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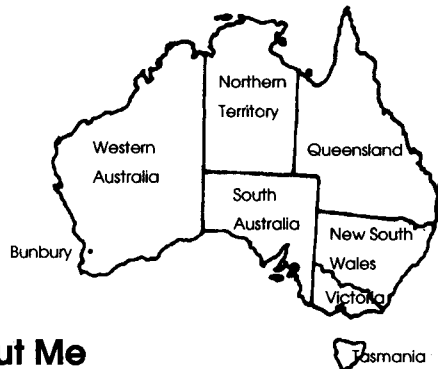


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Roelands Mission Education — A Personal Narrative

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About Me

Firstly let me introduce myself to you. My name is Irene Calgaret. I am an Aboriginal of the Nyungar people from Bunbury, Western Australia. I attend Edith Cowan University, Bunbury as a first-year student, studying English as my major.

I am the mother of three lovely daughters and the grand-mother of four wonderful grand-sons. I have been a nurse for 25 years, employed at local Government and private hospitals, and at various other small, country town hospitals in our very large state of Western Australia.

Many of you may not know where Australia is. Well, it's in the Southern hemisphere; it is the world's largest island, bordered to the west by the Indian Ocean, and to the east, by the Pacific Ocean. Our nearest neighbours are New Zealand to the east and New Guinea to the north. Western Australia is the most remote of Australia's seven states. Our capital city is Perth.

My education began back in 1951, at the local primary school in the very small town of Roelands, where my family had lived for quite some time. This school included little white kids, who were my friends — some of whom are still my friends. There were two classrooms and just two teachers with about fifty students.

Mission

Today I am speaking to you about my life as a child of six, who was educated in a totally segregated

school, on a mission farm, for **Aboriginals only**, run by white so-called Christian people.

I was forcibly removed from my family, from the love, the warmth and security of my home, when another type of education began. In this mission as a six-year-old, I soon found out what child slave labour was all about. On arrival at this place we were automatically deloused with kerosene, our hair cut, then scrubbed until we were shining and crying our guts out.

Mealtimes meant we all lined up — boys on one side, girls on the other. As always, a missionary was there to check our face and hands to make sure we were clean enough to eat the food God had provided for us.

Once inside this huge hall, where our meals were served, we had to stand and say Grace; after the meal, the same — say a prayer or have a reading from the Bible. Only then could we leave the table.

We were sent to bed at 6.30 pm. Before going to sleep, as always, said a prayer. We were locked in our dormitory. Every dormitory housed up to 15-20 children. Girls were housed in separate homes, away from the boys, who were on one side of the mission. We were never permitted to talk to the boys, not even our brothers.

Then at 6.00 am on the dot it was out of bed for us. Again we had another prayer to start the day. If we didn't get up immediately we were tipped out of bed, right out on the floor. This of course served only to embarrass us and/or make us mad. Our parents **never** treated us like this. What a shock this was to us little kids!

The girls were made to do a lot domestic work; we also had to get the meals ready for the day. We had to help look after the babies, and the little kids in

the mission too. It did not matter that we were only little kids ourselves, there was always work to be done. The boys mainly did farm work. There were cows to milk, chooks to be fed, and baby calves, after they were removed from their mothers, to be fed (at least we had something in common with them). We collected the scraps in a wheelbarrow from each home, to feed the pigs. All of this was done before breakfast. It wasn't too bad during the summertime, as it would be warm and fairly light, but in the winter, it was bitterly cold and dark. Like most little kids, we were so frightened of the dark, and to make it worse we had no shoes. Boy, did our little feet suffer. Looking back, it seems as if most of our time was spent on working and praying.

The mission owned a lot of land and they also had one of the biggest orchards in the area in which we had to work, picking, cleaning and packing the fruit for sale in the city, as well as for export. We had to make the wooden boxes to pack the fruit in. If you were caught eating any of the fruit, you always copped a flogging. These floggings got worse as you got older, when they became quite brutal. The stick they used depended on who was giving it to you. Often they didn't just belt your hands — your whole body became the target of some very savage beatings.

It was demanded that we never speak our native language; we tried so hard to keep our language. We were forced to speak only English. As we were just little kids, we did not know how to stand up to these bullies, who ruled over us, and unfortunately the beatings we got soon knocked our language out of us, until just a few words remained. We were often made to feel ashamed of our culture, and of the fact that we are Aboriginals.

Racism

The education taught to us was of a good standard, for we coped well with white children; when eventually we attended the secondary government school in the district, we were of an equal standard. The hardest thing to cope with was the racism in the schools. Consequently we were often in trouble with the teachers due to the amount of fights we used to get into, for that was our only way of getting rid of the anger. It was no good trying to turn the

other cheek; if we did, they thought we were weak and just kept right on picking on us, until we lost our tempers and had to fight.

Government Policy: The 1905 Act

In our country, there was a government policy established in 1905, involving every Aboriginal person in the land. This barbaric policy involved the forcible removal of children from their parents. We were removed from our culture, our land, our families and anything that was familiar to us. This policy was aimed mainly at the children of mixed blood and today there would not be one Aboriginal person who has not been touched by this policy. The government's assimilation policy decreed we, the children, would become so integrated into the white society we would eventually forget our black heritage and forget our people. They also believed that if they kept us segregated, they would breed out the black, and turn us all into white.

Hence the forcible removal began. Many children who were removed from their parents were taken to far-away places. This of course created a state of disorientation and confusion in the child, so that eventually these children would forget their parents. In some cases this is exactly what happened; so much so, that many of these children who are now adults, still don't know who their families are, or are still finding their families. A lot of these people have not been given access to Mission or government files, to let them know who their parents or their siblings are. Many must wait for years to learn their true identity, sometimes finding out too late, as their parents have passed on.

