

INTRODUCTION

MARKED BY A CROSS drawn in ink at about the place where her navel would be, the child stands in the centre of the group of six tiny girls. Her companions look shyly, sadly, at the camera; but her eyes are downcast. She seems to be oblivious, or at least forgetful, of the photographer, concentrating on a ball that she cradles at shoulder level. This child, with her high-domed forehead and gently pouting upper lip, is an orphan among orphans, Australian children of mixed race.

The orphanage was in Darwin, and the photograph of the children appeared in a newspaper in the 1930s, because the Minister for the Interior was appealing for people in Melbourne and Sydney to take the children in, to 'rescue them from becoming outcasts'. This was part of a long-term government plan to assimilate Indigenous people into the dominant white community by removing the children from their families at as young an age as possible, preferably at birth, cutting them off from their own place, language, and customs, and thereby somehow bleaching aboriginality from Australian society. This attempt at assimilation was nothing but a policy of systematic genocide, an attempt to wipe out a race of people. How apt it is, then, that this beautiful child is carelessly and so distinctly marked with a cross at the centre of her being, as if to signify the ruthless severing of the umbilicus that connects her to her mother and her race. The person who made the cross has

From *The Stolen Children – Their Stories*, edited by Carmel Bird. Published March 1998 by Random House Australia. ISBN 0-09-183689. Introduction Copyright © Carmel Bird 1998. All rights reserved. This .pdf file is available at <http://www.carmelbird.com>

written underneath the picture: ‘I like the little girl in centre of group, but if taken by anyone else, any of the others would do, as long as they are strong’.

It is a haunting picture, an image of the saddest and most tender vulnerability, already damaged, about to be further violated and sacrificed. This picture is an emblem of stolen children, and it rouses pity, outrage, grief and mourning.

Sorry Time was eerie music, like a rising wind:
the song of tribal Aborigines in mourning.

— Jan Mayman ‘Sorry Time’

National Sorry Day, 26 May 1998. This day of mourning for the tragedies, and losses suffered by Indigenous people of Australia takes place on the anniversary of the publication of *Bringing Them Home*, a report prepared by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission from material gathered during the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families. One of the Recommendations of the report is that Sorry Day should be an annual event to commemorate the history of the forcible removal of children from their families. The report documents a terrible grief and loss, and highlights the troubled relationship that exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. This relationship is a critical and dramatic element in our history, imbued with tragedy and sorrow, affecting the lives of all of us, and until it is fully examined, acknowledged and mourned, there can be no reconciliation. There was an Aboriginal Day of Mourning on 26 January 1938. Fifty years on, and the sounds of lamentation are louder and more insistent. The evils of the past always come back to haunt us, and to deny the past is to cast a dark shadow, to cripple the future, infecting it with the nature of those evils. In editing this book, I hope to contribute to the revelation of the meanings of our past, to make the stories of Indigenous Australians more accessible to everyone, and to inspire more among us to read and consider the full text and the full implications of *Bringing Them Home*.

Many non-Indigenous Australians are conscious of the wrongs done to Indigenous Australians both in the past and in the present, and are active in their determination to discover ways to right those wrongs. In August 1996 the Governor-General, Sir William Deane, gave the inaugural Lingiari Lecture at the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation in Canberra. He said:

True reconciliation between the Australian nation and its Indigenous peoples is not achievable in the absence of acknowledgement by the nation of the

wrongfulness of the past dispossession, oppression and degradation of the Aboriginal peoples. That is not to say that individual Australians who had no part in what was done in the past should feel or acknowledge personal guilt. It is simply to assert our identity as a nation and the basic fact that national shame, as well as national pride, can and should exist in relation to past acts and omissions, at least when done or made in the name of the community or with the authority of government.

Sir William made it clear that the present low self-esteem and poor quality of life of many Indigenous people flow from the events of the past. 'The dispossession, the destruction of hunting fields and the devastation of lives were all related. The new diseases, the alcohol and the new pressures of living were all introduced.' The devastation of lives is the subject at the centre of the report *Bringing Them Home*. It is a sad footnote to the Governor-General's 1996 speech that in 1997 he was moved to say, as the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people appeared to widen: 'I weep for our country'.

