

Lost and Found: Counter-Narratives of Dis/located Children

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For Nell Musgrove & Kriatine Moruzzi (eds.) *Children's Voices from the Past*, Palgrave MacMillan (publication date: March 2019)

Abstract

Conventional histories of children in institutional care are dominated by official voices justifying a coercive welfare system which isolated children from their families and silenced them publicly. But a succession of formal inquiries have motivated survivors of institutionalised childhoods to testify about atrocious maltreatment. Freedom of Information legislation gave survivors incentives to understand their time in "care" and to reconnect with families. However, many found personal records missing, while those that were located were woefully inadequate, often inaccurate, and painfully pejorative. Care-leavers are now asserting a developing counter-narrative that challenges the dominant narrative of previous eras. This paper summarises a case that goes beyond traditional welfare archives to reveal a story of multi-generational welfare custody, exemplifying the historic ideology underpinning child welfare in Victoria.

Discursive silencing and the construction of children as 'moral dirt'

On 11 July 1899, seven girls aged twelve to seventeen fled from Mrs Elizabeth Rowe's School for the Reclaiming of Fallen Protestant Girls—more widely known as the Brookside Private Girls Reformatory—situated at Cape Clear, near Ballarat. When they gave themselves up to police, the girls revealed their grievances about Brookside: the physical work they were forced to do was beyond their strength, they had been flogged, had their hair cut, suffered bread-and-water diets, and had their hands tied behind their backs. Two of the girls showed police bruises, which they said were from severe floggings. To press their case that all was not well at the reformatory, the girls pointed to previous absconders.¹

The girls were told their claims were exaggerated, and the credibility gap matched the power gap. The proprietor, Mrs Rowe, was the daughter of the Archdeacon of Melbourne and Geelong, Theodore Stretch, and a close friend of George Guillaume, the long-term Secretary of the Department for Neglected Children and Reformatory Schools who regularly hailed Brookside as a model institution for 'difficult' female state wards. Already typecast by the Department that sent them to Brookside as "fallen and depraved girls,"² the girls were vilified by ex-staffers,³ and the local press. The Ballarat *Star* asserted that "girls of this class are frequently unreliable", and "proved capable of telling the most arrant falsehoods."⁴ The *Star's* rival, the Ballarat *Courier*, declared they had "a terrible record of depravity" and had "strong criminal propensities."⁵ It is no surprise to read the bold headlines: "A searching investigation ... a complete vindication." The Department supported the police finding: the girls "one and all confessed that their former story had not an atom of truth in it, and completely exonerated the matron and her assistants, and also Mrs Rowe, from any charge of cruelty or overworking."⁶

¹ "The Brookside Reformatory: Serious Allegations Against the Management," *Star* (Ballarat), July 17, 1899, 2. (Please note that colonial newspapers often published reports with no title and only rarely named the author.)

² Victorian Government, Department for Neglected Children and Reformatory Schools, Annual Report for 1899. The relevant Department changed its name many times over the years. For the sake of simplicity, we henceforth use the term "Annual Report" to refer to that Department's report to Parliament.

³ "Rejoinder from a Former Officer," *Argus* (Melbourne), July 17, 1899, 5.

⁴ No title, *Star*, July 26, 1899, 2.

⁵ No title, *Courier* (Ballarat), July 24, 1899, 2.

⁶ "Brookside Reformatory. Searching Investigation. The Charges of Cruelty. A Complete Vindication," *Star*, July 24, 1899, 2.

However, grudging concessions did emerge. Mrs Rowe's personal doctor, Dr Fox, explained he had ordered girls' hands tied to prevent masturbation, which he called a form of "moral insanity."⁷ Brookside's matron, Mrs King, acknowledged that previous absconders had had their hair cut as punishment. Alice Henry, an investigative reporter who visited Brookside, found that girls' hair had been not just cut, but shaved⁸— a gendered form of punishment traditionally meted out to female prisoners and dating back in Australia to the convict era. Intended specifically to degrade and humiliate,⁹ such punishments served to criminalise children in welfare institutions, and thus set the stage for the formal conflation of the justice and child-welfare systems in the 20th century.

Henry further discovered that straightjackets had been used and she witnessed girls doing "rough and unsexing work".¹⁰ Unsexing work? The *Star* explained that it was "light manual labor ... the most suitable for them" because:

It is found that needlework and similar light employment is not good for girls of such vicious tendencies, and healthy outdoor life, it is urged, benefits them more, morally and physically, than ordinary woman's work.¹¹

Most of Mrs Rowe's Ladies Committee resigned, although the local press did not bother to report that information. It would be another three years before Brookside quietly closed: and the Department explained the closure was "in consequence of the accommodation and management being unsatisfactory."¹² By then the girls had been moved on and their complaints long forgotten.

The maltreatment of the girls in Brookside and the wholesale coercive appropriation of their narratives by institutional staff, law-enforcement figures and the news media stand as exemplary facets of a child-welfare paradigm that prevailed into the latter decades of the twentieth century. Of especial note is the radical diminishment of the girls' historical voices in inverse relation to the foregrounding and legitimization of the establishment's version, and the fact that these outcomes hinge centrally on the documentary records of the events. Indeed, as survivors of institutional care continue to discover to this day, the records that document their childhoods rarely reflect the experiences that defined those childhoods, but are couched in distantly bureaucratic, utilitarian terminology, or the puritanical tones and language of a system intrinsically premised on unjust punishment. In this chapter we examine some of the causes and consequences of this paradigm, via a twentieth-century case study that has its generational roots in the middle of the previous century.

