

Stolen Generations

The Child has been kept in ignorance of his father's fate and it is my present intention to retain him in confinement and by kind treatment I am in hopes from his tender age, he may be [accustomed] to civilised habits, as to make it improbable he would revert to a barbarous life when grown up.ⁱ

Lt. Governor Irwin in 1833 reporting to his superiors in London following the execution of 8 year-old 'Billy's' father, Midgegooroo.

This is the first recorded removal of a Noongar child in the Swan River Colony. Four months later, after repeated requests, he was returned to his mother. Billy's removal was not legal, but like other cases in the early years of colonialism, little was done to stop it. The impact of colonization on Noongar children began early on with the violent conflict between Noongars and Europeans over land, laws, and vast differences in culture and perspective.

Over the next one and a half centuries, successive generations of European settlers sought to impose European values and behaviour on the Indigenous population. They did so with the deliberate and calculated removal of Noongar and other Indigenous children from their families. The children were confined in government and church-sponsored institutions, where they were to be re-educated and Christianized.

Missions

With the arrival of the Christian missions came the first systemic removal of Noongar children.ⁱⁱ From the point of view of the missionaries, their work was to 'save the souls' of the Aboriginal race. For Noongar people it meant fear of police and cars carrying officers from the Welfare Department. Doolan Leisha Eatts recalls:

...'[A]t the Badjaling Mission, you know everyone was camped along. We were camped right up at the sand plain, up the top there. And when the car comes in down the bottom, come in like that, well the bottom camp they all had a young fella who was trained to whistle long and sharp for danger if there was a car coming in. And so young fella would give this long sharp whistle and it be carried on with every young fella in the family too, and it would get up to the camp where we were. And of course all the kids used to run and 'ide'.ⁱⁱⁱ

Legal removal of Indigenous Children

The first law in Western Australia to officially sanction the removal of children was the Industrial Schools Act of 1874. It stated that, 'any Indigenous child "surrendered" to an institution could be detained there without parental consent, or contracted to employment after the age of 12 until the child reached 21 years'.^{iv}

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1905 Act

The 1905 Act gave the government even further control over Noongar people's lives.^v Provisions of the 1905 Act for the first time incorporated an assessment of *behaviour* to determine whether an individual should be defined as Aboriginal or not. It recognized the Chief Protector of Aborigines as the legal guardian of every Aboriginal child. More consequential was his power to remove any child born of 'half-caste' or Aboriginal mother to a home or mission.

The number of missions and settlements in Western Australia exploded from six in 1905, to 24 in 1915, when A.O. Neville became the Chief Protector of Aborigines.^{vi} Neville was a strong advocate of assimilation and thought children of mixed descent should be absorbed, racially and culturally, into the general population. His tenure was characterised by a sharp increase in the number of Noongar children being taken from their families.

Sister Kate's Quarter Caste Home

A definitive moment in the execution of assimilation policy in Western Australia was the establishment of Sister Kate's Home for "quarter caste" children in 1933 (located in East Perth). Children who were 'almost white' were targeted for removal and brought to Sister Kate's because they were thought to have the best chances of assimilating successfully into the European population. Parents were strongly discouraged or prevented from visiting their children. These Noongar children were often not told that they had living relatives or even that they were Aboriginal at all.^{vii}

After WW2

After the Second World War, Australia was signatory to the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, but this did not put an end to the abuse of Indigenous human rights, and certainly did not put an end to the removal of children. The government now insisted that Aboriginal people live in the same way and to the same material standards as other Australians, and punished them if they failed to do so by targeting their children for removal. As a result, Aboriginal families were intensely monitored by government departments.^{viii}

1950- 1970s.

By the early 1950s, compulsory removal of children could only occur if the Child Welfare Department could prove child neglect or delinquency, warranting removal through the courts.^{ix} However, the Child Welfare Department and the courts were prone to interpret the different cultural practices of Aboriginal child-rearing as neglect.

