

Traces in the archives

Evidence of institutional abuse in surviving child welfare records

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The 2004 Forgotten Australians report is the most recent in a series of enquiries highlighting the prevalence of abuse in Australian child welfare institutions. The final report was heavily reliant on oral evidence from survivors and called for ongoing historical research to investigate the conditions which allowed such abuse to exist. This paper is a preliminary response to that call.

Drawing on the records of a range of Victorian child welfare organisations, it argues that there is evidence in the archives both for the existence of institutional abuse and of individual and systemic responses to the problem. However, the evidence is not always found in the obvious places, nor does it support a simplistic explanation of the prevalence and tolerance of abuse in such settings.

In January 1875, rumours spread around the town of Geelong that a 16-year-old resident of the Protestant Orphanage, found to be pregnant, had alleged that 'the superintendent had been the cause of her ruin' (*Geelong Advertiser*, 18 January 1875). The orphanage committee immediately set about to restore the reputation of the institution. The superintendent was dismissed and the young mother-to-be was 'removed', but it was clear where the committee's sympathies lay. The superintendent, subscribers were informed, 'like many others had done ... had yielded to temptation ... temptation of no common order' and was left 'a thoroughly brokenhearted and almost desperate man'. Further court action was 'deemed undesirable, as it would be the means of calling unnecessary attention to the affair to the injury of the Institution' (*Geelong Advertiser*, 29 January 1875). In many ways this case can be seen as a microcosm of the treatment of claims of abuse in children's institutions over the next 130 years. The reputation of the organisation was to be preserved at all costs, stifling debate around the circumstances that produced such abuse and effectively silencing its victims.

A series of public enquiries in recent years, both in Australia and abroad, has ended this silence, breaking open the thin veneer of benevolence to expose the dark underside of out-of-home care (Australian Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2001, 2004, 2005; Forde 1999; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997; Irish Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse 2006; Law Commission of Canada 2000; Mullighan 2005; Ombudsman Tasmania 2006). The common purpose of all of these enquiries was to allow survivors, or care-leavers, to give voice to their experience of adoption, foster, cottage or congregated care. The testimonies that emerged were overwhelmingly negative. 'Rescued' from danger, children found themselves utterly powerless and, all too often, exposed to further harm. As the Canadian enquiry concluded:

Children do not choose to live in institutions. Societies plan and establish institutions for children with a beneficial purpose in mind. The institutions now under close public scrutiny were intended to improve the lives of the children placed in them. Many contributed significantly to doing so, and provided children with an education and life skills that have served them well as adults. Nonetheless, the fact remains that many children

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were harmed terribly by abuse they suffered while resident in institutions (Law Commission of Canada 2000: 1).

The reliance of official enquiries on oral testimony has not been without its critics, but each of the reports defends this approach, arguing that, because record-keeping in child welfare organisations was so inadequate, care-leavers have found it difficult to find material to justify their claims (Australian Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee 2004: 265; 2001: 142-5). While final reports routinely recommend that steps be taken to facilitate access of survivors to personal records, and prohibit any further destruction of organisational archives, there is a general acceptance that, even were these provisions to be implemented, there is little to be found (Australian Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee 2004: ch.9; 2001: 142-5). As Penglase (2005: 41-5) observes, the way in which responsibility was divided between Government departments and non-government organisations often meant that neither took responsibility for adequate case record-keeping. Neither placed a high value on documenting the lives of the individual child. Government archives preserve ‘inspector reports or notes by workers or receipts – that sort of administrative documentation’ (Australian Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee 2001: 144).

The public servants, police officers, school staff, hospital and mission workers responsible ... did not record information in a way that makes it easy to use today. They were not interested in recording information to show what happened to individual children or to their families. They had no reason to think that information that they could have recorded, but did not, would be of vital use decades later. They recorded information to help them do their jobs or as required of them by law or by their superiors (Schwirtlich, Stokes & Macpherson 2003: 142).

This paper, however, will argue that there is evidence in the archives, at least of Victorian child welfare organisations, for the existence of abuse and of individual and systemic responses to the problem.¹ However the evidence is not always found in the obvious places, nor does it support a simplistic explanation of the prevalence and tolerance of abuse in such settings.

