‘Suffer Little Children’: British child migration as a study of journeyings between centre and periphery

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Looking back, looking forward

Of all the former Empires of settlement, the British Empire was unique in sending overseas children seen as being on the margins of society. Child migration to the Americas began in the seventeenth century but was at its height in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries when it was estimated that almost 80,000 children were sent to Canada. The scholarship of such historians as Joy Parr and Gillian Wagner in the early 1980s drew attention to the complex context of British child migration, involving voluntary organizations, the imperial state and the parents of many of the children. In Canada particularly, child migrants came to play an important part in rural economies. In the twentieth century child migration continued on a smaller scale until at least the late 1960s with most child migrants being sent to Australia. The survivors of these child migration schemes are now men and women in middle to late age.

Over the past two decades, there has been an increasing media and government interest in the history of British child migration. Since the late 1980s the children sent to the former British Dominions of white settlement have been represented as The Lost Children of Empire separated from family and kin and exiled overseas to hardship. It has been suggested that in the years after 1945 alone up to 10,000 child migrants were sent...
from Britain, although it was more likely that no more than 3000 arrived in Australia during the postwar period and a total of 6000 over the twentieth century.4

Following an intense media and public campaign, and with the election of the Blair Labour Government, the Health Committee of the House of Commons presented a report in 1998 on the welfare of former British child migrants. Concentrating on post-1945 migration, the Committee focused on three major areas. First, it was claimed that the vast majority of child migrants had been attracted by images of opportunity in Australia and then sent overseas without consent or knowledge of their family and kin in Britain. Second, it was suggested that in Australia the children were subjected to both physical and sexual abuse. Finally, it was argued that that the effect of migration from the centre to the periphery of Empire has had a devastating effect on the former child migrants, particularly in terms of their personal and cultural identity.5 The Committee concluded that ‘child migration was a bad and in human terms, costly mistake’, which had been based on ‘deceit and abuse of children who had been caught up in the various schemes’.6 Accepting this report, the British Government agreed that child migration was ‘a misguided policy’ which had left a legacy of problems and suffering. It also established a one million pound fund to enable former child migrants to reunite with any surviving kith and kin.7

Despite this apparent apology from the British Government for a past policy, an international campaign condemning child migration continues. In June 2002, a $600 million class action on behalf of the descendants of former child migrants was launched in Canada against Barnardo’s, the major organization involved in child migration schemes in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. The class action was based on the abuse child migrants were said to have suffered on being sent to work on farms.8 In October 2002, an International Conference was held in New Orleans by the Child Migrants Trust, the international association of former child migrants and their families. Organized around the theme of ‘Return, Reunite and Reconcile’ its subject was ‘Child Migration: Learning the Lessons from Past Policy and Practice to Help Create a Better Safer World for Our Children and Families’.9

There has been a particular concern for those child migrants sent to Australia after the Second World War, most of whom are still living and able to recount their own stories. In 1996, the Parliament of the State of Western Australia, where most twentieth-century child migrants were sent, established a Select Committee of Enquiry.10 Much of the criticism here was directed against Catholic child migration. Allegations of physical and sexual abuse of children within Catholic institutions has been substantiated not only through oral

6 Ibid, xxviii.
8 Internet Source from PR Newswire Europe, 18 June 2002.
10 Western Australian Legislative Assembly, Select Committee into Child Migration, 1996. The enquiry was not completed and no formal recommendations were issued.
history accounts but also by the research of such Catholic historians as Barry Coldrey, who wrote the official history of the Christian Brothers scheme which brought children out from Britain to farm schools in Western Australia. The Catholic Church has also admitted such abuse in ‘Out of Court’ settlement. The focus on child abuse led to further press interest and the publication of Orphans of Empire: The Shocking Story of Child Migration to Australia by the Sydney journalist Alan Gill.

In 2001, the Senate of the Australian Parliament established its own enquiry into child migration. This provided the opportunity for many former child migrants to recount harrowing accounts of their experiences of life in Australian institutions. As with the earlier House of Commons Health Committee Report, there was strong criticism of child migration schemes. The report of the Senate Enquiry, entitled Lost Innocents, recommended that the Australian Government provide some financial resources and assistance to enable former child migrants to access their own personal and other records. The Committee also called on the Australian Government to issue a statement acknowledging that the child migration policy of former Governments was wrong and that the current Government should indicate ‘deep sorrow and regret for the psychological, social and economic harm caused to the children and the hurt and distress suffered at the hands of those who were in charge of them, particularly the children who were the victims of abuse and assault’. The Australian Government has accepted a number of the recommendations for limited financial and other assistance to enable former child migrants to access their personal records. On the question of responsibility it has refused to offer a formal apology (thus mirroring the view it has taken on the ‘stolen generation’ of indigenous children who were removed from their families and placed in institutions).

Instead, the response of the Australian Government indicated that it ‘regrets the injustices and suffering that some child migrants may have experienced as a result of past practices in relation to child migration’.

