



Recollections
of a British
child migrant and
the truth about
Australia's human
trafficking past

The Bush Orphanage

John Hawkins

For Joanne and Belinda, whose unconditional love

has made my life's journey worth every single step

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truth about Australia's
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Preface

In 1618 one hundred homeless children were taken off the streets of London and sent to Virginia, Britain's first American colony. Over the next 350 years an estimated 150,000 children were sent to Britain's colonies to work, to populate the land and to defend their new homes.

Remarkably, even into the 1940s, Britain continued to use 'abandoned' children as an arm of foreign and economic policy, responding to pleas from Australia, a faithful wartime ally, to help fill a vast continent of barely seven million people – to either 'populate or perish'. The last child migrant, supposedly orphaned or deserted by their parents – over 3000 of them – were sent to Australia after World War II.

In 1933 Canada banned child migration after years of allegations of cruelty and abuse. Ever mindful of not repeating the Canadian scandal, the British Home Office laid out specific guidelines about how these children should be raised, educated and assimilated into Australian society. However, the more child-friendly and humane model for care of children proposed by the Home Office did not exist at the time in Australia. This could have been a sticking point for the child migration scheme.

A five-page memorandum, written in 1947, from the Home Office to the Australian government outlined principles of acceptable childcare –based on the recommendations of the 1946 Curtin Committee Report, which had condemned institutional care and promoted fostering and adoption. It was accompanied by a one-page memo from the British High Commissioner in Canberra that read, in part, 'This is a departmental view only and is not to be taken as the view of the British government', effectively allowing Australia to ignore the Home Office's standards of care. It seems likely that the hands of the British Secretary of State, who was responsible for child migrants, were all over the statement, as he fully supported Australia's ambitions for child migration.

Ideas about welfare in the two countries could not have been more different. With the passing of the 1948 Children Act (UK), Britain began formally moving away from harsh institutionalised care for apparently abandoned children, preferring to foster or adopt these children back into British society. The Act presented a much fairer social deal for the estimated 30 000 British children who, for years, had been locked away in homes and orphanages. Unfortunately some were allowed to fall through the legal cracks left open by the Act and the Secretary of State.

While British social workers were removing children from institutions, private charitable and religious organisations, with approval from the Secretary of State, continued shoving them straight back into even worse institutions on the other side of the world. Australia had legislated for the care of all British children until the age of 21, but in effect this care only continued until the children were sixteen.

The Australian Immigration (Guardianship of Children) Act 1946 resulted in institutionalisation of all the British children, so preventing them from being fostered or adopted and having a normal home life.

During the parliamentary debate over the Act, the member for Darwin in Tasmania, Dame Enid Lyons, warned of the possible damaging consequences and offered 5000 homes across Australia for fostering

and adoptions. Arthur Calwell, the Minister for Immigration, who demanded to retain the personal power of legal guardianship for child migrants, refused, telling the Parliament, 'We certainly require more safeguards in respect of them than we do for our own children'.

During the years of postwar child migration, a frustrated Home Office frequently lectured the Australian government about the inadequacies of institutionalised care. Finally fed up, Britain was forced to ban child migration in 1956 after a withering condemnation in the Ross Report commissioned by the Home Office, citing institutionalised cruelty and abuse.

Part I of this book is the life story of a child traveller cast adrift on an ocean of uncertainties. It is my story.

Part II is a brief overview of the child migration scheme to Australia.

It is a story about the complicity of governments who shirked their legal and moral responsibility for the lives of child migrants and, in doing so, negated the common misconception that the genuine but misguided authorities in Britain and Australia were driven by benevolence and goodwill to give children a 'fresh start in life'. It is also a story of the churches and secular organisations that took part in child migration, and ultimately have taken the blame for the tragedy.

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PART
I
THE LIFE JOURNEY OF
A CHILD MIGRANT

1 - BABY JOHN

In early 1954, when I was seven years old, Oliver Lyttelton, my legal guardian and the British Secretary of State for the Colonies, agreed with my carers, the Sisters of Nazareth, that I had no real future in England and should be sent to Australia for my own good. I was about to lose my nearest parents, my country and my childhood.

The Secretary of State consented to the removal of thousands of children in the years after World War II. Like his predecessors, he relied solely on the advice of those to whom he had delegated his lawful authority: the private religious and secular organisations – our ‘temporary guardians’ – who would gain most from child migrants, as we were officially described. Again, like his predecessors, he preferred to distance himself from any personal involvement.

