

The orphan who unorphaned himself

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Over recent years the compelling story of thousands of men and women who came to Australia as child migrants and so-called 'orphans' has entered the public spotlight. The ABC documentary *The Leaving of Liverpool*, Alan Gills' *Orphans of The Empire* and Margaret Humphries' *Empty Cradles* have highlighted the policy imperatives which drove the child migration scheme, the actual experiences of child migrants and the fallout from the scheme. For some the experience was a nightmare that continues to haunt them. For others it was a vehicle to migrate, thrive and survive in the Lucky Country.

Under the Empire Settlement Acts of 1922 and 1937, the British Government assisted private philanthropic organisations to help people who wanted to settle in 'His Majesty's Overseas Dominions'. About 150,000 children were shipped off to help populate Dominions such as Canada, Rhodesia, New Zealand and Australia with 'good white stock'. Genuine philanthropic desire to rescue children from destitution and neglect in Britain was also a motive.

About 10,000 child migrants were sent to Australia before the scheme ended in 1967. Issues in the recent debate are of special interest to those that drink from (or would aspire to drink from) the Cup of Equity.

One pragmatic equity issue is that the Senate Committee of Inquiry into Child Migration to Australia in the 20th century will provide an opportunity for Patrick O'Flaherty to give a voice to their life

Many child migrants who enquired about their parents were told stories about being left on orphanage steps – the idea being to create a sense of dependence and curb further discussion. In my case, it was not fiction but the truth. My father and mother met at a dance in County Cork, Ireland. I was the love child. Mum was embarrassed about being pregnant, left Ireland, went across to London, and left me outside the Sisters of Nazareth Home at Finchley. I was all of two and a half weeks old. She left me with her name attached to the clothing. She then went off to live her own independent life.

The war was on and Hitler's bombs were pounding London. The children were evacuated to safer areas. I ended up at another Nazareth House, run by the same Order, at Carlisle, near the England-Scotland border. Meanwhile my mother kept tabs on my father, who had joined the Royal Air Force, obtaining a maintenance order against him, even though she herself had long since given up her child.

Not that I knew anything about all this. On 10 December 1947, when I was eight years old, I arrived in the *Asturias* at Fremantle, with one of the first groups of post-war child migrants.

I remember the voyage vividly, including the passage through the Suez Canal; the ship passing within sight of the sprawling British military base where (though I didn't know it) my father and his wife were billeted. I was sent out here in the knowledge and understanding that I was a war orphan. That's what people called us at that time.

On arrival at Fremantle I was sent to the care of the Christian Brothers who managed four orphanages for boys in Western Australia, Castledare, Clontarf, Bindoon and Tardun. I was sent to the junior orphanage at Castledare for two years before transferring to a senior orphanage at Clontarf.

I performed well at Clontarf, being earmarked as a bright student. I was encouraged by the Child Welfare Department to continue my education at Aquinas College. The letter from the Director of the Department, congratulating me on passing eight out of eight subjects in the Junior Certificate, was the first letter that I had received in my life. While at Aquinas I was told that I had a vocation and set out in earnest to 'answer the call'. I briefly underwent training with the Christian Brothers, but found this to be an unhappy period of my life and experienced serious personal internal struggles. At one point I was suicidal; it cost me dearly.

Following that experience I felt I needed to have a complete break. I lost myself in a wide range of activities. I sewed carpets, sold encyclopaedias, did labouring jobs, just anything. Then an opportunity arose for me to help out on a two million hectare Aboriginal reserve below Halls Creek in Western Australia. It was an enormous place. The work was hard, varied and tremendously interesting. I wrote a dictionary of Gogadja, learnt horse riding, mustering

cattle, and enjoyed life in a part of Australia where the music of Slim Dusty reigned supreme.

After my time in the desert I joined the hordes of eager young men and women hopeful of securing work in Canberra with the Commonwealth Public Service. I did well in the Public Service Exam and spent the next thirty years working in a variety of Commonwealth Government departments in policy, administration, management and executive roles.

Like many other child migrants, my potential has been realised largely in middle years. As a part-time student I undertook a course in cross-cultural studies as an external student at Armidale. I did this course because at the time I was working in Immigration which, under the impetus of the then Minister, Al Grassby, was moving rapidly away from a fixation on Australia as an Anglo mono-cultural society to one where all cultures could be acknowledged, celebrated and woven together as part of the fabric of a multicultural society.

Following the completion of the course I was to join a group of Australian educators on a cultural study tour of migrant source countries. I decided to focus on the Scandinavian countries, if for no other reason that my newly married wife was from Finland. My Finnish was improving and it would be a unique experience.

One day in 1973, out of the blue, a letter arrived from a Sister of Nazareth saying that she had been in contact with a lady in England, who "has revealed herself as your mother. (She is) now married with three other children (and) has suffered very much over the years from worrying about your welfare". The kind Sister also wrote that she had written to the Christian Brothers in Western Australia but had received no reply.

