

Child Migration

1800s – 1970s

Details

Child Migration to Australia refers to children who were sent to Australia unaccompanied by their parents, and who had no family ties or contacts in Australia. Child migrants were generally aged between 7 and 14, although some were younger, and were sent to Australia from Britain and Malta under formal child immigration schemes. Although some children went to placements in private homes, the vast majority were placed in institutions such as orphanages or farm schools, where many experienced abuse of all kinds, lack of education and nurturing, overwork and physical labour, and loss of identity and connections to family.

Child migration schemes involved non-government religious or charitable organisations working with the Imperial and Commonwealth governments. These organisations saw emigration as a means of creating opportunities for children in institutions in Britain, many of whom had been placed there because of family poverty or because their mothers were unmarried. Child migration was viewed very differently to youth migration – older teenagers and young men and women who received assisted passage to come from Britain to Australia to work in rural industries and in domestic service, under schemes such as the Big Brother Movement. Public knowledge and information about child migration came to light in the late 1980s due to the work of Margaret Humphreys and the Child Migrants Trust, and inquiries and apologies in the UK and Australia followed.

In Australia, child migrants from Britain were represented as ideal new (white) citizens of the Commonwealth, seen as adaptable and able to be assimilated into the Australian community. Barry Coldrey writes that although child migrants were only a modest percentage of immigrants to Australia, they were always treated as special “in the bureaucracy and by the media”:

There was something heart-warming in the vision of desperately underprivileged British children leaving behind the cold northern slums of the Old World to seek a new and better life in the sun-drenched dominions, and there was something uplifting in watching the arrival of what was perceived to be the cream of Britain's youth leaving the security of hearth and home to further their prospects in a distant land and to guard and extend the empire by settling the imperial frontier. They were the bricks of empire (Coldrey, Good British Stock, 1999).

Child migration to Australia began in the nineteenth century, for example the Earl Grey Pauper Immigration Scheme (1848-1851) which brought Irish orphans aged 14-19, mostly girls, from British workhouses to Australia to work as domestic labour. Other government-run schemes followed, also focussing on older children from 14 years up.

Formal child migration schemes began in 1913, with the Western Australian government working with the Fairbridge Society to bring 13 child migrants aged between 7-14 to the newly opened Fairbridge Farm School in Pinjarra.

In 1922, the Empire Settlement Act was passed in Britain. This made possible a number of schemes where non-government organisations brought child migrants to Australia with financial assistance from the British and

Australian governments. In the 1920s, child migrants were brought to Western Australia (Fairbridge Farm School), Queensland (Riverview Training Farm; Nazareth House Brisbane) and New South Wales (Scarborough House and Barnardo House, Barnardos; Burnside Homes).

The Great Depression brought these migration schemes to a halt. Some began again later in the 1930s but were once again interrupted by World War Two.

While some British children were sent to Australia as child evacuees during World War Two, this was a different scheme to child migration, and war evacuees were treated very differently than the child migrants who arrived after the war. For example, child evacuees were placed with private families rather than in institutions, and were aided to keep in touch with their families in Britain.

The post World War Two period saw thousands of child migrants come to Australia from Britain as well as a few hundred from Malta. According to the Senate report, *Lost Innocents* (2001), the rationale for child migration shifted from providing training in farming or domestic labour, to boosting Australia's population after World War Two. In 1946, the Immigration Minister, Arthur Calwell, announced a schedule of priorities for migrants to Australia under a new assisted passage scheme. There were 11 categories, with child migrants at the top of the list (*Lost Innocents*, 2001, p.26).

The Empire Settlement Act of 1922 was reactivated to allow for this next wave of child migration to Australia, with the British and Australian governments entering into agreements with non-government organisations. The organisations in Britain responsible for selecting and sending the children from British institutions were known as sending agencies. The organisations in Australia who received the children and placed them in institutions were known as receiving agencies. They were also referred to as the voluntary societies. In some cases, the same organisation would undertake both the sending and receiving functions (for example, Dr Barnardo's, Fairbridge). In other cases, sending agencies established relationships with receiving agencies to facilitate the process. For example, the Catholic Child Welfare Council in Britain was responsible for sending children to a variety of Catholic-run institutions in Australia.

The main Australian receiving agencies during the post-war period were Catholic Church agencies (including the Christian Brothers, the Sisters of Mercy and the Sisters of Nazareth), Fairbridge, Dr Barnardo's Homes, and Protestant churches including the Church of England and the Salvation Army.

Under the Immigration (Guardianship of Children) Act 1946, legal guardianship for all unaccompanied children arriving in Australia, including child migrants, was assigned to the Commonwealth Minister for Immigration from the time they arrived in Australia until they reached the age of 21. The Minister could delegate these powers to State welfare authorities. State government departments then entered into agreements with the receiving agencies for the day to day 'care' of the children.

