

A remarkable journey to safety

CROKER ISLAND Exodus



CROKER ISLAND EXODUS



1942, CROKER ISLAND, ARAFURA SEA

As the Japanese bomb Australia's north, 95 Aboriginal children and their missionary carers make a remarkable journey to safety across the continent.

This 'little' party sets off on a trek that takes them from Croker Island through Arnhem Land to a Methodist farm at Otford on the edge of Sydney.

Over 44 days they travel 5,000 miles by foot, boat, canoe, truck and train.

This compelling documentary film is their story, in their own words, a truly heroic and untold journey.

www.crokerislandexodus.com



THE STORY OF AN EXODUS

1941, all white women and children are evacuated from Darwin. Japanese invasion is imminent.



On a tiny Methodist mission on Croker Island in the Arafura Sea, the Superintendent and three Cottage mothers are responsible for 95 Aboriginal children allocated to their care by the government.

The missionary women are given the option of evacuating but how can they abandon the children placed in their care? However food supplies are running dangerously low and no help comes through the long wet.

February 1942, a message by pedal radio, Darwin has been bombed, the missionaries will now have to move the children off the island themselves. So they begin their perilous journey.

After borrowing some fuel they are finally able to secure the mission boat **The Larrpan** and sail to Barclay Point. They spend their first night on the mainland facing the threat of salt-water crocodiles.

A young Margaret Somerville, one of the Cottage mothers, remembers in her letters home,

What a strange crowd we looked, lying down in all our clothes on a sandy strip of beach on the top of Australia! How quiet and lonely it seemed.

Their first destination is Oenpelli Mission. This requires a trek over many miles of open savannah and the harsh beautiful stone country of Arnhem Land. When the old truck becomes bogged, the children help push it to harder ground. They gather armfuls of water lily stalks and climb for berries in the bush plum trees.



Netta, one of the mission children, looks back more than 70 years later and laughs,

Somebody found a half dead goanna and we were fighting for that goanna, we want the tail, somebody wanted the leg, Alice wanted the head.

THE STORY OF AN EXODUS



Margaret Somerville remembers,

It was the resourcefulness of the children that kept us fed.

At night they make camp, using their dwindling supply of flour and yeast to make damper. It will still be many miles walking. At Oenpelli they expect to stay 3 days but it is weeks before word that government trucks can't get through and they will have to walk another 60 miles to meet them. With help from the traditional Aboriginal men they cross the flooded East Alligator River by dug out canoe. The river is home to saltwater crocodiles but despite falling into the river they make it across safely. After many days, they meet up with the trucks. But arriving in Pine Creek they find an American army base, no beds just the Butcher's Paddock on the outskirts of town. They are forced to stay in this one tree paddock until they can board a cattle train en route

to Alice Springs and their destination, a Methodist Farm in Otford on the outskirts of Sydney.

In 44 days these brave women and their young charges travel from Croker Island across the Australian continent. This is a truly heroic and untold journey. But it is also an epic story of human endurance, strength and resilience.

After the war, Margaret returned to Croker Island with 69 children including Alice, Netta and Jessie. She stayed on the island until 1965 when she returned to Sydney to look after her parents. A year later there was a government decision to close the

