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Mount Cashel: After 30 years, the pain still has not gone away



For survivor Billy Earle, the adage 'time heals all wounds' is only hypothetical

[Peter Gullage](#) • CBC News • Posted: Feb 17, 2019 6:00 PM NT | Last Updated: February 17



Time doesn't necessarily heal all wounds, says Billy Earle, who as a boy suffered abuse at the hands of the Christian Brothers at Mount Cashel. (Bruce Tilley/CBC)

Ask Billy Earle if time heals all wounds.

You get a look, a long breath and an honest answer.

"That's a hypothetical question," said the former victim of abuse at the Mount Cashel orphanage in St. John's.

February marks the 30th anniversary of the reopening of a covered-up police investigation into child abuse at the orphanage that the lay order of Christian Brothers ran for more than a century in the east end of St. John's.

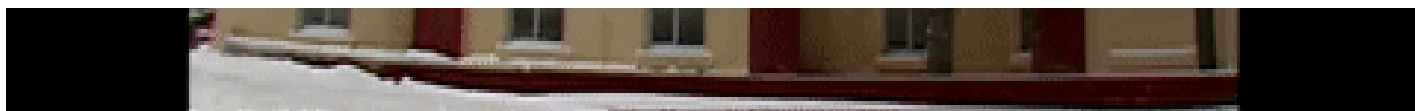
In the weeks and months after the police investigation was reopened, the media reported countless details of abuse that boys who were placed at the orphanage had suffered, and the Newfoundland and Labrador government ordered a public inquiry to investigate what went wrong.

The subsequent Hughes inquiry's proceedings were televised — often across Canada, thanks to then-new cable news channels — and took captivated viewers inside a scandal that involved the police, the top levels of government and the Roman Catholic church.

- [Mount Cashel abuse survivors win financial settlement](#)

Where a Sobeys supermarket now looks over the houses of an infill subdivision used to stand a building where decades of physical and sexual abuse was carried out by the very men trusted to care for troubled and vulnerable children.





It has been three decades since an investigation into allegations of child abuse was reopened after a coverup in the '70s. (CBC)

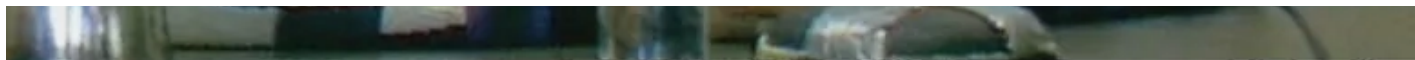
The first Mount Cashel resident to go public was Billy's younger brother, Shane. From his revelations in the press spilled more disturbing stories from more victims.

Three decades later, coverups of institutional abuse — one case after another, in countries everywhere — are still rocking the Catholic Church. But it was the stories told in 1989 by men about what happened when they were young boys at a St. John's orphanage that drew the world's attention.

'I was 10 years old. It was a nightmare'

It isn't easy for Earle to think back to 1975, when he told a police officer of the abuse he and Shane suffered at the hands of the brothers at Mount Cashel.





Billy Earle testifies at the Hughes commission in 1989. (CBC)

"It's not much different than the day it began," he said. "To think about what happened 44 years ago. I was 10 years old. It was a nightmare."

The Earle brothers' young lives were complicated. Their parents divorced, and handling the needs of seven kids — four girls and three boys — was too much. The boys were placed in Mount Cashel to ease the burden.

Although called an orphanage, Mount Cashel's residents were often not orphans. Many of the children were placed there as wards of the state because of problems at home.

Life in the orphanage became a life of torture for the Earle boys. After two years of witnessing and enduring abuse, they snuck out and made their way to their father to reveal what was happening.

Graphic details taken in original investigation

That set off a cascade of events, of meetings with police and social workers. A Newfoundland Constabulary investigation started, and 21 boys were interviewed.

The youngsters, ranging in age from nine to 17, detailed graphic examples of physical and sexual abuse.





Det. Robert Hillier testifies at the Hughes Commission in 1989. On Dec. 9, 1975, Hillier began an investigation into allegations of abuse at the Mount Cashel orphanage. Nine days later, he was ordered by RNC Chief John Lawlor to end the investigation and file a report. He was also ordered to remove all references to sexual assault from his report. (CBC)

In 1975, they told the police investigator that they were targeted by three brothers who fondled, kissed, raped and beat them. The statements taken from the boys at police headquarters talk of brothers sneaking into beds, lying on top of them as they slept. There was forced masturbation, as well as violent thrashings.

