

Reconstructing Australia's Shameful Past: The Stolen Generations in Life-Writing, fiction and film

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History in Australia is no longer the preserve of academics. The leading historians have become household names, the publication of their books is given widespread media coverage and their findings are hotly debated both in the letters pages of newspapers and in private homes. One of the most emotive issues is undoubtedly that of the Stolen Generations. Although the practise of taking Aboriginal children from their parents dates back to the arrival of the first colonist and was systemised in the first half of the twentieth century¹, the term “Stolen Generations” was not coined until 1982 by the historian Peter Read in a short report written for the New South Wales government². He recalls that at the time no one was really interested: “Non-Aboriginals said that it couldn’t have happened. The victims of removal thought it was a shame job to talk about their removal” (4).

Things changed dramatically in 1997 when the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission released its report *Bringing Them Home*, the first national inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and communities. *Bringing Them Home* contained the stories of over 500 Indigenous Australians who had been forcibly removed from their families between 1910 and 1970 and formulated a number of recommendations. Although it was aimed at non-Indigenous people and was

¹ See Anna Haebich *Broken circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families 1800-2000* Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2000.

² Read, Peter. *The Stolen Generations: The Removal of Aboriginal Children in New South Wales 1883 to 1969*. Sydney Government Press, 1982.

produced by the same authorities that for so long controlled Indigenous lives, it was an extremely important document for Indigenous Australians. It was the first official report to “give a voice to those who have not been listened to, or who have had the language in which to tell a story taken away from them” (Frow 2); Precisely because it was framed within a legal discourse and sanctioned by the government itself, it “enabled indigenous speakers [to occupy] a place and a space within a national culture they had not been able to occupy before” (Schaffer, 2002: 6).

White Australian reactions to *Bringing Them Home* can be broadly divided into two groups. On the one hand, those who have attempted to dismiss its findings, claiming that the report’s methodology was fundamentally flawed, that the numbers of children concerned have been exaggerated and that they were removed for ‘their own good.’³ On the other hand, those who were genuinely moved by the stories and who are under the impression that this shameful part of Australia’s past was deliberately hidden from them.⁴ As Anna Haebich points out, however, “The questions that hovers in the air is not ‘Why weren’t we told?’ [...] but ‘Why didn’t we know?’” (2001: 79). White people were actively involved in the removal of the children, newspapers advertised for foster parents and ran stories both on the poor conditions in some children’s homes and on the ‘happy’ lives adopted Aboriginal children led with their ‘new’ white families.

In this paper I intend to deal neither with the current political implications of the report and the Howard government’s refusal to apologise for past events, nor with the historical evidence of child removal. Instead I would like to look at how Indigenous women have dealt with the subject in life-writing and fiction and how whites have in turn attempted to ‘recolonise’ their stories. I would like to concentrate on women rather than men for several reasons. First, according to Anne Brewster, although story telling is an integral part of traditional Aboriginal culture, it is the Aboriginal women who have become “the bearers of ‘naïve knowledges,’ a counter-discourse to white culture” (1993, 3). Second, official white discourse and policy concentrated on the women rather than the men and the women were doubly affected by the policy of child removal first as children and then as mothers. Finally, as the following quotation illustrates, white official discourse continually denied the women’s feelings for their children.

³ These positions are defended by people such as Ron Brunton, Paddy McGuinness and Keith Windschuttle.

⁴ See for example Henry Reynolds, *Why weren’t we Told ? A personal search for the truth about our history*. Camberwell: Penguin, 1999.

I am convinced that the short lived grief of the parent is of little consequence compared to the children's future. The half-caste is intellectually above the aborigine and it is the duty of the State that they be given a chance to lead a better and purer life than their brothers. I would not hesitate for one moment to separate any half-caste from its aboriginal mother, no matter how frantic her momentary grief may be at the time. They soon forget their offspring. (qtd in Haebich 2000: 235).

Telling, or writing their stories, becomes for Indigenous women a way of repossessing their lives and positioning themselves as subjects instead of objects; a way of challenging white Australia's politics of identity by taking responsibility for defining themselves.

