

Interstate movement of Northern Territory children

1930s – 1970s

Details

Children from the Northern Territory were moved interstate by the government from the 1930s through to the late 1970s. Aboriginal children considered at the time to be of mixed descent were transferred interstate for training. During World War II many children from mission stations and other residential care facilities were evacuated to southern states. After the war, because of a lack of institutions for State children and children with disabilities in the Northern Territory, the Welfare Branch and its successors continued to make arrangements with interstate Homes for the placement of children.

The movement of children under the care of the government from the Northern Territory to other states was a practice which began in the 1930s and continued through to the late 1970s and potentially beyond.

Although the government initially focused on transferring Aboriginal children, referred to at the time as 'half-caste', it later extended the practice to other children in its care. This included non-Aboriginal children committed to State care for various reasons, and children with disabilities.

Transfer of children interstate prior to World War II

In June 1934, while the Northern Territory was under the control of the Commonwealth Government, the Minister for the Interior, Mr Perkins became concerned about the future of Aboriginal children of 'mixed descent'. He arranged for articles to be placed in newspapers across the country calling for individuals and institutions interstate to make offers to take in 50 children from The Bungalow at Alice Springs and the Myilly Point Home, also known as the Darwin Half Caste Home. His aim was that they would be taken into families or institutions, trained to become citizens and absorbed into the white community. The advertisements sparked the interest of an institution in Victoria as well as from a number of white families. A 1934 article in the Sydney Morning Herald describes this reaction:

An immediate response has followed the appeal of the Minister for the Interior (Mr. Perkins) for the care, by private persons or Institutions, in the more closely settled parts of Australia, of 50 children of half-caste and white parents who are now housed at Alice Springs and Darwin. Mr. Perkins said today that two institutions, one of which was in Victoria, had offered to care for the 50 children, while several private persons had offered to take charge of individuals. These offers would be considered by his department, which appreciated the benefits which the children would gain in surroundings away from their present aboriginal environment.

Although the Aboriginals Ordinance 1918 did not specifically cover the removal of children to another state, the extreme powers of the Chief Protector over Aboriginal people and a number of sections of the Act did allow it to happen legally. These powers continued through successive amended legislation.

A file in the National Archives related to the transfer of 'light coloured children' from Northern Territory to 'southern states' which encompasses the period 1952 to 1958 includes correspondence referring to a 'policy' of interstate removal as early as the 1930s:

It appears that in the early 1930s a policy was enunciated whereby all octoroon children in the Territory were to be transferred to southern denominational institutions with a view to their ultimate adoption by white parents.

A letter on the file refers to a number of children who were moved interstate in the 1930s and who were still maintained there in 1952. The group included two girls placed in the Church of England Home for Children in Brighton, Victoria in 1939; a girl placed at the Sacred Heart Orphanage at Crystal Brook in South Australia; and two children with disabilities, one placed at St Gabriel's School for Deaf Boys at Castle Hill, NSW and one at the Parkside Home (Asylum) in South Australia.

It is not yet clear how many children were transferred interstate prior to World War II.

Evacuation during World War II

World War II and the bombing of Darwin by the Japanese in 1942 led to the organised evacuation of Aboriginal children, considered at the time to be of 'mixed-decent', and non-Aboriginal children from the Northern Territory. Children were evacuated from various missions to locations in the southern states, including Carrieton, Balaklava and Hawker in South Australia and Mulgoa and Otford in New South Wales. Some of these children were returned to the Northern Territory in 1946. Others remained interstate.

Post war movement of Aboriginal children

In the early 1950s a new policy and practice for the transfer of Aboriginal children from the Northern Territory was being developed by the Commonwealth Government in conjunction with southern states. This arrangement was seen as a way of advancing the assimilation of "light coloured children". An initial survey of potential institutions and arrangements was made in South Australia, it being regarded as:

the most accessible Southern state from the Territory and therefore more likely to be used in the placement of light coloured children..

The passing of the 1953 Welfare Ordinance provided definite legislative power to the Director of Welfare to place Aboriginal children interstate. Under the new Ordinance the Director, or a Welfare Officer, had the power "to take a ward from a place in the Territory to a place outside the Territory". Although the legislation contained the condition that this did not apply to children under the age of 14, who by removal interstate would be separated from their parents, the legislation allowed this condition to be overridden if the Administrator authorised it. This legislation led to many Aboriginal children being sent interstate for care and education. By 1956, the scheme was administered by the NT Welfare Branch.

While arrangements were being made with the welfare departments in South Australia, New South Wales and Queensland, discussion began about what the respective responsibilities of the Commonwealth, the NT Welfare Branch and the States would be with regard to selection of Homes and the supervision of the children.

It would seem to be necessary, however, to take into account the functions, rights and responsibilities of State Government Departments of Child Welfare. Care may need to be exercised in order that there is no appearance of entry by Commonwealth Government officers into a State Government's arc of activities.