An estimated 450 homes and orphanages across Britain catered to tens of thousands of ‘poor and abandoned’ children. Child welfare organisations were a subsidised ‘growth’ industry and some profited on the back of children’s misery. Few organisations campaigned for social reform in the turmoil of postwar Britain, and the problem of abandoned children remained largely hidden.

The Home Office deemed that only the most socially deprived children – those with no family ties and of ‘below-average’ mental and physical development – were to be considered as child migrants. According to the 1946 Curtis Committee Report, ‘children of fine physique and of good mental equipment should be kept in the United Kingdom’ – one of the discriminatory recommendations adopted as British government policy at the time.

There were contrasting views on child migration within the British government. The Home Office questioned the morality of deporting children, while the Dominions Office, with a few hundred years’ experience, strongly supported it. Churches supported it, yet it was generally opposed by those working in the welfare sector – the social workers and child psychologists. The British public was generally unaware of the scheme as it was out of the public eye. Those who were aware genuinely believed the spin that child migration was in a child’s best interest, failing to see it as deportation masquerading as a benevolent and opportunistic way of increasing the population in a foreign country.

As a child, my life was sculpted and shaped by social engineers. My future was planned from the moment my traumatised and trusting mother thrust me into the care of the Sisters of Nazareth in the

hope that I would be adopted. Like so many others, I had been promised to Australia as a child migrant and nothing could save me once I was registered at Australia House in London. I could have expected to join 50 000 children each year from all over Europe, if the Australian Minister for Immigration had his way when in the heady days of 1946 he proudly quoted the London *Daily Sketch* that Australia was soon to 'become the greatest foster-father the world has ever known'. This was certainly no claim Mother England could make, with her record of exporting children, forcing the most vulnerable children to pay a big price for being defenceless.

The Sisters had their own powerful reasons for supporting child migration. They were driven by a fervent belief in the righteousness of their cause. Getting more Catholic children to Australia to spread the faith in their new country was their objective, and God would not forget their contribution on Judgment Day. The social workers at Australia House were poised to exploit the misguided passion of these simple nuns, who blindly agreed to provide Catholic children and by 1956 had sent close to 700 boys and girls to Australia.

News of my impending deportation to Australia in early 1953 came as a complete shock. Being a frightened, insecure child with no home or family, the fear of losing my orphanage home and my country of birth shattered my young mind. I became seriously ill and was hospitalised for many weeks. I had just experienced my first physical and mental breakdown. Because of my illness, another boy from the orphanage took my place on the passenger ship.

For more than a year I was spared further trauma until suddenly, without warning, I was put aboard a ship at Southampton docks and sent to Australia, swallowed up, like thousands of others, by Australia's insatiable demand for British children.

Delivered to an orphanage near the Swan River in Perth, on the other side of the world, I served out the remainder of my childhood in Australian institutions. Left behind was a shattered foster family who had rescued me when I had been ill the year before. This caring family were excited about the prospect of becoming my new parents. They had taken me into their home on a part-time basis and made me one of their own. For nearly a year the Sisters had assured them that their application to adopt me had been approved. Crushed and haunted by my sudden disappearance, they would spend the rest of their lives searching the world for their seven-year-old orphan boy. I missed the love and protection of this family and Roy, the only real father I ever had, never saw me again.



I was born in England on 13 March 1947, out of wedlock. Society was hypocritical and harsh, and many godly people in control of abandoned children in that era regarded my mother and others like her as wayward, loose women unsuited to motherhood. Abortion was illegal, although the business of perilous backyard abortions flourished. For a lot of young women it was easier to go through with the pregnancy and give up the baby. If a Catholic mother had the right connections, the process of abandoning a baby or child was quick, relatively painless – except for the child and often the mother – and permanent. A few mothers took advantage of this culture and gave up their children for no other reason than inconvenience; yet for most, like my mother, it was devastating.

My mother named me 'John Patrick' after her father, even though he was unpopular and was often drunk. My mother, like most members of the family, had tasted his violence. Her naturally rebellious nature and her dreams of a better life encouraged her to leave the family home when she was very

young to study as a nurse.

