

BOOK REVIEW

Surviving Care: Achieving Justice and Healing for the Forgotten Australians

Richard Hil & Elizabeth Branigan (Eds.) (2010). Robina, Queensland: Bond University Press, ISBN 978 0 980 61875 4, paperback, 336 pp.

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On 16 November 2009 the then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, issued an apology to those who were classed as 'Forgotten Australians'. He said: 'We come together today to deal with an ugly chapter in our nation's history. And we come together to offer our nation's apology.' In his speech Mr Rudd acknowledged the fact that over half a million Australian children who were not part of the 'Stolen Generation' and were not child migrants spent all or part of their childhood in some form of institutional care.

The institutions were administered by State Government departments, as well as various church and religious orders including City Missions and the United Protestant Association. Charities were also known to place children in care, including the Red Cross, the Benevolent Society and Barnados, as well as service groups such as the Masonic Lodge.

The 2004 Senate Inquiry, entitled *Forgotten Australians*, found that there was endemic and systemic abuse by all of these organisations. Stories of sexual, physical and emotional abuse were unearthed, as well as accounts of murder, lack of medical care, starvation and lack of educational opportunities. Moreover, orphaned babies were found to be subjected to illegal, damaging and life threatening medical experiments by researchers at Melbourne University, who used similar arguments to justify their behaviours as did the Nazis in their horrific death camps.

These events, however, did not really come to light until the Senate Inquiry (2004) with most of the offending organisations flirting with the truth, rewriting history or telling untruths whilst seeking to absolve themselves from any responsibility for these horrific occurrences. The problem for them now, however, is that there are thousands of Forgotten Australians who survived care, grew into adulthood and now want to achieve meaningful justice and healing. This volume, edited by Hil and Branigan, seeks to explore and provide an in-depth analysis of some of the main issues that confront, confound and continue to confuse and frighten care leavers. The chapters address issues which deal not only with past experiences but also with many present-day societal and legal problems.

In their chapter, Branigan and Solomon point out that:

The Forgotten Australians are now ageing and, because of the disadvantages many experienced as a result of their upbringing, are often ill-equipped to argue for redress and compensation through the adversarial legal system. (p. 202)

These issues, concerns and problems, which have manifested themselves in the lives of care leavers, had their genesis in childhood experiences. In his contribution to the book, Ryszard Szablicki identified this contextually when stating 'Rigid control over every aspect of my young life was there even when the keepers weren't' (p. 69).

This comment highlights what seems to be an underlying concept raised by all the contributors – namely, that children were in many instances looked after by people who were seen as 'keepers'. This notion of a person being another person's keeper underscores the idea and belief that children in care were regarded as little more than performing animals who were subjected to some form of cruel behavioural training which was needed to keep them in line. Hil and Smith explore the notion of storytelling, with Hil blotting from his mind his time spent in six institutions, and thus creating what he describes as 'a domain of non-existence as to anything regarding my childhood' (p. 56).

With concepts such as this predicating institutional childcare, it can be seen, as Branigan and Solomon point out, why Forgotten Australians viewed themselves in such a negative manner. We can further understand why so many individuals were frightened by an adversarial legal system which viewed them at times with disdain, a political system which ignored their pleas for justice and a church system which denied all corporate responsibility. As Joanna Penglase, a former care leaver and co-founder of Care Leavers Australia Network (CLAN), points out, the NSW Government, which mouths politically correct platitudes about justice and healing, places what are in many instances insurmountable obstacles in the way in order to prevent cases coming to court.

A text such as this needs to possess two major underlying characteristics: validity and reliability. All too often books and texts which deal with such issues are written by

well-meaning academics who are unable to fully appreciate the trauma that people such as the Forgotten Australians endured and are still enduring. The strength of this publication is not only that it is academically valid, but that many of the contributors experienced the trauma of growing up in care or of being consigned to foster care.

Their stories bring to life the poignancy of their abused childhood and their struggles as adults to make some sense of their early life. This, combined with their academic qualifications, provides credibility and a deep and searching examination of the major issues. Deidre Michel, for example, when exploring an apology given by Mike Rann who was the South Australian Premier at the time, highlights the fact that she is 'left with many questions but no compensation, no specialised counselling service and no justice, as the people who abused me are dead' (p. 171).

These real-life experiences are given further validity by those contributors who are also involved in dealing with care leavers and other marginalised groups through the law, public policy and human rights. A practicing lawyer fighting the churches and the State for justice and redress is ex-Senator Andrew Murray, who due to his experiences in care as a child migrant, played a major role in establishing the Senate Inquiry.

This text is easy to read and provides a comprehensive study of the issues facing Forgotten Australians who are

getting older, yet still face huge unanswered problems and issues.

With the story of Forgotten Australians being included in the national history curriculum, there is a necessity for health professionals such as nurses, doctors and social workers to have a clear understanding of these issues as well as counsellors, psychologists, lawyers, and political science and theology students.

This text provides a well-written and well-researched examination of the issues which have affected over half a million Australians who ask for justice and redress, and who cannot be forgotten any longer.

References

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