

Somebody's children: Child exports to the colonies

Chris Goddard

Oh why does the wind blow upon me so wild?

Is it because I'm nobody's child?

(Phila Henrietta Case, "Nobody's Child")

White Australia was founded by exporting convicts from Britain. According to Fabian and Loh (1980) until the 1820s, about a quarter of those convicts were aged 18 years or less. While this is now common knowledge, the full scale of child exportation from Britain has only recently come to public attention.

The interest that this former child welfare practice has aroused is largely due to the work of a social worker, Margaret Humphreys, who founded the Child Migrant's Trust.

A book, *Lost Children of the Empire*, by Bean and Melville (1989) did a great deal to publicise the work of the Trust, and there has even been an award-winning television dramatisation, *The Leaving of Liverpool* (ABC-TV).

The children were described as orphans, but most of them were not. Some parents did not appear to understand that their children were off to the colonies while others did. As I noted elsewhere, there was a particular irony in the stories of the children who came from Britain to Australia:

Some of those children were to come half-way around the world to spend their lives as little more than slaves and prisoners, in institutions and on farms close to other children who were shipped across the state to suffer, too often, cruelty and abuse on account of their Aboriginal family background.

(Goddard & Carew, 1993:19)

For this **Point and Counterpoint**, I recorded an interview, while in England, with someone who was shipped as a child under such a British scheme. He was taken to Africa, not Australia, but his story raises, in a personal and poignant way, many questions.

His account highlights issues of consent and professional responsibility, of good intentions and parental efforts to do their best for their children. The story also demonstrates a young child's determination to fight the system and be restored to his parents.

The man has requested anonymity to protect the feelings of his father and other family members. There is a great deal to reflect upon in his story. It emphasises the power invested in social workers and others in the child welfare field and our ability to change lives. His history also stresses that the actions we take today may not be charitably judged tomorrow.

Most of the people who carried out the policies and practices... were honourable. Most of the actions were carried out by people who genuinely believed they were doing good... It is important to realise that a picturesque and romantic view of child welfare is insufficient. Good intentions are never enough on their own.

(Goddard & Carew, 1993:26)

The interview

CG: Could you tell us what your experience was of the Child Migration Scheme?

Bob: I was a young child of about seven and one day my father said, 'Would you like to go and see the lions and tigers?' And I said, 'Of course, I would'.

This eventually led to my brother and I going to Rhodesia House in London, being interviewed by people there and undergoing various tests, which I assume were health and Intelligence Tests. Later I found myself going through the Union Castle Line dock in Southampton onto a huge liner. I was a peasant boy and had never seen a ship in my life,

and there I was steaming towards Africa. Before we went to the Union Castle dock, I remember my mother seeing us off at London station. There were 12 children all dressed in the identical uniforms of the Fairbridge Society. My mother was waving goodbye to my younger brother and me. There were other mothers on the station. They stayed where they were, rooted to the spot as the train pulled away, but I remember my mother running after us crying, with her mascara running down her face. One of her shoe heels broke, so she hobbled after the train. I was ashamed for her, because I thought she looked ludicrous. Suddenly I realised that I'd been conned, that I didn't want to do this. Of course by the time we got to Southampton and went through the Union Castle dock it was too late.

So we eventually arrived at Cape Town and had a few days there. I saw my first 'wild' animal, which was a squirrel in a very civilised Cape Town Park. We caught the train to Rhodesia, which took two to three days. When we arrived at Bulawayo Station very confused, very baffled, we were put onto a pantechinon and taken about twelve miles outside the town to an old RAF station, an abandoned World War II camp that was now used as a school (this was sometime in the early 1950s). It consisted of rows of tin huts lined with plaster board and standing on brick piles. The girls were separated off and went over to one part of the compound and the boys were streamed by age and sent into another part. I slept my first night knowing that I shouldn't be there, that I didn't want to be there. I wet the bed for the first time then and I didn't stop wetting until the age of thirteen. That night I missed the Forest of Dean from which I'd come, and I never stopped missing it every night

for the subsequent years I was in Africa – the cool green dampness of England versus the brown and yellow dryness of the Veldt – I physically ached for home.

CG: Why do you think your parents, (or your father at least, because it sounds as if it might have been predominantly your father), made that decision to send you away?

Bob: I imagine it was thought that children could have a good quality of life in Africa, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia (the colonies as they were then called). It was considered a 'good' life. So part of it was altruistic, in a sense. It's important to emphasise that we were peasant not *urban* working class and thus were extremely poor people from the country. In those days just after the Second World War, Britain was impoverished and rationed. We were living in a prisoner of war camp, in concrete huts that used to belong to the American guards. It was damp and covered in mould. My parents had very little money, very few prospects and four children. So there was a degree of altruism about it and many other parents responded to the advertisements for that reason, I suppose.

