

Hélène Ferrarini, *Allons enfants de la Guyane: Éduquer, évangéliser, coloniser les Amérindiens dans la République*. Toulouse, France: Éditions Anacharsis, 2022. 287 pp. (€16.00)

In this attractive little book (which is a truly big book!), Hélène Ferrarini opens up a little explored area of the recent history of French Guiana: the stranglehold of the Catholic Church on Amerindian, and to a lesser extent Maroon children, through boarding schools known locally as “homes.”

In a long opening section on these “homes,” Ferrarini questions the archives to understand how, in this country of human rights, in this country where Church and State are strictly separated by law, the State, legally responsible for providing egalitarian, free, compulsory, and secular education, could simply abdicate that responsibility, shunting it onto the Church. One can understand that a dyed-in-the-wool Catholic rejoices, around 1945, to see young Amerindian “savages” being civilized under the care of good Fathers and good Sisters. We understand a little less how the good Catholic who has become the prefect (the highest representative of republican authority) encourages the undertaking. And it’s hard to understand at all how the national department of education, for lack of funds, incompetence, and especially laziness, continues today to cover up the permanent kidnapping of children who should be under its care.

In the second part, Ferrarini changes her role from historian to ethnographer, collecting the words of those who were housed in “Indian homes,” as well as their children and parents. The testimonies are staggering: the children, wrenched from their families, are undressed and washed. Their hair is cut. They are put in a row. Siblings are separated, the mother tongue is banished, family food is prohibited. In short, any reminder of the community cocoon is smothered. The obligatory mass, the stultifying recitation of the formulas of the catechism, are also part of a ritual, a ritual disconnected from their lives. We “desavage” them (the verb *désauvager* exists in French Guiana), we create choir-boys, housekeepers ... Phew! It’s done: we have, at the very least, disguised them as civilized people. How about we start a little earlier? Children would be more docile, don’t you think? And perhaps because Ferrarini refuses to condemn the protagonists, she does not report the words of Father Barbotin, which everyone knows: “To turn a little Indian into a good Christian, you must first make him an orphan.” And almost everything boils down to one wound: the deprivation of the children’s freedom to be themselves.

Some ex-residents try to understand what could have motivated their parents to let them go; they would like so much to clear them of guilt: “they thought they were doing the right thing, they didn’t know, they had to ...”. Well, no, not

exactly. They weren't obliged, but the presence, the relentlessness of the gendarmes tended to make people believe they were doing the right thing. Some tried to minimize the injury: "We learned things." Yes, they learned things. They learned to know the Other, the language of the Other, the Other's mode of operation, strategies, defenses, attacks ... and weaknesses too. Eventually, out came one—and now two—generations of young adults ready for the struggle, ready to claim their lands, their languages, their cultures. On equal terms. What a victory!

Yes, they learned things. But how much have they missed? Who will give them back the language of their parents? Who will teach them to hunt and fish again? Who will give them back intimacy with the forest, the river, the sea ... an intimacy that requires years of tenuous, refined, complex learning, an intimacy that makes the Amerindians great connoisseurs of an environment that only they and the Maroons know how to tame without harming it?

Then comes the question that everyone is burning to ask: all this for what result? Has the strategy of evangelizing the little "savages," nourishing "true hope for the Christianization of the primitive tribes" (a nun, 1967) borne fruit? Even the clergy have doubts. As one priest put it in 1978, "We have youth, we can mix it, work it! Yeah! It is quite the opposite." The ex-residents of the boarding schools entrust Hélène Ferrarini with half-tone testimonies: "Religion in the end is just indoctrination"; "I think that prayer, sometimes, it helps me too." Ferrarini then rightly insists on the equally aggressive assault led by the evangelical churches. As for the weakening of shamanism, we can be reassured: it still has a bright future.

A final word on the excellent preface: the man who signs it acted in the play. He knows what he is talking about. So precisely, he talks about it with modesty, but the emotion is on edge.

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