I contacted my mother by phone from Canberra and we exchanged letters. I was delighted, especially with the assurance from my mother that all would be well, and the excitement of eventually meeting. The news, after thirty-two years, that my mother was alive brought different reactions from the community. There was amazement, wonder, concern and a rather remarkable telegram from a politician who congratulated me on unorphaning myself! The opportunity for a reunion came with the cross-cultural study tour mentioned above. The added bonus was an opportunity to meet my wife's family and especially to introduce to both sets of grandparents our newly arrived baby Michael O'Flaherty.

On the way to Finland we were to stop overnight at London. This was the chance to meet Mum. At the Charles De Gaulle Airport in Paris I got an enormous bunch of flowers because I was not sure what words, if any I would say when finally I met Mum. However, when we landed at Heathrow my mother did not turn up. Can you imagine how I felt? I just hid my face behind the bunch of flowers and cried and cried. After all the letters, the expectations, all the detail.

We had already booked to stay the night at Heathrow and that is what we did. Our bus pulled up at the hotel. And there she was. I found my mother waiting. She was loaded with pills. She looked terrible. There was no emotion, no embrace or anything. It was one of those moments in life that words cannot describe. I remember reflecting later (and even today I don't know why); so much for the idea about maternal deprivation!

The next day we were off to Finland. Before leaving my mother said to me, "What would you do if your father was alive?" Now that hadn't even occurred to me. I was reconciled with the idea that my dad was a 'war hero' and had died in the London blitz. For that reason each Anzac Day in Canberra I'd join the crowds to pay homage. I'd often thought if only I had his medals I'd be able to do his memory proud!

The visit to Helsinki was great, as was meeting my wife's family and linking in with the cultural study tour in Stockholm. But I needed to attend to unfinished family business. Upon returning to London I visited Mum's house in Littlehampton. When I arrived the atmosphere was tense. I looked at her. She looked at me. Then the telephone rang. All the tension disappeared. Imagine how I felt when Mum came back and said, "Patrick, it's for you. It's your father."

A man came on the line with a strong Irish brogue. The conversation was friendly and I was invited to visit my father's family in Bridgend, Wales. The first train stop past Cardiff. I told my mother that I wanted to see my dad as soon as possible. She reacted aggressively. She said, "If you go and see your father I don't want to see you again, I will throw myself under a bus." I said, "Make sure that it's a bloody big one". It was virtually the end to an already shaky relationship.

I caught the train to Bridgend to meet my father. When I got off the train there he was, my father, standing tall and dignified. I was so proud. I was introduced to the family. It was simply a case of big brother has come home. Over a glass or two of Baileys Irish Whiskey we had a heart to heart chat, silence, laughs and tears. I was particularly struck by the fact that my father had not one derogatory comment against my mother.

I then rang my wife in Finland and said, "Guess what, Dad's alive too!" She said, "If he is anything like your mother I don't want to know him". I went back to Finland and convinced her to meet my father and family. It all worked out well and they really spoiled baby Michael.

Returning to Canberra after that event, I experienced a new lease of life. I continued my career in the Public Service and took advantage of the part-time study arrangement to complete a B.Ed and M.Ed at the then Canberra College of Advanced Education. I used the study to gain skills in research, policy analysis, linguistics and administration, which I was able to integrate with my pro-

fessional life. I then also became actively involved with the Public Sector Union and for six years was the President of the Professional Division (formerly Professional Officers' Association) and in 1998 was awarded a Merit Award for 'outstanding service'. I also continued my involvement with multicultural policies and realities, especially the annual multicultural festival in Canberra.

Because I had spent a considerable amount of money in reconnecting with my family, I was thrilled to receive in 1994 a return air fare from the independent panel set up by the Christian Brothers to assist former child migrants to visit their rediscovered families. I enjoyed the most wonderful family Christmas with my father and several newly found relatives in Wales. That was the last time I saw my father. Some of my relatives were hatching a plot for me to be a surprise guest at my father's 80th birthday in mid 1997. It was not to be. My father died suddenly in Wales on 27 October 1996. He was buried in the family plot in a little village, Kildorrey, in the north of County Cork. I was not able to make it to the funeral.

In September 1999 a group of thirty people took part in an ACT Government-Can-Trade-Business Delegation to Ireland. The National Australia Business Association initiated this visit. You guessed it! I (thanks to Oz Lotto) joined the delegation and sipped sweetly from the cup of equity as I imbibed the atmosphere and culture of Ireland. A personal highlight of the visit was tracking down the family grave at Kildorrey in north County Cork. In the grave lies my father, my aunt, my paternal grandmother and my great-grandfather and great-grandmother. Nearby is the cabin with a turf fire, still in good shape, which once resounded with the voices of the relatives that I never knew. Also nearby is Bowen's Court Estate, also linked with my family? I quietly strolled through the property, reminiscing, thinking that all things considered I could side with Albert Facey and claim 'a fortunate life'!

I have now returned to study at the institution that provided me with a sense of equity. I am pursuing a Ph.D in the field of cultural heritage. My research topic is child migration. I believe that post-World War II migration heritage in Australia has ignored child migrants. I argue that addressing this imbalance will provide new perspectives on Australia's recent social history.