The Brookside scandal, with its discourse of contempt and derision, was not an isolated event. When a government reformatory was set up in Ballarat, the *Star* called it "a receptacle for the scum of Victoria."¹³ Newspapers echoed an endless repertoire of catchphrases in official reports that demonised children as being 'tainted' and in need of control rather than care. One Departmental head aired his concern about "a grade of abnormal children" he was detaining because they were "a danger to the community" due to their "amorous propensities" and their potential to "bear numerous children who from birth become burdens on society."¹⁴

In terminology that would become normalised in the twentieth century, girls were said to be "exposed to moral danger" while boys were more "likely to lapse into a life of vice and crime."¹⁵

⁷ Marjorie Theobald, *Knowing Women: Origins of Women's Education in Nineteenth-Century Australia* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 237.

⁸ Alice Henry (Special Reporter), "Reformatories and Reform. Private Efforts at State Expense. Brookside Institution. Managed on Wrong Principles," *Argus*, August 2, 1899, 4.

⁹ Joy Damousi, *Depraved and Disorderly: Female Convicts, Sexuality and Gender in Colonial Australia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 86, 88-89.

¹⁰ *Argus*, August 2, 1899, 4.

¹¹ *Star*, July 18, 1899, 4.

¹² Annual Report for 1903, 4.

¹³ *Star*, December 23, 1879, 2.

¹⁴ Annual Report for 1902, 5.

¹⁵ Robert Van Kreiken, 1992. "State Intervention, welfare and the social construction of girlhood in Australian history," TASA Sociology Conference, Flinders University, Adelaide; Renata Howe and Shurlee Swain, 1995. *Single Mothers and Their Children: disposal, punishment and survival in Australia* (Melbourne: Cambridge

Sometimes the ‘misdeeds’ of boys were also sexualized. In 1923, for example, an inspector of a boys’ reformatory in Victoria attributed the poor physical strength of some of the boys to masturbation. He assured the Department that “a close watch is kept ... with the purpose of checking the evil, and punishment is administered to offenders when detected.”¹⁶

The line between child welfare and the criminal justice system was perennially ill-defined—both systems regarded the children they dealt with as morally reprehensible—and hence distinctions between reformatories set up for the confinement and rehabilitation of child offenders, and residential institutions housing children who had suffered abandonment, neglect or abuse became increasingly meaningless—as did distinctions between the way the respective groups were regarded and treated. Harry Ferguson argues that the harsh treatment meted out to children in institutions was not aberrant in the context of the child welfare system’s purport but essential to its fundamental aim, which, historian Shurlee Swain reminds us, was to remove children from degraded families and so prevent moral fault being passed on to the next generation.¹⁷ However, the reality was that the key factor directing most children into the Victorian colonial welfare system was poverty.¹⁸ That was still true in the 1960s when social work academic Leonard Tierney found that the vast majority of families in the welfare system came from the “marginally employed and unskilled occupational groups,” and poverty was the major reason children were admitted to care Homes.¹⁹ Even in the twenty-first century, social work academic Dorothy Scott confirms that the clients of the contemporary child protection system are most often drawn from the ranks of the poor and marginalised.²⁰

Ferguson argues that framing institutionalised children as ‘moral dirt’ both caused and justified their poor treatment within welfare systems.²¹ This was part of a broader social discourse which conflated poverty with immorality, creating a binary of deserving and undeserving families. The moral underclass paradigm²² that holds poverty as a consequence of personal failings such as wanton recklessness and indolence—or even just bad choices—has had distinguished champions. In between stints as Prime Minister of Australia, in 1942, Robert Menzies told a radio audience:

...to say that the industrious and intelligent son of self-sacrificing and saving and forward-looking parents has the same social deserts and even material needs as the dull offspring of stupid and improvident parents is absurd.²³

Tony Abbott, when in Opposition and soon to become Prime Minister, offered the view that, “We just can’t stop people from being homeless if that’s their choice.”²⁴

University Press); Kerry Carrington with Margaret Pereira. 2009. *Offending Youth: Sex, Crime and Justice* (Sydney: Federation Press).

¹⁶ Victorian Government, Submission to Senate Community Affairs References Committee [“Forgotten Australians” Inquiry], 2003.

¹⁷ Harry Ferguson, “Abused and Looked After Children as ‘Moral Dirt’: Child Abuse and Institutional Care in Historical Perspective,” *Journal of Social Policy* 36, no. 1 (2007): 123; Shurlee Swain, “History of Child Protection Legislation,” (Sydney: Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2014), 6.

¹⁸ Christina Twomey, *Deserted and Destitute: Motherhood, Wife Desertion and Colonial Welfare* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2002); Nell Musgrove, *The Scars Remain: A Long History of Forgotten Australians and Children’s Institutions* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2013); Donella Jaggs, *Neglected and Criminal: Foundations of Child Welfare Legislation in Victoria* (Melbourne: Centre for Youth and Community Studies, Phillip Institute of Technology, 1986).

¹⁹ Leonard Tierney, *Children Who Need Help* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1963): 119.

²⁰ Dorothy Scott, “Sowing the Seeds of Innovation in Child Protection” (paper given at the 10th Australasian Child Abuse and Neglect Conference, Wellington NZ, 2006).

