

# Derivative and indigenous in the history and historiography of child welfare in Australia

## Part Two

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*This article traces the history of child welfare in Australia, showing the ways in which policies and practices, deriving primarily from Britain, were adopted and adapted in a nation in which jurisdiction was split between colonies/states and further divided, within states, on the basis of race. It argues that child welfare has always been part of the nation-building project, central to national objectives when children could be constructed as future citizens, marginal, and more punitive, when they were more easily understood as threats to social stability. In this second part, it discusses post-war developments in services for non-indigenous children, and indigenous child welfare services. It concludes with a discussion of the historiography of child welfare in Australia arguing that because, to date, historical writing has concentrated on localised or specialist studies, child welfare professionals have limited access to an understanding of the history of the systems within which they work.*

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### THE CHILD IN A PERIOD OF POST WAR RECONSTRUCTION

Although Australia emerged more confidently from the Second World War than it had from the first, old anxieties about population and modernity were revived in the aftermath of a global conflict which had substantially decreased the nation's isolation. 'The wrecked homes and shattered domestic lives which have followed the termination of hostilities', the Church of England Messenger believed, would produce a new and more dangerous type of child,

... deprived of parental love and guidance and left to fend for himself in a selfish world ... The seeds of hatred readily take root in his fertile mind and he becomes a menace to his own and the community's welfare. False and dangerous doctrines appeal to his untrained mind – he is then on the road to disaster.

Only by rebuilding child welfare services 'in accordance with the latest developments overseas' could the community be saved (Church of England Messenger, 15 November 1946, 29 November 1946).

The 'latest developments overseas' included the growth of a considerable body of knowledge around child psychology, which argued that children grew best within loving families, with a particular emphasis on the importance of the mother-child bond in early infancy (Bowlby 1953; Winnicott 1957). The acceptance of such arguments produced a climate in which finance was available to reconstruct existing child welfare services even though the proportion of children coming into care was declining steadily across the country. Large congregate care institutions were dismantled to be replaced initially by

children's villages or campus cottages, modelled on English facilities visited by local experts prior to the war. In later re-developments, the children's village model was replaced by family group homes dotted around the suburbs.

Some of these re-developments were made possible by the funding attached to the child migration scheme which formed an integral part of the Australian Government's plans to populate the country in the aftermath of war. From its very beginning, however, this scheme was built upon a fundamental mismatch: Australia wanted young children to fill its empty spaces without threatening existing labour conditions while the British sending institutions visualised a scheme in which young people, ready to go to work, could embrace the opportunities of Australia. Targets were never met, and many of those who did come have, in adulthood, reacted angrily to their experiences, accusing the British and Australian Governments and the participating child welfare institutions of deception and neglect, and seeking redress for the exploitation and ill-treatment they had experienced (Bean & Melville 1989; Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2001).

The reconstruction of child welfare facilities in the 1950s coincided with a temporary peak in the proportion of children in the population. From 1961 the demographic, and hence the political importance of children, moved into a steady decline with child welfare services relegated to a more marginal position in government priorities. The original goals of the child welfare movement were both idealistic and disciplinary, based on a desire to 'rescue' the children of the 'dangerous' classes and to prepare them for active citizenship in the

democratic nation. The movement attracted first the moral and later the financial support of government because these goals were shared – the nation could see the value of maximising its productive workforce. Economic changes in the late twentieth century eroded much of this shared value base, reducing the need for the future labour of young people and returning them again to the category of a ‘dangerous class’ needing to be contained. Welfare agencies, which now looked to government for the bulk of their financial support, could no longer be sure that this relationship was based on goals that both ‘partners’ shared. Child welfare was subsumed under the more general heading of family welfare, served primarily by community-based support programs designed to diminish the need for children ever to come into care. Institutional facilities have been replaced by foster care programs, designed primarily to meet short-term needs. Despite community concern about physical and sexual abuse, and rising death rates amongst children under state supervision, there has been little political will to reverse the retreat from responsibility which has marked the last twenty years of child welfare policy.

#### INDIGENOUS CHILDREN

The term ‘child welfare’, in Australian usage, was itself exclusionary, identifying non-indigenous children only as central to the development of the new nation. In NSW the existence of ‘children of the aborigines, getting food from the state’ was used as an argument for greater intervention in the lives of ‘children of white men’ who were believed to be relatively deprived in comparison (NSWPD 1905: 674). The coded term ‘race suicide’, used initially to condemn abortion and contraception, was widened to encompass the whole range of threats to white childhood, while promoting also a blindness to the plight of Aboriginal children whose survival was never invested with the same value. Despite an increasing interest in the plight of native fauna in the animal side of its work, the Queensland Society for the Prevention of Cruelty, like SPCCs in other states, remained silent on the subject of indigenous children.