For historians of education and childhood the current controversy and debate provokes a number of questions. First, there is the issue of child abuse. While some could question the memories of some child migrants the consistent testimony from so many child migrants presented in these official enquiries seems to provide incontrovertible evidence that forms of sustained sexual and physical abuse occurred in a number of Australian institutions which received British child migrants. Most but not all of this abuse was confined to Catholic institutions. This issue also relates to the wider question of the nature of the education and care within all orphanages that existed in both England and Australia until at least the 1970s. There are questions here about the construction of childhood within institutions that require further elaboration.

11 Barry Coldrey, The Scheme: The Christian Brothers and Childcare in Western Australia (Perth: Argyle Press, 1993). See also B.M. Coldrey, “A charity which has outlived its usefulness”: the last phase of Catholic child migration, 1947–1956. History of Education, 25/4 (1996). In writing these accounts Coldrey also compiled a ‘secret history’ of sexual abuse in these institutions. Coldrey has since written on the general issue of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. Professor Tom O’Donoghue has also recently attempted to explain abuse within the Catholic Church in his 2002 ANZHES Presidential address.

12 Alan Gill, Orphans of Empire: The Shocking Story of Child Migration to Australia (Sydney: Millennium Books, 1997).

13 Australian Parliament, Senate, Community Affairs Reference Committee, Lost Innocents: Righting the Record, Recommendation 30 (of 33 Recommendations), xviii.

14 Bringing them Home: National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 1997). Some former child migrants have argued that they were a stolen white generation. As the discussion below suggests, this idea ignores the specific contexts of child migration.

On the other hand, it is also important to recognize that not all child migration schemes were similar. Indeed there are a number of published autobiographies of former child migrants that actually recount their experiences of being transplanted from the centre of Empire to the periphery as a positive move that improved many of their life chances.16

More generally, rather than being a well-kept secret of evil and abuse, as some critics have suggested, child migration—even in the twentieth century—was often celebrated by both governments and the media. During the interwar years, the child migration movement received royal patronage and support from the imperial press. In particular, the Fairbridge Farm at Pinjarra Western Australia, to which most British child migrants were sent in the 1920s and 1930s, was celebrated as the ‘finest institution for human regeneration that ever existed’. The future King George VI and his wife visited the farm in 1927 and his brother the future Edward VIII launched a major fund-raising campaign in the 1930s to extend this ideal to other parts of the British Empire.17

How can we therefore steer a new journey between past celebration and current critique? While acknowledging the hurt that it brought to many thousands of children sent overseas we need to understand child migration within specific historical contexts. But is this sufficient? What can the study of child migration inform us about not only the experiences of child migrants but also changing concepts of childhood in the twentieth century? And what does it say about the changing relationship between the centre and the periphery of Empire?18 To try and answer these questions, we need not one but a series of journeys that can link the past to the present and the centre to the periphery.

The first journey—charity, faith and hope at the imperial centre

In beginning this journey I draw first upon the recent insights of two colleagues. First, Pavla Miller has argued convincingly in her important study *Transformations of Patriarchy in the West* that, during the nineteenth century in Britain, North America and the white colonies of settlement, the patriarchal state came to redefine dependency. This process included the state asserting its rights over those of parents.19 The creation of universal and compulsory schooling systems was part of this process but there was also special provision for those defined as being of special need.

Second, Jeroen Dekker has recently reminded us of the homes for re-education of children at risk that emerged throughout Western Europe in the nineteenth century. In his study entitled *The Will to Change the Child*, he has illuminated three themes that motivated this child rescue movement. The first was the ‘method of change’ that was widely used ‘as a last resort’ in taking away children temporarily from their parents and placing them in new institutional ‘homes’ in an effort to re-educate them. The second


18 For an earlier but more limited attempt to confront these questions issues see Geoffrey Sherington, ‘Fairbridge Child Migrants’, in *Child Welfare and Social Action in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, edited by Jon Lawrence and Pat Starkey (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001), 53–81.

theme suggests that re-education drew either on the Enlightenment and the optimism and expectation that removal would lead to ‘betterment’ or the pessimism of religious philanthropy that re-education should emphasize atonement and salvation. The final theme concerns the relationship between private philanthropy and the state with the former being initially predominant in these social movements in the early nineteenth century; by the end of the century private initiative had become entwined with social policy.20

In Britain, during the nineteenth century private charity initially came to supplement the role of the state in child rescue. As in Europe, the difference in provision for the ‘delinquent’ and the ‘deprived’ was often blurred. At the centre of provision for the poor, however, was the 1834 Poor Law Act, which enshrined the principle of institutionalization to replace the older forms of outdoor relief. Under the Poor Law Act local Boards of Guardians assumed responsibility for the care and education of pauper children. Increasingly, special solutions were designed to rescue children. In the Poor Law workhouses children were separated from the adult poor. Some Poor Law Unions established special district schools for destitute children. By the early 1900s it was estimated that that there were between 70,000 and 80,000 children under the jurisdiction of the Poor Law. Less than a third of these were then in workhouses. About one-third were in district and residential schools or special homes of the Poor Law Guardians. There was also provision for boarding out children with families. The Poor Law Guardians also made use of the voluntary sector. By 1914, about one-fifth of children in the care of the state were in the Homes of principally religious bodies such as the Methodist National Children’s Homes (founded 1869) and the Waifs and Strays Society (1881). Faced by family crisis many parents also voluntarily placed their children in these homes of religious philanthropy rather than having the state intervene to assert its rights to protect children.21