²¹ Ferguson, “Abused and Looked After Children”, 123.

²² Ruth Levitas, *The Inclusive Society? Social Exclusion and New Labour* (London: Macmillan, 1998).

²³ Robert Menzies, “The Forgotten People,” (speech b’cast May 22, 1942, reprinted in *Well May We Say...The Speeches that Made Australia*, ed. Sally Warhaft (Melbourne: Black Inc, 2004): 155.

²⁴ Australian Broadcasting Corporation, *Four Corners*, March 15, 2010.

In 2015, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse found this grossly disrespectful attitude evident in a Department Officer's report of a visit in 1965 to a Salvation Army Boys' Home which accepted long term placements of "boys from very substandard families who are unlikely ever to do them much credit or older lads who are too dull or unmannerly to be acceptable in the more refined type of cottage home."²⁵ In other cases, negative racial stereotypes also played a role in the decisions made about state children. For example, in 1955 a Departmental officer wrote that a resident of the Ballarat Orphanage was sent back to Lake Tyers Mission Station because "she seems to have all the aboriginal characteristics—lazy, careless, dirty (Hygiene) cunning etc, which will make placement difficult as time goes by."²⁶

It was agreed at the Royal Commission that such attitudes about the 'worth' of state children by Department officers might explain in part why children's Homes were not adequately inspected and supervised.²⁷ Tagging children as 'moral dirt' may also have given unwritten licence to brutality of all kinds—not just sexual abuse. Examples abound, and affirm that little if anything changed over time. The nineteenth century gives us the Brookside episode recounted above; go forward to the early decades of the twentieth century, and we find a member of the visiting committee of the Royal Park Depot, Sir James Barrett, in 1927 declaring it "absolutely necessary" to flog Depot children to maintain discipline at the institution "with its proportion of inherently diseased, morbid and degenerate boys";²⁸ then in 2004, the Senate Community Affairs References Committee finds that literally hundreds of thousands of children suffered terrible abuse while institutionalised in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Physical brutality was common and systemic, but it was not the only cruel treatment that was justified on prejudicial grounds. Writing about state wards—who were adopted, the Head of the Department advised government that

Every care ... must be exercised to keep them happy in their ignorance as the disillusionment would assuredly ... make the rest of their lives unhappy to learn they, in most cases, came into the World nameless and were deserted by those responsible for their existence.²⁹

Such unthinking dismissal of, and disrespect for, the individual integrity of the children, under the guise of well-meant concern for their emotional wellbeing, bespeaks a systemic attitude that is effectively contemptuous of those in its care. And the word *contempt*, in fact, could well encapsulate virtually all the instances of maltreatment inflicted upon children in care throughout the period under discussion.

Finding voices in an age of testimony

The voices of the hundreds of thousands of Australian children who were institutionalised in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were routinely and systematically ignored—or if they were heard, they were disbelieved or otherwise silenced. In the child protection case files of the Victorian Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children—a rare example of a century of intact archives—the voices of those who worked in the field can be heard, and sometimes the voices of those parents who wrote letters of gratitude or anger. Yet,

Paradoxically, the voices of the children remain almost inaudible, detectable only through others' descriptions of their suffering, and by an empathic leap of imagination into the space between the lines.³⁰

²⁵ Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse [hereafter Royal Commission], "Case Study 33" (Adelaide: Transcript October 9, 2015): 11338.

²⁶ Community Welfare Department memo (June 29, 1955) quoted in Kate Gaffney, "The Best of Intentions: Winlaton Youth Training Centre 1956-1993" (MA Diss., Monash University, 1998): 36.

²⁷ Royal Commission, "Case Study 33", 11338.

²⁸ *Age*, November 18, 1927, 12

²⁹ Annual Report for 1934, 8.

³⁰ Dorothy Scott and Shurlee Swain, *Confronting Cruelty: Historical Perspectives on Child Abuse* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002): xiv.

This profound lack of respect was not the only reason children's voices were silenced. For generations, children have been silenced in the construction of welfare records, but in recent decades survivors have increasingly contested the ways in which these files render their experiences invisible.³¹ In the matter of sexual abuse, for example, Swain rightly points out that some residential care institutions were "saturated with a sexuality,"

the presence of which was suppressed, or more often, completely denied, confronting the residents with experiences which they had no language to describe, and against which they had little ability to protest.³²

Swain asserts that it was only in the aftermath of the feminist re-discovery of child sexual abuse in the 1970s that survivors had access to a language through which to understand and articulate their experiences.³³ This may be so, but equally the emergence of a discourse on human rights for children³⁴ and legislation providing access to personal information³⁵ stimulated older care-leavers to be increasingly assertive—and effective—in voicing their maltreatment in institutions.³⁶

Care-leaver advocacy helped lead to a chain of formal inquiries giving survivors the opportunity and encouragement to articulate in graphic detail the maltreatment they experienced. Australia was in fact one of the first nations to undertake survivor-led inquiries into the history of out-of-home care.³⁷ The first nation-wide example, *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*,³⁸ demonstrated the powerful social transformations that survivor testimony can initiate. Other major national inquiries that followed—including *Lost Innocents* which examined child migrants,³⁹ *Forgotten Australians* which encompassed all Australian children who experienced out-of-home care,⁴⁰ and the recently concluded Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse—all continued the approach of privileging survivor testimony.

