The College on the Hill

Isabelle Knockwood, with Gillian Thomas. *Out of the Depths: The Experiences of Mi'kmaw Children at the Indian Residential School at Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia*. Lockeport, NS: Roseway Publishing, 1992 (ISBN 0–9694180–2–7).

Review by Margaret Harry

The Indian Residential School at Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia—the college on the hill—was established in 1929 and finally closed in 1967. During these years, a substantial number of Mi'kmaw children in the province were removed from their families to spend the greater part of their early youth in the institution. There, they were not only deprived of all the ordinary support of family life, but boys and girls were forcibly separated, so that siblings were unable to communicate with each other, often for months on end. The children were punished for speaking their own language, and for disobeying any other of the many rules of the school. Beatings were common and arbitrary. Those who were caught trying to run away were locked up, had their heads shaved, and were fed bread and water. In addition to all of this, the children were forced into long hours of manual labour, often working with machinery and equipment that was too large, heavy, or complicated for them. Not surprisingly, there were horrifying accidents, which left several children maimed for life. Then there were those who died of disease, suffering from neglect in the harsh environment of the school. From 1936 to 1947, starting at the age of five, Isabelle Knockwood was a student in the school, bewildered, frustrated, and often terrified, lost in a misery which it has taken her many years to come to terms with.

In some ways, *Out of the Depths* is only too familiar a story. In this book, Knockwood chronicles the bitter ironies of all such institutions, where the actual experience of the children was a horribly distorted reflection of an apparently well intentioned original purpose. "Discuss . . . the evils of Indian isolation" (48) read the "Instructions to teachers" in a school which deliberately isolated the children from their communities, their families, and even from each other. And Knockwood admits that her intention in writing the book is at least partly therapeutic, for according to the advice of a mentor, "Isabelle the adult has to go back into that school and find Isabelle the child and take her by the hand and get her out of there" (159). Nevertheless, the book contains a great deal of valuable first–hand information, not only from Knockwood's memories of her own experience, but also from the detailed corroborative evidence provided by the many former students she interviewed and taped. Individual teachers are identified and given personalities, and the children also emerge not just as the helpless victims of the horror, but as characters who each reacted differently to the traumatic experience of their youth, and who followed many different paths in learning to deal with it.

Apart from its value as a document of witness, however, Knockwood's work also presents some useful insights into the problems facing researchers in her field. As she herself remarks, "If I had never attended the Indian Residential School and had based this book on material in libraries and archives, rather than on the students' own experiences, I would have told a quite different story" (142). Yet she conscientiously includes several of the positive reports given by some of the former students as well as the generally positive records of the archives of the Sisters of Charity and the extent to which the memories of nuns who had worked at the school differed from her own. While she usually leaves such discrepancies without much comment, unlike her straightforward identification of the biases, for example, in media reports, it is clear from several examples she gives how conflicting testimony might arise. In one case in particular, that of Nancy Lampquin, the beating that Nancy received before "disappearing" from the school is graphically described. Like that of other children, such as Mary Agnes Ward, Nancy's beating occurred immediately preceding her death, but no official connection between the beating and the death was ever made. The children were told "in an off–hand manner" the day after Nancy's beating that she had tuberculosis, and they later learned that she had died. An attempt made by Knockwood's father to discover the truth was officially discouraged: "The priest apparently put my father off by pointing out that he wasn't Nancy's next of kin. He said her father was out working on a trapline somewhere in the Quebec woods and could not be located, so the matter was dropped" (134). On the other

hand, the official school records mention neither the beating nor the tuberculosis, saying only the following of Nancy: "Very delicate and sick for almost a year. Died" (134).

Even where they can be regarded as accurate, official records may be problematic in other ways, reflecting as they do the inhumanity and exploitative attitudes of those who make them. As Knockwood comments, concerning the application form for the school, "neither we nor our parents knew at the time that when they signed the paper the Indian Agent gave them they were appointing the school's principal as their children's legal guardian" (112), and the inclusion of personal documents in public records can be hurtful even after the passage of time. In Knockwood's own case, her parents had written a "special reasons" letter, of which she knew nothing "until over fifty years later when I came upon it in the Nova Scotia Public Archives and felt shocked to find what my father had written as a pleading letter should be a public document for all to see" (112). Knockwood's point is not that the letter should not be made public—indeed, she publishes an excerpt from it herself—but rather that its inclusion without permission or even consultation in a public archives carries a not so subtle bias of discrimination and indifference.

Out of the Depths is by no means a scholarly study, nor has Gillian Thomas, a professor at Saint Mary's University whom Knockwood met while pursuing her degree in anthropology, attempted to influence it in any such way. Rather, it is a series of personal reminiscences and anecdotes, reinforced by material provided by classmates, and further expanded by details from archives and other public records. It has the value of exposing yet another episode in the shameful treatment of the Native Peoples, with all its human cost. It also presents objectively some of the real difficulties inherent in writing the history of an officially sanctioned oppression. As a personal memoir it is wholly effective.