My grandfather worked as a clerk in the coal industry, writing letters for the illiterate to earn extra money. He died at 52 of an illness related to coal mining and is buried somewhere in the Midlands; the exact place is unknown as, apart from my mother's husband, no-one went to his funeral. His grandfather owned a little steamer, transporting coal backwards and forwards from France. Quite a few of the Hawkins forebears were shipowners and sea captains. We are related to the Irish offshoot of the Hawkins family, who settled in and around Wexford in the late 1500s after leaving Devon to take up a land grant made by Queen Elizabeth I to John Hawkins as reward for defeating, along with his cousin Sir Francis Drake, the Spanish Armada and returning a good part of the plunder to the English crown.¹ Sir John Hawkins's descendants have lived there ever since.

1 John Hawkins, Drake's cousin and partner, earned notoriety for developing the slave trade, shipping human cargo from Africa to the Americas. To maximise the commercial potential, Elizabeth gave Hawkins two royal navy warships and, again, the Crown shared in the profits of the slave trade.

My mother never believed that we were Irish and, after moving to England in the late 1930s, she has always felt at home there. Despite 300 years in Ireland, we were still English: 'Hawkins' is an English name.

My natural father's identity remains little more than family rumour and speculation, a fleeting ghost crossing the family canvas, best laid to rest. A few in the family were in the know yet took the secret to the grave, including my mother. The discretion of the Catholic Church could be relied upon in the case that a child survived life in an orphanage and came back later to ask questions.

My mother met my father in 1946, when they both worked at St Bernard's Hospital in Middlesex, London. She was a pretty 24-year-old nurse and he was a young Irish doctor from a well-known medical family. They had fallen in love and planned to marry. My mother fell pregnant so the marriage had to take place as quickly as possible to avoid family shame. The church, guests and celebrations had all been decided when suddenly my father fled back to Dublin. Before he left, he offered my mother a 'legal' abortion at the hospital.

My mother was from a strong, proud Irish Catholic family with traditions and values typical of the times. To escape family pressures, and to give herself space to think, she fled south alone, where she gave birth to me in 1947 at Grayshott in Alton, a small southern English village. Several days later, Father O'Riordan baptised me and suggested she accompany him to his presbytery on the Isle of Wight to think things through in a quiet place while working as his housekeeper. We stayed on the island for six months while she hoped against hope that her love might return. Father O'Riordan suggested that she have me adopted, advising her to try the Sisters of Nazareth who ran a home nearby on the mainland in Romsey. She handed me over to the Sisters, devastated she was about to lose the baby she had breastfed and loved.

Without support from her family, and frightened that she would be permanently ostracised, she begged the Mother Superior to have me adopted into a good English family, readily believing the nun who said she could adopt me out that very day, as young couples who couldn't have children were regular visitors to the home. Soon after my mother signed the official release papers, the Mother Superior pointed to a young couple leaving the home with me in a pram and said to my mother, 'There goes John. A good Catholic couple has just adopted him'. Shattered though she was by our separation,

she was gladdened by the thought I would be loved and cared for. However, this was a cruel performance put on for my mother's benefit, and soon after she left, the couple wheeled me back to the orphanage. This ruse was frequently used by the Sisters of Nazareth to prevent mothers changing their minds and coming back the next day for their child.

The mainly Irish Sisters of Nazareth reared me from the age of six months in an efficient and most loveless Catholic home in England that cared for 20 to 30 boys about the same age. The Sisters of Nazareth, known for their poor record-keeping, took a narrow line, demanding little information from the parent (usually the mother) parting with the child. The book entry describing my circumstances reads, in just a few words:

Admitted to Nazareth house 26 Sep. 1947. His mother was housekeeper to Reverend Father O'Riordan Shanklin, when he was admitted and by whom he was recommended. Since then she has deserted the child.²

These few words were the only written proof of my existence.

² The comment 'mother deserted child' appeared on many children's files. This categorisation was important to the social workers in Australia who conducted the interview of prospective child migrants because it made the child an automatic candidate for migration.

Relinquishing mothers were frequently teenagers – just children themselves – who were too stressed and immature to know their own minds and were glad of the 'few questions asked' opportunity offered by the nuns. However, many mothers, like mine, felt differently and given the opportunity would have chosen to have a say in the future of their babies.

Taking in children like me was a typical charitable response by the Sisters at the time. They had a long, proud history of helping the poor, the sick and the needy. Originally a French order, they had arrived in England in the mid 1800s and set up their mission on 10 acres of vegetable gardens in Hammersmith, then located on the outskirts of London.³ The Sisters ran homes all over Britain. In most of the homes there were children being raised until they were five or six years old when they would be sent to Australia. My time with the Sisters started badly – I imagine myself red-faced, fists clenched, defiant and demanding. I presume that I screamed constantly for the comfort of my mother's smell and her breast milk, along with dozens of other babies who were also desperately missing their mothers, until, exhausted, we would fall asleep. My mother's face strangely remained embedded in my memory.

