

10 NEWS SUNDAY, JUNE 12, 2011 THE SUN-HERALD



**STOLEN CHILDHOODS**

# 'I can still hear

As a film examines the injustices of the child migration schemes, **Susan Chenery** talks to those left scarred by the shame of two countries.

In the winter the children left blood on the frost. Their bare feet stumbled on rocks that peeled the skin, but they were so numb with cold that they barely felt the pain.

They were children forced into hard labour; being punished for being born without hope. And punished again if they protested.

"If you complained it was bang over the head, 'You little sook, you little girl,'" says John Hennessey, who was one of those children.

On treacherous building sites little boys were flogged if they slowed down, carrying loads of bricks up the scaffolding, lime burns lacerating their legs, hands blistered and cut. This was not Dickensian England; this was Australia and it was happening until 1970.

Hennessey is still, at 75, a noticeably damaged man. He is warmly greeted by everyone he encounters at the Ingleburn RSL Club in Sydney, where we meet for lunch. But he is in tears throughout much of our interview. He did not receive a birthday card until he was 62. It was from the mother he had yearned for all his life but had been told was dead.

In 1946, at the age of 10, Hennessey was sent from an orphanage in England to the brutal Bindoon Boys Town in Western Australia. He recalls the arrival in Fremantle for the big adventure that had been promised: kangaroos would take the children to school and oranges would fall from the trees. Instead, they were herded into trucks.

"The brothers and sisters were all together," he says. "And then they started grabbing the girls away from their brothers. I can still hear the screams of these kids being separated. Some of them never saw their sisters again. I still have nightmares."

Life at Bindoon, run by the Catholic Church's Christian Brothers, was a catalogue of cruelty, where beatings and sexual assaults were daily events.

"Bindoon was nothing more than a paedophile ring," Hennessey says. "Most of the brothers were into



raping and molesting little boys, sometimes sharing their favourites with each other."

The boys were put to work building the series of grand buildings that Bindoon became. "It was slave labour," says Hennessey. Many of them are now deaf or partially deaf because they were constantly bashed around the head.

He recalls children resorting to stealing food from the pigs they tended – because the pigs were better fed. Brother Francis Keaney, the head of Bindoon, would eat bacon and eggs in front of boys who were fed porridge mixed with bran from the chicken feed. The boys would raid the bins for his scraps.

Hennessey was the leader of a group of hungry boys who raided Keaney's vineyard one night. The next day the 193-centimetre tall, 108-kilogram priest stripped him naked in front of the others and beat him viciously with his fists and walking stick. Then, as Hennessey lay bleeding on the floor, the priest kicked him out the door with heavy boots. Hennessey has had a pronounced stutter ever since.

When he found a little boy crying because he had been molested, he took him to Keaney for counsel. "He went into a rage, whacked me across the head, whacked the kid across the head and said, 'Don't you ever come into this office and tell me lies.'"

The harrowing plight of child migrants such as Hennessey is examined in the film *Sunshine and Oranges*, which opened on Thursday. It focuses on a British social worker, Margaret Humphreys, and her work to blow the whistle on the child migration schemes and help the victims find their families.

One of those victims was Harold Haig, who started looking for his mother when he was 18. "She was the only woman I ever wanted to meet," he says. "She was the only one who could fill the void. If you are told you are an orphan and your parents are dead, there is nobody there. You walk around feeling that you don't belong anywhere. So for years there was a real emptiness in me."

Haig started his search too late, both his parents had died by the time

he found details about them. But his father had still been alive when he went looking in England in 1974.

The only family John Hennessey knew were the priests who called the boys "sons of whores". "I thought Brother Keaney was my father," he says. "It wasn't until I was about 19, 20, that I began asking some questions. Surely I must have a family. I didn't know which way to turn. The church wouldn't help me."

Hennessey had no birth certificate or papers, no identity. He later discovered his name had been changed and his birthday altered by three years. When he went to get his records from the Sisters of Nazareth in Bristol, where he had spent the first 10 years of his life, "they denied I even existed".

It was 57 years before Hennessey found his mother in a rapturous reunion. "My mum told me, 'Michael John, you were stolen out of your cradle when you were two months old. Being born out of wedlock was a mortal sin, we were classed as children of the devil, that was the philosophy they worked on us.'"

"My mother was in a desperate situation. She had no support from

family and didn't know which way to turn, so she went to the nuns. She was an Irish girl, you know, and the nuns told her, 'Mary, you are not a fit and decent woman to have this child. John is ours and he belongs to God. He will be adopted and have a good life.' She went to visit me two to three times but the nuns told her never to come back. The priest made her swear on the Bible that she would never tell anybody that she had this child."

