A Generation in Politics: The Alumni of the Saint-Marc-de-Figuery Residential School

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In Canada, discussions about Indian residential schools were for a long time a taboo subject. Since the 1970s, the emergence of strong Native political associations and their increased presence in the media have begun to help loosen once-silent tongues. The literature about the residential school experience is growing, as seen in the number of major academic works and law commission studies as well as in the broad coverage of the topic in Native periodicals and newspapers.

In this literature, we first notice the recurrence of particular themes and, second, a lack of coverage of the Québec scene. Most works about Native residential schools, first established in the nineteenth century, essentially deal with the trauma engendered by various abuses the children experienced, their later struggles (psychological, judicial) as adults to recover their dignity, and the consequences for contemporary educational policies. The exception is Québec, where the literature is sparse, in contrast to British Columbia, for example, where it is abundant (e.g., Nuu-chah-nulth Tribal Council 1996; Kelm 1998). We find testimony from former residential school students on internet websites, in periodicals and in reports published by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (Fondation autochtone de guérison 2002; Dion Stout & Kipling 2003; Wesley-Esquimaux & Smoleski 2004); we also find allusions to Québec in a few academic works (Larose 1989; Leroux 1995; Bousquet 2005), and especially in some major works (Miller 1996; Milloy 1999), but rarely an article or a thesis dedicated to the topic. And the few pages in the major works relating to Québec schools essentially deal with the effects of federal policies and administration. Hidden within the silences are voices from six residential schools that operated in Québec from the mid-1930s until the mid-1970s. Two schools, Anglican and Catholic, opened their doors before the Second World War, at Fort George. The remaining four, Amos, Pointe-Bleue, Sept-Iles and La Tuque, run by the Oblates, opened after the War.
I will focus on the Amos Indian residential school, located at Saint-Marc-de-Figuery in Abitibi, and especially on the influence and impact of its alumni on their home societies a few decades after their stay in residential schools. This paper is based on interviews conducted since 1996 on the Algonquin (Algonkin) reserve of Pikogan with 15 former students (7 women and 6 men) and some of their relatives (parents and children). While I, in fact, conducted interviews with 25 former residential school students (8 women and 17 men) between 1996 and 2005, I only use data from those 15 people who spent at least three (in some cases as many as eight) years in residential school. Thus the recurrent themes in the data allow generalizations to emerge. For the same reason, I also use data from the parents of these former students (that is to say, today's elders, 5 women and 4 men) and from their children (4 women and 5 men). Among the ex-students, a few are siblings, but most declared they have never spoken of their experiences to family members. The interviews refer to the period 1955-1965, the first ten years of the residential school, which was reputed to be the most difficult for the students "because they were still breaking in the system" and "because parents weren't yet aware of what was going on."

It had not been my intention to conduct research on this delicate topic. Shortly after my arrival on the Pikogan reserve at the end of 1995, a former priest was sent to jail after being convicted of pedophilia. Since this priest had worked at the school, the conviction raised many issues from the past. The people I was working with therefore broached the subject themselves, explaining that it needed to be known and written about, and I decided to gather this testimony whenever people wanted to share their memories. Former students told me their stories with humour, sadness and frankness. Their emotions are suggestive of the complexity of the problem.

1. This school has two equivalent names: Amos Indian Residential School and Saint-Marc-de-Figuery Indian Residential School or, in French, Pensionnat indien d’Amos and Pensionnat indien de Saint-Marc-de-Figuery. The former students often refer to it simply as Saint-Marc.
2. The term alumni here includes both males and females.
3. For this and much more, I thank them. All names in the text are pseudonyms.
FROM "THE LOST GENERATION" TO "THE POLITICIZED GENERATION"

Historians, law commissioners, education specialists and criminologists have argued that the government intended residential schools to separate Native children from their cultures and that the curricula in those schools marginalized Native people (Miller 1987; Milloy 1999; Kelm 1998; Law Commission of Canada 2000; Ing 1991; Canada, Commission Royale sur les Peuples Autochtones 1996, chapter 10). Thus, what the people at Pikogan and I refer to as "the residential school generation" is considered a "lost generation." Simply put, the former students were so traumatized by their experiences that they had many difficulties dealing with their identity, learning how to solve conflicts, and becoming good parents.