³ the Sisters of Nazareth continue their work from their headquarters in Hammersmith, caring for the elderly. today, their 10 acres is one of the most beautiful private gardens in London.

I'm sure there were pleasant moments, but my mind remembers mainly the negative times. I recall a three or four year old standing up in a high-railed cot looking across a dormitory nursery, watching nuns in long dark habits and black-and-white hoods, which covered everything except their faces, seemingly glide across the polished wooden floor as though on a cushion of air. Busily coming and going, they carried sheets, nappies, pots and pans. Some sang quietly to themselves while others shouted orders.

Young girls were helping too, shushing crying children to calm them for sleep or simply yelling at them to shut up. The girls were ex-orphanage recruits who had failed to adjust to life outside the

home. We were probably raised as much by these girls as by the nuns. It was the usual practice for one of the girls to gather us around in a tight circle on the floor while she read us a story. In the evening the girls bathed us two at a time. We wore linen modesty slips around our waists and they finished our bath by ducking our heads under the soapy bathwater, which caused a stinging sensation when it got into my nose and ruined what was always a lovely bath.

Life at the orphanage was strict and spartan. There were few privileges. Food was basic and there was barely enough, so we were often hungry. When some of the children were reunited as adults with their siblings, they discovered that the lack of good nutrition in childhood had made them physically much smaller than their siblings who had grown up outside.

Quite a few of the Irish nuns seemed unhappy, including the Mother Superior, which didn't help the general atmosphere in the home. Religious orders sometimes placed 'difficult' members in orphanages and homes, as they couldn't afford the cost of care for these people. It was also common for the least qualified in their ranks to work in orphanages. One nun – a tall, thin stern-looking Irishwoman called Sister Dominic – was regularly aggressive and often frightened the children with her swishing strap and constant yelling. Her behaviour towards us may have been affected by her attitude towards the English.

Birthdays were never celebrated, coming and going without our knowledge as no-one knew their date of birth. When I was five years old, I experienced my first normal Christmas. A British military helicopter carrying Father Christmas landed on our field with bags of toys, probably donated. I remember many excited children and strange adults being there. I received a toy double-decker bus and a conductor's hat. We played with our toys for a couple of hours until all the visiting dignitaries and well-wishers had left. I proudly showed off my gift to one of the nuns, who appeared more interested in the box in which the toy came. 'Where's the box? Don't damage that box!' she shouted as the nuns gathered up the toys and put them back into their boxes. We never saw the toys again as they were probably sold or donated to another charity. Despite this loss, no child cried or became upset, so thoroughly ignorant were we of gifts and the meaning of giving and receiving, or indeed, ownership. It was the first time we had ever received a present or heard of reindeers landing on rooftops and Father Christmas making his way down the chimney.

The strangers who visited us that day had us enthralled with this story, and we were both excited and confused. All we had known about Christmas before this was what the nuns had told us about its religious significance as the time our saviour Jesus Christ was born. The nuns did go to a special effort to give us a nice meal and put up streamers, balloons and a colourful Christmas tree at the front of the dining room. Carols were played and sung – the hymn 'Silent Night' was easily our favourite.

The early years of my childhood were tragic – as was the childhood of many children in similar circumstances. I'd like to think there were kind nuns who cared for me before I was old enough to remember. One kind person I do remember was a young, pretty Irish nun who named me 'Baby John'. Kind and happy, she provided the only music in the home with her beautiful singing voice. I remember the day we were told we would get pillows to sleep on and we could tuck our neatly folded pyjamas under the pillow just like the older children. We had ceased being infants and were now considered to be boys. The nuns stopped calling me Baby John and I became just John.

2 - LEAVING HOME

The Sisters in my orphanage at Romsey had created in my mind a powerful negative image of the Christian Brothers in Australia. Whenever they violently chastised a child using a strap or their hands they would often yell, 'If you think this hurts, wait until the Christian Brothers in Australia get hold of you'.

The Sisters had a long tradition of association with the Christian Brothers in Ireland. Young boys were expected to attend Christian Brothers secondary schools after their primary education with the nuns. It was expected, therefore, that the male British orphans would go to Christian Brothers orphanages and girls to the Sisters of Nazareth orphanages in Australia.