Secondly, my parents' marriage was in difficulty, and I suspect many others who gave their children away were in this state as well. There were frequent rows in the house, sometimes leading to violence. My mother was constantly leaving home and going back to her mother in Bristol. So they were the reasons – 'altruism', poverty and marital problems.

On top of that there is another reason, and this is the one that one broods about for the rest of one's life. There was a lack of paternal and maternal care. It seems to me that, other than in life and death situations, it is unnatural for parents to part with their children. It's just unnatural, whatever the English upper classes think about it, for example, sending their children off to public schools and to long summer camps. However, going to a public school at the other end of the country is one thing, but to the other end of the Empire is another. So I think there was a lack of maternal and paternal love. This is the key – we were not loved and wanted and we were 'got rid of'.

CG: Why do you think that it was a

favoured form of child welfare? Why did the Fairbridge Society and others, for example Barnardo's, decide that this was the best thing for children?

Bob: One has to put it into the context of the times, when many of these children had rickets and were badly fed and so on. In the colonies, children were tall and had plenty to eat, (at least theoretically). Reality turned out very badly for some of them, but in *theory* there was plenty of sunshine and vitamins. It was thought a good, healthy environment for children to grow. As well as that, the colonialists like Rhodes were quoted as saying that a country is never colonised until the farmers have got their roots in the land. So having defeated the Africans, the next step was to put white farmers in, and the intention clearly was for us to go out there and do that. So the idea was that poor children, who would otherwise have been destined for poverty, would go to a nice, bright colony with a new start and a healthy life and would have the hope, the chance of founding the colony along with the other people.

We now know so much more about the need of children for their family, and the need to belong to a place and feel that this is their home, where they come from. There was very little understanding then of the psychological damage done to children by wrenching them away from their home, however bad. I think now, if the same sort of money had been spent on making good child care provision in the homes of us poor people, it would have been infinitely better for us than sending us to the colonies, but that is a matter of perspective.

CG: You say you were six or seven when you went. Do you have any concept of how much warning you had? You said you were asked if you wanted to go and see the lions and tigers. Do you have any concept of the time scale over which that occurred?

Bob: No, I don't. All I do remember is being asked that. Subsequently I've seen reports that all the families of the children were visited by social workers, from what was then the equivalent of the British Association (I've forgotten what it was then called). These social workers came and interviewed the family, but I don't remember them at all. I was presumably written in as having been consulted and agreed, which of

course is nonsense. I didn't understand the issues, what I was agreeing to or what the alternatives were.

CG: You went with your brother who was eleven months younger. Did you feel responsible for him? That you had to look after him?

Bob: Yes very much so. I assumed a parental and protective burden at seven years of age.

CG: Tell us a little bit about your life there once you got there. Was it all it was supposed to be?

Bob: I now know that the school at Fairbridge in Rhodesia was one of the better schools. I know that in some schools in Canada and Australia the standard of child care was absolutely appalling. Having said that, we were in one of the best, God knows what was going on in the worst. We were brutalised psychologically more than physically, although severe beatings with canes, that produced blood on the buttocks, were a part of our lives.

CG: Why were you beaten?

Bob: We were beaten for disobeying, for insolence (dumb insolence was a favourite one). You couldn't get away with dumb insolence, if a master suspected you of being scornful of him, then you were severely beaten. We were also beaten for failing to do our homework, to perform chores etc. By and large at our school, the beatings followed a logical and predictable pattern. You knew if you behaved in certain ways it wouldn't happen, that is the beatings from the masters. The beatings from the prefects were a different cup of tea. There, for example, if you didn't have sexual relationships with one of the older boys, you would get beaten. If you didn't run two miles to the African store to buy them cigarettes, you would get a beating. In fact you got beaten for anything really. Sometimes, it seemed, they caned boys because they wanted something to do.

The system of putting older boys in charge of younger boys (prefects, or sub-prefects) was in my view similar to the Nazi camps, where they put some of the most criminal Jews in charge of the other Jews. They were infinitely more brutal than the actual guards themselves. These boy prefects, aged between sixteen and eighteen, were often extremely cruel towards the younger ones. I suffered particularly badly because I was

always a rebel. If I hadn't got out of the school, I don't know how I would have got on. I was beaten every day in the pantechnicon that took boys over ten miles into school in Bulawayo, badly beaten.

CG: It sounds like *Lord of the Flies*, children torturing other children. How were your days made up?

