

Enquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families.

**SUBMISSION BY HOWARD MILES, President of the  
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**INTRODUCTION**

During its 91-year history, the AIM ~~was~~<sup>has run</sup> only two homes for the care of Aboriginal children.

The first was set up around 1906 at Singleton (NSW). Until 1920 it cared for orphaned and needy children at a time when most Australians ignored the plight of the first occupants of this country.

The second Home operated from 1946 until 1980 in Bagot Road, Darwin. It was officially known as the Retta Dixon Home, but was generally referred to as 'RDH'.

This submission concentrates on the home in Darwin.

I am not writing from personal experience. Although I led some camps for RDH children in 1956, and occasionally visited the Home in later years, I was not involved in its operation.

Most of the staff who served there in the early years have passed away. However, documents at AIM Headquarters, and conversations with former workers at RDH, have given me a good understanding of what took place there.

**OUTLINE HISTORY OF RETTA DIXON HOME**

Some time before the commencement of the Second World War, women missionaries of the AIM began to care for neglected part-Aboriginal children in Darwin. This was an entirely unplanned and unofficial attempt to respond positively to a situation that had come to their notice as they moved among the Aboriginal people.

When a Japanese invasion seemed imminent in the early 1940s, the missionaries and children in their care were evacuated to South Australia. A number of Aboriginal women accompanied them. For some four years this group lived in difficult circumstances near Balaklava (SA). (Details are given in the book 'Take This Child' by Barbara Cummings.)

After the war, the Native Affairs Branch arranged for the evacuees to be returned to Darwin. The AIM was also offered temporary use of 10 buildings on part of Bagot Compound, if we agreed to set up a Home for the children. Our Mission Council eventually agreed to this request. We saw it as an opportunity to continue to minister to boys and girls in great need of love and care.

The party of women and children, together with various items of furniture, commenced the long and tedious journey in March 1946.

The trip by train to Alice Springs took four days. Then there was a delay of five weeks. Finally they set off in trucks for a further four days until they at last reached Darwin.

There were 51 children and 8 young women in the original group. Another 20 children joined them during the next 12 months. Most of the buildings they moved into were pre-fab. metal 'Sidney William' huts that had formed an Army camp. Conditions were primitive. The only option was to operate on a dormitory system, with everyone having meals in a large dining area.

The women missionaries selflessly threw themselves into the task. Long hours were spent getting the Home operating. Some of them even had to sleep in the dormitories with their charges.

Unlike homes set up in the bush, there was no school on the Bagot Road site. At first the children were taken by truck to the Darwin Primary School. In later years they were able to travel by school bus.

RDH operated in crowded conditions on that site for the next 15 years. The number of children steadily climbed as the Native Affairs officers constantly asked for additional children to be accommodated. The total stabilised at around 100, but there was a time when a peak of 120 was reached.

Those in authority - both in the Mission and in the <sup>Welfare Dept.</sup> ~~Native Affairs~~ Branch - realised that the 'temporary' buildings at RDH weren't adequate. In 1956 negotiations for a more suitable site were started with the Minister for Territories. Eventually, about 10 acres of land further along Bagot Road were leased to the Mission.

In addition, a Government loan of about 90,000 pounds (\$180,000) was approved for the erection of 8 six-bedroom cottages and some ancillary buildings on that site.

The Mission recruited a team of volunteer builders from the southern States. Work commenced in December 1959, but the mammoth task wasn't completed until the end of 1962

The new Home was organised on the cottage system. Boys and girls of various ages were carefully selected to form 'family' units in each cottage. House parents or a house mother were in charge of each cottage. As far as possible, brothers and sisters were placed in the same cottage. It was anticipated that this would enable the children to have a lifestyle as close as possible to that of a normal family.

Only 12 years after the new Home commenced, cyclone Tracy smashed into Darwin. RDH buildings were severely damaged. Children and staff were evacuated to NSW.

A team of volunteers carried out repairs, but it was some months before any of the children moved back to the cottages. But the numbers were reduced. And changes in Government policies meant that fewer and fewer children were accommodated there in the next few years. RDH finally ceased to operate in 1980.