In his study of Aboriginal peoples and politics (1990), focusing on the evolution of leadership in British Columbia between 1849 and 1989, Paul Tennant has raised other interesting points about the consequences of the process. He pointed out the link between school attendance and a major change in political skills: "In contrast to their predecessors, they were more knowledgeable about White society and government, and so they could communicate readily with government officials and other Whites" (1990:84). He does not, however, refer exclusively to residential schools since he also deals with mission schools and with high school graduates in general. With reference to residential schools, he notes, "The overall quality of Indian education remained low ... and the dropout rate was high" (1990:140). He goes on to state that, "It is possible, but by no means demonstrated, that Protestant schooling implanted fewer political inhibitions than did Catholic schooling" (1990:82). I cannot confirm this hypothesis, since five of six Quebec residential schools were run by Catholics, including Saint-Marc-de-Figuery, and there are no particular data that suggest that religious affiliation played a significant role in later political sensibility.4

J.R. Miller, in Shingwauk's vision, makes a stronger link between residential school attendance and later political leadership. After documenting the traumas of the "survivors," he notes (1996:430):

4. The first large-scale pan-Indian provincial political organization, l'Association des Indiens du Quebec, was founded in 1965 by chiefs who had little formal schooling, with the aid of a few of their children who were former residential school students. Most of these leaders came from predominantly Catholic bands.
Ironically, one of the most powerful effects of the residential school has been its role in moulding Native students into political leaders as well as defenders of the traditional culture. As has been pointed out, an astonishingly high proportion of the male leadership of Native political organizations, especially from the 1940s until the 1980s, were the products of residential schools.

I follow Miller in arguing that this “lost” generation of survivors is also a politicized generation. The former students can be seen as a unique transitional generation who changed the social dynamics of their communities. Not all of them are politicians, but all of them experienced violence and aggression, sometimes physical, always psychological, which forced a rethinking of social and cultural models that perhaps went further than it did for others, who were not subject to the rigours of residential schools. Thus, the relationship to their cultures was transformed and politicized, and acquired an ideological importance during a period (after 1970) in which all Aboriginal people had to come to terms with Euro-Canadian colonial practices. I suggest that, with this generation, culture has become a political tool to be used as a means of protesting and claiming justice or as a resource which Aboriginal people can use to negotiate with Euro-Canadian society. As such, the residential school period has become a source of innovation and of strength in their attempts to have their identity acknowledged.

The uniqueness of Québec residential schools compared to those founded in the early part of the regime in the 19th century is the social and political context in which these schools operated: new Federal government policies vis-à-vis First Nations after the Second World War and the emergence of Québécois nationalism fueled by its hydro-electric projects. These factors helped shape a particular form of political activism among Québec’s First Nations, which was also influenced by the experience gained from Native activism in other parts of Canada.

**The Context: A Change in Federal Politics Towards Natives**

Native residential schools had appeared in the rest of Canada long before they did in Québec. In Québec, the Oblate clergy raised the issue of Native education with the Department of Indian Affairs in the early 1940s. After years of pressure, by the end of that decade they managed to convince the government to respect the law mandating obligatory school-
ing and to apply the residential school model for indigenous peoples in the province. An extract from a letter sent in 1949 by J.A. Desmarais, Bishop of Amos, to Louis St-Laurent, the Prime Minister of Canada, reveals a part of the process:

Après avoir étudié longuement ce problème, j’en suis venu à la conclusion que la seule et unique manière de donner à ces pauvres nomades l’éducation, à laquelle ils ont certainement droit, c’est de construire des ECOLES-PENSIONNATS semblables à celles qui existent dans les autres provinces canadiennes.

Pourquoi chez nous, dans la Province de Québec, nos Indiens seraient-ils plus longtemps privés des avantages dont jouissent depuis bien des années les Indiens des autres provinces?

