

# The Children of Tomorrow's Great Potlatch

ERNIE GREY

"The day will soon come when First Nations people and whites will sit together to take part in the greatest potlatch of all. They will talk and sing about the wonderful world they will be leaving for their children."

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We dream of the day when First Nations people and whites will sit together to take part in a great potlatch. Before this happens, the whites must learn more of the First Nations history, because understanding is essential to create solutions and harmony.

The Indian Act of 1876 shattered the lives of the aboriginal people of Canada. It imprisoned Canada's aboriginal people on tracts of land called reserves and in tandem with both colonial and provincial legislation permitted any non-Indian male over the age of eighteen to simply occupy up to three hundred and twenty acres of the aboriginal peoples' tribal homelands. In British Columbia, the colonial Governor James Douglas encouraged the notion that the Indians ought to pre-empt land after the fashion of whites but this policy was soon reversed by Sir Joseph Trutch. He was a surveyor who was to become the chief architect of Indian policy in British Columbia after Douglas's retirement in 1864. In addition to the loss of tribal homelands through the process of pre-emption, the Indian Act outlawed all aboriginal religious ceremonies and practices from 1880 to 1951. This legislation also made it impossible for aboriginal people to take part in the political and economic life of the industrial society springing up just outside the bounds of the reserves. As residents of B.C., Indians were denied the provincial vote and the opportunity to hold public office in the provincial government until 1949. In Canada, all Indians

were denied the right to vote in federal elections and the opportunity to hold federal public office until 1960. This meant that Indians had no voice in shaping either legislation or policies affecting their lives for nearly a century. All decisions affecting Indians were to be the private preserve of White politicians in Victoria or in Ottawa until more than halfway through the next century. So all-pervasive was the Indian Act in the lives of Indian people in B.C., that Native people or lawyers acting on their behalf could be jailed without recourse of law for advocating Indian land rights in the period from 1927 to 1951. As absurd as it was, Indian agents also roamed British Columbia Indian reserves to make sure the houses were kept tidy. (Mathias, 1986:2)

While it is easy to identify the wrongs of this legislation and the damaging impact it had on all native peoples, those most profoundly damaged were the children of the First Nations peoples.

### *Residential Schools*

Dr. Neil MacDonald of the University of Manitoba has described in an interview (24 May 1989) the practice of "Fall round-up" in which the children of the First Nations peoples were gathered in groups or "rounded up" to be taken to the residential schools:

It is near the turn of the century. Indian agents, RCMP constables, and non-Native farmhands encircle a Manitoba Indian reserve. One of the Indian agents and an RCMP constable approach the house of an Indian family, bang on the door and loudly demand the parents give up their children to them. The parents have barricaded the door and refuse to answer. The Indian agent instructs the RCMP constable to break down the door. They rush into the house, pry the frightened, screaming children from their parents' arms and rush them to a holding area outside. The constable and agent go to the next house and the next and in the ensuing few days this scene is repeated many times on this reserve and on most reserves in Southern Manitoba. All children captured during "Fall round-up" are marched to the nearest CPR station, assigned a number and unceremoniously herded into cattle cars for transport to the residential school at Winnipeg.

Dr. MacDonald described another incident as told to him by an Indian agent who took part in "Fall round-up":

The Indian agent was sitting on his horse after his group of children had been loaded onto the train and noticed a dust cloud in the distance. Thinking it was more agents bringing their shipment of children he called for the train to wait for the new arrivals. When the group of people arrived at the station, he found they were not the agents and children but the mothers of the children he had rounded-up. The women ran alongside the cattle cars until they found their child or children. They grabbed the hands of their children and refused to let go, thus preventing the train's departure. The RCMP constables responded by climbing up the sides of the cars and stomped on the hands of the mothers,

breaking their grips and some of their hands and fingers. The train then departed for Winnipeg.

Abhorrent scenes such as those described above occurred in many parts of Canada in this past century. Margaret George of the Sto:lo nation of the Fraser Valley in British Columbia, and now a member of the Burrard band, confirms that First Nations children of British Columbia underwent similar experiences. She remembers (5 October 1990) that upon being removed from her home as a child she was taken to a cattle pen at Agassiz, where she was assigned a number and measured for her height. The children were not trusted to know how old they were and so were sent to various residential schools across the province according to their height rather than their actual age. She states that siblings were frequently sent to separate schools, but in instances of being at the same institution were not permitted contact with each other. The children were removed at age five and remained in the residential schools until age sixteen. Contact with parents was strongly discouraged and strictly limited. A number of children returned to their homes during summer months but were estranged from their families because they no longer spoke or understood their native tongue. They also had a new set of behaviours and values their families could not understand. Those children who remained at the schools throughout the summer months had no contact with family or community members for the many years they were confined to the schools.