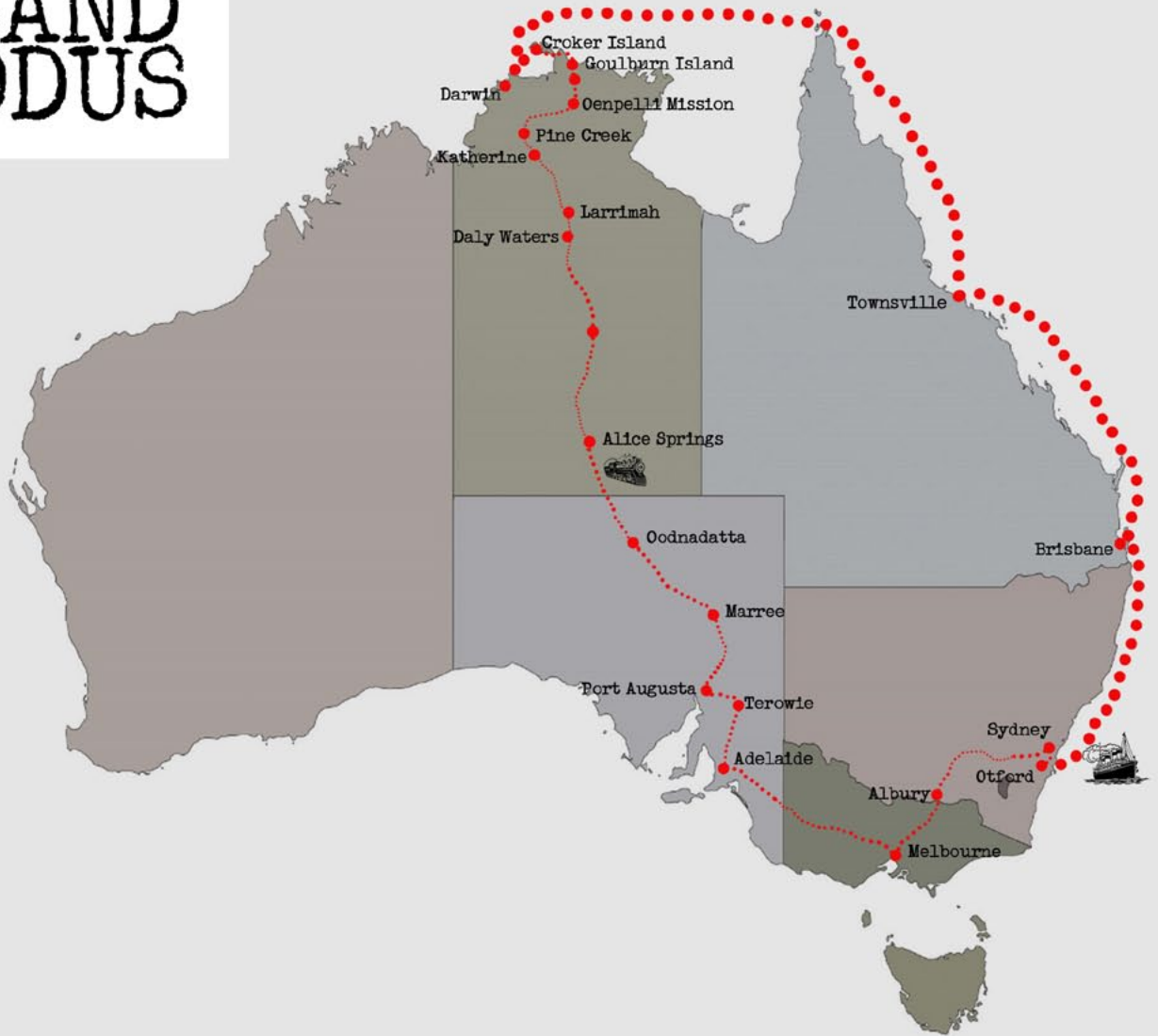
Mission and move all the remaining children to homes in the suburbs of Darwin and Adelaide.



