

# The Stolen Generations



The removal of Aboriginal children  
in New South Wales 1883 to 1969

Peter Read



Sixth reprint (2007)

First published in 1981

ISBN 0-646-46221-0

# Foreword

This is the sixth reprint of Professor Peter Read's landmark paper *The Stolen Generations* first written in 1981.

Each year thousands of Australians read Professor Read's harrowing account of one of the most shameful episodes in our nation's history.

While we celebrate milestones such as the Mabo decision, the 1967 referendum and a successful half century of NAIDOC, *The Stolen Generations* remains as a stark reminder of the hard facts many Aboriginal men and women live with every day. Yet despite the horrors faced by the Stolen Generations there exists an opportunity for reconciliation through the work of the Family Records Unit of the NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs.

The Unit gives Aboriginal people in NSW a chance to track down their personal records and those of their families.

In this way vital information about people stolen from their families can be used to help heal the scars, and reconnect Aboriginal families with their loved ones, their culture and their land.

*The Stolen Generations* is a sobering reminder that history informs the past the present and the future.

It is our duty to learn history's lessons. We must ensure the injustice of the past never returns to haunt future generations of Aboriginal people.

*Paul Lynch MP*

*NSW Minister for Aboriginal Affairs May 2007*



# 2006: The return of the Stolen Generations

When I wrote 'The Stolen Generations' in 1981, child separation was scarcely talked about. Non-Aborigines said it couldn't have happened. The victims of separation thought it shameful to talk about their removal. They believed that maybe their parents hadn't been able to care for them properly, or worse still, didn't want them.

Twenty five years later, thousands of Aboriginal adults have spoken out against the hurts they endured, and are still enduring. So have the parents, and the extended families of those people. And yet, one third of all the children currently in care in Australia are Indigenous. How many of them will be future Link-Up clients?

As the National Enquiry showed in 1995/6, the hurt never goes away. But at least the non-Kooris concede that the policy happened and that it was wrong. The Premier has apologised. There are Link-Up organisations in every state and in the Northern Territory. The victims of separation now understand that their families grieved for them as much as they grieved for their families.

Stolen Generations Link-Up (NSW), as it is now known, has thousands of people waiting for their families to be traced. They want to begin, with their Link-Up counsellors, the long and exciting journey home. Under the current wonderful Link-Up leadership, many hundreds have made that journey to embrace their parents, siblings, culture and identity.

History can't be turned back, but the Link-Up organisations across Australia are having a pretty good shot at it.

Peter Read

## About the Author

Professor Peter Read, with Oomera Edwards, founded Link-Up (NSW) in 1980. Peter is today the Public Officer of that organisation and Deputy Director, National Centre for Indigenous Studies, Australian National University.

# Introduction

White people have never been able to leave Aborigines alone. Children particularly have suffered. Missionaries, teachers, government officials have believed that the best way to make black people behave like white people was to get hold of the children who had not yet learned Aboriginal lifeways. They thought that children's minds were like a kind of blackboard on which the European secrets could be written.

This article is about what happened to those Aboriginal children in New South Wales who were taken away from their parents, either living on government reserves and stations, by government legislation, and put in the care of the whites\*. It is the story of the attempt to 'breed out' the Aboriginal race. It is the story of attempted genocide.

Genocide does not simply mean the extermination of people by violence but may include any means at all. At the height of the policy of separating Aboriginal people from their parents the Aborigines Welfare Board meant to do just that. The 1921 Report of the Board stated that 'the continuation of this policy of dissociating the children from camp life must eventually solve the Aboriginal problem'.

'The Aboriginal problem' meant Aboriginal people who could not, or chose not to, live as white people wanted them to do. The 1926 Report put the Board's intentions even more clearly: when children were placed in a 'first class private home', the superior standard of life would 'pave the way for the absorption of these people into the general population'. At the same time, Aboriginal adults, who could not be sent away, were driven from reserves or from the outskirts of country towns. Adult Aboriginal resistance proved too strong for the Board, for those adults either came back after a time, or went to live outside another town. But the children could not return until they were eighteen. Some were taken so young that they did not remember where they had come from or even who their parents were. Many of these children did not, and could not, return to their families.

*'In view of the inadequate provision as regards housing, food and care of the children of ....., on the Aboriginal reserve at ....., would you kindly charge the children as neglected and commit them to the care of this Board'. Letter from Aboriginal Welfare Board to Police Sergeant at a mid-Western town in New South Wales, 1958.*

\*An Aboriginal station had a manager; an Aboriginal Reserve was unmanaged.

