

Forgotten or Ignored Australians? The Australian Museums Sector's Marginalisation of the *Inside* Exhibition

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Dr Wayne Chamley from Broken Rites, in his oral history recorded by the National Library of Australia, and Senator Claire Moore in the documentary film *Apology and Beyond* (2012), have both argued that Australia has the highest rate of institutionalisation of children in the world. Of the estimated 500,000 children who experienced institutionalised 'care' in Australia in the twentieth century, approximately 50,000 were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children who are known as the 'Stolen Generations' and 10,000 were Former Child Migrants from Britain or Malta. However, there is little acknowledgement that the vast majority of institutionalised children were Australian-born, non-Indigenous children: the 'Forgotten Australians'.

In 2009, the Australian Government, in an attempt to draw attention to this disavowed history, commissioned the National Museum of Australia (NMA) to create a touring exhibition about Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants. Subsequently, *Inside: Life in Children's Homes and Institutions*, a temporary exhibition, which I co-curated, represented the experiences of the Stolen Generations, Child Migrants and Forgotten Australians. It opened at the NMA in November 2011 and closed in February 2012. Despite being designed for a small gallery space of only 200 square metres and fully-funded by the Australian Government to tour nationally, to date only the Melbourne and Queensland Museums have agreed to host the *Inside* exhibition.

At the time of writing this chapter the NMA is involved with associated discussions with the Western Australian Museum, in the hope of securing a contract. Even if this cultural institution also hosts *Inside*, the total number of three agreements will exist in stark contrast with the number of exhibited representations of other versions of the history of the institutionalisation of children. For example, the exhibition *On their Own: Britain's Child Migrants* created by the Australian National Maritime Museum, has been hosted by six museums throughout Australia. The ongoing module concerning the Stolen Generations entitled *Losing our Children* is included in the permanent Gallery of the First Australians within the NMA. These exhibitions display crucial chapters of Australia's history. However, a significant number of publicly funded Australian museums have chosen to exclude the experiences of the majority of those children who experienced institutionalised care in Australia – the 'Forgotten Australians'. Further, a submission by members of the Alliance of Forgotten Australians to discuss, at the Museums Australia 2013 Conference, the lack of nation-wide take-up of the *Inside* exhibition was rejected by the conference organisers. What may account for this marginalisation of the representation of the Forgotten Australians by most Australian museums?

The problem of government intrusion

The 2009 commission of *Inside* by the Australian Government, led at the time by Labor prime minister, Kevin Rudd, marked the first occasion that the NMA had been directed by the Government to create a specific exhibition. Museums may take a dim view of governments directing their content. Whilst many Australian museums receive government funding, they are subject to separate governance arrangements, being led by a board or a council. These are statutory bodies with powers delineated by a specific act of parliament. Currently, such independence holds a particular resonance for the Australian museums sector following the history wars of

the Howard Government. In 1996 then Prime Minister John Howard, during his Sir Robert Menzies lecture, condemned a 'black arm view of history' arguing that opponents of the legacy of the Liberal Party were using political correctness to write Australia's history. Instead, Howard wanted to ensure that Australia's 'heroic achievements' were emphasised. In addition, throughout his term as prime minister he refused to apologise to the Stolen Generations. His decree was followed by determined control of the NMA. In his presentation at the 2004 Australasian Political Studies Association Conference, Greg McCarthy summarised the way in which Howard exercised this control. The NMA opened in 2001 and Howard appointed to its Council his colleagues who shared his ideological views. Nevertheless, Museum Director Dawn Casey insisted on representing a pluralistic view of history. However, Council members leaked their objections to the media, which, as a result, became the principle battleground of the history wars as journalists publically debated the worth of the NMA's work. In 2003 the Council did not renew Casey's contract.

As a result of the history wars, the Australian museums sector may now feel sensitive to any direct government guidance on exhibition content. However, if the museum sector has refused the opportunity to host the touring exhibition *Inside* simply because it was a government initiative, then this response may demonstrate a lack of understanding of why Rudd promised a touring exhibition about the history of out-of-home 'care' for children. Also, the NMA had hitherto turned its back on an opportunity to independently create an exhibition on this subject.

