**BETWEEN TWO WORLDS:
THE COMMONWEALTH GOVERNMENT
AND THE REMOVAL OF ABORIGINAL CHILDREN
OF PART DESCENT IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY - AN
AUSTRALIAN ARCHIVES EXHIBITION**

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Between Two Worlds: The Commonwealth government and the removal of Aboriginal children of part-descent in the Northern Territory is a touring exhibition prepared by the Australian Archives in 1993, as part of the Commonwealth government's celebration of the International Year for the World's Indigenous Peoples. *Between Two Worlds* looks at two Northern Territory 'Half-caste' institutions run by the Commonwealth government: the Bungalow in Alice Springs and the Kahlin Home in Darwin, which both operated between 1913 and the 1940s. Using oral histories, photographs and documents drawn mainly from the Australian Archives' collection, the exhibition explores the experiences of the children who were placed in these institutions and follows the development of the government policy which shaped their lives. This article will describe the process involved in developing and staging *Between Two Worlds*, and consider some of the responses it has received since its Australia-wide tour commenced in Sydney in October 1993.

The Australian Archives is the Commonwealth government organisation responsible for preserving the archival records of all Commonwealth government agencies. In 1993, a Public Programs Branch was established to co-ordinate publications and exhibitions activity within the Archives as a means of raising its public profile and improving accessibility to the records in its custody. Apart from the *Between Two Worlds* exhibition, the Branch is responsible for a program of exhibitions in Kings Hall at Old Parliament House in Canberra. It also publishes guides to records held by Australian Archives, as well as cards, posters and postcards based on Australian Archives material. Two recent guides are *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in Commonwealth Records: A Guide to Records in the Australian Archives, ACT Regional Office* compiled by Ros Fraser¹ and *'My Heart is Breaking': A Joint Guide to Records about Aboriginal People in the Public Record Office of Victoria and the Australian Archives*.²

Between Two Worlds had its genesis in a decision by the Commonwealth Government that Australian Archives should prepare a national travelling exhibition of its records relating to Indigenous Australians, to mark the International Year of the World's Indigenous People (IYWIP) in 1993. Helen Nosworthy, now the National Director of Public Programs at Australian Archives, was responsible for managing the exhibition project, and drew together the team which helped her bring the idea to fruition. As exhibition curator, I was responsible for developing the original concept, researching the subject, writing the exhibition text and selecting the exhibits, all with the help of Dr Peter Read of the ANU History Department, who acted as our expert curatorial adviser. Hewitt

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¹ Fraser 1993.

² Australian Archives 1993.

Design Associates designed the exhibition, and other Australian Archives staff provided assistance with research, reprography and conservation work.

The objectives of the exhibition were threefold:

- to support the United Nations and Commonwealth government objectives for IYWIP, in particular the aim of furthering the process of reconciliation within Australia;
- to give insight into the impact of Commonwealth government administrations on Aboriginal Australians; and
- to give Aboriginal Australians a better understanding of what records about them and their people are likely to be held by Australian Archives or Commonwealth departments.

Given the vast range of Commonwealth records which relate to Aboriginal Australians held by the Archives, choosing the subject of the exhibition was a formidable task. We decided that this, the Archives' first major travelling exhibition, should be relevant, stimulating and challenging, and look not only at the development of Commonwealth policy, but at the impact of that policy on the daily lives of real people.

The Commonwealth government did not assume responsibility for Aboriginal affairs until 1967. Most government records relating to the daily lives of Aboriginal people before that time were generated by the states and are therefore held in state government archives. Generally, pre-1967 records about Indigenous Australians in the custody of Australian Archives relate more to Commonwealth policy development than day to day administration, where the stories of individual people and particular events are more likely to emerge. One of the exceptions to this rule is the Archives' collection of records relating to the Northern Territory, which was directly administered by the Commonwealth government from 1911 to 1978. (The other notable exception is the collection of late nineteenth and early twentieth century records held in the Victorian Office of the Archives, which were inherited from the State government of Victoria when Aboriginal affairs became a Commonwealth government responsibility.) Peter Read, who had used records held by the Australian Archives during previous research projects, suggested that the story of the government-run 'Half-caste' institutions documented in these Northern Territory records might form the basis of a stimulating exhibition. Throughout the exhibition development process which saw his original idea eventually realised as *Between Two Worlds*, Dr Read provided guidance, encouragement and invaluable expert advice.

