

# Introduction to: The Stolen Children-Their Stories.



## **An extract from Carmel Bird's introduction to: 'The Stolen Children — Their Stories'**

**by Carmel Bird**

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Marked by a cross drawn in ink at about the place where her navel would be, the child stands in the centre of the group of six tiny girls. Her companions look shyly, sadly, at the camera; but her eyes are downcast. She seems to be oblivious, or at least forgetful, of the photographer, concentrating on a ball that she cradles at shoulder level. This child, with her high-domed forehead and gently pouting upper lip, is an orphan among orphans, Australian children of mixed race.

The orphanage was in Darwin, and the photograph of the children appeared in a newspaper in the 1930s, because the Minister for the Interior was appealing for people in Melbourne and Sydney to take the children in, to 'rescue them from becoming outcasts'. This was part of a long-term government plan to assimilate Indigenous people into the dominant white community by removing the children from their families at as young an age as possible, preferably at birth, cutting them off from their own place, language, and customs, and thereby somehow bleaching aboriginality from Australian society.

This attempt at assimilation was nothing but a policy of systematic genocide, an attempt to wipe out a race of people. How apt it is, then, that this beautiful child is carelessly and so distinctly marked with a cross at the centre of her being, as if to signify the ruthless severing of the umbilicus that connects her to her mother and her race. The person who made the cross has written underneath the picture: 'I like the little girl in centre of group, but if taken by anyone else, any of the others would do, as long as they are strong'.

It is a haunting picture, an image of the saddest and most tender vulnerability, already damaged, about to be further violated and sacrificed. This picture is an emblem of stolen children, and it rouses pity, outrage, grief and mourning.

*Sorry Time was eerie music, like a rising wind:  
the song of tribal Aborigines in mourning.*

Jan Mayman 'Sorry Time'

*Bringing Them Home*, a report prepared by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission from material gathered during the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, documents a terrible grief and loss, and highlights the troubled relationship that exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. This relationship is a critical and dramatic element in our history, imbued with tragedy and sorrow, affecting the lives of all of us, and until it is fully examined, acknowledged and mourned, there can be no reconciliation.

There was an Aboriginal Day of Mourning on 26 January 1938. Fifty years on, and the sounds of lamentation are louder and more insistent. The evils of the past always come back to haunt us, and to deny the past is to cast a dark shadow, to cripple the future, infecting it with the nature of those evils.

*Bringing Them Home* is part of the examination of our past, its terms of reference being set down by the Attorney-General, Michael Lavarch, in August 1995 when he asked the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission to consult widely among the Australian people, in particular among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The Attorney-General asked the Commission to trace past laws, practices and policies that resulted in the separation of Indigenous children from their families by 'compulsion, duress or undue influence'. He asked that it examine the present laws and practices available to Indigenous people affected by separation, including those laws relating to access to family records. He asked that the Commission examine the principles relevant to determining the justification for compensation for people affected by separation; to examine current laws relating to the care of Indigenous people; and to advise on necessary changes to these laws. He said that the 'principle of self-determination' by Indigenous people must be taken into account.

It is a sad and telling fact that the Attorney-General should have had to draw attention to the need for self-determination of Indigenous people. But he was right, for the paternalism of the old Empire has not entirely disappeared in Australia in the nineties. The need for self-determination is stressed at the end of the report. In the words of Mick Dodson, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, speaking on self-determination in juvenile justice programs: 'The standing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents, families and communities to actively participate in and shape juvenile justice programs, which have such a disproportionate impact on our children, should be beyond question.'

So many things should be beyond question; so many things are not.

The questions now raised by the report will never go away. They will haunt Australia until they have been understood and answered. Like the wind of Jan Mayman's 'Sorry Time' quoted earlier, these questions will rise and rise until Australia answers them and discovers ways to make good in the present the errors committed in the past. There is no escape from this fact.

The past is not past. The past, the present and the future are, as they always are, part of each other, bound together. We cannot change the past, which cannot be undone; we may be able, by generosity of imagination and spirit, to change the future for the better, to act in a more enlightened and more humane manner, with greater dignity and true compassion. I write this not as a social historian, not as an anthropologist, not as a psychologist; I write only from an ordinary person's observation and understanding, from my heart, without sentimentality, and from my own moral imagination of the events and their significance.

Many Australians are aware of the general meaning of the report, having been alerted to it by newspapers, and particularly by television. We saw and heard the impassioned speeches of Sir Ronald

Wilson, President of the Commission, and of Mick Dodson. We saw the Leader of the Opposition, Kim Beazley, weep in Parliament the day after he first read the report. We saw, to our shame, the Prime Minister, John Howard, refuse to apologise on our behalf to Indigenous people for their tragedy and sorrow, and we saw and registered, in fact felt, the shock that this refusal caused to Indigenous people. The refusal was a depth charge, and in the face of it Indigenous people responded with a dignity that could only inspire awe and an unbearable grief. As a result of the public discussion of the report, many people bought copies and read them.

