

The Lost Generation



At Fairbridge Home before leaving for Australia in 1955 to a life of abuse and brutality

In the post-war era, approximately 150,000 children were shipped to Australia while New Zealand, Rhodesia and Canada. Governments have not been able to provide accurate statistics concerning the numbers of children received from the United Kingdom.

In this context, child migration refers to children generally between the ages of three and fourteen; the majority being between seven and ten. These children were sent away with the expectation that they would never return, to start new lives in a foreign land always without their families and often after many years of harsh institutional care.

Many child migrants, British boys and girls, were sent overseas by specialist agencies such as the Fairbridge Society, established specifically for the purpose of migrating young children to populate the empire with "Good White British stock". Well known national charities such as Barnardos, which provided a wider range of child care services, along with the Church of England, the Methodist Church, the Salvation Army and the Catholic Church played major roles.

In New Zealand, children were often placed with foster parents while those in Canada were entrusted to the care of farmers often without sufficient preparation or supervision. Some Canadian farmers were even charged with manslaughter, such was the extent of their cruelty. Very few children were legally adopted overseas and the vast majority spent their entire childhoods in large, impersonal institutions or farm schools which accommodated up to three hundred and fifty children.

Child migration was inspired by a variety of motives, none of which gave first priority to the needs of the children involved. Consequently, child migrants were viewed as a convenient source of cheap labour on Canada's farms, as a means of boosting Australia's post-war population and as a way to preserve white, managerial elite in the former Rhodesia. Certain groups of children were excluded as

countries would not accept physically handicapped or black children, for example. One of the earlier motives of the schemes had been to maintain the racial unity of Britain's Empire.

After being told fanciful tales of travel to the "Land of Milk and Honey" where children ride to school on horseback and pick up fruit on the side of the road, child migrants were sent abroad without passports, social histories or even the most basic documentation about their identities. Brothers and sisters were frequently separated on the docks and sent to institutions in different parts of the country; some were finger-printed and then loaded onto the backs of trucks for long journeys to institutions in remote regions, only to be put to work as labourers the next day.

Many felt an extreme sense of rejection by their family and country of origin or both. Others felt rather like characters from one of Kafka's novels; their sentence was obvious - exile from their family and homeland - but the nature of their or their parents' crime was a complete mystery.

The tragic reality for many child migrants was appalling standards of care which fell well below accepted standards found within British institutions. Far too many children experienced practices and policies which would not have been tolerated by British child care agencies in that era. Children as young as four were sent to institutions in Western Australia were involved in building works without adequate food or basic safety measures. Many were injured in building accidents at a time in their life when they would have been in school or playing with their friends if they had remained in the United Kingdom.

Throughout its long history, child migration has been punctuated by a series of scandals. The lack of educational provision, the overwork and inadequate pay, the suicides following episodes of ill-treatment and the appalling evidence of protracted physical and sexual abuse all have featured in official inquiries or newspaper headlines in nineteenth century Canada and South Africa as well as post-war New Zealand and Australia. These variations on a theme represent different forms of child abuse, involving a particularly vulnerable, large group of British children whose interests have never been safeguarded effectively and consistently.

Britain is the only country in the world with a sustained history of child migration.

Only Britain has used child migration as a significant part of its child care policy over a period of four centuries rather than as a brief and temporary expedient during times of war or civil unrest.

The reality of this policy was to remove children, some as young as three years old, from their homes, from their mothers and fathers, from all that was familiar to them, and to ship them thousands of miles away from their home country to institutions in distant lands within the Commonwealth. Many of these children were removed without their parents' knowledge or consent.

The Catholic Church became a major player in the emigration of British children to Australia. It was the success of the Fairbridge and Barnardos schemes that inspired the Catholic Church to become more involved in the British child migrant scheme. The motivations of the Catholic Church's increased involvement is varied but arguably it included the desire to give the children a more suitable religious training than that which Fairbridge was giving, and to maintain Catholic numbers against the Protestants. Then there was an additional source of income as the British government provided financial assistance to the Catholic Church to aid the transportation to Australia. As was said by the Western Australian Legislative Assembly Select Committee into Child Migration, the

money which migrant children would bring in was more per head than the State placed boys, the numbers of which were falling anyway.

During the 1950s The Salvation Army did have a small-scale emigration programme from the UK for up to 16 boys a year. The boys, mainly aged 14 or 15 years old, replied to advertisements or were referred from Australia House and travelled to Queensland in Australia to a Salvation Army training centre where they were trained and then helped to enter into regular employment mainly in Queensland. Some children who were migrated by other agencies were subsequently housed in Salvation Army children's homes around Australia.

In 2004 The Salvation Army in Australia unreservedly apologised to former residents of any of its children's homes who were subjected to any form of abuse and maltreatment while in its care. It acknowledges the failure and deeply regrets that not all the children in its care received the love and protection they deserved. That apology was reiterated by The Salvation Army in Australia last year with deep regret for any part we may have played in causing these child migrants to have suffered abuse and neglect thousands of miles from home. We once again reiterate that apology.

Dr. Barnardo's Homes, as Barnardo's was then known, was one of many children's charities involved in child migration. The practice, which began in earnest in the late 1800s and started to decline rapidly after World War II, was born from the idea of offering children an opportunity of a new start in life, in a new country. The last child we migrated was in 1967, to Australia.

Members of two Catholic religious orders trafficked in children for decades, taking poor kids from their parents in Britain and Malta and promising to educate them in Australia, then putting them to a life of forced labour and physical and sexual abuse, according to a federal class action in Manhattan.

Three former "child migrants" say the Congregation of Christian Brothers and the Order of the Sisters of Mercy took subsidies from the British, Australian and Maltese governments for the children's upkeep and education, but kept the money for themselves and gave the children nothing save hardship and pain, forcing them to beg for scraps of food and root around in pig troughs for sustenance.

The children say the religious orders took them from their homes under false pretences and forced them into a horrific life of unending work, ignorance, violence and rape.