The need to consult with Aboriginal Australians about the preparation of the exhibition was recognised from the inception of the project, and was emphasised by the Cabinet when deciding that the exhibition should form part of the government's IYWIP program. This consultation process was taken very seriously by the exhibition team, which was faced with the question - with whom should we consult, and how should we do it? A number of constraints limited the options open to us. The Australian Archives has no permanently established mechanism through which Indigenous Australians could be consulted. In order to be launched within the International Year, the exhibition had to be brought to completion within only nine months, a relatively short period which would not allow time for widespread consultation. Helen Nosworthy sought advice on developing a consultation strategy from staff at the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, the Aboriginal Reconciliation Unit of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet and the National Museum of Australia. She also discussed the project with an Australian Archives Aboriginal staff member. The approach eventually adopted was to establish a small group of representatives of Aboriginal people, who advised the exhibition team throughout the development of the exhibition.

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Once the subject of the exhibition had been determined, deciding on the appropriate membership of the Reference Group, as it became known, was made a little easier. Helen Nosworthy approached a range of people who have some involvement in the issue of removal, particularly in the Northern Territory. Those who generously agreed to assist were Colleen Starkis from Australian Archives; Brian White from the Central Australian Aboriginal Child Care Agency in Alice Springs; Barbara Cummings, the President of KARU (the Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agency in Darwin) and author of *Take This Child*,³ Colleen Burns, also from KARU; and Bob Randall, the Aboriginal Cultural Adviser at the Education Resource Centre, Queanbeyan and a former resident of the Bungalow. Assistance in developing particular aspects of the exhibition was also provided by Carol Kendall from Link-Up (NSW) and Gordon Briscoe, a historian and former resident of the Bungalow.

The assistance of the Reference Group proved vital to the development of *Between Two Worlds*. The members not only provided advice on all aspects of the exhibition, including its content and design, but also provided an avenue for wider consultation about specific aspects of the exhibition's content. In this capacity, Brian White, Barbara Cummings and Colleen Burns put us in touch with six former residents of Kahlin and the Bungalow who generously agreed to share their stories. They were George Bray, Alec Kruger, Herbie Laughton, Emily Liddle, Hilda Muir and Daisy Ruddick. All members of the Reference Group from outside Australian Archives, and all the former residents of the homes who spoke to us were recompensed for the time they spent contributing to the development of the exhibition.

With our Reference Group scattered across the country between Sydney, Canberra, Alice Springs and Darwin, the logistics of consultation were complex. Telephone calls were frequent, but it was the face to face meetings which generally proved to be the most effective form of consultation. Helen and I travelled to Alice Springs and Darwin twice during the development phase, an experience which we found both productive and personally rewarding. On our first visit we met with Brian White in Alice Springs, who introduced us to Alec Kruger, and Herbie and Alan Laughton. Helen and I had come to the meeting with a rough agenda of issues we hoped to address, but after a short while the agenda was discarded and we found ourselves sitting on the floor of the ACCA office, absorbed by the stories of life in the institutions that Alec, Herbie and Alan were telling. Our meeting a few days later in Darwin with Colleen Burns, Barbara Cummings, Daisy Ruddick and Hilda Muir was similarly successful. We spoke only briefly about our plans for the exhibition, and spent most of our time listening to the women talk about their own experiences as removed children. These initial meetings proved vital in establishing a rapport with the Aboriginal people who would contribute so much to the eventual success of the exhibition.

It was on our second trip to the Territory several months later that we discussed the content of the exhibition in more detail. We had given members of the Reference Group copies of the draft text, and although they had little to say about specific matters of wording or interpretation, they were generally happy with the proposed content. We showed them copies of all the photographs we were considering using and sought permission from relevant family members to use several letters written by former residents or their parents. We also received guidance on the matter of naming and displaying photographs of people who have died. I spoke to each of the former residents at greater

³ Cummings 1990.

length about their experiences and borrowed photographs from them for use in the exhibition.

The terminology used in the exhibition text was determined on the advice of our Reference Group. During our second visit to the Territory we discussed the range of terms which might be used in reference to Aboriginal people, and established a set of preferred terms which were used consistently throughout the exhibition and all associated publicity material. They all agreed that the terms 'Half-caste' and 'mixed blood' were not acceptable, and preferred 'Aboriginals' to 'Aborigines', and 'Aboriginals of part-descent' to 'Aboriginals of mixed-descent'. The proposed title was also the subject of discussion. Some concern was expressed that the title 'Between Two Worlds' might imply that Aboriginals of part-descent were neither Black nor White, and therefore had no distinct culture or rights of their own. In the end, however, the former residents of the institutions strongly endorsed it, arguing that it aptly summed up their situation as children, torn from their Aboriginal families, yet never really accepted by White society.

Between Two Worlds on display at Parliament House in Canberra, December 1993. Australian Archives.