Life-Writing

In 1977 Margaret Tucker became the first Indigenous woman to publish her own experience of being removed as a child in a full length book, ironically titled *If Everyone Cared*. Although it is subtitled "an autobiography" it is an example not of 'traditional' western autobiography but rather of what has since been termed "life-writing,"⁵ the most well-known example of which is undoubtedly Sally Morgan's phenomenally popular book *My Place*, published in 1987.⁶

Life-writing, differs from autobiography in that it concentrates on only a small part of the author's life and is very much anchored in the wider community. It becomes an occasion for giving details of traditional Aboriginal life and for re-telling white settlement from an Indigenous point of view. Although published, works of life-writing are really oral narratives and, in many cases, contain stories that have been handed down to the narrator by other family members. Despite often being consciously marketed for white readers, they remain part of an Indigenous tradition of story-telling as a form of 'education' for the younger generations. Whilst it is important not to forget this double enunciation, I shall be considering them here mainly in terms of their reception by white readers.

⁵ Other early examples include Monica Clare, *Karobran: The Story of an Aboriginal Girl*. Sydney: Alternative Publishing Co., 1978. Ella Simon, *Through My Eyes*. Adelaide: Rigby, 1978. MumShirl & Bobbi Sykes, *MumShirl: an Autobiography with the Assistance of Bobbi Sykes*. Richmond: Heinemann Educational, 1981. Elsie Roughsey Labumore, *An Aboriginal Mother Tells of the Old and the New*, ed. Paul Memmett & Robyn Horsman, Melbourne:McPhee Gribble, 1984.

⁶ *My Place* was a watershed in the history of Australian Indigenous women's writing. For further details see, for example, Michele Grossman. "Out of the Salon and into the Streets: contextualising Australian Indigenous women's writing". *Women's Writing* 5(2), (1988) : 169-192.

Morgan's aim in writing her family history was to "try to tell a little bit of the other side of the story" (162), the story that was not in white Australia's history books and that was not taught in schools. Sally was brought up to think her skin was dark because she was of Indian origin and she only discovered she was Aboriginal when she was fifteen. The book traces how Sally gradually uncovered her family history and includes not only her own story but that of her mother, her grand-mother and her great uncle. However, her grandmother, who ought to be her main source for knowledge about the past, refuses for a long time to talk to her about it. Only gradually does Sally discover that as a child Daisy was taken away from her own parents and later, as an adult, had her own children taken away from her. Although Daisy eventually talks reluctantly about how she was removed from her parents she refuses to talk about her first experiences as a mother; she will tell Sally neither how she became pregnant nor what happened to her baby. At this stage, Sally thinks she is talking about only one baby but further research after the book was published revealed that had at least six children taken from her (Laurie). Shortly before she dies, Daisy says to Sally: "don't you understand, yet [...] there are some things I just can't talk 'bout" (343).

This inability to talk about painful past experiences is in fact typical of many of the earlier works. *Wandering Girl* by Glenyse Ward, published the same year, makes no reference at all to child removal - only the information on the book jacket tells the reader that Ward was removed at the age of one after her mother had taken her to the doctor for treatment. Kay Schaffer suggests that for many Aboriginal women, cut off from their indigenous ancestry, the sense of shame was so ingrained that they could "[recuperate] a tentative sense of selfhood [only] by identifying with imposed white structures" (2003:58).

Linked to this difficulty in positioning themselves outside white power structures is the women's claim that their story is universal. Ruth Hegarty, for example says "My story is [all the mission children's] story; whatever I write would reflect the experiences and feelings of all. Our lives were governed by the same policies and what happened to one, happened to all of us" (4). As Rosanne Kennedy argues, such claims are a way of authenticating what is being said at a time when white Australians knew little or nothing about child removal. These early works "could not be read as a '*testimonio*' because non-Indigenous Australians did not know enough about the treatment of Aboriginals in Australia to read [the works] as representative" (237). Not surprisingly in such a context, most early examples of life-writing were marketed

(and read) as ‘battler-stories,’ a genre familiar to white readers⁷. Labelling them like this was a way of assimilating distinct indigenous experience into white Australian normality; a way of avoiding questions of blame and responsibility.

And yet, arguably one of the most important functions of Aboriginal writing is to make non-Indigenous Australians realise that there is another side to their country’s history. After all, as the Indigenous novelist Kim Scott has pointed out; “Indigenous people already know about their suffering. It is the whites who need to be educated” (Buck). Writing about their past enables Indigenous people to position themselves as subjects and not as objects of other people’s discourse, be they anthropologists, missionaries, government officials or historians. Equally importantly, such texts can serve as a way of establishing communication between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. However, as Kay Schaffer has argued on several occasions, it is only when the speaker has an active listener, prepared to hear and acknowledge what is being said that the cathartic function of talking of the past can be fulfilled and that the country as a whole can move forward.

