

## Book Reviews

*Indian Education in Canada: The Legacy*, Volume 1, edited by Jean Barman, Yvonne Hébert, and Don McCaskill. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1986. Pp. 172.

If there ever was a monument to the importance of ideas and attitudes, it is Amerindian education in Canada. From the days of the first missionary attempts to educate Amerindians into being Europeans over three hundred years ago, until very recently, the basic assumptions behind experiments in educating Amerindians have not changed. Despite ostensible shifts in goals and considerable variation in details, not to mention a huge amount of expressed good intentions, Euro-Canadians are only now beginning seriously to question their perception of Amerindians as "savages" with rudimentary cultures, desperately in need of guidance in order to realize their potential as fully developed human beings. Thus baldly put, that statement may shock some educators, who would be quick to disclaim any such attitude on their part. Sadly, the record speaks for itself: as study after study has shown with dreary consistency, official education programmes have been designed by Euro-Canadians to "fit" Amerindians into western civilization, a goal seen as achievable only by first of all destroying Amerindian cultural systems.

The means taken to realize this seem incredible today: forcible separation of children from their parents, teaching the children to disdain their ancestral way of life and in some extreme cases even their own parents, forbidding them to speak their native languages, to mention only a few. Such measures, instead of preparing the children for participation in mainstream Euro-Canadian society, resulted in disorientation and loss of a sense of identity, as well as in even more serious damage. To make matters worse, it was all too easy to blame the Amerindians themselves for this record of unrelieved failure: as "savages," they did not have the personal psychological equipment to cope with the civilized world.

The situation is not without its touch of irony: during the days when western Amerindians were surrendering their lands by means of the numbered treaties, it was they who insisted that government-funded schools be part of the deal. They had realized all too clearly that the drastic changes already beginning in their lifestyles would call for some fundamental reorientations, and they pinned their hopes on government schools to prepare their children for what was coming. The federal government, under pressure to get a settlement, agreed only reluctantly. The naïve expectations of the Amerindians that they would be accepted into the new system as equals, with freedom to adapt within their own cultural frameworks, were quickly dashed; instead, they found themselves engaged in a struggle of wills as Euro-Canadians set about using schools as instruments of assimilation. It was a struggle that had been long underway in eastern

Canada, but still had to be refought in the west before the changing social scene following World War II sensitized public perceptions to the plight of the Natives.

This collection of essays brings together well-known authorities to examine some Canadian experiments in Amerindian education. The tale is one of well-laid plans and ultimate frustrations, beginning in New France in the seventeenth century (Cornelius J. Jaenen) and ending up in the Yukon in the twentieth (Ken Coates). Included among the other essayists are J. Donald Wilson, who takes a sharp look at what went on in nineteenth-century Ontario; Jacqueline Gresko on Catholic Amerindian schools in Saskatchewan and British Columbia; and Jean Barman on an Anglican experiment in Yale, British Columbia, deep in the Fraser Canyon. Their accounts all deal with the same phenomenon: the general assumption that has prevailed since the beginning of colonial settlement, that it was up to Euro-Canadians to lead the way to a bright new future (the white man's burden), and all that Amerindians had to do was to follow. As these essays make only too clear, that assumption has proved unworkable in a wide variety of geographical locations, social ambiances, and sets of immediate goals and rules. Until Euro-Canadians not only accept but internalize the fallaciousness of their traditional perception of Amerindians, and learn to deal with them as equals, the frustrations will continue.

The one essayist to delve into what schooling means to Amerindians is Marie Battiste. In her article, "Micmac Literacy and Cognitive Assimilation," she makes the point that there is literacy and literacy: the sequential type propagated by Western education she sees as "the modernizing agent of society and an economic commodity necessary for national development." (P. 23) As such, it became "a sword of cognitive imperialism." The traditional literacy of the Micmac, on the other hand, is symbolic, based on collective dialogue and ritual, creating "a shared belief of how the world works and what constitutes proper action." (P. 26) Missionaries began toward the end of the seventeenth century to reduce Micmac to writing, at first in the form of ideograms; later, attention turned to developing roman scripts. According to Battiste, by the early 1980s, the Micmac had four different roman scripts, and no consensus as to which one should serve for all. She dodges the problem when considering the future of Micmac education by maintaining that it must be flexible enough to "allow a choice of systems and knowledge."

The first successful move on the part of Amerindians to cut the Gordian knot of their educational problems occurred in northeastern Alberta in 1970, when local Natives occupied the Blue Quills Indian Residential School, resulting in Canada's first Native-administered school. Describing how this came about in "The Changing Experience of Indian Residential Schooling: Blue Quills, 1931-1970," Diane Persson says that the Department of Indian Affairs gave the new administration six months to prove itself,



convinced that the whole affair would turn out to be a unique episode without consequence. Instead, it proved to be a turning point, as Amerindians abandoned the passiveness with which they had previously accepted Euro-Canadian impositions. Today, sixteen years later, not only is Blue Quills still under Amerindian management, but the movement toward Native control of schooling is rapidly spreading: in 1984, 187 bands were operating their own schools, claiming a fifth of the total number of Amerindian pupils. Almost half of these schools are in British Columbia, and most of the rest on the Prairies. The introductory overview to the essay notes that two school districts are now Amerindian-controlled, that of the Nisgaha on the West Coast and the Cree of northern Québec. But the continuing federal budgetary grip has ensured that Native decision-making powers still remain limited, and progress is slower than reasonably could be expected. Much official reluctance remains to be overcome; as these essays point out very well, it is not easy for mainstream society, after centuries of assumed superiority, to admit that in dealing with Amerindians, it might be a good idea to try cooperative partnership instead of bossiness.

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*Another Country: Writings by and about Henry Kreisel* edited by Shirley Neuman. Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1985. Pp. 362.

Henry Kreisel has written two novels and a volume of stories distinguished by an effortless narrative style whose direct statements, discreet symbolism and apparent simplicity conceal unexpected moral complexities. On closer consideration they reveal the distressing complication of his prevailing themes (freedom, responsibility, justice, history, betrayal) and the ambiguity of his outlook. "I think, for me, there is always this element of doubt which expresses itself in a kind of ironic point of view" (p. 201), he comments in *Another Country*, and throughout the book we find examples of the ambivalence, ambiguity and duality that colour his temperament. Countering and attempting to placate this penchant for "irony and paradox" (p. 45), however, is a strong humanism, that is, a willingness to accept man with all his faults because even they contribute to a noble, redeeming, moral vision of humanity. "I am Man," he proclaimed precociously when he was nineteen years old, and "Man is eternal." (P. 38) At issue in Kreisel's writing is an ongoing debate between skepticism and secular faith: can our faults be reconciled in an ethical system? or is evil — especially in the twentieth century — so pervasive and destructive that it makes a mockery of any such system?

*Another Country* provides the personal and social background that gave rise to these questions and to the artistic sensibility that grapples with them in fiction. It contains memoirs, letters, essays, interviews, poems, stories and a play, as well as ten essays on Kreisel's works and a bibliography.