Most Australians have heard of the Stolen Generations, a term used to describe Aboriginal children who were forcibly removed from their families during the twentieth century. This inhumane practice was instigated by the Aborigines Act of 1905, which decreed that all Aboriginal persons in the state of Western Australia – whether adults or children – were to become wards of the state. Under this Act, adult Aborigines had no rights and their children, in most cases, were taken from them to live in settlements or missions throughout the state.

However, the policy of removing Aboriginal children began many years before the Aborigines Act was implemented. The introduction of different religious denominations to the Swan River Colony during the nineteenth century saw missionaries eager to Christianise the ‘heathen natives’. These missionaries played an important role in bringing about the cultural fragmentation of Nyoongar and other Aboriginal groups, as well as contributing to loss of language and identity, and most important of all, the loss of Aboriginal children to their families. This article will provide insight into the historical reasons why Aboriginal children were removed from their mothers and extended families to live a life isolated from their cultural heritages. These Aboriginal children became known as the Stolen Generations, and the effects of their forced removal into missions, settlements, orphanages and foster homes have continued to resound in contemporary Western Australia – in fact all over Australia – long after this vicious practice was abolished.

**Missions**

One of the first missions established in Western Australia was the New Norcia Mission, which was run by the Catholic Benedictine monks, Brothers Serra and Salvado, of whom the latter eventually became Bishop Salvado. In its founding years, the New Norcia Mission became a champion of the Yuat Nyoongars living in the Victoria Plains region. The Benedictine monks developed a good rapport and trust with the Yuat, and the locals visited the mission and helped the priests tend their animals. As the mission grew, the locals became shepherds and shearers for the monks (Green and Tilbrook xiii). In time, they became settled and some of their children even attended lessons set up by the Brothers. Under Bishop Salvado's mentorship, the Nyoongar people learned how to tend gardens and farm crops, and erected buildings, cleared land for a road to Perth, and even helped to construct a bridge across the Moore River. In a sense they became domesticated and came to rely on the New Norcia Mission for sustenance. Bishop Salvado allotted the Aborigines plots of land on which they were able to build houses of their own.

By the late 1860s the Aborigines were well on the way to becoming settled in their new lifestyle. They even formed a cricket team, and in 1879 the team went to Perth and Fremantle to play. The only drawback to this apparent utopia was that Bishop Salvado had total control over the Yuat Nyoongars. Parents had to sign a consent form surrendering their children to the mission, with Bishop Salvado being the sole guardian. They did not realise that they were signing away all parental rights to the New Norcia Mission and the Bishop.

During the 1890s, the colonial government under John Forrest deemed it necessary to forego the financial assistance to New Norcia that had been used to subsidise the cost of Aboriginal people living there, causing a financial strain which the Mission could not withstand (Green and Tilbrook). Many Aboriginal people were forced to leave New Norcia to seek employment elsewhere, which was a blow to the Aborigines as it left them at the mercy of the colonial government's laws and policies concerning Indigenous people. When the Aborigines Act was passed in 1905, Aboriginal people realised that their lives and their children had been forfeited by inhuman policies that eventually almost decimated the Indigenous population.
Other missions – including those at Forrest River and Drysdale River in the Kimberley region, Wandering and Roelands missions, Tardun and Karralundi missions and a host of others – were all established to deal with the ungodliness of the Aboriginal population. There was a conglomeration of religious bodies all vying for the souls of the Aboriginal people, especially those of the children. Most of these missions operated under rigid rules of obedience and if the children broke these rules, they were punished. Many soon learned not to get into trouble, but conditions were exceptionally harsh, as many members of the church believed in the old adage, 'spare the rod and spoil the child'.

My mother was placed in New Norcia Mission for Aboriginal orphans (in the girls' section) when she was eleven, and some of the stories she told my siblings and me when we were growing up are shocking. The treatment that the nuns handed out to the girls was very unchristian to say the least. My mother stayed at New Norcia for three years and then she was sent to the Moore River Native Settlement to gain 'meaningful' employment – as a domestic.

Settlements

The only settlement that I will talk about is the Moore River Native Settlement, that horror camp for Aboriginal people, who had been brought there from all over the state. However, there was a large settlement in the south of the state near Katanning called Carrolup, but this is not as well known as Moore River. Nevertheless, Carrolup has the distinction of producing some of the best Aboriginal artists in this country. Artworks by Reynold Hart and Revel Cooper – to name two of the most prolific artists – are now collectors' items, and their renown as Nyoongar Indigenous artists has spread far and wide.

Carrolup and the Moore River Native Settlement were established around the same time – between 1916 and 1918. These settlements were built so that the Chief Protector of Aborigines, A.O. Neville, had easy access to information about the inmates in the form of reports from their supervisors or superintendents. Pat Jacobs states in her biography of Neville, Mr. Neville (1990), that "he [Neville] had outlined a sweeping reformation of the management and control of the Aboriginal population of Western Australia" and that "the Aboriginal population of the state would be strategically controlled at a considerable reduction in cost to the government" (78). In essence, Neville wanted the Aboriginal people to be herded into these settlements in order to control and manipulate them, and to purge the towns of Aboriginal people. The idea, as put forward by Daisy Bates, that Aboriginal people were dying out and that all white people had to do was 'smooth the dying pillow', was the criterion or yardstick by which Neville gauged Aboriginal existence. He wanted to hasten the process by first putting all Aboriginal people into settlements where they would be starved and ill-treated, and then waiting for them to die. All I can say is, "Daisy Bates and Mr. Neville – and I hope you are both roasting in hell", Aboriginal people are surviving and many are living lives that are on par with those of white people.