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While we received a warm reception in Alice Springs from the Aboriginal community, the response from other locals was not so welcoming. The Conservation Commission of the Northern Territory is responsible for administering the Old Telegraph Station in Alice Springs which is now operated as an historic site, and was home to the Bungalow 'Half-caste' Institution between 1932 and 1942. During a visit to the Conservation Commission offices to view some photographs of the Bungalow which were eventually used in the exhibition, I met with several Commission staff who expressed concern about the way in which the Old Telegraph Station site would be represented in our exhibition. They feared that to focus on this aspect of the site's history might jeopardise the image which the Commission had been promoting for the site, which emphasises its role as a telegraph station. This encounter brought home to me just how sensitive the issue of removal is for those who live closely with its legacy, especially in the midst of post-Mabo tensions.

The majority of the photographs and documents included in the exhibition are drawn from the collection of Australian Archives. Researching and selecting the material for display was a time consuming but fascinating task. The development of the government's policy of removal is well documented in the files of the Department of the Interior held in the Archives' National Office in Canberra. These files also include correspondence about the establishment of the government's 'Half-caste' homes and official reports from government visitors. The process of researching the vast amount of relevant material was made considerably easier through the use of *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People in Commonwealth Records: A Guide to Records in the Australian Archives, ACT Regional Office*, compiled by Ros Fraser and published by Australian Archives. Our Northern Territory office was a fruitful source of records documenting the day-to-day administration of the Homes. The unpublished 'Guide to Records in the Northern Territory Regional Office', also compiled by Ros Fraser and available for reference in Australian Archives search rooms, was also enormously useful in this research.

Additional material for display, mainly in the form of photographs, was provided by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, the Conservation Commission of the Northern Territory, the Museum of Victoria, the National Library of Australia, the Northern Territory Archives Service and the State Library of the Northern Territory.

As we researched the archival records it quickly became clear that the views of the Aboriginal people who were subject to the government's policies were unlikely to be found amongst the official files. With the exception of several letters from residents of the Homes or parents seeking access to their removed children, two of which are included in the exhibition, the government files almost exclusively document the dominant White view of the story. We decided that the best way to interpret the experiences of those Aboriginal people affected by the government's policy was to include oral history recordings and music, through which they could tell their own versions of the story. Existing oral history recordings of each of the former residents who had agreed to share their stories were lent by the Institute for Aboriginal Development, the Oral History unit of the Northern Territory Archives and Associate Professor Tony Austin from Northern Territory University. These recordings were edited to form the basis of three sound stations, at which visitors can select from several short excerpts. They were also incorporated into the six minute audio-visual presentation, which summarises the exhibition's story through a powerful collage of music, oral histories, photographs and moving footage.

It was through the words of George Bray, Alec Kruger, Herbie Laughton, Emily Liddle, Hilda Muir and Daisy Ruddick that we were able to explore the human impact of the government policy documented in the archival records. Where the documents

encapsulate the views of White officialdom, the words and songs of the former residents reflect some of the responses of those affected by the official policies. Where the government letters and reports state with sometimes shocking frankness the justification for the policy of removal, the oral histories reveal its shattering impact on the lives of individual Aboriginal people. Through their generous participation in the development of *Between Two Worlds*, George, Alec, Herbie, Emily, Hilda and Daisy gave it an added dimension which helps bring home the very real effects of past government activities on the lives of Aboriginal people today.

One of the basic principles of archival practice is that the archivist's role is not to interpret the records in their care, only to make them available for others to interpret. In an organisation with only a short history of presenting exhibitions, this was an attitude we often encountered from our professional colleagues. Those in the museum profession who have been presenting exhibitions for many years have long recognised that interpretation is not only an unavoidable element of exhibition development, but it is also an essential one if the exhibition is to engage, challenge or stimulate its audience. Decisions about which aspects of the story of removal to tell and which to leave out, which points of view to incorporate and which to ignore, how to present the chosen themes both visually and verbally, all formed part of the interpretive approach consciously developed by the exhibition team.

As one of the main objectives set for the exhibition was to contribute to the process of reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, our interpretative approach was to attempt a balanced view of the subject which would be accessible to as wide an audience as possible. Our aim was not to condemn those responsible for the removal of Aboriginal children, but to explain how and why a practice which today seems so brutal, could once have been acceptable to a majority of Australians. We also aimed to explore the impact of the policy of removal on the lives of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory, and consider some of their past and present responses to it. Some of those who share their stories in the exhibition remember fondly the camaraderie of life in the homes. Others, who hold much harsher memories of childhood, are still very bitter about losing contact with their families and their culture. The whole issue of the removal and institutionalisation of Aboriginal children is a very complex one with far reaching implications. It is this complexity which we have attempted to interpret, albeit briefly, in *Between Two Worlds*.