As Dekker and others have suggested, re-education of the child celebrated rural ideals. The best place for re-education homes was seen to be in the countryside away from the perceived corruptions and temptations of urban life. This myth of rural regeneration for poor children from urban areas would persist throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. In Europe there was the model of such famous institutions as Mettrai in central France, an agricultural home and farm established to reform the habits of juvenile offenders and pauper children.22

In Britain religious philanthropy became closely associated with a faith in the rural ideals of Empire. A number of the child rescue charities sponsored the emigration of children with support from a number of Poor Law Unions. By the 1870s even the Catholic Church in England had formed an emigration society to send reformatory, industrial school and Poor Law children to Canada.23

20 Jeroen Dekker, The Will to Change the Child: Re-education Homes for Children at Risk in Nineteenth Century Western Europe (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2001).
The most prominent late nineteenth-century child migration schemes arose from the work of the evangelical philanthropist Thomas Barnardo. Working in the slums of East London, Barnardo had become convinced that by removing working-class children from what he saw as the temptations and sins of the city he could save them both for this life and for the after-life. Barnardo began a number of new initiatives in child rescue including establishing the Girls Village Home in the then semi-rural area of Barkingside, Essex. Here cottage homes were created with the girls being placed under the care of a cottage mother. He also supported opportunities for salvation in the wide-open spaces of the white Dominions of the British Empire by sending mainly boys to work on farms in Canada.

Even in the 1880s, there were controversies associated with such schemes of imperial child migration. Some, but far from all, of the Barnardo children were orphans or children who had been deserted by their parents. Many had been placed in institutions by their parents or relatives as a part of a strategy of survival in order to cope with crises that often faced working-class families. But whereas many re-education homes had been established as a short-term solution of removal of the child, child migration led to a more permanent and long-term separation. There were a number of charges levelled against Barnardo’s and similar organizations that children had been sent to Canada without the permission or even the knowledge of their living parents. Children as young as ten were often sent straight out to work on the farms of families who had supposedly adopted them. Various enquiries suggested that a number of the children were treated cruelly and there were a few cases of resulting deaths. Despite these revelations, the reputation of Dr Barnardo was at its height in the early twentieth century; he was praised as a social reformer who held out hopes of relieving the distress of urban life and offering opportunities for children to have a new life in the colonies. Being brought up on the prairies of Canada was seen as being preferable to a life in the workhouse.

What sustained the child migration movement was the new hope in Empire of the early twentieth century. The national efficiency concerns arising out of the Boer War and the fears of the physical degeneration of the British race prompted solutions that could apparently be found in the White Dominions of Empire. Child emigration would not only help to populate the Empire but would also relieve local ratepayers in Britain of the burden of caring for the children of the poor. From 1900, there was a growing support for state-assisted child emigration. In 1903–04, Charles Kinloch-Cooke, founding member of the publication The Empire Review and Conservative Party Member of Parliament, began a campaign to convince local government in Britain to support the ‘Emigration of State Children’. He also approached a number of the Dominion Governments suggesting that they take such children to provide proper training and also supervised inspection when they were sent out to work. While recognizing the role of philanthropic organizations such as Barnardo’s, Cooke called for direct state action to emigrate that category of children who were ‘orphan and deserted’ in Poor Law Homes — out of which, he suggested, there was perhaps a total of 6000 children who could be regarded as physically fit to send overseas. In contrast with earlier emigration schemes, he was proposing actual training in the colonies to prepare children for farm work while a system of supervision, already established in Canada following a number of earlier abuses, would provide for adequate controls.

26 For a general analysis and critique of child migration to Canada, see Parr, Labouring Children.
By the early twentieth century, child migration had thus entered a new phase of imperial concern. As Harry Hendrick has suggested, the earlier efforts to rescue and reclaim children on the periphery of society were supplanted by a new view that saw children as an investment in an imperial future.28

It was within this new context of the push towards state-supported Empire settlement that a new imperial child migration society emerged. Founded at Oxford in 1909, the Child Emigration Society, later known as the Fairbridge Society, shared some of the features of the earlier child emigration organizations. Initially it relied on philanthropic bequests to survive, creating fund-raising committees throughout Southern England. But the Society was also infused with the early twentieth-century ethic of Empire. Kingsley Fairbridge, the founder of the Society, was born and grew up in Rhodesia on the very periphery of the expanding Empire of white settlement. An early Rhodes scholar, he was attracted personally and ideologically to the imperial views of Cecil Rhodes. He was convinced that child migration could both rescue British children from what he saw as the horrors of urban working-class life and also provide them with new opportunities in the white Dominions of settlement. As such, the Fairbridge Society came to reflect a new essentially secular faith in both Empire and Empire settlement.29