In 1998, Carmel Bird, a white Australian novelist, edited a small selection of the stories contained in *Bringing Them Home* and published them under the title *The Stolen Children: Their Stories*. The change in the title is itself significant. The “them” in *Bringing Them Home* undoubtedly refers to the children but the stolen *children* “refigure[s] the tellers of the stories for all time as children” (Olubas and Greenwell 7) and denies their existence as adult narrators. In Bird’s book the removal of the children ceases to be a specific Aboriginal experience which took place at a given historical time and becomes instead a universal experience of maternal loss. Paradoxically, hardly any of the stories give the mother’s point of view but Bird’s introduction makes it very clear how she wants the stories be read:

No two words strike deeper into the human heart than the words ‘stolen children’. Nothing is more valuable to us than our children, nothing so irreplaceable, so precious, so beloved. The history of white Australians is marred by children lost in the bush, children spirited away by unknown agents. The stories of these children have become the stuff of myth, icons of horror, and they ring with the notes of darkest nightmare. (10)

The reader, in other words, should extrapolate from the children’s stories and imagine what it must have been like for the mother. However, as Brigitta Olubas and Lisa Greenwell

⁷ Jennifer Jones has analysed the textual changes made by the white editor of *If Everyone Cared* in “As Long as She Got Her Voice: How Cross-Cultural Collaboration Shapes Aboriginal Textuality”. *Altitude* 5 (2005). Online: <http://www.api-network.com/altitude/an>

point out, in denying historical differences between the experiences of white and Aboriginal Australians, *The Stolen Children* “re-institute[s] the asymmetry of access to public speech that had been challenged by the version of the stories in the original HREOC Report” (8). Because the book relies on empathy, white readers are no longer in the position of active ‘listeners.’ They do not have to reflect on responsibility, do not have to acknowledge anything; the need for reconciliation has disappeared.

From Book to Film

This white appropriation of indigenous stories becomes even clearer when we turn to the film *Rabbit Proof Fence*. The book *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* was first published in 1996, before *Bringing Them Home*. The first four and a half chapters are a mixture of oral history and fiction. They describe the arrival of whites in Western Australia and the way the Aborigines were gradually forced off their land. These chapters also provide a wealth of information about the traditional Aboriginal way of life, from giving birth, to hunting. Throughout the book archival documents are incorporated into the oral history thus challenging the status of the written document as the only means of knowing the past.

The other four and a half chapters in the book tell the story of three girls, aged fourteen, eleven and eight from Jigalong in North Western Australia, who were removed from their families and sent to Moore River Native Settlement near Perth. They escaped and, despite being tracked by native police and search planes, walked the 1600 kilometres back home by following the Rabbit Proof Fence. The book was written by Doris Pilkington/Nugi Garimara, the daughter of the elder girl Molly, and is based on her mother’s and aunt’s memories. In the introduction Pilkington calls it a “historical event” and a “historic journey”. Anne Brewster argues that in this way just as the first half rewrites “discovery narratives” the second half “rewrite[s] a national history which has to date given European ‘explorers’ the monopoly of heroic treks” (2002).

The second part of the book was turned into a film by the expatriate white producer Phillip Noyce and released under the shortened title *Rabbit Proof Fence* in 2002. The film has been hailed for successfully bringing the plight of Indigenous Australians to world attention. However, as well as entirely omitting the first half of the book a number of other changes were also made. The abduction was seen with a certain fatalism by the real Molly’s parents;

the girls were taken away on a horse, not in a car and Daisy was not ‘captured’ on the same day as Molly and Gracie. Even more significantly, perhaps, the girls are younger. In the book Molly is fourteen and is clearly identified as an adolescent who will soon be of marriageable age. In the film she is twelve, still a child, still ‘innocent’ with no overtones of sexuality. One newspaper reviewer argues that looking for differences between the book and the film is beside the point: “Based on a true story it may be, but it is drama rather than documentary, an accurate summing-up of collective experience rather than a meticulous detailing of one personal history” (Fickling). However, I would argue that it is precisely this “summing up of collective experience” which is problematic as it erases the specificity of the Australian historical situation and ignores the experiences of individuals, something which *Bringing them Home* had established as both desirable and necessary.

This is particularly clear when we consider how the film was marketed abroad. In France it was released under the title *Le chemin de la liberté*. While this title echoes that of Nelson Mandela’s autobiography *Un long chemin vers la liberté*, the freedom the path lead to was very different. The Indigenous population of Australia had lost their land and with it their traditional way of life. They did not become Australian citizens until 1967 and in the 1930s, when the film is set, they were legally wards of the state. Amongst other restrictions, they were forbidden to go into a bar or buy alcohol, they could not travel without a permit, they had to obtain permission to marry and their children were often excluded from ‘white’ schools. This was the freedom that the three girls were walking back to. Gracie was recaptured before she saw her mother again. Molly, who did make it ‘home’, was sent back to Moore River nine years later by which time she was a mother herself.