Since 2003, Leonie Sheedy, the co-founder of the Care Leavers of Australia Network (CLAN), repeatedly contacted the NMA requesting an exhibition about the experiences of those who experienced out-of-home 'care'. This appeal was also included in CLAN'S submission to the Senate Inquiry into

Children in Institutional Care. Senator Andrew Murray spoke to this written recommendation during one of the scheduled official hearings as part of the Inquiry:

It seems odd to me that more space and attention is given to dinosaurs than to half a million Australians.

Sheedy agreed:

Get the dinosaurs out of the Australian museum [in Sydney], for once, and dedicate it to orphanages and children. Let our histories be visible.

Here a general comparison between natural and social histories had been made, at a Senate inquiry hearing no less. In addition, Murray's observation of the vast number of institutionalised children could be seen as an argument that the National Museum showed poor judgement in refusing to engage with CLAN given that Australia institutionalised thousands of its own children at an alarmingly high rate.

Recommendation 35 of the Senate Inquiry's report (2004) formalised the Committee's will to redress this lack of understanding:

That the National Museum of Australia be urged to consider establishing an exhibition, preferably permanent, related to the history and experiences of children in institutional care, and that such an exhibition have the capacity to tour as a travelling exhibition.

The then director, Craddock Morton, took two years to respond to CLAN's request for an exhibition. His written reply, in 2005, demonstrated that the NMA would not rock Howard's boat:

As you are no doubt aware the Government is yet to table its response to the recommendations outlined in the Forgotten

Australians report. We understand that the response is expected within the next few months. Until the Government's views are known the National Museum is not in a position to formally act on the recommendation.

At the 2007 federal election, the Australian Labor Party defeated the Howard Government. In 2008 Prime Minister Rudd delivered the National Apology to the Stolen Generations. In the following year, at the launch of Thomas Keneally's book *The Australians*, Rudd called a truce to the history wars: 'We can all engage in the debates about the complexities of the good, the bad, the ugly'. None of these developments prompted the NMA to revisit the idea of an exhibition about institutionalised children. As a result, it took Rudd, in a subsequent National Apology, on this occasion to the Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants, to declare that his government would fund Recommendation 35. Legally, the NMA had the right to refuse this initiative but conceded to Rudd's proposal on the basis that it was unwise to refuse government funding in an era of tight budgets.

Howard's attack on the NMA as opposed to a recommendation by a Senate Community Affairs References Committee to reveal the history of children on out-of-home 'care' perhaps illustrates the need for the Australian museums sector to understand the difference between museums being forced to endure government intrusion, on one hand, and on the other, being responsive to Australian people. The Senate Committee comprised representatives from six separate political parties. The recommendation for an exhibition, then, unlike the history wars, did not come from a prime minister with a monologic agenda, but was the result of a democratic process.

At his plenary address at the 2011 FIHRM conference in Liverpool, UK, David Fleming – CEO of National Museums Liverpool and President of the

Federation of the International Human Rights Museums (FIHRM) – argued that museums carry an increased responsibility to break silences of the past. Because museums are held in high regard by the public, they can expect to be approached by interest groups who want their experiences and histories represented. The Australian Government’s support for an exhibition and the preceding push by Forgotten Australians to have their experiences represented, substantiates Fleming’s observation. Additionally, in 2009 in Mexico, the International Committee on Management (INTERCOM) of the International Council of Museums ratified the following declaration:

INTERCOM believes that it is a fundamental responsibility of museums, wherever possible, to be active in promoting diversity and human rights, respect and equality for people of all origins, beliefs and background.

The fully-funded *Inside* exhibition provided an opportunity for Australian museums to realise this declaration.

Consensus history

Can the low level of acceptance of *Inside* by Australian museums be explained by the absence of Forgotten Australians from consensus history? Laurajane Smith in her book *Uses of Heritage* (2006) notes that cultural institutions promote ‘a consensus version of history’ in order to ‘regulate cultural and social tensions in the present’. Who and what concerning this particular chapter in history are not acknowledged?

