

*A Knock on the Door: The Essential History of Residential Schools from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.* Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2015. 274 pages. \$19.95 paper.

*A Knock on the Door* is an abridged version of the six volume final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, which addressed that country's notorious, century-long policy of forcing Indigenous children to attend residential schools. The TRC was mandated by the Indian Residential Schools Agreement of 2006, an out of court settlement to several class actions that threatened Canada and the country's largest Christian churches—which jointly administered the schools—with massive financial penalties in civil damages. As acknowledged in the 2008 official apology from Canada's then Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, the bare facts about residential schools are these. They were a deliberate assault on Indigenous languages, cultures, and families; they were mass sites of physical and sexual abuse; and their long-term effects on individual survivors and their families continue to be sources of severe intergenerational harm in Indigenous communities. But there is much more to know about residential schools than this.

The report rests on more than 6,570 survivor statements collected by the commission over 7 years and on the commission's own primary research; the TRC's court-supervised mandate required the federal government and churches to hand over to the commission any and all relevant documents in their possession. The design, operation, and impacts of residential schooling have already been charted by historians, of both the academic and community variety,<sup>1</sup> but the commission's unparalleled document access and community outreach add authority, detail, texture, and wisdom to the record. The main findings of *A Knock on the Door* (the title refers to the arrival of police or "Indian agents" taking children away for residential schooling) are as follows.

The schools were run by Canada's main Christian denominations in a public-private partnership that was driven primarily by cost concerns rather than considerations of education or welfare. For example, per capita expenditures on students were never better than one-third of the comparable amount spent on non-Native children in similar institutions (35). Students were fed meagre portions of inferior quality food (6) while spending unconscionable hours working at menial labour to sustain the institutions in which they were effectively trapped (56). The schools were "badly constructed, poorly maintained, overcrowded, unsanitary fire traps" (16).

The effects of Canada's disregard for the well-being of Indigenous children were plain to see during the life of the schools. Fifty-three schools were destroyed by fire, resulting in 40 student deaths (78). Criticized by early twentieth-century health officials as "incubators of disease," residential schools had tuberculosis death

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<sup>1</sup> John Milloy, *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System, 1879 to 1986* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1999); Isabelle Knockwood, *Out of the Depths: The Experiences of Mi'kmaw Children at the Indian Residential School at Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2015).

rates in the area of 25% (79); as recently as the early 1960s, student death rates were twice the Canadian school-age average (74). This systemic indignity extended to death itself; citing costs, officials refused consistently to return the bodies of deceased students home for burial (85). These were consigned instead to unmarked graves, which were typically left abandoned when the school closed (85-86).

The system barely paid lip service to its educational mandate. Staffed by underpaid teachers who were selected primarily for their piety and whose curriculum emphasized Euro-Christian superiority, the schools presided over woeful outcomes (47, 52). Graduates emerged stripped of their language and culture but still lacking adequate knowledge and skills as defined by the settler society (47, 63). In short, the whole thrust of residential schooling was deracination and belittlement.

The administrative orientation of the schools can only be described as totalitarian. Students were assigned and referred to by number (13). Siblings were punished harshly for the mere act of conversing (6). The obsession with disconnection and reshaping even extended beyond the schools; officials waged campaigns against Indigenous community leaders whom they deemed insufficiently pliant (7) and schemed variously to arrange and prevent marriages among graduates (6).

Institutions premised on an ethos of disrespect fostered still more overt forms of abuse. The report details instances of punishment including head-shaving (89), the forced eating of vomit (70), and beatings with such instruments as seven-thonged straps, riding whips (88), and hockey sticks (90). Sexual abuse, as survivors had been insisting since at least the late 1980s, was also rampant. *A Knock on the Door* gives us a sense of the magnitude of the abuse and of Canada's historic failure to address it. As of January 2015, Canada had convicted only 40 individuals for acts of physical or sexual abuse committed at a residential school (92); yet by that same point in time, 37,951 individuals, a full 48% of the total number of registered living residential school survivors, had made formal claims of abuse under the Independent Assessment Process provided by the Settlement Agreement (93). This is a stunning gap between incidence and sanction: almost 40,000 claims from survivors who lived to see the new millennium, but only forty convictions of abusers over a duration spanning more than a century. As the TRC reports, school personnel "placed their own interests ahead of the children in their care"; rather than reporting abuse, administrators and staff more often "covered up that victimization. It was cowardly behaviour" (91).