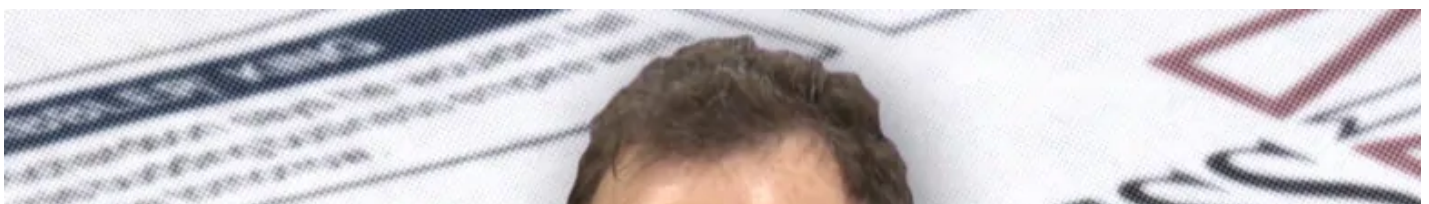
Revealing the secrets from inside Mount Cashel gave a young Billy Earle some hope.

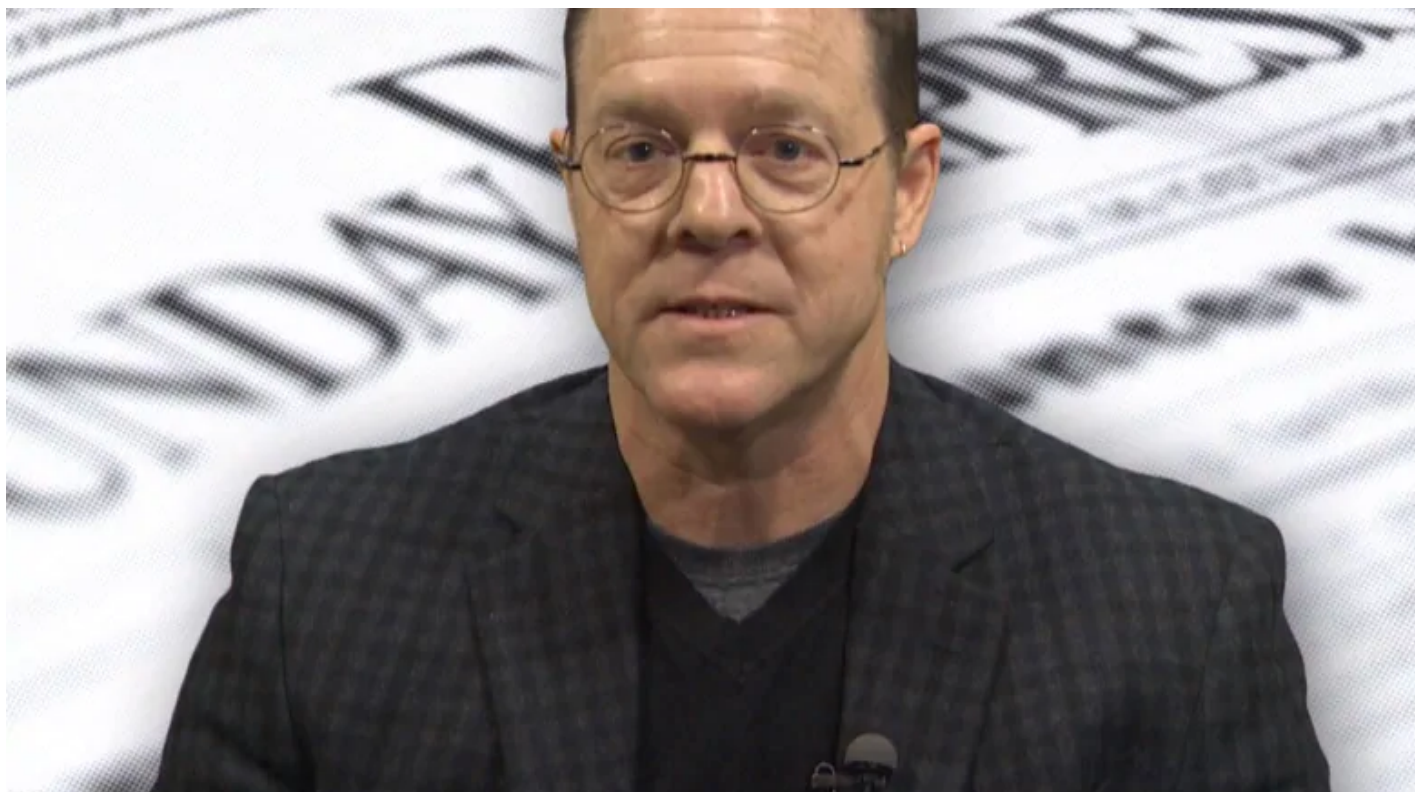
"Hopefully they were going to do something with the scandal that was going on behind closed doors," he said.

