

Exhibition Review: *Inside: Life in Children's Homes and Institutions*. National Museum Australia touring museum exhibition, Melbourne Museum, 29 August 2013 to 27 January 2014.

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In early 2003, the Community Affairs References Committee of the Australian Senate began an inquiry into the experiences of children in institutional care during much of the twentieth century. The inquiry arose from a plethora of complaints, amassed over decades, of neglect and gross abuse suffered by children in dozens of government- and church-run orphanages, children's homes, 'training centres' and reformatories across Australia. The Committee's report, handed down in August 2004, determined that approximately half a million Australians had experienced out-of-home care during their childhood and/or adolescence, of whom an enormous number had suffered abuse. The Committee coined a term to characterize this group, employing it as the title of the report: *Forgotten Australians* (Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2004).

This was the third in a series of Federal Government inquiries into child-institutionalization. The first, in the mid-1990s, an investigation of forced removals of Aboriginal children into care, had brought to nationwide public attention the experiences of the tens of thousands dubbed the 'Stolen Generation' (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997); the second, which reported in 2001 under the title *Lost Innocents* (Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2001), had examined the policy, in operation from the 1940s to the 1960s, of sponsoring between 7,000 and 10,000 migrant children (Dow and Phillips 2009) from Britain and Malta to Australia under the pretence of affording them greater life-opportunities than they could expect back home, only to institutionalize them on arrival and subject them to years of brutal incarceration and indentured labour.

The third inquiry, into the *Forgotten Australians*, received what the Committee described as 'the largest volume of highly personal, emotive and significant evidence of any Senate inquiry' (Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2004: 4). Among its key recommendations was that the Australian Government should formally apologize to the *Forgotten Australians*, in the process fully acknowledging and taking responsibility for their suffering, in a manner similar to the Apology to the Stolen Generation which had been recommended by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in 1997 (but which by 2004 was yet to occur). Both apologies would have to wait for the advent of a Labor Government under Kevin Rudd. Prime Minister Rudd delivered the Nation's Apology to the Stolen Generations in February 2008, and to the *Forgotten Australians* (including former child migrants) in November 2009.

The three major Federal inquiries did not take place in a vacuum; within Australia they followed or immediately gave rise to a number of State government inquiries. All Australian States have since issued their own apologies to the victims of institutionalization. Nor was this a peculiarly Australian phenomenon; the move toward public investigation and official acknowledgement of institutional brutalization of the young in Australia reflected something of a global trend. Similar inquiries have been conducted in the UK, Ireland, Canada, Iceland, some Scandinavian countries and Germany, both at government level and by charitable organizations such as the Catholic Church (Sköld 2013: 6).

Among the formal recommendations of the 2003-4 Senate Inquiry was that a museum exhibition should commemorate the experiences of the *Forgotten Australians*. The Report enjoined the National Museum to take responsibility for the establishment of such an exhibition, specifying too that it be 'preferably permanent' (Senate Community Affairs References Committee 2004: xxvii). Given the very substantial number of Australians who identify as *Forgotten Australians*, and given, too, the fact that both the Prime Minister and the Opposition Leader of the day, Malcolm Turnbull, apologized to them on behalf of government and nation, thus marking their suffering with historic gravitas comparable to that shown the Stolen Generations

the previous year, many stakeholders assumed that the notion of a major museum exhibition representing their experiences would meet with ready acceptance among curators. This was not the case, however; several years of lobbying by the Forgotten Australians' peak support and advocacy group, Care Leavers of Australia Network (CLAN), were needed before the National Museum acquiesced to the prospect of a *temporary* exhibition (and there is some evidence that even that decision hung as much as anything on government funding considerations) (Chynoweth 2012).

Inside: Life in Children's Homes and Institutions opened at the National Museum, Canberra, in November 2011 – seven years after the Senate Inquiry's recommendations were published. It was in place for three months until the end of February 2012, to highly positive patron responses. With its closure, however, the exhibition, and the issue it represented, seemed to drift once more into a kind of limbo. Although the Senate Committee's recommendation had also expressed an explicit vision of an exhibition suitable for touring, no plans were initially in place for this to occur. Thus a further 18 months would pass before the viewing public outside Canberra had an opportunity to glimpse the stories presented from *Inside*.