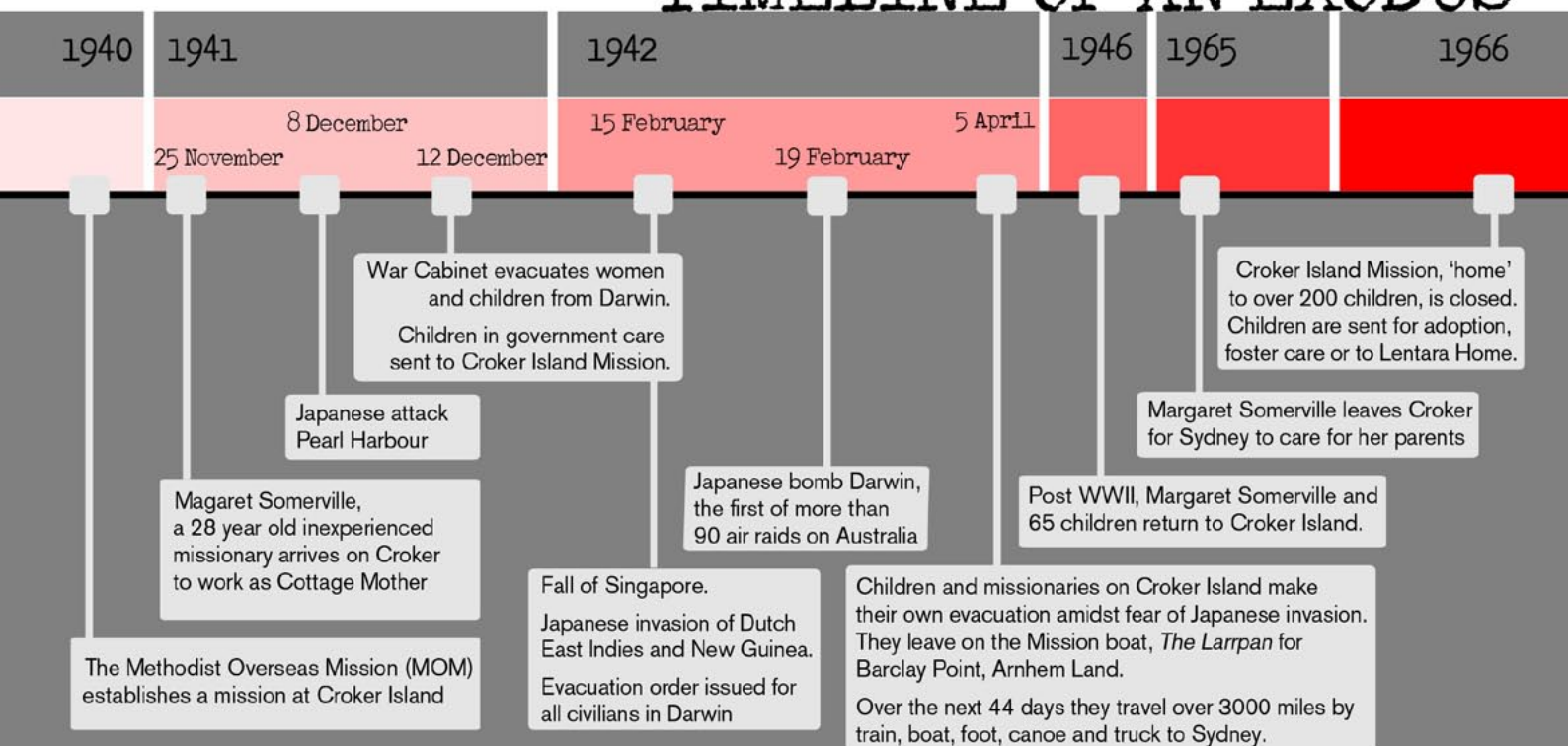
Alice, Netta and Jessie are now in their 80s. They have endured so much in their lives but the friendships forged on Croker remain strong and feisty. These Aboriginal women still call Margaret, now 100 years old, 'sister'.

It is their shared stories of love, humour and compassion that are central to this film.

CROKER ISLAND EXODUS



TIMELINE OF AN EXODUS



THE FILMMAKERS



STEVEN MCGREGOR
WRITER & DIRECTOR

Steven McGregor is an Indigenous writer/director from Darwin and a graduate of the Australian Film, Television and Radio School.

He was the director on the award winning documentaries *My Brother Vinnie* and *5 Seasons*. His most recent production was the acclaimed 3 part documentary series, *In a League Of Their Own*. Steven's 50 min drama *Cold Turkey* screened in festivals all over the world and was nominated for two AFI awards. He worked as a script advisor and Indigenous consultant on Baz Luhrmann's *Australia* and has written for the new ABC series, *Redfern Now*. He is soon to direct *George Rurrumbu*, the story of the legendary front man of the Warumpi Band.

ANNA GRIEVE
PRODUCER

Anna Grieve was Executive Producer at Film Australia for eight years. Her production credits include the multi award winning, *Dhakiyarr vs the King* shot in Arnhem Land, *Art Series* with Betty Churcher, *Docs for Mobile* with the NFB and four films with Peter Butt including *Who Killed Dr Bogle & Mrs Chandler?* (still the highest rating documentary in ABC TV history). Recent highlights include *The Prime Minister is Missing*, *I, Spry* and 2012 SXSW Interactive award winner, the multi-platform documentary *Big Stories*, *Small Towns*. (www.bigstories.com.au) a participatory media project shot in rural Australia and Cambodia gathering local stories for a global audience.



