Boys who were inmates at the Victoria Industrial School (VIS) from its opening in 1887 to its closure in 1934 often suffered extreme, violent, and capricious penalties and encountered calculated psychological manipulation. The violence they experienced and the justifications school officials put forward to account for such injurious practices are explored through case files, public investigations, newspaper reports, revelations from former inmates, defensive statements given by superintendents, and confessions by staff. Exploration of these sources suggests that, despite repeated recommendations from Toronto City Council, the public, and commissions of inquiry, violent penalties persisted. Despite claims to the contrary, the VIS was, for many boys, a cruel and merciless institution.

THE VICTORIA Industrial School (VIS) opened its doors in 1887 in Mimico, Ontario (located 20 kilometres west of Toronto), with the intention of reforming wayward boys, preventing their further deviance, and inculcating self-control. Annual reports suggest these goals were peacefully pursued through a progressive and patient reform programme, which included farm and industrial training, education, religious instruction, and recreation. Such reports paint a pleasant portrait of an irenic and amicable existence within institutional walls.
This annual accounting, however, obscures the institutional underbelly, which, when exposed, reveals a violent and at times brutal ethos.¹

Punishments and penalties experienced by boys at the VIS often exceeded what can easily be grouped under corporal punishment, institutional training, or force. Michel Foucault maintained that cultivation of “proper” subjectivities proceeds most effectively through painstakingly slow and subtle manipulation of the soul.² Emile Durkheim, for his part, was convinced that “proper” training and education does not invoke the fear of sanctions to curb violations of the rule. Instead, like Foucault, he maintained that training must be a creative and subtle power that works through a deliberate process and subtle manipulation.³ Violence possesses little of discipline’s creative, slow, or subtle character. Rather it is immediate, destructive, and rooted in the antecedent causative condition. Beyond servility, resentment, and fear, little is created. It is, as Durkheim articulates, essentially “expiation.”⁴ Although VIS officials found it an effective means through which to maintain order, intimidation through violence does little to (re)shape pernicious behaviour: in fact, just the opposite may result. W. H. Auden writes: “I and the public know, what all schoolchildren learn, those to whom evil is done, Do evil in return.”⁵

Of note are three separate, but interconnected, events during which the violence of VIS staff and officials became an object of public scrutiny. First was Superintendent Donald McKinnon’s “inquisitorial method.” To ferret out sexual misconduct, the superintendent queried inmates accused of wrongdoing with purposely vague questions, such as “what have you to tell me?” Adamant boys were advised to prepare for a beating. Confronted thus and out of fear, boys inevitably not only confessed their own wrongdoing, but implicated other inmates in pernicious conduct. Second, during 1912, the violence confronting inmates received

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⁴ Ibid., p. 182.

considerable public attention as a result of the actions of Mrs. Fredrick Spain. After visiting her son (Wilbert) and witnessing the conditions of his restraint (he was handcuffed to a bed) as well as physical evidence of an extreme beating, Mrs. Spain contacted the Toronto Daily Star to voice her disgust. On this occasion, the provincial government conducted an inquiry. Third, in 1927 institutional violence became once again an issue for public scrutiny during an investigation by a committee of city aldermen into the death of a former inmate (James Brawn), which exposed the brutality inmates suffered at the hands of VIS staff. While the committee did not find cause for considerable concern, A. J. Scott, a VIS night-watchman and a devout Christian, felt duty-bound to confess what he knew.

Superintendents and staff deployed a number of narrative techniques to account for their violent acts. Giving an account of oneself typically presupposes that the self has an intimate connection to the suffering of some “other.” Such accounts are interlocutory means through which individuals attend to or address an “other” who has accused them of immorality, illegality, or violence. They thus contain the a priori demand of an outside agent who requests an evaluation of behaviour falling beyond prevailing normative boundaries. If I am to give an account, it is always to someone whom I hope to influence in accordance with my interpretation of events. Clearly, not all narrative takes this form, but an account that follows from allegation must, a priori, accept that the self, the I, has causal agency, even if that instance can be satisfactorily explained. Accounts given by VIS officials accused of violence attempted to span the fracture between their conduct and normativity. Toward this end, superintendents and staff claimed that they followed directions to eliminate “filthy habits,” to stamp out inmate violence, to maintain institutional order, to reveal inmate secrets, to keep boys from escaping, to imprint morality lessons, and, most conspicuously, to quell a state of emergency.

When discussing accounts it is useful to distinguish between excuses and justifications. To begin, excuses are accounts wherein an accused fully admits the immorality of the act being called into question, but shirks full responsibility through appeal to socially approved vocabularies. According to John Austin, excuses either deny intent, recklessness, or negligence. We are daily confronted by and deploy a deluge of excuses —

6 An account is not required for that which acquiesces with the established order. Staff who acted according to routine and common sense were rarely asked to explain their conformity. That is, while conduct connected to training, discipline, and correction was not subject to intense scrutiny and demands for an account, violence and abuse certainly were.
“Wasn’t me!” “My dog ate it.” “I have three other papers due.” “Did you see what she was wearing?” — to (re)cite but a few. Justifications, by contrast, are put forward by an individual who accepts responsibility for a violation, but in the face of extenuating circumstances denies the act’s pejorative quality. Thus, if the good that accrues from a certain course (such as speeding to get my labouring wife to the hospital) outweighs the harm (disobeying the posted speed limit), deviance can be justified. However, I would have greater difficulty justifying endangering her life and those of others to get to the hockey game before the opening face-off. Justifications, in opposition to excuses, appeal to normative rightness wherein the guilty not only rationalizes conduct, but maintains that it deserves positive points and perhaps thanks (for example, getting to the hospital in time).

Intended as a contribution to the social history of the institutional governance of youth in Canada, this study highlights the violence male inmates at the VIS endured and the justifications officials offered to account for their injurious practices. It is based on case files, public investigations of VIS practices, newspaper reports, revelations from former inmates, defensive statements given by superintendents, and confessions by staff. Exploration of these sources suggests that, notwithstanding repeated recommendations from Toronto City Council, the public, and commissions of inquiry, the VIS’s brand of violent penalty persisted. Inmates suffered extreme, violent, and capricious penalties and encountered calculated psychological manipulation. Despite claims to the contrary, the VIS was, for many boys, a cruel and merciless institution.

The VIS and its Inmates
Before moving to a discussion of the coercive penalties VIS inmates experienced, it is instructive to examine the boys’ demographic profile. A partial portrait of this population can be painted from the sample of 523 cases I drew from the VIS case books and registers for the years 1887 to 1929. The most obvious conclusion is that boys incarcerated at the school grew up in families that struggled to maintain even a basic economic existence in the face of uncertain financial times, war, and family instability. Boys’ fathers were employed in a variety of occupations, the common denominator being that their work was predominantly low-paying and short on prestige. Their fathers were night watchmen, cooks on boats, carpenters, railroad labourers, chimney sweeps, bartenders, butchers, and upholsterers. Given the nature of these occupations, it is likely that many boys who arrived at the industrial school were familiar

with privation. Fathers’ employment was rarely sufficient. In many cases, mothers were compelled to take on menial employment as domestics and washwomen.\(^\text{11}\)