Even though he would become deputy mayor of Campbelltown and be awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for services to the community, Hennessey, like many Bindoon boys, was too damaged to marry. "You just have all this shame and guilt."

When bleak postwar Britain answered Australia's call for "good white British stock" to build its population, it saw an opportunity to empty overflowing institutions of the innocent victims of poverty, illegitimacy and broken homes. In the child trafficking that became known as the child migration schemes it cost £5 a week to keep a child in care in Britain but just 10 shillings in Australia. Institutions that

## For instant updates, it's just another working weekend.



The Commonwealth Bank is the only bank that offers an Everyday Account that updates instantly, no matter what day of the week it is, so you always know where you stand. And if you deposit at least \$2,000 a month, there's no monthly account fee\*. Finally, a bank that can keep up with you.

**Experience Money magazine's Bank of the Year**  
Sign up in branch today or visit [commbank.com.au/instantly](http://commbank.com.au/instantly)



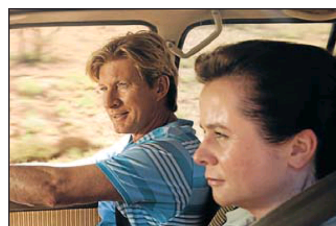
Important information: Excludes contactless transactions and some credit transactions on Mobile Banking. \*Applies to accounts opened after 1 June 2010 only. If you fail to make the minimum deposit of \$2,000 (excluding Bank-initiated transactions) in any calendar month, the monthly fee will be charged for that month only. Other fees may apply. Terms and conditions issued by Commonwealth Bank of Australia ABN 48 123 124 are available on request. You should consider whether this product is appropriate to you. CBANK-1157C

THE041 0010

Printed and distributed by NewspaperDirect  
[www.newspaperdirect.com](http://www.newspaperdirect.com) US/Can: 1 877 980 4040 Intern: 800 636 6364  
COPYRIGHT AND PROTECTED BY APPLICABLE LAW

STOLEN CHILDHOODS

# the kids' screams'



Harrowing story ... from far left: John Hennessey at home; on his arrival in 1947 (circled); and, top, reunited with his mother, May Mary Kelly. Above: David Wenham playing a former child immigrant and Emily Watson as the crusading social worker Margaret Humphreys in *Oranges and Sunshine*. Photo opposite page: Jacky Ghossein

took children would be paid a subsidy for each one of them. All the reputable agencies – Barnardo's, the Salvation Army, the Fairbridge Society, National Children's Home, the Catholic and Anglican churches – colluded in sending children to the other side of the world for "a better life". They were thought a particularly attractive category of migrant, according to a 1945 prime ministerial brief to state pre-miers, "on account of their easier assimilation, adaptability, long working life ahead and easier housing". In 200 years it is estimated that 150,000 British children were dumped around the globe. Between 1912 and 1970, about 7000 were shipped to Australia. The first big hurt for those children was the rejection. They couldn't understand what they had done that was so wrong that their own country didn't want them. They were promised that loving families were waiting to adopt them but they were delivered into institutionalised abuse. Very few were adopted or fostered. The whole system was based on lies. The majority of the children had mothers who were alive: women who

had been told that their child had been adopted in Britain or had died. Many had put their children into care until they got back on their feet. Humphreys, who established the Child Migrants Trust, says the women had no choice. "It could be about the social stigma of being single parents. Some children went into short-term care because of family illness. Mothers who went to see them at weekends while they were in short-term care, or arrived to collect them [found] that their children had gone." A blanket policy of concealing a child's history was, as it turned out, a convenient way of covering tracks. Some organisations were so determined these children would never find their way home that they changed their names and dates, and places of birth. It was cover-up that went to the highest echelons of British society and would have never been uncovered but for the clear-thinking Humphreys. The Nottingham social worker received a letter from a woman in Australia. "She wrote, 'I was four years old when I left your home town. I was

put on a boat to Australia. My name was changed. My birth date was changed. I don't know who I am. Can you help me?' I looked at this letter and thought this is absolutely preposterous. So I wrote back to her and said, 'Look, you must have been fostered or adopted. You had to have gone there with an adult. Four-year-olds cannot get on a boat and take themselves to the other side of the world.'" But it was all too true, as Humphreys discovered when she investigated and found the woman's mother. When she started putting the pieces together in 1987 she had no idea of the scale of the deportation. After she placed an ad in a Melbourne newspaper, the responses came in a flood. Her husband, Merv, registered at Nottingham University to do a doctoral thesis on the history of child migration, knowing it would give