## A typical case

The following story is a composite one, the details taken from the case histories of a number of families. Suppose that, in 1950, a family containing seven children was living on a reserve, when it was learned that an Inspector of the Aborigines Protection Board was to pay a visit. Both the children and parents knew from past experience that they might have to fight for the right to stay together. What they did not know was that their names were already on the Inspector's blacklist, as a family whose lifestyle did not match the manager's opinion of how Aboriginal families ought to live. Nor did they know that a magistrate's committal hearing was scheduled for the following week, nor that the local police had already been asked to prepare a charge sheet for each of the children, as 'neglected and under incompetent guardianship'. Nor did they know that, far away in Cootamundra and Kempsey, the superintendents had been warned to prepare places for several more children.

A week later the hearing (it was only a formality) was over. The children were committed, but not allowed to return home. They were kept in the local hospital, until on the eighth day after the hearing, they were quietly placed on a bus and driven away. No one waved goodbye. No one on the Station even knew when they went.

The mother, suddenly deprived of her family, went into a state of shock from which she never really recovered. For months, not a word was heard of her children. In the belief that some of the older children had been placed as domestic servants for white families in Sydney, she bought presents and at Christmas went to Sydney to find them. She never knew whether it was by accident or not that she was sent to the wrong address, but she arrived at a home in Woollahra to find that her daughter had been sent somewhere else. Nobody seemed to know where. Her presents were taken by the children at the place where she was staying, and she arrived home without gifts or information. Meanwhile her husband remained an alcoholic.

The two-year period of the children's detainment came and went without comment from any white official. Then a little information trickled back about what had become of the children. One, it seemed, had died, but nobody knew where or when or how. (In the private files of the Board was the information that she had died of tuberculosis at Waterfall Sanitarium in 1952).

Two children, it was said, had married white people and raised their children as whites, but that was only a rumour. (The Board's records noted this to be the case and recorded the details of the marriages). Of the fourth child nothing was heard, beyond that she had been taken to the Bomaderry Children's Home until she was seven, and then a white person from Victoria had taken her away. (That was where the Board's records ended, too).

Of the fifth child nothing at all was known. He simply disappeared. (The Board's records contained no information, indeed, the only person who might have been able to help was the Superintendent of Bloomfield Mental Hospital, at Orange, who wrote to the Board enquiring about four Aboriginal people, all vague about their past lives, who had been admitted with histories of violence, but who now did not seem to want to leave). One of the boys eventually came home, now twenty years old. He was an alcoholic and refused to talk of his experiences. The seventh child, a girl, came home too. All she would say was that she had a baby at the Ashfield Children's Home, which was taken away from her when it was two weeks old, and she had never seen it again. She married a local man, and lived at the reserve.

As the children who had come back grew to their thirties, it was clear that they were not able to function as normal adults. They had nightmares. They resented their parents, particularly their mother, as if she had been responsible for their removal. They had periods of alcoholism during which they became uncontrollably violent. They drank or gambled what few wages they earned and remained what the Aborigines Protection Board called 'unassimilable'.

The family is imaginary, but every one of the details happened to one or more individuals. Yet the policy which allowed such events to take place was proposed, debated and affirmed in the Parliament of the State of New South Wales, and for fifty years was sanctioned and administered by the Aborigines Protection (later Welfare) Board.

For two or three generations there was scarcely a word of protest by those whose duty it was to protect: members of parliamentary oppositions, Christians, parents, people of common humanity. Why? Why was it necessary to remove five thousand children from their parents and try to turn them into white people?

To quote the words of the Board itself, it was to counter the 'positive menace to the State' which people of Aboriginal descent were supposed to offer the whites. The solution seemed to lie in making people adopt the same values, believe in the same things. The whites could not tolerate a different way of life. They did not like being not wanted, not needed. But legally, economically, and in values, Aborigines were not like whites, and most did not want to be.

Those who wanted to be were not allowed to be. When it became obvious that Aborigines didn't want them, or want to be like them, the whites resorted to force.



Aboriginal Camp - Brewarrina, 1932



## The laws regarding children

The first official power over children granted to the Board was through the *Aborigines Protection Act* of 1909\*. Before that, it had to rely on unofficial powers like stopping the food rations to the parents whose children did not attend school. Then when the girls' dormitory was built at Warangesda Aboriginal Station on the Murrumbidgee, in 1893, the plan was that Aboriginal girls from all over the State would go there to learn how to become domestic servants.

There were no legal powers to coerce people, and since Aborigines showed no enthusiasm for the scheme, the Board resorted to threats and promises. For instance, parents who allowed their girls to go into the dormitory were allowed to stay on Warangesda Station. Those who wanted to leave were offered free rail passes if they left the girls behind. Those who wanted to remove the whole family from the station to avoid the manager's control were warned that they thereby rendered their children liable to prosecution under the *Neglected Children and Juvenile Offenders Act*.

