Amongst God's Own

The Enduring Legacy *of* St. Mary's Mission

Terry Glavin
and
Former Students of St. Mary's

III

A Survivor's Story

On a sweeping expanse of green grass overlooking the Fraser River on a warm late-summer afternoon, Cyril Pierre, a 53-year-old fisherman and a carpenter, pointed out the places he remembered from his childhood. More than 140 years after Leon Fouquet arrived on the beach below, there is nothing left of the holy city the first Oblates built. Even the remnants of St. Mary's Indian Residential School are gone. There is only a covered picnic area, the stone foundations of long-gone buildings, and a cemetery. On a hill overlooking the field, there is the reconstructed Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes, replicated from one of the mission's most venerable early structures.

Pierre pointed to an overgrown rock wall. This is where the boy's dormitory was, he said. Over there, that was where the orchard was. That's where the girls lived. There was a classroom here. This is where the gymnasium used to be. There are people who come here now, Pierre said, and they don't know anything about what was here once, but they leave because they feel something wrong. They can hear babies crying.

"That's how strong it is," Pierre said. "It's the hurt that's still in this place, and I know because my heart was broken here."

Cyril Pierre turned and looked downriver, towards the distant peak of a mountain he could see from the third floor of the boys' dormitory when he was a boy. He would look out the window and hope for a glimpse of the mountain, knowing that just beyond it, on an island in the Fraser, was his home.

"My heart was broken here," he repeated. "But I'm a survivor."

What Cyril Pierre survived during his years at St. Mary's, between 1955 and 1967, is something that is widely considered to be one of the most shameful chapters in Canada's history—the internment of succeeding generations of aboriginal children in residential schools that were intended to serve the purposes of re-education camps. As B.C. Indian Commissioner I.W. Powell put it, "barbarism can only be cured by education." In its 1887 report, the federal Indian superintendent-general's office described the purpose of the schools as "the emancipation of the Indian from his inherent superstition and gross ignorance." The early architect of Canada's Indian residential-school strategy, Nicholas Flood

Davin, was equally blunt. The whole point was "to take away their simple Indian mythology."

Run by Catholics, Anglicans, the United Church and the Salvation Army, the schools are widely regarded as having been little better than vectors of disease and pedophilia. But it is also said that the schools were, in the main, valiant attempts to provide an education for aboriginal children within a white society that couldn't be bothered with them.

No matter what opinion one holds of the schools, certain things must stand as facts.

One is that the residential schools' legacy, as aptly described by a 1997 study completed by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, is "a sorrowful monument, still casting a deep shadow over the lives of many aboriginal people and communities."

Another is that the schools, throughout most of their history, were generally staffed by well-meaning and courageous faculty.

The other fact is that the explicit purpose of the residential school system, at least from the beginning of the federal government's involvement, was to alienate aboriginal children from their parents, and to destroy the very foundations of aboriginal culture. In spite of their early zealotry, and whatever their long-standing altruistic ambitions, the Oblates at St. Mary's ended up being reduced to serving that purpose.

The Oblates, and their fellow teachers among the Sisters of Saint Ann, had been overwhelmed by history and by the flood of white settlers that swept over the Fraser Valley. But more than anything else, the Oblates and the Sisters of Saint Ann were overwhelmed by a devil's bargain they were resigned to strike with the federal government. They had no choice but to acquiesce to Ottawa if they were to keep St. Mary's operating. They were obliged to participate in Canada's tragic residential-school strategy in exchange for money. Despite their persistent rigorous piety, and despite their many dedicated, decent and sincere members, the Oblates became a mere function of the "corrupt civilization" they had first set out to redeem.

Just downriver from the grassy field where Pierre walked is Mission City, which took its name from the Oblate settlement. Just upriver from here, a complex of buildings, their simple institutional utility betrayed by their late-20th century architecture, is all that remains of the experiment to which the Oblates had been reduced. The school buildings are now occupied by the Sto:lo government, and leased from the federal government.

For Cyril Pierre, the residential school experience was crippling. At the time this book was being written, there were 8,000 aboriginal people across Canada who, like Pierre, were pursuing civil and criminal cases against those entrusted to their care while they were in residential schools.

By the time this book was written, many Anglicans, Salvation Army adherents, United Church employees and Oblates had already been convicted of a variety of charges arising from such cases.

In British Columbia, the Anglican Diocese of Cariboo was facing bankruptcy as a result of civil suits arising from sexual abuse in the schools it operated, and the Anglicans' national organization was paying $100,000 a month in legal fees to defend itself against several hundred residential-school lawsuits. Oblate Harold McIntee was convicted in 1988 of sexually molesting at least 17 boys over a 30-year period at Saint Joseph's residential school near William's Lake. Among the clerics to have brought shame upon the Catholic Church in this way was Bishop Hubert O'Connor, the highest-ranking official of the Catholic Church in Canada to face such charges. In the early 1990s, O'Connor, who had admitted having sex with young aboriginal women at Saint Joseph's school, was charged with several counts of rape and sexual assault, but the charges were stayed on a technicality.

More than 40 former St. Mary's students were interviewed during research for this book, and many provided their own written submissions. Some made allegations of criminal code offences. The worst abuses are associated with specific priests, and specific nuns. The offenders were clearly a small minority.