DANIELLE MacLEAN
WRITER & PRODUCER

Danielle MacLean is an Indigenous writer/director/producer from Darwin. She directed many CAAMA productions before writing and directing *For Who I Am – Bonita Mabo, My Colour Your Kind* and the award-winning drama *Queen of Hearts*. She has written for the new ABC series *Redfern Now*.



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

STEVEN MCGREGOR

Crocker Island Exodus explores a little known story of Australia's war history set in some of the most amazing country on earth - Australia's Northern Territory. In 1942 three female Methodist Missionaries in charge of 95 Aboriginal children undertook an epic journey that saw them travel 3000 miles from Croker Island in the Northern Territory to Otford in New South Wales.



It was a journey taken in desperation as the government had all but abandoned them following the Japanese bombing of Darwin. With all resources being injected into the defence of Australia's North, Croker Island's supply lines became non-existent. They had no choice but to flee for their lives. But this was no ordinary group of children, as stolen generation children they were used to fending for themselves and caring for each other because as they say, 'there was no one else to do it'.



And it was this self-sufficiency that meant they would survive such an incredible journey."

Our characters are a group of ladies in their 80's. They have endured so much in their lives but to this day the friendships forged on Croker Island are still as strong and feisty as when they were children. Alice, Jessie and Netta who feature in this film are not bitter, there is sadness that some of them never saw their mothers again, but what they have developed is a Croker Island family and one they cherish.

The other integral character to this story is Sister Margaret Somerville who wrote a book, *They Crossed A Continent*, based on the detailed letters she wrote home to her family during the epic journey. She recounts with great humour and clarity her life on Croker and the story of the evacuation. Our ladies have great affection for Margaret who is now 100 years old and they still keep in contact with her. This is an epic story of human endurance and friendships. Against all odds and without the guidance and love of parents, these women have survived to raise families of their own. It is not a 'poor bugger me' story but one of strength and survival. The ladies have been gracious enough to entrust us to tell their story.

INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR STEVEN MCGREGOR

How old were you when you knew you wanted to be a filmmaker? And was there a particular film or filmmaker that inspired this decision?

I remember being fascinated by black and white photos as a kid. It was the image, something in the eyes of the people in the photos. This sparked my interest in how these images were captured, this then evolved into filmmaking.

Describe your first experience with filmmaking.

My first experience was with a NT Government video unit where I was employed as a trainee, a production assistant. Essentially I was a packhorse lugging gear around. The equipment was low band u-matic. But there were some good people there and they let me jump on the camera and showed me the basics of editing and then I played around with the gear.

Can you tell us about the genesis of your film?

This film came from one of the producers, Danielle MacLean whose Auntie was one of the kids on the journey. It immediately captured my interest, the scale of the journey, the friendships forged and the bond that binds them together.

Please describe your film for us?

The film is about the strength of the human spirit and enduring friendships that span a life time.

As a documentary-maker how do you build up a relationship with your subject/s?

I build relationships with the characters, I don't like the word subjects, through respect. You have to earn respect to receive it.

Which parts of the filmmaking process do you enjoy the most? The least?

I really like the filming but I also enjoy the editing, to see the film come together. There are some surprises in the edit, some good, some not so good. The least enjoyable part about the film making process is trying to raise the money.

What were your biggest challenges and surprises whilst shooting Croker Island Exodus?

The biggest challenge was trying to condense the story into a manageable shape. It is such an epic story.

What do you feel your responsibility is to your subject/s after filming has finished?

I want the people who have entrusted us with the story to feel that we have done right by them. I want them to feel we have respected their story, I want them to be proud of their film.

Which films/directors do you think have most influenced your work?

I don't have one particular director that I look to, though I do like the Coen Brothers. There are lots of directors that have influenced me. For this film, John Sayles Lone Star was a huge influence. I'd watched it at film school and was blown away by it, the way he seamlessly transitioned from the present to the past was something I'd never seen before. I wanted to try it in a film somewhere down the line. But I had to wait for the right film, to force it on a film would have been wrong but this film was perfect.

What is the best piece of professional advice you've ever been given, and who gave it to you?

The best piece of advice I was given was by mother. I'd left school at 17 and was sitting on the couch bludging. She told me to get off my ass and get a job. She dragged me up to these government people and I got the trainee position in the NT government video unit.