Commonwealth Government Officers could perhaps at your request appropriately exercise supervision in respect of these children as belonging within the care of your Department. It seems, however, that when the children are removed from the Northern Territory into a State, the necessary supervision may more suitably be exercised by that State Government's child welfare officers.

While the Commonwealth retained ultimate responsibility for the children, the State departments assisted with checking of potential foster homes and institutions and the regular supervision of children placed in the state.

A document on the same NAA file, dated May 1957, provides a list of the names of 16 children ranging in age from 5 to 16 who were placed interstate in NSW, SA and Victoria. Of the 16 children, four were in foster homes and the rest were living in institutions. The following institutions were listed:

- Sisters of the Good Shepherd, Ashfield, Sydney, NSW
- Aborigines Inland Mission Bible Training Institute, Singleton NSW
- "Dalmar" Children's Home, Carlingford, NSW
- Dominican Convent, Cabra, SA
- Central Methodist Mission Homes for Children, Magill, SA
- "Orana" Peace Memorial Homes for Children, Burwood, Vic

While many children committed to State Care were sent interstate by the Welfare Branch for care and training, others came under a new scheme referred to as the Part Aboriginal Training Scheme. Under this program, children were mostly selected by missionaries and the Welfare Branch to go interstate for education. It is not clear how much input parents and the children themselves had in this decision. The children were sent to a wide variety of schools. Many lived in interstate institutions and some were placed in foster care. The scheme also extended to young Aboriginal people with disabilities.

Post war transfer of non-Aboriginal children

Prior to the mid-1950s, there were no institutions in the Northern Territory for non-Aboriginal children who came into State Care. Children who were committed into care as neglected or who had committed offences were placed into foster care or in the vast majority of cases, transferred to institutions interstate. There were also no facilities or respite care for children with disabilities. For this reason, all children with disabilities were sent interstate, the majority to institutions in South Australia such as the Somerton Crippled Children's Home, the Strathmont Centre, Parkside Mental Hospital (later Glenside Hospital), The SA Institution for the Blind and Deaf and Dumb (later Townsend House for Deaf and Blind Children) and Minda Home. On those occasions where the institutions in SA were full some children with disabilities were kept in prisons in the Northern Territory.

The 1955 Northern Territory Administration report commented on this issue:

Over the period the State Children's Council has been confronted with a number of problems, the chief of which is the lack of a reception home where destitute and neglected children could be accommodated pending their removal to foster homes or suitable institutions.

That year, 32 children came into care, 9 European and 23 of Aboriginal descent. Only four of these were placed in foster care. While some of the Aboriginal children were placed in mission dormitories or Homes in the Northern Territory specifically established to take in children of 'mixed descent', the rest were sent to six different institutions in South Australia, Queensland and Victoria. These were:

- St Joseph's Orphanage, Largs Bay, South Australia
- Farr House, Mitcham, South Australia
- St Francis House, Semaphore, South Australia
- Salesian School, South Australia
- Tufnell Home, Queensland
- Bayswater Vocational Training Centre, The Basin, Victoria

Establishment of institutions in the Northern Territory

Even after the establishment of Receiving Homes from 1956 onwards, many children were placed there, before appearing in court, and then were sentenced to interstate institutions.

It seems that there was no need for separate legislation to cover the transfer of non-Aboriginal children interstate as it was covered in the 1958 Child Welfare Ordinance 1958. Under Part III, Section 18 of the Ordinance, the Administrator could proclaim institutions in other States as institutions for the reception and accommodation of Northern Territory children:

18. The Administrator may, subject to such conditions as are prescribed and to such further conditions as he thinks fit, approve a mission station, reformatory, orphanage, school, home or other establishment, whether within the Northern Territory or not, as an institution for the purposes of this Ordinance.

The practice of moving children interstate continued through the 1960s and 1970s despite the gradual development of new residential care options in the Northern Territory, including secure care centres for children who had committed offences and cottage homes for children committed for other reasons. The lack of care options for children with disabilities continued into the late 1970s which meant that children with physical or intellectual disabilities continued to be sent south.

The legacy of the transfer of children interstate

Many children who were sent interstate never returned to the Northern Territory. For children who were placed interstate as babies or infants, it is possible that they are unaware of their Northern Territory origins.

In relation to records, children who were placed interstate may find that there are records about them spread across different jurisdictions. Children interstate were visited by State-based social workers as well as a welfare officer employed by the NT welfare branch. This means that a child may have a NT Welfare Branch file, reports among Commonwealth records in files related to children sent south, as well as a record in an Admission register and information in other documents kept by the interstate institution.

