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Abstract

From 1910 to 1970, the Australian government embarked on a policy of Aboriginal child removal which sought to acculturate Aborigine children of mixed descent into white Australian society. The 1997 report, *Bringing Them Home*, records the individual testimonies of hundreds of victims of child removal and argues that prolonged familial separation caused irreparable damage to native Australian communities. Carmel Bird's edited version of the report, *The Stolen Children: Their Stories*, was published in 1998 to disseminate the report's findings and advocate for legislative action. Her book includes the stories of seventeen individuals and responses to the original report from prominent politicians and historians.

Keywords

Aboriginal child removal, Carmel Bird, Stolen Generations, White Australia

Disciplines

History of the Pacific Islands | Indigenous Studies | Literature in English, Anglophone outside British Isles and North America

Comments

Written for HIST 228: Modern Australia

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The Stolen Children: Their Stories:

Aboriginal Child Removal Policy and Consequences

Peter Wildgruber

History 228: Modern Australia

Professor Birkner

April 28, 2021

I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code. -Peter Wildgruber

How does one put into words the intense anguish felt by a child, ripped from a mother's arms? In Australia, nearly one in three Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were stolen from their mothers under child removal policies from 1910 until 1970.¹ The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's 1997 report, *Bringing Them Home*, details the impact of this familial separation on the lives of 'half-caste' Aboriginal children who were placed under institutional care. The 700-page report records the personal accounts of hundreds of Aboriginal individuals, examines the impact of the separations, and recommends policy to support damaged Aboriginal communities. Carmel Bird's edited version of the report, *The Stolen Children: Their Stories*, focuses on seventeen of the accounts and the responses from politicians, activists, and historians to the report's findings. Reading these heart wrenching stories from the victims of the child removal policy illuminates the impact of the predominant racial ideology on individual Australians lives. The prevailing notion of white racial superiority and the "doomed" Aboriginal race must be understood to explain why the half-Aboriginal children taken to missionaries and orphanages were told they "had to be white."² White mothers also played a central role in the institutionalization of part-Indigenous children, but some feminists rejected the policy and advocated for Aboriginal mothers' rights. Bird's book paints a complex picture of the varied implementations of child separation and reveals the unique experiences of each child.

From among Carmel Bird's selected accounts, "Tony's Story" stands out as emblematic of the tragic social and emotional impact of child removal. Tony was adopted into a white family in 1967 and faced rejection by his adoption mother because of his dark skin. "She wanted a white

¹ "Bringing Them Home: The 'Stolen Children' Report (1997)," The Australian Human Rights Commission, April 1, 1997, <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-social-justice/publications/bringing-them-home>, 31.

² Carmel Bird, *The Stolen Children: Their Stories* (Milsons Point, N.S.W.: Random House, 1998), 56.

son” and had no restraint in showing it, soon adopting another boy with blue eyes and blond hair.³ After facing constant ridicule including verbal slurs, he was sent to a different school from his brothers to avoid embarrassing them. All Tony wanted was to live with his birth mother, so he started running away to cause enough trouble to be sent back. Despite all this he was told returning to his family was impossible. Tony was labelled an “uncontrollable” and sent to Wilson youth center, a ‘prison’ where he felt ignored and isolated. A family Tony met while running away from Wilson loved and treated him as one of their own. Their attempts to adopt him were blocked by the state. Tony is not totally embittered by his experience, because he remembers people who accepted and love him. Though his life was touched by some white parents who really cared, the bureaucracy of the welfare department denies him the possibility for a happier life. He continued to run away to avoid being adopted by a family who may treat him like his first and ends up on a train headed to Townsville. On the train, he meets a woman who takes care of him and asks him questions about who he is and where he comes from, but he cannot reveal anything for fear of being caught. He was arrested and returned to Boy’s Town after which he found employment. He feared dying alone, and although his welfare officer recommended reintroduction to his birth mother, this request was ignored. Again, the well-being or wishes of the child are ignored. Placed with another family, he fell into antisocial behavior to cope with his problems, resulting in his arrest. He tried to reconnect with the family after prison, but the adoption mother did not want to see him. When she died, Tony regretted never telling her he loved her. He turned to drugs, alcohol, and crime, resulting in his arrest and long-term imprisonment. Link-Up, a program to reunite separated families, found that his mother had died nine years prior. She was the woman he met on the train to Townsville. Tony never reunites with

³ Carmel Bird, *The Stolen Children: Their Stories*, 67.

his family, but even those who do, describe their inability to reconnect with their mothers or siblings because of barriers of culture or language erected by their time in white society. Fiona struggled to communicate with her reunited family: “once that language was taken away, we lost a part of that very soul.”⁴ Not all stories end tragically, but the time spent separated from their Aboriginal communities leaves scars evident throughout the report. Despite the shared trauma of being removed from their families and the loss of their Indigenous culture, these adults’ experiences as children complicate our understanding of child removal’s effects.

