The Stolen Children: a personal account

Linda Freedman interviews Teresa Donaczy

Teresa Donaczy and her grandson Daniel.

Teresa Donaczy's calm presence and quiet sense of humour cannot mask her pain. The memory of removal from her family at the age of five still haunts her. A re-union thirty-four years later, a happy marriage, nine children and thirteen grandchildren cannot erase the hurt.

Born Teresa Kirby on an Aboriginal reserve in the New South Wales town of Balranald in 1936, Teresa recalls how the Aboriginal people hid their children in the bushes to avoid them being taken by New South Wales Government authorities.

Teresa was the youngest surviving child of Laura and Arthur Kirby. She lost both her parents in tragic circumstances when she was very young, her father following a fall from a tree, and her mother in childbirth. She lost two other siblings at an early age, a brother from pneumonia and a sister from burns after stepping into the fire. As was customary, Teresa's oldest sister, Ruby, took care of her six remaining siblings, including Teresa. Ruby, like Teresa, still resides in Swan Hill and they are the only two siblings left.

From her Swan Hill home, Teresa told the story of her removal:

> I remember when they took me. My brother Alf, who was a few years older, and I were walking along the riverbank when a car pulled up and the driver asked if we were all right. Alf optimistically replied that he was hungry, and before we knew it we were in the car on our way to the police station. The terror of not knowing what would happen will never leave me. We were locked in a cell and fed through the bars. No-one explained why we were there and we were just sent on a train to what would be our homes for all of our childhood. I was taken to the Cootamundra Girl's Home and Alf went to the Kempsey Boy's Home. I still remember Alf's scream when we were separated.

Teresa known as Tess at the Home, recalls many happy times and much kindness. Gone were the strict days of an earlier time, when corporal punishment was routinely administered. Yet regimentation and order remained, with routines strictly adhered to and numerous jobs to be performed. As one of the youngest residents, Teresa recalls being spoilt by the other girls, always carried around and looked after. "The other girls made it seem like we were a big happy family", she explained. She also remembers the kindly matron, the friendly local school and the walks and picnics. Visits to the local picture theatre were a special treat and music was provide by piano at the home. Sunday was a favourite day when, after a sleep in, the girls would listen to 'cowboys' (country and western singers) on the radio. Teresa remembers having 'flutters' around some of the boys at her school and being terrified at local dances but having a good time.

Although Teresa describes the atmosphere with the other Cootamundra girls as "one big happy family", nothing could replace the loss of her own. Contact was discouraged. Alf tried without success to keep in touch, but apart from a few letters they were unable to see each other. When she was placed in service, her sister Beatrice visited hoping to lure her back home. Teresa explained however, that it had been drummed into the girls not to back to their own people. In every aspect of their lives, particularly education and religion, white values were foisted on the taken children. Assimilation was the goal. But Teresa never forgot.

Teresa was a sickly child and suffered from a range of illnesses including whooping cough, scarlet fever and St Vitus Dance, the last of which resulted in eighteen months hospitalisation at the age of ten. Other memories remain vivid. If Teresa closes her eyes she recalls images of orchards, gardens, livestock, daily prayers and lots of ironing.

Training for domestic service was the only option offered to Cootamundra residents, although Teresa recalls that the fairer skinned girls were sometimes allowed better opportunities. Others ran away from the oppressive environment, usually ending up in Sydney, at Redfern.

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There appeared to be a denial that the girls had the abilities to equip them for further education. Teresa's school report in 1951 revealed that she was sixth out of a class of twenty-two children in form 2, receiving high marks in some subjects. Yet reports from the Aboriginal Welfare Board rated her standard of intelligence as "poor" and her outstanding abilities as "none". In the dubious categories of 'morals', 'honesty', and 'truthfulness' the Board assessed Teresa as "good".

At the age of fifteen and a half, Teresa was withdrawn from school for three months 'training'. The Aborigines Welfare Board report of 1951 listed the 'nature and extent of the training' involving laundry, kitchen work, cooking, house duties and sewing. At the

ABORIGINES WELFARE BOARD.

Cootamundra Girls' Home.

Name of Child Jessie Kirby

Progress Report for Term Ending 31st Dec 1951.

Age 15 years 4 months. Caste N. C

Colour Y. Dark Religion Presbyterian

HEALTH REPORT (mention any sickness, hospital treatment, etc.)

Good Examined

Personal Hygiene Fair

Height 4 ft 10 ins Weight 8st 10 lbs Dental Condition Good

CONDUCT (including any outstanding aspects of the child's behaviour)

Good

EDUCATION.

Class 2D Position in Class 6 Number in Class 22

Standard of Intelligence Poor

Outstanding Abilities Nil

Morals Good	Initiative Fair
Honesty Good	Industry Good
Truthfulness Good	Thoroughness Good

NATURE AND EXTENT OF TRAINING (Trainees only)

Laundry, Kitchen work, Cooking, House duties Sewing

MATRON'S COMMENT.

Jessie has been a home girl since Sept. She is slow but doing very well. She is pleasant in the Home

E.B.P.