So, Aboriginal people from all over Western Australia were placed at Moore River Native Settlement, which became the biggest internment camp for Aboriginal people in the state. Many books have been written about Moore River – Anna Haebich's For Their Own Good (1988), Susan Maushart's Sort of a Place Like Home (1993), my own book No Options No Choice (1994), and recently Stephen Kinnane's book Shadow Lines (2003), to name just a few. Much more has been written about Moore River and the inhuman treatment meted out to Aborigines there in biographies and autobiographies. Stories come from all angles, but the message is the same – Aboriginal lives were forfeited on the whims of A.O. Neville, the Western Australian Government and most white people of that state.

The Stolen Generations

My father was a member of the Stolen Generations. He was taken from his mother and extended Aboriginal family at Hillside Station, near Marble Bar, in 1916. He was just six years old and spoke not a word of English. The Aboriginal Protection Board placed him in a foster home with a Swiss couple for three years and when they returned to Europe after World War I, he was transferred to the newly established Moore River Native Settlement, which became his home for the next twenty-four years. My father has always deeply regretted that he was removed from his mother, extended family, cultural heritage and his
language. He never fully recovered from his loss. He was fifty-eight years old in 1968 when he returned to
his homeland around Marble Bar and Nullagine, and to the fragments of his extended family. Now, when
I look at my family tree, I see generations of my mother's people going back into the 1800s – a strong line
of Nyoongar people – as well as the white side of my heritage. But on my father's side, I see only his name
and the name of his English father. No mention is made of his Aboriginal mother or her people – nothing. It
is sad and so immoral. Luckily for Dad he did find members of his extended family and was able to gather
some information about his mother. At least my father died knowing something of his cultural heritage,
identity and belonging. Other Aboriginal children were not so lucky. Their search is still going on.

Of the removal of Aboriginal children – a policy that was implemented with alacrity by the Western
Australian Government during the early years of the twentieth century – the question could be asked, 'why
was it so necessary to uproot Aboriginal children from their people and their homelands'? According to Joan
Wardrop, it was so that the Aboriginal people, especially the children, could be trained as domestic servants
and farm labourers for farmers, pastoralists and white people living in the city. But is that an adequate
reason? Why did government officials pass an Act of Parliament that denigrated Aboriginal people to the
extent that they were totally under the jurisdiction of the Chief Protector of Aborigines? Were the Indigenous
people (or the 'natives' as they were then called) subject to these horrendous policies simply for the purpose
of providing manual labour for the whites? Maybe that was one reason, but it was not the main reason. The
underlying purpose of taking children away from their natural surroundings was to isolate them from their
families and 'breed out the Aboriginal blood' in them.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, miscegenation between white men and Aboriginal women
was steadily growing. The many 'half-caste' or near-white children living among the Aboriginal people
became apparent to the authorities, who believed that something had to be done to protect these children
from Aboriginal influence. A plan for the removal of these children was formulated and implemented with
the Aborigines Act 1905. Fair and 'half-caste' children from around the state were rounded up and taken to
the Moore River Native Settlement or the missions that had been established to Christianise the Aborigines.
The Aborigines could only look on in horror as their children were taken away; to do anything against this
gross infringement of their liberty was to court a prison sentence.

To get a better idea of the dilemma that the Aborigines found themselves in, one has to go back to the
early days of colonisation in Western Australia. As the white intruders settled Aboriginal land and claimed
it as their own by the use of pieces of paper, the Indigenous people found themselves being shunted from
their traditional land and lifestyles. With the loss of their traditional lands in the south-west, the Nyoongar
people, as with other Aboriginal groups, were forced to live as fringe dwellers on the edge of the towns. A
lot of them had no work so they resorted to begging the townspeople for crumbs. The rations they received
from government agencies via the Aborigines Protection Board were never enough. Their bush foods were
hard to get because of the loss of their land and the loss of their traditional hunting, gathering and foraging
customs when colonisation took place.

The whites guarded their stolen land with fences to keep Aborigines out, and the Aborigines could
not intrude on other Aboriginal lands, so begging and becoming nuisances to white people was the last
resort. What the whites had reaped while taking the Aboriginal lands, they sowed by having Aborigines
turn into beggars, living on the fringes of their towns. What was to be done to stop these annoyances to
white sensibilities? It was simple, really. Isolation. Isolate the Aborigines on reserves near the rubbish
dumps of white towns, get the religious bodies to establish missions in areas far away from the towns and
 teach them about Christianity, establish settlements where Aborigines from all over the state can live in
ignominious poverty, and take the fairer Aboriginal children from their families and foster them out to
white people or place them in orphanages, where they could forget their family and traditional culture and
learn the 'acceptable' behaviour of the white people. After this was done, white people could sit back and
 watch Aborigines die like flies through lack of food, poor living conditions and loss of land. It doesn't paint
a very nice picture, does it? But it happened. Such was the mentality of the colonisers at the time, with
ethnocentricity and racism running rife.

This period in Western Australia's history – in fact the history from all over Australia regarding the
treatment of Aborigines – was very depressing and degrading for the Indigenous people. Yet we have
survived these horrendous policies and Acts that attempted to determine our lives. I like to believe that the
people are stronger for it, and would fight against such policies now, should they occur again. Our children have the right to remain with their parents and extended families, just as Aboriginal adults have the right to make their own decisions and live their lives to the full extent of their capabilities. Although Aborigines were subjected to these policies made on their behalf by the government, we as adult Aboriginal people must ensure that conditions such as our ancestors and predecessors lived through never happen again. We have that right as human beings and citizens in this country of our ancestral belonging.

Bibliography


