

## Marella: Out of Hiding

As you pull into the carpark of the Bernie Mullane Sports Complex in the north-western Sydney suburb of Kellyville, you could be forgiven for thinking you had entered some sort of child's paradise. Between the soccer fields, cricket pitches, netball and tennis courts, picnic areas and award-winning playground...every age, interest and ability has been catered for in an environment where "individuals, family and community groups [are encouraged] to connect, feel welcome and grow in body, mind and spirit". You can just imagine all the excited kids piling out of backseats on crisp Saturday mornings ahead of their big game, full of the innocence of childhood to be recalled with nostalgia by parents alike in years to come. But one of the Hills District's premier sports and recreation venues hides a black history that no amount of investment in the health and wellbeing of future generations can erase. Unbeknownst to all the happy children playing, the Bernie Mullane Sports Complex was built over the site of the former Marella Aboriginal Children's Home.

Social anthropologist Dr Melinda Hinkson asserts that there is a reason why places of historical significance are kept hidden, while Sydney archaeologist Paul Irish identifies the barriers to acknowledging post-contact Aboriginal histories. To this effect, Marella does not hold the same tourist appeal as pre-contact petroglyphs, nor does a visit promote the sense of Australian identity found in travel brochures. Despite acknowledgement of other sites of cultural genocide, such as the Cootamundra Girls Home and Auschwitz – places where you wouldn't dream of chucking a Frisbee around, out of respect for the lives that have been lost – no acknowledgement exists of the horrors that occurred at Marella. To the contrary, you will find a plaque in front of a tree at the entrance to the indoor gymnasium commemorating a councillor, Bernie Mullane, who bears no connection with the site where every effort has been made to forget what happened. This first stop on our tour of Marella is synonymous with the culture of denial, identified by Hinkson, which sees Aboriginal sovereignty denied in Australia.

Marella Aboriginal Mission Farm was started in 1953 by former pioneer missionary aviator "Sky Pilot" Keith Langford-Smith following his dismissal under controversial circumstances from the remote Northern Territory mission of Roper River. However, far from being a refuge for orphaned Aboriginal children, as reported in the press at the time, the child residents were victims of the Stolen Generations who had been removed from their families, many of whom did not know if their children were dead or alive. As you move through Marella, it is helpful to reflect on recent missing child campaigns, such as those related to the disappearances of Daniel Morcombe and Madeleine McCann. Both the Morcombe and McCann families have gone to extreme lengths, as supported by their respective governments, to find out what happened to their children. By contrast, it was precisely those systems meant to protect children which inflicted untold grief on the families of children removed to Marella. Former child resident, Aunty Rita Wright, reflects on how her mother never stopped searching for her and her sister's bodies in the bush surrounding their home in Brewarrina, over 700 kilometres away.

These days, juxtaposed against the suburban backdrop, with housing estates closing in on all sides, you will find a series of four Aboriginal murals depicting native animals in the far right-hand corner of the playground beside the carpark. What the developers could not have realised about this second site of significance [since removed] is that these tokenistic allusions to Australia's Aboriginal past are positioned directly over the site where Aunty Rita and other traumatised children were made to sleep in chook pens with the livestock. Former resident

Dawn Smith recalls “I remember doing cleaning – chook [poo], straw and chaff. That’s where we slept.” While more appropriate sleeping quarters were eventually built at the insistence of the Child Welfare Department in 1968, it is widely speculated that Langford-Smith’s primary motivation for keeping the children on the farm was financial. Other motivations have since come under the scrutiny of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.

When the children weren’t providing ‘slave labour’ – milking the cows, feeding the chooks, doing the washing, weeding the extensive rose gardens, harvesting the fruit orchard and cleaning out the sewage pit – rare photos from a private collection show them enjoying the lake. Once brimming with bird life such as water hens, grey cranes and black shags, it is now so overgrown with algae that it has had to be fenced off by the council. But as you follow the path around from the playground you may notice a border of Lilli Pilli trees. Just as the former child residents used to search for bush tucker to supplement their poor diets, which often consisted of nothing more than baby food, you can pick the red berries which are high in Vitamin C. If any of the Marella kids got caught sneaking into the kitchen, “For punishment we used to slide up and down the dormitory hallway, polishing the lino all day long. [Langford-Smith] made us put on old socks and we had to polish until we could see our faces in the floor.”

If you continue along the Lilli Pilli lined path as it winds its way around the lake and out past the sports fields, you will see what appears to be bushland down to your right. Head through the clearing in the trees where the grass has worn into track. This third site of significance, the creek, is where the children were allowed to play for a few hours on a weekend if they had been “good”, and is still spoken fondly of by former residents as a respite from the jail-like yard they were usually confined to. This favourite place used to feature a convict wall that the children would climb over into the neighbouring property to catch tadpoles. “Mr Darryl’s” place has since been subdivided into a housing estate, and the convict wall demolished – more evidence of Australia’s unsavoury history which has been erased from Marella. However, the horse-shaped tree where the children used to pretend to be cowboys and cowgirls riding away to freedom still remains, albeit a little wobblier than it used to be after years of carrying the Dreamings of so many.

With the tour of what secrets Marella is ready to share coming to an end, take the long way back across the oval, and remember the many fetes that used to be held there. Beautifully coloured bedspreads would be laid out in the dormitories and the children paraded in new clothes in a bid to impress potential benefactors. However, such niceties would disappear just as quickly as they had appeared, and the children would return to their usual clothes sourced from a communal cupboard, including underwear. Neither would they benefit from any of the donations from well-meaning members of the public. It took Aunty Rita Wright sixteen years of collecting spare pennies which she hid in a jar in order to hatch her escape. The question as you make to leave and head for coffee in nearby Kellyville remains: do all the children playing there today, completely oblivious to the heinous crimes that have occurred, help towards healing the place? Or is the absence of any acknowledgement evidence of further injustice?

by Ash Wright for Aunty Rita Wright, circa 2015

