserved.