Rabbit-Proof Fence, ‘Mr Devil’ and the Desire to Forget

Tony Birch

‘This is a true story’

In February this year I attended a premiere of Rabbit-Proof Fence, a film directed by Phillip Noyce. The story deals with a journey, made in 1931, by three young Aboriginal girls, sisters Molly (Evelyn Sampi) and Daisy Craig (Tianna Sansbury), and a cousin, Gracie Fields (Laura Monaghan). The girls escaped from the Moore River Aboriginal Settlement in the south of Western Australia and walked home, to their own community at Jigalang, some 1600 kilometres to the north, by following one of the state’s three rabbit-proof fences. In telling the story of the children’s journey, Rabbit-Proof Fence also visits a history that many in non-Aboriginal Australia have been unable to visit without turning away in a denial of this past. The broader frame of Rabbit-Proof Fence addresses the history of the stolen generations, the historical experience of the removal of Indigenous children from their families and communities, a history often subject to ridicule by those in white Australia unable to accept and own their story of oppression. The film also gives some attention to A.O. Neville (or ‘Mr Devil’ as he is referred to by one of the female inmates at Moore River), the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia from 1915 until 1940, a man obsessed with issues of miscegenation and the (literal) purity of skin.

A True Story

The premiere I attended was held at the Rivoli Cinemas in sedate inner-eastern Camberwell. This leafy Melbourne suburb is renowned for its expensive Victorian and Federation villas and the scarcity of venues that possess a liquor licence, rendering cupboard drinking as much a necessity as a genteel art form. The theatre complex itself is something of a mess of a mini-multiplex and a ‘lovingly restored’ 1930s Art Deco picture palace. My personally addressed invitation was an elaborate affair, slipped between a mock-distressed paper folder, bound with
rough string, perhaps in an effort to lend authenticity to the title on the cover piece of the invite, *Rabbit-Proof Fence: A True Story*.

This screening was one for the Aboriginal community of Victoria, not exclusively, but still a coming together of a people whose elders were the first to experience the legislative cruelty of attempts to destroy Indigenous life through the Victorian colonial government’s infamous *Aborigines Protection Act* of 1886 (more commonly known as the ‘half-caste’ act). Before the screening began, the foyer of the cinema resembled something of a family reunion, of handshakes, loving embraces and parents proudly introducing their children to revered community leaders, people who had spent entire lives struggling for the human rights of their community. While it is true that all Aboriginal families have been ‘touched’ by the history of the stolen generations, I also saw in that crowd several close friends and elders who had been touched more directly and heavily than others, having been taken from their parents from a very young age, sometimes never seeing them again.

I was a very proud parent that night. My guests for the evening were my two teenage daughters, one who had just successfully finished her first year at University, the other about to bury herself in the books for her final year at high school. As we filed into the cinema I noticed that a bottle of water and a packet of tissues had been strategically placed on each seat. People began holding up the tissues to each other while nervously laughing about the prospect of having ‘a bit of a bawl’ during the screening. I sat between my eldest daughter and an auntie, Joy Sellers, a senior staff member at the Bunjilaka Aboriginal Centre at Melbourne Museum. Joy is both hard as steel and leather-down soft. In 1999 I sometimes needed to lean on her while dealing with my own emotional difficulties while working as a curator on *Koori Voices*, the Victorian Aboriginal social history exhibition which is now installed at Bunjilaka.

A segment of that exhibition, *Family Matters*, deals with the removal of Aboriginal children from their communities in Victoria. During discussions at the museum about how we might tell this story, we talked about the sadness and grief necessarily contained in such a story. We owed a responsibility to the truth of this emotion and the damage it has caused to Aboriginal families. At the same time we did not want to present Aboriginal people as little more than helpless victims. We tossed around these issues on an almost daily basis.

While sitting in the public service beige vinyl ambience of the tearoom one morning Joy Sellers matter-of-factly told the story of her own removal. She had been no older than a baby in a pram when her mother had gone into a fish and chip shop in Gertrude Street, Fitzroy, to buy lunch for the family. Joy’s mother would have been watching her baby through the shop window. While waiting for her parcel of chips the police pulled up in the street and snatched Joy from the pram. She did not see her family again for more than thirty years.

