

A heartfelt but limited work

Rabbit-Proof Fence, directed by Philip Noyce

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Rabbit-Proof Fence, the latest film by Australian director Philip Noyce, brings to a wider audience one of the many tragic and, until recently, untold stories of the “stolen generation”—the estimated 30,000 Aboriginal children forcibly removed from their parents by Australian authorities between 1900 and the late 1960s.

The film, now screening in Australia and to be released in the US and Britain in June, dramatises the true story of three young Aboriginal girls who resisted the policy. The girls—14-year-old Molly Kelly, her eight-year-old sister Daisy, and their 10-year-old cousin Gracie Cross—were taken from their families by police in 1931 at Jigalong, an Aboriginal settlement on the edge of the Little Sandy Desert in northwest Australia, and relocated to the notorious Moore River Native Settlement near Perth. Refusing to accept this state of affairs, the girls escaped and, following the rabbit-proof fence which bisects Western Australia from north to south, walked 2,400 kilometres in an attempt to rejoin their communities in the far north of the state.

Gracie was captured before making it home. But the epic journey traversed by the other two girls took place in some of the harshest outback country in Australia. Doris Pilkington Garimara, Molly Kelly’s daughter, provided the first account of this incredible voyage in her 1996 book, *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*.

Noyce’s film begins in Jigalong. The girls’ fathers, who had since moved on, were white workers employed in the construction of the rabbit fence. Molly (Everlyn Sampi), Daisy (Tianna Sansbury) and Gracie (Laura Monaghan) were being collectively raised and cared for by Maude and Lily, their Aboriginal mothers. As half-caste children, they came under the scrutiny of the local police, who reported their existence to A.O. Neville (Kenneth Branagh), the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia.

Neville, who was appointed to the position in 1915, had complete legal control over all the Aborigines in the state. He orders police officers to remove the children. A local policeman drags the terrified girls from their mothers, forces them into a car and to the nearest railway station where they are caged and transported to the Moore River settlement.

This emotionally-charged scene, as well as other moments at the children’s new home in Moore River, accurately capture the brutality of government policy toward the indigenous population. Portrayal of life at the soul-destroying settlement is particularly effective and unsettling. The children are locked up each night, like common criminals, in mass dormitories, forbidden from speaking their own language and told that they have no parents. The food slops they are served have to be eaten with their hands and each day is punctuated by hymn singing and harsh discipline. Anyone caught contravening mission rules or attempting to escape is placed in solitary confinement for 14 days.

These events are interspersed with scenes of Neville, who is portrayed as a dour bureaucrat, administering the government’s “assimilation” program. The immediate aim of this policy, which was legally instituted in Western Australia in 1905 and practised to varying degrees throughout

Australia for the next six and half decades, was to separate half-caste Aboriginal children from their families and culture, convert them to Christianity and train them as domestic servants or other forms of cheap labour. The long-term government aim, however, was even more sinister—to prevent half-caste children from procreating with full-blooded Aborigines, in order to “breed out” the Aboriginal race.

In one disturbing scene, Neville uses lantern slides to explain his “breeding out” theories to an audience of middle class ladies in Perth. He later visits the mission to inspect the skin colour of the imprisoned children. According to the Chief Protector, those children with lighter skin are more intelligent. They should be separated from the rest and given a slightly better education.

Urged on by Molly, the girls flee the settlement and begin their perilous journey. Unlike the rest of the Moore River inmates, who have been told they have no parents, the Jigalong girls have not forgotten their mothers and are determined to return home.

The rest of the film cuts between the girls’ three-month trek, pursued by Moodoo (David Gulpilil), an Aboriginal tracker specifically employed by the mission to recapture escapees, and a progressively more angry and frustrated Neville. With sporadic assistance from a few Aboriginal and white rural workers along the way, Molly and Daisy make it home to an emotional welcome from their family. An attempt by a local policeman to seize the girls is repulsed by the community and the film concludes with a brief appearance by Molly and Daisy, now in their 80s and still living in Jigalong.

Just before the final titles appear, a short text explains that Molly continued to suffer the horrors of the government’s assimilation policies. After marrying and giving birth to two children—Doris and Annabelle—she and the girls were captured in 1940 and transported back to Moore River. Molly escaped again and although forced to leave four-year-old Doris behind, walked the rabbit-proof fence carrying 18-month-old Annabelle back to Jigalong. A year later, Annabelle was taken by government authorities. Molly never saw her younger daughter again, and it was not until 30 years later that Doris was reunited with her mother.

A veteran of 20 feature films, Noyce has said that he regarded *Rabbit-Proof Fence* as his “greatest challenge” because he wanted a film that “allowed Australians to come to terms with the history of race relations,” one that provided “an understanding of the deeply felt emotions that have fuelled debates on the stolen generation issue”. While the 51-year-old director has faithfully recounted the girls’ story, the film is not the artistic success it could have been.

Noyce, who began filmmaking in the early 1970s, has had a checkered career. Noteworthy early work includes *Backroads* (1977), about outback life for Aborigines and *Newsfront* (1978), the story of two newsreel photographers in Australia in the 1940s and 50s. These films were followed by two unremarkable telemovies—*The Dismissal* (1983), about the constitutional coup that removed the Whitlam Labor government in 1975, and *Cowra Breakout* (1984), dealing with the mass breakout of

Japanese POWs in rural Australia during World War II.

After directing *Dead Calm* in 1989, a thriller starring Sam Neil and Nicole Kidman, Noyce moved to Hollywood where he has remained for the last 12 years. Like many others before him, Noyce made creative and political compromises and spent most of the 90s producing second-rate thrillers or action films such as *Patriot Games* (1992), *Clear and Present Danger* (1994), *The Saint* (1997), *The Bone Collector* (1999) and other forgettable movies. Despite this, Noyce has found it in himself to make *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, the first-ever and long overdue feature film about the “stolen generation”. He reportedly dropped out of a \$220 million Hollywood production to make the film, and should be applauded for doing so.