In America the poster for the film bore the slogan “What if the government kidnapped your daughter? It happened every week in Australia from 1905 to 1971.” Although the vast majority of the white American audience would have run no risk of having their daughters kidnapped even had they lived in Australia, the slogan accurately reflects the way the film works. As Noyce himself says in the documentary *Following the Rabbit Proof Fence* about how the film was made, his choice of actresses was determined largely by the knowledge that, while they had to look like Aborigines, the white audience also had to be able to identify with them as the film relies on empathy. Much of the film is shot from Molly’s viewpoint with the camera held at child height – the equivalent of a first person subjective narration. Tony Hughes D’aeth argues that this “heavy reliance on first-person filmic techniques has the effect

of portraying the events of the Stolen Generations as though they were unwitnessed, as though they took place away from any third person, outside the view of history” (6). Just like Carmel Bird’s book, “empathic identification with the victim closes off discussions of responsibility, appropriates the girls’ experience on white-settler terms and perpetuates a white-settler national politics of assimilation” (Schaffer and Potter 3).

In both the book and the film the pain of the mother is largely absent. Molly walked back to Jigalong not once but twice, the second time taking her eighteen-month-old daughter Annabelle with her but leaving four-year-old Doris behind in Moore River. Three years later, Annabelle was removed and sent to Sister Kate’s Children’s Home in Perth. Molly never saw her again. As an adult Annabelle refused to meet her, denying that she had an Aboriginal mother. Yet all this is summed up in a few lines at the end of the book and in a voice over in the final scene of the film. As I have argued above, the universal appeal of the child can explain the film version of events but it does not explain the book. It seems to me that, like Sally Morgan’s grandmother, some experiences are too painful, too private to talk about. Although Molly made it back to Jigalong twice, her second escape was not a ‘success’ since it meant abandoning one daughter – Doris was never returned to her mother’s care.

Fiction as truth

For an account of the mother’s suffering, and the diversity of Aboriginal experience, it is necessary to turn to a novel. For Alexis Wright, fiction has several advantages over factual writing. Because it is an imaginative form, a novel enables the writer to imagine memories which are too painful to be told, what she calls those “haunting memories of the impossible and frightening silence of family members” (2002: 12). It also offers a freedom other forms of writing do not; freedom from the risk of whites bringing a libel charge and also freedom to write without hurting members of one’s own community. As Wright puts it; “fiction [is] the best way of presenting a truth – not the real truth, but more of a truth than non-fiction which is not really the truth either. Non fiction is often about the writer telling what is safe to tell” (2002: 14).

Wright’s novel, *Plains of Promise* published in 1997, tells the story of four generations of Indigenous women in Central North West Queensland. The first woman does not have a name, only a number, and she commits suicide after she is brought to live at the mission and

her seven year old daughter Ivy is taken away from her. Ivy is repeatedly raped by the white missionary and at the age of fourteen gives birth to a daughter, Mary, who is immediately removed and adopted without her consent or knowledge, by a white Melbourne family. Ivy refuses to accept the loss of her daughter and spends over twenty years in a psychiatric hospital. She is then released into the community and eventually ends up living alone, a few hours drive from the former mission. Mary meanwhile, is trying to trace her Aboriginal roots accompanied by her own young daughter Jesse, whose neglectful father is an Indigenous activist.

Like Molly, Daisy, and the people who tell their stories in *Bringing Them Home*, the mothers in *Plains of Promise* cannot speak about the loss of their children but because it is a novel and there is a third person narrative voice, their pain can be portrayed. The first woman's suicide is an act of protest at the removal of her child, a refusal to continue to exist on the terms imposed by others. Her suicide is not only "a desperate defence of [her] own identity in the face of encroaching chaos" (Lott) but, by choosing self-immolation, an attempt to annihilate the world itself by removing all trace of her own existence. Even this desperate act, however, reveals her lack of empowerment in the white world as her death certificate states that she died of "natural causes [...] Death by accidental spillage of kerosene" (27). She is written into white history not as a rebel but as a careless black. In the current context of revisionist history in Australia, which sees people such as Keith Windschuttle using written documents to deny past mistreatment of Aborigines, this comes as a timely reminder of the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of discovering the reality behind what white officials chose to record.