With the agreement of the bishops, at the beginning of the 1950s the Oblates were entrusted with the care of these schools, sharing their responsibility with the Grey Sisters (Sisters of St Francis of Assisi). The Amos school opened in 1955 on a piece of land bought by the Federal government and cleared by Natives.

The context of the creation of the Amos school as well as that of the three other residential schools in the province must be taken into account to understand the different objectives of the system compared to those of the 19th-century schools. One major difference stands: after the Second World War, the Federal government realised that its aim of assimilating Indians and giving them equal status to Euro-Canadians was a failure. The administrative practices of the Indian Affairs Branch imposed too many limitations to attain this aim (Dyck 1983:204, 205). The Indians had become:

A people whose only apparent legacy was extreme poverty, a lack of political power, a stigmatized social identity vis-à-vis other Canadians, and the experience of being an administered people.

Federal government policy thus underwent a reorientation that was partly influenced by First Nations’ demands for social reform: beginning in 1945, according to Lavoie (2005:57), “parlera-t-on dorénavant moins du problème indien que des problèmes des Indiens afin de les résoudre.” The aim was no longer to ‘civilize’ pupils but to bring the socio-economic conditions of a ‘culturally disadvantaged minority’ into alignment with

5. This law was promulgated at the beginning of the twentieth century, through an amendment to the Indian Act.
the living conditions of other Canadians. Living conditions in Native communities in fact worsened, and public opinion became sensitive to the poor conditions in First Nations communities (Dyck 1983:205; Lavoie 2005:57). As a result, from 1946 to 1948 a special Parliamentary committee held hearings. It was, in part, mandated to address the issue of Indian education. As Lavoie notes (2005:58), First Nations people who were consulted affirmed that education was the only means of improving these conditions. They also argued, however, that they should take control of their schools and that the churches should be excluded.

In Québec, even if Indian education was slowly becoming a priority, there was no question of entrusting schooling to any but the Oblates, who had no intention of relinquishing control of ‘their’ schools to the government. In a 1956 report, one of them evaluated the growing intrusion of ‘civil authority’ in what had been an exclusively Oblate preserve (Bilodeau 1956:26):

Nous ... étions rois et maîtres dans de multiples domaines. Puis sont venues les autorités des Affaires indiennes, scolaires, médicales, policières, peut-être avons-nous été un peu lents à nous rendre compte qu’elles venaient dans leur propre domaine, avec des droits et devoirs.

Noting these changes, he recommended cooperating with the local Indian Affairs agent in Abititi (Hervé Larivière), since, he argued, this civil servant’s role was to care for “le relèvement économique et social de nos Indiens,” while the Oblates were to care for “le bien moral et religieux” (1956:27) of ‘their’ charges. It seemed logical, in a pre-eminently Catholic province, to confer responsibility for Indian schools to those who seemed better-placed to inculcate the appropriate moral values that would allow Indians to become equal citizens.

SAINT-MARC-DE-FIGUERY: VISION AND EVERYDAY LIFE

The Oblate journal *Vie Indienne*, first published in 1957 (it ceased publication in 1970), provides information about the project’s initial vision. The articles report that this type of school was “the best way to acculturate Indians”⁶ as well as to draw forth feelings of personal and ethnic pride to form an elite (Anonymous 1957a:6). Residential schooling was supposed to protect Indians from the malevolent prejudices of the Whites by

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⁶ My translation.
fostering an “atmosphere of family life.” For many members of the clergy, Indians had been isolated from the harmful effects of “civilization” by their “savage” life, and the residential school would allow them to integrate into the dominant society while still upholding the Catholic faith (O’Bomsawin 1958:4). In issue upon issue of Vie Indienne, Indians are referred to in terms such as “our protégés” or “those humble people.” The priests regarded their charges as “these dear children of the bush” (Lucas 1966:1). Indians had to develop “un plus grand esprit de prévoyance, leur faire cultiver la terre par exemple” (Anonymous 1957b:2). In fact, according to the Oblates, was it not the Indians’ values that was at the base of their poverty?