When Joy finished her story she shrugged her shoulders as if to say ‘what can you do’, got up, washed her coffee cup in the sink and said ‘I’m going for a smoke’ before leaving. She did
none of this for effect and certainly expected no sympathy from anyone in the room. But still, I wanted to say something to her. "Sorry" was the headline of the times and the word on many lips, although it was certainly not in the Prime Minister's vocabulary, nor members of his government. But someone vested with the responsibility of this history of abuse should have said sorry to Joy, and to so many others. They did not of course. And have since moved on to keeping Australian shores free from 'invading' refugees, many of them young children.

I wanted to say something to Joy as an expression of my respect for her but her tough exterior did not appear to welcome sentiment. So I put her story in the exhibition. It consists of a glass box that holds an opened newspaper-wrapped parcel of fish and chips, an object that anyone who grew up before the invasion of multi-national hamburger corporations would nostalgically remember as the fast food for a Friday night in winter Melbourne. On the reverse side of the panel that houses the object, Joy's own story is written on a wall:

I was taken from my mother at two weeks of age, in a fish and chip shop in Fitzroy. I was held at Russell Street Police Headquarters for two months, waiting for an orphanage vacancy. My mother was shown a false death certificate when her pleadings to have me returned became insistent. With the assistance of the Aboriginal community I found my mother 37 years later.

In the final frames of Rabbit-Proof Fence, the real-life elderly sisters, Molly and Daisy Craig, walk across their country around Jigalong as the young girls in the film had done. It was for me the most emotional moment in the film. To see the two women on the expanse of the screen before me was not to have any essential truth of the history of the stolen generations validated, as has been suggested by others, but to discover a more simple truth, one that really should not require discovery at all. It was to know the simple fact that they exist, these two remarkable women, who along with their cousin, Gracie Fields, had achieved something that all Aboriginal people desire: a sense of freedom.

As Molly and Daisy held the focus of the camera in their gaze (as opposed to a subjugated reversal of this relationship) I involuntarily said to myself: "there they are ... that's them." I held my bottle of water in one hand and my tissues in the other. To the left of me Joy's arm, which had been leaning heavily into mine, began to gently shake with an emotional vibration. I could hear others in the audience sobbing. I looked to my daughters. They were both crying. The image on the screen reflected itself in a tear sitting against my eldest daughter's fair skin. I saw Molly and Daisy roll slowly down her cheek.

— Crossover Appeal

In her review of Rabbit-Proof Fence, 'Simple yet powerful tale', the film critic Philippa Hawker has noted the 'potent symbolism' of a fence 'built by settlers ... to protect themselves from something they introduced to the country in the first place'. It is a symbol that is also ironic,
in that the fence assists three Aboriginal girls to defy the oppression of an introduced culture determined to firstly dispossess Aboriginal people of their country and proactively oversee the 'passing of the Aborigine', while at the same time embarking on an aggressive eugenicist experiment to 'breed out the colour' of those Aboriginal people who had inconveniently survived all attempts at extermination.

These attempts to end Aboriginal community life and any sense of self-determination and control of Indigenous land in the immediate post-Federation era of the twentieth century was reliant on government legislation enacted initially to control and contain the life and culture of Aboriginal people before eradicating it altogether. Central to these efforts were government and church-supported institutions such as the Moore River Settlement, where the three girls in the movie are briefly held in custody before their escape. It was within such settlements and reserves, operated at one time or another in every state of Australia, that many children suffered from the physical and psychological abuses discovered in the testimonies presented to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission's Bringing Them Home hearings in the mid-1990s.7

With the report yet again igniting the national hysteria commonplace when the surface of colonial violence is scratched, it is obvious that a film such as Rabbit-Proof Fence would create anxiety, both amongst those who prefer continued ignorance to honesty, and the filmmakers themselves, aware of the potential negative responses to the subject matter when seeking an audience where 'structural amnesia' or 'the social organization of forgetting' is the most common form of addressing this history.8 It would not be surprising if a film concerned with this past did not find an audience here, an issue that both the producers and publicists of Rabbit-Proof Fence were acutely aware of.