The imperial state also became involved in support for Fairbridge child migration. After considering a number of possibilities, Kingsley Fairbridge accepted a grant of land from the Western Australian Government where he created a farm school in 1911. After the First World War, he returned to Britain to secure state financial support for his venture. By the early 1920s, Fairbridge child migration was receiving financial support from both the British and Australian Governments as part of the Empire settlement movement.30

‘Empire settlement’ between the wars, the peopling of the white Dominions with British settlers, was principally an initiative from the centre: a form of social imperialism arising out of concerns over political and social unrest as well as a way to maintain Britain’s position in the world. Australian governments participated in support for Empire migration, pursuing what were seen as Australian interests in accepting British migrants, often as a way of ensuring Australian access to British capital and markets. The Empire Settlement Act of 1922 consolidated these separate interests in providing financial assistance for migration with financial support for proposals for land settlement. Added to the early postwar schemes of soldier settlement in the Dominions were provisions for specific categories of migrants such as women or children sponsored by imperial philanthropic and voluntary organizations.31

This hope in Empire during the interwar years sustained child migration. Unlike many of the earlier child rescue organizations the Fairbridge Society did not maintain any residential homes in Britain. Rather it was an Empire migration-recruiting agency depending on the Poor Law, voluntary organizations and even parents for the children it sent abroad. Perhaps only one-third of the children the Society recruited from 1911 to 1939 came directly from the Poor Law and later local government authorities; the majority

29 Sherington and Jeffrey, Fairbridge, 1–79.
30 Ibid, 80–119.
31 Keith Williams, ‘“A way out of our troubles”: the politics of Empire settlement, 1920–1922’, in Emigrants and Empire: British Settlement Between the Wars, edited by Stephen Constantine (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990); Michael Roe, Australia, Britain and Migration: A Study of Desperate Hopes (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Most of the voluntary organizations supporting migration were British based. For an Australian imperial youth migration movement, see Geoffrey Sherington, ‘“A better class of boy”: the Big Brother movement, youth migration and citizenship of Empire’, Australian Historical Studies, 33/120 (2002), 267–85.
came from philanthropic societies or were directly enrolled in the child migration scheme by parents. With Canada closing its doors to child migration in 1922, Barnardo’s sent many children to the Fairbridge farm at Pinjarra Western Australia before establishing its own similar farm school in New South Wales in 1929.32

While Kingsley Fairbridge died at the early age of 39 in 1924, his mythical presence lived on helping to sustain the Fairbridge ideal. In effect the Fairbridge re-education of British children within an Australian environment built upon the nineteenth-century models. Some children arrived on the farm as young as five or six but most were aged nine to ten. They lived in cottage homes with a cottage mother in an effort to replicate family life. All received formal schooling to age fourteen. Boys then trained to become farm labourers or small farmers; girls received training as future domestic servants. The Fairbridge Society arranged employment and provided regular inspection once the children were in work.33

During the 1930s Depression, when adult migration from Britain to Australia ceased, state support for child migration continued. Even on the eve of the Second World War, the idea of sending children to Australia retained a powerful hold on the imperial mind as once again there was discussion of reviving migration agreements between Britain and Australia. The Fairbridge Society had now established its own Empire of farm schools. The original example at Pinjarra in Western Australia had been modelled on new initiatives on Vancouver Island, at Molong in central New South Wales (established by a group of former Rhodes scholars) and at Bacchus Marsh Victoria (created with funds under the will of Lady Northcote, the wife of a former Australian Governor General). There were even plans to establish a new farm school site in Rhodesia, the former home of Kingsley Fairbridge.34

**The second journey—child migration and child rescue at the periphery**

In 1939 the British child migration movement remained an imperial endeavour organized principally from the centre. To explain the continuing existence of child migration after the Second World War we must understand the changing contexts within the centre and at the periphery. The events of the war helped to transform child migration from an imperial initiative into a legacy inherited at the periphery. At the same time, the ideal of Empire migration was increasingly supplanted by the specific Australian policy of population growth. As the claims of Empire faded, concepts of philanthropic child rescue in Britain were replaced by new views of state-centred child welfare. In Australia, child migration survived as a philanthropic endeavour supported by a national migration policy.