Initially, school administrators planned to take in children from ages 7 to 14 (Anonymous 1954). In fact, it would later welcome children from 6 (sometimes younger) to 16. From the beginning, the Amos school accommodated more than two hundred pupils. The priests picked them up in the bush, usually with trucks. At the Amos school, the majority of the children came from various Algonquin bands, such as Abitibiwinnik (Pikogan), Lac Simon, Kitcisakik, Winneway, Timiskaming and Kipawa. A few children came from Low Bush (Wahgoshig, today classified as Ojibwe), and from Sanmaur, the contemporary Wemotaci Atikamekw band. As soon as the children arrived at the residential school, boys were separated from girls and by age. Their clothes were burnt; after a shower, their hair was washed with anti-lice shampoo, cut, and finally the new student received a number and a uniform.

Timetables were very strict, each day beginning with mass. The curriculum, in addition to the usual subjects like geography, mathematics and French, included workshops in plumbing, electricity, carpentry for boys and sewing for girls. The school also had a farm, to teach children how to become farmers. The children were forced to learn French quickly since the priests, the lay brothers and the nuns in charge of the school did not speak any Native languages (except the supervisor, who had recorded prayers in Algonquin, Atikamekw and Cree that were broadcast through loudspeakers during playtimes in an effort to teach the children how to

7. Jean-Louis Robert O’Bomsawin, who signed his articles in Vie Indienne as “Joe O’Bomsawin c.m.,” was the first Abenakis to become a teaching “brother” in the congregation of Les frères de Sainte-Croix (Anonymous 1958:2).

8. This project was a failure, as not a single student ever became a farmer.
pray with the parents once they returned home). In fact, the use of Native languages was limited to catechism and songs (Trudel 1992).

It should be noted that the Oblates thought they were respecting Indian traditions (Anonymous 1957b:2):

Il ne s’agit pas d’éliminer le particularisme des Indiens. Leur implantation en terre canadienne, qui remonte à beaucoup plus loin que celle des Canadiens d’expression française ou anglaise, commande au contraire une politique généreuse à leur égard. […] Tout en conservant leurs traditions les plus précieuses, nous devons les aider à trouver une nécessaire évolution.

This passage directly contradicts the widespread idea that missionaries (in this case, the Oblates) did not tolerate First Nations cultures.

During playtime, sports such as hockey were important. The clergy also created scout groups and theatre and dance troupes. Incidentally, we can find pictures in Vie Indienne of playlets performed at the Amos school, where children played ‘Indian’ by wearing feather headdresses or acted the part of missionaries bringing the gospel to the Indians, or played Jacques Cartier landing in Canada and his subsequent rescue from starvation by Indians.

For the children, everything was new. Prior to their arrival at the school they had been living in tents or log cabins in the bush. At the school, they had to live in a huge building, sleep in beds in dormitories, and experience a new diet: Peter (44 years old, 17 April 1996) remembers being afraid of stairs; Caroline (50, April 1996; 57, August 2003) was afraid of falling off her bed at night since she had never experienced a European-style bed before; she still remembers the strong odour of hot oatmeal in the morning. Boys and girls were not allowed to see each other, except for feasts. Students had to stay in the school for ten months and were prevented from leaving by fences. They could only see their parents at Christmas and return to their families during summer holidays. The Oblates’ severe discipline was also new to the Indians, since it was completely and totally incompatible with the traditional upbringing they had received.

Decades later, testimony from the former boarders reflects fear, lack of understanding and feelings of abandonment, as well as a profound sense that they were not respected by the priests, nuns and lay teachers. They remember many cases of injustice, for instance the confiscation of hares they had trapped near the school or of the candies given to them by
their parents. Corporal punishments were common: some remember being forced to spend the night kneeling beside their bed, being locked up in closets, being deprived of food, being forced to swallow their own vomit, being beaten, and so on. Some children undertook hunger strikes in protest of their unfair treatment. Except for one person, all the former students claim that their parents did not believe their reports of mistreatment at the school.

