

“A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School Systems”. John S. Malloy

A Book Review

By [John C. A. Manley](#)

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In my novel, [Much Ado About Corona](#), one of the indigenous characters, affectionately called “Granddad” by the people of Moosehead, was abducted as a child by the RCMP and put into the Canadian residential school system. Now, at the end of his life, he again finds himself under government “care,” locked away in a COVID-restricted nursing home.

Today is National Day for Truth and Reconciliation in Canada.

In recognition, I wanted to give a short review of the principle book I referenced to craft Granddad’s back story:

A National Crime: The Canadian Government and The Residential School System, 1879 to 1986 by John S. Milloy. Considered “One of the 100 most important Canadian books ever written” by the Literary Review of Canada, it provides a surprisingly balanced overview of what took place, without resorting to unsubstantiated hype or otherwise excusing the neglect and abuse many (but not all) of the children suffered.

I came to the book expecting damning testimonials and eye-witness accounts from the indigenous population. Instead, I discovered a collection of reports, letters, articles and other written material by non-indigenous citizens — dating back as far as the 1800s — speaking out against the injustices they saw.

Many of the citations are from government paid inspectors exposing how the children were “overworked, overtired and underfed” and subjected to a “poor diet” of “unfamiliar food,” “overcrowding” and “poor ventilation” that inevitably led to diseases like tuberculosis.

Despite such hard-to-read reports, I felt the book provided a balanced and not so absolutely dismal overview of this “national crime.”

In many cases, some students did benefit from certain schools, especially those children coming from homes where the parents had neglected or abandoned them for drink or other vices.

Many of the staff and schoolmasters were ardently looking out for the wellbeing of the children, at their own expense, but simply had insufficient funding or concern from the government.

As the chief medical officer of the Indian Department reported in 1907, a “trail of disease and death has gone on almost unchecked by any serious effort on the part of Indian Affairs.”

In spite of little mention of the sexual abuse allegations, John S. Milloy’s extensive historical references presents a crime scene that cannot be excused. While much of the aim of the residential school system may have been rooted in good intentions to improve the future of native children, the benefits of “killing the Indian and saving the child” were far outweighed by the negatives of what very much neared an attempt at cultural genocide.

You can purchase a copy of *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and The Residential School System* through your local bookstore or [online](#).

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John C. A. Manley is the author of the full-length novel, [Much Ado About Corona: Dystopian Love Story](#). He is currently working on the sequel, [Brave New Normal](#). John lives in Stratford, Ontario, with his son Jonah, and the ever-present spirit of his late wife, Nicole. You can [subscribe](#) to his email newsletter, read his [full bio](#) or find out more about his [novel](#).

Featured image: Study period at a Roman Catholic Indian Residential School in Fort Resolution, NWT (Licensed under CC BY 2.0)

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