Most of us desperately did not want to go to Australia, despite the rosy picture the nuns painted of sunshine and fruit trees. In my eyes they had successfully demonised the Christian Brothers there. Yet the nuns' own punishments were often brutal enough. They could whip a child's legs red raw with a long leather strap that hung down the side of their habit.

When my time came to be deported, I planned to hide among trees in a wood nearby. My plan came unstuck, however, when panic broke out among the nuns one day. They gathered all of us inside and told us there was a murderer – worse, a child murderer – on the loose and hiding in the wood. I peered through the window with the other children and saw the police take away a bald-headed man whose arms were handcuffed behind his back. Whether he was a murderer or not, the incident forever ended my hope of hiding in the wood.

At Romsey I was often ill and bedridden. Lack of decent protein didn't help my frail body. A man who was employed by the convent befriended me and sometimes brought sweets to the dormitory. One day he took out his penis and forced me to stroke it with my hands. He then threatened to kill me if I told anyone. I was too young to understand what he was doing, but I understood clearly what the death threat meant. I became withdrawn and very frightened. The nuns suspected something was wrong and moved me into a small room with a bed and locked the door. I was told to knock on the door if I needed to go to the toilet. I was belted one day with a leather strap for peeing in the corner after my knocking failed to bring a response. I learned to climb out the large window in the room, stand on the windowsill and pee a long way into the courtyard, never daring to look down.

Over time, I observed small groups of children, many crying, leave the orphanage. I knew my time would be coming soon. One black West Indian child cried as he couldn't go due to his colour – he was lonely and sad because all his friends had been sent away.

Some of the children had spoken about Australia, passing on stories other children had told them, building images of monsters worse than any storybook. It was where orphans disappeared across the vast sea, never to return. I was never ready or willing for this journey.

On the 2 May 1953, at the age of six, I underwent my first medical examination at Australia House in London for the Department of Immigration. This was the day I had feared most as it signalled that it would be only a few weeks before I was forced to leave. I was consumed with fear and, after the examination, I cried, fretted and stopped eating, breaking down mentally and physically. Seriously ill, I was hospitalised for many weeks.

I do not know what illness I suffered. I had been walking around the statue in the courtyard with the other children, saying prayers. I was limping very badly and one of the nuns took me out of the group to investigate and found an enormous lump in my groin. I was rushed to hospital almost immediately. I recall only the kidney-shaped hospital tray with the big needle that was injected into my buttock twice a day, which hurt so much that I cried every time I saw the nurses coming. My illness meant that I literally missed the boat and the nuns found another boy to take my place on the passenger ship.

Shortly after I came out of hospital I was transferred to Nazareth House in Hill Lane, Southampton, one of many orphanages the Sisters ran in England. By now I understood without doubt that I was an orphan, that my parents were dead and that my life depended on the charity of the Sisters, who had cared for me in hospital.

Pressure from children's officers from the local authority forced the nuns to open their doors to the public for the first time, and soon after my arrival at Nazareth House, they placed advertisements in the local daily newspapers seeking families to visit children on the weekends. Local authorities were suspicious of the secretive nature of church institutions and, since the passing of the new Children Act in 1948, the role of the local children's officers was to place the thousands of children back with their families, into foster care or have them adopted. In reality, a disproportionate number of children from orphanages run by nuns ended up as child migrants.

I first met the Broom family soon after my arrival in Southampton. They were fishmongers, who followed the Church of England and had a house in Bugle Street, about 100 metres from St Joseph's Catholic Primary School, which I was now attending. The Mother Superior allowed the family to take me home on weekends, an unusual privilege as I recall no other child being given a similar opportunity. It may have been because of my poor condition after my lengthy illness but the visits by children's officers were undoubtedly having an effect on the nuns' behaviour.

Joy Broom was a tall, young, attractive and strong woman who, with husband Roy, soon made me part of the family. After the birth of her daughter she had been unable to have other children. Her daughter Wendy, a year younger than me, was excited to have a new brother and I had my own bedroom and toys. Mrs Broom read me stories at night until I fell asleep curled up on her lap.

At first I was shy and withdrawn, not used to all the love and affection. Yet, they were happy days as I adjusted to life outside the orphanage. Mrs Broom was very protective and held my hand every time I left the family home to stop me running onto the street. Everything was new and different, and the street was dangerous. There was much to learn about life on the other side of the orphanage wall. We travelled together on a double-decker bus and I ran upstairs, with Wendy in hot pursuit, to get to the front for the best view of the street. Mrs Broom taught me how to behave, how to share and how to love. She asked me one day if I would like her to be my mother. I had begun calling Joy and Roy 'mummy and daddy', which seemed perfectly natural as Joy had made formal approaches to the Mother Superior to officially adopt me.