Despite Oblate protests that they had no intention of eradicating Indian culture, the boarders are all convinced that they were victims of a policy of assimilation. One states (Mike, 48, 26 August 1996, Pikogan):


This declaration seems an indictment. By laying the responsibility at the parents’ feet, he seems to deny that abuses were entirely the fault of the Oblates. The parents’ perspective is, of course, different (Judith, 70, Pikogan, April 1996):

Les prêtres nous avaient un peu expliqué que les enfants devaient aller à l’école, pour savoir lire et écrire. Nous ne savions pas qu’à cause de cela, notre mode de vie allait se perdre. On ne nous avait pas dit non plus qu’ils allaient empêcher les enfants de parler dans notre langue. Nous pensions qu’ils allaient conserver la langue, qu’on allait parler en algonquin là-bas.

What the parents could not believe most of all were the sexual abuses. To be fondled by a priest during a confession, or to be raped regularly, seemed incredible for the adults who trusted the priests. Parents and elders had agreed with the idea of the residential school, believing that it would be good for the children to read and write. To recognize the school’s failures and abuses called into question their entire premise for entrusting the care of their children to the Oblates. I cannot draw any statistics relating to abuse patterns from the testimony I recorded, but some of it clearly states that they were abused. The parents also felt cheated, as they had not realized that they would not be able to see their children as
often they wanted, that they would lose their role of educators, and that their children would be forced to forget, except for prayers, their language.

LEAVING THE RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL: FINDING A PLACE IN AN UNWELCOMING SOCIETY

The Amos residential school closed in 1972. The only positive points mentioned to me are that students learned French and discipline. As François Larose says (1988:38), “les pensionnats ont [...] permis à un certain nombre de jeunes autochtones d’avoir accès aux études supérieures et d’effectuer une jonction avec une partie de l’intelligentsia canadienne.” Whereas elders say that they and their ancestors were exploited by fur traders and swindled by the Department of Indian Affairs because they only spoke Algonquin and were illiterate, residential schools gave people the elementary means to defend themselves and their cause. As proof, a number of important contemporary leaders were pupils at residential schools: Romeo Saganash, Matthew Coon Come for the Crees (they went to the boarding school at La Tuque), Jimmy Papatie, Jimmy Hunter, Richard Kistabish, Jackie Kistabish for the Algonquins, among others.9 According to Toby Morantz (2002:219), residential schools “benefitted” these leaders “by providing them with networks and contacts which were well used in the 1970s.”

The rest are mostly very bad memories. After rejoining their families, students had difficulty remembering their language. They failed to see any resemblances between themselves and the social models represented by their parents. Former students had not learned the knowledge and skills necessary to live in the bush. Nor were they able to integrate into the dominant society, especially since they had been kept isolated from Euro-Canadians during their school years. All of them felt ashamed of being Native. For example, some forbade others to speak Algonquin, even in private (Caroline, 50, May 1996, Pikogan):

9. This brief list omits a few public personalities who came from Québec bands but who attended residential schools outside the province. Crees, especially, were sometimes sent to Anglican schools in Ontario, e.g., at Moose Factory, Sault Ste Marie, Sioux Lookout. This list includes people such as Ted Moses, Jane Willis, Billy Diamond. Matthew Coon Come, besides attending school in La Tuque, also attended schools at Moose Factory and Hull.
Cette femme-là, elle fait beaucoup de reproches parce qu'on n’a pas transmis la langue à nos enfants. Mais je me souviens de comment elle était, à la sortie du pensionnat. Elle nous interdisait de parler en indien quand il y avait des Blancs, et même entre nous.

For the first time in their history, a huge gap appeared between two generations.

After leaving residential school, the alumni found that Algonquin society seemed unsuited and unreceptive to their needs. They had to create new models. They had learned that their parents’ lifestyle was no longer viable, that it only brought them poverty. This theme often emerged in discussions with elders, who stated, “nous étions pauvres quand nous vivions de la fourrure. Nous ne savions pas que nous étions pauvres, nous avions toujours vécu comme ça.” Furthermore, their parents, wanting to be close to their children, had moved near Amos and other towns to camp. As it became more and more difficult to make a living by trapping, people ended up settling on new reserves. Thus, the former students became the first generation to spend their early adult lives in the reserve context. The alumni also note that even if alcoholism was always present in their bands before the residential school, it became worse afterwards; all the informants state that they became heavy alcoholics and drug addicts after leaving school. Almost all of their first marriages failed due to conjugal violence. They feel themselves to be failures as parents as they never learned how to deal with their anger or how to raise their children. Their children confirm this point. For example, Rémi (27, 1996) and Ted (29, 1996), both children of former students, state that even if they are not former residential school students themselves, they are nonetheless victims of the system since they are children of those who suffered the negative consequences of the residential school regime. Communities had been in distress before the residential school experience, but the situation became worse after. As adults, the students had to reconstruct their lives and their communities with skills maladapted for either Native or Euro-Canadian society.