First Nations children in British Columbia were compelled by the Indian Act to attend the residential schools. The first of these schools appeared in British Columbia in the 1880s and continued to operate until the latter 1960s. Thus, four generations of aboriginal children were raised during their most formative years outside the influence of their home communities. As Randy Fred points out in his Introduction to Celia Haig-Brown's *Resistance and Renewal: Surviving the Indian Residential School*, the bridge between generations which would have permitted the transfer of cultural knowledge from one generation to the next had been virtually destroyed. (Haig-Brown, 1988: 12)

In the residential schools powerful measures were taken by the caretakers of the children to force the children to abandon their languages and dissuade them from identifying with the lifestyle and values of their parents. Those who attended the schools recall horrific tortures and beatings at the hands of their care-takers for speaking their native language. (Comeau and Stantin, 1990:96)

A Salish elder, Henry Castle, recalled (interview, September 11, 1990)

the punishment he received for speaking Halkomelem, the language of the Coast Salish people:

When his classmates were caught speaking their language one day at Coqualeetza school near Chilliwack they had their mouths pried open and sewing needles driven through their tongues into the bottom of their mouths by their caretakers. This type of treatment is corroborated in contemporary literature. (Haig-Brown 1988:11)

Recent reports dealing with the residential schools focus on the horrendous physical and sexual abuse many native children suffered while in these institutions. Abuse of this nature follows its victims throughout their lives and colours their relationships with others. Those who have written about these institutions emphasize those aspects of the institutions designed to assimilate aboriginal children. Undoubtedly, the religious denominations operating these schools under contract with the federal government wanted the children to embrace their particular brand of Christianity. (Tennant, 1990:79) However, the federal government and private wealth in British Columbia were strongly motivated and committed to the establishment of these institutions for their own reasons.

So it was that, coincident with the creation of the residential schools, the Indian Act was amended to outlaw potlatches. (Tennant, 1990:51) The potlatches were outlawed not exclusively at the behest of the Christian denominations active in missionary work in that era — government officials and individuals at the head of fishing and lumber companies also wanted the “potlatch laws” introduced. In this case, however, it was not because they cared whether potlatches were “heathen” practices or not but because potlatches took Indian people from village to village, thereby depriving those companies of the Indian labour they were determined to have. (Gla-  
vin, 1990:82). To the federal government and resource companies, the residential schools represented a workforce the companies could draw on in future in order to expand their wealth and thereby their influence on the Pacific coast. However, as European immigration increased, interest in Indian labour subsided. White hands replaced brown hands on the cannery lines, in the sawmills, and out on the fishing grounds.

To the Christian denominations, the residential schools were factories producing souls for Christ. To the Indians, however, the schools came to represent the loss of their children. Parents and children were made strangers to each other. In the schools, children did not learn the meaning of family — what it meant to be son or daughter, brother of sister, aunt or uncle. Therefore, when many of the children who had survived the residential school experience returned home and started their own families,

they found themselves ill-prepared to be parents. It is a universal truth that one learns to be a parent in a family, not in an institutional setting. (Miller, 1989:196). The social order in aboriginal communities is built on the extended family. The schools virtually obliterated Indian family life and, therefore, severely compromised the social order of most Indian communities. In part, this is what is at the base of many of the social ills in Indian communities. Infant mortality rates are three times greater for native infants than for non-native. Three times more native children than non-native children will take their own lives. Ninety-five percent of all native children enrolled in schools will drop out by grade 12. The high incidence of family violence and poor health due to diseases linked to self-destructive lifestyles and poverty continue to tear at the fabric of First Nations families. (Comeau and Stantin, 1990:79). These grim statistics are, in part, the continuing legacy of the residential schools. Unfortunately for Indians, residential schools were to remain a fixture in British Columbia until the 1960s. It is a grim irony that throughout the entire era of the residential schools, white people and their churches would loudly extol the virtues of family life.