Every school day I crossed the road, had lunch with Joy and Wendy and played until it was time to go back to class. I spent weekends and holidays with the family. I met other members of their family who were curious to meet Joy and Roy's new boy. All the children played hopscotch on the footpath in front of the fish shop in downtown Southampton. For the first time, I felt love and security, and looked forward to the day when I would finally be released from the orphanage and move in permanently with my new family with whom life was pleasant and idyllic – it was a place where I was learning about

birthdays, Christmas, toys and love. I was also learning rapidly how to read and write thanks to Joy's private lessons for Wendy and me.

Mother Superior told the family she had no objections to adoption, but that the paperwork would take time and the family would need to be patient. At first, relations between the family and Mother Superior were cordial, but over the last months they deteriorated and became strained. Often while I was waiting in the parlour for Mrs Broom, the Mother Superior would come in and say, 'That stout woman is here to fetch you!' and then abruptly walk out. If I was returned a little late to the orphanage, I was taken by the hand by one of the nuns and yanked without ceremony back inside.

The nuns began sending small groups of children to the local cinema during the week and we sat on the floor jostling, with our hands in the air, to be chosen. I was always overlooked and was too young to realise that I was being punished in a custody battle turning nastier by the week. I now know that my hospital treatment, opening the orphanage to the public and sending children to the local cinema and outside schools was a radical departure from the usual harshness of orphanage life. The privileges had come about as a result of a recent overhaul of British child welfare. At the time, though I had no idea that I had become the object of an increasingly ugly tug of war between the Brooms and the nuns. Frustrated by delays and failed commitments, Joy and Roy had demanded of Mother Superior the right to adopt me. I was supposedly an orphan and, for my foster family, it was a simple case of need, love and humanity.

They had cared for me for just over a year when, on 6 March 1954, I was made to undergo another medical examination by staff from Australia House. This time the process was supposed to be different. Official criteria stipulated that any child presented a second time for migration should be most carefully assessed, especially if there had been a medical or psychological problem.

My heart sank. Again I was overcome by fear of the Australians. Surely it was a mistake. My tearful protestations during my examination the year before had cut no ice, especially with the female social worker with the strange accent who aggressively asked questions and put 'yes' and 'no' answers in my mouth. She had almost ordered me, 'You are going to like Australia!', while the Mother Superior enthusiastically nodded in agreement.

I was sure it would be different now that I had an English family –as my mother had wished. My future was no longer bleak and insecure. They couldn't possibly send me away. I pleaded with the Australian social worker and the Mother Superior. This time, they assured me it was just a routine medical. They didn't even mention Australia and my mind was put at ease. The social worker asked 'You're a clever boy, John. Would you like to write your name here?', tricking me into signing a medical report that failed to include details about my hospital treatment, doctors' reports or medical history.¹ The nuns and the social workers at Australia House had conveniently forgotten about my illness the year before and what had caused it. I was not represented by an independent social worker, a requirement under the Children Act that was supposed to give orphans protection.²

1 Part ii, pages 272–275, describes how the protocol at Australia house was often ignored so as to increase the numbers of child migrants being sent to Australia and extract children's consent under false pretences.

2 Part II, page 258–259, describes the promise by the Home Office that independent social workers, who were supposed to know the children being prepared for migration, would be involved in any interviews to protect the rights of the orphans.

I continued my life with the Brooms for the next three months, giving no further thought to the interview, medical or the documents prepared by Australian immigration officials.

In June 1954, at the age of seven years and three months, I weighed just 19 kilograms and stood 100 centimetres, as recorded on my travel documents. My weedy below-average frame was the result of years of inadequate nutrition. The nuns had not conducted an IQ test, another requirement of the Act, so I have no record of my intellectual status, though I was able to read and write a bit. I had now met the three main criteria for child migration: I was small in stature, of below-average intelligence and had no family links.

Suddenly my life was turned upside down. Strange children began arriving at the home, and we were put into a room together. I was given a small case with new clothes, shoes and socks. The next day we were bussed to the wharf and put aboard the P&O passenger ship *Strathmore*. The Sisters told me bluntly at the wharf that the Broom family didn't want to see me anymore. A couple of the ship's officers ushered our little group up the gangway and onto the ship while a brass band played 'Auld Lang Syne'.