Second, integration into the dominant society turned out to be a myth. The alumni experienced great difficulty in finding jobs because they were not properly trained, because they had addiction problems, and because they were subject to racism. The Catholic religious training they had received, still very much respected by their parents, was associated
with the dominant society that had rejected them, and so also became a difficult subject in Native communities.

In brief, for all these reasons, the alumni of the residential school form a distinct transitional generation, between semi-nomadism and sedentarism, between distress and reconstruction, and between colonialism and autonomy.

THE EMERGENCE OF NEW ROLE MODELS

Beginning in the 1970s, new group dynamics began to emerge in Algonquin communities. It was a time of negotiation, with claims presented to national and international organizations. It was the time of the James Bay Agreement, of the creation of associations such as Femmes autochtones du Québec, of manifestos against pollution and for "Indian control of Indian education" (made by the National Indian Brotherhood). Algonquins participated in those movements: the Association des Indiens du Québec (1965-1976), the first to side with the Cree when the provincial government announced its plans for developing hydro-electric power in the Cree homeland, included three Algonquin chiefs and former residential school students representing their communities. On the local level, there emerged a desire to regain control of education, to protect culture and language, to improve living conditions, and to fight against violence. The first Native-run school in Pikogan was created by residential school alumni in the basement of the church (Wylde, Kistabish & Mowatt 1983). The alumni also collaborated to raise funds for various projects, such as launching a community newspaper and radio, the opening of a community centre, as well as developing a cooperative for handcrafts, organizing festivals and hockey tournaments. The founding of a minor league hockey tournament for Indians (which has existed since the mid-1980s and become an institution) is an example of First Nation desires to regain control of their destinies, to participate in the community development, and to counter negative changes that they identify as the consequences of the residential school system. Félix (40, 1996), a founding member of the tournament, remembers that he proposed creating a hockey league when discussing vandalism in the community with parents, so that young people would become interested in sports and have something positive to do. Money was raised locally and sponsors found. Seventy-two teams partici-
pated, Algonquin, Cree, Atikamekw, Montagnais. The first tournament was a success, and it has been held every year since.

Little by little, the generation composed of former residential school students has assumed control of all strategic domains of local government – band councils, local schools, police, land claims research, as well as emerging businesses linked to tourism and to cultural activities. Many underwent therapy to deal with addiction. Even those who have chosen not to be publicly committed are involved in Native organizations and participate in consultations and committees.

What characterizes them as a generation is the relationship to the culture they have created. No longer able or willing to live as semi-nomads, the residential school generation has transformed their relationship to their heritage by giving it an ideological and, especially, political dimension. It is not surprising that every declaration by former students, whether dealing with improving reserve conditions, with economic issues, or even with banal questions (for example, cooking) is coloured by references to the Algonquin ‘culture’ that must be protected and transmitted to future generations (Evelyn, 48, Pikogan, June 1996):

Les jeunes préfèrent la pizza à la viande de bois. Pour le gala des étudiants, il y a quelques années, je me suis battue avec d’autres parents pour qu’il y ait du steak d’original au menu. Quand on mange de la viande de bois, ce n’est pas pareil qu’avec la pizza. La pizza, ça se mange debout, vite fait. Si on ne montre pas aux jeunes comment cuisiner la viande de bois, bientôt ils ne chasseront plus et n’en mangeront plus. Ils parlent déjà trop le français à la maison, ils vont finir par vivre totalement comme les Blancs.

Food is more than a pretext for creating a link between the bush, language choice and Algonquin identity. Eating bush food implies being able to hunt and trap, which in turn implies being autonomous and being able to make claims to ancestral homelands.