When Jipp tires of Ivy's endless questions about what has happened to her baby, he has her committed to a psychiatric hospital where she refuses to speak. because no one will answer the one question which really interests her: the whereabouts of her child, The staff put this down to shyness, not realising, or caring, that "she was in the midst of a massive sulk which had lasted for each day of her more than twenty years at Sycamore Heights" (168). Ironically, when Ivy finally talks to the hospital staff to tell them she does not want to go 'home', they just ignore her. In the end, whether she chooses to speak or to remain silent makes absolutely no difference to the way she is treated.

For the doctors she is an object of curiosity, never of compassion. The traces of her pregnancy are put down to a "botched abortion," (171) and the regular gynaeco-

logical examinations she is forced to undergo become a form of clinical rape. Her file contains “no information [...] about her admittance, no medical notes on her condition, no note of her age or anything about her background” (167). The stories in *Bringing Them Home* recall endlessly empty files, unanswered letters, records destroyed by fire; remembering for Indigenous Australians is as much an act of recalling what is not known as what is known. The advantage of the novel is that the unrecorded, the lost and the destroyed can be told, silences can be explained, files recovered, white record-keeping deciphered.

Like Sally, when Mary questions Indigenous people about the past in an attempt to learn more about her own origins, she is frequently confronted by silence. For some the silence stems from the pain of remembering: “Nobody wanted to have the pain of the past suddenly foisted upon them. The memories were too sad” (227), but for others it is a way of maintaining precarious positions of power. *Plains of Promise* challenges the easy dichotomy of victims and victimisers. Both physical and verbal violence are omnipresent in the Aboriginal part of the mission: Buddy uses people to further his own political ambitions and has no scruples about leaving Mary to bring up his daughter as a single mother. However, the novel clearly shows that the Aborigines become victimisers only after they have been victimised themselves. The novel is in many ways a plea for Aboriginal self-determination and a recognition that white tactics of ‘divide and rule’ are unfortunately all too often effective. Buddy reproaches Mary for never having experienced the hardships of life on an Aboriginal reserve and declares that this prevents her from being an Aboriginal spokesperson. Mary in turn accuses him of “trying to hijack and belittle her Aboriginality” (227). She reflects bitterly: “No wonder we can’t get it together and get anywhere when all we do is argue about how much more oppressed we are than each other” (265). These shifts in point of view remove the dangers of unconditional empathy and identification with one single character and force the reader to reflect on the question of responsibility and where the blame really lies.

Like works of life-writing, *Plains of Promise* retells Australian history from an Indigenous viewpoint – the book opens, for example, with the arrival of the first white missionary. As the novel progresses, however, whites gradually fade into the background and the book ends with an Aboriginal legend. This suggests that Indigenous culture is not in danger of dying out, as so many whites like to claim, but rather, like any living culture, that it is constantly adapting to the modern world. This optimism is further reinforced by the

narrator's belief that the land will always be there: "In spite of the foreign burrs and stinging nettles along the river banks – nothing foreign could change the essence of the land. No white man had that power" (75). As long as the land is there, unchanging, then there is hope for the future for, as Wright has argued elsewhere, Indigenous Australians' sense of identity is intimately linked to the land: "The land is sacred and the land is people. People are the land. The two are synonymous – one and the same" (Wright 2000: 10⁸).

Conclusion

The works I have briefly evoked should obviously be placed within the larger debate which is currently taking place within Australia about the whole of the country's history and it should not be forgotten that these 'History Wars'⁹ are not so much about history as about politics, about controlling the past to control the present. As Linda Alcoff says "Who is speaking, who is spoken of, and who listens is a result, as well as an act, of political struggle" (17). Life-writing, novels and films clearly illustrate both the advantages and the dangers of micro-history as opposed to macro-history. The story of an individual is undoubtedly an excellent way of arousing white interest in the country's shameful past. At the same time, too much empathy can lead to a blurring of the realities of the historical situation and a failure to see the political implications of the subject's story, as Edward Hills says "History is depoliticized as the personal and emotional take centre stage" (105). Paradoxically it is fiction, whose meaning is harder to pin down, which most successfully escapes assimilation practices and which therefore offers one of the most useful reconstructions of the past; a reconstruction that is culturally accessible to both white and Indigenous readers and which helps create a sense of a communal past hitherto absent, thereby laying the foundations for a shared future identity.

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⁸ This book was commissioned by Actes Sud and translated by Sabine Porte. It has not been published in English. Actes Sud has kindly given me permission to quote from the original English text for the purposes of this paper.

⁹ Title of a recent book by Stuart Mcintryre and Anna Clarke (Melbourne University Press 2003)

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