It is estimated that in Australia in the twentieth century, 88 per cent of institutionalised children were Australian-born, non-Indigenous children – the ‘Forgotten Australians’. The Senate Report *Forgotten Australians* (2004) notes that children were placed into ‘care’ for various reasons. There was a lack of income security for single parents. Some parents succumbed to

physical or mental illness and were unable to care for their children. Some children were abandoned or lost a parent from death or separation. Others were victims of domestic abuse. Some were taken into 'care' simply because a loving family member who cared for them was deemed unfit by the state.

In its submission to the Victorian Government's Inquiry into the Handling of Child Abuse by Religious and Other Organisations (2012-13), CLAN notes that there were over 800 orphanages and children's Homes or institutions in Australia in the twentieth century. In its publication *Forgotten Australians: Supporting Survivors of Childhood Institutional Care in Australia* (2011), the Alliance for Forgotten Australians notes that institutionalised children suffered long lasting separation from siblings. Many children were lied to about their parents being deceased when they were alive or that their parents did not love them despite failed attempts by parents to visit their children. Physical deprivation, hunger and inadequate dental care were common. Some children were the subjects of medical testing. Others were the victims of sustained brutality, including solitary confinement, cruel beatings and humiliation. A large number of children experienced sexual abuse. Children generally did not receive an adequate education and, instead, were forced to work on farms or in laundries. Many had their names and identities changed by institutional staff.

As a result of these childhood abuses, Forgotten Australians define themselves as survivors. Many have fought emotional adversity and physical scars or injuries to participate in a society that abandoned them as children. Long-term effects of institutionalised abuse may include social isolation, illiteracy, a lack of trust of others and difficulty in forming long-term relationships and in parenting their own children, self-harm, substance abuse and mental illness. Poor institutional record keeping means that some adult survivors do not know their original names or identities of biological

family members. The challenge in identifying these consequences is that it stigmatises and shames these survivors. Therefore, it is important to shift attention to the causal factors that produced these effects as 'care' leaver Dr Joanna Penglase explained in her testimony to the 2004 Senate Inquiry:

We are emotionally disabled – that is what has happened to us – and it is visible unfortunately in ways that get us more and more stigmatised. We then get labelled 'mentally ill' or 'alcoholic' or 'bad parent', but that is the effect of emotional instability inflicted on you as a child. So it is about throwing some light on all of this.

Such a shift may be assisted by inclusive and publicly acknowledged narratives about institutionalised childhood abuse in Australia. This requires a revision of the current consensus version of history to include those non-Indigenous, Australian born children who comprised the vast majority of those who were institutionalised. A survey into Queensland's Forgotten Australians conducted by Ian Watson and RPR Consulting in 2011, disclosed the difficulty that some Forgotten Australians have in accessing essential services, simply because providers do not acknowledge their childhood circumstances. One survey respondent noted:

There is no way anyone is going to ever believe us. Even now after the apology & [sic] all that have been in the papers some professionals & also doctors, nurses & social security still have never heard of us. A doctor told me once to get out of his office & stop lying.

The perception of subsumption of the rights of others

Any push for the visibility and associated rights of non-Indigenous Australians within a chapter of history that is defined through the subjectivity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples understandably strikes a nerve within Australia. This may seem to resemble neo-conservatism and the associated fantasy of a return to pre-multicultural nations. Such revision may be perceived as a re-ignition of the history wars.

Historian Henry Reynolds coined and used the phrase 'this whispering in our hearts' as the title of his 1998 book to encapsulate his discussion of the history of attacks on Aboriginal rights and associated acts of 'humanitarianism'. It is a profound tension that endures and those cultural institutions that represent the narratives of the Stolen Generations contribute to the resolution of this tension. Narratives of Forgotten Australians need not eclipse or subsume the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples if the institutionalisation of non-Indigenous children is understood as a chapter in Australia's class history.