Bringing Them Home is part of the examination of our past, its terms of reference being set down by the Attorney-General, Michael Lavarch, in August 1995 when he asked the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission to consult widely among the Australian people, in particular among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The Attorney-General asked the Commission to trace past laws, practices and policies that resulted in the separation of Indigenous children from their families by 'compulsion, duress or undue influence'. He asked that it examine the present laws and practices available to Indigenous people affected by separation, including those laws relating to access to family records. He asked that the Commission examine the principles relevant to determining the justification for compensation for people affected by separation; to examine current laws relating to the care of Indigenous people; and to advise on necessary changes to these laws. He said that the 'principle of self-determination' by Indigenous people must be taken into account. It is a sad and telling fact that the Attorney-General should have had to draw attention to the need for self-determination of Indigenous people. But he was right, for the paternalism of the old Empire has not entirely disappeared in Australia in the nineties. The need for self-determination is stressed at the end of the report. In the words of Mick Dodson, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, speaking on self-determination in juvenile justice programs: 'The standing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents, families and communities to actively

participate in and shape juvenile justice programs, which have such a disproportionate impact on our children, should be beyond question.'

So many things should be beyond question; so many things are not.

The questions now raised by the report will never go away. They will haunt Australia until they have been understood and answered. Like the wind of Jan Mayman's 'Sorry Time' quoted earlier, these questions will rise and rise until Australia answers them and discovers ways to make good in the present the errors committed in the past. There is no escape from this fact. The past is not past. The past, the present and the future are, as they always are, part of each other, bound together. We cannot change the past, which cannot be undone; we may be able, by generosity of imagination and spirit, to change the future for the better, to act in a more enlightened and more humane manner, with greater dignity and true compassion. I write this Introduction not as a social historian, not as an anthropologist, not as a psychologist; I write only from an ordinary person's observation and understanding, from my heart, without sentimentality, and from my own moral imagination of the events and their significance. I felt compelled to collect the stories of the stolen children, separate them from the other material in the report, and present them in this way with simplicity, clarity and compassion. They are documents of a unique kind, and I have chosen to place them among other documents which relate to them, reflecting on them, commenting on them in direct and illuminating ways.

When I read the stories of the stolen children I was very moved and I was awed by the dignified responses to hardship. I was, at the same time, reminded of the many many stories everywhere of people in adversity, their courage and grace. And I found a redemptive quality in the stories themselves, in the act of telling both for the storytellers and for the listeners.

Many Australians are aware of the general meaning of the report, having been alerted to it by newspapers, and particularly by television. We saw and heard the impassioned speeches of Sir Ronald Wilson, President of the Commission, and of Mick Dodson. We saw the Leader of the Opposition, Kim Beazley, weep in Parliament the day after he first read the report. We saw, to our shame, the Prime Minister, John Howard, refuse to apologise on our behalf to Indigenous people for their tragedy and sorrow, and we saw and registered, in fact felt, the shock that this refusal caused to Indigenous people. The refusal was a depth charge, and in the face of it Indigenous people responded with a dignity that could only inspire awe and an unbear-

able grief. As a result of the public discussion of the report, many people bought copies and read them.

In December 1997, the Federal Government made its formal response to the Report. No apology has been offered by the government on behalf of the Australian people, but \$63 million, to be spent over four years, has been set aside to promote the health and welfare of Indigenous people, and to support the repair of language and culture within Indigenous communities. There is an emphasis on effecting the reunion of families. But the deep and urgent wish of Indigenous people for an apology has not been fulfilled. Some of the state premiers have apologised, and some, although not all, churches — which were the agencies controlling many of the orphanages — have also apologised, expressing a profound regret and great sorrow, but the statement of apology from the Federal Government remains unsaid.

The Report is a document of some seven hundred pages, and costs more than many Australians can afford to pay for a book. Six months after its release, copies of *Bringing Them Home* were still unavailable in suburban libraries, and it was therefore inaccessible to the public for consultation or loan.