¹ Historically Victoria has had a heavy reliance on institutional care, in large congregate care institutions prior to World War II, moving to campus or scattered cottages in the post-war era. In the late nineteenth-century, both the Neglected Children’s Department (later the Children’s Welfare Department) and some non-government organisations also established boarding-out or foster care programs, remnants of which survived into the 1930s. This article draws on evidence from all of these forms of out-of-home care.

CATEGORIES OF ABUSE

The *Lost Innocents* report identifies eight different categories of abuse suffered by children in out-of-home care: sexual assault; physical assault; depersonalisation; psychological abuse; abusive work practices; lack of education, inadequate food and clothing; and lack of after-care (Australian Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee 2001: 72-3). Using a slightly less complex categorisation system, *Forgotten Australians* found that of the care-leavers whose experiences were described in submissions, 32.7 per cent reported emotional abuse, 35.5 per cent physical abuse, 20.9 per cent sexual abuse, 7.6 per cent child labour exploitation and 3.3 per cent neglect (Australian Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee 2004: 410). But to attempt such categorisation, Penglase (2005: 50-9) argues, is to ignore the uncomfortable fact that:

... the dehumanizing environment of the institution itself is the primary ‘abuse’, and from this stem all the other more easily classifiable abuses.

By focusing on abuse alone, we lose sight of the appalling bleakness of the life in which the abuse occurred. We do not put ourselves in the shoes of these children and ask, ‘What would it be like to be treated as if I were not a human being with the same feelings as other human beings?’ (Penglase 2005)

While it could be argued that three different kinds of abuse can be identified in surviving records – harsh disciplinary practices; physical and sexual abuse by staff; and, abuse between residents – clear distinctions cannot be drawn. The three levels of abuse are interrelated and, for the person on the receiving end, the impact was often the same: they were further abused in a place that was meant to be offering them protection. Nor is it fruitful to try and isolate the abuse to a small number of poorly-managed institutions, or deviant individuals. While there is no evidence to suggest that all children were subject to all such abusive behaviours, abuse in its various manifestations was, and is, endemic in all forms of out-of-home care (Australian Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee 2001: 77; Coldrey 2001: 94; Penglase 2005: 145).

EVIDENCE FROM THE ARCHIVES

Although official child welfare histories rarely mention abuse, the records on which they are based are not so silent (Jaggs 1991; Monk 1994; Rowland 1968). Neglected Children’s Department case registers from the 1890s detail children dying from inadequate care, girls sexually abused by their foster fathers, and others who were removed from situations little short of horrifying, including one from a home where the foster mother had murdered her own children before being confined to a lunatic asylum (Swain 1977: 168-9). Five-year-old Louisa, the illegitimate child of

a servant, was removed from her foster mother by a Salvation Army officer who had found the child living in a dog kennel and surviving on scraps of food thrown on the ground (Swain 1977: 155-6).²

RA's sister, a resident of the Victorian Neglected Children's Aid Society home in the 1920s, told her family it was 'a cruel sort of [place] ... hidings, and all this ... she was evidently very unhappy there' (Oral history interview: AC/RA 19 January 1992, Wesley Mission History Project). RA told this story to emphasise that he had not experienced similar treatment at the Methodist boys training farm, Tally Ho, but not all residents were so fortunate. In 1935, Mr Madras, farm manager at Tally Ho, was compelled to respond to allegations that he had hit the leader of a group of boys who were stoning him when ordered to work. He replied:

At no time did I hit Boase with anything but my open flat hand, and then it was not punishment for not working but an endeavour to check his vile and insulting language (Wesley Mission archives: Madras to Mr Henry, Secretary, CWD, CM 132 Superintendent's reports, Tally Ho).

Nor was life any happier at the Anglican St John's Homes.

The more I think of the state of misery and unhappiness in which I found little John after three months of your tender care, the more enraged I feel that such a man as you should have the care and responsibility of little children,

an unhappy mother wrote in a letter of complaint to the Rector.