him access to archive material. The couple were often in a state of disbelief as he assembled a dossier that showed how two governments had devastated families and destroyed thousands of lives. Humphreys says: "This was a group of people who had everything taken from them, their families, their country, their identity, their communities, their extended family, their schools, their little networks. Everything had gone." Humphreys set up offices in Australia so she could counsel victims. In Britain she turned detective, slogging through church records, phone books, the general registrar office in London and archives for leads. She sought out people who might have lived in the same boarding house as someone's mother years earlier. It was hard on her, too. Humphreys was shaken by death threats and frequently had to leave her own young children to travel to Australia. In her book *Empty Cradles* she writes: "To take children from their families was an abuse; to strip them of their identity was an abuse; to forget them and then deny their loss was an abuse. Within this context

and within our culture, few tragedies can compare." Now she wants to restore the reputations of the mothers who suffered as much as their children, for whom "it has been a grief without end, a loss without conclusion". Harold Haig, who is the secretary of the International Association of Former Child Migrants, is full of praise for Humphreys's work. "If it had landed in the lap of anyone but Margaret, they would have gotten away with it," he says. "I don't think anyone else would have had the courage or sense of justice issues, the strength, really, to be able to carry on." Humphreys says the organisations involved in the migration schemes were determined to keep their secrets. "Why the records were concealed for so long would be obvious to any of us ... the schemes were based on deception that would have been exposed. What they did was eradicate their identities by dates of birth being changed or incorrect or by names being changed or incorrect, so I think that was to take away the child's sense of self and identity." Continued Page 12

→ Children of a scandal  
Photo gallery at [smh.com.au](http://smh.com.au)

<p><b>Los Angeles</b></p> <p>\$1669* per person</p> <p>from</p> <p>Offer ends 27 Jun 11, unless sold out prior.</p> <p>Travel: 01 Aug – 31 Oct 11.</p>	<p><b>San Francisco</b></p> <p>\$1764* per person</p> <p>from</p> <p>Offer ends 27 Jun 11, unless sold out prior.</p> <p>Travel: 01 Aug – 31 Oct 11.</p>
<p><b>Las Vegas</b></p> <p>\$1779* per person</p> <p>from</p> <p>Offer ends 27 Jun 11, unless sold out prior.</p> <p>Travel: 01 Aug – 31 Oct 11.</p>	<p><b>New York</b></p> <p>\$1869* per person</p> <p>from</p> <p>Offer ends 27 Jun 11, unless sold out prior.</p> <p>Travel: 01 Aug – 31 Oct 11.</p>

For return economy class travel from Sydney.

[jetset.com.au](http://jetset.com.au) 1300 JETSET 1300 538 738

**Jetset Travel**

Know the world we know

**FlyBuys** \*Conditions apply. Agents may charge service fees and/or fees for card payments which vary. Prices correct at 07 June 2011 but may fluctuate if surcharges, fees, taxes or currency change. Amounts payable to third parties not included. Offers subject to availability. Please check all prices, availability and other information with your travel consultant before booking. Non-refundable fare. Standard FlyBuys terms and conditions apply and are available at [flybuys.com.au](http://flybuys.com.au). Valid at participating agencies and on selected offers. Ask in store for details. To be eligible for this offer, members must present their FlyBuys card and mention this offer at time of booking and payment. FlyBuys points are not awarded on taxes, fees and surcharges. © 2011 Jetset Pty Limited trading as Jetset Travel I ABN 30 098 029 362 I Travel Agents Licence 27483381 NSW I All rights reserved.

Printed and distributed by NewspaperDirect  
[www.newspaperdirect.com](http://www.newspaperdirect.com) US/Can: 1 877 980 4040 Intern: 800 6364 6364  
COPYRIGHT AND PROTECTED BY APPLICABLE LAW

STOLEN CHILDHOODS

'I felt like a weight had been lifted from me'

From Page 11

She concedes the obvious: if you tell children that their parents are dead, they are unlikely to keep asking for mummy or daddy.

But in middle age, these people slowly began to find out that they did belong somewhere. But for many, as with Haig, it was too late. The closest Tony Costa, a former Bindoon boy, now 70, got to his mother was visiting her grave. When she moved to the US, she left a letter at her old church with her married name and address. The letter was never passed on, even when Costa went there looking for her.

Marcelle O'Brien was four when she was shipped to Australia. She had been in foster care. Her foster mother tried to get her back, going so far as to write to the Queen Mother. O'Brien has no memory of the court case that her "Mummy Chapman" lost.

O'Brien was destined to lead a miserable existence at a Fairbridge Farm at Pinjarra in Western Australia, where the girls were told, "You belong in the gutter, you are nothing, you have nobody."

