

What's Happening

I N T H E W O R L D ?

BY LAWRENCE GABLE

VOL 10, NO 5 JANUARY 2010

For many years Britain sent children to other countries in the British Commonwealth. Although the Child Migrants Program ended 40 years ago, Australia just apologized for its role in it. Britain's apology will come early in 2010.

Britain had a history of sending children overseas. The first case came in 1618, when it sent 100 children across the Atlantic to the colony in Virginia. In the 19th century it sent 440 children to South Africa as laborers after that country had abolished slavery. The migrant program itself began in the 1920s and ended in 1967. It sent nearly 150,000 children away, most to Australia and Canada.

Britain took children who were living in bad conditions. The majority of them were living in institutions because their parents had been unable to care for them. The government also found children who lived on the streets. Their parents, often just single mothers, had abandoned them. In any case, most children were not orphans.

Many of the people involved in the program had good intentions. They wanted to protect the children from the bad lives they faced and offer them a safer, more prosperous life. They also wanted to help Britain by freeing the government from the expense of housing and feeding the children. However, the government recognizes now that it should have worked to fix social problems, not just export them.

Unfortunately the program's officials made some awful mistakes. The fundamental one was the heartlessness of sending children alone to a strange place. Some were as young as three years old. They faced lonely childhoods without love, understanding and emotional support. If siblings did arrive together, the authorities often separated them. They ended up working on isolated farms and receiving few opportunities for education.

The program also misled parents and children. Some parents thought the children had been adopted in Britain. The program sent many children away without notifying the parents, and officials told children that



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their parents had died. Often they also created documents for the children with the wrong names and birth dates, and a statement that the children had no living relatives.

Another terrible injustice was placing the children in the protection of people who abused them. Some of the migrant children were treated well and received good care.

For too many, though, it turned out to be a childhood of abuse through starvation, slave labor, and sexual and physical abuse. Many children received severe beatings with belt buckles and bamboo canes.

The countries that received the migrant children certainly got an economic benefit. Their populations were low, and they got young, healthy workers whom they did not have to pay. Boys usually did work on farms while girls worked as servants in homes. Perhaps 100,000 British children went to Canada, and 10,000 to Australia. Nearly 600 ended up in New Zealand, and 300 in Rhodesia.

Australia's prime minister, Kevin Rudd, gave a national apology at a ceremony in November. About 1,000 people attended, and many of them had been migrant children themselves. People wept as he expressed sorrow to all who bore "the physical suffering, the emotional starvation and the cold absence of love." When he finished the audience burst into cheers and applause.

Other countries also have responded to the Child Migrants Program. New Zealand's government apologized for its program in 2008. Although a victims' organization reports that nearly two-thirds of the children in Canada were abused, the government claims that most were not. As a result, it has no plans to apologize for its program. Prime Minister Gordon Brown's apology for Britain's mistakes is coming soon.

Over the years the surviving migrant children have wanted an apology and information about where they came from. Although the apologies are long overdue, they are welcome. The children have carried the burden of their suffering for a lifetime, and now they finally have the chance to put the ugly past behind them.

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Britain took children from bad conditions. Most were living in institutions because their parents had been unable to care for them. It also found children who lived on the streets because their parents, often just single mothers, had abandoned them.

The program had good intentions. It wanted to offer the children a safer, more prosperous life. It also wanted to save Britain the expense of housing and feeding the children. However, the government recognizes now that it should have fixed social problems, not just sent them away.

Unfortunately the program made some awful mistakes. The worst was the heartlessness of sending children alone to a strange place. Some were as young as three years old. They faced lonely childhoods without love and emotional support. If brothers and sisters arrived together, the authorities often separated them. They ended up on isolated farms and had few opportunities for education.

The program also misled parents and children. Some parents thought the children had been adopted in Britain. The program told many children that their parents had died, and sent many



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away without telling the parents.

Often they also created documents for the children that had the wrong names and birth dates.

Another terrible injustice was placing the children where people abused them.

Some children received good care. However, too many

suffered abuse through starvation, slave labor, and sexual and physical

abuse. Many children received beatings.

The countries that received the migrant children were glad to get the children. Their populations were low, and they got young, healthy workers who worked for free. Boys usually worked on farms while girls were servants in homes.

Australia's prime minister, Kevin Rudd, gave a national apology in November. About 1,000 people attended the ceremony. Many of them had been migrant children, and they wept as he spoke. He expressed sorrow for the children's physical suffering and the absence of love. When he finished the audience burst into cheers and applause.

Other countries also have responded to the Child Migrants Program. New Zealand's government apologized in 2008. A victims' organization for the children in Canada reports that nearly two-thirds of them were abused, but the government claims that most were not. As a result, it has no plans to apologize. An apology from Britain's prime minister is coming soon.

The migrant children always have wanted an apology and information about where they came from. The apologies are long overdue, but they are welcome. Even though most of the children are elderly now, they finally have the chance to put the ugly past behind them.

Background Information

In 1998 the British government set up a fund of \$2.6 million to pay for trips that reunited former child migrants with their families in Britain.

Approximately 100,000 children went to Canada between 1899 and 1939. That is when the program officially stopped, but an organization for the migrants to Canada, Home Children Canada, reports that the final children arrived in 1948.

Home Children Canada has helped the victims find out where they came from. It says that Britain intentionally falsified 10,000 records.

In the 1920s Australia replaced Canada as the primary destination for migrant children.

Australia's Department of Immigration reports that about 6,500 children arrived in Australia between 1912 and 1967. However, the British government reports that 10,000 children were sent to Australia. This higher number probably included youths between the ages of 17 and 20.

Prime Minister Rudd gave Australia's national apology on November 16, 2009 in the capital, Canberra. Prime Minister Brown will issue Britain's apology after he has met with some of the program's survivors.

Australians call the migrant children the "Lost Innocents." Australia stopped the program in 1967, and about 7,000 of the former migrants still live in there.

Rhodesia, now called Zimbabwe, received hundreds of children between 1946 and 1956.

Survivors in Australia are demanding financial compensation from the government, but it has said that it will not compensate them.

Children were sent to New Zealand between 1948 and 1954. Most of them ended up in foster homes rather than in state-run institutions.

After World War II Australia became aware of the need to boost its population. However, it was afraid of getting immigrants from Asia, so it welcomed children of "good White stock" from Britain. Australia's immigration policy favored British and White immigrants until the 1970s.

As early as 1924 a commission in Britain, the Bondfield Commission, recommended that the country should stop sending children overseas and deal with its domestic problems instead.

Topics for Discussion and Writing

Pre-reading:

- Why do you think a country would apologize for mistakes it made in the past?

Comprehension:

- Cite some of the mistakes the British government made with the Child Migrants Program.

Beyond the Text:

- List some ways in which children end up living without, or apart from, their parents.
- What do you think Mr. Rudd meant when he apologized for "emotional starvation"?
- Mr. Rudd called the program "an ugly chapter" in Australia's history. Tell about an ugly chapter in some other country's history.

Vocabulary (*advanced article only)

Article-specific: migrant; British Commonwealth; overseas; orphan; emotional; siblings*; isolated; to abuse

High-use: to abolish*; majority*; institution; to abandon; intention; prosperous; fundamental*; authorities; to mislead; economic*; surviving*

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CA Curricular Standards (4–12)

English-Language Arts

Reading 1.0 Vocabulary Development

2.0 Comprehension (Informational Materials)

Writing 1.0 Writing Strategies

2.0 Writing Applications

ELD—Intermediate and Advanced

Reading Vocabulary Development/Comprehension

Writing Strategies and Applications

Listening and Speaking