To adapt to economic uncertainty, many parents encouraged their children to find work. From my sample, 43 per cent of boys were employed at some occupation before arriving at the industrial school. Tasks allocated to boys differed from those typically assigned to girls. Ruth Alexander has argued that many working-class daughters living in New York during the first three decades of the twentieth century took on waitressing, factory work, and domestic labour to relieve their families’ economic burden.\(^\text{12}\) Working-class boys in Toronto took on a variety of disparate, but similarly unskilled jobs. They worked as newsboys, as delivery boys, in print shops, in poolrooms, as pin-setters, and at making hats. Although the types of jobs changed over time, farm work (30 per cent), messenger jobs (30 per cent), and factory labour (11 per cent) were consistently among the most common forms of employment.\(^\text{13}\)

By the turn of the twentieth century, the great majority of boys arriving at the VIS (unlike girls of a similar age in comparable girls’ reformatories) had been convicted of criminal offences.\(^\text{14}\) As Table 1 illustrates, by 1910 two-thirds of commitments to the school were for crime; by 1921 that number had risen to 82 per cent.\(^\text{15}\) For this class of boys, superintendent Chester Ferrier explained in 1909, the official crime markers might just measure the tip of the proverbial iceberg. “[Ask] him how many times he was guilty of theft and not found out and he frequently confesses to many,” the superintendent explained.\(^\text{16}\) Ferrier was astonished by the number of times a boy could commit theft and escape detection. Of the 474 cases from my sample in which information was entered, 79 per cent of the boys had been convicted of a criminal offence before being admitted to the VIS, the most often cited being theft. Clearly, boys admitted to the VIS were well acquainted with criminality.\(^\text{17}\)

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\(^\text{11}\) AO, ISAT, RG 8–51–7, Case Books.


\(^\text{13}\) AO, ISAT, RG 8–51–7, Case Books.

\(^\text{14}\) Tamara Myers has argued that offences against the sexual and moral order were the main reason girls were incarcerated at the Girls’ Cottage Industrial School in Montreal. Tamara Myers, Caught: Montreal’s Modern Girls and the Law, 1869–1945 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).

\(^\text{15}\) AO, ISAT, RG 8–51–5, Miscellaneous, Report of the Commissioners Appointed by the Ontario Government, April 16, 1912. Bennett (“Taming Bad Boys”) and Neff (“The Ontario Industrial Schools Act”) make similar points in their work.

\(^\text{16}\) AO, ISAT, Annual Report, 1909, p. 18.

\(^\text{17}\) AO, ISAT, RG 8–51–7, Case Books.
Boys who entered the VIS were typically members of poor families, shirked their school obligations, and had been convicted of at least one criminal offence. Parents, police, judges, and Children’s Aid Society (CAS) agents agreed these boys had violated respectable conduct and required measures to correct their corrupt characters. How did the VIS attempt to alter the boys’ wayward course? To this end, the VIS boasted a six-pronged attack on juvenile deviance that included instruction in drill, industrial training, farming, education, religion, and athletics.

School officials promised to recreate wayward youth into men who found employment in the country, attended church, resisted temptations, and obeyed their parents. In short, the VIS disciplinary strategy attempted to mould boys into the nineteenth-century masculine ideal. Religious instruction taught self-control; sports instilled ways to temper aggression with restraint; industrial training created breadwinners; and drill encouraged the militaristic values of obedience, respect, and self-discipline.

School officials were convinced this brand of masculine training would prepare boys to be heads of working-class families and for respectable life in the community or (preferably) on farms.

Alongside this form of masculine training, we must consider how corporal punishment reinforced institutional order and appropriate manly patterns of behaviour. Throughout history there have been populations

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Table 1: Rationale for Commitment to VIS, 1898–1927

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rationale</th>
<th>1898</th>
<th>1900</th>
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<th>1906</th>
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<td>44</td>
<td>58</td>
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<td>137</td>
<td>156</td>
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</table>

Source: The evidence provided for these years is representative of the information presented in the VIS Annual Reports, 1898–1927. See also Bennett, “Taming Bad Boys,” p. 80.

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18 Ibid.
19 Hogeveen, “‘You will hardly believe I turned out so well’.”
20 Ibid.; Hogeveen, “Can’t You be a Man?”
21 Hogeveen, “‘You will hardly believe I turned out so well’.”
22 Despite structural shifts in conceptions of normative working-class masculinity, the VIS did not radically alter its reform programme to coincide with these alterations (Hogeveen, “Can’t You be a Man?”).
for whom violent penalties (such as birching or whipping) were considered not only acceptable, but required. Swaggering boys have traditionally been regarded as particularly appropriate candidates. In a recent article that considers discourses of corporal punishment manifested in mid-twentieth-century Canadian prison investigations, Carolyn Strange suggests that committee members in two major governmental inquiries implicitly agreed that treating men’s and women’s bodies differently was a critical benchmark of modern civility. Strange goes on to explain that “the visibility of the female body and its sensational exposure in the act” of corporal punishment to the male gaze partly explains gendered sensibilities regarding its use. Evidently, boys’ bodies were not regarded in the same way as those belonging to women and girls. Whether as students in public schools or as inmates of institutions, deviant boys have consistently been included among categories considered most deserving of a good caning.

Physical penalty possesses little of what Foucault deemed discipline’s “positive” or creative quality. According to Foucault’s influential treatise on the prison, by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, discipline centred on the soul largely displaced the infliction of pain on or to the body. That inmates of the VIS were on the receiving end of corporal punishments should come as a surprise to strict adherents of Foucault’s work. Boys were routinely subjected to corporal punishment well into the twentieth century, qualifying Foucault’s contention that by the turn of the nineteenth century “one no longer touched the body.”

Despite repeated recommendations to curtail its use, the school’s brand of violent penalty continued relatively unchallenged. However, by the 1890s, some citizens of Toronto found the VIS’s use of corporal punishment quite unsettling.

26 Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 11. See also Strange, “The Undercurrents of Penal Culture”; Watterson, “Chips off the Old Block.”
“Not for what one has done, but for what one knows”
VIS Superintendent Donald J. McKinnon’s tenure at the VIS’s helm was punctuated by frequent battles with the Public School Inspector from Toronto, James Hughes. Mrs. Warburton, one of the school’s teachers, furnished the inspector with intimate institutional knowledge. It turns out that Warburton and McKinnon frequently battled over institutional policy. Their mutual animosity reached a climax when Warburton wrote a number of damning letters to Hughes showcasing what she perceived to be the superintendent’s inadequacies. In addition to some of the more general charges, Warburton accused the superintendent of speaking untruths in boys’ presence and failing to secure his officers’ confidence. According to Warbuton, McKinnon never cooperated with them in attempting to secure order, and they had known him to pervert the truth to serve his own purposes. 27 Perhaps the most damaging of Warbuton’s challenges concerned the superintendent’s violent system of punishment. The teacher charged that the superintendent inflicted and sanctioned a system of “punishments injurious to the [boys’] health.” 28

Under considerable pressure from Hughes and Warburton, McKinnon vacated his position in 1893.