The opportunity to have a voice was not entirely without potential hazards, as the advocates knew. Notwithstanding that the inquiry into the separation of Indigenous children from their families had produced 535 submissions⁴¹ and the Child Migrants Inquiry 253 submissions,⁴² Leonie

³¹ For a broader discussion about the silences in case files in a range of settings including child welfare, as well as records from courts, asylums, hospitals and so on, see *On the Case: Explorations in Social History*, ed. Franca Iacovetta and Wendy Mitchinson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998).

³² Swain, Shurlee. 2015. "Giving Voice to Narratives of Institutional Sex Abuse," *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 41, no. 2, (2015): 30.

³³ Swain, Shurlee. "Giving Voice to Narratives": 291.

³⁴ The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted in 1989 and stimulated the work of advocates in the 1990s, but the discourse of children's rights has a much longer history which was used by people working for reform long before rights were codified. See, e.g., Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Legislative History of the Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Vol. 1 (New York: United Nations, 2007).

³⁵ Freedom of Information (FOI) laws coupled with privacy laws in each jurisdiction in Australia opened up access to personal information. See Rhys Stubbs, "Freedom of Information and Democracy in Australia and Beyond," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 43, no. 4 (2008).

³⁶ Care-leavers in Australia began organising collectively in the mid 1990s and the national peak body, Care Leavers Australia (now Australasia) Network (CLAN), was established in 2000.

³⁷ Johanna Sköld, 2013. "Historical Abuse—A Contemporary Issue: Compiling Inquiries into Abuse and Neglect of Children in Out-Of-Home Care Worldwide," *Journal of Scandinavian Studies in Criminology and Crime Prevention* 14, sup. 1 (2013): 5-23.

³⁸ Australian Human Rights Commission, *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (Sydney: The Commission, 1997).

³⁹ Senate Community Affairs References Committee, *Lost Innocents: Righting the Record: Report on Child Migration* (Canberra: Australian Government, 2001).

⁴⁰ Senate Community Affairs References Committee, *Forgotten Australians: A Report on Australians Who Experienced Institutional or Out-of-Home Care as Children* (Canberra: Australian Government, 2004).

⁴¹ Human Rights Commission, *Bringing Them Home*.

Sheedy, one of the co-founders of the peak advocacy group CLAN, warned the Senate Committee inquiring into Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children in 2003-4 not to expect too many submissions for a variety of cogent reasons. Not the least of these was that “It is very difficult and painful to find the words to express ... emotions in a calm and rational manner.”⁴³ In hindsight, however, Sheedy underestimated the capacity of CLAN’s advocacy and the increasing readiness of care-leavers to put their accounts on the record. This third Inquiry received 614 submissions.⁴⁴ The inquiry noted a constantly recurring theme in the evidence: that when they were children, they “would not be asked for their view or opinions on anything.”⁴⁵ The idea that children might have anything worthwhile to say never occurred to authorities in an era characterised by disrespect and the bigotry of no expectations.

In total, these three national inquiries produced more than 1400 submissions, most of them direct survivor testimony. The sheer weight and consistency of evidence presented by care-leavers confirmed that abuse was systemic and unrelenting.⁴⁶ By the time of the Australian Royal Commission (2013-2017), personal testimony had become a torrent. When it closed in late 2017, the Royal Commission had heard over 8,000 personal stories in private sessions, the greatest proportion of which were provided by survivors of abuse in children’s Homes.⁴⁷

These successive inquiries secured a prominent platform for survivors, particularly on the topic of historical abuse. It also generated something of an upheaval in the social welfare sector which is now grappling with how to balance the “expertise of the professional” with the “expertise of experience” in responding to the revelations of these inquiries.⁴⁸ The mass body of eyewitness accounts constitutes a significant counter-history of Australia’s child welfare system—a kind of crowd-sourced alternative history.⁴⁹

Despite the rich tapestry of memories which come together to create this counter-history, care-leavers often have many questions about their childhoods. Why were they put into ‘care’? Why were they passed from one Home to another? What became of their brothers and sisters when they were split up? What happened to their parents? Many told the Royal Commission that “without typical childhood records and mementos, they feel lost, isolated, incomplete, and that their childhoods were meaningless or insignificant.”⁵⁰ Growing up with corporate parents created large gaps in personal, social and cultural understandings that other children took for granted. Birthdays and anniversaries passed by unnoticed; dining halls heard no family anecdotes and banter; cold, dark dormitories replaced the warm intimacy of bedtime stories; and the touch of an adult could feel creepy, or worse.

The official records are often approached as a storehouse of hope. Yet, if records have not been lost or destroyed—and that is common⁵¹—they can shock, and even re-traumatise the adult the child has become.⁵² The voices they find are almost never their own, and rarely even those of their parents. Far from finding answers to some of their questions, many find that the records frame

⁴² Senate Committee, *Lost Innocents*.

⁴³ Sköld, “Historical Abuse”, 1.

⁴⁴ Senate Committee, *Forgotten Australians*.

⁴⁵ Senate Committee, *Forgotten Australians*, 128.

⁴⁶ Senate Committee, *Forgotten Australians*, xv.

⁴⁷ Royal Commission, “Fast Facts,” (2017): <https://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au>.

