

Rediscovering the horrors of residential schools

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It's a gut-wrenching and dreadful way to begin the month of June, which was designated Indigenous History Month by Justin Trudeau's government in 2017, from the Aboriginal History Month declared by Stephen Harper's government in 2009, which arose from the June 21 Aboriginal History Day declared by Jean Chrétien in 1996, deriving from a proposal from the Assembly of First Nations' forerunner, the National Indian Brotherhood, in 1982.

The first headlines appeared last week in a local news report in British Columbia's southern interior, then quickly spread across Canada, and then around the world: “Mass grave of Indigenous children discovered in Kamloops.” “`Horrible History': Mass Grave of Indigenous Children Reported in Canada.” “Memorials spread for 215 First Nations children found buried in mass grave in B.C.”

Because this history is important and still unfolding, and facts matter, it may be useful to know that, strictly speaking, there was **no discovery of a mass grave** at the site of the Kamloops residential school last week. That is not what Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc Chief Rosanne Casimir announced last Thursday, in a statement that was reported in such a way as to draw the whole country into a moment of genuine anguish and perfectly righteous outrage.

It's not just that the words “mass grave” do not appear in Chief Casimir's painfully thoughtful and thoroughly clear statement of fact. Perhaps this is just a detail, but whatever term is used to describe the site adjacent to the Kamloops Indian Residential School — a Roman Catholic complex built in the heart of the Tk'emlúps community in 1890 that was still a place of internment in the late 1960s — the community's elders were well aware of it. Efforts to investigate and document the burials began in the early 2000s.

New ground-penetrating radar that was brought to the effort over the Victoria Day weekend “confirms” what the Tk'emlúps elders had long known, Chief Casimir stated. By precisely situating the remains of what would appear to be 215 children who had been enrolled at the residential school, the technology had allowed the Tk'emlúps community to “verify” what the people had known but could not properly document.

Given the atrociously high death rate at the residential schools, and the annual confinement of hundreds of children from Indigenous communities throughout B.C.'s southern interior at the Kamloops institution — the largest of Canada's 130 residential schools — it is expected that far more burials will be located at the site.

The National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation at the University of Manitoba has managed to find documentary evidence of only 51 deaths of students who were enrolled at the Kamloops school between 1915 and 1964. “At this time we have more questions than answers,” Chief Casimir said.

But it's not just that no mass grave was “discovered” in Kamloops over the Victoria Day weekend. It's that for Canada's Indigenous people, the legacy of the schools isn't just history. It remains an open wound, and everybody else seems doomed to “discover” the horrors of those institutions over and over again, forgetting, remembering, and then

forgetting again. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission released its findings only six years ago. The findings contained meticulous research about the legions of the dead the schools produced, and concluded quite reasonably that the decades-long federal policy of confining Indigenous children in those institutions amounted to cultural genocide. The fourth and final volume of the TRC report is a 266-page compendium titled *Missing Children and Unmarked Burials*. Down through the decades, the “discovery” of forlorn grave sites associated with the schools has been a routine occurrence in Canada's news media. Some were once well-tended cemeteries. Others were hastily dug meadows, long turned to overgrown mounds of earth, filled with the dead and forgotten. And then “discovered.” And then lost again.

The TRC report was able to identify the schools attended by 3,201 of the 4,118 children on the “death register” now maintained by the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation. “It is likely that the majority are buried in school or school-related cemeteries,” the report states. Nowhere in the 266-page report do the incendiary words “mass grave” appear. They shouldn't have to. Another mere detail, perhaps, but the TRC researchers found that it wasn't just difficult to find the grave sites. Sometimes they couldn't even locate the sites of the residential schools where children were known to have died.

Imprisoned in chronically underfunded institutions that were incubation chambers for epidemic diseases, the children died in droves. Enfeebled by homesickness, brutal and sadistic punishments and wholly inadequate nutrition, they died from tuberculosis, pneumonia, the Spanish influenza and measles, among any number of proximate causes. At the Old Sun boarding school in Alberta, there were years when children were dying at 10 times the rate of children in the non-Indigenous population. At Fort St. James, 78 people died in the 1918-19 influenza pandemic — students, staff and local Indigenous people. Father Joseph Allard, the principal, reported that “a large common grave was dug for them.”

As for truth, it comes out every few years, only to fade away again, and it's been this way ever since 1922, when Canada's newspapers were running front-page headlines about a booklet about the schools written by P.H. Bryce, the Department of Indian Affairs' chief medical inspector, titled *The Story of a National Crime*. As for reconciliation, Canadians are clearly as up to it as they've ever been, as the outpouring of empathy and solidarity over the past few days has made plain. But justice is another thing altogether.

The TRC report chronicles barbaric punishments, duly recorded by federal bureaucrats and officials with the churches that ran the schools. Students shackled to one another, placed in handcuffs and leg irons, beaten with sticks and chains, sent to solitary confinement cells for days on end — and schools that knowingly hired convicted “child molesters.” Only a few dozen individuals have ever been prosecuted and convicted for the abuse those children endured.

These grave injustices are “the fault of Canada,” Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said the other day, as though the federal government was just a bystander, and it's everyone else's fault. On Tuesday, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops pledged to “continue walking side by side with Indigenous Peoples in the present,” as though they were just pedestrians, in some sort of parade.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was just one part of the 2006 Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, which concluded 15 years of headline-

grabbing horror stories arising from lawsuits involving tens of thousands of residential school survivors. Roughly \$1.6 billion was eventually paid out in a general compensation package, and another \$3.2 billion was paid out by the Independent Assessment Process (IAP) to 38,000 victims of severe abuse. A pittance. As part of that process, the federal government tracked down 5,315 alleged abusers – not to bring them to justice, but to see whether they had anything to say to the IAP. Only 840 of them showed any interest. It's not clear that any of the alleged abusers were ever convicted.

For whatever its merits, the deal let the federal government and the churches off the hook, making all these crimes “the fault of Canada.” And this just might have some small thing to do with why we're always so shocked, and then we just seem to forget, and all those open wounds, after all these years, remain unhealed.