Carmel Bird has chosen these stories purposefully to focus on the emotional trauma and abuse inflicted upon these youth, but her conclusions are echoed in the larger report and in other biographical narratives. As in Tony’s case, most stories relayed in the report describe emotional distress caused by feeling out-of-place and desperately missing their Indigenous families. In almost all accounts, the victims recall disturbing physical, verbal, or sexual abuse inflicted by employers, priests, nuns, and adoption parents. Researchers found that “of 483 people who had been forcibly removed, almost two-thirds (62.1%) reported having been physically abused” and close to one-sixth reported sexual exploitation and abuse.⁵ Even beyond the period of abusive events, the lingering after-effects are also substantiated in the report. In a three-year study, “90% of participants who had been separated were psychologically distressed for most of the three years.”⁶ Even if the welfare of the children had been the true intent of those involved, there exists a staggering amount of evidence for the widespread abuse of removed children. The descriptions of life in the missions and working on farms selected by Bird closely resembled the imagery in *Rabbit Proof Fence*. In that film, the dramatic sequence where the children are ripped away from

⁴ Carmel Bird, *The Stolen Children: Their Stories*, 97.

⁵ “Bringing Them Home: The ‘Stolen Children’ Report,” 168.

⁶ “Bringing Them Home: The ‘Stolen Children’ Report,” 170.

their mother is echoed in many of the stories. Both the film and written accounts point to the impact of separation across generations. The state takes Molly's children to Moore's River just as she had been, and Carol from the report states that "five generations of my family have been affected by removal of children."⁷ The *Bringing Them Home* report's findings align closely with other interpretations and biographical accounts of family separation, suggesting that the similarities across these hundreds of accounts are representative of a larger pattern of abuse, terror, and cultural damage inflicted by the removal of Aboriginal children from their families.

In *The Stolen Children*, one of the most infuriating cruelties was denying the children an explanation as to why they were removed from their parents and could not return. Adopted at an early age by an unloving white family, Tony "couldn't understand why they wouldn't take [him] home."⁸ Repeatedly throughout these narratives, welfare officers and adoptive parents deny the children in their care information about their families whereabouts or wellbeing and often lie to discourage runaways. Bird offers that the true purpose of the removal of 'half-caste' aboriginal children was to assimilate them into white society, dispossess them of their culture and heritage, and breed out all remnants of Indigenous physical characteristics.⁹ In her brief introduction, Bird does not delve into the complex biological and political basis for this removal as an element of social Darwinism. Between 1890 and 1912 Aborigines became wards of the state, and Aboriginal protection boards were given complete control over marriage, employment, and child custody.¹⁰ Australia in the 20th century was increasingly interested in the biological basis of race, and scientific research and debate surrounding Aborigines abounded. Into the 1920s and 1930s,

⁷ Carmel Bird, *The Stolen Children: Their Stories*, 59.

⁸ Carmel Bird, *The Stolen Children: Their Stories*, 68.

⁹ Carmel Bird, *The Stolen Children: Their Stories*, 11.

¹⁰ Stuart Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia*, 4th ed. (Port Melbourne, Victoria: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 149.

studies of Aboriginals determined them to be “archaic” Caucasians based on pseudoscientific blood comparisons and phrenological study.¹¹ These primitive racial theories led academics like John Burton Cleland to write that full-blooded Aboriginals were doomed in their current state and advise that their “‘children must be removed from their parents under such circumstances’ and placed with white foster parents or in a home”.¹² Because native Australians were considered a form of Caucasian, Cleland believed that white Australians could absorb their ‘half-caste’ children into society by marriage.¹³ In the early 20th century, Australians had dedicated themselves to the ideals of social-liberalism and believed that their nation and liberal-democracy “depended upon cultural and racial homogeneity.”¹⁴ By the 1950s, the Australian government shifted their removal of part-Indigenous children towards cultural absorption more so than biological, turning away from eugenics following the Holocaust in Germany.¹⁵ White Australians believed throughout the 20th century that the eventual assimilation of Aborigines was necessary to ensure social stability and that it was in their best interests.

Maternalism played an essential role in the process of indigenous child removal but also posed challenges to child removal. Even as women were gaining status in society, distinctions were made between white and non-white women. Benefits such as maternity allowance applied only to white mothers.¹⁶ After denying unmarried Aboriginal mothers of ‘half-castes’ the means to support them, the children were removed on the grounds of welfare. The process of maternal

¹¹ Warwick Anderson, “Ch.7 - From Deserts the Prophets Come,” in *The Cultivation of Whiteness: Science, Health, and Racial Destiny in Australia* (Basic Books, 2003), pp. 191-224, 193.

