

Early Warnings: Elizabeth Shaw's Letter, 1898

I have had it on my mind to give you an idea of what I saw at the Port Simpson Home, because believing that you as the Secretary of our Montreal Women's Missionary Society should know the condition of affairs as I found them.

I have delayed writing from week to week as the task is anything but a pleasant one. I know you will understand how distasteful it is to me under the circumstances, but I feel impressed that I should not be dealing honestly with my church or by the Missionary Society if I did not apprise the proper authorities of what is going on in the Institution of which I was Matron for five weeks.

Good schools are an absolute necessity and under the Indian Act attendance upon schools is compulsory in B.C. What these Indians need as far as I can make out is something that will enter into their everyday life and purify that. I suppose the originators of the Home system thought that the sending of well-trained sons and daughters back into their Indian homes was the best method of accomplishing this, but I think that no candid worker in this field will go so far as to say this result has followed.

After 5 weeks of matronship I could understand why. In this Home there were 21 boys ranging in age from 6 to 20. From the oldest to the youngest every one of these lads had his thinking done for him. The minutest detail of every boy's life was supervised by somebody, and his thinking faculties were fairly superintended out of him. At least that is my opinion.

What do you think of locking dormitory doors upon boys most of whom are on the verge of young manhood; this is the unwavering rule at the Home, and if during the night one of them wanted to go out, he had to knock on the wall, and, if he succeeded in waking the Matron she had to get up and let him out, await his return and relock him in again. If he did not succeed in awaking her ... but I need not explain further. And this is the routine of the day. From the overseeing of their private devotions in the morning to the

putting of them to bed at night they are constantly being watched. For 13 years in the East I taught children of all grades and sizes and I know that this kind of treatment would have simply paralyzed their faculties. Are the Indians made of different materials?

I often looked at those 21 boys in the Port Simpson Home and wondered if a method which made a machine of human beings formed in the image of God could be the right one. What do you think?

Before I came into this work I, in common with most of the other women of the Women's Missionary Society, supposed that the one great aim of these Homes was to bring these Indian children to God and through these children to reach the older people. You may imagine my feelings when on questioning the boys I found that only 3 out of 21 had any desire to become Christians. You may know how my heart was wrung when I found that most of them fairly hated the name of religion. This was particularly the case with the older ones. In fact they all seemed to detest everything in connection with the Home and really when I think of some of the scenes that I witnessed there I can hardly wonder at their feeling.

The slightest mistake on the part of the boys brought down the wrath of the authorities, and the severe floggings which were the almost inevitable consequences of wrong-doing seemed to me in many cases to be out of all proportion to the gravity of the offence. I know that children need to be corrected and Indian children are probably no exception to this rule, but to keep them in a chronic state of fear, as these children apparently were, seems to me to be wrong and unnatural.

I can truthfully say that I never was any place where I saw so little manifestation of love and sympathy as in that Mission Home at Port Simpson. "Never trust an Indian" was a quotation I heard very frequently and truly it seemed the rule in that Institution. None of the boys were trusted and right well they knew this lack of faith in them. One of the big boys put the matter in a nut shell

when he said, "We never receive anything here but a threat or a command."

These children never seem happy; they did not play as other boys so far as I could see and there was considerable skin disease among them which was in my opinion partly due to insufficient diet. I would not like to state that such a thing was of a regular occurrence but I can positively say that again and again during my matronship I was compelled to set meat before the boys that my brothers would not set before their dogs. It was so nearly rotten that the smell of it when cooking was so bad that I really could not stay in the kitchen, and the boys, hungry as I am sure they were, said that they could not eat it, this, when there was abundance of good wholesome food in the house, seemed to me inexcusable. In fact there was abundance of everything thanks to the generosity of the badly mistaken people of the East. And if you could have seen the piles and piles of warm comfortable clothing locked away in the store-room and then took a look at the thin patched, yes and ragged clothes of the few boys that were not supplied with comfortable clothes by their family friends. When I asked why I could not make over some of those good clothes for the 2 or 3 orphans who needed clothes so badly, I was told that these were to be exchanged for fish.

I very much fear that the Girls' Home is conducted on pretty much the same principle. Of course I never lived there and consequently did not see behind the curtains of the Institution as I did in the Boy's Home. One incident did come to my personal notice. There was a girl in the Home that caused a great deal of trouble. It happened that her Father wished to take her away from the Home before she had stayed there the requisite length of time and eventually the case went to law. My cousin, Mr. Harris of Vancouver, pleaded the suit which was decided in favour of the Home. The girl was taken back to the home and shortly became very troublesome to the new Matron who finally handed her over to the Principal of the Boys Home to see what he could do with her. Nellie was taken to the Boys Home to act as general servant for the family, and he told me himself

that she seemed delighted at the prospect of the change saying "Take me anywhere only take me out of this."

Nellie went down to the village one night without permission. She was found and taken directly back to the Richards establishment and some time after midnight I was awakened by awful screams from downstairs. As soon as I had recovered from my fright I awoke to the fact that Nellie Tennis, a full grown young woman, engaged to be married, was receiving a severe thrashing at the hands of the man who has the spiritual and temporal over-sight of the Boy's Home.

My blood nearly froze in my veins as the shrieks of the unfortunate woman rang through the house, and to my dying day I shall never forget the agony in her voice as she pleaded "Oh Mr. Richards, pray for me." Nor the tone of his as he replied between the blows "Pray for you? I am tired praying for you." After the bearing was over the culprit was thrust into the Skookum House, a little stuffy pantry off the kitchen without air or light. Just here I might explain that I understand that there are prison houses in connection with all the Homes under the auspices of the Methodist Church, though of course I only saw those in the Homes at Port Simpson, but if these are fair samples, they are a disgrace to our fair Methodism, at least so it seemed to me. They are regular jail cells without modern jail improvements. But to return to poor Nellie, who was locked up in one of those places (I forget how many days) she lay on the floor with no better bed than an old mat and a blanket.

You will probably wonder that the children in these Homes stay there when the majority of them seem so unhappy. I wondered at it myself until I discovered that the parents of guardians of the children bind them over to the Home authorities for a term of years and are powerless to get them out until the expiration of the contract, unless special permission is granted by the Home authorities. The parents are thus powerless in the matter and if the children attempted to run away there is no place for them to go even if they succeeded in getting out of the Home.

Source: United Church Archives