Meanwhile, the boys in the family were simply ordered off Warangesda to find work. Under the new legislation of 1909 children could be removed without their parents' consent only if they were found by a magistrate to be 'neglected'. To the Board's officers, the most useful part of the official definition of 'neglect' was the part dealing with children having 'no visible means of support or fixed place of abode'. Thus parents who were forced to leave Aboriginal stations, or who left their houses on reserves voluntarily in order to retain their children, might be brought before a magistrate for neglecting their children.

However, a practical difficulty was that children were sometimes released by magistrates who reasoned, quite rightly, that well fed and well dressed children could not be considered 'neglected' even if they did live in a tent beside the river. Within a few years of the passing of the *Aborigines Protection Act*, members of the Board were complaining in the Annual Reports of the inadequacy of their powers. By 1912 the Board was no longer content with its Act.

\*The *Aborigines Protection (later Welfare) Board* was established in 1883 by the New South Wales Government. The Board had no specific statutory powers until 1909, so children were removed under the general child welfare laws. The *Aborigines Welfare Board* was abolished in 1969.

Three years later the Board's efforts were rewarded with an amendment to the Act, in 1915, which stated that any Aboriginal child might be removed without parental consent if the Board considered it to be in the interest of the child's moral or physical welfare. It was up to the parents to show that the child had a right to be with them, not the other way round. No court hearings were necessary; the manager of an Aboriginal station, or a policeman on a reserve or in a town might simply order them removed. The racial intention was obvious enough for all prepared to see, and some managers cut a long story short when they came to that part of the committal notice, 'Reasons for Board taking control of the child'. They simply wrote, 'for being Aboriginal'.

The 1915 amendment also allowed much younger children than previously to be taken away. The Cootamundra Girls' Home was established in 1911 in anticipation of the amendment – it was for those girls too young to go straight into domestic service. (The Kinchela Boys' Home was established at Kempsey in 1924. Boys were sent there before being sent out as 'apprentice' farm labourers). In 1916 the Board began to remove children from their families under the new legislation.

A new book called the Register of Wards was begun, which contained the details of each commitment and the later history of each ward. Today it is in the State archives, and in it, researchers may catch a glimpse of the enormous tragedy of what happened to the first eight hundred children removed under the 1915 Amendment\*.

The law remained as it was until 1939, when Aboriginal children were again brought under the jurisdiction of a new *Child Welfare Act*. Magistrates' hearings before committal again became necessary, but a new category appeared in that Act under which children could be removed from their families. In addition to being 'neglected', children could also be found to be 'uncontrollable': an Aboriginal child who refused to go to school, for instance, could be considered 'uncontrollable', and in fact as many children were removed under the new legislation as had been under the *Aborigines Protection Act*.

\*The 'Ward Registers of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines, 1916-28' are held by State Records NSW. Like other records of the Aborigines Welfare Board they are closed to public access and permission to view them must be obtained from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs.

The 'uncontrollable' clause could be used to separate 'difficult' children from their families, or to transfer children already placed. Since there were no homes set aside specifically for 'uncontrollable' Aboriginal children, children so committed generally went to a State Corrective Institution like the Parramatta Girls' Home, or Mt Penang. There, their Aboriginality, perhaps denied by the staff and inmates if they were of light colouring, was even more under threat than if they were at Kinchela or Cootamundra.

White children too were charged with neglect, and removed from their parents. But the Act under which white children were charged was a good deal more generous in the alternatives it offered to permanent separation, for it was framed for a different purpose. White single mothers could apply for a pension to look after their own children. Children could be committed to a suitable relative, and they could be returned to their parents after a period of good behaviour.

Institutionalised children could be returned home for holidays. No such provisions existed under the *Aborigines Protection Act*, for its intention was to separate children from their parents (and their race) permanently. The different attitudes underlying black and white child welfare legislation can be seen by comparing this extract from a report on the Parramatta Industrial Home (1921):

*Just as life is opening before them with all its possibilities of joy and happiness, something happens, and all the 'promise fair' vanishes, and they find themselves walking down that dark and gloomy labyrinth which leads to all that is wrong and bad in life, all that taps the best in their young souls, and all that means in the end, much sorrow and misery.*

and this extract from the Report of the Aborigines Welfare Board of 1911:

*to allow these children to remain on the Reserve to grow up in comparative idleness in the midst of more or less vicious surroundings would be, to say the least, an injustice to the children themselves, and a positive menace to the State.*

## The number of children taken

There are several reasons why the number of children removed from their families can be little better than an estimate. No records now exist, if any were kept, of children sent to Warangesda (that is, before 1909) or from Warangesda into service, or from their own stations into service before 1909 and 1916.