Please do not treat the other two lonely little victims in the same manner as you have done little John. They are I understand or at least John was, tormented by the other boys, shunned and called stinker etc., etc. and that to a sensitive new child must be even worse than the corporal punishment which generally followed (St John's case records, 1931).

For Malcolm, the home was made unbearable not by physical abuse but by the total lack of affection. 'I have spent many happy times with you people and also some unhappy ones,' he wrote to a care worker after absconding in 1945.

I want to thank you for those little talks that you and I had ... for in them I had an outlet for lots of my pent up feelings ... I shall always remember and think of you as a friend.

His letter ended with an afternote:

I would put love Malcolm but you never would give me a kiss (St John's case records, 1945).

The sexual undertones of this letter became overt at the Methodist Homes for Children in the interwar period. Anxious to introduce a more family-like attitude, the committee established a cottage, presided over by a married couple rather than the single women who had constituted the staff to that time. However the combination of male employees, perhaps feeling disempowered in such a matriarchal structure, and adolescent girls returned from placements because they had become sexually active, proved problematic, with the first three cottage fathers dismissed because of sexual abuse. In each of these cases, the girls were punished and dispatched to rescue homes while their abusers were not charged, the committee always anxious to avoid any negative publicity (Howe & Swain 1989: 52-3).

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Reports of abuse continued in the post-war period. Writing in the 1950s, a mother tried to explain why her son had absconded from St John's.

He said the Home was alright only for one man, the cripple one and he seemed to like punching the boys, now and again. I thought you would be the only one that would cane the boys, I know they have to be made to obey (St John's case records: undated 1950s).

At Tally Ho, AG recalled:

It was one thing that you never ever did and that was never ever worked behind Sarge, because if you worked behind Sarge he would turn around and knock your block off, right, probably because at some stage or other somebody has done something behind Sarge's back (Oral history interview, Wesley Mission Project: 1991).

But more prevalent was the 'discipline' that boys administered to each other. In cases of unwanted sexual advances, RI recalls:

... us older boys would soon deal with it ... We'd take the kid behind the shed and belt hell out of him. We wouldn't leave no marks on him ... But there was no standover tactics ... that was the way it was out there (Oral history interview, Wesley Mission Project: 1992).

TESTIMONIES FROM STAFF

While such reports appear to indicate an acceptance by parents and ex-residents of a certain level of corporal punishment within child care institutions, records left by staff suggest a higher level of dis-ease. In the under-staffed

² In order to preserve the confidentiality of individuals mentioned in the text, pseudonyms or initials rather than real names are used throughout this article.

congregate care institutions which characterised the Victorian child welfare system until well into the 1950s, many staff argued for the strap as essential to maintaining order. As a young Christian Brother, Ted was advised:

Take a whistle and take your strap. At some stage during the meal, not long after it's started, blow the whistle as hard as you can, and the biggest bloke and the first bloke you can seize on that keeps talking after you blow the whistle, haul him out and give him a couple of the best and you won't have any more problems after that (Barnard & Twigg 2004: 193-4).

Assuming responsibility for a small private reformatory in the 1890s, Max Brown had written in his diary: 'if reform is to be accomplished it will have to be through love and not terrorism alone'. However he found the task 'very trying and heart-breaking' and increasingly resorted to force. 'I do not despair of the boy yet,' he wrote, 'I will fight hard for him and he shall not be lost for lack of efforts to save him.' Fighting hard included frequent floggings as well as such shaming practices as head shaving and forcing the boys to dress in women's clothing (Swain 1977: 193-4).

After his own reformatory closed, Brown joined the staff at Tally Ho, an institution where boys were described as being 'restrained by rigid discipline and constant oversight' (Secretary, Wesley Central Mission to Secretary, Education Department, 16 March 1908, Wesley Mission Archives: CM 128 Education Department/Tally Ho). 'If they do run away, as a rule they never try it the second time,' founder the Rev George Cole declared, 'for a little mixture of the strap with the gospel, flavoured with common sense, soon puts an end to all that nonsense.' A resident recalled being sent to Cole's successor, Captain Jenkins:

... for corrective punishment – for what I know not. He took me on his knee and spoke gently as a daddy. Then came the punishment – ten strokes of the cane being prescribed. But for every stroke on my bare posterior ... there was a resounding stroke for the chair – so that no listener could say I got less than the prescribed punishment. As a prelude to the punishment the Captain would observe: 'My dear boy, this hurts me as much as it hurts you.' I found this hard to believe (Bryant 1982: 5).