But notwithstanding the commitment of all those involved, including Kenneth Branagh, who waived his usual fee, the movie tends to skim the surface. Branagh, the only character with any substantial lines, provides a workmanlike and, at times, interesting performance as the coldly-efficient A.O. Neville. The young girls—Everlyn Sampi, Tianna Sansbury and Laura Monaghan—had never acted before and are commendable in their roles. But the film’s focus on the mechanics of the journey takes precedence over a deeper exploration of its characters. One never really comes to understand the girls as children, or gets any real sense of their early life in Jigalong.

The most significant problem, however, is Noyce’s failure to provide a broader historical context to the events, or to trace out the connection between Neville’s actions and the long and bloody record of Aboriginal oppression in Australia. This weakens the overall impact of the film.

This approach has found favour with some local critics who have praised *Rabbit-Proof Fence* because it is not “too political”. Leigh Paatsch writing in Sydney’s *Daily Telegraph* was typical. “[W]ithout taking a tub-thumping stance,” Paatsch wrote on February 21, “*Rabbit-Proof Fence* subtly shifts the ongoing Stolen Generation debate to where it should have been all along: as a tragic humanitarian riddle that still eludes a fathomable answer.”

Noyce would, no doubt, reject this crude obfuscation. But his film would have been considerably stronger if he had clearly established that Neville was not some isolated individual, and that “assimilation” was but a stage in the ongoing genocidal war against Aborigines, which began with British settlement in Australia in the late 18th century. This would have provided a more truthful account of “the history of race relations” and given the film a richer and more powerful texture.

As has been extensively documented, early Australian authorities regarded Aborigines as a sub-human species that could not, in the main, be immediately exploited for cheap labour and had to be driven off all valuable farming land. While racist notions of white superiority formed the ideological justification for government oppression, Aboriginal people were, in fact, victims of the developing capitalist economy—in particular the drive of British and later Australian capital to maximise profits and investments on the continent, requiring the destruction of all impediments, including human ones.

For the first 120 years of British settlement and during the first decades of the 20th century, Aboriginal men, women and children were hunted and killed like wild animals in a policy that can only accurately, and in line with 1948 United Nation Conventions, be defined as genocide—the systematic attempt to destroy a race of people.

Figures vary, but the Aboriginal population, which was estimated to have been between 250,000 and 750,000 in 1788, was reduced to 31,000 by 1911. In the state of Tasmania, a combination of police, troopers, white vigilante groups and individual settlers wiped out the entire Aboriginal population in the early decades of the 19th century.

Having taken possession of the best farming land, government and church authorities began herding Aborigines into reservations, where every aspect of their lives—income, language, religion, culture—came under

administrative control. This policy was officially defined as “protection”.

In the latter part of the 19th and early part of the 20th centuries, government administrators consciously prepared the eventual elimination of the Aboriginal race. Every state had a protector and every protector was empowered to separate half-caste children from their parents and imprison them in government or church missions.

James Isdell, one of Western Australia’s regional protectors, wrote in a letter to a superior in 1907 that Aboriginal women were “prostitutes at heart” and all Aborigines “dirty, filthy and immoral”. Isdell said he would not hesitate to separate half-caste children, because their Aboriginal mothers would quickly forget their offspring. Their grief, he declared, was only related to disappointment over loss of income from turning their daughters into prostitutes.

It was in this political and cultural atmosphere that A.O. Neville became Western Australia’s Chief Protector of Aborigines. His “breeding out” theories, outlined in his book, *Australia’s Coloured Minority: their place in our community*, codified policies already being implemented by state and federal officials across Australia.

Under Neville’s three-point plan, half-castes would be taken from their mothers, arranged marriages would encourage intermarriage between half-castes and “whites”, full-blooded Aborigines would die out and, eventually, the Aboriginal race as a whole would disappear. As he told a Western Australian royal commission: “[Half-castes] have to be protected against themselves.... The sore spot requires the application of the surgeon’s knife for the good of the patient, and probably against the patient’s will.”

Calls for sterilisation from other legislators were not uncommon. In fact, in 1934, three years after Molly, Daisy and Gracie, escaped from Moore River, the Under-Secretary of the Home Department in Queensland, publicly advocated the sterilisation of all half-caste Aborigines.

Certainly, all of this could not be included in *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. But a more profound portrait of Neville and the conditions suffered by Molly, Daisy and Gracie, along with countless other Aboriginal children, depends upon an understanding of at least aspects of this history and the wider political context.

Noyce reduces the second imprisonment of Molly and her two children in Moore River and her escape back along the *Rabbit-Proof Fence* to a few words of text at the end film. But he could have depicted these events and used them to explore the deeper psychological impact of the policy on the now mature woman. To do so would also have provided Noyce with an opportunity to dramatise Neville’s appearance at the first national conference of Aboriginal “protectors” in 1937, just three years before authorities apprehended Molly again.

Neville was a leading figure at this now infamous conference and his “breeding out policy” was unanimously adopted as a national aim. He asked the assembled delegates “Are we going to have a population of one million blacks in the Commonwealth, or are we going to merge them into our white community and eventually forget that there were any Aborigines in Australia?” This could have been powerful material for the film.

Notwithstanding the weaknesses, which tend to indicate a loss of political nerve on Noyce’s part, *Rabbit-Proof Fence* is a sincere and heartfelt work. It casts an important new light on perhaps the dirtiest secret of Australian capitalism and will, hopefully, open the way for others to more deeply probe this and other critical issues.



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