⁴⁸ Jacqueline Wilson and Frank Golding, “Latent Scrutiny: Personal Archives as Perpetual Mementos of the Official Gaze,” *Archival Science* 16, no. 1 (2016); Nell Musgrove, “The Role and Importance of History,” in *Apologies and the Legacy of Institutional Child Abuse: International Perspectives*, ed. Johanna Sköld and Shurlee Swain (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

⁴⁹ Shurlee Swain, “Stakeholders as Subjects: The Role Of Historians in the Development of Australia’s Find and Connect Web Resource.” *The Public Historian* 36, no. 4 (2014).

⁵⁰ Royal Commission, “Consultation Paper on Records and Recordkeeping Practices.” (Sydney: The Commission, 2016): 10.

⁵¹ Gaffney, “The Best of Intentions,” 11.

⁵² Wilson and Golding, “Latent Scrutiny.”

them constantly as problems, and often include insulting, demeaning, or downright hostile comments about them or their parents.⁵³ The conflation of ‘neglect’ and criminality discussed earlier can be shocking for care-leavers to find within their personal files. When the Golding boys were little children they were ‘charged’, ‘committed’, ‘released on probation’, ‘re-committed’, and eventually ‘discharged’. These convictions remain on their personal files forever.⁵⁴ If they ran away from the brutality—an act that may be read variously as defiance, survival or resistance—they were listed in the Police Gazettes until captured and re-incarcerated. The view of the children described within the files is distorted through this lens, and care-leavers can struggle to reconcile their own memories and sense of self with what they find in the records.

Particularly from the mid-twentieth century, care-leaver’s files might contain reports of home inspections made in response to reports of ‘neglect’. Particularly if the inspectors, often police officers, decided that children should be committed to the department, their reports to Children’s Courts were aimed at showing the parents in the worst possible light in order to win a conviction.⁵⁵ One care-leaver’s file reports that in 1948 a policeman described the family’s living conditions as “primitive and filthy”. He declared the mother, who had a two-week old baby and seven other children—aged 11, 10, 9, 6, 4, 2 and 1—to be “slightly sub-normal” and the father as “a man apparently of low mentality.” How he made these judgments remains a mystery since he had met the family only briefly and the father was a tuberculosis in-patient at a Melbourne hospital. Promising the mother some respite, the policeman told her he would take the children to the local Red Cross. Instead, he prosecuted them as neglected children, “Living under conditions likely to lapse into a career of vice and crime etc.” He spared the baby. The mother was not told about the Children’s Court hearing and the father was in no condition to appear at that time. When they read this account, the two oldest children (by then in their 60s) were incandescent with rage because, in their words, it was “a pack of lies.” There were other allegations against their parents they also hotly contested—and would have contested at the time if anyone cared to listen to them.⁵⁶

Golding found similar contestable claims in his childhood records. In 1950 his mother wrote to the Department to ask that her three children be returned to her. Her version was that her boys would be returned to her if the father had no more convictions in twelve months. She wrote that, “he has not been in any bother since early in 1948 and he is now in a good business of his own and I am sure that we are more capable of looking after the boys than anyone else.”⁵⁷ In its reply the Department let his mother know who was in control on two counts. First, they were reminded of their “irregular domestic situation”—the bureaucrat could not bring himself to say they were not married. Second, the father had a “very formidable list of convictions over many years”—which could not be vitiated by an unblemished record for three years. Therefore, “I am unable to regard your home as possessing a sufficiently reasonable moral environment to justify returning the three boys to your care.”⁵⁸

But there was more: the mother and the boys would be further penalised. The Department’s letter went on:

I am exercised, following reports furnished to me as to the wisdom of permitting Mr. Golding access to the children in consequence of the upsetting effect he has on them and

⁵³ Suellen Murray, *Finding Lost Childhoods: Supporting Care-leavers to Access Personal Records* (Melbourne: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017): 83ff.

⁵⁴ Parliament of Victoria, *Victorian Parliamentary Debate*, November 15, 2017 at: https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/images/stories/daily-hansard/Council_2017/Council_Aug-Dec_2017_Daily_15_November_2017.pdf.

⁵⁵ Tierney, *Children Who Need Help*, 93.

⁵⁶ Anonymous personal communication.

⁵⁷ Frank Golding, *An Orphan’s Escape: Memories of a Lost Childhood* (Melbourne: Lothian, 2005): 218.

⁵⁸ Golding, *Orphan’s Escape*, 221.

their custodians when he visits. If further complaints of this nature are received I will have no alternative but to direct that he be denied access.⁵⁹

The boys had a very different memory of their father's visits, but they were never asked what they thought or how they felt. Indeed they were never told about this threat. But even had they known, their experience of institutional power would have taught them the futility of even trying to put their case.

It is not surprising that many care-leavers want to challenge the narrative found in official accounts. Freedom Of Information (FOI) laws do generally provide a right-of-reply clause. In Victoria, for example, a "person shall be entitled to request the correction or amendment of any part of that information where it is inaccurate, incomplete, out of date, or where it would give a misleading impression."⁶⁰ Why is this provision used only infrequently?⁶¹ Most agencies routinely fail to tell care-leavers about their rights in the matter. But many care-leavers say it would not be a sufficient rebuttal anyway. The agency would still own the records, and they, the subjects, would remain in a subordinate position in determining the future use of their records.