Such silences disguised the fact that indigenous children had been subject to a process of removal which had commenced in the earliest days of colonisation. Individual ‘orphans’ were taken into the homes of white settlers as both intermediaries and servants well before the establishment of the first race-specific institution at Parramatta, outside Sydney, in 1815. The Native Institution was never a success. Aboriginal parents were reluctant to surrender their children, even temporarily, and death rates amongst those admitted to the institution were high. After several changes of location and management, the institution closed in 1829 (Kociumbas 1997: 13). Widespread removals by pastoralists and missionaries intensified as the frontier widened. Although some removals were built upon a curiosity factor, most were constructed as acts of charity, the opportunity to ‘enjoy’ the benefits of civilisation being compared favourably to the increasingly difficult lot of Aboriginal people both inside and outside the settlement (HREOC 1997: 27-28).

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The resistance of Aboriginal parents to parting with their children and a general hardening of racial attitudes in the colonies saw this language of charity transformed into a language of rescue, in which the removal of Aboriginal children ‘from their bad environments and parental influences’ was posited as essential to the future of the nation (Link-

Up (NSW) and Wilson 1997: 50). The passage of Aboriginal Protection Acts in the various states in the early years of Federation transformed this widespread practice into official policy, with Protectors being given the power to act in place of parents for the Aboriginal children under their control. Officially the policy was applied to ‘illegitimate children of not less than 50 per cent white blood’ whose ‘elevation’ to the living standards ‘of a white’ was considered to be ‘a matter of social and economic urgency’ (Link-Up and Wilson 1997: 17) but the decimation of the Aboriginal population in the course of European occupation, the prevalence of consensual and non-consensual cross-racial sexual relationships and the non-recognition of traditional marriage placed many Aboriginal children at risk. Although the love of Aboriginal mothers for their children was recognised this was usually cast in animalistic terms, as something which dissipated as the child moved beyond infancy. A child removed at four or five, authorities believed, would quickly be forgotten (Link-Up and Wilson 1997: 18). Although accurate statistics are hard to compile, the 1997 National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families concluded that from 1910 to 1970 between one in three and one in ten indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families. It concluded that no indigenous family escaped the effects of forcible removal with most being affected in one or more generations (HREOC 1997: 37).

Where states with small Aboriginal populations accommodated such children within the existing child welfare structures, in New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory separate institutions were established, some controlled by the Aboriginal Protection Boards and others by voluntary organisations. Usually segregated by gender they offered a minimal education designed to prepare the children to enter the workforce as farm workers or domestic servants. The move, in the 1950s, from institutional to substitute family care was also reflected within such separate child welfare systems. In each of the States the authorities charged with Aboriginal ‘protection’ began to advertise for foster and adoptive families for the children in

their care. This served to further promote a policy of absorption into the white population where Aboriginality was denied and broke up the residual sense of community which had been able to be maintained in the separatist institutions. Outside the Board's control large numbers of Aboriginal single mothers were coerced to part with their babies as new-baby adoption became common practice in the post-war years. Again the language was one of rescue with benevolent white families lauded for their willingness to open their homes to children in need. Critical to the success of such placements was the breaking of all bonds between the child and its family of origin. Often, for the adoptive parents, this involved a denial of the child's aboriginality as well.

The child removal policy, in its many guises, is increasingly being positioned within an accusation of genocide as an essential concomitant of the European invasion (HREOC 1997: 270-5). Having eliminated most of the indigenous population through murder, poisoning, disease and starvation in the process of taking possession of their lands, government consistently under-resourced the reserves on which the survivors were confined. This served to create the very conditions which were used to justify the removal of the children, destined to be brought up in ignorance of their Aboriginal culture. Buttressing such policies was the social Darwinist belief that the 'real', that is 'full-blood', Aboriginal people were destined to die out and that the interests of their mixed descent children would be best served by maximising the white and therefore superior side of their inheritance (Link-Up and Wilson, 1997: 33-35). Yet the practice of removal was seldom consistent with the promise with too many children moving from abusive institutional or family placement through to exploitative employment, outsiders in a society intent on preserving its own whiteness (HREOC 1997: 153). Ten per cent of children reported experiencing sexual abuse in institutional care, a figure rising to 30 per cent for girls placed in foster homes (HREOC 1997: 163). Genuine bonds of affection were discouraged, children were deprived of any but the most basic levels of education and were forced into menial employment (HREOC 1997: 169-72).