There are detailed records (one or two pages each) of 800 wards sent into employment between 1916 and 1928. There is a further list of 1500 names, without details, of children sent in 1936. There are no systematic records of Aboriginal children sent into State or religious homes not specifically designed for Aborigines. The number of children of Aboriginal descent whom the Board did not recognise as Aboriginal is also unknown, but likely to be substantial after the 1950s. After that time, Welfare Officers were instructed to hand over Aboriginal children of 'lighter caste' to the Child Welfare Department if they were to be committed. In addition there was an unknown number of children committed unofficially, of whom no records appear now to exist. This includes children of whom the Board asked local church bodies or individuals to take charge. Often three or four families handled the children before a permanent home was found, and the records were lost on the way. Another category of removed children which is difficult to quantify are those who went away to white people for a 'holiday' and did not return.



Aboriginal Camp - Tingha, circa 1925

### Estimates of Aboriginal children removed – 1883 to 1969

	Number of children
• Placed at Warangesda dormitory and subsequently in services before 1909 (a)	300
<b>Under the <i>Aborigines Protection Act</i>:</b>	
• Aborigines Protection Board – placed between 1909 – 1916 (a)	400
• Aborigines Protection Board – placed between 1916 – 1938 (Board's records)	2300
• Kinchela and Cootamundra Homes combined: total children, 1939 – 1969	825
• Other official denominational homes (e.g. Marella, Boystown etc) (a)	300
• Other official non-Aboriginal institutions (e.g. Mittagong Homes, training ship Sobraon) (a)	200
• In Aboriginal Welfare Board foster homes (in 1959, there were 120) (a)	300
<b>Under Child Welfare Legislation:</b>	
• 'Uncontrollable' children committed to non-Aboriginal institutions (e.g. Mt Penang, Parramatta) (a)	400
• 'Delinquent' children committed for offences to non-Aboriginal corrective institutions (1969 – 120) (a)	400
• Children of 'light caste' committed to the Child Welfare Department as wards, placed in non-Aboriginal homes, foster homes (1969 – 350) (a)	800
<b>Table revised 2006</b>	

(a) = approximate figures due to lack of records

*Sources:*

*Minutes of the Aborigines Protection Board, State Records, NSW*

*Managers' and Matrons' Reports – Kinchela and Cootamundra Homes, State Records, NSW*

*Aborigines Welfare Board – General Correspondence Files, State Records, NSW.*

*New South Wales Department of Youth and Community Services – Survey of Aboriginal Children, G.R. Caton, 1969.*

## Life in the homes

The most important factor in the view of the Board was that Aboriginal children had to be separated from the rest of their race. One Annual Report of the 1920s predicted that the children, once institutionalised, would not be allowed to return to any Aboriginal station or reserve, 'except perhaps those who have parents, on an occasional visit'. In practice no home visits were allowed at all. Parents received no encouragement to come, and were positively discouraged if they attempted to stay more than a day. Even Christmas holidays were generally spent in the homes. Letters in and out were censored.

Brothers and sisters might see each other every two or three years, often not at all. Children who left the homes for employment were generally forbidden to return, even if it were the only home they knew. That was one method – to cut off the outside world. The other was propaganda from within. Little by little the view was put across that blacks on reserves were dirty, untrustworthy, bad. There was generally no black staff to whom the children could relate.

Partly because it was presented with no opposition, the propaganda had its successes. Some children left the homes ashamed of the colour of their skin. Girls have stated that they used to cross the road in order to avoid an Aboriginal man, not just because they had been taught to, but because in the end, they themselves had come to believe that he was a threat – dirty, brutal, black!

The staff at the homes varied between those who might have been good in another environment, and the psychopathic. The better ones took an interest in the children. They were called 'mum' or 'dad', and tried to overcome a sterile and hostile environment. But their horizons were lowered in living from day to day, they were over-worked, and probably all of them brutalised by the system in which they had chosen to work. What can be said of the 'good' officials is that during their care the children did not suffer more than they had to, and may have suffered less, under a system which was barbaric in its execution and indefensible in its intent. The bad officials were monsters.

For instance, after an enquiry in 1935, the manager of Kinchela was warned in a private letter on a number of counts. He must not be drunk on duty. He must no longer use a stockwhip on the boys, nor tie them up. He was not to use dietary punishments. He had to keep a punishment register and he was no longer allowed to send the boys out as labour on local farms. The evidence of some of the boys bears out the enquiry's findings.

One man stated that he was kept locked up in a shed for several days and told to eat hay. Another in 1981 had scars on his feet, which he received forty years ago from frost bite, bringing in the cows, without shoes, on winter mornings before dawn.