"Brought in, give police statements and thought, 'Great, we'll have it all dealt with.' Figured we had a concrete foundation around us. There was nothing ever done, and we were back in the hands of the abusers."

A well-protected secret

What followed, though, was a deliberate effort by senior public servants, church officials, police brass and politicians to not only cover up the sins of the Christian Brothers, but to deliberately hide what had happened.





Reporter Philip Lee says the Mount Cashel story was, in many ways, the biggest story he's ever worked on. (CBC)

Their actions remained a well-protected secret for 14 years.

Philip Lee was 25 years old when he started writing Mount Cashel stories at the Sunday Express, a weekly newspaper in St. John's, in 1989.

"I was a young reporter and it was really the first big story that I ever worked on," he said. "In many ways it was the biggest story that I ever did work on."

Mount Cashel enjoyed a good reputation in the community. It was a favoured charity and an example of "the good work" of the church.





Mount Cashel in 1996. (CBC)

"I was fairly new to St. John's at the time and I didn't know where Mount Cashel was. I had to get a map out," Lee said in an interview.

"And I remember driving over there and going into the parking lot and knocking on the front doors and asking some questions at the time."

Those questions and the answers that followed tore open a scandal that was at once a combination of pain, relief and recoil. Months later, by the time the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Response of the Newfoundland Criminal Justice System to Complaints started holding hearings with Justice Samuel Hughes, the story of Mount Cashel was already legend.





Lawyer Geoff Budden says 'this evil of child abuse can be controlled but it can't be eradicated, apparently.' (CBC)

Geoff Budden was a young lawyer when Mount Cashel unfolded, and he has built his law practice around suing on behalf of victims of abuse. His first client from the orphanage came to him in 1991.

Since then, he has represented 110 victims of abuse at Mount Cashel.

"I did realize pretty quickly that this was not a local story," he said.

"This was not a story of St. John's, or Newfoundland or even Canada. There were lawyers, commentators, church officials, writers of various sorts throughout North America and throughout the world who were paying attention to what was happening with Mount Cashel and were drawing lessons from it."

In 3 decades, abusers have changed, too

In the 30 years since that covered-up police investigation in St. John's was reopened, the shock of child sexual abuse has become a daily story from somewhere in the world. The internet means predators have moved from the halls of a long-gone orphanage into the bedrooms of vulnerable young people who are lured through their smartphones.

“What about the government officials, the politicians, the coverup with the police? There was nothing ever done with them.”

- Billy Earle

"This evil of child abuse can be controlled but it can't be eradicated, apparently," Budden said.

"I think there will always be people who by reasons of illness of some sick and frustrated power dynamic will want to sexually exploit children. New times present new problems. I don't think we can never not be vigilant as a parent, as a society."

Billy Earle said time and healing is "hypothetical." What's not hypothetical, though, is that he says not everyone involved felt justice was evenly delivered.

"A lot of guys who went through the inquiry are very sick. Close friends of mine have committed suicide," Earle said.

"We talk about the Christian Brothers who paid their dues big time and went to jail. What about the government officials, the politicians, the coverup with the police? There was nothing ever done with them."



Mount Cashel is gone, replaced by a grocery store overlooking residential homes. (CBC)

Three decades later, Lee believes the characters who orchestrated the cover up of that 1975 investigation "didn't think twice about the boys."

- [**Philip Lee: Mount Cashel, and the redemptive power of pulling stories from the darkness**](#)

"It's disappointing that they didn't have the courage, or the moral courage, to come forward and say what they did and admit that they had done wrong," Lee said.

That wrong allowed an evil to roam through Mount Cashel, piling pain on victims for years to come.

And it's a pain that is still inflicted on children because, for whatever reason, the lesson of Mount Cashel was never fully learned.

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