Many prefer to construct a counter narrative that tells "their side of the story" in their own words outside official archives.⁶² This is never easy. Disconnected from family and community, and denied access to the normal family accumulation of collective memory and emotions, knowledge of kin, even pooled possessions, a care-leaver's personal narrative is likely to be, in the words of Joy Damousi, "messy and emotional"⁶³—and often full of dark humour. In care-leaver circles, the Department of Human Services becomes Human Sacrifices, the Salvation Army becomes the Starvation Army, the Christian Brothers become Christian Butchers and Sisters of Mercy are Sisters of No Mercy. As a two-week-old child, one care-leaver was described in the file as "a quiet but pretty dull baby." Now she calls up a service provider with the greeting, "This is your pretty dull client calling."⁶⁴

Larissa Behrendt is right to point out that history is not a single story.

It is competing narratives, brought to life by different groups whose experiences are diverse and often challenge the dominant story a country seeks to tell itself. There are no absolute truths in history. It is a process, a conversation, a constantly altering story.⁶⁵

In Australia, hundreds of care-leavers have produced competing narratives in the form of memoirs and personal accounts which challenge the dominant story found in official accounts of child welfare. These care-leaver narratives are increasingly found in the collection of the National Library of Australia, and in other places such as the CLAN Newsletter and website, and can, collectively, be likened to a new form of "history from below"—personal histories created from a subterranean world of rich experience and often residual family fragments.⁶⁶

The Goldings—In Their Own Words

Many care-leavers' first-hand accounts are characterised by an incisive assessment of their individual childhood experience, motivated by a determination to write as active agents interpreting

⁵⁹ Golding, *Orphan's Escape*, 221.

⁶⁰ Parliament of Victoria, *Freedom of Information Act* (1992), s. 39.

⁶¹ The major agencies that hold care-leaver records in Victoria meet bi-monthly to discuss policy and exchange information. The consensus is that applications to correct or amend files are unusual.

⁶² Leonie Sheedy, Vlad Selacovic and Frank Golding, in conversation with David Denborough, "So You Are Accessing Your Personal File? You Are Not Alone," *International Journal of Narrative Theory and Community Work* no. 4 (2017).

⁶³ Damousi, *Depraved and Disorderly*, 102

⁶⁴ Anonymous personal communication.

⁶⁵ Larissa Behrendt, "Settlement or Invasion? The Coloniser's Quandary," in *The Honest History Book*, ed. David Stephens and Alison Broinowski (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2017): 233.

⁶⁶ Martin Lyons, "A New History from Below: The Writing Culture of Ordinary People in Europe." *History Australia* 7, no. 3 (2010): 59.1.

and reinterpreting their past and shaping their own lives and values. For example, two of the three Golding siblings have published separate and distinctly different memoirs dealing with their reconnected nuclear family and its relationship with the welfare system.⁶⁷ Over time, however, in pursuing fragmented facts from a wide range of discrete sources, the youngest sibling uncovered an extraordinary narrative extending over five generations from the 1860s. That research located the Golding boys' childhood experience in the context of the history of institutionalisation of their extended family which, in turn, was embedded within the social and cultural history of Victoria—a process that produces what Ashley Barnwell calls the “intergenerational self.”⁶⁸ The Sinnett-Golding family history illustrates much of the argument of this chapter: the construction of the child and family as worthless, the recurrence of that negative judgment in subsequent generations, the willful failure of authorities to listen to the voice of the child, and the veil of silence imposed by official records. However, by taking control of the narrative sources—including those found outside official welfare archives—Golding constructs an alternative narrative of the intergenerational self.

The official narrative starts in 1864 with a half-page document in the Children's Register under the name Edward John Synott [sic].⁶⁹ The Register gives basic information: Edward was born in 1854; on 18 February 1865, aged 11, he was taken to the Industrial School in Melbourne; his “native place” was said to be Melbourne (not true); his religion was C of E; he'd been vaccinated for Small Pox prior to his admission; he could read “indifferently”; his conduct, reported on the only Half Yearly Report completed on 2/12/1867, was “good”; there was a brief list of places and dates where he was “stationed”, including P. Bridge and Nelson; and his “discharge” was listed as February 1870.⁷⁰

It requires a little homework to understand that “P. Bridge” was the Immigrants Home at Princes Bridge which was the first industrial school declared after the passage of the *Neglected and Criminal Children's Act* 1864, and that “Nelson” refers to the former grand battleship converted to a hulk anchored off Williamstown and used as another industrial school. There is nothing about the nature of Edward's experience at Princes Bridge or on the *Nelson*. But it must have been traumatic. In 1865, of the more than 850 children he rubbed shoulders with in the decaying, bug infested quarters, 117 died.⁷¹ Moreover, a Royal Commission into Penal and Prison Discipline confirmed in 1872 that “immoral practices of the worst kind spring up” amongst the boys which “can never be effectually suppressed.”⁷² Who knows whether Edward was sexually abused or otherwise maltreated? The vast majority of assaults on state children in these early years of Victoria's child welfare system (indeed even long after) were not recorded, especially when it came to sexual assaults. Analysing a number of nineteenth century inquiries Shurlee Swain concluded that:

Sexual abuse was rarely raised in ... investigations, although occasional references to problems with immorality in the institutions ... would suggest that this absence was indicative of a silence around sexuality. Where immorality was mentioned, it was taken as referring to sexual behaviour among the children and the risk of moral contagion when innocent children were placed amongst the already ‘depraved’ ... There was little space at this point for the children to speak.⁷³

If there were problems, the fault was attributed to the ‘depraved’ children, or the tainted families from which they sprang. Nineteenth-century institutions had no interest in hearing, let alone

⁶⁷ Frank Golding, *Orphan's Escape*; Bob Golding, 2006. *The Invisible Children* (Warracknabeal, VIC: self-published, 2006); Bob Golding, *Behind and Beyond the Brick Walls* Melbourne: self-published, 2008).