Phillip Noyce, who made the now acclaimed Backroads in 1977 (a journey through the badlands of 'backroads' race relations in rural New South Wales).9 before eventually moving on to the blockbuster big screen of Hollywood, has been acutely aware of the difficulties in selling Rabbit-Proof Fence in Australia. As a little-known director in the mid-1970s, Noyce was able to make a movie that could star Aboriginal activist Gary Foley, even then a veteran of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy protests of 1972, a leading advocate of Aboriginal self-determination and land rights, and a suspected member of Australia's version of the Black Panther movement.10 This was hardly the profile for a potential matinee idol. But at the time of course Noyce was not looking for, or expecting, box-office success for the film. Nor did it get it, with Backroads originally having a very limited run in Australian cinemas.11

Noyce's expectations for Rabbit-Proof Fence were vastly different, with the pre-marketing of the film regarded as vital in finding the film a positive reception and wide audience. The reviews of the film were awaited with anxiety. Generally the film has received favourable, and occasionally glowing reviews (too many which play on the title of the film, for example 'full
proof’ and ‘not director proof’). Much comment has been made about the light touch provided for a narrative ripe for overproduced melodrama. It is a chase movie with little serious chasing done. It is a deeply emotional film, largely absent of emotional props (although clearly the screen presence of each of the three young actors, Evelyn Sampi, Laura Monaghan and Tianna Sansbury, conveying the emotions of defiance, courage, fear and vulnerability, is of such a charismatic quality that audiences are left breathlessly supportive of the girls throughout the journey home). But still, given the subject matter Noyce adopted a restrained approach to the material, providing the story with an allegoric tone that invites an engagement with the wider history of the treatment of Aboriginal people without giving it direct focus.

I do not know if *Rabbit-Proof Fence* is a ‘landmark film’, as one critic wrote in a review describing the core of this story as ‘Australia’s dirty little secret’.

But it is a very good movie that deserves the audience it seeks, both because, as a commercial film, it does engage and entertain while still being able to explore an issue central any understanding of Australia’s past without either trivialising or distorting it for the marketplace. While recognising that all commercial films are reliant on marketing and advertising to find an audience, I found the selling and reception of *Rabbit-Proof Fence* of particular interest with regard to what such an approach might say about Australian audiences, the role of cinema in telling stories about the past and the presence of Aboriginal characters and faces in our movie houses.

Before production of *Rabbit-Proof Fence* commenced, decisions were made about how the film would be marketed in Australia. The eventual strategy would include inviting the Channel Nine Network’s Today programme onto the set of the film to produce a ‘making of …’ for television release, and a reader’s competition run through the *Women’s Weekly* magazine. Noyce deliberately targeted such media outlets, he says, as ‘we felt that these two bastions of upright middle-class Australia would be very important in convincing audiences that it was okay to see the movie’.

Seeking out another end of the market, a potential, mainly female teenage audience, *TV Hits* ran a ‘Search for a Star’ headline with a pictorial spread focussing on the three young actors, while the ever-hip Mambo label produced a ‘specially-designed’ T-shirt.

Of the three actors, it is the eldest, thirteen-year-old Evelyn Sampi, who has received the bulk of media attention. She has been described as potentially ‘the next Halle Berry’ (this year’s best female actor winner at the US Academy Awards) in an extensive magazine feature in a Melbourne newspaper that also celebrated her ‘dazzlingly cinematic beauty’, with the blood of Aborigines, of Afghans and Chinese traders, of Filipino, Indonesian, Timorese and Japanese divers and British pearlers ... flowing through two centuries into the gloriously photogenic planes of Evelyn Sampi’s lovely face.