The brutality of some of the officials was compounded by the lack of external control. Despite the enquiry's findings, the management at Kinchela does not seem to have changed for the better. Eight years later there was another enquiry into what the Board called 'sexual deviance'. An Inspector from the Child Welfare Department thought the boys were bored even though they had too much manual work to do.



Bomaderry Home, 1928

Though the Manager had conceded that the scrubbing and washing that the boys had to do was not the life of normal healthy boys, the Inspector thought that his estimate of the boys' two hours' work a day after school was too low. The boys in reality, he thought, had to work four hours, and in winter they had no time for leisure at all. He noted the pathetic eagerness which the boys showed in helping some workmen mend a wall. One sentence was particularly chilling, as it brings to mind images of prisoners in a concentration camp: 'there is a noticeable tendency for the boys to sit on their haunches motionless and silent'. Sexual deviation, he concluded, sprang very largely from the boys' environment.

Whether the superintendents were good or bad, nothing could change the sterility of the environment. The children were emotionally, spiritually, intellectually and psychologically deprived, and scars might never heal.

In a mid-western town I met an ex-Kinchela man. When he was ten he had been taken straight from school by a welfare officer, he said, and was never able to say goodbye to his father. He was placed in Kinchela and was an inmate during the period described above. He could not, or would not, talk of his experiences there. He was divorced, had been an alcoholic, and was deeply unhappy. I saw him one morning unable to decide whether to go to the doctor or chemist for advice on one of the many ailments with which his life seemed to be preoccupied. Kinchela crippled that man for life.

As the children approached the age of fourteen or fifteen the question arose of their employment. The girls at Cootamundra were better prepared for the work – described by one of them as 'slavery' – for their training in the home coincided exactly with what was needed to be done anyway. It consisted of the scrubbing, washing, ironing and sewing which the Board did not want to pay anyone to do. The same argument did not apply so well to the boys, but they still had to perform scrubbing and kitchen duties anyway, or else they worked in the vegetable gardens or dairy. In choosing a position, the Board assumed that basically blacks were stupid. Its very first Report in 1883 stated that black children after training would 'take their places with the industrial classes of the colony'. In 1938, fifty years later, it was the same: boys would become 'rural workers and most of the girls domestic workers'.

Such were the advantages of life in white society! Talent was ignored.





One boy was noted by the Kinchela manager to enjoy 'sitting by himself for hours playing the mouth organ'. There was no thought of a possible musical career. Although he was noted to have been particularly fond of animals, he was sent to work in the abattoirs of a sheep station. When he ran away, he was charged with being 'uncontrollable'. Today he is a professional musician.



There was a space on a child's term report on which the manager or matron estimated the level of intelligence. Anything above 'average' was rare, and the majority ranged from 'poor' to 'moronic'. Sometimes the estimate of the manager was in defiance of a good school report. One child came 7th out of a class of 23, yet the Cootamundra matron characterised her intelligence as 'very, very poor'. One Kinchela manager was questioned about the difference between his low estimate of a boy's ability and the good estimate of Kempsey High School. His reply was simply that the boy appeared unintelligent to him.

*Aboriginal Girl in Service,  
Strathfield, circa 1928*

There seems to have been no comprehension of the effect of the environment upon measured intelligence. Many children's marks after a promising start went from bad to worse, and culminated in the remark, 'in view of the low mental capacity of this child I recommend that he does not continue at High School but be sent to employment!'

It was the same with personality. The children were expected to have problems because they were black, and when problems arose, they seemed to confirm the deep-seated notions of racial inferiority. If children ran away from home, it was only to be expected that they would go on walkabout. If they were violent or passive, sullen or outspoken, it was often written down to the unfortunate racial characteristics of the Aboriginal people.

The children, and the race itself, were held in the utmost contempt even by some members of the Board. During the enquiry of 1933 into the manager's behaviour, one board member exclaimed when he heard some of the allegations (there is a verbatim account of the meeting), 'the evidence of these black boys is not worth the paper it is written on!'



## Employment

At fifteen, the children had to leave the homes, and as State wards enter an 'apprenticeship'. They might be sent to a pastoral station or to a middle-class home in Sydney. A few (I have not heard of many) were treated with some dignity and respect by their employers. More frequently they became just the little black maid or station hand about the place. They were paid little, and most of that went into a trust account to which access was difficult. (The official reason for this was that it taught wards responsibility, but it could also be used for controlling the way in which money was spent. Requests for funds to travel home for a holiday, for instance, could be met with refusal). Comments by employers, and there are scores of them on the files, indicated a total lack of interest in, or failure to comprehend, the history of individual wards. Phrases like:

*'I asked for a trained mission boy and this one cannot do anything' and after a boy ran away, 'if you cannot find him within a few days please send a replacement as we need some extra labour for the harvest.'*

indicate that the Board was sending wards to places which were entirely unsuitable. Children who misbehaved or ran away were sent to some remote station (Brewarrina was a favourite). Just as there was no conception of the real causes of abnormal behaviour in the homes, so there was none when the children were placed in employment. Deceit, laziness, theft, malicious damage, violence and insolence were common complaints.