People were moved and to a certain extent informed by what they saw on television and in newspapers at the time of the publication of the Report. And news reports continue to keep us informed of the government and public response to the Report as time goes on. In fact some of the material I have collected here is only part of the narrative, because the story develops as time moves on. But the news media are ephemeral, and it was clear to me that unless people could have more ready access to the material in the report, they would remain largely uninformed of its details, the true fabric of the matters in question. The report not only contains stories of the denial of basic human rights; it alleges attempted genocide of the Indigenous people of this country. We all need to know how such an allegation could be made. We need to know, for instance, the fact that in 1841 the Protector of Aborigines in South Australia actually presided over a massacre of thirty Indigenous people.

The findings of 1948 International Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide came into force in Australia in 1951. One of the definitions of genocide is: 'the forcible transferring of children of a group to another group'. A state can not excuse itself by claiming that the practice of genocide was previously lawful under its own laws or that its people did not (or do not) share the outrage of the international community.

White Australians need to read the stories of the people who suffered

systematically and in so many ways at the hands of white Australians, principally of earlier generations. Indigenous people told their stories to the Inquiry and many of these stories are quoted in the report. The courage, dignity and generosity, as well as the tragedy, of these storytellers shines out in their words, delivered from the heart and written in tears.

When I read the report it became a matter of passionate urgency to me that the oral histories told in it should be made accessible to everyone. People in other countries wished to know the stories I had read in *Bringing Them Home*. Of all the means of making the stories known — including publishing them on the Internet at <<http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/special/rslibrary/hreoc/stolen/>> — collecting them in a small book seemed to me to be the simplest and, in the long run, perhaps the most effective. I realise that images are in many ways more immediately powerful than printed words, that television and film are the key media in promoting a message to the world. But I still think that a small and portable paperback book is still a useful storytelling tool, a carrier of messages. Reading a book is a private experience, a perfect way to receive the intimate and personal oral histories of these courageous and sorrowful people. If all the machines shut down, if the systems fail, so long as the sun shines, or we can light a candle, a few people may be able to shelter in some corner of the globe and read the stories in books. Books may be rapidly becoming drab, outmoded technology, but they have the potential, in their simplicity, to be the great survivors, in the end. A bit like the cockroaches, supposedly the life-form that will survive a nuclear holocaust, a few books may still be bearing their messages when everything else has melted. It doesn't take much to get a book to work.

Most of the people whose stories are collected here first saw their stories in print in *Bringing Them Home*. They are people who were brutally and wrongfully separated from their mothers, their fathers, their families and communities when they were very young, people whose attachment to their own contexts were severed and destroyed. Remembering their lives, telling their stories to the Inquiry was difficult and heart-rending for them. Seeing the stories in print was a new and shocking confrontation with the horrors of the past. Several of these people have agreed to republish their stories in *The Stolen Children – Their Stories*, hoping that the stories will reach a wider audience, and help to convince all Australians that an apology is due to those who have come to be known as the stolen generations. Something I understand but deeply regret is that a few of the people whose stories are published in the report were unable to face the experience of seeing the story reprinted

here, and so their stories have had to be omitted. One of the storytellers, Carol, requested that the version of her story published here should be more detailed than the version included in the Report.

Most of the storytellers were interested in the idea of this book as a means of bringing their experiences to the consciousness of all, and were eager to co-operate. I wrote to the storytellers and asked them for permission to reprint their stories. Some of them, when they rang me, told me they had been to the library to check me out. They knew where and when I was born, and the names of some of my family, and the titles of my books. The experience of receiving their permission was unlike any previous experience I have had when putting together an anthology of other people's writing. These writers had already consulted their brothers and sisters before phoning me, and the phone calls we had were long and warm and very friendly and funny and sad. In some cases I did not speak to the storyteller, but to a member of the extended family. Some of the stories here were not included in the original report, but are further documentation of the sadness of much of our history.

When people tell their stories, they usually enjoy feeling proud, and delight in being named and in claiming their own history. Not so the stolen children. The names under which these stories appear are not the real names of the writers. This is because the writers feel they must remain anonymous so that they cannot be identified as the people who have suffered as they have suffered. Their friends, employers, families might see them differently if they knew who they really were. This anonymity is yet another tragic element in this deep, vast tale of pain and sorrow that is a central part of the story of our country.