Peter Read in *The Stolen Generations* (1981) describes the historical policy of separating Aboriginal children from their parents as an attempt to 'absorb' these children into non-Indigenous Australian culture. It was a policy of attempted racial genocide. The experiences of the Forgotten Australians can be understood, alternatively, through the notion of class discrimination. The historical rhetoric of members of parliament suggests that children who were raised in poverty were deemed unworthy of government investment. Joanna Penglase in *Orphans of the Living* (2009) notes that this view was espoused in 1942 by Robert Menzies in his speech *The Forgotten People*. He used this term to describe Australia's middle class not 'Forgotten Australians':

To say that the industrious and intelligent son of self-sacrificing and saving and forward-looking parents has the same social desserts and even material needs as the dull offspring of stupid and improvident parents is absurd.

Similarly, in 1956 Robert Heffron, New South Wales Deputy Premier and Minister of Education, went further and surmised that neglected children were pathological:

Deprived children, whether in their own homes or out of them, are a source of social infection as real and serious as are carriers of diphtheria and typhoid.

The marginalisation of Australia's white underclass

The absence of Forgotten Australians from the official history of Australia's institutionalisation of children may be symptomatic of a wider marginalisation of Australia's non-Indigenous underclass. Wray and Newitz argue in their introduction to *White Trash: Race and Class in America* (1997) that the United States is immersed in the myth of classlessness. This notion of 'white trash' is a means of blaming the poor for being poor. 'The term white trash', they note, 'helps solidify for the middle and upper classes a sense of intellectual superiority'. Their analysis can easily be applied to Australia, given that this country, too, has bought into a myth of the nation as an egalitarian society. Egalitarianism, however, is not the same as classlessness.

The Senate Inquiry into Forgotten Australians concerned non-Indigenous survivors of institutionalised care. The majority were children who were victims of poverty. Children, Wayne Chamley observed in an interview for Radio National on 16 November 2009, were 'seen as units to be controlled'. Granting visibility, associated subjectivity and subsequent legitimacy, in an exhibition to those former 'uncontrollable' and 'deprived' children could threaten the cultural authority of mainstream Australian museums.

In their introduction to *Heritage, Labour and the Working Classes* (2011), Laurajane Smith, Paul Shackel and Gary Campbell argue that all heritage and museum sectors have an ethical obligation to include the notion of class in their work:

there is a moral imperative to address issues of class and economic social inequality and its hidden injuries to self-respect and self-worth. By revealing these inequalities it becomes easier to see how they were developed and are sustained, and we can choose whether we want to challenge those situations. Uncovering hidden injuries can set the tone for some form of justice and reconciliation within communities.

But they also note the continued dominance of an Authorised Heritage Discourse which emphasises non-controversial narratives. This discourse 'deifies the great and the good, the beautiful and the old, the comfortable and the consensual. It also ignores or distains people, places, artefacts and traditions that are not associated with the economic and cultural elite, or recall uncomfortable and dissonant heritage'.

These observations were exemplified by some conservation staff members at the NMA who complained about the distressing nature of some of the objects included in the *Inside* exhibition. In addition, managers at the Museum directed me to include 'the good stories' in the exhibition. This was in stark contrast to over 600 submissions to the 2004 Senate Inquiry into children in institutional care which detailed horrific testimonies of abuse and neglect.

There is a truism held by many in the museum sector that the public has a certain level of tolerance to difficult histories and 'edgy topics'. Fiona Cameron's work – reported for example in 'Beyond Surface Representations' in the *Open Museum Journal* (2006) – refutes this. Most people want to know the truth and have no issues with museums being vehicles for carrying out civic responsibilities. This was also borne out in Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton's national survey published as *History at the Crossroads: Australians and the Past* (2010).

Inclusion policy directed by collection content

Authorised Heritage Discourse also informs museum collection policy. In addition, museum collecting practices were also informed by modernity which positioned the 'non-West' as exotic. The current code of ethics (2013) published by the International Council of Museums includes the importance of the return and restitution of cultural property. Without at all wishing to negate these critical principles, these collection-based ethics may be the sole driver of some museums' attempt at an inclusive practice. Museums, then, work with those communities that are represented in their collections. However, historically objects relating to some marginalised groups, including working-class and underclass communities, may not have been deemed exotic or valuable within international arts markets. Such objects were thus, historically, excluded from museum collections.