Mrs. L. Whitaker,
Jellingroo,
TUMBLONG

1st September, 1954.

C2998

Dear Madam,

As the aboriginal girl, Theresa Kirby, in your employ, has now attained the age of 18 years, she is entitled to receive her wages direct.

I would therefore be pleased to learn whether you are prepared to continue to employ Theresa and pay her a wage of £3.10.- per week from 28th August, such wage to be reviewed at the end of six months.

Yours faithfully,

M. H. SAXBY
Superintendent of
Aborigines Welfare.

Please note termination of Theresa Kirby's apprenticeship on 27.8.54.

Wedding Invitation

The Matron
Girls' Home
Cootamundra

request the pleasure of the company of

Mr. Green

at the Marriage of

Jessie Kirby

to

Leo Donaczy

at

Cootamundra Presbyterian Church

on 24th October 1959

at 3-30 pm

Girls' Home Cootamundra

R.S.V.P.

ABORIGINES WELFARE BOARD.

Cootamundra Girls' Home.

Name of Child Jessie Kirby

Progress Report for Term Ending 31-12-50

Age 14 years 4 months. Caste N.C

Colour Y. Dark Religion Presbyterian

HEALTH REPORT (mention any sickness, hospital treatment, etc.)

Good.

Personal Hygiene Fair

Height Weight Dental Condition 14.10.50 Exam

CONDUCT (including any outstanding aspects of the child's behaviour)

Good.

EDUCATION.

Class K.O.7 Position in Class No report Number in Class

Standard of Intelligence Low

Outstanding Abilities Nil

Morals Good	Initiative Fair
Honesty Good	Industry Fair
Truthfulness Good	Thoroughness Fair

NATURE AND EXTENT OF TRAINING (Trainees only)

MATRON'S COMMENT.

Jessie is a quiet slow worker and does not give any trouble

E.B.P.

COOTAMUNDRA INTERMEDIATE HIGH SCHOOL

REPORT

On Jessie Kirby 195

For (TERM / HALF-YEAR) ended 30th June 195 Position in Year 6

Year 2D No. in Year 22

Days Absent

SUBJECT	EXAM. %	AVERAGE OF CLASS	POSITION IN CLASS	REMARKS
ENGLISH	71	54	1	V. Good
HISTORY	90	69	2	V. Good
DICTATION	46	51	13	Class work is much better.
MATHS II/ARITHMETIC	74	60	3	Good
MATHS III/ALGEBRA	65			
GEN. MATHS/GEOMETRY				
LATIN POETRY				
FRENCH				
CHEMISTRY AND PHYSICS				
GEOGRAPHY	82	61	5	Good
SOCIAL STUDIES				
ECONOMICS				
BUSINESS PRINCIPLES / READING	68	65		
WOODWORK				
FARM MECHANICS				
TECHNICAL DRAWING				
AGRICULTURE / BIOLOGY	71		6	Can do very good work
NEEDLEWORK	60			Does good work.
ART - CRAFT	73	73	12	
HOME ECONOMICS				

REMARKS: Has worked very well.

J. Nicholls
PRINCIPAL

completion of training the girls were sent into domestic service, with parting words of advice from the matron: "Don't let a boy put his hands down your pants!"

Teresa considers herself to be one of the fortunate ones. Her first posting was to a young family with three children near Gundagai. Together with another Cootamundra resident, she was treated as one of the family. She remembers the family ignoring the Cootamundra instructions that they were to eat away from the family in the kitchen. Not only were they allowed to join the family for meals but were treated as members of the family in many ways. This enlightened family lost many friends because of the way they treated the girls from the Home.

Although most of her work was confined to indoor duties, Teresa enjoyed helping out in the shearing sheds. She loved the outdoors and was allowed to ride the family's horse in her spare time. Her fondest memory is the 21st birthday party provided by the family. She particularly remembers the perfect pavlovas.

The young women from Cootamundra were not allowed to receive their wages direct, and Teresa's money was placed in trust until she was eighteen years of age. After seven years, the family moved to Sydney and it was time for her to move on again. A few shorter domestic placements were followed by laundry work in a pub.

Teresa explained that marriages to white men were encouraged to 'get black blood out'.

On 24th October, 1959 Teresa married Des Donaczy, an Hungarian immigrant working as a 'jack of all trades'. Their marriage was the first wedding to be celebrated at Cootamundra of a resident who had been raised at the Home. Although it was a grand occasion, none of Teresa's family were invited. Teresa explained that marriages to white men were encouraged to 'get black blood out'. With this assimilation goal in mind, the girls were kept away from their own people.

Teresa and Des's first home was a converted garage located in the slaughter yards at Cootamundra. Their first born, Maria, arrived in 1961.

The turning point in Teresa's life was her family re-union. She had written letters to a relative to ask for assistance in finding her family. She recalls how they arrived by car in the middle of the night, thirty-four years after her removal. It was quite a celebration and over the years Teresa and her extended family became very close. Teresa eventually moved to Swan Hill to be close to family members and she refers to a happy but hard adult life. Des worked long hours as a farm labourer, walking eleven miles to work and back each day. They had few comforts and devoted their lives to their children. Sadly, Des died in 1985 and Teresa lost a fond companion. She felt that Des understood what she had been through as he had left family and friends in Hungary and missed his own people. She felt a great sadness when Alf died as they had become very close, with the shared experience of being taken from their family.