The removal of children began in 1886 and continued until 1969.

Whites

How on earth could white people, who had invaded our country, decide that the Indigenous people of Australia, with a history of more than forty thousand years, were not capable of caring for and looking after their children? Then they, the white Australians, have the gall to condemn my people for the mistrust and hate many of us have for those

in positions of authority, like the police and the government agencies.

After being placed in the mission our parents were discouraged from ever visiting us, and were usually told to leave the place, and don't come back. Each time they tried to visit, they would be met with the same cold response until eventually they gave up trying to see their children.

Can any of us feel or understand the loss, and emptiness, our parents must have felt? Some of our parents lost all of their children at once. My own parents lost five children, including an eighteen-month-old baby on what started out as a normal day, but suddenly, their worst nightmare became a reality.

That nightmare has stayed with me all my life and I still mourn for the loss of my parents, who have both passed away. I never had the chance to get to know my mother, for she died at an early age, just after I had left the mission. I did get to spend some time with my father, but unfortunately, most of that time he seemed like some stranger I happened to call Dad. We didn't know how to break down the barrier.

Parents

The life was drained from our parents, as they wondered how they would ever survive this, the most dreadful thing to ever befall them. There was nowhere for them to turn for help to get their children back. The Chief Protector of Aborigines became the Guardian of all children, up to the age of 16, and had made the order for the removal of children. If our parents complained to the police (who were made Honorary Guardians of Aborigines), they would be imprisoned, kicked out of the towns and/or beaten very badly.

Many of my people lost their reason for living when they lost their children. They drifted from town to town. Often their relationships broke down; many fell into the habit of drinking to forget their misery. Unfortunately, many died very early deaths, many

with broken hearts, a loss of identity and alcoholism, as they lost the will to live. My own mother included. There was despair and disorientation created in the adults after losing their children.

There was the thought that eventually the children would forget their parents. This of course happened with many children; so much so, that many of these children who are adults now, still don't know their families, or are still finding their families.



Effects

Many of my people have been very badly affected by this separation and many carry a hatred and a mistrust of the police and government agencies. They have passed these feelings on to their children. A big number of our children drop out of school, some never completing Primary education.

Many of these children end up in the juvenile justice system, and become adult offenders. We have a very high rate of imprisonment, in both male and female adults and a high rate of black deaths in custody, and these have been shown to be a direct result of the removal of children. Many parents today have difficulties in bringing up their children due to the fact that they never had role models, apart from the heavy-handed discipline dealt out by the Missionaries. A very high rate of juvenile offenders has become common, with many, it seems, on a road to self-destruction.

The Aboriginal Legal Service believes the effects of removal are a significant factor in:

- over-representation in the criminal justice system;
- physical, mental and emotional health problems;
- domestic violence;
- welfare dependency;
- substance and alcohol abuse;
- breakdown of traditional family structures;
- a loss of cultural and spiritual identity; and
- loss of individual self-esteem, security and happiness. (*Telling Our Story*, July 1996)

We have a very high rate of admissions into hospitals, both for children and adults. My people have a very high rate of early deaths in adulthood due to diabetes, heart disease, obesity and alcohol-related diseases. There is a high rate of infant mortality; foetal alcohol syndrome, failure to thrive, malnutrition, gastroenteritis and chronic respiratory diseases are major infant killers. Many of my people still live in third world situations, where poverty abounds. Some Aboriginal communities still don't have running water or flushing toilets, not even the basic essentials for good health.

Update¹

Currently there is an inquiry to investigate the impact on children who were forcibly removed from their families. This is being carried out, all over our country, by the Aboriginal Legal Service (ALS). A survey is being submitted to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. The Commission is also speaking to individuals, in an attempt to get a true picture of the pain and suffering my people have undergone at the hands of these Government policies.

Part of the removal of children has led to many health problems, including depression, self-mutilation, alcohol and substance abuse, and suicide. (*The West Australian*, Monday, May 20, 1996)

The ALS has made 166 recommendations to the inquiry, including monetary compensation, culturally appropriate counselling services and

for Aborigines and their communities to be given responsibility to deliver their own services. (*The West Australian*, Tuesday, May 21, 1996, p. 9)

The Anglican and Catholic churches have apologised for their role in separating Aboriginal children from their families. 'No matter how well intentioned the motives of the Church were, its complicity has contributed to the dislocation of the people concerned and therefore their loss of land, language and identity,' Perth Anglican Bishop David Murray said. The Anglican Church was involved in at least five Western Australian institutions, all of which actively discouraged or banned contact between Aboriginal parents and their children.

The Church is attempting to make amends and had established an Aboriginal Lands Trust in recognition of European settlement on Aboriginal land. (*The West Australian*, Wednesday, May 15, 1996, p. 10).

Lastly

There is, and always will be, special bonds with the brothers and sisters we made in that horrible place. The only real thing we had, was our love for each other and our ability to look after each other. The one other thing that the mission gave me was the guts to keep going and the strength to never give in.

Irene Calgaret is an Aboriginal of the Nyungar people from Bunbury, Western Australia. She is undertaking a Bachelor of Arts degree majoring in English at Edith Cowan University, Bunbury Campus, Western Australia. □

¹ Since Irene Calgaret presented this paper at the World Indigenous Peoples' Conference in June 1996, the *Bringing Them Home* Report on the Stolen Children has been released. The full text of the Report is now available on the Internet at <http://www.austlii.edu.au/rsjlibrary/hreoc/stolen/>