In an essay entitled “A Defence,” McKinnon responded to allegations of violence and cruelty by relaying the sequencing of events as he interpreted them. While historians can never be certain whether and by whom McKinnon’s confessions were read, I am convinced it was studied with considerable interest by, at the very least, the Industrial Schools Association of Toronto (ISAT). Indeed, “A Defence” was addressed to “the members of the Toronto Public School Board, and of the Industrial Schools Association of Toronto.” Whether the 27-page document was disseminated beyond these two groups remains unclear. A copy of the document made its way into the library collection of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

Before probing McKinnon’s essay more fully, it is important to pause to inquire about how an individual becomes positioned as one who must give an account. Nietzsche maintained that we give accounts only when interpellated as beings rendered accountable by external judges. If Nietzsche is right, I provide an account of my conduct because someone has called attention to it and demanded an explanation. In response and on the defensive, the a priori guilty individual attempts to reconstruct his or her action in light of a specific charge. For Nietzsche, imputation demands

27 Toronto, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education Library, Donald J. McKinnon, “The Victoria Industrial School and its Late Superintendent: A Defence,” n.p. McKinnon also accused Mrs. Warburton of wrongdoing; her influence was not always “of a nature to make the most lasting impression on the character of our boys, she refused to make her home in the school and it was not in the best interests of the school that a staff member make confidential reports to Hughes.”
28 McKinnon, “A Defence.”
that we reflect upon ourselves and the innermost processes intertwined with the events under scrutiny. It was in this spirit that McKinnon narrated his seemingly violent approach to maintaining institutional order. Such an account takes a narrative form that depended upon McKinnon’s authoritative ability to narrate linkages between events and his involvement, being directed, as it were in this case, toward persuasion.

In “A Defence,” McKinnon appears reflective, as if he were taking his tenure at the helm of the VIS as an object of rumination. Nevertheless, he also comes across as attempting to render intelligible to those awaiting his account how he could possibly rationalize his conduct. By narrating his account in public form, he seemed fully aware that an audience expected an allocution for what he had done and for what reason. Indeed, as McKinnon was giving an account of himself, he was not solely offering a narrative through what may be considered an objective medium. Rather, the account was an act, a performance for another as an allocutory deed.

Sections of McKinnon’s defence dealing with his methods and rationales for punishing deviant boys are instructive for what they reveal about institutional violence. Although boys’ heterosexual activities were not policed outside the institution to the same extent as was the case for girls, homosexual conduct among boys inside the VIS was one activity that staff condemned swiftly and decisively. Unlike the situation documented by Sharon Myers with respect to the Industrial Home of East St. John, attendants at the VIS maintained strict and continuous surveillance over the entire inmate population at night to counter “pernicious” sexuality. Feminist historians such as Michelle Cale have suggested that, because girls were defined in terms of their sexuality before they entered female reformatories, officials merely continued this practice. Similarly, in their

30 Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*.
31 Ibid.
33 Sharon Myers, “Revenge and Revolt: The Boys’ Industrial Home of East Saint John in the Inter-war Period” in Hilary Thompson, ed., *Children’s Voices in Atlantic Literature and Culture: Essays on Childhood* (Guelph, ON: Canadian Children’s Press, 1995). Myers points out that not until an investigation was conducted in 1929 was night supervision conducted, a situation greatly resented by the inmates.
study of girls’ resistance to the attempts of reform schools to regulate their wayward conduct, Tamara Myers and Joan Sangster provide evidence that sexual behaviour among delinquent girls was met with suspension of privileges or silence on the part of nuns who ran the institution. For boys, coercive sexual regulation began once they entered the institution, where the facility’s staff was ever vigilant to detect any hint of sexual conduct among inmates. Institutional officials such as Superintendent McKinnon regarded sexual conduct among inmates to be a direct affront to institutional order and wider normative structures of heterosexual masculinity. In testimony before the 1891 Commissioners Appointed to Enquire into the Prison and Reformatory System of Ontario, he stated:

A: There has been evil in the dormitories. That was about two years ago.
Q: You refer to masturbation?
A: Yes, and boys getting into the beds with each other.36

Boys who engaged in same-sex conduct within the walls of the VIS met with psychological manipulation and, at times, violence.37 To ferret out this type of behaviour, McKinnon employed an “inquisitorial method” that he rationalized by appeals to the greater institutional good of eradicating illicit sex. It was inaugurated one eventful evening after McKinnon had been summoned to settle a quarrel that had erupted between two boys. To his dismay, McKinnon discovered that one of the boys had accused the other of “very filthy practices” that he considered much worse than simple masturbation. When accused of the crime, the guilty boy confessed his involvement and implicated another boy.38 McKinnon was concerned about how far this trouble had infiltrated the institution. Placing the first two quarrelling offenders in a room under guard, he sent for other inmates implicated in the so-called filthy habits. Once he was able to draw out further names from the third boy, he similarly detained him and sent for yet another. This process continued until all implicated

38 McKinnon, “A Defence.”
boys were betrayed. To each and all interrogated, McKinnon framed his question in the same way: “Tell me anything you know of that’s very bad.” Such an interrogation was designed to elicit a response that would condemn not only the confessor, but others as well. Accused boys who did not acknowledge responsibility would, according to McKinnon, be “quietly told to prepare for punishment.”

Interrogated boys confronted a rather disagreeable double bind: confession prompted severe whipping; silence suggested complicity and incited violence. To force the recalcitrant to own up to their wrongs, or the wrongs of others, McKinnon thrashed silent boys until useful information was forthcoming. However, the superintendent rationalized in “A Defence,” punishment was rarely necessary. Boys were generally willing to confess things previously unknown to him. Violence, or the threat of violence, uncovered the confessor’s hidden knowledge — or knowledge the boy fabricated to avoid thrashing. According to McKinnon, his initial foray into inquisitorial methods was long, drawn-out, and (he rationalized) ultimately successful. The inaugural event lasted close to 24 hours and concluded only after the last boy had confessed. According to McKinnon’s unofficial tally, the result of his examination yielded “78 boys out of 115 [he interrogated] had confessed themselves or had been proved guilty of sodomy, French vice or masturbation.”

The accounts boys provided cannot be divided from the interlocutory scene in which they were elicited. Thus we are right to enquire whether the boys told the truth about themselves and the knowledge they possessed, or merely responded to the demands of McKinnon’s interrogation and the potential threats to their bodies. It seems that offering rumour and innuendo as truth served the purpose as well, or perhaps better than, telling the putative truth. Indeed, as Foucault maintains in his last lectures, confession impels a certain “manifestation” of the self that does not necessarily correspond to an inner truth, but whose constitutive truth can neither be taken as mere illusion. Rather, the confession in this instance is a speech act in which the inmate makes himself appear for another. That is, the decisive element is not that McKinnon now knew the “truth” about boys’ conduct. “It is the confession, the verbal act of confession, which comes last and which makes appear . . . the truth, the reality of what has happened.” The verbal confession was the fulfilment and manifestation of a truth already established.

39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Michel Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the College de France* (New York: Picador, 2005).
43 Ibid., p. 178
McKinnon’s narrative did not deny his actions. Rather, the former superintendent was adamant that, while he was indeed responsible for the “inquisitorial method,” the boys’ conduct not only permitted but demanded such a violent response. McKinnon’s narrative attempted to establish a link between his conduct and the boys’ suffering in a way that absolved him of ultimate responsibility. Put more rigorously, McKinnon’s inquisitorial system, he reassured his readers, served a purpose beyond mere punishment: by breaking down the inmate subculture of silence, it uncovered boys’ secrets, punished wrongdoing, and stamped out sexual and other forms of deviance. More importantly, he argued, such practices maintained institutional equilibrium and forced sexual restraint on the inmates.  

McKinnon’s essay produced and established the superintendent as justified in his deployment of violence to stamp out malignance. It seems to have pacified his critics. As far as the historical record reveals, no legal action was ever taken against McKinnon or his staff for employing the dubiously titled “inquisitorial method.” While McKinnon’s tenure was never the subject of formal investigation, his successor, Superintendent Ferrier, was scrutinized on two separate occasions when the violence inmates suffered became public.