The consistent theme for post-removal memories is the lack of love, the strict, often cruel treatment by adults, the constantly disparaging remarks about Aboriginality – and the fact that the child should be showing more gratitude for having been taken from all that – and of course the terrible loneliness and longing to return to family and community (HREOC 1997: 159).

Despite the demise of race-specific protective structures, widespread disadvantage in both rural and urban Aboriginal communities continues. As a result indigenous children continue to be over-represented amongst children in care and therefore disproportionately likely to incur the damage that such separation can entail.

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The historiography of child welfare in Australia tends to reflect the complexities and constraints of the system itself. The impact of the theoretical work of Michel Foucault has seen child welfare history positioned within an analysis of medico-charitable interventions into family life (Finch 1993; Hetherington 1995) rather than the older Marxist model of social control (Bessant 1987; Kennedy 1982). Kociumbas (1997), in the one attempt to write a comprehensive history of childhood in Australia, analyses child welfare within a contestation model, arguing that authority passed from 'charitable church people . . . especially, middle-class women' to

male secular experts, initially doctors but later psychologists, who came to question the competence of all women to rear children, increasing the breadth of surveillance. Few others have attempted a national coverage, choosing, like van Krieken (1991) and Gilding (1991), to develop a thesis believed to have national significance but constrained to testing it only on a state basis.

The explicitly state-based literature is richer, but seldom attempts to place the individual experience within a wider context. Although there have been calls from several states for official inquiries into the treatment of children in child welfare institutions, only Queensland so far has taken up the challenge (Commission of Inquiry into Abuse of Children in Queensland Institutions 1999).

As well as the rich primary source archives a small number of analytical works survive from the developmental period (Davey 1956; Mackellar 1907; Spence 1907). The centenary of voluntary provision has produced an array of commissioned institutional histories, varying widely in quality (Cole 1969; Howe & Swain 1989, 1991; Jaggs 1988, 1991; Monk 1994; Ramsland 1985; Rowland 1968; Smedley 1992; Strahan 1988). The attempts at state-based histories are more theoretical in approach. Ramsland's (1986) *Children of the Backlanes* depicts child welfare in New South Wales as simply replicating policies developed in Britain, while Barbalet's (1983) *Far From a Low Gutter Girl* draws on case records and correspondence to examine the world of female wards in South Australia prior to the Second World War. The other states are less well served although thematic histories provide in-depth studies of sub-groups within the wider child welfare population (Bavin 1991; Bean & Melville 1989; Berreen 1997; Bosworth 1993; Brown 1972; Davis 1988; Davison 1983; Dickey 1977, 1979, 1986; Garton 1986, 1996; Gill 1997; Horsburgh 1976, 1980; Jaggs 1986; Mellor 1990; Ramsland 1974; Reiger 1985; Robinson 1985; Scott & Swain 2002; Swain with Howe 1995). In recent years indigenous child welfare history has been well served by both analytical and autobiographical works (Crawford 1989; Cummings 1990; Edwards &

Read 1989; Goodall 1990; Haebich 1992, 2000; Huggins 1994; Kennedy 1985; Langford 1988; Read 1999; Tucker 1983; Ward 1987) with a small number of autobiographies emerging from individuals who grew up in non-indigenous institutions as well (Facey 1981; Lane 1990; Moore 1990; Shayler 2001; Smith 1990).

Writing in 1991 Mary McDougall Gordon (1991: 101-2) identified several lacunae in Australian childhood historiography: the focus on the colonial period, with little material at all on the post second world war period; a concentration on the policy and practice of the two most populous states with this concomitant assumption that such studies provided a basis for generalisation on a national basis; the emphasis on children of British stock to the exclusion of ethnic and indigenous children. The controversy surrounding the *Bringing them home* report (HREOC 1997) has ensured that the experience of indigenous children is no longer ignored, although it still tends to be studied in isolation from the wider child welfare system, but the other gaps remain substantially unfilled. Although, as this brief survey has argued, Australian child welfare policy has been characterised by derivation rather than innovation, the systems which resulted have impacted both on individual lives and the national identity. Yet a shortage of research funds and an increasing reluctance of voluntary and statutory agencies to allow historians access to their records for fear of litigation, decrease the possibilities of a national history being produced. ♦

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