The second incarnation of *Inside* opened at Melbourne Museum on 29 August 2013 and ran until 27 January 2014. At this writing it may be seen at the Western Australian Maritime Museum until 27 June 2014, after which it travels to the Queensland Museum in Brisbane, where it will be in place from 9 August to 16 November 2014. It was the Melbourne version that I saw. I attended the exhibition, and present my impressions here, not as a practitioner in museology, but rather in a dual role as a social historian and ethnographer specializing in institutionalization, and as a member of the Forgotten Australians, having been taken into State care a number of times as a child and adolescent. I therefore approached the exhibition with both professional interest and, inevitably, to some extent the emotional demands of the stakeholder.

Such demands go to the heart of what an exhibition of this kind must aim to achieve, if it is to have any moral relevance. The key question to be addressed, when any event or site of great suffering is publicly represented, is, To what extent does the representation do justice to the lived experience of those who were there? (Wilson 2008: 6, 220). Such a criterion consists, in turn, of a further twofold requirement. The first is that the design must embody an authenticity, an empathetic integrity for the subject, such that it will, ideally, induce in the knowledgeable insider an unreserved affirmation that this is indeed 'how it was' (Wilson 2008: 220). The second requirement is that these core evocative qualities are effectively communicated to the mass audience – presumably the majority of those attending – who do *not* have such insight born of personal experience. In my view, *Inside* satisfied both of these requirements very well indeed, and the curators are to be commended for their achievement.

The exhibition's power, I believe, lies in its understanding and depiction of the multitude of individual narratives, and fragments of narratives, both explicit and implied, of institutionalized children, and their place in the broader institutional, societal and political narratives. An abundant collection of physical artefacts are complemented by a range of audio-visual media through which individual Forgotten Australians give voice to their experiences, archival news footage and other media allow an historical glimpse of the then radically euphemized public face of the institutions, and Kevin Rudd's and Malcolm Turnbull's joint official Apologies are replayed in their entirety. In this way, an impressive synthesis of 'micro' and 'grand' narrative is achieved.

For me, and I suspect for many patrons, the exhibition's most redolent aspect is its collection of personal items and institutional objects. In his influential work *In Small Things Forgotten*, historical archaeologist James Deetz (1996) speaks of the evocative nature of minutiae, and the immense importance of attending to ordinary objects in our study of the past, if we are to gain deep understanding of the lives and day-to-day experiences of those whose voices have been silenced by time. In its use of such objects, *Inside* succeeds admirably, presenting what might be termed an archaeology of affect, and in the process granting the viewer moments of poignant and, it must be said, at times distressing empathy.

The objects displayed include toys, items of clothing, a tricycle, documentary records, and 'pocket-size' items such as tickets, letters, and photographs. One in particular, an institutional rather than personal item, serves to encapsulate the extraordinary, gratuitous brutality of the institutions and the lives spent within them: a leather strap about a foot long, to outward

appearances typical of those traditionally used until recently in school settings to implement corporal punishment. But as an accompanying x-ray photograph reveals, the leather exterior conceals a band of steel at the core, turning an instrument of relatively harmless (albeit painful) punishment into something of a hybrid between a cosh and a whip.

Aside from the manifest evil of such artefacts, others embody a dark but subtle ambiguity, even when seemingly simple and benign. Perhaps the most redolent example for me was a teddy bear given as a Christmas present to an inmate of a Melbourne church-run orphanage in the 1960s. The accompanying exposition tells us that soon after it was received, it was confiscated without explanation. Such arbitrary, enigmatic deprivation was entirely typical of the ethos of many institutions. On viewing the teddy bear I was reminded of one of the orphanages I spent time in as a child, where there was an attic to which I was, for some reason, consigned one day while unwell. The room, which was normally kept locked and its contents therefore secret, I was surprised to find was full of toys, with which I played for several hours in a state of vaguely bewildered wonder. The main living areas of the orphanage were notably austere, almost devoid of toys or play equipment, and until I saw the contents of that usually inaccessible attic I had no idea there were any items of childish recreation anywhere in the building at all.