“Ain’t I gettin’ skinny, mother?”
While McKinnon trained his sights on so-called “filthy habits,” under Ferrier’s tenure leaving the institution without permission was considered a grave offence that demanded a similarly severe response. Tamara Myers and Joan Sangster argue that running away was not only the most active form of reaction to an oppressive institutional structure; it was the most common. Since the VIS did not employ a full-time chaplain, the route taken to church on Sundays presented inmates with optimum conditions to make their break. As inmates were paraded through the streets of Mimico to attend religious services, they could be relatively certain that the few staff present would not be able to apprehend and then restrain them. Other boys, such as Chuck I., showed greater ingenuity. Chuck informed his teacher he was not feeling well. “Go to the School’s hospital and wait for a nurse,” his teacher told him. His sickness was a ruse. Taking a key he had somehow lifted from an unsuspecting attendant, he simply let himself out the front door. Chuck was never located again. Wilbert Spain, however, would not be so fortunate.

44 McKinnon, “A Defence.”
45 Myers and Sangster, “Retorts, Runaways, and Riots”; see also Myers, “Revenge and Revolt.”
46 AO, ISAT, RG 8–51–8, Case Files.
47 Ibid. Since a public inquiry was called to investigate his case, I have used this boy’s real name.
An inquiry held during late February and early March of 1912 demanded that Chester Ferrier — the longest-serving VIS superintendent — account for his disgraceful treatment of inmates. Allegations by Mrs. Fredrick W. Spain that her 15-year-old son Wilbert had been the victim of violent and draconian penalties at Ferrier’s hands triggered the investigation. Mrs. Spain formally complained that “her son, Wilbert Spain, after running away from the VIS several times was returned to the School on 9 January, and on that day was ordered by the superintendent to be put to bed with handcuffs placed on his ankles.” During Wilbert’s punishment, the superintendent had whipped him with a strap on the bare back and legs while he was chained to a bed. For a month and four days, Wilbert was compelled to wear handcuffs on his ankles and was fed a diet of bread and water.\footnote{AO, ISAT, RG 8–51–5, Series D, Miscellaneous, Report of the Commissioners, April 16, 1912.}

Mrs. Spain visited her son while he was under restraint and was understandably outraged after encountering his battered body. As a result of extreme beatings and deprivation of proper nourishment, Mrs. Spain found her son’s backside was covered with welts and that he had lost considerable weight. She wanted answers. Mrs. Spain then contacted Ferrier, J. J. Kelso, the Superintendent of Neglected and Dependent Children, the Toronto Daily Star, and G. Tower, chairman of the VIS board of management, to secure an investigation into the punishment her son had been forced to endure. Mr. Tower questioned the nature of Wilbert’s injuries. He did not think the “boy had been so severely punished as the report made out.”\footnote{“Was Youth Harshly Treated at Mimico Industrial Home?” Toronto Daily Star, February 26, 1912.} Perhaps, Tower rationalized, the report was the result of “a mother’s hysterics.” Other members of the VIS board took the allegations made by Mrs. Spain with a “grain of salt.” Mr. Hendry, for example, preferred to side with Ferrier. He stated, “I do not know the boy in question, but I do know the School and I have every confidence in Mr. Ferrier.”\footnote{Ibid.} Kelso, too, found Mrs. Spain’s account extremely difficult to reconcile. Although Wilbert had been tied up, Kelso reassured the newspaper reporter that the inmate was not suffering. Even if he was, Kelso maintained that some boys and some situations required a degree of force reserved for the worst possible cases. Besides, Kelso informed the Toronto Daily Star, Ferrier could be excused for exceeding established limits since “there were certain boys who had to be corrected and sometimes dealt with severely in order to maintain discipline.”\footnote{Ibid.}

While Kelso remained unconvinced that violent corporal punishment should be excluded from institutional practice, not everyone living in Toronto at the time agreed. Since the early 1890s, Toronto’s Humane
Society, with support from former mayor and VIS champion W. H. Howland, had spearheaded a campaign to rid the city of cruelty not only to children but also to animals. By the closing years of the nineteenth century, the abuse of children, the whipping of boys, and cruelty to animals for the purposes of training were all considered, at least among self-declared humanitarian elites, unacceptable. Thus it is not surprising to find that contemporary newspaper reports and editorials revealed the outrage many Toronto citizens must have felt about the allegations of abuse at the VIS. More than one commentator was bothered by Ferrier’s means of correction. Whips, chains, and starvation were not the “instruments for the expulsion of evil from the human heart,” one anonymous source commented in a 1912 newspaper article. Antiquated means of punishment were more likely to break boys’ hearts so they became “as wild beasts handled with whips and chains.” Presbyterian minister Rev. J. D. Morrow agreed. In his mind, the VIS was supposed to be a place of reform through humanitarian means, and such important work could not “be left in the remote control of men who believe that boys may be reformed by tying them up as beasts.”  

The use of physical violence to achieve rehabilitative ends was not what many Progressive-era Toronto citizens had in mind when contemplating effective training. According to one newspaper report, in a climate where prison reformers were “devising humane ways and methods of correcting grown criminals,” it seemed contradictory “to reserve its chains for the little children.” Public opinion in Ontario, the report continued, had steadily moved away from the “old and wrong notion that harsh measures [we]re imperative” to maintain institutional discipline. Although citizens of Toronto had initially considered the VIS a site of reformation, newspaper reports and allegations of abuse prompted calls for VIS officials to account for their violence. Indeed, by the early 1900s, press reports had directed considerable attention to the school in a manner that revealed its brutal underside. 

As the Spain case increasingly became a public issue, other boys came forward with similar accusations. Armed with these, the provincial

52 According to Jones and Rutman, the Humane Society was very energetic in its preventative efforts to end the physical abuse and suffering of children. By hosting conferences, speaking to school children, and distributing relevant literature, the Society attempted to ensure that the city’s children and animals would receive more humane treatment. Andrew Jones and Leonard Rutman, *In the Children’s Aid: J. J. Kelso and Child Welfare in Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), p. 76.


54 Ibid.


56 Ibid.

government agreed to assemble a committee to investigate Ferrier’s administration. The provincial secretary ordered Dr. Bruce Smith to investigate charges of cruelty to inmates. Since the city of Toronto bore the largest share of the expense in connection with the school, the council argued that the city’s interests should be represented.\(^{58}\) As a result, R. C. Harris and J. E. Starr (who was Toronto’s first juvenile court judge) were appointed to join Dr. Smith. While the Spain case drew critical attention to the abuse of one VIS inmate, the team of provincial and municipal representatives set out to locate evidence that VIS policy relied on violence against boys. On February 29, 1912, the provincial government passed a resolution that established an inquiry into conditions of institutional life and overcrowding at the VIS.\(^{59}\)

Unmoved by what secrets an investigation of his administration would ultimately reveal, Ferrier boldly informed the VIS board of directors that “he was not afraid of any investigation,” nor was he “ashamed of his methods of management.”\(^{60}\) On the contrary, he declared, he had never been overly harsh or cruel to any inmate. He, like McKinnon before him, rationalized his actions by appealing to the greater good of institutional order. Ferrier explained to a reporter from the Toronto World that “[d]iscipline had to be maintained and [I] would maintain it by [my] own judgment.” Moreover, he complained that the press was painting one dimension of a very complicated picture. Ferrier countered that, while he would not apologize for employing exceptional measures to suppress conduct detrimental to institutional stability, he was not unceasingly violent. On one occasion, he informed the reporter, an escaped (anonymous) inmate was returned, forgiven, and told to find something to eat.\(^{61}\)