The emergence of the postwar welfare state in Britain had implications for new concepts of childhood. The wartime evacuation of working-class children from British cities and their resettlement in the homes of ‘respectable society’ reopened a debate on the health and welfare of the young. The war also reinforced the role of psychiatry and the view that stable family relationships and particularly a bonding between mother and child were the grounding for good mental health.35 The 1944 Education Act reinforced the

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33 Sherington and Jeffery, *Fairbridge*, 120–51.
34 Ibid., 152–96.
responsibilities of the state and local authorities for the health and physical well-being of children. Of even more significance, the report of the Curtis Committee of 1945 was strongly critical of the care of the almost 125,000 British children then in homes of the state and voluntary organizations. The report led to the 1948 Children’s Act, which emphasized first the principle of boarding out children rather than placing them in residential homes and second the importance of not only adoption but restoring children to their natural parents where possible. Relationships within the family were now posited as the solution to childcare and the upbringing of children.36

In terms of the politics of child welfare the Curtis Committee and the 1948 Act signalled the potential end to British Government support for child migration. The Curtis Committee recommended that British children only be sent overseas where the Dominion Government could guarantee that their welfare and care would be comparable to that they would receive in Britain.37 After 1945, the British Home Office issued specific regulations that any organization involved with child migration would need to assume full responsibility to ensure that they provided the same care allowed for such children in Britain.38

As the recent research of Stephen Constantine, Kathleen Paul and Julie Grier has demonstrated, postwar British Governments continued to allow child migration to continue for two major reasons. First, while the overall justification for Empire settlement had ceased to exist, British Governments continued to support migration agreements with the White Dominions as a way of sustaining the status and authority of the emerging British Commonwealth of Nations. Second, there was the continuing influence of the voluntary sector in child welfare and the attachment of such organizations to child migration as a form of child rescue. The British Government thus maintained a formal commitment to child emigration during the 1940s and 1950s despite the fact that a number of British Home Office delegations to Australia found that the care of child migrants did not reach the standards now required for child welfare in Britain.39

But the major impetus for the idea of child migration had passed from centre to periphery. Australian support for child migration after 1945 has been generally explained in terms of a national commitment to a population policy. On grounds of defence and as the basis for economic growth the wartime Australian Labor Government supported increased immigration as part of postwar reconstruction. As part of this policy consideration was even given to bringing in 50,000 war orphans from Europe, a scheme that was soon abandoned because of the costs of education and housing.40 The immigration of British child migrants formed part of the overall Australian postwar policy that still favoured British migrants as a means of maintaining the basis of a British and White Australia.

38 See Sherington and Jeffery, Fairbridge, 221–2.
There was also the specific influence of religious philanthropy within both Britain and Australia. Whereas the Fairbridge Society had dominated child migration pre-1939, after 1945 many child migrants went to orphanages established by the Churches. As such they became part of the Australian child welfare system. As scholars such as Ramsland, Barbarlet and Van Krieken have shown, even from the beginning of white settlement in 1788 the Australian colonial paternal state had assumed responsibility for the education and care of the delinquent and deprived. By the twentieth century much of state welfare was being organized around the principle of boarding out children brought into care and placing them with other families. But religious philanthropy was still significant in Australian child welfare even after the Second World War. In particular, the major competitor to the role of the state in child welfare was the Australian Catholic Church. Just as a separate system of Catholic schools staffed by religious orders emerged to compete with the public schools of the state, so a separate system of Catholic orphanages run by brothers and nuns was created to rescue Catholic children. While the state tended to adopt the principle of boarding out children, the Catholic Church continued to favour institutional life as a way of saving Catholic children from what it saw as the proselytizing of the Protestant-based state.

It was this fear of Protestantism that had led the Australian Catholic Church to support British child migration. Concerned that Catholic children were being brought out under schemes such as those of the Fairbridge Society, by the late 1930s the Church had established its own farm schools in Western Australia to which Catholic migrants could be sent. With the revival of child migration after the War, the majority of early postwar child migrants were being sent not only to these farm schools but to a variety of Catholic and other orphanages throughout Australia. Whereas the older imperial organizations such as the Fairbridge Society relied on the old myths of Empire to attract new recruits, Catholic child migration survived through the international associations of religious orders and the importance of maintaining the faith.

Older forms of child rescue based on religious philanthropy thus survived on the Australian periphery even while they were being challenged at the centre. In both Britain and Canada the organized social work profession criticized the ideals of philanthropy that supported the aims of child migration. As Patrick Dunae has argued, these new concepts of child welfare were in part associated with both generational change and the challenge of the predominantly female-based social work profession to the older forms of philanthropy supported by upper class males attached to the older ideals of Empire. In Australia, traditional views of child rescue and philanthropy continued to hold sway even within government departments until at least the 1950s. It was only in the 1930s that the first steps began in the training of professional social workers. The voluntary sector and

particularly the orphanages of the Churches virtually operated outside the supervision of the state.  

The policy of post-war child migration was further complicated by the nature of the Australian federation. While the Australian federal government was responsible for migration policy, the education, care and welfare of children remained under the supervision of individual Australian states. As part of its support for British child migration, the federal government enacted the 1946 Immigration (Guardianship of Children) Act whereby the federal minister of immigration would act as the formal legal guardian of all children sent as migrants under the auspices of any government or non-government organization. In effect, these powers were delegated to individual states and then to the various organizations involved in child migration. When a number of British delegations visited Australia to inspect the institutions to which child migrants had been sent, reports went to the Australian federal government. Despite criticisms and proposals to ‘blacklist’ a number of the institutions no action resulted. 