I would have liked to include photographs of the people who told the stories, pictures to illuminate and illustrate the stories, but of course that was not possible. The people must remain not only nameless, but faceless. Neither was it possible to give biographical details of the writers, as is usually the case in an anthology of stories. The real people behind the stories of the stolen children must continue to remain faceless, to exist in the shadows of our history, until such time as Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia are one, until our differences are reconciled, until the past is examined and mourned, and we can move on.

It is a commonplace notion that severe loss in any form has to be confronted, examined, acknowledged, discussed, exposed before a process of emotional and even physical healing can begin. One of the most powerful

and effective ways people have of recovering from loss is the telling of the personal stories associated with the loss. The Church offers the confessional as part of this process; in modern society many people seek the help of counsellors and psychiatrists to whom they can unburden their souls, to whom they can tell their own stories of loss and pain. Listen to me, we say, let me tell you what has happened to me, let me tell you my story. If I can make you understand me, I may better understand myself. When people told their stories to the Inquiry many of them found that the act of telling was personally. The act of listening is the other part of telling; you can't really tell a story unless somebody is listening. And in this case the listeners have as much at stake as the tellers. If Australia will listen to the stolen children and take their stories in and let those stories live in the consciousness of the country, this country will begin to heal the wounds of over two hundred years of deliberate and unconscious abuses of human rights.

I am indebted to Karen Menzies, a social worker who has acted as an intermediary between myself and the storytellers, for her sensitive understanding, patience and insight. Without her help it would not have been possible for me to compile this anthology. And I am also profoundly grateful to Sir Ronald Wilson for writing a Preface for the book, and to the historian Henry Reynolds for writing an Afterword that sets out in brief the history of white supremacy and racial discrimination that characterised the 'settling' of Australia by Europeans, and that is still ingrained in our society. Martin Flanagan wrote 'Brother' particularly for this book, and Veronica Brady's piece was also specially written for the 'Perspective' section. Robert Manne, Marilyn Lake, Lang Dean and Jack Waterford donated their published writing. I have placed these alongside extracts of speeches made in Parliament at the time of the tabling of the Report. The section 'Perspectives' could have been a vast, almost unending collection of responses to the Report, but I have selected just a few pieces which seem to me to form a kind of frame for the stories of the stolen children themselves.

No two words strike deeper into the human heart than the words 'stolen children'. Nothing is more valuable to us than our children, nothing so irreplaceable, so precious, so beloved. The history of white Australians is marred by children lost in the bush, children spirited away by unknown agents. The stories of these children have become the stuff of myth, icons of horror, and they ring with the notes of darkest nightmare. How must it be, then, to be such children, stolen children. How must it be to be children who have been snatched from their mothers and systematically stripped of cul-

ture, language, rights and dignity? To be such children who grow to be adults within the very society that visited these crimes upon them. Yet the storytellers in this book are distinguished by a courage and a generosity that speaks with the voice of grace.

The conjunction of the words ‘stolen’ and ‘children’ is a horror for both parties, for the child and for the mother. Etched into the stories collected here are the grief and suffering of the mothers. As Murray says in his Journal: ‘the worst thing that could ever happen to any woman black or white was to have her children taken from her’. Many members of the stolen generations suffered first as children who were taken and later as mothers whose children were removed.

The stolen children in this book speak of a feeling of emptiness, of having a sense of a hole in their hearts as they recall their loss of family, language, culture, identity. They catalogue the abuses they suffered at the hands of white families and missionaries, but the original wound is that which was inflicted at the moment they were torn from their mothers. Sometimes this happened with the mother’s consent, the family being tricked into believing the separation was for the good of the child who would go away and be nurtured and educated and even loved. The tragic irony of this is brought out in ‘Anne’s Story’.