While Ferrier attempted to pass himself off as a sympathetic figure, former residents publicly challenged that assessment. For instance, Cecil’s parents were certain that a stint at the VIS would break him of his idle and deviant conduct. While a resident for only five months, he told the Toronto World a harrowing tale of his stay under Ferrier’s reign. The former resident declared conditions inside the VIS so intolerable that he would rather “commit suicide than return to the School.” Reporters heard how Ferrier beat him and how attendants violently knocked him down for trivial offences. During his stay Cecil had received at least six severe whippings or “trimmings,” as he called them. On one occasion after Cecil was caught smoking a cigarette, Ferrier made him kneel with his arms resting over a chair. The superintendent then beat

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58 “Mimico School Inquiry by the City and Government,” Toronto World, February 18, 1912.
60 “Superintendent Ferrier Not Afraid of Any Investigation,” Toronto World, February 29, 1912.
61 Ibid.
him upon his naked back using a piece of tug-strap with a force so severe as to leave behind cuts and welts.62 Other former residents detailed similar tales.63 A resident of three years, who preferred to remain anonymous, informed the *Toronto World* that he had run away twice from the institution. On his return, the anonymous inmate reported, Ferrier “laid him over a chair, put his knee on the small of his back and beat him with a strap.”64

Abuses experienced by Wilbert, Cecil, and the anonymous informant were not confined to Ferrier’s administration. Former superintendent McKinnon freely admitted such techniques were central to maintaining an orderly institution. He informed the *Toronto World* that there were boys at the VIS who were like the “wild horses of the west.” McKinnon saw no harm in chaining up a boy overnight who had attempted to run from the facility. “When a boy got the idea in his head that he would run away,” McKinnon reasoned, “the only way to get it out was to tie him up for a few days so that he could not run away and that would get the idea out of his head.” Attempting to rationalize his and Ferrier’s actions, the former superintendent continued, “You know, there are boys out there who are crazy. They may be just crazy.”65 McKinnon thus attempted to exculpate himself and Ferrier by shifting the burden of blame to recalcitrant and exceptional inmates. Rather than acknowledge full responsibility, McKinnon, as was his practice when called to account, supplied the public with what he considered an effective means through which to shift accountability for the charges.

On February 29, the commission appointed to probe Ferrier’s administration formally commenced proceedings in a VIS schoolroom set aside for the occasion. Ferrier could only sit and listen while Mrs. Spain explained the suffering her son had endured. A horrified gasp ran throughout the room as she recounted how she came upon her son’s beaten body strapped to a bed. When she reached her son, Mrs. Spain said, Wilbert faintly queried, “Ain’t I gettin’ skinny, mother?”66 To corroborate his mother’s testimony, Wilbert was next to testify. According to newspaper reports,

63 This discussion is not meant to accept uncritically Cecil’s and the anonymous resident’s versions of events. Indeed, there are many reasons to be sceptical: for one, the boys might have been speaking to the press out of vengeance. Whether their accounts are fabrications is impossible to determine from the historical record.
64 “Boy Was Seen at St. John’s School with Heavy Iron around his Leg,” *Toronto World*, March 5, 1912. This informant said he was prepared to swear to his story before the commission if his name was withheld from publication. His reason for not wanting his name revealed was that his wife and mother-in-law were unaware he had been a VIS inmate.
66 “Superintendent of Mimico Admits that Boys Were Handcuffed and Put on Bread and Water Diet,” *Toronto World*, March 1, 1912.
he appeared a slight lad of 14 years, and the natural softness of his voice added to the drama his testimony produced. Wilbert supposed that he had been bad for running away, but not so bad as to deserve such severe penalty. He recalled the superintendent saying: “I suppose we had better chain you up for a while.” After he identified the handcuffs from among the exhibits, Dr. Smith asked Wilbert whether they were cold. Wilbert’s weak reply was: “Sometimes, sir.” During his weeks of confinement the irons were removed only twice: on one occasion so he could read to 40 other boys for an hour, and on another to allow him to take a bath. Weakened by confinement and physical violence, he was forced to crawl around in a meagre attempt to cleanse himself. Some staff had difficulty accepting Wilbert’s punishment, however. Mrs. Sherrick, a matron at the VIS, testified she had brought him milk, cake, and meat when conditions allowed her to go undetected. Andrew Gordon, the carpentry instructor and officer in charge of Wilbert during his punishment, had sent boys to play with him when Ferrier was absent.

Ferrier took the stand toward the close of the five-hour session. When asked about the validity of allegations levelled against him and his staff, Ferrier confirmed they were substantially correct, but attempted to absolve himself by appealing to the greater good of an orderly institution and the challenge posed by exceptional boys. He maintained that boys who were almost impossible to handle responded only to the harshest penalties. Ferrier admitted to punishing another boy by giving him a diet of bread and water over the course of 60 days, but was certain the meagre diet alone was insufficient punishment. Ferrier therefore had coupled this penalty with shackles and the strap. He was convinced that the tripartite strategy of shackles, the strap, and a diet of bread and water was the “only effective method of making bad boys good.” Handcuffs, Ferrier went on to say, were the only way to prevent obstinate boys from escaping. In response to Ferrier’s testimony, Dr. Bruce Smith retorted such practices were forbidden in asylums, even for the most violent “maniacs.”

Given the evidence presented, we would not be wrong to expect that the Commission had conclusively denounced the superintendent. Surprisingly, it did nothing of the sort. Instead of outright condemnation of Ferrier for employing violence to maintain institutional equilibrium, the Commission’s report offered several rationales for its use. That a

67 “Last of Leg Irons Seen at Industrial School,” Toronto Daily Star, March 5, 1912.
68 Ibid.
69 “Superintendent of Mimico Admits that Boys Were Handcuffed and Put on Bread and Water Diet,” Toronto World, March 1, 1912.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
72 AO, ISAT, RG 8–51–5, Miscellaneous, Report of the Commissioners, April 16, 1912.
private board of governors managed the VIS was among the reasons given to excuse Ferrier’s actions. The Board of Education for Toronto under the Industrial Schools Act had allowed a private board to assemble and administer an institution where discipline was entirely in the hands of the superintendent. According to the Commissioners, this fact probably “explain[ed] the situation.” Poking fun at and revealing the inadequacy of the Industrial Schools Board, Jack Canuck, a muckraking people’s paper, offered the following exchange:

   Mr. Citizen: “Is the institution to blame?”
   Jack Canuck: “Not altogether.”
   Mr. Citizen: “Is the Board to Blame?”
   Jack Canuck: “Very Likely.”
   Mr. Citizen: “What is a Board?”
   Jack Canuck: “Lumber.”

Although the Commissioners seemed unwilling to criticize Ferrier and the abusive practices of his staff overtly, Jack Canuck was not so pensive. In response to the question, “was the system of punishment in use at the VIS fit and proper?” the anonymous commentator replied:

   Whippings till the flesh was bruised. Bread and water diet. Manacles. These three things were plainly shown to have been in vogue at the Mimico school. Were they a necessary part of such a school’s code of correction? A thousand times, No! If we are going to make our boys despise the society that is endeavoring to reform them we must chain them to bedposts, flog them as sailors used to be flogged in the navy and feed them with plainer fare than we throw our dogs.

