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Speaking My Truth: Reflections on Reconciliation & Residential School

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Reviews (I)

Rogers, S., DeGagné, M., & Dewar, J. (2012). *Speaking My Truth: Reflections on Reconciliation & Residential School*. Ottawa: Aboriginal Healing Foundation. ISBN: 978-0-9876900-4-3

Though their origins go back to the 19th century, the Indian residential schools reached their peak in the first half of the 20th century, when eighty of these schools were operating across Canada. Their main goal was simple: to transform the children of aboriginal people into the image of white Canadians. However, the consequences were not only complex and broader in scope, but also devastating for aboriginal children who were forced to be fully assimilated into a new culture and way of life. Hidden behind the mask of formal education, the Indian residential schools were part of an overarching colonial strategy that led to cultural, medical, spiritual, political, and material disruptions in the life of aboriginal people up to the present time.

Uprooted from their normal lives and familiar locations, more than 150,000 children ended up at the Indian residential schools. These publicly funded educational institutions were ruled by religious authorities who gave immediate priority to the teaching of the catechism. The commonly available instruction at these residential schools was focused on taking the aboriginal culture out of the children through the imposition of religious dogma. These practices, nevertheless, were only a small part of what were much bigger problems. The poor living conditions sharply accelerated disease rates, especially tuberculosis, which produced the most devastating effects upon aboriginal children. Worse still, they were victims of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, which not only impacted these children but



the next generation.

Speaking my Truth touches on these difficult issues at the Indian residential schools. Divided into three main parts, *Speaking my Truth* contains fourteen short but poignant stories and a number of historical pictures selected by the editors Shelagh Rogers, Mike DeGagné and Jonathan Dewar, from the volume series *Truth and Reconciliation* published by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation in Canada. The stories illustrate the way that different aboriginal and non-aboriginal people have experienced these dramatic episodes and, importantly, how they have tried to overcome them in different contexts.

Two of the strengths of the book are the broad spectrum of the presented perspectives, and the fact that these situated views provide personal accounts to disturbing events that are usually represented by different means at a more abstract level. As stated in the foreword, the stories being told represent “the full range of emotions, from sorrow to joy, and not without humour”. *Speaking my Truth* perfectly complements other works on Canadian aboriginal history that touch upon these issues from the single perspective of an author.

I myself come from a country, Spain, where the presence of one of the most shameful episodes of its past, marked by a civil war, is still characterized either by the denial of truth or the entrenchment of the positions; despite relatively recent governmental changes in how to deal with its suppressed memory. I want by no means to compare two unrelated facts, but given my own experience in a country where, ironically, the silence of its past was the precondition of its established democracy, I have learnt to highly value gestures of reconciliation by recognizing past injustices and conveying apologies in order to take the first steps in the right direction to a better future for all of the people involved. *Speaking my truth* contributes to the complex process of reconciliation, and concretely, making people aware of where we come from in terms of past educational institutions and their relationship with aboriginal peoples in Canada.