After the Second World War, the economy of British Columbia expanded at a rate unprecedented in its history. The coffers of the provincial government swelled in large measure due to the rate at which its resource-rich land mass was being exploited. Ottawa and Victoria would now introduce a wide range of social programs and educational opportunities for its citizens. Sadly, in this same era the aboriginal people of B.C. were all but forgotten. First Nations families had been relegated to a gray world on reserves and would not join in the "great potlatch" being given by the governments.

### *Child Welfare*

In the late 1960s, rows of small, dark children were marched from the remaining residential schools in the province. As the children were led to the waiting buses to be taken to the planes and trains which would take them back to their home communities, the keys were turned in the locks of the great doors, forever closing the residential schools and marking the end of an era.

Now that the schools were closed, bureaucrats met in air-conditioned offices in Victoria and Ottawa trying to decide which senior level of government would take on the responsibility for the protection and care of Indian children. Outside consultants were canvassed for their views and

recommendations on how best to extend child welfare to Indian children. H. B. Hawthorne, the author of a study entitled "A Survey of the Contemporary Indians of Canada: A Report on Economic, Political, Educational Needs and Policies," wrote about the jurisdictional confusion over the responsibility of child welfare services on reserve. He described child welfare services to Indians in most of Canada as being unsatisfactory to appalling. Hawthorne recommended that child welfare services of each province be extended to the reserves and that the Indians be induced to accept this arrangement. However, no thought was given as to whether or not these services were compatible with the needs or wishes of the Indian communities.

Much of the wrangling between Ottawa and Victoria over child welfare services to Indians was rooted in differences over which government would pay for these services. Both the provinces and the federal government remain uncertain as to who is really responsible for child welfare on reserve. For now, Victoria is happy to apprehend Indian children on reserve, leaving Ottawa to pick up the bill while the children are in care.

Like the dark-frocked missionaries of old who were determined to save native children from satanic forces, the bureaucrats in their dark three-piece suits set out to rescue native children from the new devils of post World War II Canada, namely poverty, "unsanitary" homes, and neglectful parents. No turn-of-the-century missionary pursued his work among the Indians with greater vigour than the freshly scrubbed young social workers assigned to inquire into the welfare of Indian children newly returned from the residential schools. These graduates of reputable schools of social work had learned their lessons well. An elderly couple on a reserve was an inappropriate resource for a child whose parents were away working in a cannery or perhaps out on a trapline or tending fishing nets on either the Skeena or Fraser Rivers. Multi-generational households were not good for children either, and therefore a child's presence in one was good cause to remove him or her. Any dwelling which lacked the amenities of a suburban community also prompted the social workers to remove children. Evidence of alcohol consumption in an Indian home was sufficient reason to take a child. Reports of neglect from reliable informants like school teachers, priests, or Indian agents needed no investigation and therefore were good enough reason to apprehend children. After a while, local white merchants, commercial fishermen, and taxi-cab drivers came to be regarded, in the eyes of the social workers, as reliable witnesses to the failings of Indian parents.

In 1955, of the 3,433 children placed in protective care in British Co-

lumbia, less than 1 percent (twenty-nine) were native. By 1964, native children represented 34.2 percent (1,446) of the total 4,228 children in care. According to Patrick Johnston, author of "Native Children and the Child Welfare System," native children accounted for 36.7 percent of all children in care in British Columbia in 1980, even though only 3.5 percent of all children in the province were native. According to Johnston, the placement of non-native children was usually a temporary situation. This was not so for native children who were either shuffled from one foster home to another for years or adopted, mostly by non-native families. The majority never returned home.

In the early 1960s and 1970s many Indian children adopted by whites were removed by their new families to countries overseas or to locations in the United States. Many adoptions of Canadian Indian children were arranged by social workers who did not give a second thought to the implications of sending thousands of aboriginal children to other countries. The patronizing logic of the early missionaries and decision-makers in Ottawa was reflected in the decisions of these new "protectors" of the Indian children.

While the conditions under which the children lived in the church-run schools of a decade earlier were deplorable, at least the parents of the children knew where they were. Children taken into care by the provincial Child Welfare authorities could be anywhere in the province. In the case of adoption, members of a child's family or band council knew it was just as possible for the child to be in Australia as in Canada. What is more, the children were now to experience a sense of isolation greater than that which they had experienced in the church-run schools. In the schools, the children may have been occasionally visited by a relative or a friend of the family, or they may have breached the rules to socialize with a sibling. The foster home system often did not hold out this opportunity. In the case of adoption the child would, in most cases, never be seen or heard of again by his or her family.