In the end, child migration ceased because there were no longer children to send to Australia. The Fairbridge society attempted to continue by the development of a number of schemes, including bringing out single parents with their children and even finally a two-parent scheme. Other organizations such as Barnardo’s continued to bring out children to Australia with parental knowledge and consent. But by the end of the 1960s the child migration movement was over. Its legacy remained in the disrupted lives of many of the former child migrants whose despair has led to the recent enquiries.

The final journey—child migration in the century of childhoods

Writing in 1901, the Swedish educationist Ellen Key suggested that the twentieth century would be the ‘Century of the Child’. Reflecting on this prediction Jeroen Dekker has recently reminded us that this romanticized ideal of Key became the child-oriented century with growing attention to the supposed rights of children as well as the continuing growth of child study and the child-centred professions. Within this context, the twin ideals of progressive education became child protection associated with the notion of individual autonomy and development. In effect, the twentieth century remained the century of childhoods rather than any single universal and idealized vision of the child. The children of the poor and the marginalized were observed and labelled in different ways from those of the ‘respectable’ classes, including the perceived ‘respectable working class’. Children defined as being in need of care and protection had to accept intervention and direction rather than being accorded rights for being children. 

Reflecting on child welfare from the late nineteenth to the late twentieth century, Harry Hendrick has argued in *Child Welfare: England 1872–1989* that there are constant dualities in the way children on the periphery of society are represented: the dualities of body/mind and the dualities of victims/threats. During the nineteenth century there was focus on the bodies of the poor and deprived; by the mid- to late twentieth century there was increasing interest in the minds of even poor children. Equally, the children of the

45 See discussion in Sherington and Jeffery, *Fairbridge*, 211–12.
46 See Sherington and Jeffery, *Fairbridge*, 218.
47 Constantine, ‘Child migration to Australia after 1945’, 120–3.
poor were seen as victims of their family and general social circumstances; they were also perceived as a potential threat to the social and moral order.\textsuperscript{49}

The child rescue movement of the early to mid-nineteenth century sought to save the bodies and the souls if not the minds of children on the periphery of society. The movement represented such children as victims who required saving but it also raised the issue of the threat they offered. British child migration to Australia grew out of this overall movement of nineteenth-century child rescue. In place of the solution of changing children through an institution in Britain, child migration offered the prospect of a new environment in the White Dominions of Settlement. As such, the children were often portrayed as being rescued from the limited institutional life of British orphanages. At the same time, by transplanting such children to a rural environment, overseas religious philanthropy was assisting to sustain a view of childhood that shared many of the features of traditional rural apprenticeships when the young moved into another household to become rural workers. In this sense there was a perceived view of the family of Empire that could sustain all its children.

As already outlined, much of the impetus and rationale for child migration from Britain to Australia in the twentieth century initially arose from the aims and ideals of the Fairbridge Society. The childhood of Kingsley Fairbridge had been formed on the rural frontiers of Empire. From an early age he had become independent of his own family. Through the creation of the Fairbridge Society he was both reflecting his own experience and expressing his imperial and paternalist hope for the children he was bringing to Australia. In his inaugural address founding the Society at Oxford in 1909 he reflected on his hopes for the future, indicating that he was proposing to establish a society for ‘the furtherance of emigration from the ranks of young children, of the orphan and waif class, to the Colonies’.\textsuperscript{50} In a new environment they would be transformed into good and useful citizens, in the process relieving Britain of its ‘surplus population’ and satisfying the colonial demand for more population, and particularly agricultural settlers. He proposed to take out children from the age of eight to ten before they had attained the taint of ‘professional pauperism’ and before their physique had become stunted under adverse conditions in Britain. His ‘School of Agriculture’ would not be an institution such as the workhouse but a ‘loose collection of farms’ with a central point for the corporate life of the community. The staff of the school would be ‘gentlemen and gentlewomen of refinement and culture’. The education in the school would include physical culture and ‘mental education’, emphasizing various principles of agriculture with a curriculum extended over ten years with half of each year’s work devoted to theory and half to practical farming. Finally, the children would receive also ‘moral’ education on both their physical training and their formal studies and with provision for instruction in their own particular religious denomination. The aim of the education would be independence, with the children being encouraged to do as much as possible for themselves. To develop responsibility he intended to hand over the management of the school to a council composed of the pupils. For the first five or six years there would be a common curriculum for all but then opportunity to specialize. On leaving school each would have a certain amount of capital. He expected a few boys to become small farmers immediately but the majority would require billets with local farmers while a few would probably join the military or the police. While the enterprise was designed principally for males, he also intended that girls would receive an


\textsuperscript{50} Sherington and Jeffery, \textit{Fairbridge}, 25.
education that would enable them to find work as nurses, governesses, housekeeper, cooks and domestics.\textsuperscript{51}