That’s one enormously diverse family tree. It is also a similar description to that of a ‘type’, a ‘caste’ that created a sense of horror and disgust in the minds of authorities such as A.O. Neville in the 1930s. But times have moved on, particularly in the world of globally marketed feature
films. Noyce, in a comment on the attachment of an exotic hybrid identity to this young Aboriginal girl from Broome states candidly that although 'the term is racist', Evelyn Sampi has what the film industry calls 'crossover appeal', which in the language of Hollywood is the ability to put black faces on the screen that appeal to mainstream white audiences. While recognising the realities of the need to sell the film to a potential audience it remains an uncomfortable thought that while Evelyn Sampi's public-relations-driven identity gives the film currency, the real-life person she plays, Molly Craig (and many thousands like her), suffered under the 'protection' of the state because she represented one of the great fears of the infant white Australian federation, the mixing of blood, the uncontrolled mixing of races, miscegenation.

Noyce felt that in attempting to make a film dealing with a history not only about stolen Aboriginal children, but 'the stolen history of Australia as a whole' he faced great difficulty in having it accepted at all in this country. He further stated that the film has the potential to become 'a vehicle that will allow them [white Australians] to confront the history of race relations in this country' through an acceptance of the story presented in the film. We must remember that it is not the past itself, nor 'historical' films that Australian audiences shy away from, with Noyce making the point that features such as Peter Weir's Picnic At Hanging Rock (1975), Gallipoli (1981), and his own Newsfront (1978) successfully attracted audiences to films with strong historical themes. But again, as Noyce recognises, 'these films were confirming our past for us' and therefore did not pose the threat that this film might, in confronting audiences with a past some would prefer not be discussed at all, let alone take responsibility for.

The marketing strategy used to convince a public of the value of Rabbit-Proof Fence left one reviewer feeling 'extra cynical', describing the exercise as 'tacky'. Considering the film as a commercial venture, the publicity machine is a reality that cranks up even when features contain established Hollywood A-list actors, such as Harrison Ford or Sharon Stone, (both who have previously worked with Noyce). What concerns me is that if a filmmaker and a public relations firm are required to work so hard for an Australian public to accept an Aboriginal story (although, we so easily forget, if we ever did remember, that it is a white story also) what will happen when Aboriginal stories do not have the beauty, charisma or vulnerable appeal of young girls to sell them? How would stories about a Land Rights struggle be received by white Australia? There is no crossover appeal in that (unless perhaps Denzel Washington could be recruited to play Eddie Mabo). I suspect that, as with the original release of Phillip Noyce's Backroads in 1977, such films will continue to struggle for an audience, regardless of the qualities of the filmmaking or the extraordinary stories that might be told.

— Saving 'Mr Devil'

On the release of Rabbit-Proof Fence, John Neville, the now ninety-year-old son of the late A.O. Neville, wrote that his father was the victim of a 'smear campaign', who was being presented
as 'the scapegoat' for a 'primitive people trying to come to terms with modern civilisation.' Neville believes his father should be remembered as 'The Native's Friend', as he once was regarded by other Western Australian colonial stalwarts, such as members of the land-holding Durack family. Critics of *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and the portrayal by British actor Kenneth Branagh of Neville as the bureaucratically obsessed 'protector' of Aborigines also want a particular memory of Neville saved, rejecting any notion that he was a 'racist' (a term that is never used in the film), who wanted to 'breed out the Aboriginal race.'

Any claim that Neville did not want to 'breed out' Aboriginal families and communities is absurd and beyond serious defending. But this argument does convey its own truth: that the defenders of people such as Neville and the policies he administered realise that in addressing this past, particularly in a popular medium such as the feature film, is dangerous in that this history of racism may find a mass audience, and possibly a sympathetic one at that. As Chief Protector of Aborigines for over twenty-five years Neville supported theories of biological control that were proactively aimed at exterminating an Aboriginal identity and culture in Australia. Neville was a central figure in the progression of colonisation that began with land theft and direct murder before moving toward another form of violence, assimilation, a barbaric policy that included what the philosopher Raimond Gaita refers to as 'the dehumanising treatment of the children and their parents [with] intentions saturated with profound disdain for the Aborigines who were regarded as less than fully human.' It was Neville who was directly responsible for the violence committed against Aboriginal communities during his administration, remembered by Aboriginal people as a horrific experience.