INTERVIEW WITH PRODUCER DANIELLE MacLEAN

How old were you when you knew you wanted to be a filmmaker? And was there a particular film or filmmaker that inspired this decision?

When I was 16 I went back to Alice Springs for a holiday to visit family and a close family friend was working for CAAMA Productions at the time and I remember thinking that her work seemed so interesting and that it would be great to do something like that. I actually end up following her footsteps in a lot of ways.



Describe your first experience with filmmaking.

My first filmmaking experience was working as a production assistant for CAAMA Productions on an Aboriginal language series in Central Australia this meant going out bush to make documentaries with traditional Aboriginal people, it was definitely a steep learning curve and I felt lucky to be involved in the recording of so many amazing stories, giving people a voice who otherwise would not have one.

Can you tell us about the genesis of the film?

I am related to one of the women who undertook this remarkable journey and it was another family member who insisted I should make the film. Once I spoke to the ladies, I knew that this was a remarkable idea for a film and that I had to be involved in making it.

Please describe your film for us?

This is a film about shared memories of an event that would shape life long friendships through loss, heartache and joy.



Croker Island Exodus cast and crew

THREE LADIES

NETTA CAHILL

Born in the late 1930s, Netta was on walkabout with her mother visiting her Grandmother in Oodnadatta when she was picked up by police and taken to Charlotte Waters a pick up station for half-caste children.

"They gave us the surname 'Waters' because Charlotte Waters was the pick-up station".

Netta believes she was four or five years old at the time and has vivid memories of this traumatic event. Netta was sent to the Bungalow institution in Alice Springs.

"At the Bungalow we use to snatch food off one another. We were like little puppy dogs picking up apple cores and skin. The Government did not do much for me but the Church has really lifted me up and gave me my strong character and they showed me how to love and respect one another."

Much of her young life was spent on the newly formed Croker Island Mission and she recalls happy days with the other children,

"I don't think I was strong enough to be their guardian sisters but we still cared for each other, because we were taught and we had nobody else to love us. We loved each other..."

Sent south to escape the threat from Japanese fighters during WW2, she returned to Croker Island after the war and stayed on the Island until around 14 years of age when she was sent into Darwin to work. Netta married and had four children. At the age of 45 she received an unexpected message, the mother who she believed long dead had been into the Native Affairs Office in Alice Springs asking of her welfare. So, at 45, Netta met her mother again. She has fond memories of the reunion although she was shocked at the impoverished conditions that her family lived in. Netta now has 16 grand children and 8 great grand children and is still enjoying her life in Darwin.



Jessie, Alice and Netta by a poinciana tree near Pine Creek

JESSIE LYONS

Jessie was taken to the 'half-caste pick up station' at Charlotte Waters but unlike Netta Jessie doesn't remember being taken away.

"I never seen my mother again and I never met my father until 1974. When someone told me my father was down in Katherine I said; who's my father? I didn't know I had a father for heavens sake. Sad..."

Jessie was sent to the Bungalow Mission in Alice Springs and when the war broke up was sent up to Croker Island Mission.

"Croker Island was so beautiful, paradise. We looked after the younger ones when they come to Croker Island. Well I was a cottage mother when I was still going to High school".

Jessie had 8 children and numerous grandchildren and great grandchildren, there's so many she's stopped counting. She still lives in Darwin and her children affectionately call her "car dog" because when anyone is going bush for a drive, Jessie is the first one in the car.

I'm grateful anyway for what the missionaries did for me, they taught us how to look after ourselves, look after our children. I mean there's a lot of other things I think about but I don't say anything about it.

ALICE BRISTON

"It was Native Affairs that picked two colored kids up, that was Ruby Palmer and me and this bloke held two of us in his hands, took us away from my mother up to Kahlin Compound beach, there was a track from the beach up to where the home was, so anyway we got left there."

Alice was sent to numerous half-caste institutions before ending up in the care of the Methodist Church at Croker Island.

"And we used to have good fun in the creek, and the water over us. It was lovely. And I reckon it was a very nice place to live. It was home for me, our home."

Alice was evacuated with all the other children to Otford and returned to Croker Island Mission until she reached 16 years old.

She worked as a domestic before meeting her husband and having eleven children. She has a large extended family of grandchildren and great grandchildren.