In the context of this interpretative approach, drafting the text was a challenging task. Attempting to tell an extensive story and communicate complex ideas in simple terms proved difficult. Using my research of secondary sources and archival documents, I drafted text for most of the story's fifteen panels. Peter Read also contributed draft text for several themes which required further research, and checked the accuracy of my text. All text was re-drafted many times, incorporating the comments of our Reference Group, until we were satisfied with its style and accuracy.

While work on the exhibition's content proceeded, Hewitt Design Associates designed its layout and graphic style. We were determined from the outset to avoid the visual clichés which sometimes characterise designs relating to Aboriginal themes, and to reject the appropriation of Aboriginal graphic motifs. Tom Hewitt and his staff developed a striking design, based on triangular modules made of metal towers and linked by calico panels. As well as being light and easy to pack for travelling, the modules could be rearranged to suit the unique requirements of each venue. The chronological story line of the exhibition, told through a combination of text, photographs, documents and oral history recordings, is unfolded over eight of these modules. At the core of this flexible structure is a triangular

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space with a tent-like ceiling, which accommodates television monitors. Here the six-minute audio-visual, produced by Pritchard Productions, plays continuously, encapsulating the story of the exhibition.

On 20 October 1993, after over nine months of work, the day had finally come for the exhibition to be opened to the public at the Australian Museum in Sydney. The opening was attended by several hundred people, including George Bray, Alec Kruger, Herbie Laughton, Emily Liddle, Hilda Muir, Daisy Ruddick and Barbara Cummings, who had been flown down to Sydney by Australian Archives especially for the occasion. Charles Perkins, himself a former resident of the Bungalow in Alice Springs, officially opened the exhibition after Herbie Laughton gave a stirring rendition of his song 'Old Bungalow Days'. Media interest in the event was strong, and the former residents spent much of the opening posing for photographs and being interviewed. For me the highlight of the event came after all the guests had left, when I sat in the Museum foyer recuperating with Herbie Laughton and Alec Kruger. When I asked Mr Laughton what he thought of the opening, his reply was moving: 'I used to think that we were unwanted, that nobody cared about us, but now I see there's all these people who care. It makes life worth living.'

Overall, the response to *Between Two Worlds* has been extremely positive. In order to assess whether the objectives set for the exhibition had been achieved, we appointed a market research firm to undertake evaluation of *Between Two Worlds* during its Sydney season. Several weeks of visitor observation and interviews revealed that ninety per cent of visitors surveyed were impressed with the exhibition and about eighty per cent said that they had learnt something new about the history of Aboriginal Australians.

These findings are supported by comments entered into the visitors book during the exhibition's season at the Araluen Centre in Alice Springs in May 1994. Comments include:

Presentation is excellent. The best part is the Aboriginal contributors who share their stories - THE TRUTH. Thank you, as it helps me and others to deal with the pain in a positive way.

A must-see for all Australians, indeed all people. Our own 'holocaust' in a sense. Maybe a bridge, or part of, for reconciliation.

A real eye-opener!

Excellent. Shocking without being too maudlin, or too goody goody.

An extremely disturbing experience.

Wonderful exhibition! The information is presented in a very easy to grasp way, especially considering the amount of information and the emotionally charged subject. I am happy to have seen the exhibit and will continue to think about its contents for a long while.

The exhibition has so far travelled to the Australian Museum in Sydney, Parliament House in Canberra, the Araluen Centre in Alice Springs, the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory in Darwin, and the Tandanya Centre in Adelaide. In October 1994 it opens at the Western Australian Museum in Perth, before travelling to the Museum's outpost at Queens Park Theatre, Geraldton in January 1995. In May 1995 it travels to the Dubbo Regional Gallery in New South Wales, and completes its tour at the Museum of Victoria in Melbourne from July 1995. Assistance in funding the tour has been provided through the federal government's Visions of Australia program for touring exhibitions.

It is conservatively estimated that after its first three venues *Between Two Worlds* had been seen by over one hundred thousand visitors. By the end of its two-year tour, this figure is likely to have at least doubled. A companion publication, containing the exhibition text, a selection of the exhibits and a number of introductory essays, is to be

published in 1995. It is hoped that through this publication, the story of *Between Two Worlds* will be made available in a permanent form to a wide audience currently beyond the reach of the exhibition.

For Australian Archives, the development of *Between Two Worlds* was a new experience, but one which has proved surprisingly fruitful. Not only has the profile of the Archives been raised, at least amongst the museum-going public, but the organisation's relationship with Aboriginal communities has been strengthened and enriched through the active involvement of Aboriginal Australians in the exhibition's development. The months of research, consultation, writing, planning and organising involved in bringing the project to fruition have paid off in the continuing success of its nation wide tour.

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