This optimistic imperial dream of a new journey in life for child migrants could never be fully realized. Following the death of Fairbridge, and with the growth of numbers of child migrants, even the Fairbridge ideal became less personal in terms of human relations and more institutionalized in form and practice. Despite the vision of a unified Empire of settlement there were also conflicting interests between the centre and periphery. In Australia, as in Canada, there was initially little sympathy for children represented as coming from British slums. Child migrants could assist rural development but some feared that they were a threat to the British race overseas. With the new eugenic concerns of the early twentieth century such children were constantly scrutinized for physical and mental deficiencies.\textsuperscript{52}

As for the child migrants themselves, opportunities still remained limited. In Canada, as Joy Parr has pointed out, rural life in the Dominions in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries offered some better prospects than were available to many working-class children in British cities. But the opportunities were never as great as the promoters of child migration had suggested.\textsuperscript{53} In Australia, some of the early child migrants who arrived with Kingsley Fairbridge prior to and just after the First World War became small farmers during the 1920s, indirectly assisted by the import of British capital, which would soon leave Australia in debt to Britain. But even these early hopes for success were soon ended. The Depression of the 1930s destroyed the lives of many former child migrants, ending the hopes of creating a small rural yeomanry and leaving many stranded without the support of kin and community.\textsuperscript{54}

Eventually, child migration came to share some of the worst features of the British orphanages from which many children had come. Indeed it was ironic that in its final phase child migration returned to many of the features of nineteenth-century child rescue. And this occurred at the very moment when centre and periphery were following separate paths, not only in the area of child welfare but in terms of national identities as both Britain and Australia began to shed the umbrella of Empire. For many child migrants the result would be a succession of personal crises.

The history of British child migration thus has many different dimensions. It is a history that must be understood in term of changing contexts and changing relationships between Britain and Australia. To conclude we should reflect therefore on its human dimensions within these changes between centre and periphery. A glimpse of the impact on individual lives can be seen in the stories of just two child migrants. These particular life stories reflect the overall changes in child migration but also reveal personal journeys between the centre and periphery.

The first journey was that of Jean Halls, who arrived under the Fairbridge scheme prior to the Second World War. She has recently published her autobiography under the title \textit{Miracle of Fairbridge}. Born in London in 1922 Joan was the daughter of a furniture worker who in his sixties married a much younger woman. An accident at work had damaged his eyesight and led to his losing his job. He is then believed to have started a

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid, 25–6.
\textsuperscript{52} For the eugenicist arguments against child migrants in Canada see Patricia Rooke and R.L. Schnell, \textit{Discarding the Asylum: From Child Rescue to the Welfare State in English-Canada (1800–1950)} (Latham, MD: University Press of America, 1983), 222–73; for Australia see Sherington and Jeffery, \textit{Fairbridge}, 90–1.
\textsuperscript{53} See Parr, \textit{Labouring Children}, 123–41.
\textsuperscript{54} Sherington, ‘Fairbridge Child Migrants’, 65–76.
second-hand furniture business but became bankrupt. Evicted from the family lodgings for non-payment of rent he ended up in the Poor Law Workhouse with his young children while his wife went to work as a waitress. When his wife simply ‘disappeared’ Barnardo’s agreed to accept his two youngest children, Joan aged two and her sister Kath aged four. After eight years at the Barnardo’s Girls Village Home in Essex both parents agreed to the two sisters being sent to the Fairbridge Farm at Pinjarra, Western Australia. They came to Australia during the period when child migration was being celebrated as an achievement of Empire.55

As a child in Britain, Joan’s life at Barnardo’s had provided physical comfort and protection. Eagerly anticipated but rare parental visits meant confronting ‘perfect strangers’. Migration thus involved little of the trauma of the separation from kin. Indeed, in the Depression of the 1930s, Australia seemed to promise unbounded opportunities:

The wide open spaces with so much added freedom, plus the feeling of a family in the cottage changed our lives. There were a few children who had thrust into the institution life, just a few weeks before boarding the ship to come here. These are the ones who are still unhappy at being a child migrant. Who knows what would have happened to us had we stayed in Britain? I am sure that we may not have been given the education, training, or closeness of family, which we gained at Fairbridge. We were so lucky at having all these benefits, plus a yearly seaside holiday. What more could one ask for?56

Yet she also admits that a childhood in institutions leaves long-lasting effects:

One of the few drawbacks in all of these children’s homes, no matter how good the people in charge, was the lack of personal contact. This makes relating to other people difficult. The earlier perception that we were different and people’s attitude to us, makes us tend to be suspicious of their motives, and unwilling to trust them when they wanted to be normally friendly.57

At least Joan had a Fairbridge ‘Godfather’ who paid for her to attend high school. Sent out to work as a domestic she was later employed on the land and during the Second World War joined the Australian Women’s Army and served in the medical corps. Married in 1946, she now has her own extended family as well as associations with the ‘family’ of former Fairbridge child migrants.

The second journey in life of a post-Second World War child migrant provides a marked contrast. This account comes from the evidence given to the Australian Senate Enquiry in November 2000. While the submission is personally signed, for reasons of privacy I shall refer to it here as the submission of TGD. This was a journey initially similar to many other earlier child migrants such as Joan Halls yet in outcomes vastly different from what Kingsley Fairbridge had outlined.

