

# The nightmare at Bindoon

**T**HE small, slightly-built boy thought his luck was changing when the nuns in the Welsh orphanage told him he would be going to Australia.

It was April, 1947. Nigel Fitzgibbon was 13 and had not seen his parents for 10 years.

His mother had registered him in her maiden name to reduce the chances of her husband being able to trace the boy. Then she took a train to London and was never heard from again.

Now, with the excitement of medical checks, travel documents and new clothes for the voyage to Fremantle, Nigel's hopes for a better life looked like coming true.

On August 15, the 30 boys arrived at Southampton and boarded the liner SS Astaurius with about 1000 other passengers. Of these, about 250 were boys and girls destined for other church-run farm schools and orphanages in WA.

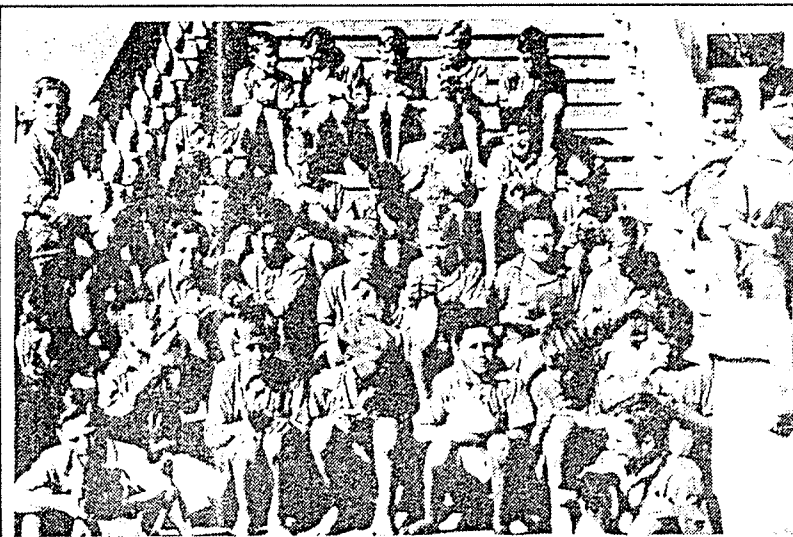
The rest of the passenger list was made up of assisted-passage migrants and displaced persons, mainly Polish soldiers.

"Life on the ship was good," Mr Fitzgibbon recalls. "The food was the best I'd had and there were games and activities."

The best part for the youngsters was a pet monkey owned by one of the Polish soldiers. They watched entranced as it performed somersaults, smoked cigarettes and pilfered from the pockets of unsuspecting bystanders.

"As we approached Fremantle the ship's skipper, Captain J. Carr, offered two pounds to the first orphan to sight the coast of Australia, a prize which went to a young Welsh boy, John Coniffe.

"The Astaurius entered the port with the radios blaring out stirring martial music and *Advance Australia Fair*."



THE first Bindoon migrants. This picture was taken in 1947.

By ANDRE MALAN

Once ashore they were fingerprinted and the Catholics were assembled for a blessing from Archbishop Redmond Prendiville.

Soon after there were tears when the children heard that the Polish soldier's monkey had been killed by quarantine officials.

From the docks they were taken to the Clontarf orphanage south of Perth for a welcoming reception. Two hours later, Nigel Fitzgibbon and his friends were on their way to Boys' Town at Bindoon, 95km away.

Mr Fitzgibbon is now 53 and still lives in WA. He describes the three years he spent at Bindoon from 1947 to 1950 as a nightmare.

**A** NORMALLY genial man, he speaks angrily and with passion about the ill-treatment, sexual abuse and overwork he and the others were subjected to — treatment which, he says, caused

psychological scars from which many ex-Boys' Town residents still suffer.

No serious attempt was ever made to educate the new arrivals and discipline gradually increased, the boys receiving frequent beltings with leather harness straps.

In February 1948 the boys heard with concern of the return to Bindoon of Brother Paul Keaney, who had lived there once before and had a reputation as an iron disciplinarian and fierce taskmaster.

Keaney set about building three large stone and granite buildings.

Mr Fitzgibbon recalls: "It was sheer slave labour with primitive tools from dawn to late evening. Visitors were always impressed by Keaney's zeal and passion for getting the work done but never realised the terrible cost to the boys.

"We had cement burns on our hands and feet and our bodies were nearly emaciated.

"We had no decent clothing and there were never any outings or other recreation.

"My first contact with Brother

## A tyrant who taught loyalty

WHATEVER dark deeds may have occurred there in the past, the old Bindoon Boys' Town is the site of an excellent agricultural college bearing the name of the man who cast such a large shadow over Nigel Fitzgibbon and his friends.

The man from whom it gets its name, Brother Paul Francis Keaney, was born in Ireland in 1888 and migrated to Australia in 1911. He died at Bindoon in 1965.

But even his critics, such as Fitzgibbon, give him credit for instilling in the boys the need to learn a trade and for displaying loyalty to ex-Bindoon boys.



● Brother Keaney

Keaney was devastating. One day when I was 13 he called me up to him and asked me what I wanted to be. I said I didn't know and without warning his huge first slammed into my face, breaking my nose and knocking me down.

"That night, for the first and only time, I cried in my bed and asked: 'Where's my dad?'"

"Two years later I and another boy named Bernard Binns had almost completed the granite structure for the big statue of Christ the King — the Prince of Peace, when Keaney came through the bush, shouting, swearing and abusing us. We were both whacked about the body with a huge stick. Bernard Binns flew off through the bush and I never saw him again."

Five days after the young Fitzgibbon arrived, he was confined to bed by an insect bite which made his face swell alarmingly.

That evening an elderly brother came into the dormitory and tried to fondle him under the bed-clothes.

"I was terrified and didn't know

what to do. Fortunately one of the other boys came in to visit me just then and the brother walked away," he said.

"Brother Keaney had a disturbing habit of punishing boys by making them stand on a table and drop their trousers. He'd then call out 'Lift your curtain Bidy Ann,' a signal for them to raise their shirts so they could be belted on their bare backsides."

But there was revenge of a sort. Mr Fitzgibbon recalls: "We used to trap as many rabbits as we could to save the expense of meat.

"There were many feral cats on the property and often these cats got caught in our traps.

"The Spanish Benedictine nuns used to cook for the brothers and an old Aboriginal woman cooked for the boys.

"I must admit I made sure the carcasses of any cats I caught in my traps were included with the rabbits. Sisters Hildegard and Francis kept aside for the dining table of the brothers."