Disoriented, tears streaming down my face, I searched intently through the bottom rails of the fence on the ship's deck to see if the Brooms had at least come to see me off. I desperately needed them.

On the dock three nuns stood motionless, with arms folded inside their sleeves, like black-and-white statues, in contrast to the movement and colour of people laughing and crying, the balloons, streamers and noise. People packed the ship's rails, pushing, waving and yelling.

Bewildered, I watched the ship slowly pull away from the wharf, stretching hundreds of colourful streamers that I hoped might hold the ship from leaving.

One, then another, then all the streamers broke and drifted down into the murky water below. My head floated down with the streamers, stretched and torn apart. The blackest cloud of grief, helplessness and irretrievable loss descended. Weeping inconsolably, I left my little suitcase by the rails and wandered off to find a place where I could be alone. All the orphanage children's stories came flooding back – the ship, the vast ocean, the fear – but worse, I had lost my family.

A day later, Joy and Roy were happier than usual as they drove to the orphanage to fetch me for the weekend. During the week, Roy had purchased two new bikes: a blue one for Wendy and a red one for me. They had kept the secret from us both and they knew my eyes would fairly pop when I saw my new three-wheeler. Mother Superior coldly delivered the news that I had been sent away. The Sisters had raised me from the age of six months, yet few tears were shed when they sent their children off. They were deeply religious yet had little humanity. Joy was rocked to the point of collapse and wept bitter tears. Mother Superior refused to provide any further information and shut the orphanage doors on the family.

A few years later, a kindly nun told Mrs Broom that I had been sent to Australia, although she couldn't say where. Joy continued to mourn her loss, worrying about what had become of her little boy, and began a lifetime's search with Roy for me, the child they loved. They kept the drawings I had made of them all sitting by the fire.

From the deck, I watched England grow smaller and smaller until the last vestige of land became

mist-shrouded speck then disappeared. Only seagulls followed, swooping and diving along the ship's wake. ~~A long white river was carrying me away from my world. My mind shut down, collapsing inwards. Realising that I may never again see my home or the only people who really loved me, I numbed my emotions. Little registered with me except the pain in the pit of my stomach, which wouldn't go away.~~

The thought of climbing the ship's rails and falling into the sea had already entered my head. I was sitting, weeping quietly when I heard children's voices: 'We've found him. He's here! He's here!'

A ship's officer was carrying my suitcase and he grabbed my hand and dragged me like a rag doll to a cabin deep in the bowels of the ship, a space I would share with five other children I barely knew from the six-week voyage to Australia. I climbed into a top bunk and cried myself to sleep.

3 - GREAT OCEAN ADVENTURE

Early next morning, peering over the ship's rails, I could see only misty sky and grey rolling ocean. Even the ship seemed lonely and abandoned in this great wilderness of water. The day before, I had watched the seagulls swooping and diving on graceful wings and screeching baleful goodbyes. I envied them as they had long since flown home to England.

Most of the children and many of the other passengers were seasick during the night and few were around to face the early morning. I wasn't so affected and began to wander the decks, climbing stairs and investigating corridors until I became lost. A steward recognised me as one of the orphans and he and a couple of others took me to their quarters and asked where I was going. In tears I told them I wanted to go home. I was given a bag of sweets, a few hugs and then led back to my cabin.

After that, our group received special treatment from the ship's passengers and crew. I soon discovered the great advantages of shipboard life. Everything was exciting and luxurious, brightening the mood of even the most sorrowful and grieving among us. Not only was the food unlike any we had before, but amid the ship's many nooks and crannies lay freedom. There were no threats of discipline or punishment or nuns with swishing habits and lethal straps; here were kind, generous passengers and crew who spoiled the little orphans on board. Stewards brought biscuits, cakes, sweets and anything else we asked for.

Appointed by the nuns, our two minders, young Catholic women, one of whom appeared to be involved in a shipboard romance, struggled to keep order among our excitable group. It was their job each morning to get us up, washed and then fed in the huge dining room, a job complicated by the menu with its vast range of choices.

After breakfast, came shipboard 'school work', games, lunch, a nap, more school and then competitions on the deck with prizes. We played games such as quoits and competed in egg-and-spoon races and sack races. After dinner, we might have story time before bed. I won the ship's souvenir teaspoon with 'Strathmore' emblazoned on the handle.