[They were] bundled into the car ... [the police] didn’t give us a chance to pack anything or have our tea ... the children were hanging around their father screaming and I rushed off to see if I could get help but ... the policeman caught me and dragged me back to the cell ... we kept telling the children not to be frightened.25

A.O. Neville was a key figure at the infamous 1937 Commonwealth ‘Aboriginal Welfare’ Conference, attended by both federal and state Aboriginal ‘protectors’ and an array of bureaucrats from across Australia.26 It was at this conference that Neville could openly boast that he ‘had the power under the act to take any child from its mother at any stage of its life, no matter whether the mother be legally married or not’, despite having heard the harrowing accounts of the distress this caused to Aboriginal people during the 1934 Western Australian Mosely Royal Commission that investigated the treatment of Aboriginal people in that state.27 It was Neville who warned other delegates to the conference that Aborigines must be placed under ‘constant supervision’. And if that supervision were to fail it was Neville who told the conference that in his state pregnant Aboriginal ‘girls’ were able to have their babies, and keep them until the age of two before ‘the child is then taken away from the mother and sometimes never sees her again. Thus these children grow up as whites, knowing nothing of their own environment.’28

Neville described Aboriginal people (in his Australia’s Coloured Minority), with such inhumane mathematical terms as ‘half-castes’, ‘quarter-castes’ and the ‘offspring of the two half-bloods of the first cross’.29 His ‘protection’ of Aboriginal people was based on a necessity to fully control the life of Aboriginal people, including where they could live, who they could marry, and importantly, who would become the guardian of their children, with a fundamentalist belief that ‘colour’, and therefore identity, could be ‘bred’ out of Indigenous people by whitewashing them with ‘superior’ European blood. He further warned that if the type of policies that he had put in place in Western Australia were not adhered to across Australia the nation would be faced with a growing Aboriginal ‘problem’, being ‘a future population of 1,000,000 blacks in the Commonwealth’ posing a real threat to Australia’s continued whiteness. Neville’s ‘final solution’ to the Aboriginal problem would produce a post-Aboriginal Australia where the existence of Aboriginal family life would end and be forgotten. Neville posed a question to the 1937 conference to which an appropriate answer would produce an outcome where memory and history as well as a people themselves would disappear: ‘are we going to merge them into our white community and eventually forget that there were any aborigines in Australia?30

For anyone left with the comfort of the ‘best intentions’ approach to this history it is worth remembering (or discovering) that when H.D. Mosely, a Perth magistrate who led a Royal Commission into the ‘Treatment of Aborigines’ in Western Australia in 1934, visited the Moore
River settlement he found it a 'woeful' place, infested with vermin, where children were given no real education, inadequate food, or even implements to eat their meals with. At Moore River children were subject to punishments such as fourteen days incarceration in 'the boob'... a small, detached room made of posts driven into the ground, floor of white sand, scarcely a gleam of light, and little ventilation' (a scene replayed with poignant accuracy in the movie).31

On the weekend after attending the Rabbit-Proof Fence premiere I spoke with Phillip Noyce about the film and its reception. I said to him that some of the pen-pushing mercenaries of the Right in Australia would be lining up to expose the 'lies' in the film. Armed with their Imperial empire-building measuring tapes the landmass between Moore River and Jigalong would be surveyed, mapped and measured. Waterholes would be photographed. Reports would be commissioned. Old weather charts would be poured over to ascertain if it did actually rain that much on the day of the girl's escape. And finally, the three young actors themselves would also be measured, with body weights charted along graphs in order to verify accurately the intake of fluids required in order to sustain human life in such an environment. Thus these empirical wizards would prove, beyond any doubt, the impossibility of the girls having made the journey home.