On commencing my work for the *Inside* exhibition at the National Museum of Australia, I noted that there were no objects within the Museum's collection pertaining to the narratives of Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants. The National Museum of Australia's collection does include a fund-raising badge for an orphanage. This badge is one of a collection of badges accessioned from a single donor. However, the assessment of this particular badge in the collection catalogue made no mention that the badge relates to a children's institution. But there are a range of objects in the collection relating to the Stolen Generations. This demonstrates that, prior to the creation of the *Inside* exhibition, the National Museum's collection policy in relation to the institutionalisation of children was based on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children only. There was no inclusion, in the collection, of objects pertaining to institutionalised non-Indigenous, underclass children.

This absence in collection policy results in the absence of current collaborative, community dialogues between museum managers and curators with contemporary, white, underclass communities. Therefore, a primary emphasis on collections and the associated ethics will not, alone, fulfil an inclusive museum practice. Instead, an inclusive museum practice is more likely to succeed when people and their narratives, not objects or collections, are prioritised and that such an emphasis is informed by discursive pluralism, including the discourse of class. This is not to discount the importance of objects and collections as part of museum work but to acknowledge as David Fleming did in his keynote address at Museum and Change International Conference in Prague, 2005, that exhibitions that deal with difficult and controversial subjects would not exist within museums that focus solely on their collections.

Reception of *Inside*

The low level of take-up of *Inside* may be due to managerial concerns that such difficult exhibition subject matter may be too confrontational and thus may not appeal to visitors. How, then, was *Inside* received during its three-month display at the National Museum of Australia?

Susan Marsden in her review of *Inside* in the journal *History Australia* (2012) stated that:

Descriptions of institutional life in the words of those who experienced it are the most compelling feature of the exhibition and are integral to many of the exhibits.

However, Marsden criticised the exhibition for the low level attention given to Former Child Migrants, the lack of historical context and only one reference in the exhibition to the oral histories of Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants collected by the National Library of Australia.

Marsden was employed as an interviewer for this oral history project which may have accounted for her expectation that this work be included in the exhibition.

The representation of Former Child Migrants in the exhibition was an attempt to highlight the fact that only two per cent of institutionalised children in Australia were Child Migrants and stress the need for attention to be paid to Forgotten Australians who had hitherto been marginalised in Australia's consensus version of history. The minimisation of historical context in the exhibition reflects the senior curator's preference, to exclude references to policy and legislation which resulted in the vast numbers of institutionalised children in Australia. Marsden's preference is for broader political and societal contexts to be included in the representations of narratives of struggle instead of relying solely on the experience of individuals. Underlying this is a tension between the cultural authority of the museum as institution and the professional practitioner and that of the individual as a subject in history.

Diana James, in her review of *Inside* published in April 2013 by the NMA's online journal *reCollections*, observed that many visitors noticeably wept at the content of the exhibition. She went on to say:

The power of this exhibition is in the felt absence, the silence and stillness of objects redolent with suppressed screams... *Inside* is a stimulus for national rethinking of who we have been, who we are and what we aspire to be. If a nation's character is revealed by the way it treats children in its care, then Australia turned the face of a prison warder towards many of its children.

James also noted that the exhibition was restrained, evident in the restricted size of the exhibition: this was 'not a "blockbuster" for the Museum'. The fact that *Inside* was constrained by the NMA – evident in a small gallery space,

minimal publicity and its short-term, three-month display period – may account for it being overlooked by other Australian museums.