We had been given a little pocket money, a suitcase with a change of clothing and shoes and socks and some toiletries, so when our minders accepted an invitation to dine at the captain's table, we looked proper little gentlemen. This jovial man laughed and said his name was Captain Cook and that he had been given the job of getting us to Australia. Despite the heady shipboard life, I continued to feel a deep sense of foreboding as, day after day, the distance between me and my loved ones in England increased.

When the ship crossed the equator there was great jubilation and we were allowed to join the passengers and crew, who had dressed up to celebrate the event. That evening we mingled with King Neptune, Cleopatra, Julius Caesar, the devil, pirates, painted ladies and gentleman in top hats. For children who had never experienced anything like the colour and the music, it was pure excitement. A passenger I moved through the crowd, one of the passengers, who I was soon to meet in less festive circumstances, patted my head and gave me a shilling. There were certain advantages in being small and cute, but there was a major disadvantage and I would soon find out what it was.

The day we crossed the equator the crew put on a spectacular poolside performance, swinging on

ropes tied to temporary rigging, and falling and diving into the pool from a great height while the band played 'What Shall We Do With the Drunken Sailor?' The playful sailors threw some of the children in my group into the water. I managed to keep my distance, as I was very frightened of water.

That night, nine-year-old John M. woke me and asked me to follow him to the ship's pool, now in semi-darkness, as he wanted to show me something. He stole around to the deep end, pointed into the water, crying 'Look!' As I peered down, I felt a violent push to my back. I screamed as I fell in, thrashing hard to stay afloat. I couldn't swim and the more I flailed about, the further away from the edge of the pool I moved. Soon I gave up the struggle and sank to the bottom.

Everything was fading into an incredibly painful blackness when I felt someone pull me out. A smiling man in a crumpled wet cocktail suit carried me gasping uncontrollably to the ship's infirmary. Yelling for help, he rushed me to a room where medical staff pumped water from my lungs. The quick action saved my life.

Fortunately my rescuer had seen part of the incident from a deck above the pool where a late party was still in progress. In the dim light he could make out the motionless body of a child under water and had run down several flights of steps and dived in to rescue me. Meanwhile, John had fled to his cabin. Nothing was said of the incident and I never complained to our minders. They assumed that we were playing and I had just fallen in. Terrified of John, I avoided him from then on.

A few days later, my rescuer appeared at our dining table to see how I was getting on. Again, he patted my head and gave me a shilling. Little did I know this was fuelling John's hatred and envy, putting my life at risk.¹

1 forty years later, in 1998, John phoned me at my farm. I had not seen him since he was about fifteen. He told me of his life after the orphanage and asked me if I remembered the incident at the ship's pool. 'yes I do, and I nearly drowned,' I said. 'I'm phoning to apologise,' he said. 'I did it deliberately; I wanted to kill you.' he went on to explain how jealous he had become. 'there were two cute-looking boys in our group. you were one and I was the other. When I realised the passengers were giving you more money than me I admit I lost the plot!' I told John he shouldn't feel bad and jokingly added that, as a farmer, I knew how hard it was to kill weeds. he was relieved. I felt sad that he had carried this awful burden throughout his life. He was only nine at the time and, like the rest of us, was 'damaged goods' to some extent.

We sailed through the Suez Canal, stopping at the port of Aden, where locals surrounded the ship in a assortment of small boats and canoes filled with goods. Business between passengers and the traders was conducted using ropes and baskets. Some locals were allowed aboard to entertain us by making day-old chicks and coins appear and disappear. The coins seemed to come out of their ears. We were completely in awe, believing these men were wizards or magicians.

Our journey finally ended when the ship entered Fremantle Harbour in Western Australia on a winter June day in 1954. We would miss the beautiful, white streamlined *Strathmore*² and her crew, who had given our group such care and attention.

2 the P&O Strathmore, which had a top speed of 20 knots and accommodation for 445 first-class and 665 tourist-class passengers, continued to bring new settlers to Australia until she was sold to Greek shipowner, John S. Latsis, in 1963. Her name was changed to Marianna Latsis. Built in 1935, the third of five 'Straths' in the P&O line, she and her four sisters were involved in the 1942 landings in north Africa, where her sister ship Strathallan was torpedoed on 21 December. She spent her final days transporting pilgrims to Jeddah, and in 1969 was sold to ship breakers at Spezia.

Accompanied by our minders, of whom we had become quite fond, we boarded a bus bound for Castledare to what felt like the most remote place on earth they could send us.

Having seen us to our destination, our minders headed back to Fremantle to rejoin the ship, now headed for Sydney.

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