Rabbit-proof fence: "a true story"?

by Keith Windschuttle

The Australian-born Hollywood film director Phillip Noyce built most of his career on thrillers and action adventures, but this year he has simultaneously released onto the market two highly political films. One is his adaptation of Graham Greene's novel *The Quiet American* set in Vietnam in the 1950s. In Noyce's hands, the film outdoes even the novelist's anti-Americanism and support for the Communists then trying to take control of the country.

The second film, *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, is ostensibly an adventure story of female bravery and ingenuity in which three Aboriginal girls escape from an oppressive institution in Western Australia and make a fifteen-hundred-mile journey back to their home. In reality it is a work every bit as politically committed as Greene's. If anything, the anti-Australianism of the latter film outdoes the anti-Americanism of the former.

Rabbit-Proof Fence opens by declaring it is "a true story." Its script is a combination of a fictionalized memoir written by Doris Pilkington, whose mother was one of the three runaways, plus the 1997 report of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, entitled *Bringing Them Home*. The latter is possibly the most contentious government document ever published in Australia. The commission claimed that Aboriginal child-removal policies from the 1930s to 1970 amounted to "genocide" and that the Australian government owed those affected a public apology plus large amounts of monetary compensation. Writing in *The Washington Post* on February 2, 2003 the Melbourne academic Robert Manne endorsed the report and commended the film: "No episode in the country's history," Manne wrote, "is more ideologically sensitive than the story of what are now called the 'stolen generations.'"

The film depicts a typical scene portrayed by the report. In 1930, a policeman forcibly removes screaming children from their mother at Jigalong in the north-west of the continent. They are conveyed under brutal conditions to the Moore River Native Settlement, an institution resembling a concentration camp. The children are half-caste Aborigines and the rationale for their removal is justified by the chief protector of natives in Western Australia, an English-born public servant named A. O. Neville, played in the film by Kenneth Branagh. He explains to a group of white ladies that his objective is to "breed out the color" by separating half-caste children from other Aborigines.

He believes the declining full-blood Aboriginal population is doomed to die out. The number of half-castes, though, are rapidly increasing and threatening the political ideal of a White Australia. Half-caste children who remain with their mothers in blacks camps are likely to breed back into the Aboriginal population. If, however, they can be removed while children and then reared in institutions, they will marry other half-castes, quarter-castes, or whites. Eventually, this eugenics-inspired policy would see the Aboriginal race virtually eliminated. According to the Human Rights Commission report, between 1910 and 1970 these policies caused from ten to thirty per cent of all Australian Aborigines to be forcibly removed from their families. Using definitions adopted by the United Nations, it said this amounted to genocide.

The three girls who star in the film represent Aboriginal resistance to these plans. They escape the settlement and are pursued by the authorities, who use all the modern world's communications and transportation technology at their disposal. By following

the rabbit-proof fence, however—which was built to keep a rabbit plague in the east from spreading to the farming and grazing lands of the west coast—and by trusting their native ingenuity and knowledge of their environment, two of the girls eventually make it back home.

Australian audiences for the film have been invariably moved by the girls' plight, made angry at their white oppressors, and left in tears at the heroism of their great trek. This summer, the film has been the major box office success and won the Australian Film Institute award for best picture. Noyce used his acceptance speech to criticize the conservative government of Prime Minister John Howard for refusing to apologize to the Aborigines and also for exploiting fears of illegal Muslim immigrants. The government's last election victory, Noyce said, was based on "an exploitation of race hatred." As a result, Australia had "lost its humanity."

Despite this, a number of influential critics of the "stolen generations" report and of Noyce's film have emerged. They have argued that the only exploitation involved has been of the credulity of the public who, in both cases, have been fed gross misrepresentations of Australian history. Rather than being stolen from loving parents to fulfill a nationalist policy of racist eugenics, the only cases where Aboriginal children were removed involved serious parental neglect. In many of these cases, the parents were alcoholics who were not providing proper nutrition or health care and the authorities would have been culpable had they not acted. In some Aboriginal communities, half-caste children were treated as outcasts, especially the girls who became easy sexual prey for both whites and blacks. In some tribes, half-caste children were commonly subject to infanticide.

Forcible removals, like that depicted in the film, were rare. Indeed, the scene Noyce created is pure fiction since, according to the book, Molly was taken without a struggle and with the acquiescence of her stepfather who was present at the time. Moreover, institutions like that depicted in *Rabbit-Proof Fence* usually housed Aboriginal children placed voluntarily by their parents to be educated. Evidence from a 1934 enquiry showed that of the 1,067 admitted to the Moore River Native Settlement, only sixty-four were unattended or orphan children. That is, only 6 percent could possibly have been removals from their mothers. Yet the film depicts them all as stolen children.