Often drawing on correspondence from Canadian archives, the report shows more generally that administrators and policymakers knew of but left unaddressed a host of other deficiencies, injuries, and evils. For example, Canadian and church officials were aware of the routine resort to discipline well in excess of any known norms or standards (87); inadequate funding (35); poor education outcomes (47); untrained staff (72); water, air, and sanitation problems (77); and inadequate diets, persistent health problems, and high death rates (83-84; 101).

*A Knock on the Door* turns from the words of officialdom to those of survivors in its attempt to convey some of the human impact of residential schooling. Drawing on statements made by former students either privately to the commission

or at the commission's public events, the report tells of children "isolated and bereft of home teaching and protection" (98); in "constant fear" (14); suffering "disrupted families" (127); enduring "self-destructive behaviors" (95); feeling the "burden of shame and anger" (129); and facing intergenerational cycles of dysfunction and abuse (130). The report also notes a different legacy: the tenacious survivors, who, in their thirst for justice, breached Canada's wall of denial, fought for the Settlement Agreement, and thus created the TRC. The report is their victory and tribute (8).

Perhaps the central contribution of the report is interpretive. In response to the first wave of abuse litigation in the early 1990s, Canada developed an emerging narrative that depicted residential schools as well-intentioned educational institutions that turned out to have harboured some rogue abusers. The activism of survivors then forced Canada to make deeper admissions. The 2008 apology reframed residential schools as products of a misguided policy that, driven by ideas of Euro-Christian superiority, sundered families, attempted to stamp out Indigenous languages and cultures, and caused grave intergenerational harm.

Drawing on contemporary scholarship in settler-colonial studies, Canadian and church archives, and its own interpretation of the record, the TRC report goes beyond the narrative proffered in the apology to provide what we can call the eliminationist interpretation of residential schooling. In its words, the residential schools were part of a policy of cultural genocide, which aimed to "eliminate Aboriginal governments; ignore Aboriginal rights; terminate the Treaties" and, by so doing, to "cause Aboriginal peoples to cease to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural, religious, and racial entities in Canada" (3, 5). By forcibly separating generations of children from their families, languages, and cultures, the residential schools policy aimed to weaken the capacity of Indigenous nations to resist colonialism and exercise their basic human right to self-determination.

Although there surely is legitimate debate about the TRC's decision to use the qualifying adjective, the phrase "cultural genocide" is effective in placing Canada in the context of the more well-known twentieth-century cases. All were attempts to neutralize by destructive means distinct populations that posed obstacles to official campaigns of territorial consolidation and racist self-aggrandizement. In the words of the commission, "The Canadian federal government pursued this policy of cultural genocide because it wished to divest itself of its legal and financial obligations to Aboriginal people and gain control over their land and resources" (5). The report buttresses this interpretation by quoting the words of notable Canadian officials who were responsible for the residential schools policy, including Canada's first prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, and then showing throughout its pages how the residential schools were designed and operated to further different incarnations of the eliminationist agenda.

"Reconciliation" has become the global keyword for reckoning with gross injustice, and Canada is certainly no exception. Although during its life the TRC treated reconciliation in the primarily affective and hortatory terms of testimony, acknowledgment, and forgiveness, it gives the concept a much more substantive meaning in the final report. Reconciliation in the wake of colonial dispossession and cultural genocide demands that "we restore what must be restored, repair what must be repaired, and return what must be returned" (6). Accordingly, *A Knock at*

*the Door* concludes with 94 Calls to Action that aim to put this more substantive meaning of reconciliation into effect. The Calls to Action address matters of social policy, education, crime and justice, language rights, commemoration, governance relationships, and land rights. It insists that the overriding framework for reconciliation must be the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

How to evaluate *A Knock on the Door*? We know that the TRC report was produced under very adverse conditions. For example, the federal government and churches refused consistently to provide the commission with timely and appropriate access to relevant documents, despite their clear legal obligation to do so under the Settlement Agreement. Although the TRC fought and won two court cases over these matters, the ensuing delays came with a significant price.<sup>2</sup> As Aimée Craft, Director of Research at the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, reports in her afterword to the volume, “while the TRC was completing its final report, documents were still being disclosed by parties that had agreed to provide them” (190). Readers who see shortcomings know whom to blame.

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<sup>2</sup> *Fontaine v. Canada (Attorney-General)*, 2013 ONSC 684; *Fontaine v. Canada (Attorney-General)*, 2014 ONSC 283. At the time of writing a third case, decided initially as *Fontaine v. Canada (Attorney-General)* 2014 ONSC 4585, was still under litigation.