Western Australia was the major destination for post World War Two child migrants, receiving 48% of the children from Britain and Malta who came during this period. Some child migrants were placed in orphanages and children's Homes in cities and large towns. Many went to farm schools in rural locations in Western Australia and New South Wales. Fairbridge had farm schools in Western Australia, at Pinjarra, and in New South Wales, at Molong. In Victoria, a farm school at Bacchus Marsh was run by the Lady Northcote Trust. A number of institutions in Tasmania received child migrants after World War Two, including Tresca (run by Fairbridge) and Boys' Town (run by the Salesians of Don Bosco). Other child migrants were sent to institutions where they lived with Australian-born children who had been removed from their families. These included St Joseph's Home, Neerkol in Queensland, Nazareth House and St Johns Homes for Boys in Victoria, and Dalmar and Murray-Dwyer Boys' Orphanage in New South Wales.

The British Government was concerned about conditions in the Australian institutions and in the 1950s two tours inspected conditions at the institutions and reported back to the British authorities. The first, in 1951 by John Moss, was largely complimentary about the conditions at Australian institutions and positive about child migration schemes in general. The second, a fact-finding mission headed by John Ross in 1956, was scathing about the conditions at many of the institutions visited and was opposed to child migration as a concept. While this investigation did not lead to the formal end of child migration schemes, wholesale child migration ceased soon

after.

The last children to come to Australia under formal child migration schemes arrived in 1967. In the meantime, Fairbridge also received children under their newly established Family Migration schemes, where children were sent to Australia first and stayed in institutions before later being joined by their parents.

The *Lost Innocents* report noted that in total, up to 7500 children were sent to Australia in the 20th century under child migration schemes. Around 4000 of these arrived after World War Two.

Former child migrants began sharing their experiences in the 1980s. A key organisation in advocacy and raising awareness about the scale and impact of child migration was the Child Migrants Trust, established in 1986 by British social worker Margaret Humphreys. More details came to light about child migration with the publication of a number of books in the 1990s, and the broadcasting of television documentaries and a mini-series, *The Leaving of Liverpool* (1994).

These experiences highlighted the brutal conditions many child migrants had grown up under, in institutions where abuse of all kinds was rife. Child migrants highlighted that they were frequently told untruthfully that their parents in England either did not want them or had passed away, and they were not provided with any information about their families. As the Child Migrants Trust noted:

The reality of this policy was to remove children, some as young as three years old 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. (Child Migrants Trust, Child Migration History)

The *Lost Innocents* report noted that "To say that in some circumstances children were stolen from their parents and their country is not putting it too strongly."

From the 1990s, a number of calls were made for an inquiry into child migration to Australia.

In 1996, the Western Australian government appointed a Select Committee into Child Migration to inquire into the situation in that state. In the United Kingdom, the House of Commons Health Committee commenced an inquiry into child migration in 1997. The Committee took evidence in 1997 and 1998 and travelled to Australia and New Zealand to hear from Former Child Migrants. Its report was handed down in December 1998.

In Australia, on the motion of Senator Andrew Murray (himself a Former Child Migrant from Britain to Zimbabwe), the Senate referred the issue of child migration to the Community Affairs References Committee for inquiry and report. The *Lost Innocents* report was tabled on 30 August 2001.

The British and Australian Governments both formally apologised to Former Child Migrants. The Australian Government apology occurred on 16 November 2009 and the British Government apology on 24 February 2010.

Later inquiries in the UK also looked into child migration programs as part of their broader investigations. These are the Northern Ireland Historical Abuse Inquiry (2017), the British Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuses (2018) and the Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry (2023).

In 2019, following the recommendations from the British Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, the British Government announced a payment scheme for Former British Child Migrants. In 2024, this scheme was still running.

More info

Related Entries

Related Events

- [Care of Children Committee, United Kingdom \(1946\)](#)
- [Apology to Former Child Migrants by the British Government \(24 February 2010\)](#)
- [Visit of John Moss \(1951\)](#)
- [Fact-Finding Mission on Child Migration \(1956\)](#)
- [Apology to Former Child Migrants by the Parliament of Western Australia \(13 August 1998\)](#)
- [Inquiry into the Implementation of the Recommendations of the Lost Innocents and Forgotten Australians Reports, Parliament of Australia \(2008 - 2009\)](#)
- [Select Committee into Child Migration, Legislative Assembly, Parliament of Western Australia \(June 1996 - November 1996\)](#)

Related Glossary Terms

- [Child Evacuee \(1940 - c. 1945\)](#)