The Human Rights Commission based its entire report on claims made by Aborigines themselves and did not test their evidence by calling witnesses from among the officials who allegedly removed them. Three test cases subsequently came before the courts, accompanied by claims for compensation. The evidence of the litigants contrasted dramatically with the records of their removal. In one case, a baby boy had been placed in a rabbit burrow by his grandmother and left to die. He was rescued later by his aunt. His teenage mother subsequently agreed to place him in an orphanage. Despite sympathetic judges, none of the three claimants could demonstrate they were forcibly removed, and no government policies were found to support a racist or "stolen generation" thesis.

Documentary evidence also emerged to show that some high-profile Aborigines who claimed to have been stolen had invented their stories. Fabricators included the former head of the Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander Commission, Lois O'Donoghue, whose white father had placed her and her sisters in a Catholic boarding school where he paid for their upkeep.

At the same time, descendants of A. O. Neville sprang to his defense, producing a biography and a string of documents from his career to demonstrate that, far from being a racist who wanted to see the Aborigines die out, he had dedicated his life to their well-being. When he died, his wife received about 500 letters from Aborigines

praising his efforts to rescue abandoned children and protect them from exploitation. In other words, rather than demonstrating that Australia had "lost its humanity," Aboriginal policy has consistently been based on humanitarian intentions. This is not to say these aims have been uniformly successful. While 70 percent of people of Aboriginal descent now live in urban areas where large numbers are socially indistinguishable from other Australians, the 30 percent who still live in remote outback communities suffer endemic poverty, poor health and education, as well as rising incidences of alcoholism and domestic violence. Humanitarian intervention, which has usually involved Christian missionaries trying to provide health and education services in these remote areas, has a poor record of success compared to that of the gradual, individual, and unassisted assimilation of Aboriginal people into mainstream society.

When Phillip Noyce recruited the three girls who were to star in his film, he chose them from outback communities in Western Australia. He found the eldest, Everlyn Sampi, who was to play fourteen-year-old Molly in the film, living with her mother at Broome on the north-west coast. A striking number of parallels emerged between the young actress and the character she played. Both had white fathers who had left their mothers. Neither was educated. Molly had attracted the attention of the authorities because of reports she was "running wild with the whites" and was being abused by the full-blood members of her tribe. Everlyn had reached puberty but could not read or write, was regularly truant from school, and Noyce himself became worried about her return to Broome and the life she would lead after the film was made. During rehearsals, Everlyn emulated her character and ran away twice. She was found in a telephone booth trying to book a ticket back to Broome. She was caught and returned to Noyce, who told a journalist her behavior "makes you want to protect her, adopt her."

Noyce decided to do just that. With her mother's consent, he arranged for her to enter a boarding school near Perth. But again, just like Molly, she hated it and demanded to be flown home. Last year a television reporter, James Thomas, confronted Noyce with the parallels between his own actions and those of his film's chief villain, the Aboriginal protector Neville.

> Thomas: Picture this: a white man enters a remote Aboriginal community with the best intentions, takes three girls out of their community and promises them fame and fortune. Does it sound familiar?
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> Noyce: Mmm-hmm.
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> Thomas: Are you aware of the irony that exists in what you are doing with this film and the actual topic of the film itself?
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> Noyce: Well, I suppose in one way you could say that in a different context, in a different time, I'm A. O. Neville promising these young Aboriginal children a better life, asking them to do things that are against their instincts, perhaps because it's for their own good. But we do live in a slightly different world.

While we obviously do live in a different world, Noyce himself succumbed to an instinct that is as old as the British settlement of Australia: the desire to offer Aboriginal people the benefits of civilized life and to educate their children in the ways of the modern world.

If this is true, though, why would Australia's artists and intellectuals have become so uniformly intent on portraying their own country in such bleak terms, regularly

comparing Aboriginal policy to the intentions of the Nazis towards the Jews? Among the most visible of the symbols of this attitude is the new National Museum of Australia whose central construction—shaped as a lightning bolt striking the land—is borrowed from the Jewish Museum in Berlin in order to signify that the Aborigines suffered the equivalent of the Holocaust. The museum's director described its opening, which coincided with the centenary of federation, as "a birthday gift to Australia," but symbolically to accuse the nation of the most terrible crime possible was a strange present. Yet, apart from a handful of conservative objectors, the country largely accepted it without demur.

The reason is the consensus reached by the university-based historians of Aboriginal Australia over the past thirty years. This consensus now commands an overwhelming majority of support in the media, the arts, the universities, and the public service. In addition to inventing the "stolen generations" thesis—which originated in 1982 in a book by Peter Read of the Australian National University—academic historians have created a picture of widespread mass killings on the frontiers of the nineteenth-century colonies that not only went unpunished but had covert government support. Some of these colonies engaged in what the principal historian of race relations in Tasmania, Lyndall Ryan, has called "a conscious policy of genocide."