Sometimes it is the small details that have been etched in a child’s memory that emphasise the horror of what happened to these children. One such detail is not in this book because the writer was one of those who could not bear to repeat the experience of seeing her story in print for a second time. However it is a detail that returns to me constantly for its simple and awful symbolism. This girl was sent to a white family at Christmas time. The daughter of the house received the gift of a bride doll, while the Indigenous child received a Raggedy Ann. A similarly striking incident occurs in ‘John’s Story’. When they arrived at the orphanage the small boys each carried a little suitcase containing only a Bible which was their treasure and which somehow gave them a kind of identity. The first thing they had to do, before having their heads shaved, was to cast their little suitcases, Bible and all, into a bonfire.

When you read the stories of the stolen children you will begin to know and feel how life has been — how life is — for many Indigenous Australians, people who were taken from their families as tiny babies or as children, and you can not fail to be moved. And don’t imagine that the children of today are immune. Part Six of *Bringing Them Home* is titled ‘Contemporary Sep-

arations' and begins with a quotation from the Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia: 'The fact remains that Aboriginal children are still being removed from their families at an unacceptable rate, whether by the child welfare or the juvenile justice systems, or both'.

The wealth of evidence given to the Inquiry showed that the methods and practices in the removal and separation of Indigenous children from their families across Australia were similar in all regions of the country. The children could be taken away at any age, and many of them were taken from their mothers at birth or in very early infancy. Most of the children so taken were put into institutions where the other children were mostly Indigenous, of mixed race, and where the staff were non-Indigenous. If a child was adopted or fostered out to a family, that family was usually white. The objective of all this activity was to absorb Indigenous children into white society, to force them to forget and deny their Aboriginal heritage and blood, and to bring about, within a few generations, a form of breeding-out of all Indigenous characteristics.

The children thus suffered contempt and denigration of their heritage, their own nature, and often the presence of Aboriginal blood was denied. They would be told that their parents were dead or had rejected them, and family members were unable to contact the children, or even to know where they had gone. Letters to and from the children and their true families were suppressed by the authorities; parcels of clothing and toys sent were never received. Children were severed from their roots, denied access to the true nourishment of their spirit, and were at the mercy of institutions or strangers. Children were exploited in every way, and were the object of psychological, physical and sexual abuse. It is clear that subsequent generations continue to suffer the effects of the separations of the earlier generations, and that these separations are largely to blame for the troubled lives of many Indigenous Australians today. The complex, ongoing and compounding effects of the separations result in a cycle of damage from which it is profoundly difficult to escape. There is a theme of helpless sorrow running through these stories. There is a mounting threnody that all Australians must learn to hear and to acknowledge.

Throughout the Report there are many short quotations from members of the stolen generations, as well as longer stories. Within both kinds of narrative there are moments when the reader must pause, draw breath, re-read a sentence in horror and in the hope of disbelief. Embedded in the report's short explanations of the quotations from the words of the stolen children are

arresting little sentences that will chill you to the bone. Taking one of these at random: ‘woman taken from her parents with her three sisters when the family, who worked and resided on a pastoral station, came into town to collect stores’. In that description of a life lies the sharpest tragedy and horror. The children are no more than a commodity; the authorities can simply take them from their parents who are going about their ordinary business in the town. I put myself imaginatively in the position of any of the people in this drama — the parents, the children, the police — and every position is intolerable. The situation itself is intolerable. I think that perhaps imagination is one of the most important and powerful factors in the necessary process of reconciliation. If white Australians can begin to imagine what life has been like for many Indigenous Australians over the past two hundred years, they will have begun to understand and will be compelled to act. If we read these stories how can we not be shocked and moved by stories such as the following?

In Confidential evidence number 528, given to the Commission, a man who was removed from his family in the 1970s, when he was eight, and who suffered sexual abuse in the orphanage and in foster homes organised by the church, said that he is still so frightened of the welfare system that he is afraid to have children of his own, and is unable to show love to others.

There’s still a lot of unresolved issues within me. One of the biggest ones is I cannot really love anyone no more. I’m sick of being hurt. Every time I used to get close to anyone they were just taken away from me. The other fact is, if I did meet someone, I don’t want to have children, cos I’m frightened that the welfare system would come back and take my children.