At 16 O'Brien was sent to work for a family. She slept in a shed and, with no one to protect her, she was fair game for the local men.

By the time her mother was found she was in a home slipping into dementia. O'Brien only had three weeks with a lucid mother.

Margaret Gallagher, now 70, was 12 when she was sent to Australia by Barnardo's, having been told her parents had been killed in the war.



Made to feel shame ... clockwise from left: Margaret Gallagher as a child in Britain; Gallagher at home in Woy Woy; migrants leave London bound for the colonies; former migrant Harold Haig - both his parents had died by the time he traced them. Photos: Brock Perks, Ken Irwin

under no circumstances tell anyone she was a Barnardo's child.

"I was made to feel shame. One of the biggest things for me, and it has only just healed, is that when I go anywhere and I am in a room I feel like I don't belong, I am not good enough. Not good enough to be here, I don't fit."

When she was 30 she found her mother, who had been raped at 14 and whose parents had made her put the baby up for adoption and promise never to tell anyone.

Sitting in an armchair at her home in Woy Woy, Gallagher says she believes in forgiveness, but her anger and hurt are obvious.

Such feelings are to be expected, says Humphreys. "This is generational. It will not stop at this generation of child migrants. The pain will not stop there. As they say to me, Margaret, I live with it every day."

In 1998, a health select committee in the British House of Commons had to be adjourned because mem-

bers were so affected by the testimony of John Hennessey. "One of the delegates said that if the circumstances had been different I could have been in his job," he recalls.

A 2001 Senate inquiry in Australia led to the establishment of a small travel fund to allow some migrants to visit Britain to meet their families. It did not extend to funding the Child Migrant Trust's long-term counselling for victims or its detective work in finding lost families.

In November 2009 Kevin Rudd apologised for the "absolute tragedy" of half a million children who suffered neglect and abuse in state institutions, among them the child migrants. He called the victims "forgotten Australians".

It was news to the child migrants that they had been "forgotten". Tony Costa says: "Calling us forgotten Australians is just another form of identity fraud - we used to be called 'orphans' and that was a lie, now we are 'forgotten Australians' which denies our real identity again."

In February last year, the then British prime minister Gordon Brown apologised specifically to the child migrants for Britain's catastrophic failure "in the first duty of a nation - to protect its children".

He also announced the creation of a £6 million fund aimed at restoring

families torn apart by the scheme. It is used to pay for people to visit newfound families in Britain. However tenuous the connection, knowing that they have half-brothers and sisters and cousins, relatives, means so much to these people.

But is this enough? Is it enough to make up for the calculated decisions that ruined so many lives? There are three strands to justice - recognition, reparation and restitution. If the apologies were recognition, and the British fund is reparation, then there is still a long way to go. "That third strand is personal restitution, personal compensation," says Haig. "I would like someone to explain to me what worse thing a government can do to you that means that you could get compensation. That is the final aim and I think all child migrants deserve restitution and we are certainly working on it in the UK." Humphreys, Haig and most of the child migrants believe there needs to be a judicial inquiry in both countries to establish why this scandal happened. "The association has been calling for a judicial inquiry from 1998

and, of course, we have been refused that," Haig says. "No one can give you an answer as to why it actually happened. Why the British government decided that the right thing to do for children was to send them to the other side of the world, deport them."

Humphreys says understanding is still needed. "It is more about helping people see and understand their responsibilities/ Helping people appreciate that historic abuse is with us every day. If society doesn't deal with historic abuse it just gets worse."

Haig believes there is still an issue of accountability: "Politicians give fine speeches about family and how much they believe in them and all of that, but the actions are different ... The thing is that governments haven't been held accountable. That is why there needs to be an inquiry. To tell [victims] what has happened. The most important thing is to make sure this never happens again."

And it is not too late to offer support for the victims, says Humphreys. "It is never too late for them and their families. And it is never too late for us, society, to do the right thing. People are getting older ... the families are as well. We have to move faster ... and with more resolution and determination. Every day counts and time is running out."

ipad Photo gallery: the children shipped to Australia.

Switch today and you could save with Australia's most awarded home lender. ANZ logo and award icons.

Money Magazine Home Loan of the Year Award 2010, 2008, 2007, 2006 and 2005, and AFR Smart Investor Magazine Home Lender of the Year Award 2005, 2004, 2002, 2001, 2000 and 1999. Australian Lending Awards, Lender of the Year Award 2011 and Best Investor Lender Award 2011.

Printed and distributed by NewspaperDirect. Copyright and protected by applicable law.