Bob: Well, all schools are bad where children are left in charge of children. Children are cruel. As regards occupation and education, it was a hot country so the system was that we had education in the morning and then had a lot of prep in the evenings. There was quite an emphasis on education and for that I am grateful. For example, I learnt Latin, which has stood me in good stead in terms of languages. The education I think was similar to a typical English public school, rigorous and tough. I would like to see a partial return to that in this country. There is nothing wrong with rigour as such. What was wrong was the constant oppression, the driving, insistent demands and nowhere to go home to, to let off steam, no one to protect you, I remember. It was a farm school, the emphasis was strongly on agriculture. I think it was so in most of the Fairbridge schools. We seemed to have thousands of acres of land, mostly scrub. We had an African compound with cattle and so on. There were chores to do around the school.

CG: When did you do those?

Bob: Weekends, evenings, periods when it could fit it. We were fed well in the sense that there was plenty even if food was used occasionally as a weapon to enforce conformity. One could go through quite substantial periods of intense hunger when deprived of food for not conforming. That was another weapon in the armoury of control.

CG: You've emphasised the severity of the masters. Are there any masters there that you have warm memories of, that you thought did a good job?

Bob: Yes there are. If I give the impression that the masters were unnecessarily cruel, I would say that more accurately, they were unnecessarily strict, firm or harsh. I don't think that most of them could be described as straightforward sadists (this distinguishes the Rhodesian school from some of the others.) But they were unnecessarily tough on

us. One or two were warmer and the person I remember with most affection is the Padre. He was really the only person for me at the school that I could spend time with and unburden myself to. Also Mr and Mrs Robinson, the Headmaster and his wife were genuinely kind people. But I think they failed to comprehend the cruelty in the system they ruled over (or so it seemed to me as a bewildered child unable at that age to reconcile how good people could try to make the best of a bad system.)

There were also house mothers and these were often nurses who had come out to Rhodesia with the kids and stayed there. At the end of each dormitory there was a little flat for the house mother. I have extremely poor memories of them, but again, there is the odd one who stands out in my mind, such as Miss Reid who was a kindly soul. It seems to me that they were the sort of women one often finds in the nursing profession to whom maternal love and affection does not come easily. It seemed that they were all working hard at it without any natural feminine warmth. Or perhaps it was all too distressing for them. Anyway, I couldn't turn to them for help and love, for example, over my bedwetting. If I had told them I would be exposed - so I concealed it for years.

CG: Did you have any communication with your parents?

Bob: We had letters but the impression was that they were discouraged. Maybe the idea was that you cut off all contacts and became Rhodesian. I realised after a while that the only hope of getting home was to bombard my parents with letters *begging* to come home. I was dimly aware, even at the age of eight or nine, that my letters might be read by masters, and perhaps also by some of the officials from Rhodesia House, (like General Hawthorn who used to come out to visit us and who was shown the best of the school, did a quick whip round, took a few silly films to show people at home and went off). I somehow knew that it was people like that who had to become aware of my letters. At a very early age I seemed to know how bureaucracies worked. I grasped it instinctively. That's how I got home, in fact by writing home. I was never encouraged to do that. It was discouraged, but I knew that letters would be my salvation.

CG: So how long were you there for? At the Fairbridge school?

Bob: Oddly enough, I've never actually worked this out in great detail. My father doesn't like to talk about the whole Rhodesian incident and my mother is now dead. I was there roughly from six or seven years of age till about thirteen or fourteen I suppose.

CG: Can you remember when you started this bombardment of letters to get you out?

Bob: I would have been eight or nine. Again I instinctively and shrewdly knew the sort of things to put in my letter calculated to appeal to my mother's feelings. It was an instinct that I had for survival. I used, for example, to lay on how unhappy I was, how desperately lonely I was, how badly I'd been treated, and I kept at it until my mother, I think it was, asked for me back. That was a very unusual procedure indeed, but she did and we got home in the end.

CG: How were you then told that you were going home? Can you remember anything about that?

Bob: Very quickly, very suddenly. Consultation with, and the preparation of, children pre events in those days were rare. My brother and I were suddenly told to report. My brother wasn't so much aware of what was going on, I was making the running. So it was a greater shock to him than to me. We were suddenly told to report to a place in the school, we were given some items like bags and we were taken into Bulawayo and kitted out with warm clothing like heavy flannel suits which were incredibly hot. The following day we were taken to the airport (a grass strip in those days), put onto an old Dakota and flown to Salisbury. There we caught a large plane back to England. Twenty-one hours later we were shivering at the terminus at London airport, wondering what had happened to us. It was all so quick.

CG: And did your parents welcome you back?

