

**FILM REVIEW – *We Were Children***

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The thought-provoking film *We Were Children* – directed and produced by Timothy Wolochatiuk, Kyle Irving, and David Christensen – is about the indoctrination and abuse of approximately 150,000 Indigenous children in Canadian residential schools. The movie narrates the stories of the now-grown victims, who still feel the unforgettable pain created by the Canadian government, even after the state has apologized for those horrendous acts. This film review provides a summary of the key events and atrocities portrayed in the movie, narrated from the perspective of real-life victims such as Glen Anaquod and Lyna Hart. It further explains what human rights, and specifically Indigenous rights, were violated throughout the residential school period in Canada.

Between the years 1850 and 1996, Indigenous children were taken from their homes and placed in boarding schools. In these schools, they were taught the ways of the white man (that is, the ways of the majority population in Canada) and forced to get rid of their so-called “savage” ways. This included practicing Christianity, learning English and/or French, eating mainstream Canadian foods, and assimilating into the ways of the Western world rather than having access to their own culture. The film commences when Lyna was plucked from her home and taken to a residential school. She recalls being terrified of this new place full of nuns and priests; she felt out of place even though she was surrounded by other Indigenous children from other communities. Lyna was given a bath upon arrival, which

included a thorough scrubbing because incoming children were considered very dirty. This notion of inherent dirtiness was imprinted on their young minds, as highlighted in the scene where Lyna sees an older girl washing her hands and face so intensely that she asks why she is doing that. The girl replies, “Because I am not white enough. See, you’re dirty.” After making comparisons amongst themselves, the older girl concludes that Lyna was “dirty” because she was darker than she was.

Sexual abuse of the children by the priests was common in many of these schools. Both Lyna and Glen, who attended different schools, narrated incidences of sexual abuse. Lyna caught a priest raping one of the boys. When she tried to report it to a nurse, the woman chose to disregard what Lyna said even though it was evident that she knew it was very possible. As the movie went on, it hurt my heart to find out that the priest learned of Lyna’s discovery and proceeded to sexually abuse her, too. When Glen asked to go home for a visit, a priest at his school trapped him in a small basement room where no one could find him. Glen soon realized that there was a girl down there with him, and two priests could come down and rape the girl constantly. While Glen was later rescued by one of the nuns, he realized he could never ask to go home again – and the girl in the basement was not discovered.

Maybe the hardest part of this film was that many of the Indigenous elders could not fathom that these stories were true, because they truly believed that the priests and nuns would never do such harm. This can be seen in a scene where Glen and his friend ran away to his aunt’s house. They explained that the food at school was unbearable and rotten, and she replies that this is nonsense because no school would treat students this way. Sadly, she betrayed the two young boys and called the school to come to pick them up. Glen, like many others, came to realize that he just had to live through this unbearable situation until he aged out of the residential school system. Lyna was very angry at the church when she finally got out of school and didn’t want anything to do with it again. Many former students of Canada’s residential schools suffer long-term mental health consequences, with high

mortality rates even after they leave school. The film notes, for instance, that several boys later died in adulthood due to alcoholism or suicide.

It is important to remember that the residential school program was not only legal, it was actively supported by the Canadian government. It was designed to assimilate Indigenous youth into Canadian society at the expense of their culture and self-determination. Former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper presented an apology for the government's involvement in residential schooling in 2008, admitting that it was meant to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions, and cultures. Some saw it as "killing the Indian" while letting the child live. Stories from survivors such as Glen and Lyna help illustrate how basic human rights were abused in these schools. Considering the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), for instance, this program deliberately disregarded Articles 1-3, 5-7, and 18. Basically, everyone has the right to equality, liberty, recognition as a person before the law, beliefs, religion, participation in the cultural life of community, as well as freedom from discrimination, torture, and degrading treatment (UN General Assembly, 1948). Evidence from victims' stories and even directly from the government apology in 2008 shows us how many of these rights were not protected, and perhaps weren't even considered applicable to Indigenous people at the time.

The rights violations central to residential schooling shows a broader pattern of abuse among Indigenous peoples. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) was adopted by the international community because it "protects collective rights that may not be addressed in other human rights charters that emphasize individual rights, and it also safeguards the individual rights of Indigenous people" (Hansen, n.d.). Action must be taken against the discrimination of and disregard for Indigenous people – in Canada and around the world. As stated in Article 8 of the UNDRIP: "Indigenous peoples and individuals have the right not to be subjected to forced assimilation or destruction of their culture" (United Nations, 2011).

As Lyna says in *We Were Children*, none of this had to happen – but while it was certainly a bad thing that some people want to forget, communities need to talk about these abuses and acknowledge that they occurred. People do not want to talk about it and victims may even feel shame for what they endured. These Indigenous youth were robbed of their childhoods, and the residential school system displayed a disregard for human dignity. These realities show a side of the church that people do not want to talk about, but frankly many people know it is a problem. These abuses, from the past but also those that continue in our present, must come to light.

## References

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