In 2000 I began a project to re-assess the evidence for this frontier warfare and the massacres that purportedly accompanied it. The project began in Tasmania, or Van Diemen's Land as it was known until 1855, about which I originally expected to write a single chapter. In re-reading all the archival evidence and double-checking all the claims by historians, however, I found such a wealth of material, including some of the most hair-raising breaches of historical practice imaginable, that Van Diemen's Land has become the subject of the first of what will eventually be a three-volume series entitled *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*. The first book was published in early December by Macleay Press and has ever since been part of a virulent and frequently vicious debate in the press.

Van Diemen's Land is widely regarded as Australia's worst-case scenario, indeed, one of the few cases of outright genocide in the British Empire. International writers now routinely compare the British in this colony with the Spaniards in Mexico, the Belgians in the Congo, the Turks in Armenia, and Pol Pot in Cambodia.

My own reconsideration of the evidence comes to a completely different conclusion. In all of Europe's colonial encounters with the New Worlds of the Americas and the Pacific, Van Diemen's Land was probably the site where the least indigenous blood of all was deliberately shed. In the entire period from 1803, when the colonists arrived, to 1834, when all but one family of Aborigines had been removed to a sanctuary on Flinders Island, racial conflict resulted in a plausible death toll of one-hundred and eighteen of the original inhabitants, less than four deaths a year.

It is true the original 2000 full-blood Tasmanian Aborigines did die out in the nineteenth century (although they left a trail of mixed-blood descendants who today number about 16,000 out of a total population of 500,000). The demise of the original inhabitants was almost entirely a consequence of two factors: their ten-thousand-year isolation since the last ice age that had left them vulnerable to introduced diseases, especially influenza, pneumonia, and tuberculosis; and the fact that the men traded and prostituted their women to white stockmen and sealers to such an extent that they lost the ability to reproduce themselves.

None of this involved genocide, which requires murderous intention against a whole race of people. The ruling ideas of the age, both in England and the colonies, favored the conciliation of the Aborigines. Van Diemen's Land was colonized at a time when

British society and politics were strongly influenced by a revival of Christian Evangelicalism, expressed in the successful campaign to end slavery, and by the philosophy of the English and Scottish Enlightenment, which emphasized the unity of humankind. The colonial governors and leading settlers not only held these ideas, they publicly expressed and acted upon them. While they suspected their convict lower orders of abusing the Aborigines, their main aim was to prevent this from happening. Their intent was to civilize and modernize the Aborigines, not exterminate them.

On the Aborigines' side, despite the claims of academic historians, there was nothing that resembled frontier warfare, patriotic struggle, or systematic resistance of any kind. What historians call the "Black War" of Van Diemen's Land from 1824–1831 began as a minor crime wave by two Europeanized black bushrangers, followed by an outbreak of robbery and murder by tribal Aborigines.

In both Tasmania and the mainland, many Aborigines willingly accommodated themselves to the newcomers. They were drawn to and became part of the new society. Many others, however, were subject to a policy that kept them separated from the white population. The system of segregated missions and reserves that emerged in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries was, in my view, the worst crime that Australia committed against the Aborigines. The missionaries and government officials who initiated this strategy claimed it was to protect them from white violence and white exploitation. They originated this thesis in order to provide a rationale for their own institutions and to provide themselves with a captive audience.

There is no doubt that the segregation was often undertaken with the best of intentions. The missionaries saw themselves fulfilling the evangelical and humanitarian traditions of their own culture. In exaggerating the conflict that did occur, however, and in accepting as true a range of myths, rumors, and frontier yarns about violence, they left a legacy of assertions which academic historians have seized upon over the last thirty years in order to construct their own bleak portrait of the nation's beginnings.

The leading figures among these historians were educated in the 1960s and were influenced by the politics of that radical decade. In particular, they accepted the Sixties slogan that everything is political, a notion that went a long way to justify the overt politicization of their work. Although several started out as Marxists, they soon welcomed "interest group" politics, in which women, gays, blacks, and ethnics were all portrayed as oppressed by the prevailing social structure. They replaced the class struggle of Marxism with the "gender, race, and class" liberation movements. After the fall of Communism in 1989, many of them abandoned the cause of the workers to take up that of the Aborigines.

Nonetheless, the underlying impetus of those many well-educated, middle-class Australians who have accepted their story has been not so much their politics as the Enlightenment humanitarianism and evangelical Christianity that has been present since the country's founding. They have inherited a self-critical, morally sensitive culture that readily becomes incensed at breaches of its own ethical rules. This is why they are so willing to believe authors who discover injustices such as those alleged to have been perpetrated against the Aborigines. And this is why those who become the accusers, like Phillip Noyce, often share so much in common with those they accuse, like A. O. Neville.

The obvious problem for such a self-critical moral outlook is its vulnerability to exploitation by those who would mislead and deceive for their own ends. Every now and again such a culture needs a cold bath of factual analysis to bring it to its senses. The time for such a shock to the system in Australia is now well overdue.

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