In only two ways did I feel that *Inside* could have been significantly improved regarding its capacity to evoke the institutional experience. I would like it to have included a soundscape, incorporating the daily aural experience of a typical institution; and (perhaps more challenging to include, but technically possibly) I missed the institutional *smells* that hang in the mind and which can emotionally sum up one's sense of place and condition.

It is axiomatic that, with very few exceptions, children of affluent households did not go into institutional care (Twomey 2002; Swain 2012; Swain and Musgrove 2012). Those 'few exceptions' were most often female victims of the system's intrinsic gender bias, which tended to target supposedly 'wayward' girls across the socio-economic spectrum. *Inside* is therefore as much a story about gender as it is about justice, as much about class as about human rights, and, above all, as much about poverty as about care. It is here that a different strand of the 'grand' narrative comes into play, and one which, to be fair, the exhibition could not be expected to address any more than implicitly.

The institutions in question were, almost without exception, characterized by a terrible, bleak austerity, both in their mode of operation and as physical environments. It is far more than a mere rhetorical cliché to describe them as 'Dickensian'. In this they reflected their cultural, architectural and historical origins in Victorian-era Britain as repositories of the most irredeemably 'othered' sector of society: the poor. Victorian society was divided sharply and uncompromisingly, into the 'respectable' and 'those who were not' (Best 1973: 282). The dominant social order of mid-Victorian England was one based on 'independence' and 'respectability' (Best 1973: 279), with the poor regarded as inherently 'vulgar' (Davidoff and Hall 1997: 360). Their perceived economic and social failure was considered proof of a degraded character (Mowat 1961: 2; Best 1973: 280). This belief remained central to Victorian approaches to the problem of poverty throughout the nineteenth century, and was the basis of not only the establishment of the archetypal charitable 'home', but also many practices seen in modern social work, including the concept of individual 'case work' and regimes of official scrutiny – what sociologist Kerry Carrington (1993: 42) terms the 'visibility of otherness' – imposed under the rubric of regular domestic intervention (Mowat 1961: 13).

Such moralistic judgements derived from a fantasy that stood at the centre of the Victorian ethos: equality of opportunity – the notion that social privilege was based on merit gained through toil, and that such privilege was available to anyone prepared to honestly strive (Mowat 1961: 1-4; Hall 1992: 143). Thus was born the synthesis, epitomized in policy and practice and underpinning almost all aspects of institutional life, of obsessive emphasis on the virtues of 'industry', and, in equal measure, emphasis on *disapproval*.

Aside from the appalling physical abuse suffered by many Forgotten Australians during their time in 'care', perhaps the most enduring, and most commonly reported, source of trauma was the radical degradation routinely meted out to children, in the form of extreme, yet absolutely routine, disapproval. It is in the nature of such psychological abuse that the victim is highly likely to internalize the attitudes imposed upon them, and this is, indeed, the plight of many Forgotten Australians to this day; although their institutionalization officially ended decades

ago, their sense of humiliation and diminished self-worth prevails (Wilson 2013).

A key factor in this perpetuation of self-denigration is the social ambience subsequently experienced by those formerly in care. Many Forgotten Australians have found that the beliefs outlined above are by no means confined to the institution but are translated in society at large into attitudes of, at worst, outright hostility and, at best, apathetic indifference. Thus the victims are denied credibility, rendering them effectively voiceless and socially disempowered. I noted in my introductory passage above the apparent reluctance on the part of National Museum Australia to commit fully to the idea of the exhibition. This instance of prevarication is significant, I believe, because it connotes just such indifference. In this regard, there is a 'grand narrative' aspect of *Inside* that I found markedly cogent. Malcolm Turnbull's speech of apology, which was delivered immediately after that of the Prime Minister and which replayed as a video loop in the exhibition, includes a particularly insightful phrase. To those who had been for so long disempowered by the moral deafness of society and officialdom, Turnbull repeatedly affirmed, 'We believe you'. For a significant number of Forgotten Australians, those were the key words of the day. If *Inside* is successful in promoting such an epiphany among its non-stakeholder visitors – and I do believe it has that potential – then the efforts of the curators will have been amply justified.

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