It is surely a terrible irony that a system described as ‘welfare’ is cast in this man’s mind (and in the minds of many other Indigenous people who told their stories to the Inquiry) as a monster that will invade his life and steal his children. Many of the short entries from confidential submissions contain phrases of a poignant wistfulness that is so very sad: ‘I’ve often thought, as old as I am, that it would have been lovely to have known a father and a mother, to know parents even for a little while, just to have had the opportunity of having a mother tuck you into bed and give you a good-night kiss — but it was never to be.’ The writer of that sentence in Confidential submission number 65, was fostered at two months of age, in 1936 in Tasmania. And a woman who was sent to the Cootamundra Girls’ Home in the 1950s gives us in Confidential submission number 332 a vivid picture from her memory: ‘I remember all we children being herded up, like a mob of cattle,

and feeling the humiliation of being graded by the colour of our skins for the government records’.

There can be no disbelief; these are true stories, the stories of the descendants of the original inhabitants of this country. They reveal a society that tolerated the harshest cruelties, and that denied the existence of these cruelties, a society that hoped the problem of Indigenous people would disappear, hoped that the people themselves would disappear, dissolve into the background like images in a fading photograph.

If you repeat a lie often enough it comes to be believed, but then if you keep repeating it on and on, it begins to be exposed for the lie that it is. I am a white Australian of Celtic background. I grew up in Tasmania with the story that the whole race of the Tasmanian Aborigines had been killed off last century. During my early life, the lie had been told too often, and the truth was beginning to get out, but slowly and very painfully. Genocide was attempted in Tasmania in the nineteenth century, but it failed. (Forcible removal of Indigenous children from their families occurred during two periods in Tasmania. The first began with the European occupation of Tasmania in 1803 and lasted until the middle of the nineteenth century. The second started in the 1930s with the forcible removal of Indigenous children from Cape Barren Island under general child welfare legislation and continues into the present. However, in more recent times welfare practice in Tasmania has regarded removal as an absolute last resort.)

The history I was taught said that the whole race of Indigenous Tasmanians had been successfully eradicated by 1876 when Truganini died. The Indigenous people of Tasmania did not die out, that they are very much alive today. Fearing her dead body would be seen as a curiosity and a commodity to be dissected and examined by scientists, Truganini said as she was dying: ‘Don’t let them cut me up, but bury me behind the mountains.’ Her state funeral was farcical as the coffin was empty. Her body had been already buried in the chapel in the Hobart jail. Two years later it was exhumed and boiled and reduced to a skeleton that was stored in a wooden crate in the museum. Years later, during a clean-up at the museum, the crate was about to be thrown out. Suddenly someone realised it contained the bones of ‘the last Tasmanian’. These bones were then assembled and put on display in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery.

When I was a child I saw that skeleton. It seemed to me to be incredibly tiny, a waif of a skeleton in a glass case. It was taken off display in 1947. In 1976 the bones of Truganini were cremated and the ashes scattered in the

Southern Ocean. The story of the Indigenous Tasmanians is part of the story of the attempted genocide of the Indigenous people of Australia, and the stories of the stolen children are another part of that story.

I went to school in Tasmania with some girls who lived in an orphanage. The fact that they were known as orphans set them apart as different, yet it was not until I met some of them decades later that I realised they were Aboriginal. I imagine that this my experience is not unusual for white Australians of my generation. When I read *Bringing Them Home* I realised the baby boy mysteriously adopted by friends of my parents was a child of mixed race. I was envious of his tight curly hair. I recall that he was very loved and nurtured by his adoptive family, and it is clear from some sections of the Report that not all Indigenous children who were removed from their own families suffered at the hands of their adoptive families. There remains, however, the tragedy of the loss of language and culture to any children cut off from their own people.

The Indigenous people of Tasmania had not, after all, disappeared. The Indigenous people of Australia and the islands of the Torres Strait will never disappear. They belong here, they have an indisputable right to be here in the full dignity of their humanity, and to contribute in confidence and joy to the future of this country. Listen to their voices.

Carmel Bird
Melbourne
Australia Day, 26 January 1998