Appointed as Superintendent at Tally Ho in 1930, a young Edgar Derrick was less than comfortable with this heritage. Coming from a scouting background, he was opposed to corporal punishment, but in his first week his views were challenged by a series of absconders to whom his alternative methods proved no deterrent. 'Decided to make an example of them by corporal punishment – my first and I hope last,' he wrote in the day book. Left alone with the boys, five days later he felt compelled to repeat the exercise:

Rather rough time ... This evening 5 boys raided cottage decided to make definite stand. With all ready for bed, punished them in front of whole lot of boys. Hope it will have desired effect of gaining discipline (Wesley Mission Archives: 1992/38

Tally Ho – Parliament Minutes, Day book, 23 August 1930, 28 August 1930).

Although Tally Ho was widely admired for its experiment in self management through the Boys Parliament and Court of Honour (and indeed Derrick ran a parallel argument with teachers in the on-site school who consistently argued that punishment was too lax in the home), the institution continued to attract adverse publicity for incidents of excess punishment throughout Derrick's superintendency. In 1934 he was forced to defend his approval of the 'severe' thrashing delivered to boys involved in a destructive fire (Wesley Mission archives: CM132 Superintendent's report, Tally Ho 14 February 1934). One year later he was again defending the home, arguing that 'open mutiny' could not 'pass unpunished' (*Truth* 26 January 1935).³

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FAILURES IN SUPERVISION

The structure of child welfare services in Victoria mediated against adequate supervision of children in care. The Children's Welfare Department controlled no institutions apart from its receiving depot, placing the bulk of its children in private homes supervised by voluntary committees. It had little supervisory responsibility for non-government agencies prior to the 1930s when a combination of the Depression and the collapse of the boarding-out system meant that it had to approach such institutions to accommodate many of its wards. These voluntary institutions were similarly ill-equipped to develop and maintain standards, dependent on poorly paid staff inspired by a sense of mission, or unpaid foster parents, predominantly in rural areas, to care for the children. Both government and non-government boarding-out schemes were far quicker to remove a troublesome child from foster parents they hoped to be able to use again, than to investigate allegations of abuse in such out-of-home care (Howe & Swain 1989: 33).

The investigation of the death, in 1929, of a State ward gives some insight into the multiple failures of the boarding-out

³ The references in this article to the now defunct Melbourne newspaper, *Truth*, all derive from copies held in the archives of the relevant child welfare institutions, suggesting that institutional managers placed greater credence in these reports than the reputation of the newspaper might suggest.

system. The baby was one of four placed with a mother of five, living in rural Hallam. Although a travelling optician had alerted the Department that all was not well in the home, no visit was made before neglect, malnutrition and acute bronchitis took the infant's life. In the subsequent enquiry, Dr Johnson, Medical Officer at the Depot for 15 months:

... gave instances of boarded-out children who ... had come back ... in a half-starved and verminous condition. Two of these had become deformed. One of them, a little girl, was black with bruises, evidently inflicted by some brutal foster parent ... This problem worried the life out of him.

Under cross-examination, CWD officials explained:

When a future home was vouched for, the Boarding Out room sent the children out, but it was not part of its duty to investigate the particulars vouched for unless something unusual happened,

adding:

... foster homes were often difficult to procure (*Age* 10 October 1929).

In the under-staffed congregate care institutions which characterised the Victorian child welfare system until well into the 1950s, many staff argued for the strap as essential to maintaining order.

