

A slice of colonialism: The long view

When flying Air Tindi at just the right height you can see the waves in the land, low hills really, all facing the same direction moved by erosion and the prevailing north-west territorial wind. I imagined some exceptionally long-lived being looking down and watching the movement of these waves in the land. If on such a time scale people could even be seen, we would appear as short-lived land plankton appearing here and there in the valleys between the waves. Fort Simpson is in one such valley on the Mackenzie River.

I am told that Simpson was a natural meeting place for trade in the North West Territories which is why the Hudson Bay Company established a fort in the area, but I was there concerned with another aspect of our colonial history – the Indian residential schools. The residential schools were often brutal places in the north as well as the south. One woman had her ankles broken as a girl – an effective deterrent to running away. Priests, nuns and older children sexually abused younger children. But the psychological damage was often just as great. One woman was taught that she was “the Devil’s child” because her parents had not been church-married, and she was punished regularly. Another child was told that she was an orphan, and it was many years before she discovered that she actually did have living parents. Although Indian Affairs regulations allowed children to visit their parents for Xmas starting in 1948, northern children and their parents were not told of this right until decades later.

The purpose of the residential schools was to change the culture of the people. One former chief said that he considered himself “half-English,” because, although he can speak his Dene language fluently, he thinks in English. This means that he automatically thinks English concepts, and translates them into Dene, rather than thinking Dene concepts. Thus he thinks in terms of owning things rather than just using them.

I learned that the Dene did not give up any land when signing Treaty 11 because land was not culturally something that could be bought, sold or traded. It was for temporary use, like the water we drink or the air we breathe. Thus the Dene of this region never accepted reservations nor any restrictions to their use of any part of the land.

But I note that the corporations have now begun to sell bottled water, and I imagine bottled air will not be far behind. Those that cannot afford good quality air will have to buy cheaper, polluted air. That long-lived being, watching the waves in the land, has probably developed a sense of humour by now.