"I don't know how I survived up to now. Having children and looking after them and growing them up you know, we respectable people".

A life long supporter of the Darwin Buffaloes AFL football side, she can still be found most weekends supporting her beloved team.

MARGARET SOMERVILLE



Margaret Somerville and children on Croker Island



Margaret Somerville on her 96th birthday

Born in 1912, Margaret Somerville was the daughter of a Methodist Minister. She was employed as a cottage mother at the Croker Island Methodist Mission from 1941-65. She was one of three cottage mothers who helped take the children from the mission to safety in Otford, New South Wales during World War 2.

"We will not leave without the children."

A young woman with zeal, generosity and compassion, she wrote *They Crossed A Continent* about her experiences based on a letter she wrote to her parents en route during the evacuation. When she launched the book in 2010 Governor-General Quentin Bryce said,

"This is one of the greatest of all Australian stories of love and compassion."

When the war ended, Margaret returned to Croker Island with 69 of the children. She was the only one of the original cottage mothers to do so. She dedicated the rest of her life working with children.

In 1965, Margaret returned to Sydney, accompanied by two foster children who later returned to their family. She was awarded an MBE for her work on Croker Island and the Somerville Homes in Darwin are named in her honour. Margaret turns 100 in September 2012, and is still going strong.



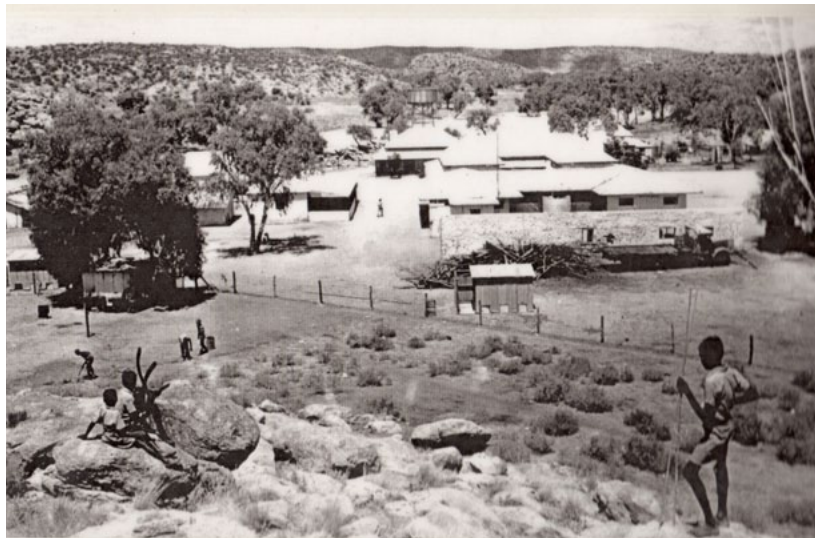
Recess time, Croker Island Mission, 1950s

ABOUT CROKER ISLAND



Croker Island is an hour's flight north of Darwin at the meeting place of the Arafura Sea and the Timor Sea. The traditional owners are the Yammirr people. Many Aboriginal people acknowledge Croker Island as the birthplace of the Rainbow Serpent, one of the most important spiritual beings in the Dreamtime. The island is covered with tropical rainforest, fringed by sandy beaches and coral reef. Birds like Brolga and Jabiru are abundant.

The Methodist Overseas Mission started building a mission at Croker Island in 1940 to house children of 'mixed descent'. The mission on Croker was designed as a children's home with cottages instead of dormitories and groups of children placed under the care of cottage mothers. With war approaching, considerable government pressure was put on the Methodists to take children as quickly as possible. Many children from government institutions in Alice Springs, Darwin and Pine Creek were the first to be moved to Croker Island in 1941. In April of 1942, the children and missionaries at Croker Island were forced to evacuate amidst fears of Japanese invasion.



Bungalow Half-Caste Institution Alice Springs, May 1939



Many of the children were returned to Croker Island in 1946. Children of mixed race continued to be sent to the Mission for the next two decades.

Croker Island Mission was closed in 1966, with many of the children being transferred to Lentara Children's Home in Magill, South Australia or into foster care and adoption around Australia.

Today Croker Island is the home to the Aboriginal community of Minjilang, located on Mission Bay on the east coast.