The accounts of abuse at St. Mary's do not fit a simple pattern. It isn't a simple story of horrible things that became more rare as the years passed, or of things getting gradually better over time. In the 1800s, there wasn't so much as a hand lifted against the students. In later years, during certain periods, public strapping was almost a daily event. While all of St. Mary's history is associated with the suppression of aboriginal language among students, in its final years, the use of aboriginal language was actually encouraged. The early 1950s, despite the great hardship of those times, was a period in which reports of gross abuse are rare. The early 1960s, at least for some students, were nightmarish.

For legal reasons, allegations of criminal conduct, whatever their veracity, cannot be repeated here. Cyril Pierre's specific allegations cannot be repeated here, either. But that wasn't what he wanted to talk about, anyway.

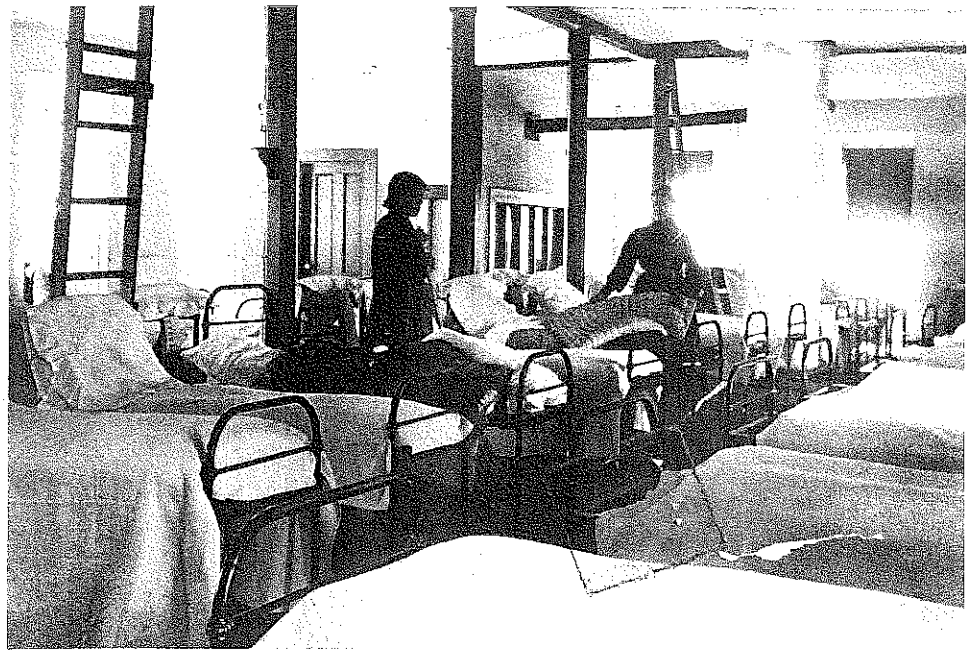
More than anything, Pierre likes to talk about his own children. Five strong sons. Top marks in school. Honour-roll material. All active in sports. All confident, the product of a loving home, and all testimony to the truth of Pierre's own survival. Despite the wounds he had carried all his life as a consequence of what happened to him here, he never let his children know.

"They buried us here," he said of his generation. "And many of us became suicidal. Or alcoholics. Or abusers. There was great suffering. It's like a hole, and we are trying to dig our way out of it."

The Oblates themselves admit as much.

In 1991, in an acknowledgement of the role they had played in dismembering aboriginal culture, Canada's Oblates issued a carefully-worded apology to Canada's aboriginal peoples. Declaring themselves to be of the "same family" as the aboriginal peoples with whom they had been so long associated, the Oblates pledged to return to the kind of solidarity that exists within families. "We recognize that the road beyond past hurt may be long and steep," the statement read, "but we pledge ourselves anew to journey with the Native Peoples on that road." Cyril Pierre knows all about that road. He has been walking it, mostly alone, ever since he was a boy.

THE GIRLS' RESIDENCE HOUSED THE DORMITORIES, NUNS' QUARTERS, AN INFIRMARY, A RECREATION ROOM AND THE CHAPEL.



GIRLS' DORMITORY

DELIVINA PAUL

ATTENDED FROM 1943 TO 1952

We were given a locker for our clothes and what dormitory and bed we would be in. We put our things away, given a shower and had a head check to see if we had any lice. We were given two sets of clothes and had to have everything marked so we would not lose anything.

GENEVA AUDREY WILLIAMS

ATTENDED FROM 1944 TO 1956

Before you had a bed you had to go to the barn and fill the mattress tick with hay. This was your bed for the year. If you didn't fill it tight enough, your mattress was very thin by the end of the year. Needless to say, the following year you filled your tick properly. Later years, we were given a proper mattress, usually batting fill, sometimes lumpy, at least it remained the same depth throughout the year. In one section of the dorm were the elementary students and the other part were the older students. Bedtime was early. 7 pm for the younger students and 9 pm for the older students.

MARY LOU SEPASS

ATTENDED FROM 1937 TO 1948

Once in a while some students would run away from school or would be caught stealing from other students and would be strapped. However, this stopped when Father Hennessey became our principal. He removed the strap from all Staff and forbid its use as a method of discipline.

Father Hennessey also made improvements to the quality of food served at the school. I remember very well how he would come into our dining room and taste the food! He had to be satisfied that we were fed well.

I have no regrets going to school at St. Mary's. In fact, I feel very fortunate. Not only did I learn academics and domestic chores, I met many people [who] *became a part of my life. I think of the awesome works of the priests and nuns that played a big part in my life. To them I will always be grateful. St. Mary's, to me, is a good memory, a good school.*