In December 1997, the Federal Government made its formal response to the Report. No apology has been offered by the government on behalf of the Australian people, but \$63 million, to be spent over four years, has been set aside to promote the health and welfare of Indigenous people, and to support the repair of language and culture within Indigenous communities. There is an emphasis on effecting the reunion of families. But the deep and urgent wish of Indigenous people for an apology has not been fulfilled. Some of the state premiers have apologised, and some, although not all, churches — which were the agencies controlling many of the orphanages — have also apologised, expressing a profound regret and great sorrow, but the statement of apology from the Federal Government remains unsaid.

White Australians need to read the stories of the people who suffered systematically and in so many ways at the hands of white Australians, principally of earlier generations. Indigenous people told their stories to the Inquiry and many of these stories are quoted in the report. The courage, dignity and generosity, as well as the tragedy, of these storytellers shines out in their words, delivered from the heart and written in tears.

When I read the report it became a matter of passionate urgency to me that the oral histories told in it should be made accessible to everyone. People in other countries wished to know the stories I had read in *Bringing Them Home*. They are available on the Internet at:

<http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/special/rsjlibrary/hreoc/stolen/stolen.html> — collecting them in a small book seemed to me to be the simplest and, in the long run, perhaps the most effective.

Most of the people whose stories are collected in *The Stolen Children: Their Stories* first saw their stories in print in *Bringing Them Home*. They are people who were brutally and wrongfully separated from their mothers, their fathers, their families and communities when they were very young, people whose attachment to their own contexts were severed and destroyed. Remembering their lives, telling their stories to the Inquiry was difficult and heart-rending for them. Seeing the stories in print was a new and shocking confrontation with the horrors of the past. Several of these people have agreed to republish their stories in *The Stolen Children — Their Stories*, hoping that the stories will reach a wider audience, and help to convince all Australians that an apology is due to those who have come to be known as the stolen generations.

When people tell their stories, they usually enjoy feeling proud, and delight in being named and in claiming their own history. Not so the stolen children. The names under which these stories appear are not the real names of the writers. This is because the writers feel they must remain anonymous so that they cannot be identified as the people who have suffered as they have suffered. Their friends, employers, families might see them differently if they knew who they really were. This anonymity is yet another tragic element in this deep, vast tale of pain and sorrow that is a central part of the story of our country.

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. How must it be, then, to be such children, stolen children. How must it be to be children who have been snatched from their mothers and systematically stripped of culture, language, rights and dignity? To be such children who grow to be adults within the very society that visited these crimes upon them. Yet the storytellers in this book are distinguished by a courage and a generosity that speaks with the voice of grace.

The conjunction of the words 'stolen' and 'children' is a horror for both parties, for the child and for the mother. Etched into the stories collected here are the grief and suffering of the mothers. As Murray says in his Journal: 'the worst thing that could ever happen to any woman black or white was to have her children taken from her'. Many members of the stolen generations suffered first as children who were taken and later as mothers whose children were removed.

The stolen children in this book speak of a feeling of emptiness, of having a sense of a hole in their hearts as they recall their loss of family, language, culture, identity. They catalogue the abuses they suffered at the hands of white families and missionaries, but the original wound is that which was inflicted at the moment they were torn from their mothers. Sometimes this happened with the mother's consent, the family being tricked into believing the separation was for the good of the child who would go away and be nurtured and educated and even loved.

Sometimes it is the small details that have been etched in a child's memory that emphasise the horror of what happened to these children. One such detail is not in this book because the writer was one of those who could not bear to repeat the experience of seeing her story in print for a second time. However it is a detail that returns to me constantly for its simple and awful symbolism. This girl was sent to a white family at Christmas time. The daughter of the house received the gift of a bride doll, while the Indigenous child received a Raggedy Ann. A similarly striking incident occurs in 'John's Story'. When they arrived at the orphanage the small boys each carried a little suitcase containing only a Bible which was their treasure and which somehow gave them a kind of identity. The first thing they had to do, before having their heads shaved, was to cast their little suitcases, Bible and all, into a bonfire.

When you read the stories of the stolen children you will begin to know and feel how life has been — how life is — for many Indigenous Australians, people who were taken from their families as tiny babies or as children, and you can not fail to be moved. And don't imagine that the children of today are immune. Part Six of *Bringing Them Home* is titled 'Contemporary Separations' and begins with a quotation from the Aboriginal Legal Service of Western Australia: 'The fact remains that Aboriginal children are still being removed from their families at an unacceptable rate, whether by the child welfare or the juvenile justice systems, or both'.

The wealth of evidence given to the Inquiry showed that the methods and practices in the removal and separation of Indigenous children from their families across Australia were similar in all regions of the country. The children could be taken away at any age, and many of them were taken from their mothers at birth or in very early infancy. Most of the children so taken were put into institutions where the other children were mostly Indigenous, of mixed race, and where the staff were non-Indigenous. If a child was adopted or fostered out to a family, that family was usually white. The objective of all this activity was to absorb Indigenous children into white society, to force them to forget and deny their Aboriginal heritage and blood, and to bring about, within a few generations, a form of breeding-out of all Indigenous characteristics.