Children at the Bungalow, Alice Springs. Many of these children were transferred to Croker Island

STOLEN GENERATIONS

In 1911, the Commonwealth gave the Chief Protector the power to act as the legal guardian of every child of mixed descent in the Northern Territory. As a result of these policies, children were forcibly removed from their families and placed into government and church institutions. Tens of thousands of Aboriginal children across Australia were taken under duress from their families by police or welfare officers. Most were under ten years old and many were under five.



Children from the Bungalow taking part in the Bangtail Muster in Alice Springs.

When John 'Black Jack' McEwen was appointed Minister for the Interior in 1937, he toured the Bungalow Institution and the Half-Caste Homes in the Northern Territory.

He was shocked by the conditions he saw,

I know many stock-breeders who would not dream of crowding their stock in the way that these half-caste children are huddled.

He proposed what he termed a 'New Deal' for Aboriginal people based on economic and social assimilation. Responsibility for the children was handed to the churches with government funding to support missions along the north coast. With the commencement of World War 2, McEwen's policy proposals came to an abrupt end. After the war, the forcible removal of Indigenous children recommenced. Patrol officers were required to report on the presence of children of mixed descent living in Aboriginal communities and make arrangements for their removal.

The National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families was established in May 1995. Its 1997 Report 'Bringing them Home' found that forcible removal of Indigenous children was a gross violation of human rights, which continued well after Australia had undertaken international human rights commitments.

On 13th February 2008 Kevin Rudd, then Prime Minister, made an official apology to the Stolen Generations. The Government stated there would be no compensation fund.

In 2007, in a landmark case in the State Supreme Court of South Australia, Bruce Trevorrow became the first member of the Stolen Generation to win compensation. The South Australian government appealed but in 2010 the Full Court affirmed Trevorrow's right to compensation.

To date, this case appears to be the only legal precedent for compensation.

LIVE LINKS

Link-Up

<http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/fhu/linkup.html>

Providing a range of services to members of the Stolen Generations, their families, and foster and adoptive families

NT Stolen Generations

<http://www.ntsgac.org/>

Formally incorporated in 1998 to respond directly to the needs and concerns of members of the Stolen Generations, their families and communities

Stolen Generations by Peter Read

<http://www.daa.nsw.gov.au/publications/53.html>

Sixth reprint of Professor Peter Read's landmark 1981 paper

Silent Cries for Croker, Our Island Home

<http://salinkup.com.au/media/pdf/crokerdisplay.pdf>

An overview of the Croker Island Exodus as part of SA Link Up's 2003 reunion of former residents

John McEwen's New Deal, 1939

http://www.naa.gov.au/naaresources/publications/research_guides/nt-guide/chapter8/8.3.html

Bringing Them Home Oral History Project

<http://www.nla.gov.au/oh/bth/>

The National Library of Australia's Bringing Them Home oral history interviews are being made available online in consultation with the people interviewed or their nominated next of kin, if locatable.

Margaret Somerville Interview

<http://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/951410>

Margaret interviewed by Frank Heimans in the Bringing Them Home oral history project [sound recording]

Bringing them Home Report

http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/bth_report/index.html

Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families.

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies

<http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/library/links.html>

Extensive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resource links.

Paint Me Black: Memories of Croker Island and Other Journeys

<http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/asp/aspbooks/paintmeblack.html>

Book by Claire Henty-Gebert.

ABC Report on the Making Of Croker Island Exodus

<http://www.abc.net.au/local/photos/2011/10/11/3337243.htm>

The original Croker Island Exodus was scorchingly hot, dangerous and a whole lot of fun. The filming of this incredible story proved to be a similar experience.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Director STEVEN McGREGOR

Writers DANIELLE MacLEAN & STEVEN McGREGOR

Producers ANNA GRIEVE & DANIELLE MacLEAN

Editor BILL MURPHY ASE

Director of Photography ALLAN COLLINS ACS

Production Design & Wardrobe EMMA FLETCHER

Composer GEORGE PAPANICOLAOU

Featuring ALICE BRISTON, NETTA CAHILL,

JESSIE LYONS, MARGARET SOMERVILLE

www.crokerisland.com.au

THEY CROSSED A CONTINENT

The story of a wartime exodus from Croker Island to Sydney by Margaret Somerville



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