Nor did employers show any awareness that there may have been deeper factors underlying the confrontation between two individuals. When wards threatened their employers with a broom or carving knife there may have been an element of racial defiance. A descendant of the Indigenous people was threatening a member of the invading race.

For white people seem seldom to have realised, let alone acknowledged, that the battle for Australia was the same kind of war of dispossession which was fought by Europeans anywhere in the world. Nor had they realised that military conquest did

not necessarily imply psychological defeat. This is a letter from an ex-ward written to his younger brother in service on a pastoral station:

*Listen ... if you don't like the place where you are working, tell them that you want to get another job, or go to the police station and tell them that you are not getting a fair go and if they don't get you another job first, sit down all day and when the boss tells you to do something tell him to shut up. This is what I done when I was in the homes I will kick his gut out if he doesn't give you a fair go. I'll be down about the 7th of June don't let them white c... boss you about I give c...s all they wanted and even told their wife to get stuffed so don't forget ...*

Shortly after receiving this letter, the boy ran away to join his brother. The letter was extracted illegally from the possessions he had left behind, and sent to the Board as evidence of the brother's complicity. Yet the most extraordinary part of the story was to come. The Superintendent of the Welfare Board himself wrote to the policeman at the brother's town. He asked him to tell the brother to write no more letters, or



*Cane Gang, 1932*

he would be in 'very serious trouble'. The actions of the Superintendent and the policeman were technically legal. As well as showing that the Board frequently acted as the agent of repression and control over an invaded people, the incident transcended the confrontation between individuals. It was the centuries old battle between the victor and the victims. That was in the 1950s. At the same time as this letter was written, Australian primary children were learning of the heroic exploits of one Andreas Hofer, an obscure European who defended his native land against an invader. They might just as well have looked out through the school-room doors.



## Fostering

In 1957 the Board placed advertisements in the major newspapers calling for foster parents to look after Aboriginal children. The principal reason was economic. Children were still being committed in large numbers, yet the Aboriginal institutions were overcrowded. There was an extraordinary response and in a few years more children were in foster care than in the two homes combined.

In many cases, the children were treated kindly, but the pressure on children to make them want to behave like Europeans was enormous. This was especially true for children taken from their families so young that they had no yardstick with which to measure the propaganda. The following unthinking, racist assumptions were contained in a letter by a woman a few days after she had taken control of a ward:

*The wee girlie has settled down with us very well. She is a charming child and we are already much attached. I took her to the shop and bought jodhpurs, lemon cardigan, shoes, hair-ribbon, gloves and many things I thought she would like. Her eyes fairly sparkled. I think she looks best of all in the school uniform, and we are to buy a navy and white hat with a badge. She also has a hair styling and is a very obedient and affectionate child. Here I must say that Lillian from henceforth would like to be known as Mary Rose, and it is just what I will call her ...*

*I was very pleased to notice how modest she is about her person. She is saying her prayers also. She wanted Him to make her 'my colour' (i.e. white). Poor little girl. I explained that God had made men in lots of colours and she seemed much happier then.*

This preposterous nonsense contained the seeds of incalculable harm, not least from the expectations sown in the girl's mind that she should in fact be accepted by white people. The great majority of wards, like the great majority of Aborigines, were not accepted as equals by whites.

The subsequent history of this child was sadly typical of a great many Aboriginal children fostered by white people who, whatever their motives, understood nothing

of the complexity of raising a child belonging to another race. The girl at the age of eleven began to exhibit the usual behaviour of a child only partially accepted into a foster home, and already aware of rejection by wider society.

By the age of twelve she had been rejected by her foster mother, and, at thirteen, using her own name by choice, she was an inmate of the Cootamundra home. At the time of her transfer, a Welfare Officer belatedly admitted that the foster mother had been a bad choice. Yet it was the Board which had chosen her in the first rush of publicity, and its officers had been caught in the same affected middle-class vise. This is the summing up of a Board official's inspection of a potential foster parent:

*New home, beautifully furnished, all furniture is modern style made by husband. New Australian Dutch family. Lovely children, very well-mannered. This seems ideal for small girl. Better surroundings could not be found. Recommended.*



*Cootamundra Home, circa 1930*

## Going home

At the age of eighteen, wards and foster children were free legally to do what they wished. A good many went home to an emotional reunion, only to find, if their family lived on a managed Aboriginal station, that they were subject to a whole new set of Regulations.