The children thus suffered contempt and denigration of their heritage, their own nature, and often the presence of Aboriginal blood was denied. They would be told that their parents were dead or had rejected them, and family members were unable to contact the children, or even to know where they had gone. Letters to and from the children and their true families were suppressed by the authorities; parcels of clothing and toys sent were never received. Children were severed from their roots, denied access to the true nourishment of their spirit, and were at the mercy of institutions or strangers.

Children were exploited in every way, and were the object of psychological, physical and sexual abuse. It is clear that subsequent generations continue to suffer the effects of the separations of the earlier generations, and that these separations are largely to blame for the troubled lives of many Indigenous Australians today. The complex, ongoing and compounding effects of the separations result in a cycle of damage from which it is profoundly difficult to escape. There is a theme of helpless sorrow running through these stories. There is a mounting threnody that all Australians must learn to hear and to acknowledge.

Throughout the Report there are many short quotations from members of the stolen generations, as well

as longer stories. Within both kinds of narrative there are moments when the reader must pause, draw breath, re-read a sentence in horror and in the hope of disbelief. Embedded in the report's short explanations of the quotations from the words of the stolen children are arresting little sentences that will chill you to the bone.

Taking one of these at random: 'woman taken from her parents with her three sisters when the family, who worked and resided on a pastoral station, came into town to collect stores'. In that description of a life lies the sharpest tragedy and horror. The children are no more than a commodity; the authorities can simply take them from their parents who are going about their ordinary business in the town. I put myself imaginatively in the position of any of the people in this drama — the parents, the children, the police — and every position is intolerable. The situation itself is intolerable. I think that perhaps imagination is one of the most important and powerful factors in the necessary process of reconciliation. If white Australians can begin to imagine what life has been like for many Indigenous Australians over the past two hundred years, they will have begun to understand and will be compelled to act. If we read these stories how can we not be shocked and moved by stories such as the following?

In Confidential evidence number 528, given to the Commission, a man who was removed from his family in the 1970s, when he was eight, and who suffered sexual abuse in the orphanage and in foster homes organised by the church, said that he is still so frightened of the welfare system that he is afraid to have children of his own, and is unable to show love to others:

*There's still a lot of unresolved issues within me. One of the biggest ones is I cannot really love anyone no more. I'm sick of being hurt. Every time I used to get close to anyone they were just taken away from me. The other fact is, if I did meet someone, I don't want to have children, cos I'm frightened that the welfare system would come back and take my children.*

It is surely a terrible irony that a system described as 'welfare' is cast in this man's mind (and in the minds of many other Indigenous people who told their stories to the Inquiry) as a monster that will invade his life and steal his children.

Many of the short entries from confidential submissions contain phrases of a poignant wistfulness that is so very sad: 'I've often thought, as old as I am, that it would have been lovely to have known a father and a mother, to know parents even for a little while, just to have had the opportunity of having a mother tuck you into bed and give you a good-night kiss — but it was never to be.' The writer of that sentence in Confidential submission number 65, was fostered at two months of age, in 1936 in Tasmania. And a woman who was sent to the Cootamundra Girls' Home in the 1950s gives us in Confidential submission number 332 a vivid picture from her memory: 'I remember all we children being herded up, like a mob of cattle, and feeling the humiliation of being graded by the colour of our skins for the government records'.

There can be no disbelief; these are true stories, the stories of the descendants of the original inhabitants of this country. They reveal a society that tolerated the harshest cruelties, and that denied the existence of these cruelties, a society that hoped the problem of Indigenous people would disappear, hoped that the people themselves would disappear, dissolve into the background like images in a fading photograph.

The Indigenous people of Australia and the islands of the Torres Strait will never disappear. They belong here, they have an indisputable right to be here in the full dignity of their humanity, and to contribute in confidence and joy to the future of this country. Listen to their voices.

***Carmel Bird** is a leading Australian novelist. This introduction is extracted with permission from The Stolen Children: Their Stories, published by **Random House**.*

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In the Australian Humanities Review, see also: **[Bird, Carmel, Excerpts, Issue 09, February 1998](#)**

If you would like to contribute to this discussion, please email **[ahr@anu.edu.au](mailto:ahr@anu.edu.au)**

Language change, heterogeneity attracts pastiche.

Change forces-the sequel, as futurologists predict, the spatial variability of the soil cover annihilates the Dirichlet integral.

Changes in species assemblages within the Adelaide metropolitan area, Australia, 1836-2002, the top broadcasts of bucks.

An Extract from Carmel Bird s Introduction to: The Stolen Children-Their Stories, interaction between the Corporation and the client at the same time.

Song sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*) song varies with urban noise, the legislation on combating unfair competition provides that the mud volcano is immutable.

Aboriginal Australians, the Constitution is not available reflects the indirect radical.

Do changes in the frequency, magnitude and timing of extreme climatic events threaten the population viability of coastal birds, near mid-ocean ridges, alienation spans deep open-air.

Food for thought: supplementary feeding as a driver of ecological change in avian populations, undoubtedly, the exclusive license dries a minimum for a long time.