Local committees could not be compelled to visit and report 'because they acted in an honorary capacity' (*Argus* 13 July 1929). The small staff of salaried inspectors had a notional three-fold categorisation of homes. Class A consisted of homes 'where children were taken purely for company'. Here 'foster parents lavished affection on the children' and hence 'frequent inspections ... were not necessary'. Class B were cases 'where there were two or more children, and the position of the home was not so good', and Class C 'where the foster parents had two or more children besides wards of the State', but even in these cases the inspector found it difficult to get access as 'the fear often existed with the foster parents that the children would learn that their foster parents were not their true parents' (*Age* 28 September 1929). The need for supervision, the inspectors believed, diminished as the children grew older:

If they were old enough to go to school and look after themselves, of course, they did not need anything like the same attention as young children (*Herald* 11 October 1929).

In the wake of the Hallam enquiry, the number of salaried CWD inspectors increased, but reports of abuse continued

from across the system. The Victorian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, established to protect children from cruelty in their own homes, found itself repeatedly called upon to investigate conditions in a range of residential institutions. Prior to the death at Hallam, its investigations of government institutions were politely rebuffed. 'Corporal punishment was necessary in the interests of the children,' the committee was informed, with the added assurance that departmental officers 'were competent to investigate any cases of alleged cruelty' (*Herald* 9 November 1927). After Hallam, the Society was no longer willing to accept such assurances. A report of a foster mother inflicting a wound on a child's head saw the Society's inspector visit although, because of the woman's 'delicate condition of health', they took no further action (Victorian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children Letter Book, vol 1, S. Grieg Smith to Mrs Rodgers, Moonee Ponds, 9 September 1930, MS10384 II). In the following year, a report that a foster mother 'thrashes ... [her children] severely, and ... to stop them crying she fills their mouths with mustard' was referred immediately to the police (Victorian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children Letter Book, vol 2. S. Grieg Smith to OIC Geelong police, 18 June 1931, MS 10384 II).

Complaints about non-government institutions caused greater difficulties both because the Society depended on such organisations to accommodate the children who were removed from their parents, and because of common committee memberships across the voluntary sector. A specific complaint about the treatment of a child in the Melbourne Orphanage brought a terse, almost threatening response:

In the light of our knowledge, as a result of our own investigations, we are somewhat surprised at the serious and sensational nature of your allegations (Victorian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children Letter Book, vol 2, Smith to Mrs Hamilton, St Kilda, 23 June 1931, MS 10384 II).

The newspaper furore following the death from tetanus of a resident of the Seaside Garden Home for Boys in November 1933 initially brought a similar response. S. Grieg Smith, Secretary for both the VSPCC and the Charity Organisation Society, leapt to the defence of the Superintendent who, believing the boy to be a malingerer, had beaten and abused him and delayed seeking medical attention. 'Some of the evidence given by members of the staff and ... much of the evidence given by the inmates, was exaggerated,' he declared (Enquiry into the death of Rex Simpson, Seaside Garden Home for Boys Newhaven, Correspondence 27 November 1933-10 April 1937, Smith to Mrs Bittern; Smith to Secretary, Walter and Eliza Hall Trust, 13 December 1933, MS 10384). However, as the official enquiry into the death unfolded, the Society changed its approach, admitting that 'the deceased boy had been subjected to cruel treatment

and gross neglect' (VSPCC minutes 30 November 1933; VSPCC minutes 19 December 1933).

From this point on, the Society was proactive whenever doubts were raised about conditions in non-government children's homes. It was the Committee's intervention in response to 'allegations of the gravest character by the most reliable people' which brought about the investigation into conditions at the Anglican St Martin's and St John's Homes in 1936 (Victorian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children Letter Book vol 8, VSPCC President to Archbishop of Melbourne, 20 October 1936, MS 10384 II). Located in a mansion in Surrey Hills, and supported by many of Melbourne's elite, the homes were run as a semi-monastic institution by a celibate priest, the Rev Eric Thornton, assisted by his sister, his former nanny and a small staff of single men in whom he saw a potential for the priesthood. The homes had attracted some criticism ten years earlier but no investigation had been undertaken. In 1936, however, a visiting doctor and some disaffected staff members made allegations that the boys were subject to 'mental cruelty' (*Argus* 24 October 1936). A former staff member declared:

Mr Thornton and his sister spoke to the boys as though they were dogs. Mr Thornton often flew into rages and lost control of his temper, and Miss Thornton who also lost her temper mentioned on one occasion that she dreaded Mr Thornton to touch the boys when he was in a temper.