If there was no work on the station, and if they were female this was almost certain to be the case, they would have to leave again after a short holiday to find work. If they married, they would be allowed to live on the station, but in practice, there were not many men of marriageable age about. They were at Kinchela, or, returning, had been forced to seek work elsewhere. If the young couple married off the station, they were subject to the provisions of the Act by which they had been separated from their own parents.

Some went back to bad homecomings, the family dead or moved away. A few – perhaps more than a few – never went back. To help those who wished to return to their families, but were too frightened, and to help parents and children to find each other, an organisation, Link-Up, began in 1981. Several people have, through this service, been reunited with their families. One woman was introduced to her nephew, which appeared to be the first contact she had with her family for 57 years. Another woman was amazed to learn, that she had been returned to Cootamundra by a foster parent, for reasons she stated were totally fictitious.

It was another case of rejection by the foster parent when the child reached puberty. A third person went back to a mid-western town to find her family at the age of thirty. She had been a foster child, and, she said, had visited every town in New South Wales except the one she knew to be her birthplace. She had until then been too frightened to return, for she had come to grips not only with a new set of relatives, but with her own Aboriginality from which she had been estranged for so long. Many adults have yet to return, and need encouragement.

The force of white propaganda about 'dirty blacks' including, by implication, a person's own parents, has proved too strong for many who were taken too young to be aware of what they had lost.



Those that did go back found a very different world from that which they had been told to expect. They had been told that southern Aborigines had no culture. Once they stopped speaking their language, and dancing their corroboree, somehow they were Aborigines no longer. The late Professor Elkin, a member of the Board and the official anthropological adviser for many years, must carry some of the blame for this. In 1944 he wrote:

*The mixed blood people, however, have been in the unfortunate position of possessing no social life worth the name. Dotted about in small groups on Reserves and Settlements... they have not shared in the general community life, nor have they any traditional or spontaneous life of their own.*

A black writer exclaimed that 'the denial of culture to southern Aborigines is the final colonial insult'. Yet this opinion, so deeply ingrained in the minds of the white population, was the foundation of the Assimilation Policy. The whites were so mesmerised by their own view of society that they could not perceive the value of alternative child raising methods, which were an integral part of the 'non-existent' black culture. One official wrote that the children of a certain woman at La Perouse should be seized because she kept leaving them with relatives for hours while she went shopping. He must have been unaware that such practice had been common since the white invasion, and probably for thousands of years before that.

No granny, according to the whites, no cousin or auntie, could look after the children as well as the parents. As soon as the parents ceased to look after their children in the manner approved by officials, there was the opportunity for the children to be removed.

In a small country town on the western slopes, the mother of a family died on 8th February, 1948. On the 14th, her four children were committed on the grounds of 'incompetent guardianship, no-one to look after the children'. Proceedings must have begun almost on the day of the mother's death. Obviously no attempt at all was made to find a relative to look after the children. By the time relatives in other towns heard what had happened it would have been too late. It was more than a question

of the Board simply not trying to find someone. Most of the officers did not approve of auntie, or grandmother, or grandmother's brother, looking after the children. Black children had to be brought up in the approved way, or the State would take them.



## The effects

Many ex-wards, especially women, resent criticism of the institutions. They argue that if they had been left on the reserves they would now be barefoot, pregnant or drunk. Through the homes, they say they have gained a knowledge of the 'right' way of life.

The psychological issues in the institutionalisation of the children are most complex, and I shall not pursue the subject except to make two points. One is that very few indeed of the ex-institution people have been, in fact, accepted by the whites as equals. No amount of 'white' behaviour or attitudes can overcome skin-colour, or restore dignity to one's self-concept. The other is that people who accepted the white culture as superior will not readily admit to the white's crime of trying to 'breed out' the Aboriginal race. Other products of separation can also be recognised. One is the large group of people who will not talk of their experiences at all. Their refusal to talk tells its own story. The alcoholics too tell a story without words, as do the ex-wards who, deprived of parental caring behaviour as children, later abandoned their own children. Every one of the five thousand children removed from their parents had, and



*New Boys at Kinchela, 1932*

still have, their own private and bitter memories of separation and later problems of adjustment. From the point of view of the Aboriginal race as a whole, we can hardly guess at the cost of wasted talent of those who spent a decade in the service of the whites.

We can hardly guess at the number of men and women who deny their own birth-right as Aboriginal citizens of Australia. The comparisons must tell the story. Perhaps one in six or seven Aboriginal children were taken from their families during the twentieth century, while the figure for white children was about one in three hundred. To put it another way, there is not an Aboriginal person in New South Wales who does not know, or is not related to, one or more of his/her countrymen who were institutionalised by the whites.



