

Canada's familiar abuse tale

At lunchtime today President Mary McAleese is in Canada to perform the official opening of Ireland Park, a memorial to the 38,000 Irish famine victims who emigrated to Toronto in 1847, writes **Mary Raftery**.

These Irish were part of a wave of white settlers who pushed westwards in Canada during the 19th century, exiles from their own land in turn exiling the original inhabitants, the Indians or First Nations peoples, from theirs.

Exile, however, is by no means all we had in common. As I discovered last weekend, we shared an almost identical approach to particular groups of children, whom we locked up and generally starved, beat, raped and abused for much of the 20th century.

I was in Calgary (in central Canada) at the invitation of Phil Fontaine, national chief of the General Assembly of First Nations, to address a major conference on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the process of being established to deal with the legacy of the Canadian Indian residential schools.

The Canadians were curious about the Irish industrial schools and had asked me to explain what had happened in this country, both historically and more recently as we attempted to come to terms with our own record of savagery towards institutionalised children.

In Canada during the latter half of the 19th century, as white settlers pushed the native peoples from their land, the Canadian government resolved on a final settlement of what it called the "Indian problem". Indians would be assimilated, "civilised" and "tamed". They would be trained to become useful members of Canadian society, filling suitably menial positions of labourers and servants. The plan to eliminate entire cultures, a kind of cultural genocide, would start with the children.

Virtually all First Nations youngsters - boys and girls - were forcibly removed from their families and dispatched often hundreds of miles away to residential schools. Once there, they were taken apart and broken, with the stated aim of turning them into good little English, or French-speaking, Christians.

In an uncanny echo of the Irish industrial schools, the Canadian government decided to hand the management over to religious. Catholic religious orders ran two-thirds of the 130 schools, with the remainder managed by Anglicans, Methodists and Presbyterians.

Most prominent among the Catholic religious orders who ran the schools were the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, whom of course we know well in this country as having presided with such unapologetic brutality over the reformatory for boys in Daingean, Co Offaly.

This was the place where the Oblate in charge informed a visiting delegation in the late 1960s, in the most matter-of-fact manner, that he favoured the beating of children naked, as this was more humiliating for them.

Appalling abuses were also routine throughout the 100-year history of the Indian residential schools in Canada, the last of which closed in 1996; 150,000 native children are estimated to have gone through the system, exactly the same number as here in Ireland. About 80,000 survivors of the Canadian system are alive today - in this country it is reckoned at about 30,000.

In all, three generations of First Nations, Métis and Inuit children had their culture, language and religion literally beaten out of them. Gruesome punishments were devised for children as young as five caught speaking their own languages, with accounts of pins being hammered through their tongues.

The effects of such extensive brutality, combined with widespread sexual abuse and the endless years of being told that they and their parents and families were evil and worthless, have left Canadian native

communities severely damaged, but not defeated.

Amid a plethora of court cases and class actions, the Canadian government finally agreed a settlement with First Nations negotiators last year. There is to be a central reparations scheme, which will compensate all those forced to attend residential schools, with higher amounts for those who were physically or sexually abused.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, also part of the settlement, was chosen as a mechanism where survivors could feel safe telling their stories. It is a key tenet that the process for revealing the truth should in no way result in further harm to the survivors.

This is a principle which we seem to have lost sight of. The reports of hurt, humiliation and upset emerging from the Residential Institutions Redress Board are disturbingly numerous. The drastic reduction in the number of cases being investigated by the Ryan Child Abuse Commission has left many survivors confused and angry. Both of these processes have been surrounded by a level of secrecy which can only be described as obsessive.

As the Canadians embark on their own dark but necessary journey into their cruel and criminal past, they could learn from our experience that processes which started out with the best of intentions have ended up doing perhaps as much harm as good to those who suffered the most as children.