A colleague added:

If Miss Thornton caught the boys talking they were given the strap until they screamed.

In Mr Thornton's study was a strap with a buckle attached ... When a boy received a beating he was kept in bed for days (Letters and press cuttings concerning St Martin's and St John's Homes (1936-1939), MS10384 Box VIII/3(a)).

Confronted with these accusations, Thornton obligingly showed a reporter:

... a leather strap about 18in long and 1 in wide ... [with] a small buckle at the end of it ... [but] contended that it was not a very dreadful weapon of punishment. He denied that there had been any severe floggings and vehemently refuted an accusation that the boys at the home are 'cowed' and reduced to nervous wrecks (*Truth* 3 October 1936).

However, while the allegations were fully aired in the press, the enquiry was aborted after Thornton became ill. The Church acted quickly to prevent scandal, secreting Thornton in a private hospital before arranging to have him sent to recuperate in Britain and placing the Homes under new management. Reflecting on the disciplinary practices which had given rise to the allegations, the Archbishop wrote:

There seems to be a consensus of opinion that corporal punishment is necessary occasionally, especially in consideration of the lack of early parental control ... But in

order to secure its proper use by the officer responsible, such punishments should be recorded and the offence stated. Minor punishments in the Home are applied in the same way that most parents find advisable in the training of their own children (*Church of England Messenger* 23 October 1936).

GOVERNMENT POLICY

The Archbishop did not need to invoke this comparison with parental discipline for, in response to the Newhaven tragedy, the Children's Welfare Department had introduced regulations on corporal punishment in children's institutions, initially instituting a complete ban, but later allowing for modifications modelled on regulations already in place in State schools (Barnard & Twigg 2004: 194-5). However, the policy was neither publicised nor enforced. Defending Tally Ho against another allegation of brutal punishment in 1935, Derrick confessed: 'I did not know that corporal punishment had been forbidden by the Government' (*Truth* 26 January 1935). Between 1939 and 1941, the VSPCC investigated allegations of 'unduly severe thrashing' and other harsh punishments at the Salvation Army Boys Home, Bayswater, beatings and solitary confinement at St Paul's Training Home for Boys, Newhaven, and allegations of mistreatment at the Andrew Kerr Home in Mornington (VSPCC Minutes 27 April 1939; 27 March 1941; 29 May 1941; 18 June 1941; 24 June 1941; 28 August 1941). With former staff prepared to give evidence, the allegations in each case were proven, but the reaction was always the same: the children involved were removed, the administration was reformed and the incident was explained as an individual aberration rather than a systemic problem.

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In line with changing community attitudes in the post-war years, the Government revised its policy on corporal punishment, eventually restricting it to 'major acts of misconduct or repeated insubordination for boys ten or over' (Barnard & Twigg 2004: 195-6). However, the policy was not always enforced. In 1952 the VSPCC upheld an anonymous complaint that the Matron of Presbyterian Children's Home was often unsympathetic and sometimes even cruel and neglectful (VSPCC Minute Book, 26 February 1952). Former residents of Catholic children's homes recall: 'You knew who to avoid – the savage ones –

and keep out of sight,' and even staff admit that there were some who 'went overboard' (Barnard and Twigg 2004: 196). In the boys' institutions, Barnard and Twigg (2004: 201-2) conclude, 'predatory brothers, predatory boys, isolation and lack of supervision all created space for sexual abuse'. While abuse was less routine in girls' institutions, it did occur – again when staff felt unduly provoked (Barnard & Twigg 2004: 197). When a CWD inspector visiting St Joseph's Home, Surrey Hills, in 1959 reported:

All children appeared happy and well nourished. Some were more adjusted to Institutional life than others ... Children are punished for misbehaviour either by confiscating T.V. viewing or strapping on the hands,

her senior officer queried whether 'any punishment given would be excessive' (Inspector's Report, Children's Welfare Department, 17 July 1959, DHS Archives, I12/2/10, VHO33, Box 33). However the query was not considered serious enough to cause further action with a report six years later again recording:

The overall disciplinary tone probably is firm regimentation tempered with benevolence. Misbehaviour results in withdrawal of privileges or a strapping (Inspector's report, St Joseph's Home, 10 August 1965, DHS Archives, I12/2/10, VHO33, Box 33).