She now lives for her family, her children and her grandchildren. Sitting around the kitchen table with her daughters, she explains that she has now found peace and the children fill the gap in her life. "There is no time for bitterness" she explains "I cannot live in the past." It is only recently that her family has come to know about Teresa's past, as it is now, at the age of fifty-five, that she feels able to talk about the events which shaped her life. Her children, having found Teresa's jottings in the house, have encouraged her to speak out. She feels however, that only those who have been through a similar experience can truly understand. In the town of Swan Hill there are quite a few with such shared experiences. With a heart condition, Teresa is compelled to live a quiet life. Family members offer support and her house is always filled with relatives - children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews. She has occasionally met up with members of her Cootamundra family and is always listening out for news of those with whom she shared her early years.

Teresa talks about how some Aboriginal people are now seeking compensation for the wrongs inflicted by the past. Although it will not take away what was done, she feels it will provide for the old age of those removed, those that Peter Read describes as "the stolen generation", and their families.

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The forced removal of children from their families was one of the most inhumane methods by governments of implementing assimilationist policies. It represented a significant means of exploitation by the State (Hankins 1982: 1:1:2). Teresa's story is not isolated. Children were literally stolen from their parents and removed away from their traditional way of life (Summers 1975: 111). Christian missions played a significant role in these attempts to breaking up traditional society (ibid). The separation of children from their families constituted a form of genocide, based on its philosophies of absorption, assimilation and ultimate disappearance of the Aborigine. In New South Wales in 1921, a report of the Aborigines Welfare Board stated that: "the continuation of dissociating the children from camp life must eventually solve the Aboriginal problem". As Read points out, 'the Aboriginal problem' meant Aboriginal people who could not, or chose not, to live as white people wanted them to do (undated:2).

The 1926 Report put the Board's intentions more clearly when children were placed in a "first class private home", The superior standard of which "paved the way for the absorption of these people into the general population" (ibid). Children were simply removed from their families for no other reason than being Aboriginal (Parbury 1986: 89). Parbury states:

> Nobody knows how many Aboriginal children were officially kidnapped or what happened to most of them. In most cases no records were kept and often the records were no more than names. Many Aboriginal people grew up not knowing who their parents were. Brothers and sisters were always separated and usually lost contact. Parents were actively discouraged from visiting their children, and the children were never allowed to go home, because Government policy was designed to break up Aboriginal families. After 1957, when the Government started placing Aboriginal children with white foster parents, many more Aboriginal people grew up totally cut off from their roots (ibid: 89–91).

Peter Read suggests that white people have never been able to leave Aborigines alone and children particularly have suffered. Missionaries, teachers and government officials have all believed the best way to make black people to behave like white was to get hold of the children who had not yet learned the Aboriginal lifeways. "They thought that children's minds were like a kind of blackboard on which European secrets could be written" (op cit: 2).

Read refers to the description of the Cootamundra Home by one former resident as slavery (ibid: 13). He points to the discrepancy in reports from the Home where children were given poor ratings in defiance of good school reports, as was the case with Teresa. Any rating above 'average' was rare, and the majority ranged from 'poor' to 'moronic' (ibid).

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Hankins refers to allegations that children had been flogged, slashed with a cane across the shoulder and treated with undue severity and lack of sympathy (ibid 2.1.17). She argues that by removing young girls the State attempted to control the most powerful aspects of these individuals which was as possible reproducers of future generations of Aborigines (ibid: 3.1.3). She points out how Aboriginal women were in a specially vulnerable position in regard to the control exercised by authority. Between 1916 and 1929, two hundred and twenty-three boys were removed and five hundred and seventy -seven girls (ibid 3.1.11).

Hankins also refers to the frequent references to girls "going to the bad" or "getting into trouble with the opposite sex", thus displaying a special interest in the sexual 'morality' of Aboriginal women. The girls taken to Cootamundra Home were guilty of no crime and yet their forcible removal and detention was little short of arrest and imprisonment (ibid: 4.3.1). In these institutions they were denied access to society at large and Aboriginal society in particular (ibid 4.3.2)

"We have found that Aboriginal children who have been removed from their families and placed in non-Aboriginal substitute care experience feelings of alienation and confusion about their cultural identity."

The effects still linger. As pointed out by the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Island Child Care:

> We have found that Aboriginal children who have been removed from their families and placed in non-Aboriginal substitute care experience feelings of alienation and confusion about their cultural identity. This crisis is compounded by prejudice and discrimination (1986:7).

For Teresa the memories remain strong. She refers to her lost childhood and feels a great sadness when she recalls the past. "The feelings never go away. You can't turn them off like a tap" is how she describes it. She often wonders what would have happened if the car had not pulled up or if her brother Alf had not "opened his mouth!"

Other members of the family remember too. When the extended family get together, usually at funerals, they still refer to "Little Teresa who was taken away."♦

References

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