The Museum kept a record of the number of people who visited the exhibition but will not release this figure to the public. At the insistence of *Forgotten Australians*, several weeks after the opening of *Inside* it provided a visitors' book to record responses. Curators of *Inside* had planned for the online exhibition blog – live since December 2009 – to remain active after the opening of the exhibition so that visitor responses could be published. However, management decided to cease public contributions to the blog on the day that the exhibition opened, even though external government funding had been offered several months prior for the purpose of maintaining the website until the end of February 2012. Whilst the Museum has said that it will make this book available to the public on request, it has not authorised publication of its contents. Thus, information regarding visitor responses to *Inside* are derived from the anecdotes of trained *Forgotten Australians* and *Former Child Migrants* who volunteered their time in order to be present in the exhibition space, speaking to those visitors who were interested in learning more about historical institutionalised 'care' from those with lived experiences.

These volunteers recall a significant and steady number of visitors to the exhibition including school groups and people who had travelled from interstate. *Forgotten Australian*, Wilma Robb, noted that a significant number of children of *Forgotten Australians* visited the exhibition to learn more about what their mother or father had endured as children. *Former Child Migrant* Rupert Hewison recalls survivors visiting the exhibition with family members and talking with them for the first time in detail about their childhood experiences. Robb remembers that several commented that the exhibition was, emotionally, 'too much to handle in one day'. However, she

said that these visitors would return one or two days after their initial visit. This observation challenges beliefs that controversial or difficult material deters the public from engaging with museums. Robb also recalled that school children spent most of their time watching the archival film footage of bare-footed, young Child Migrant boys labouring on the treacherous building site at Bindoon Boys Town in Western Australia.

Staff from Wattle Place, a support service for Forgotten Australians based in New South Wales, organised a bus so that approximately 50 Forgotten Australians could travel to Canberra in order to visit the *Inside* exhibition. Robb recalls these visitors saying that they felt overwhelmed that their history was on display, that finally their history was recognised. They shared with each other in the exhibition space their own childhood memories of out-of-home 'care'. Some were disappointed that their particular institution was not represented in the exhibition. Given that there were over 800 'orphanages' in Australia in the twentieth century, it was difficult to create an exhibition that represented narratives from each of these Homes.

Hewison recalls a specific episode in which a senior female visitor commented to Mary Brownlee, a Forgotten Australian volunteer in the exhibition, on the 'beautiful' child's apron on display. Mary told the visitor: 'That's my apron. That child's photo next to it is of me'. The visitor on learning this became tearful and spontaneously hugged her. This exemplified several similar incidents in which visitors displayed their empathy to those survivors of institutionalised 'care' who were present at the exhibition. Hewison told me that it was not unusual for visitors to be visibly moved by the exhibition content. He noted that some visitors cried. Others were shocked and expressed their anger that crimes ubiquitously committed against children on such a broad scale within their lifetime had

gone unpunished by the justice system. Hewison also remembers visitors commending the courage of the NMA to create such an exhibition and that there should be more exhibitions like it. If the museum's reluctance to host *Inside* was based on a concern that the exhibition content was too confronting for visitors, this fear is also at odds with anecdotal evidence.

The Australian Government's funding of Recommendation 35 of the Senate Report *Forgotten Australians* was a response to calls from hundreds of survivors of institutionalised 'care' for their experiences to be recognised. However, this government initiative came at time when the NMA was in recovery from the history wars. Museum sensitivity to this initiative perhaps obscured the fact that a government-funded exhibition about life in children's institutions was a socially responsive proposal and not an act of negative meddling. However, this observation does not explain why the NMA, prior to the government's support, refused to direct its own exhibition on this important subject.

The low level of take up of *Inside: Life in Children's Homes and Institutions* by the Australian museums sector may be symptomatic of other priorities. Perhaps the sector prefers its inclusion agenda to be determined by current community consultations and by historical collection practices. The refusal to host the *Inside* exhibition also fits comfortably within Australia's existing consensus version of history which does not acknowledge Forgotten Australians. However, a truly inclusive museum practice does not forgo the human rights of others, nor does it turn its back on an opportunity to educate its visitors and revise limited consensus narratives. The notion of inclusion denotes pluralism. The history of institutionalised child abuse in Australia is quantitatively vast, qualitatively complex and emotionally difficult. That is precisely why Forgotten Australians rightfully demand that

publicly-funded museums grasp this history with robust professionalism instead of ignoring it with platitudinous impunity.

Further Reading

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