Not much of this happened. In his review of the film 'Journey into a Nation's Soul', Evan Williams wrote that he found the story 'difficult to believe', but even if it had been 'embellished' over time by childhood memories, he believed its 'importance' lay in an examination of the history of the 'stolen generations'.32 In two of the strongest attacks on the film, Andrew Bolt's

TONY BIRCH—'THIS IS A TRUE STORY'
“Rabbit-Proof Myths”,33 and Peter Howson and Des Moore’s ‘A Rabbit-Proof Fence Full of Holes’,34 some queries concerned with the accuracy of the journey are discussed, with Bolt focussing on how the three children got to Moore River rather than how they returned home. Howson and Moore hinted at disbelief in describing ‘the almost super-human feat of walking for nine weeks along 2500km of rabbit-proof fence’.

The real concern of the film’s opponents though was not in debunking the journey but, as Andrew Bolt wrote, to expose ‘the untruths and exaggerations’ contained in Rabbit-Proof Fence, which could only serve to ‘divide the nation’ through its portrayal of a story that also introduces audiences to the ideological motivation behind the stolen generations history. Throughout the article Bolt uses bold-faced headings to counter-posing THE FILM against THE FACT to drive home his argument. Bolt used his ‘critique’ of the film to both endorse successive Australian government policies of Aboriginal child removals, and to save the reputation of A.O. Neville, who, Bolt claims, is misrepresented in the film as ‘a genocidal racist who wanted to “breed out the Aborigine”’. He prefers to present Neville as a benevolent figure who only ever removed Aboriginal children from their communities for reasons of their own protection and welfare.

The anxiety felt by Bolt and others over the portrayal of Neville in the film is that simply in being represented, Neville, rather than being a little known administrator of government policy (or the white mythological ‘Friend of the Native’), becomes not only an historical actor but an agent of history, whereby ‘action is thereby given a human face and is more easily identifiable as a “criminal act”’.35 This is exemplified in a scene in the film when at the Moore River settlement, Molly Craig has her skin colour closely inspected by ‘Mr Devil’ to see if she is fair and fit enough to be removed from Moore River to a separate ‘half-caste’ factory. For audiences to ‘witness’ the ‘protector’s’ desire for fair skin is to be confronted with the drama of this history. It may be more than ironic that it takes a Britishness to be the bane of the leading exponent of the ‘passing of the Aborigine’ in Australia in the first half of the twentieth century. I am not sure if this is a post- or neo-colonial moment.

Peter Howson, who was the Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs during the dying years of the Liberal–Country Party coalition of 1971 and 1972 when the removal policies were still firmly in place, and Des Moore, representing the parched Institute for Private Enterprise, were also centrally concerned with saving the reputation of Neville, describing his removal policies as ‘humane actions to protect them [Aboriginal children] from exploitation by whites or their own kin.’

Both articles display an anxiety and fear that Rabbit-Proof Fence will be, as Phillip Noyce hopes, the ‘ointment’ or ‘medicine’ that white Australia will swallow so as to view the stolen generations story more openly, and be prepared to finally ‘look at themselves in the mirror’.36
Howson and Moore write openly about their fears that at its heart *Rabbit-Proof Fence* is its attempt to give credibility to the now discredited Stolen Generations thesis, an extraordinary claim on their part, and one that can only be sustained if one accepts the extreme propaganda of right-wing 'think-tanks' and publications such as the conservative *Quadrant* magazine. Howson and Moore further link their opposition to *Rabbit-Proof Fence* to the Lorna Cabillo and Peter Gunner 'stolen children' case in the Northern Territory, stating that the claims of abuse suffered by these two Aboriginal people when they were children in government care in the decades after the Second World War were 'comprehensively rejected' by the courts, and that 'such stories', of being abused, 'were close to fantasies.' Howson and Moore must know that the judge hearing the case, Justice O'Loughlin, in fact accepted that both Lorna Cabillo and Peter Gunner had been abused, that they had suffered greatly as a result of their removal and that they had spoken the truth.37 As has occurred previously, Lorna Cabillo and Peter Gunner have been used here by Howson and Moore as the straw children by those who oppose any examination of the history of racism in this country.