⁶⁸ Ashley Barnwell, “Locating an Intergenerational Self in Postcolonial Family Histories,” *Life Writing* 14, no. 4 (2017), doi: 10.1080/14484528.2017.1364171.

⁶⁹ Victorian Public Record Office, VPRS 4527, Children's Register, P0002, Book 1.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Jaggs, *Neglected and Criminal*, 28.

⁷² *Argus*, August 19, 1872, 6.

⁷³ Shurlee Swain, *History of Inquiries Reviewing Institutions Providing Care for Children* (Sydney: Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2014): 8.

recording, the feelings or wishes of children, so Edward would have had no opportunity to have his view on his experience in these institutions noted in the department's documentation about him.

It is hard to be certain about how his experiences shaped him as an adult. It may be that Edward Sinnett was one of the many people who grew up in institutions and came to doubt their own capacities as parents.⁷⁴ From a young age, he never saw a family at work. It must have been hard to know how to raise a family of his own when he went on to marry and have eight children, and there is evidence that his capacity to be an effective parent was unimpressive. In this regard, he is one of a significant but uncalculated number of care-leaver families who find themselves on the child welfare treadmill.⁷⁵ One told the Senate, "I became a state ward at the age of about seven ... I am the third generation in care; I reared the fourth." Another was pleased she had broken the cycle: "My mother was institutionalised with the Sisters of Mercy. My father was in one of those institutions ... My daughter is the first in three generations to stay with her mum."⁷⁶

Edward's entry in the Children's Register reveals little about the circumstances that led to his committal. It shows that his only living parent was his mother, but her name is not recorded. His stepfather was identified: Richard Stokes of Bond Street, Ballarat, who, "much in arrears of 10 pound 5, pay[s] 3/6 monthly for maintenance." The Register tells us that Edward was committed by the Bench at Ballarat for a term of four years, but explains the cause of commitment in just one word: "neglect." The newspapers of the day reveal some of what the official record does not: that Edward frequently ran away from home; that his stepfather had offered a reward of £1 for his capture and return; that his stepfather was charged with a brutal assault on Edward—and despite the court hearing that Edward's mother was also brutalised, the stepfather was let off with a warning. It was this very man who was able—under the *Neglected and Criminal Children's Act 1864*, s.13—to declare himself as a parent who was "unable to control" his child but, being willing to pay for Edward's maintenance, he was able to have him sent to the Melbourne Industrial School. In other words, Edward was legally declared a "neglected child" because his brutal stepfather wished to be rid of him—and the law allowed it.

Edward was sentenced initially to serve four years but the Department added an extra year to his sentence because he absconded from the Industrial Schools on two occasions and crossed the thin line from 'neglected' child to 'criminal' child.

These facts are all in the public domain, via the National Library of Australia's digitised historical newspaper database, Police Gazettes and other open sources, but nobody in the welfare system of the day, or since, bothered to join the dots in a unified record. Over the following four generations, from that innocuous 'neglected and criminal' origin, the Victorian welfare system would detain more than thirty children descending from Edward Sinnett in more than a dozen different institutions. And in the accumulated records of all those children, not once can the voice of a child be heard.

There is not space to chronicle all that happened to Edward's children, and their children in turn, but a few examples illustrate the fragmentation of the family and the processes of intergenerational institutionalisation.⁷⁷ Edward's oldest son, Samuel (born 1883) spent time in reformatories for minor misdemeanours, and, like his father before him, made matters worse for himself by twice absconding—thus confirming his supposed criminality. Two of Edward's other children would go on to have children who would spend some of their childhoods in orphanages where 'protection' and 'detention' were commonly conflated.

⁷⁴ CLAN, *Struggling to Keep it Together: A National Survey about Older Care-Leavers Who Were in Australia's Orphanages, Children's Homes, Foster Care and Other Institutions* (Sydney: CLAN, 2011); Kirsi-Maria Hytönen, "My mom was a whore, but I am a good mother": Emotions Connected to Parenthood in Life Stories of Care-leavers" (paper given at the European Social Science History Conference, Belfast, April 7, 2018).

⁷⁵ Senate Committee, *Forgotten Australians*, 152-53.

⁷⁶ Senate Committee, *Forgotten Australians*, 152.

⁷⁷ Frank Golding has completed a book-length manuscript with the working title: *That's Not My Child: Letters to a Lost Mother* chronicling the institutionalisation of the extended Sinnett/Golding family.

Of particular interest is Edward's eighth child, William Sinnett (born 1894). He was the father of Frances Sinnett—Golding's mother (born 1915 while her father was serving overseas). The trauma of World War One and the Great Depression created intolerable stress for William Sinnett, his wife and her children. In the decade after the war, through a sequence of seemingly unrelated decisions, all their children except a little son (who died in a car crash) and Frances were disconnected from the family in combinations of foster care, adoption and an orphanage.

