

GOODBYE to all that?

Kristen Rundle's grandfather was shipped to Australia over 70 years ago as a child migrant. Here she tells his story, drawing on her background in academic law to describe how the legal and institutional framework of the time reduced vulnerable children such as her grandfather to mere commodities.



Joe Rundle (circled) and the rest of 'Party no 30' of the Child Emigration Society (Fairbridge London Office), prior to boarding the ship Jervis Bay. The children arrived in Australia on 16 February 1934

Last February, the then British prime minister Gordon Brown apologised to my grandfather, Joseph John Rundle (Joe). Joe was among the thousands of British children taken from their country and sent to Australia under the child migration scheme. When in 1934, aged 13, he boarded the ship Jervis Bay, bound for Pinjarra, in the west of the country, the scheme was being publicised as a great opportunity for poor and orphaned youngsters. A four page advertising spread in *The Times* in June 1934 depicted miserable

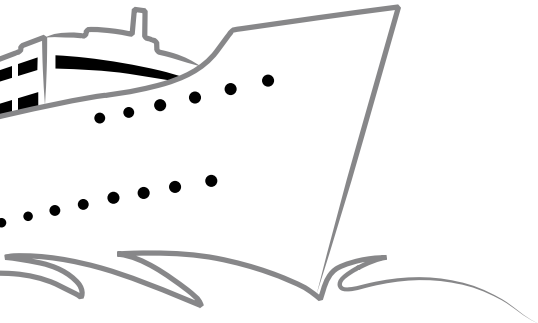
children in British slums next to happy faces on the docks, with the caption 'Good-bye to all that!'

The reality, as is now widely recognised, turned out to be very different. Trained only to be farmers or domestic servants, the children were often used for cheap labour, and there were many recorded instances of abuse and neglect. Still, when we look at those who facilitated the child migration schemes it is difficult to demonstrate ill-intent on their part. Kingsley Fairbridge, for example, founder of the Fairbridge Farm Scheme that saw child migrants train to become farmers, dedicated his life to the cause. The good of the empire was, of course, a major motive. But Fairbridge also believed it would give Britain's children of misfortune a better start in life. He remarked at the time: 'If we look after them and train them carefully they are capable of becoming efficient, God-fearing men and women, keen to build up a fortune for themselves, and continually by their labours and good citizenship adding to the wealth of the nation.'

It is highly likely that continuing destitution in England would have been the fate of these children. Child migration lifted them out of that likely fate and took them to lands of abundant sunshine. Some of the child migrants, including my grandfather Joe, who was sent to a Fairbridge Farm school, received good square meals, a basic school education, and training.

But while there might have been good intentions, their connection to the priority of empire building led to a fundamental failing. At no point were these children considered to be the bearers of any kind of choice. Even if in the spirit of rescue, the institutional

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schemes that attended to their upbringing regarded the child migrants as merely something to be acted on – farmers and servants in the making to be distributed to those parts of the Dominion where they might add value – and, critically, away from where they would not.

The destructive potential of this scheme was recognised in some quarters years before the practice eventually ended. In 1943, Tempe C Woods, a former employee at the Fairbridge Farm School, wrote a letter to the Dominions Office of the United Kingdom highlighting the failure of those running the schools to regard their emigrant charges as worthy of choices in life and opportunities for full human development. 'A large amount of the training at the Farm amounts to free labour for the convenience of personnel,' she wrote, and 'the children are made to fit the work rather than the work remodeled to suit the best interests of the children'. She added that 'children are never really consulted about careers or about what they wish to be,' they are given 'practically no instruction in the social problems which they meet when they go out to work'.

My grandfather's story reflects this view. He had been signed over to the Child Emigration Society, with the support of the British government, after his father struggled to raise him on his own. Joe's mother had died when he was two. At the farm school he was assigned to in Australia he was sent to work at a local farm, but evidence suggests he was very unhappy. One placement after the next failed to work out. Desperate to leave, he tried to enlist with the army, lying about his age.

He eventually succeeded in joining the army and got married. But it seems the scheme had left him ill-equipped to cope with the demands of life, and history repeated itself. When his wife developed a degenerative brain condition and was institutionalised, Joe put all of his seven

children, aged from two to 15 years, into institutions. Since that day in 1958, my father and his siblings have never again been together in the same room.

I believe my family's story highlights a number of the complex lessons of Britain's experiment with combining the needs of empire with the rescue of orphaned and unwanted children. When they were released into the world in which they were expected to become responsible adults, forging the relationships that would carry them through life, Britain's child migrants found that world to be a complex place for which they had not been fully prepared. When things got tough, some, it seems, repeated their history with their own children.

It is a picture that offers obvious lessons for practitioners of child welfare, social policy, psychology and many other disciplines. But the child migration story also offers some important insights into how the law addresses our most vulnerable – lessons that infuse my own academic work, three generations later. Although the scheme authorised the removal of thousands of British children to the far corners of the earth, the Empire Settlement Act 1922 actually says nothing whatsoever about child migration. Instead, its most vulnerable subjects are effectively invisible, something to be delegated without mention to the administrative sphere where agreements as to their fate were brokered with the voluntary child migration associations.

Yes, the child migration scheme might have been dreamt up with some worthy intentions. But those behind it failed to understand that connection

to family and identity, and being regarded as deserving of choices in life, are values too great to measure. If the measure of a civilised society is how it treats its most vulnerable, the lessons of these past failures must be brought to the way that our laws and institutions address the vulnerable today. Apologies are a time not only for recognition, but for putting a mirror to ourselves and our current practices.

After his death, a photograph of his mother Minnie, who had died when he was two, was found in Joe's wallet. He had, it seems, been carrying it on his person since he was eight years old. ■



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A version of this article has also appeared at guardian.co.uk/commentisfree

Joe's picture of his mother Minnie, who died when he was two