As a major sponsor of state amnesia in Australia, the vehicles of the Right have worked frenetically to dismiss both the histories of the stolen generations and the colonial past that all Australian owe an inheritance to (voluntarily or not). The credibility of this anti-stolen generations 'thesis' has been shown be motivated by political expediency, produced from lazy, predictable and poor scholarship.38 Yet, as it allows many Australians to keep their own psychological counsel and remain ignorant of the issues, the denial camp will continue to find its own audience, including politicians ever willing to defend 'decent Australians' against the 'ridiculous' attacks on 'our' history. Endlessly parroting the word 'ridiculous' is the extent to which the Prime Minister, John Howard, engages with this history.

--- The End ---

In the foyer after the screening of *Rabbit-Proof Fence* contradictory scenes were being played out. The three central actors of the film had been at the screening and received rapturous applause at its conclusion. I witnessed what looked like three retired white charity queens in cocktail dresses, about to have their photograph taken with the girls, placed strategically on the knee of each of the overdressed women in an image frighteningly similar to many of those taken over the decades at 'half-caste' institutions across Australia, whereby local members of various ladies' auxiliaries and church groups would document their 'good works' in assisting government institutions. I also saw Lillian Frank, genuine Toorak socialite, charity fundraiser and occasional gossip columnist, pursuing a retreating Gary Foley across the retro-deco carpet screaming 'Gary, Gary, we must talk'.

Before leaving the after-party I spoke with an old friend of mine who had been one of the last Aboriginal children to be 'officially' taken under the removal policies. This had been in
the early 1970s. She now has adult children, who like my own are studying, working and representing their community in vital ways that never interfere with those set on giving coverage only to stories of 'Aboriginal misery'. This woman and many others in that room are, like Molly, Daisy and Gracie, survivors of such strength that I am always at an appropriate loss to describe my respect for them.

Rabbit-Proof Fence is a true story. It is a true story of a journey of survival. It tells us about the desire of Aboriginal people to go home. I would think that most of us should be able to understand that. I would hope that even those who remain in denial could at least stomach that. It is also a film about other Indigenous landscapes and histories that await their own recognition. And in doing so they wait for white Australia to stop looking the other way.

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1. The story is based on Doris Pilkington (Nugi Garimara’s) book Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1996.
3. For Neville’s views on race and his period as Chief Protector of Aborigines see A.O. Neville, Australia’s Coloured Minority: Its Place in the Community, Currawong Publishing, Sydney, 1948.
8. This term is used by historian Peter Burke in his discussion of the psychology that exists when dominant groups within any society not only produce histories ‘written by the victors’ but conveniently ignore a past that is ‘forgotten by the victors’ as well; see Peter Burke, ‘History as Social Memory’, in Thomas Butler (ed.), Memory. History. Culture and the Mind, Blackwell, Oxford, 1989, pp. 97–113.
10. Muecke, p. 1. While it is correct, as Muecke writes, that Foley had 'hoaxed the Australian newspaper into believing that there was a highly militant Black Panther chapter in Australia', the Australian Government, various state and Commonwealth police forces and the media regarded the activism by Aboriginal people at the time as a serious political and social threat to the nation. This protest movement was also centrally involved in the downfall of the Liberal-Country Party Government in 1972.
11. According to Gary Foley the original release of film consisted of a single screening at Melbourne’s Longford cinema, see Muecke, p. 2.

29. Neville, These terms are used throughout the book.


31. Western Australian Government, p. 11-12.

32. Williams.


34. Australia, 11 March 2002, p. 11.


37. See Manne, 'In Denial', pp. 77-85.

38. For writing that debunks the 'there is no such thing as a stolen generation' polemic see Manne, and Tony Birch, 'History is Never Bloodless', Getting It Wrong after 100 years of Federation, Australian Historical Studies, forthcoming. Haebich's Broken Circles highlights through the use of both intellectual scholarship and detailed empirical work that in a sane world the arguments put by members the Right intelligentsia in relation to this issue would not be accepted as anything more than ludicrous. See also Manne's response to some of the issues of history and politics raised in the film in his Bleeding Colour, Age, 23 February 2002, 'Insight', pp. 4, 5.