Related Organisations

- [Australasian Province of the Christian Brothers \(1885 - 1953\)](#)
- [St Patrick's Province of the Christian Brothers \(1953 - 1967\)](#)
- [The Salvation Army Australia Eastern Territory \(1921 - 2018\)](#)
- [Overseas League \(1910 - current\)](#)
- [Catholic Episcopal Migration and Welfare Association \(1947? - 1970\)](#)
- [Child Migrant Friendship Society \(1987? - 2001?\)](#)
- [The Children's Society, United Kingdom \(1881 - current\)](#)
- [Family Care Society \(1989 - current\)](#)
- [Father Hudson's Society, United Kingdom \(1902 - current\)](#)
- [The International Association of Former Child Migrants and Their Families \(1994 - current\)](#)
- [NCH Action for Children, United Kingdom \(1869 - current\)](#)
- [Dr Barnardos in Australia \(1966 - c. 1995\)](#)
- [Fairbridge Foundation \(c. 1973 - c. 2016\)](#)
- [United Protestant Association of New South Wales Ltd \(1938 - current\)](#)
- [Dreadnought Trust \(1909 - 1930?\)](#)
- [Millions Club \(1912 - current\)](#)
- [Child Migrants Trust \(1987 - current\)](#)
- [Methodist Homes for Children \(1891 - c. 1953\)](#)
- [St John's Home for Boys \(c. 1924 - 1958\)](#)
- [Nazareth House, Camberwell \(1929 - 1975\)](#)
- [Church of England Boys' Home \(1918 - 1976\)](#)
- [Church of England Girls' Home, Carlingford \(1928 - 1976\)](#)
- [Monte Pio Orphanage \(1910 - 1973\)](#)
- [Murray-Dwyer Boys' Home \(1933 - 1970\)](#)
- [St Vincent's Boys' Home \(1891 - 1985\)](#)
- [St John's Orphanage, Thurgoona \(1882 - 1978\)](#)
- [St Brigid's Girls' Home, Ryde \(1898 - 1978\)](#)
- [Arncliffe Girls' Home \(1941 - 1969\)](#)
- [Gill Memorial Boys' Home \(1936 - 1980\)](#)
- [Burnside Presbyterian Orphan Homes \(1911 - 1955\)](#)
- [Burnside Presbyterian Homes for Children \(1955 - 1978\)](#)
- [Burnside Homes for Children \(1978 - 1986\)](#)
- [Dalmar \(1900 - current\)](#)
- [Green Wood \(1951 - 1966\)](#)
- [Tarana \(1959 - 1977\)](#)
- [Hartwell House \(1960 - 1970\)](#)
- [Illawong \(1962 - 1975\)](#)
- [Melrose \(1952 - 1982\)](#)
- [Sunnylands \(1955 - 1997\)](#)
- [Government Agricultural Farm, Scheyville \(1905 - 1940\)](#)

- [Gunning House \(1951 - c. 1982\)](#)
- [Scarborough House \(1921 - 1924\)](#)
- [Riverview Training Farm \(1926 - 1956\)](#)
- [St Joseph's Home, Neerkol \(1885 - 1978\)](#)
- [Home for Boys, Riverview \(1956 - 1966\)](#)
- [Burton Hall Training Farm \(c. 1947 - 1967?\)](#)
- [Dhurringile Rural Training Farm \(1951 - 1964\)](#)
- [Tardun Farm School \(1928 - 2008\)](#)
- [Bindoon \(1936 - 1966\)](#)
- [Methodist Children's Homes \(1924 - 1960\)](#)
- [Clarendon Children's Home \(1922 - 2004\)](#)
- [Tresca \(c. 1958 - 1976\)](#)
- [Hagley Farm School \(1936 - 1976?\)](#)
- [Beaufront \(c. 1949 - c. 1958\)](#)
- [Methodist Children's Home \(1922 - 1959\)](#)
- [Padbury Boys' Farm School \(1946 - 1955\)](#)
- [Swan Homes \(1943 - 1959\)](#)
- [Seaside House, Coogee \(1931 - 1968\)](#)
- [Mofflyn \(1959 - 1984\)](#)

Related Archival Collections

- [Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants oral history project \[sound recording\], National Library of Australia \(2009 - 2012\)](#)
- [Commonwealth Child and Youth Migration Records \(1901 - 1983\)](#)

Related Archival Series

- [Immigration Photographic Archive 1946 - today \(1946 - current\)](#)

Related Legislation

- [Immigration \(Guardianship of Children\) Act 1946, Commonwealth of Australia \(1946 - 1973\)](#)

Resources

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- [Michael Snell interviewed by Rob Willis in the Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants oral history project \[sound recording\]](#), 17 November 2009
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