## Why did they do it?

The whites tried to justify their actions in various ways. First that there were inspectors, officials and regulations to protect the children from abuse. Yet Margaret Tucker, in her book *If Everybody Cared*, wrote that she was too frightened to complain about her employer to the Homefinder, and so she stayed in the employ of a cruel and brutal sadist. Probably that was a common enough story. Bad regulations must be challenged, otherwise safeguards in the legal system are worthless. Thus the depriving of rations to parents who did not send their children to school was surely illegal, but no-one challenged the regulations and the practice continued. Good regulations too must be enforced, or they are worthless. Thirty years after the enquiry into the Kinchela manager's abuse of his power, another manager was found to have administered ten strokes of the cane on the bare buttocks of a boy for 'sexual perversion'. Yet his reprimand was the same as it had been in 1933, a private letter telling him not to do it again.

Another justification was that the children were in dire need, deserted by their parents and family, or committed to the homes by their own parents. I have already discussed the Board's lack of effort to find relatives willing to look after the children. And we can only guess at the pressure applied by welfare officers when they wrote on the file, 'I have been trying to persuade Mr and Mrs ..... to commit their children to the care of the Board'. What threats, what inducements were offered, the children never knew.

Today as adults they feel only the hurt of 'my mother put us away'. Almost always there was more to the story than the official version. One family lost seven children to the Board all at once, and the reason was put down to the fact, that the parents had deserted their children. The story the mother told was this: she had gone on a holiday and left the children in the care of their grandmother. Food was short, and the grandmother applied for food relief, as the mother herself had done frequently. The welfare officer heard of the case, and the children were removed.

Another justification was that it was in the children's own interest to be taken. Two beds for six children, food kept in a suitcase, an unweeded garden were taken as signs that the parents were incompetent. In one case a relative offered to look after four

committed children. A policeman (a probationary constable) visited the home, and his report ran, 'Mrs ..... agreed that she did not have sufficient accommodation to look after the extra children! Comment is scarcely necessary on the status of the woman's agreement.

When we consider the question of parental desertions more generally, it seems that the practice is so painful that only extraordinary circumstances can lead people to do it: enforced residence on a station run like a concentration camp, and alcoholism caused by poverty and hopelessness would be two such factors.

Last of all is the excuse, 'we didn't know'. But there was adequate opportunity to know. In the Second Reading Debate on the 1916 Amendment, which gave the Board almost unlimited powers to remove Aboriginal children, one Member of Parliament spoke out against it. He denounced the suggested scheme as slavery. There would be mean officials, he predicted, cringing, crawling, merciless, grasping, cruel officials, not humanitarian but who just obeyed the letter of the law, in league with the local squatters who just wanted cheap labour. Girls who were taken would be exposed to more vice than if they had stayed in the camps. Improve the children if you can, he said, but you will not improve a child by taking it away from its parents. The separation of a swallow from its parents was cruelty. Yet the Amendment was carried by 28 votes to three. Ignorance is no defence. The whites were so convinced of the rightness of their own way of life that they excluded all the others. So deep was the idea of the worthlessness of Aboriginal society in New South Wales that hardly anybody, from the highest level of administration to the lowest, got past the old irrelevancies that they respected or were friendly with certain Aborigines. What was required was an appreciation of Aboriginal lifeways in their own right, not as lived by particular individuals.

Most of the officials did not arrive at the starting point, that is, the recognition of the existence of New South Wales Aboriginal culture, let alone take the second step, which was to acknowledge its validity. The blacks whose families remained intact have known all along what the Board was trying to do, and why. For generations Aborigines have suffered. Perhaps in time the whites will suffer in the knowledge of what they have done. But they cannot expect forgiveness.

## Appendix

The goal of the Aboriginal Children's Research Project was to reduce the high numbers of Aboriginal children living in non-Aboriginal care, and prevent Aboriginal children being removed from their families and communities. Part of this process involved reconciling Aboriginal and white perceptions of the situation in New South Wales today, which in turn depends upon an understanding of the historical background.

Events like the ones described in this report are still dominant in the memories of many Aboriginal people. By contrast, these aspects of our recent history are not widely known in the white community, even amongst people working in social welfare and involved with Aboriginal families and children. Those who do have some knowledge of this ethnocentric exercise in social engineering often have little understanding of its effects on Aboriginal communities throughout New South Wales and scant appreciation of the attitudes and philosophies behind these practices.

In presenting this material, this paper contributes to developing a common base of information in the communication between Aboriginal communities and, in particular, government agencies about the return of resources to Aboriginal communities, so that these communities can fully develop the alternatives needed to care for all their children.

# Notes

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