Jean (born ex-nuptially in 1918) was the first to be removed. She was made a ward of the state and fostered in 1919 and then formally adopted in 1933. She never returned to the family in later life. Minnie (born 1920) was placed in foster care at four months. Joyce (born 1921) was placed in the Ballarat Orphanage in 1926 by her grandmother without the consent of her mother during a period of family turmoil and violence. In 1929, because her impoverished foster parents could no longer support her, Minnie joined Joyce as an inmate of the Orphanage. The Orphanage did not know that Minnie and Joyce were sisters because their intake records were not accurate. Nor did Minnie and Joyce know they were sisters. They had been infants when first separated, and Minnie was known by the surname of her foster parents.

The year 1933 was a watershed for the estranged sisters. In February, Minnie was released from the orphanage into the custody of her foster parents. In August of that year, Joyce died from a neglected wound (the irony should not be lost) and was buried by the orphanage without the family being informed. There was no inquest. The orphanage listed her grandmother as her mother on her death certificate despite their archived entry register showing her mother's correct name, Permella Sinnett.

The following year, by chance, Minnie met her oldest sister Frances who put her in contact with her mother, Permella, whereupon the foster parents relinquished Minnie. She then lived with her mother—who had by then divorced and remarried, but was now an impoverished deserted wife living "on sustenance". Apparently, unable to control Minnie who was now just short of her seventeenth birthday in 1937, Permella asked police for assistance, not anticipating the dire consequences that came when a family 'was known' to the police and welfare. Although there is no definitive way of ascertaining whether records about other Sinnett family members had been perused in order to make decisions about Minnie Sinnett, it is a possibility, given the evidence elsewhere that authorities made questionable assumptions and unjust decisions about other young mothers and their babies based on the mothers' childhood records.⁷⁸

When Minnie was found to be pregnant—"probably six weeks"—she was charged with being "a neglected child lapsing into immorality".⁷⁹ Despite having been employed for several years—and aged 17—she was made a ward of the state and sent to a Catholic girls' reformatory in Oakleigh, Melbourne. When her baby daughter was born, she was taken from her mother and was also made a ward of the state. They never met again.

Unlike her sisters, Frances Sinnett escaped being institutionalised, but the same Ballarat Orphanage would accommodate her three sons a generation later. They were taken from her and made wards of the state in 1941, for the crime of 'neglect', the very same all-purpose charge that was laid against their great-grandfather Edward Sinnett in 1864.

There is nothing in the child welfare archives that explains the narrative layers behind the story of the Sinnett/Golding family—and many other families like them. You will not find their version of events in the voluminous records constructed by welfare officials or the police. But we know from more recent oral histories and the growing body of survivor testimony, that, without support, many families could not survive the grinding poverty and adversities that dogged their lives. These hardships were seldom due to individual failings, and never a matter of free choice. Yet, those

⁷⁸ Sabrina Golds, "Legal Analysis of the Provisions Governing Access to, Disclosure of and Use of Records Held by Agencies Containing Information on Childhood Care Histories" (paper for the Rights in Records by Design project, Monash University and Federation University Australia, unpub. 2018): 14.

⁷⁹ State Wardship file, Minnie Sennett (*sic*) number 63913.

who had never known such hardships themselves were free to dislocate children by framing their families as suffering the self-inflicted depravity of a moral underclass.

In the last months of her life, Golding's then infirm mother made a heartfelt plea to her sons: "Please don't put me in a Home." Once, having read the official files kept by the Department, Golding might have remarked the irony of her request. He reflects that had he known the story of her unremitting, remorseless loss at the time, his relationship with her after the orphanage would have been very different. He certainly found no such narrative in his records as a state ward. Having embedded his intergenerational self in a more complex narrative, he is much better able to tell that story to people who matter to him—other family members, fellow care-leavers, and, if they care to listen, professionals in the child welfare field.

Conclusion

It is timely to remind ourselves that history is not a single story, but "competing narratives ... a process, a conversation, a constantly altering story."⁸⁰ There can be no real conversation and no trustworthy history unless the children in contemporary state care, and the adults who were once state children, take a leading part of that process. In considering how abuse might be prevented in out-of-home care, the Royal Commission stated in its final report that

One of the most important things we have learned about out-of-home care is that children should be given a voice, and their rights should be recognised and respected.⁸¹

However, notwithstanding the increasing body of survivor testimony and experientially-based counter-narratives, recent disclosures suggest the mistakes of the past continue to be made. In 2015 the Victorian Commissioner for Children and Young People documented contemporary incidents of sexual abuse and exploitation, and reported:

Children's views and opinions about their experience in the residential care system are rarely heard ... This lack of participation and failing to hear the child's voice was evident in the file reviews and interviews with ... staff.⁸²

There is inherent value in historical research which seeks to restore children's voices to records which have marginalised and removed the perspectives of the children they purportedly describe, but this should not be the end of the story. This chapter has argued that we need to understand the long term discursive and structural forces which allowed such record-keeping practices to persist for so long, and to see how this had very real consequences for children—not just while they were institutionalised, but across their entire lives and those of their descendants. Only then can we hope to avoid perpetuating the same harms against those in out-of-home care today.

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⁸⁰ Behrendt, "Settlement or Invasion?", 233.

⁸¹ Royal Commission, *Final Report*, Vol. 12 (Sydney: The Commission, 2017): 184.

⁸² Victorian Commission for Children and Young People, *"As a good parent would..." Inquiry into the Adequacy of the Provision of Residential Care Services to Victorian Children and Young People Who Have Been Subject to Sexual Abuse or Sexual Exploitation Whilst Residing in Residential Care* (Melbourne: The Commission, 2015): 54-55.

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