**STAFF**

RDH staff workers were always men and women who belonged to the Aborigines Inland Mission. Most were from interstate. A number were of part-Aboriginal descent. The earlier workers were missionaries who had years of experience among Aboriginal people at other AIM centres. In later years, many were recruited specifically to serve as house parents at RDH.

Miss Millie Shankelton was the first superintendent. She was a gracious and gifted lady, with a tremendous love for Aboriginal people. She was an efficient administrator and a tireless worker. Over the years she became affectionately known as 'Laelie' - a corruption of 'Lady' - by both staff and children. Her service was recognised by the granting of an MBE by the Queen.

After the move to the new site, Mervyn Pattemore was appointed Superintendent. He continued in the role until the Home was closed 18 years later.

Mervyn and his wife were very experienced missionaries of AIM. They had served for years at Borrooloola, where they had started an Aboriginal church and run a highly successful school in very difficult circumstances.

Mission records indicate that there was a constant struggle to find enough workers for the Home. Often people needed elsewhere had to be diverted to RDH to fill gaps. And because of these problems, combined with Darwin's oppressive climate, the workers were always under great pressure and strain.

**CHILDREN CARED FOR**

Initially, RDH was intended only for children of mixed race. But in later years a number of children of full Aboriginal descent were accepted. There were even a few white children whose parents were living in remote areas.

Their ages ranged from three months to about 16 years of age.

Generally speaking, the children admitted to RDH fell into four categories:

1. Wards of the NT Administration who, because of the policy of assimilation, had been taken from their families to be educated in Darwin.
2. Children whose parents had placed them in the care of the Home because of the circumstances of their lives.
3. ~~Neglected~~ Children who had been <sup>neglected or</sup> abandoned by their parents <sup>and put</sup>
4. Those admitted for short periods because of a family crisis. (It is noteworthy that some of these parents had themselves been raised at RDH. Obviously, they appreciated the care given by the staff.)

In addition, there were occasions when young people with jobs in Darwin lived at the Home.

It is doubtful that staff appointed to RDH and similar Homes from down South realised that they would be dealing with children who had been taken from their families by the Authorities. Other members of the AIM staff (such as me) were not aware of this fact until many years later.

## SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

The staff of RDH tried to organise the activities of the Home so that the children would have as normal a life as possible in such an institution.

Where possible, parents were encouraged to visit their children. Some took their children away for holidays.

As early as mid 1947 (soon after RDH was started), the Native Affairs Branch asked Miss Shankelton to accompany the 16 children being moved from Phillip Creek to Darwin. Later she wrote: 'It was a privilege to be able to meet the mothers and friends of the children and to tell them something of the Home ... and of our intention of keeping the children in touch with their mothers.' Although that apparently didn't work out, the desire was there.

Sports teams were organised for both boys and girls. They made a name for themselves in local competitions.

The children were encouraged to get involved in youth activities at the AIM church. A number of girls were enthusiastic members of the Girls Brigade. Some went to GB camps interstate.

Two holiday campsites were leased. One was at Lee Point, the other at Coomallie Creek. Each school holiday period saw crowds of excited children enjoying either the bush or the beach.

## PROBLEMS

The Government policy of removing children from their families was no doubt well-meaning, but terribly mis-guided. It caused trauma for the children concerned and added to discipline problems at RDH.

However, no matter what circumstances caused children to be committed to ~~Homes such as~~ RDH, our staff realised that these boys and girls had great needs. And they tried to provide the love and care so desperately needed.

Discipline problems, always latent in a Home of this type, were aggravated by the crowded conditions. Then there was the anomaly that the ~~Native Affairs Branch~~ <sup>Welfare Dept</sup> had ultimate control of those who were wards of the State. Yet those officers were not living in the Home and were not aware of every situation.

As already indicated, there was a constant struggle to recruit sufficient staff for RDH. No doubt, because of the desperate shortage at certain times, people were accepted who were not really suited to the job. Others may have 'cracked up' under the strain, and acted in haste or because of temper.

Recently we have heard of staff members who apparently abused some children - physically and even sexually. If these things did occur, as far as I know they were not known to ~~Miss Shankelton~~ <sup>MS</sup>. The news causes us profound regret.

However, despite the problems, and even occasional failures, the majority of the staff were sincere, loving, generous people. They gave some of the best years of their lives to serve needy boys and girls. If they had not been there, who would have met the need?

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