¹² Warwick Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness*, 215.

¹³ Warwick Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness*, 222.

¹⁴ Gwenda Tavan, “White Australia Ascendant, 1901-1939,” in *The Long, Slow Death of White Australia* (Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 2005), pp. 16-29, 20.

¹⁵ *Stolen Generations* (Ronin Films, 2000).

¹⁶ Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

colonialism in Australia was mirrored by the treatment of Indian children on the American frontier where the “removal and institutionalization of indigenous children was largely a feminine domain.”¹⁷ Some white families adopted part-Indigenous children for benevolent reasons, because they were aware of the poor medical and social conditions of Aboriginal camps and wished to improve their lives.¹⁸ Many women were not driven by a cultural crusade, and cared for and loved their adopted children as seen in the family that Tony met. Bird includes an article from Professor Marilyn Lake in her “Perspectives” section, which argues that the opposition to removing part-Indigenous children stemmed in part from feminists. Women like Mary Bennett acted as an “extension of the maternalism that characterized feminist political thought in those years” and were actively involved in standing up for Aboriginal mothers even in the 1930s.¹⁹ White women were deeply entrenched in the colonial maternalism that cared for and culturally assimilated Aboriginal children, but some feminists criticized the policy of child removal.

The testimonies republished by Bird in *The Stolen Children: Their Stories* offer insight into the mixed response from political critics and supporters alike to the report. Most notably, then Prime Minister of Australia John Howard argues that while Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islander people remain greatly disadvantaged, the Australian people today cannot be “regarded as guilty for the acts of earlier generations over which they had no control.”²⁰ Known also for his criticism of those who treated Australian history as “a basis for obsessive and consuming

¹⁷ Margaret D. Jacobs, “Maternal Colonialism: White Women and Indigenous Child Removal in the American West and Australia, 1880-1940,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2005): pp. 453-476, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25443236>, 456.

¹⁸ *Stolen Generations* (Ronin Films, 2000).

¹⁹ Carmel Bird, *The Stolen Children: Their Stories*, 132.

²⁰ Carmel Bird, *The Stolen Children: Their Stories*, 120.

national guilt and shame,” the Prime Minister refused calls for a national apology.²¹ Bird included criticisms of the Prime Minister’s statement from Australian Labor Party Leader Kim Beazley, who argues that this “symbolic issue” must be addressed with a direct and sincere apology from the head of state.²² Other critics have charged researchers and politicians with mislabeling the Aboriginals as victims of genocide. Keith Windschuttle claims that these children were “never removed from their families in order to put an end to Aboriginality” and argues that the removal was done for their welfare often with the consent of the parents.²³ Greg’s story from *The Stolen Children* challenges this claim. Greg suggests that his mother could not have understood the consent form she signed, which released custody of him to the state, because of her illiteracy.²⁴ Beyond the illegitimacy of signed documents, Bird also quotes many Aboriginals who were systematically denied their language and culture while in the state’s care. If “the old people were frightened to teach them their language,” it is impossible to suggest that cultural annihilation was not in effect.²⁵ The accounts within the *Bringing Them Home* report speak for themselves and offer serious responses to those who wish to downplay the state’s attack on Aboriginal culture and responsibility to apologize.

The submissions taken from the *Bringing Them Home* report in Carmel Bird’s edited version convey the tragedy and horror that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children faced when separated from their communities. In truly heartbreaking accounts, Accounts such as Greg, Tony, or Fiona’s express the violence, tragedy, and mental anguish they faced after being taken

²¹ Stuart Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia*, 4th ed., 288.

²² Carmel Bird, *The Stolen Children: Their Stories*, 122.

²³ Keith Windschuttle, “Why There Were No Stolen Generations (Part One),” *Quadrant Online* (Quadrant, January 1, 2010), <https://quadrant.org.au/magazine/2010/01-02/why-there-were-no-stolen-generations/>.

²⁴ Carmel Bird, *The Stolen Children: Their Stories*, 53.

²⁵ Carmel Bird, *The Stolen Children: Their Stories*, 110.

from their birth parents. The goal of racial and cultural assimilation that drove these removals was empowered by the growing responsibility of the white mother in 20th century colonial maternalism. While some women challenged the practice early on, it remained for several decades until the reforms of the 1970s. Further policy recommendations put forth in *The Stolen Children* focus on granting Aboriginal people increased self-determination, restitution, and most significantly, legal protections to ensure that their children are never taken again.

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