Not only were the board of management and former superintendents blamed for the degeneration of the VIS programme; Commissioners found the inmates to be equally censurable, if not more so. They convinced themselves that some of the boys were so far out of control that few options beyond violent penalties remained feasible. Over time, Ferrier became convinced that the inmates housed in the institution had become increasingly unmanageable. These were not the truant boys and first-time offenders whom the VIS was originally intended to house. Its initial purpose was to provide for truant boys under 14 years of age who, for various reasons, could not be induced to attend school while under their parents’ care. It was not intended to be either a prison or a reformatory and had never

73 Ibid.
74 “Mimico Revelations,” Jack Canuck, March 9, 1912, p. 18.
75 Ibid.
been provided with resources for such a purpose. Yet, according to the Commissioners, the administration was being asked to work as if it had. Howland and the other reform-minded individuals had intended to create an industrial school that would prevent boys from becoming criminals. However, as Paul Bennett has similarly suggested, various forces, such as the closure of Penetanguishene Reformatory in 1904, the passage of the Gibson Act that made provisions for J. J. Kelso’s appointment as Superintendent of Neglected and Dependent Children, and the emergence of Toronto’s Juvenile Court in 1912, all contributed to the VIS housing a greater number of troublesome offenders.76

The Commissioners concluded that those for whom the institution had initially been established had been displaced. Boys demonstrating vicious propensities (who before 1904 would have been incarcerated at the Penetanguishene Reformatory) and the feeble-minded (for whom few institutional provisions existed) were brought into contact with others whose worst fault was the result of improper home training or inadequate supervision (see Tables 1 and 2). For their part, the Commissioners concluded that, without a proper system of ordering the different classes of offenders, the VIS administration and its inaugural goals of reform, prevention, and cultivating self-control were severely and irreparably compromised.77

Justifying violence through appeals to exceptional inmates completes the shift in locating blame. Those accused, instead ofshouldering blame, effectively bridge the gap between action and causation by displacing it onto the unsuspecting, and silent, victim. If the boys were not so violent or exceptional, the disagreeable conduct of superintendents would not have been necessary in the first instance. Accountability flows not from the one accused, but from the victim on behalf of whom the charge was levelled. In response to a charge, VIS officials thus (re)constructed their deeds by demonstrating how violence did not originate in themselves, but in the ones to whom it was meted out. Thus, in an appeal to a state of emergency, the actions of the exceptional inmates were constructed as demanding a trial, not those of the officials who were merely attempting to preserve institutional order. Such a course is a remarkably fecund justification for violence: the state of emergency is soaked in violence turned back against a seemingly deserving Other.

“What would my unfriendly critics do with these boys?”

No one could have anticipated that a card addressed on May 28, 1926, to the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa would spark a year-long series of events. The card was simple, to the point, but infinitely powerful.

76 Ibid. On this point, see also Bennett, “Taming Bad Boys of the Dangerous Class.”
77 AO, ISAT, RG 8–51–5, Miscellaneous, Report of the Commissioners, April 16, 1912.
It read: “Dear Honored Sir: Please look into the abuse of the Boys at Industrial School, Mimico near Toronto.” Signed by George Heath of Toronto, the card advised, “please go when not expected.” Heath, an unknown character, was privy to mysterious circumstances surrounding the death of inmate “Jason Brown” from either a first-hand account or hearsay evidence. According to a Department of Justice ledger entry, this note was acknowledged and forwarded to the provincial Attorney General of Ontario (W. H. Price) on May 31, 1926.  

On closer inspection, Jason Brown turned out to be inmate James Brawn who had died in the VIS amid more than suspicious circumstances. As a matter of law, a coroner’s inquiry was required whenever a resident in a house of correction died. At this hearing, James’s father testified to the outrage he harboured toward the School. As an infuriated father incensed by the improper treatment of his son, Mr. Brawn heaped a tirade of abuse on VIS officials and staff. He criticized the VIS’s abuse of corporal punishment, solitary confinement, and poor treatment of the boys. As his outburst had little to do with this routine investigation, he was cut short. A confused jury curiously concluded that James had died of blood poisoning. The jury’s finding was just the beginning, however, of a series of events that would end with a former staff member making public the atrocities inmates suffered.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of inmates</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1887</td>
<td>50</td>
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<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>146</td>
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<td>1899</td>
<td>129</td>
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<tr>
<td>1917</td>
<td>300</td>
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Source: The evidence given for these years is representative of the information presented in the VIS Annual Reports, 1898–1917. See also Bennett, “Taming Bad Boys,” p. 81.

78 AO. Department of the Attorney General Files, RG 4–32–1410/1926, Investigation of the VIS.
79 Ibid., W. H. Price to Ferrier, May 31, 1926. See also Bennett (“Taming Bad Boys,” p. 90), which has a brief discussion of this incident.
80 AO, Department of the Attorney General Files, RG 4–32–1410/1926, Investigation of the VIS, A. C. Baiden to A. M. Middleton, June 11, 1926.
81 AO, Department of the Attorney General Files, RG 4–32–1410/1926, Investigation of the VIS, copy of evidence taken at Memorial Hall, Mimico, May 26, 1926.
Heath was not the only confused and interested party. Following the inquest, the Attorney General’s office had become acutely aware of a number of inconsistencies and irregularities evident in the coroner’s report. First, the attending physician and the coroner undertaking the investigation were associates. Dr. A. D. Roberts had attended to James during his illness, and Dr. A. C. Baiden, who presided over the inquest, was his partner. More enigmatic still is that the pair had performed the postmortem investigation together. The intimate association of the two medical officials involved in James Brawn’s case created, at best, a conflict of interest. Although not enshrined in law, the established practice was that the coroner should be absolutely impartial in matters of this kind. Clearly, Baiden had a vested interest in the case and should have recused himself.

Secondly, although the Crown attorney for the region typically attended the coroner’s inquest, the Crown was not represented at the inquiry into James’s death. When asked for an explanation, Baiden indicated he considered the inquest only an informal gathering with no criminal aspect to consider, which “was only necessary because the boy had died while in a house of correction.” Therefore, he thought, a crown attorney need not be present. Baiden’s account, however, did little to lift the veil shrouding the inquest.

Heath’s card, the irregularities in the coroner’s report, and Mr. Brawn’s outburst left too many questions surrounding James’s death unanswered. The cloud hanging over the VIS was further darkened by allegations of the improper treatment of boys from Toronto’s Big Brother Movement (among others), which was closely linked to the juvenile court and was primarily concerned with the prevention of adolescent male delinquency. Visitors to the VIS, like Sam Harris of the Toronto Big Brother movement, were intimately aware of the suffering inmates often endured. On a recent visit while he sat observing the boys, Harris ruminated about whether the dismal conditions of their institutional lives were in any way uplifting. The boys, he informed the Attorney General for Ontario, were “sloppy, dirty and herded,” and there was “not the high standard of handling good for development of character in boys.”