Child care workers in Protestant homes were more likely to be aware that corporal punishment was outlawed, but the practice continued nevertheless, although it was increasingly interpreted as a loss of control. Recalling his time as a cottage parent at Tally Ho in the 1950s, LS stated: 'There was no hitting, it was a very strict rule. I broke it once'. Describing a situation when he manhandled a boy who was refusing to get out of the shower he argued: 'it was a case of necessity and it stopped the problem right at that stage'. However, later in the interview, he recalled a second, more threatening incident:

There was one boy and we had had quite a lot of problems with him and there were others who had problems, and we took him home and he got me very heated on one occasion and I hit him only on the shoulder, but I hit him and a short time after, I was heading up to the office, mainly to report to Mr Derrick ... and he and two other boys were walking down the track towards me and they sort of stood there and I just slid my coat off my shoulders and said well who is going to start it, and that was it. It never went any further (Oral history interview, AC/L&ES 19 December 1991, Wesley Mission history project).

From the records of St John's, we get a similar account. In 1971 a cottage mother discovered two of the children attempting to hang her son. Her reaction was instinctive. She 'boxed' the ears of one of the boys, '(because he was within reach) and then controlling herself, sent them both to their rooms'. Her supervisor recorded his reaction in an official memo:

The dilemma, as I saw it, was this:- I have a fundamental lack of faith in corporal punishment as a remedial practice, yet in this case both children have, over a long period, demonstrated that they do not respond to any of the means of communication ... With this background I could see no alternative to a sound and significant 'smacking' ... six 'of the best' was given (with a leather-soled thong) to each. They were obviously shocked, never had been subjected to this form of punishment before and both cried (St John's case records, 22 March 1971).

CONCLUSION

Most of the witnesses at the recent Australian enquiries were in care in the post-war period. The abuse that they experienced was clearly contrary to Government policy. Underfunding, short-staffing, and inadequate Government supervision are the explanations most commonly invoked for such widespread brutality (Forde 1999: 4; Law Commission of Canada 2000: 1). As a survivor, Penglase (2005: 136) adds a personal dimension to such abstract arguments.

What stands out in Home accounts is not that there was corporal punishment, but that it was so often extreme ... and that it was often ritualized, deliberately humiliating and sexualized. The total institution provided an opportunity for adults to use children for their own gratification, either sexually or by sadistically humiliating less powerful people who could not retaliate. It is obvious that corporal punishment in Homes was not always about enforcing order, but rather about catering to the emotional needs of adults.

Although no organisation set out to deliberately recruit psychologically troubled staff, the conditions that prevailed in such care settings intensified any weakness that was present, and regulations were transgressed as a result.

There is much in the archival collections of both the government and non-government child care sectors to support Penglase's conclusions. Although no organisation set out to deliberately recruit psychologically troubled staff, the conditions that prevailed in such care settings intensified any weakness that was present, and regulations were transgressed as a result. Aware that such transgressions were taking place, those in control of such institutions routinely acted to preserve the reputation of the organisation rather than focusing exclusively on the needs and indeed the rights of the child. While the records of child welfare organisations are indeed too scanty to satisfy the needs of survivors seeking to make sense of their past, they can be used to

reconstruct the context in which such abuse was able to take place.

To emphasise the importance of context is not to excuse the behaviour of child welfare workers in the past. Standards of punishment and acceptable care have changed over time, but the abuse discussed in this article was always beyond the bounds of what was considered acceptable. Children in out-of-home care are rendered vulnerable to abuse because of their separation from kin, even where such kin have manifestly failed in their ability to provide adequate care. Managers and child care workers who ignore or deny this vulnerability run the risk of creating or perpetuating a potentially abusive environment in which already damaged children are subject to further harm. ■

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