

# SILENT SYSTEM

Forgotten Australians and  
the Institutionalisation of  
Women and Children

*Edited by*

Paul Ashton and Jacqueline Z. Wilson

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Paul Ashton and Jacqueline Z. Wilson  
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*Front cover image:* Basement dressing room with graffiti,  
Parramatta Girls Home/ Norma Parker Centre, 2008  
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## INTRODUCTION

# NEW CONTEXTS IN AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC HISTORY: AUSTRALIA'S INSTITUTIONALISED AND INCARCERATED

*Paul Ashton and Jacqueline Wilson*

During the twentieth century in Australia, more than half-a-million children grew up in 'out-of-home' care in over 800 institutions, including children's homes, foster homes, industrial schools and orphanages, a regime of mass institutionalisation which was sanctioned by legislation and administered by either the state or by non-government bodies such as churches and welfare groups. Around 7000 children were child migrants from Britain, Ireland and Malta, up to 50,000 were Indigenous 'Stolen' children and more than 450,000 non-Indigenous children.

Given a context of new social movements, in particular reconciliation, Indigenous children were the first group to have the injustices and abuses they suffered officially recognized by the federal government. This was acknowledged in the 1997 Australian Human Rights Commission's *Bringing Them Home* report on the Stolen children. During the same period, other had begun to agitate for similar recognition. This subsequently led to a number of Senate inquiries, each of which produced damning reports about the treatment of children in out-of-home care. The first was *Lost Innocents: Righting the Record: Report on Child Migration* (2001). Next, in 2004, came *Forgotten Australians: A Report on Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children*. *Lost Innocents and Forgotten Australians Revisited* was published in 2009. On 16 November that year, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd officially apologized to Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants in Parliament House, Canberra. Some state governments and institutions were to

also apologize. And there was much to apologize about.

Mirroring the findings of the other inquiries, part of the Executive Summary of the *Forgotten Australians* report observed that:

The Committee received hundreds of graphic and disturbing accounts about the treatment and care experienced by children in out-of-home care. Many care leavers showed immense courage in putting intensely personal life stories on the public record. Their stories outlined a litany of emotional, physical and sexual abuse, and often criminal physical and sexual assault. Their stories also told of neglect, humiliation and deprivation of food, education and healthcare. Such abuse and assault was widespread across institutions, across States and across the government, religious and other care providers.

Wretched, loveless upbringings inflicted on these children left a devastating legacy of anger, anxiety, depression, distrust, fear, guilt, low self-esteem, obsessiveness, phobias, poor confidence, recurring nightmares and substance abuse. They were also generally found to have low levels of education and to be overrepresented in prisons.

The latter point, regarding the relatively high proportion of those formerly in 'care' who have gone on to prison, highlights a core aspect of the moral nature of the homes and institutions under discussion. Children's homes have a peculiarly close relationship—it is not overstating things to deem it a *kinship*—with prisons. Although the homes themselves qualify unequivocally as total institutions—that is, there was no legitimate avenue of day-to-day departure from within their bounds—their carceral (relating to a prison) nature did not always suffice to achieve the level of control of inmates required by administrators. Personal testimony to the inquiries teem with accounts of children being threatened with transfer to prisons—in some cases *adult* prisons—if they did not curb their supposedly refractory ways. Nor were such threats empty, as many of the children so threatened did indeed learn.

'Transfer' to a prison—or a locked mental asylum, especially in cases of supposed sexual wantonness among females in care—was effected arbitrarily and without even a pretense at due process. The

whims and personal preferences of institution staff governed the fate of any inmate who fell into disfavor, for any reason, no matter how trivial. Once transferred, children were exposed to day-to-day regimes of inhumanity that had, in some cases, officially been deemed overly harsh for adults—such as, for instance, the ‘silent system’, which had been banned for adult prisoners since the nineteenth century but was enforced in the 1960s at Hay Institute for Girls, the maximum-security annexe of Parramatta. Those who fell even further into discredit once in such places became familiar with ‘secondary’ punishment facilities such as the ‘Black Peter’, the underground isolation cell in Brisbane’s Boggo Road Gaol, where boys from the infamous Westbrook Boys’ Home were sent.