The apprehension of First Nations children continues to this day. Half the population of First Nations people now live off reserve, and, accordingly, one half or more of recent apprehensions of native children take place in urban settings. This gives the lie to the claim of provincial Child Welfare authorities that apprehensions of Indian children are on the decline in British Columbia. The urban ghetto is now the environment from which Indian children must be rescued.

Leaders of First Nations communities and organizations in British Columbia continue their struggle to resolve the "land title" question and have

aboriginal rights enshrined in Canada's constitution, while faceless bureaucrats in both Victoria and Ottawa continue their low-profile debate over who is responsible for Child Welfare programs and their costs. As for children in need of protection, major newspapers in British Columbia still report cases of social workers ushering Indian children into flea-bag motels under the care of unskilled child-care workers because of the lack of adequate foster homes.

Publicly overshadowed by the larger legal and political fights between First Nations and the federal and provincial governments, individual tribal councils, bands and native organizations can be found on any day engaged in a gritty battle with Child Welfare authorities to reclaim their children. Their hard-won successes at establishing child welfare programs are seldom celebrated in the media or on the conference floors where First Nations leaders gather. White politicians from Victoria and Ottawa are now seen traipsing from one Indian meeting to the next in an effort to be seen alongside First Nations leaders discussing the "land title" question. The media faithfully reports these events and focuses attention on First Nations leaders. Ironically, it is the ordinary First Nations families who are responsible for advancing the native title question to its current status. It was, after all, Ron Sparrow and his fellow band members who won the most significant ruling from the Supreme Court of Canada on the matter of native fishing rights. All the while, white politicians are scrambling to have their names associated with Indian leaders who had no direct hand in the success of decisions like "Sparrow."

In the offices of a major Indian organization in downtown Vancouver, a young Indian woman, Lizbeth Pointe, is hunched over her computer terminal looking for clues which will help reunite an Indian child adopted in the 1960s with his natural mother, who has been engaged in a three-decade long search for her lost child. Ms. Pointe's face lights up, she makes one telephone call and shouts, "Bingo!" She has just discovered the whereabouts of the child for which the mother had been searching for some twenty-seven years. She then telephones the mother, who is overwhelmed with emotion. Mother and child will eventually meet. Lizbeth Pointe returns her gaze to her desk and surveys the remaining 250 active files which contain the hopes of families looking for their lost children and the dreams of children looking for their families. Lizbeth Point sighs and returns to her computer terminal.

The Indian Act of 1876 was indeed the instrument which separated First Nations people from their tribal land holdings and Indian children from their parents. This legislation estranged Indians from whites and one

First Nation from another for over a century. Now the world has changed: not only are First Nations families reclaiming their children, they are also reclaiming their rightful place in Canada. Whites, who for a century systematically dispossessed Indians from the land, are now turning to the Indians for crucial lessons on how to live with the land. While tragic events involving Indian children continue to unfold, there is now hope the lives of aboriginal families will dramatically improve in the coming decades.

The day will soon come when First Nations people and whites will sit together to take part in the greatest potlatch of all. They will talk and sing about the wonderful world they will be leaving for their children. In the middle of the great feast hall two small figures will approach a fire. The feast hall will fall into silence. All eyes will be on the two children. One child will be white, the other will be brown. The children will raise a document over their heads. In the dim light of the feast hall, the title of the document will be seen and it will read, "The Indian Act." The two children will smile and gleefully toss the document which had kept their two peoples strangers to one another for more than a hundred years into the flames. A great cheer will sound in the feast hall.

Far off in Ottawa, a public servant in the Department of Indian Affairs will clean out his desk, walk to the door, turn off the lights, and turn the key in the lock for the last time.

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## More Than Us

As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted,  
The sea and land were created,  
And, they continue to be created.  
So were we . . . and so do we.

We depend upon the sea,  
And give nothing back, except rarely.  
We live upon the land,  
And more or less give our bodies to it.

Women and men alone can not do it;  
A greater power must bless them.  
Then there is true love,  
And the birth of a child will follow.

Our children are not just ours,  
They come from more than just us,  
And must return to something more or less  
More than us.