The mother of TGD died of pneumonia during the Second World War when he was 18 months old. His father remarried almost immediately a widow who had four children. The newly married couple placed TGD and one of his brothers into care with the Sisters of Nazareth in Southampton. His father and new wife kept another brother with them as he was already 10 years old and could help with menial tasks around the home; his sister was similarly employed as a housemaid in the newly constituted family home. TGD remembers being moved from orphanage to orphanage from Southampton to Cardiff and then back to orphanages in Southern England. He now believes that this was a deliberate effort to lose him in the system of care of the Sisters of Nazareth; his father had married

55 Joan Halls, Miracle of Fairbridge (Carlisle: Western Australia, Hesperian Press, 1999), 1–5.
56 Ibid., vi.
57 Ibid.
a non-Catholic and the nuns would therefore not wish that he be returned to the paternal home. Most of all, his years in orphanages in England TGD regards as ‘the worst period of his life’:

The Nuns were the cruellest people I have ever come across in my life time, as it was the only treatment I had ever had I thought it normal. Discipline was absolute and Catholicism was paramount. If the nuns didn’t catch you doing anything wrong you knew God would punish you. Fear was something I knew as a child. We were undernourished (in all fairness that was probably due to the War). Both physically and mentally, when I arrived in Australia at 13 yrs I was developed equivalently to a 9 yr old.58

According to TGD his particular journey to Australia began when:

Some people came to the Orphanage and asked who wants to go to Australia. A few of us put up our hands. We didn’t know what Australia was. It could have been down the street or another type of orphanage. So I volunteered. I remember being asked what do rabbits eat and where do potatoes grow. I answered lettuce and in the ground. That apparently qualified me as a bright Pom worthy of entry to Australia.59

On arrival in Perth his party of child migrants were divided into three groups. Some stayed at Clontarf Orphanage in Perth, the smaller children went to another orphanage, Castledare, and the remainder to the two Christian Brothers’ farm schools, Bindoon and Tardun. TGD now regards himself as being lucky to be sent to Tardun rather than Bindoon, where many of the cases of sustained physical and sexual abuse occurred. But the education and training at Tardun even in the 1950s still revealed an obsession with the sinful bodies rather than the minds of the young migrants. Dormitories were divided into special areas for bedwetters, a common perceived affliction of British child migrants. While there was formal schooling, much of the time of the young migrants was taken up with the building of the farm orphanage itself. At weekends there was road building. All the young migrants worked in the 40-degree heat of Western Australia. Yet to TGD, ‘In general life at Tardun was great in comparison to England’. While there was work on the farm there was now little pretence that this would lead to a life of independent rural yeomanry. Nor was any effort made to supervise the lives of these young migrants into adulthood.

When I left Tardun I received a set of clothes (money provided by the Child Welfare Dept) and the Brother gave me five bob and said you are now on your own so make the best of it. I did. I have thoroughly enjoyed my life in this wonderful country Australia. I am a neutralised British Object (Naturalised Australian). And am proud to have fought for Australia in Vietnam. I have a dinky dye Aussie accent and will always call myself a proud Australian. I am married have a wonderful son, own our home and retired on Australian pension. So what is all the whingeing about.

The ‘whingeing’ lies, TGD suggests, in what he now sees as deceit, subterfuge, embarrassment and shame. Deceit by the nuns who first told him that his mother and father were killed in the blitz. Subterfuge on the part of the Church authorities when in later life he tried to seek out his family background. Shame and embarrassment when on joining the Australian Army at age 24 to learn a trade he found he had to produce a birth certificate. It was the Army that extracted a birth certificate from the Catholic authorities. At the age of 24, he now learnt his full name at birth. On marrying in 1963 he still was unable to fill out parental details. It was not until 1989 that his son, visiting Britain, was able to obtain a full birth certificate for TGD with details of both parents.

58 Submission No. 59 to the Australian Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee, Inquiry into Child Migration.
59 Ibid.
The life stories of Joan Halls and TGD capture much of the personal and lived experiences of child migrants from Britain to Australia in the twentieth century. Despite the recent representations of child migrants as victims these are accounts of survivors in journeys between centre and periphery. They are a reminder of how suffering and the efforts to relieve suffering can have so many different contexts and meanings. As we ponder the impact of the past on individual lives, we should also acknowledge that while the age of British child migration has ended, the suffering of children continues. With the decline of the postwar welfare state in both Britain and Australia there is a new concern as to the fate of those on the margins and the periphery. Moral panics still abound about the fate of the young while abuse continues in both family and other contexts. Despite those who preach the apparent death of childhood in a new global electronic age, the child-savers remain with us. And at least one small lesson we can draw from the history of British child migration is that the grand designs of those who seek to change the lives of children can not only transform but also destroy personal pasts and influence the future of individuals in quite unforeseen and unintended ways.