After a considerable period had passed, the Brawns still had received only sparse information related to their son’s death. In response, they assembled a list of charges levelled against the VIS. The 16 allegations included: that James had been locked in his room while ill, that boys

83 AO, Department of the Attorney General Files, RG 4–32–1410/1926, Investigation of the VIS, A. C. Baiden to A. M. Middleton, June 11, 1926.
84 Ibid.
worked nights under compulsion, that discourtesy had been given to James’s mother, that boys were given bad-smelling soup when sick, and that the food was generally unsuitable. Although the Brawns’ charges concerned their son’s treatment specifically, these would have far-reaching effects. The Brawns’ most significant charge involved extreme use of violent corporal punishment. Perhaps this time complaints concerning boys’ violent treatment would be heard and acted upon. 86

With the task of investigating the death of James Brawn, an informal committee of Toronto city aldermen was appointed and began hearing evidence on March 23, 1927, with deputy superintendent William E. Pettinger being the first to testify.87 When asked what punishments institutional staff commonly used, he replied that a “walk the line” approach was often employed. A confused panel of aldermen asked Pettinger to explain. According to his testimony, offending boys were ceremoniously paraded in a line for an hour to an hour and a half around a tree or about the gymnasium. In an hour, the deputy superintendent proudly concluded, some boys could cover several miles. While compliant inmates were dismissed after the prescribed time, boys who “goofed off” would walk until the task was performed according to the deputy superintendent’s exacting standards. A curious variation of “walk the line” was walking like a bear. When asked about this tactic, Pettinger responded slowly and deliberately. Boys would sometimes be made to walk around the campus on their palms and feet. He maintained that the position of the body and the lumbering side-to-side that resulted closely resembled a bear’s gait.88

Furthermore, for careless disrespect of attendants — conspicuous in boys who failed to hold their heads up and observe staff directly — obdurate inmates suffered having their noses squeezed. In some cases the pinch was sufficient to draw blood. Although Pettinger denied he ever squeezed till blood ran down boys’ faces, he did admit that such a technique was an excellent deterrent. He explained himself by claiming that boys would certainly remember the lesson. Next, the Committee raised the issue of strapping boys. The deputy superintendent’s testimony revealed that inmates were routinely whipped for causing a disturbance in their dormitories. At times, more than one attendant was involved in punishing inmates. Although Pettinger denied allegations that staff took each other’s places when their arms grew tired from whipping, he did admit his staff often teamed up to inflict penalty.89

Solitary confinement was the next item on the investigators’ agenda. Pettinger initially denied the practice was in use at the institution. The

86 AO, Department of the Attorney General Files, RG 4–32–1410/1926, Investigation of the VIS, Memorandum, April 19, 1927.
88 Ibid.
89 Ibid.
aldermen, who had received conflicting reports from the Brawns, pushed the issue further. Eventually Pettinger recanted. Although he had been truthful about the solitary room having been discontinued, the punishment had remained in full use until two weeks before the investigation. When pressed for further details, Pettinger testified boys remained in the room for a week or two to “cool off.” Formerly a bedroom, the solitary room was entirely devoid of furniture except for a set of springs Pettinger referred to as a mattress. ⁹⁰

A great deal of public scrutiny surrounded the aldermen’s investigation. Many prominent citizens of Toronto took the occasion publicly to condemn the institution. Mayor Thomas Foster, for example, described the punishments as ridiculous. “That is not discipline,” the mayor stated. “There’s something wrong there.” ⁹¹ After hearing the allegations, others wanted formal sanctions brought against the staff. For his part, Provincial Secretary Lincoln Goldie was equally upset by the Brawns’ allegations. If the accusations were true, he thought VIS staff should be sent to jail and could hardly “conceive of any human being such a brute.” ⁹²

Not all commentators were as critical as the Provincial Secretary. On the eve of a press frenzy, Forbes Godfrey, the Minister of Health and Labour, came to the defence of the VIS staff. Having served on the Industrial School Association Board for over 35 years, he was aware of the difficulties VIS officials confronted. Instead of receiving the mountain of what he considered unfair criticism, Godfrey thought the staff should be commended for their great work. Invoking the “state of exception” justification, Godfrey informed the Toronto Daily Star’s reporter, “they are not handling the good boys of the province.” He was certain the boys detained at the school were handpicked bad boys and informed the reporter that Pettinger had been shot in the side by an inmate and still suffered from the injuries. Clearly, given the general unruliness, Godfrey was convinced that VIS staff should be entitled to the odd indiscretion. He maintained, “All this sob-sister stuff is unfair, unreasonable and unjust.” ⁹³

Curiously, Ferrier was not called to testify. Intent on being heard, he instead produced a detailed written response to the Brawns’ allegations. In his response, Ferrier accounted for any perceived wrongdoing by spotlighting institutional order and inmates’ depraved disposition:

What punishment should be given a boy of 18 years who entered his Cottage and violently assaulted the young Matron? What for a boy who shot his

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⁹⁰ Ibid.
⁹¹ “Mayor Doesn’t Approve of Punishments Given at Industrial School,” Toronto Daily Star, March 24, 1927.
⁹³ “Dr. Godfrey Defends Staff at Mimico,” Toronto Daily Star, March 25, 1927.
officer? This officer is still suffering from this dastardly deed. What for a boy who deliberately assaulted his officer when his back was turned? What for the boy who upsets the discipline of the School by constant plotting at escape? What would my unfriendly critics do with these boys? A short term in detention is not harsh punishment for them.94

In Ferrier’s estimation, boys who escaped, used filthy language, caused difficulty for staff, or committed violent acts inside the institution begged for more than the usual amount of pain. By way of conclusion, Ferrier assured his accusers that boys received no undue severity in punishment. Besides, Ferrier explained, some of the discipline meted out for wayward conduct was actually good for the boys. Walking in line for brief periods, for example, might be considered beneficial exercise. Ferrier was convinced his methods were justified, but conceded that he and his staff were human and “apt to err at times and make mistakes.”95

The Committee of Aldermen agreed. On April 4, 1927, the city council adopted the investigators’ informal report and voted 15 to 7 against further inquiry. Although James Brawn contracted his fatal illness while in the institution, the Committee contended he had not died as a result of severe punishment.96 A few city council members called the Brawns irresponsible. “This thing is ridiculous,” Alderman Carrick argued. The council had “allowed their sympathy to run ahead of their good sense in allowing this to come before council.” The entire investigation, he continued, was a complete misappropriation of taxpayers’ money. At the close of the inquiry, Alderman Phillips remarked the reports were all “Bunk.”98

In the shadows lurked an individual who was anxious to weave a tale of inmate’s abuse that contradicted Phillips’s conclusion. This individual had witnessed first-hand the staff severely and unnecessary beating boys. After Toronto city council unceremoniously dismissed the issue, A. J. Scott, a former night-attendant, came forward. In a 16-page document Scott attempted to relieve himself of a burden he had carried since he began work at the institution.99 With a guilty conscience and Christian

94 AO, Department of the Attorney General Files, RG 4–32–1410/1926, Investigation of the VIS.
95 Ibid.
97 Ibid.
98 AO, Department of the Attorney General Files, RG 4–32–1410/1926, Investigation of the VIS.
99 Several hypothetical reasons may be offered for Scott’s acrimony: he might have been fired, or he may have personally disliked Ferrier. There is some evidence to suggest that his Christian exhortations got him into trouble with the School’s administration on at least one occasion. A guard reported to Ferrier that Scott had attempted to convert Jewish residents to Christianity. Instead of demonstrating contrition, Scott argued he would continue to bear witness to the work of Christ to non-Christians. To be true to the word of God, Scott argued, there was only one course open to him. In a letter to Ferrier, Scott maintained, “Jesus says in Mark 16:15 ‘Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.’ He also says in John 14:21 ‘He that
compassion for the boys, Scott came forward to unburden his mind and confess all the institution’s sins.\footnote{100\textsuperscript{}}

Scott started his first shift at the VIS on December 27, 1919. By his second shift he had witnessed what would be the first of many instances of staff violence during his career. Arriving at his post, he was greeted by what he considered a rather bothersome sight. Rounding the corner he “saw an officer beat a small boy . . . unjustly.” Observing this incident made Scott physically ill and served as a quick lesson that the official book of rules was not the law staff observed. Instead, VIS officials crafted and adhered to their own code of conduct that varied significantly from official policy.\footnote{101\textsuperscript{}}

Another moral difficulty for Scott was that Ferrier seemingly condoned abuses boys suffered at the hands of his staff. On several occasions, Scott had informed the superintendent, both in writing and verbally, about the cruelty he observed. Invariably, no action would be taken. For example, one fateful evening, Scott found two small boys kneeling on the floor holding their hands above their heads. After what had seemed like hours to the boys involved, when he came upon the scene, they begged and pleaded to be allowed to turn in for the night. Finding the cottage attendant had retired for the evening, Scott told the boys to get into bed quickly. Disturbed by the previous evening’s events, he informed Ferrier about what he had observed. To his surprise, the superintendent severely reprimanded Scott for his concern. Ferrier, it seems, had a don’t-ask-don’t-tell policy regarding staff abuse of inmates.\footnote{102\textsuperscript{}} Clearly, he chose to overlook his staff’s brutality or, like his own violence, found ways to rationalize it.