More info

Related Entries

Related Organisations

- [Sydney City Mission \(1862 - 1996\)](#)
- [Convent of the Good Shepherd, Abbotsford \(1863 - 1974\)](#)
In the late 1960s, 13 girls were sent from the Northern Territory to the Convent of the Good Shepherd, Abbotsford.
- [Cabra Dominican Convent Boarding House \(1868 - 1999\)](#)
- [South Australian Institution for the Blind and Deaf and Dumb \(1874 - 1946\)](#)
- [Church of England Homes for Children \(1894 - c. 1968\)](#)
- [Bayswater Boys' Homes \(1897 - 1987\)](#)

- [Dalmar \(1900 - current\)](#)
- [Tufnell Home \(1901 - 1993\)](#)
- [St Joseph's Orphanage Largs Bay \(1907 - 1960s\)](#)
- [Minda Home \(1911 - 1976\)](#)
- [Church of England Girls' Home, Carlingford \(1913 - 1970s\)](#)
- [Home of the Good Shepherd \(1913 - 1969\)](#)
- [Parkside Mental Hospital \(1913 - 1967\)](#)
- [The Bungalow \(1914 - 1942\)](#)
- [Church Missionary Society of Australia \(1916 - current\)](#)
- [Church of England Boys' Home \(1917 - 1976\)](#)
- [Milleewa Home for Boys \(1919 - 1966\)](#)
- [St Gabriel's School \(1922 - 1973\)](#)
- [Methodist Children's Homes \(1924 - 1960\)](#)
- [Myilly Point Home \(1924 - 1939\)](#)
- [Catholic Girls' Home Parkside \(1930 - 1943\)](#)
- [Farr House \(1935 - 1982\)](#)
- [Port Keats Mission \(1935 - 1978\)](#)
- [Somerton Crippled Children's Home \(1939 - 1976\)](#)
- [Crusaders Camp Mission Hostel \(1940? - 1946?\)](#)
- [Avoca Nursing Home \(1940? - c. 1986\)](#)
- [Sacred Heart Orphanage \(1940 - 1979\)](#)
- [Croker Island Mission \(1940 - 1968\)](#)
- [St John's Boys Town \(1941 - 1954\)](#)
- [Church Missionary Society Home for Half-Castes, Mulgoa \(1942 - c. 1947\)](#)
- [George Brown College \(1942? - 1946?\)](#)
- [Convent of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, Carrieton \(1942 - 1945\)](#)
- [Balaklava Aboriginal Welfare Institution \(1942 - 1946\)](#)
- [St Francis House \(1946 - c. 1961\)](#)
- [Townsend House Schools for Deaf and Blind Children \(1946 - 1970\)](#)
- [Retta Dixon Home \(1946 - 1982\)](#)
- [Warrawee, Grange \(1950 - 1975\)](#)
- [Orana, the Peace Memorial Homes for Children \(1953 - 1988\)](#)
- [Aborigines Inland Mission Bible Training College \(1953 - 1973\)](#)
- [Winbin \(1954 - 1975\)](#)
- [The Boarding section of the Salesian School \(1954 - 1984\)](#)
- [St Michael's Church of England War Memorial Children's Home \(1957 - 1970?\)](#)
- [Far North Children's Health Scheme \(1957 - 1975?\)](#)
- [Lentara \(1960 - 1977\)](#)
- [Glenside Hospital \(1967 - 2007\)](#)
- [Part Aboriginal Education Scheme \(1970s\)](#)
- [Townsend House for Deaf and Blind Children \(1970 - 1999\)](#)
- [Strathmont Centre \(1971 - 2014\)](#)

Related Archival Collections

- [Church Missionary Society \(New South Wales\) - Records \(1893 - 2003\)](#)

Related Legislation

- [Welfare Ordinance 1953, Northern Territory \(1957 - 1964\)](#)
- [Child Welfare Ordinance 1958, Northern Territory \(1959 - 1984\)](#)

Related Archival Series

- [List of Northern Territory evacuees, World War II \(1942\)](#)

Related Archival Items

- [Methodist Church of Australia - Care of half caste children \(Croker Island Mission\) Part 1 \(1940 - 1948\)](#)
- [Roman Catholic half caste mission, Melville Isle and Convent of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, Carrieton, South Australia \(1942 - 1970\)](#)

- [Leprosy - Medical surveys of coloured evacuees from NT - Cases admitted to southern institutions and maintenance of \(1942 - 1952\)](#)
- [Aborigines' Inland Mission, Retta Dixon Home - Northern Territory \(1942 - 1957\)](#)

Resources

- Marsden, Beth, *Aboriginal mobility, scholarships and Anglican Grammar schools in Melbourne, 1958-65*, Australian Historical Studies, 2020
- [Daisy Ingram and Bob Ingram interviewed by Karen George in the Bringing Them Home Oral History Project \[sound recording\]. \(2001\)](#), 9 April 2001
- McAloon, Dan, [War comes to Australia, seen through a missionary's eyes](#), The Catholic Weekly, 20 April 2008
- [Mission to Mansion](#), The Australian Women's Weekly, 12 June 1957

Other Resources



Title: List of Northern Territory evacuees, World War II (1942)

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