In these and a multitude of others ways, the so-called welfare institutions of Australia and their carceral partner-institutions operated in a kind of parallel universe outside the world of *habeas corpus*, of equality before the law, of innocence until proof of guilt. Sanctioned and facilitated as they were by the unholy union of welfare and punishment enacted daily by the Children’s Courts, they routinely and without remorse violated the human rights of the children in their ‘care’. In the process they stand as manifold exemplars of what sociologist Loic Wacquant labels ‘outlaw institutions’.

There is, rightly, a strong focus here in these pages and elsewhere on restoring voice to the long-silenced victims of such evils. The opportunity to tell stories that had been suppressed and disbelieved for decades has been taken up by thousands of care-leavers. The moral weight of this flood of personal histories resulted, finally, in a detailed acknowledgement of their suffering by the Senate Committee charged with their investigation, and subsequently in Prime Minister Rudd’s formal apology. For many, the relief and sense of vindication was profound. And yet we must be mindful that such processes of compassionate listening, of ‘setting the record straight’, even of the highest authority in the land formulating an explicit ‘Sorry’, may not be enough for all. For the desire to give voice to one’s experience of such abuses arises in the first place from a bone-deep need for *justice*, for some form of redress for having suffered what were—despite being nominally legal—nothing short of *crimes*—of violence, of neglect, of torture and degradation—inflicted by agents of the state

on its most vulnerable citizens.

Numerous recommendations were made in the Inquiry reports. But for the purpose of this collection, the key ones focused on personal, family, institutional and, though it was not mentioned by name, public history. Also in the Executive Summary of the *Forgotten Australians* report, it was asserted that there should be:

Recognition of care leavers and their history in Australia in more tangible ways... through the erection of memorials, creation of memorial gardens, construction of heritage centres and in other forms such as reunions. To ensure that the experiences of care leavers are not lost to current and future generations, the Committee recommends that an oral history project be undertaken to collect life stories and that the Museum of Australia should consider the establishment of a permanent exhibition as part of its collection.

Public history involves the practice of historical work in multiple forums and sites which is aimed at negotiating different understandings of the past and, more importantly, its meanings and uses in the present. And there is much work to be done by a broad range of people—including former children in out-of-home care, historians, artists, archaeologists, film makers, museum practitioners, history school teachers and governmental cultural agencies—to bring the stories of *Forgotten Australians* to a wide public audience and incorporating it ‘warts and all’ into the received narrative of Australian history. Such activities will further other similar recommendations: one relating to ‘Questions of identity both for... [*Forgotten Australians*] and of other family members through locating and accessing records [which] has become very important for many care leavers’; another stressing that ‘research needs to be undertaken into a number of areas including the role of institutional care in Australia’s social history’.

A good start has been made. Support groups for *Forgotten Australians*—such as the Alliance for *Forgotten Australians*, *Forgotten Australians Support Services*, *Care Leavers Australian Network*, *ForWards*, *Parragirls*, the *Parramatta Female Factory Precinct Memory Project*, *Pathways and Wing for Survivors*—have developed projects and programs around the areas of heritage, oral

history, public art and institutional history among other activities. The Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrant Oral History Project, attracting around 200 participants, was conducted by the National Library of Australia. It finished in 2012. And between November 2011 and February 2012, the exhibition *Inside: Life in Children's Homes and Institutions* was held at the National Museum of Australia. This exhibition also opened at the Melbourne Museum from late 2013 until 27 January 2014.

The complex of moral, legal, societal and historical issues raised by any conscientious scrutiny of the women's and children's carceral and welfare systems and their institutions reminds us of the multiplicity of narratives they embody, and of the concomitant obligation upon us not merely to pay attention to those narratives, but to consider the fullest possible range of perspectives they represent. One is reminded of sociologist Carol Bacchi's question: 'What is the problem represented to be?' That is, whose *version* of the problem(s) will be foregrounded, and in what ways will the *nature* of the problem(s) be thus defined?

The chapters in this groundbreaking book constitute an eclectic mix of scholarship drawn from a diverse group of historians, social scientists, artists, performers, freelance writers and stakeholders including former state wards and Forgotten Australians. The book stands as a synthesis of these multiple perspectives and hence as a multi-faceted approach to Bacchi's question. In the process, too, it demonstrates the breadth and depth of history work and memory work that is taking place on and around places of incarceration and confinement in Australia.

### **Further Reading**

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