On still another occasion, Scott arrived to find attendants mistreating several boys. At the start of his shift, Scott entered the cottage and was greeted by the sounds of officers beating boys in the upstairs dormitory. He waited until one of the responsible attendants descended the stairs. The apparently triumphant staff member beamed he had “licked the whole bunch of them.” Other violent penalties perpetrated by the staff

\begin{quote}
\textit{‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.’ So I refuse to disobey His command. I realize what it may mean, for me to take the stand I am taking, but my purpose in my heart, [is] to be true to God.” AO, RG 8–51–3, Administrative Correspondence, Scott to Ferrier, December 2, 1922.}
\end{quote}

\footnote{100 AO, Department of the Attorney General Files, RG 4–32–1410/1926, \textit{Investigation of the VIS}, “VIS Conditions as revealed by A. J. Scott,” n.d. Although Scott’s testimony does not contain a date, it can be assumed that the report was forwarded shortly after the City Council had made its ruling. The \textit{Toronto Daily Star} reported the story on May 17, 1927 (“Industrial School Boys Badly Beaten”) and the \textit{Evening Telegram} ran stories on May 16 (“More Mimico School Charges Before Council”) and May 17 (Some Industrial School Inmates Unmercifully Beaten”).}

\footnote{101 AO, Department of the Attorney General Files, RG 4–32–1410/1926, \textit{Investigation of the VIS}, “VIS Conditions as revealed by A. J. Scott.”}

\footnote{102 \textit{Ibid.}}
were, if it is possible to believe, much more callous. In a cold rain and with slush on the ground, the same triumphant officer punished boys by making them lie on the sidewalk. When they were sufficiently soaked, the officer gave the command, “other side” for the boys to roll over.\footnote{Ibid.}

According to Scott, “Ferrier and others knew that these are facts.”\footnote{Ibid.} The VIS correspondence files corroborate that abuse went on with Ferrier’s sanction. Scott stated:

I believe Mr. Ferrier you know that Mr. I is not reliable, but I have sometimes wondered if you knew the kind of a man he is. Do you know that he swears before the Boys, and tells smutty things about women, and gives boys Tobacco, and asks Boys to steal for him. Mr. F told me that Mr. I got a team from him and some Boys to go and haul some Brick. And I understand it was after they hauled the Brick, he took the team and had the Boys help him steal new ties from the Railway.\footnote{AO, ISA T, RG 8–51–3, Administrative Correspondence, Scott to Ferrier, March 14, 1923.}

Moreover, in his “confession” Scott revealed that Pettinger had misled the commission investigating the death of James Brawn. While the deputy superintendent denied boys were punished by having their noses pinched until bloody or were hit with sticks or missed meals, Scott argued that all of these forms of violence were common. Recalling Ferrier’s rhetorical question about what the proper punishment would be for a boy who deliberately assaulted an officer when his back was turned, Scott revealed that the superintendent had neglected to mention that, a few minutes previously, the victimized officer had punched the offending inmate in the jaw.\footnote{AO, Department of the Attorney General Files, RG 4–32–1410/1926, Investigation of the VIS, “VIS Conditions as revealed by A. J. Scott.”}

Scott further reported that, for the crime of disrupting class or using filthy language, boys were held down and beaten until staff grew fatigued. In an effort to cover up the abuse, the night-watchman claimed attendants would “wash the blood off him and put him in detention.” On another eventful evening when Scott arrived for work, a member of the day staff greeted him at the door of cottage number 6 and asked him to wait outside. Curious about what was occurring inside, yet not wanting to be detected, he quietly entered the cottage. He heard officers violently attacking a boy in the dressing room above. From the sounds he could discern the boy was kneeling by a bench and being struck on the back. After every stroke, the boy yelled out in pain. After a long period of abuse, the victim could barely muster the energy to emit a groan. Some of the
boys who were huddled in their beds during the ordeal had counted over 100 strikes. After the beating, the victim was thrown into detention until the evidence of extreme brutality had healed. Why was he treated so ruthlessly? He had been found using tobacco.\(^{107}\)

It was not, however, Scott’s report or another public scandal involving inmate abuse that ultimately brought about the closure of the VIS. Rather, it was a scathing report released by the Ontario government in 1930 that condemned the VIS as an outmoded institution.\(^{108}\) The commissioners concluded, “The conditions at Mimico should no longer be tolerated.”\(^{109}\) The Minister of Public Welfare concurred and in December 1934 finally closed the school’s doors.

**Conclusion**

Repeated probes into VIS punishment practices and Scott’s revelations expose how violence and brutality were braided with institutional policy. It seems that the VIS was a world of concrete and shadows, wherein many boys resided in fear. This ethos stands in contradistinction to the official narrative VIS officials communicated. Theoretically, the school was to reform bad boys through a combination of patient and deliberate discipline. However, when institutional or normative order was threatened by obstinate inmates, returning the VIS to a state of equilibrium eclipsed all other concerns.

According to VIS officials, while violence was fundamental to institutional governance, such extreme measures were easily rationalized. Severe penalty was necessary, staff rationalized, to counter illicit sexual contact, running away, violation of rules, and disrespect, as well as to maintain institutional order — among other reasons. Such virulence was swiftly answered with thrashing, “trimming,” tethering, hitting, pinching, punching, and other similar forms of violence. When agents outside the VIS demanded explanations, however, such abuse was rationalized through accounts intended to absolve the accused of responsibility. These accounts recognized complicity in inmate suffering, but circumvented demands from parents, advocates, and the public for staff to take responsibility by successfully persuading investigators that inmates should instead be denounced. Demand for responsibility came full circle: victims were complicit in their torment. As opposed to receiving redress for severe infliction of pain, inmates were inculpated.

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\(^{107}\) Ibid.


\(^{109}\) Ibid.
Instead of earning near universal obloquy from the public and investigative committees for their loathsome treatment of boys, superintendents were largely defended and, at times, lauded by sympathetic observers. Representatives of the wider society who were asked to investigate unofficial methods of control in large part failed to criticize these strategies and even applauded those that offered a means through which to maintain order among bad boys. The likely result of the Commission’s reluctance to indict VIS staff for their violent practices was to buttress their use. Commissioners’ seeming indifference, therefore, confirmed the use of violent punishments as a legitimate part of institutional governance. Nevertheless, before I, too, fall into the trap of providing a convenient alibi for VIS officials, it is important to maintain that institutional officials carry a heavy burden for inmates’ hardship and torment. No matter the tenability or veracity of their accounts, we should never allow such performance to obfuscate responsibility.