Family

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Noongar people have a different and broader definition of family than Europeans. See Family (on the Kaartdijin website). For them it is normal for children to be looked after by grandparents, aunts and uncles. Child Welfare officers often saw this as parents having 'abandoned' their child for others to look after.

Being Poor

One of the most shocking aspects of child removal in this period is that Indigenous people were having their children taken away from them essentially for being poor. Welfare officers would visit homes without notice, and decide to remove children based on the most trivial detail. An extract from a welfare officer's report in 1968 shows just how immediate and callous those assessments could be:

A thorough examination was not made as the father was not present. From what I saw however, I am satisfied that the children are 'neglected', if for no other reason than the shack they live in.^x

1950s – 1970s

The period of the 1950s to the 1970s was characterised by an increase in the number of Indigenous children placed in missions, and a renewed commitment of governments to the task of assimilation. More effort than ever was expended on severing the connection between Noongar children and parents, with children being deliberately sent to missions far away from their traditional country (to discourage runaways), and for the first time, the encouragement of fostering and adoptions of Aboriginal children by non-Aboriginal families.

Stories of resistance and survival

Alongside the many stories of the devastating effects of removal on both Noongar children and parents, there are stories of resistance and survival. In the face of overwhelming odds, when their culture and way of life was under direct attack, Noongar families found ways of subverting the welfare officers and the missionaries and keeping their cultures alive:

'Every morning our people would crush charcoal and mix that with animal fat and smother that all over us, so that when the police came they could only see black children in the distance.'^{xi} From a woman who was ultimately surrendered to the Mt. Margaret Mission for schooling in the 1930s.

One of the most common ways of resisting removal was children running away from the places they were taken to. Despite very harsh punishments for 'absconding', such as whipping and imprisonment, children continued to run away repeatedly.

The children in missions, especially the older children, found solidarity in developing a culture of rebellion and resistance. A letter from girls in 1934 at Moore River to Moseley Royal Commission states that "We have promised Mr. Kitson that we'd never run away. But we're sorry we have broken our promise to him. The reason why

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because the Matron is always slinging off at us and when we try to speak for our rights Mr Neal turn around and give us a hiding... she wonder why we run away and is her driving us away'^{xii}

Sometimes more direct strategies of resistance were successful. In one case, Noongar men who returned from fighting in the Second World War to find their children had been removed, marched straight to the Superintendent's office with their army issue rifles, and demanded their children back at gunpoint.^{xiii}

Many stolen children were told that their parents were dead, or did not want them, leaving them with feelings of abandonment and worthlessness. For these people, access to the documentation of their removal has been of great comfort.^{xiv}

ⁱ A Haebich & A Delroy *The Stolen Generations: separation of aboriginal children from their families in Western Australia*. Western Australian Museum, Perth 1999, p.8.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, p10.

ⁱⁱⁱ Aunty Doolan Leisha Eatts: Oral History extract: 17 January 2007 [See oral history extract under Stolen Generations on Kaartdijin-Noongar Sharing Noongar Culture website: www.noongarculture.org.au]

^{iv} A. Haebich, and D. Mellor, (eds) 2002. *Many Voices: Reflections on experiences of Indigenous Child Separation*. National Library of Australia: Canberra, p.249.

^v See also the theme 1905 Aborigines Act on www.noongarculture.org.au

^{vi} J. Carter, 1996. *History of the Removal of Aboriginal Children from their Families in Western Australia 1829 to 1972*. AAD contribution to the State submission to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission National Enquiry into Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, Aboriginal Affairs Department, March 1996, p.12.

^{vii} Ibid 1996: p16.

^{viii} A. Haebich and A. Delroy 1999: p.46.

^{ix} A. Haebich and A. Delroy 1999: p 45.

^x A. Haebich and A. Delroy 1999: p. 46.

^{xi} Ibid, p. 37.

^{xii} Cited in A. Haebich and A. Delroy, *The Stolen Generations*, p.37.

^{xiii} A. Haebich, *Broken Circles*, 2000, p. 288.

^{xiv} A. Haebich and D. Mellor 2002, p. 50.

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