“Culture” has become a political tool, a spearhead for all their different claims, but it is also a subject and a means to establish the legitimacy of their claims (Poirier 2004). As the eradication of their identity was clearly planned by the mission schools, the alumni have reversed the process by using cultural identity to negotiate and to obtain what they view as their rights. In effect, they have transformed ‘culture’ into a right. While the missions saw Native cultures as a brake on development and as an explanation for social problems, the alumni have shown that their culture
is a way of re-establishing local governance, of overcoming local problems, and a means of tracing an independent path to the future. They have made their culture public to gain a wider respect for their positions. This engagement with the public, in all its forms (cultural, social, administrative, and political) has become a new social model for younger generations. Speaking out also has repercussions for the local level and for the personal dimension: if expressing one’s emotions and speaking out in public were not traditional Algonquin behaviours, the alumni have made these into a tool for self-affirmation and for rehabilitation, for themselves and in the eyes of others (Bousquet 2005).

CONCLUSION

Hurt and traumatized, the residential school alumni found themselves adrift in the biggest generational gap ever experienced by Algonquins. In the Algonquin conception of social time, the residential school generation forms a zero point between “before” and “after,” against which changes, colonization, and the intrusion of Whites are evaluated. The wounds of the past have not healed. The trauma is still felt in contemporary communities; indeed, it cannot be any other way since the gap marks the beginning of a new culture in which this generation has invested all their social and psychological resources. Fear of acculturation and of completely losing their culture manifests itself in nearly every declaration by the alumni. Obliged to redefine their relationship to tradition and to redefine themselves, they form the first generation that has not lived a semi-nomadic lifestyle. As the future guardians of tradition, the residential school generation will leave behind a new but painful legacy, and will project Algonquin culture into the new world that they created.

More research will be required to understand the legacy of residential schools in Québec. In particular, three dimensions will have to be analyzed in more detail. First, the Oblates’ vision itself and its influence have not been thoroughly examined. In addition, this particular vision needs to be compared to the policies of other Catholic orders and of other Christian churches. Most of the works about residential schools across Canada stress the importance of assimilationist policies. The testimony gathered in the Archives Deschâtelets, however, seems to show that the Oblates did not agree with the government’s acculturation program. Instead, they nat-
urally emphasized that the Indians needed to become good Christians and not necessarily good ‘Whites.’ Moreover, the Oblates appear to have respected Native culture as long it was compatible with their Catholic viewpoint (cf. Huel 1996). As one of the Oblates wrote in 1967 (Côté 1967:71):

Dans le passé, nos missionnaires ont fait fi (involontairement sans doute) des richesses religieuses de ce peuple à évangeliser. Y aurait-il lieu de revaloriser certains symboles plus significatifs pour les Indiens? […] Avons-nous la diplomatie d’interroger les Indiens sur ce qu’ils désireraient?

Some articles in Vie Indienne echo this denunciation: “nous avons traité ces populations comme des Blancs arriérés, au lieu de voir en eux une race à qui l’hérédité et le milieu on légué une mentalité, une culture déterminées” (Anonymous 1959:6). Carney, in a 1981 article, also claims that Oblates did not pursue assimilation unless forced to do so by the federal government: they provided “instruction in French and vernacular languages, including syllabics” (1981:69), made efforts “to demand and secure the full range of Indian rights” (1981:66), but they “could hardly criticize the government for finally expanding opportunities for formal education” (1981:70), that is to say the logistical and financial support.

Second, by comparing works and accounts written before the 1990s (e.g., Johnston 1989) with those written after, we can note differences in the evaluations of the school experience; the former play down the hardships while later accounts emphasize them. It would seem that Euro-Canadian ethnocentrism had become so deeply absorbed by Natives that only the public denunciations of the schools of the 1990s have been able to call the experience into question.

And, third, the role of residential schools in the adoption of Canadian bureaucracy by First Nations people needs to be investigated if we are to understand this generation’s strong commitment to public service.10

REFERENCES


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Archives Deschâtelles, Oblates de Marie-Immaculée. Ottawa.