Bob: Well, they did and they didn't. We had a cool reception from my father, who by now had four girls to contend with. So two boys coming back made it difficult. Also we were grown. I was taller than my father and presumably was a threat to him. I was not biddable. I think he imagined I was going to be a small child, (in fact we noticed that we were actually taller and bigger than all the English children of our age. Later on they caught up. It's the

curious business that the sun drove one upwards, like plants). Anyway my father was threatened by us and perhaps he felt guilty, (insofar as he was able to feel guilty). I remember my mother saying on our arrival, 'Come on, you better have a bath after that journey', taking us into the bathroom and assisting us to strip off for a bath. She then saw that I had pubic hair and retreated in confusion. After that odd little scenario we were left alone to go our own way. I then launched a campaign of revenge which consisted of bad behaviour and verbal attacks. I was, even at that age, much more verbal and better read than my parents were. So I used this skill and facility to torture them. This went on right up to the age of about sixteen. Every time they tried to correct me, I would say, 'What do you know, you sent me away. What right have you got, you gave me away'. I played on this, so in a very short while my mother must have wished she hadn't had us back. It was very fraught in the house.

I was put into a local secondary modern school and about a year later, the headmaster said that I should transfer to the Grammar school to stay on and go to University and so on. My father said, 'No, you're not doing that', and came home with an advertisement for joining the army. In those days, incredibly, they took boys at fifteen years of age in the army. So I was virtually pushed by him into going to another institution, the army, yet another way of getting rid of us. So it could be said that the year or two I had at home was disastrous.

CG: And your younger brother, what did he do?

Bob: My younger brother was guided into the army too, he joined the artillery, I joined the medical corps via what they used to call the Army Apprenticeships Scheme. Of course, you could predict that in the army I got into all sorts of scrapes and trouble, hated it the minute I joined, the same as going to Rhodesia. I conspired to get out as quickly as I could by being unhelpful, disobedient, etc. I found that my training at Fairbridge prepared me for the army. I knew now how to play the system exactly. I knew how to put spanners in the works and how to be an awkward customer. Within a very short while, at the age of sixteen and a half, (after 18

months) I was discharged. Technically 'my services were no longer required'. So I didn't fit in there either, (thank God).

CG: Now looking back 30 years later, what do you think about your parents' decision?

Bob: As regards my parents, there came a point where I began to understand and of course when you understand, you tend to forgive. But what they did, I believe, was by any simple standard a pretty unforgivable thing. My mother died early at the age of 44 so I never had a chance to really reconcile myself with her, to my intense regret. I think that, like all of us, when they made a bad decision they rationalised it to try to make the best of it. They emphasised their altruism, the chances I had. (In fact, there are boys who stayed in Rhodesia who have done very well and think it's the best thing that happened to them.) In my case, I still think that to abandon one's children at an early age to the mercies of strangers, with the intention of never seeing them again, is unnatural; to be done only when there is no option, like when the Jewish women in Holland gave their children away to Dutch people because they knew they were going to be gassed. So now, to some extent, I understand *why* they did it, but I still find it hard to reconcile myself with the fact that my parents did not have sufficient love for me to help them struggle through.

In the village where I live, to this very day thirty odd years later, people still say, 'Oh yes, you're the boys who were sent away'. They never understood why, and they were just as poor. My parents were criticised because it was perceived by all the other struggling peasants as an odd thing to do. So yes I understand, I know what they were going through, and there's a degree of forgiveness, but I still look back on it with deep regret. It certainly made life more difficult for us. For example, I should have gone to University early on. As it was I left school at fifteen. After the army, I ended up in Rock'n'Roll bands, drifting round, doing jobs like farm labouring and meat portering. I had no trade, no background. So by the time I got married, at the age of 19, I had nothing to fall back on. I realised that with a family I'd need to be educated and I went to Psychiatric nurse training

and subsequently Social Work at Bristol Polytechnic. I eventually educated myself but it wasn't until nearly thirty years of age that I achieved those things that most people have done at twenty-one. It was a very bitter, hard struggle to acquire learning in poverty and with a wife and two children living in a bedsitter. It exhausted me.

CG: How has it affected you as a parent? In your role as a parent, in your behaviour towards your own children, do you think?

Bob: It's difficult to assess, you'd have to ask them. I honestly believe that my own children are well balanced human beings. If anything, my children have suffered from the fact that I've had very low expectations of them, I've never driven them, it's always been too easy for them at home. To some extent, I've been overindulgent. For example, my own boy has 2 A-levels of poor quality. They could have been two or three A-levels of good quality if I'd been the classic middle class parent driving and expecting and pushing them along in the way that a lot of my contemporaries had. But who knows? Which parent *really* knows how they've affected their children? I'd say we are a loving family living close by each other in our English village. My wife and I are enjoying our grandchildren and I thank God that I had the resource in me to love my kids. When one finally judges my parents, one must recall that *they too* have their story, their reasons. Remember also the war that ruined the lives of millions. You can write my parents, my brother and me down as casualties of war, poverty, professional incompetence and ignorance.

CG: Thank you for allowing us to hear your story.

References

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