

Letter To Global & Mail: What Margaret Wenthe Said Was Racist, Harmful And False

By Grahame Russell, November 4, 2008

Margaret Wenthe should be let go by the Globe and Mail. More importantly, the GM should be let go.

Writing critical and hard-hitting articles (even if snide and mean-spirited, as Wenthe's can be) is important and necessary (not the snide and mean-spirited parts). Publishing racist opinions that are harmful and fundamentally hateful should not be permitted or endorsed.

It is bitterly ironic, but not surprising, that the GM published Wenthe's defense of Pound's racist comments ("What Dick Pound said was really dumb – and also true", Globe and Mail, October 24, 2008) at the same time as a Truth and Reconciliation Commission is being established in Canada to investigate the abuses and harms caused by the Residential School system that the Canadian government, Churches and society forced upon First Nations peoples from the late 1800s through to 1996.

(Dick Pound should also be let go from Vancouver's Olympics organizing committee for his remarks: "We must not forget that 400 years ago, Canada was a land of savages, with scarcely 10,000 inhabitants of European descent, ...").

While there are differences between particular Residential Schools, in general, some 150,000 Indigenous children were taken from their families and communities and sent to Christian Church schools where they were forbidden to speak their languages, sing their songs, celebrate their cultures and spiritual practices, even wear their hair long, and more. Numerous are the testimonies of physical and sexual abuse and suspicious deaths.

As the years and decades went by, as languages and cultural and spiritual practices were intentionally eliminated, family and community bonds were destroyed. The Residential Schools contributed to ethnocide.

Does Wenthe believe the Residential School system was a "cultural development" program that was a "force for good" aimed at, umm, exorcising the savageness from Indigenous children, thus giving them a chance "to interact with the modern world like everyone else"? (Words and phrases in quotes are drawn from her article)

But this is not only an issue about the racist opinion of one person concerning the Indigenous peoples of what is now known as "Canada". The GM should publish a retraction and an apology. Wenthe is a well known conservative Canadian journalist such that when it published her article the GM was in effect stating that this is a debatable

issue – whether or not the Indigenous peoples were “savages” when the so-called ‘civilized’ Europeans arrived. (Are “savages” even human?)

It is easy to come up with similar scenarios. Will the GM publish an article, using choice racist adjectives, that justifies Nazi Germany’s policies and actions based on arguments that Jews were lesser people? Or an article about the inferiority of Africans (“negros”, soon to be labeled by the “n” word), such that they could be bought and sold as slave chattel, tortured and killed?

Or how the less-than-human Indigenous peoples of all the Americas were “pagans” (a word like “savages” or using the “n” word), such that they should be forcibly converted by the Europeans to Christianity, or exterminated ... and stripped of their land and resources, by the way?

While it is important and enlightening to discuss cultural differences, and there were many between the humans invading from Europe and the humans already living in what came to be known as the “Americas”, labeling the Indigenous peoples as “savages” and inferior has nothing to do with cultural differences. Harmful arguments advocating racial superiority (let alone any other category of fundamental human inferiority or superiority) should not be enabled and supported.

Why does the GM believe it fair journalism to present arguments that the First Nations peoples were “savages”?

With the risk of over-generalizing, I think the answer to this question is that a majority of Europeans and people from nations created by European expansionism (Canada, United States, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa) remain today incapable of accepting collective responsibility for our history based in part on the African slave trade (causing the deaths of tens of millions of Africans), the carving up of Africa into colonial, racist pieces of pie for the European powers, the extermination or subjugation of Indigenous peoples across the world, particularly in the Americas (causing the deaths of tens of millions), and the wholesale occupation (stealing) of lands and resources. While Europeans and nations created by European expansionism comfortably cast moral judgment on other nations and nationalities that have committed atrocities at home and abroad through history (the Soviet Union under Stalin, China under Mao, Nazi Germany, for example), we refuse to acknowledge our historical participation in and benefitting from large-scale crimes against humanity.

Instead, we fabricate explanations that become justifications: ‘It really was not that bad, what happened here with the first “contact” of European “explorers”, because there really weren’t humans living here, only “savages”, “pagans”.’

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission faces a big and sad challenge of documenting “the truth of survivors, their families, communities and anyone who has been personally

affected by the Indian Residential Schools (IRS) legacy” (<http://www.trc-cvr.ca/indexen.html>).

Mainstream Canada faces a more daunting challenge: to introspectively and critically look at how the racist convictions of Christian superiority of the Second Nations justified and enabled the conquest of what is now known as “Canada”, right through to justifying and enabling the Residential School system.

As the Globe and Mail will not fire itself, would it underwrite and open itself to its own ‘Truth Commission’ of sorts? Name a panel of independent media experts and historians to carefully review GM archives related to the Residential Schools and prepare a full report – holding no punches – as to how the GM did its part to justify and legitimize the Residential Schools for so many years?

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