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Review of *Indian School Days* By Basil H. Johnston

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Indian School Days. By Basil H. Johnston. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995. Map, appendix, glossary. 256 pp. \$12.95 paper.

In 1939 Basil H. Johnston's mother told him he would soon be going on a short trip. The reasons for her seeming upset during preparations for his departure became clear to the ten-year-old Ojibway only when the agent came to collect him. Basil realized he was being taken to Spanish, a small village in northern Ontario and the site of the St. Peter Claver's Indian Residential School. *Indian School Days* renders the autobiographical remembrances of the author's years at the Jesuit boarding school.

Residential schools for Native American children were spread throughout Canada and the United States through the 1950s. Funded by the government and religious organizations, their mission was to assimilate students into majority society. To the educators in charge, this meant the elimination of tribal language and customs and the implementation of a "Canadian" or "American" as well as a vocational

curriculum. This was in no way multicultural education. As Johnston writes, "we were taught to be resourceful. But unless one has a sense of worth and dignity, resourcefulness, intelligence and shrewdness are of little advantage."

Johnston's account of his education with a hundred and fifty or so other Indian youths is absorbing. A gifted storyteller, he recounts vividly his arrival at the school, his designation as number forty-three, and his ordered, monotonous life. Johnston also writes of the other students and their ways of surviving the austerity and intended cultural conversion. "Were it not for the spirit of the boys, every day would have passed according to plan and schedule, and there would have been no story."

Indeed, the boys had spirit. They bartered the limited food, prayed to Kitchi-Manitou for good weather so they could play sports, and experimented with forbidden experiences like horseback riding—all this while attempting to avoid the vigilant eyes of the priests in charge and the quick punishments certain to follow any infringements of the rules. The author is able to convey the humor in such episodes along with the poignancy of childhood in such an unnatural setting.

Anyone interested in education, history, or Native Americans should find *Indian School Days* an engaging narrative. Basil H. Johnston, valedictorian of St. Peter Claver's class of 1950, has made his voice heard in a wonderful book.

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