

Rabbit Proof Fence translated into French

Our correspondent
3 September 2003

Follow the *Rabbit Proof Fence*, *one of the most popular books by an Australian Aboriginal writer, has now been translated and published in France. Written by Doris Pilkington in 1996, and subsequently produced as a film last year by director Phillip Noyce, it tells the story of the forcible removal of three young mixed-race Aboriginal girls from their families by government officials in the early 1930s. Thousands of Aboriginal children were subjected to this cruel government policy in the first seven decades of the twentieth century.*

The French edition is published by the Paris-based Autrement company and entitled Le Chemin de la liberté: l'odyssée de trois jeunes aborigènes (ISBN: 2-7467-0311-4). It was translated by Cécile Deniard, and contains an afterword by World Socialist Web Site staff writer Richard Phillips. Publication of the 157-page book coincided with the French release of Noyce's film.

The following is the book's afterword.

Follow the *Rabbit Proof Fence* by Doris Pilkington is one of the many remarkable stories that have begun to be published about the “stolen generation”—the name given to the estimated 30,000 Aboriginal children of mixed race parentage kidnapped from their families by Australian authorities between 1900 and 1971.

Written in 1996, the book is a biographical account of the forcible removal of three young girls—14-year-old Molly Kelly (the author's mother), her eight-year-old sister Daisy and their 10-year-old cousin Gracie Cross—from their parents by police and government officials in the winter of 1931 and their courageous escape from a government-run settlement.

As readers will discover, Molly, Daisy and Gracie were taken from their homes in Jigalong, an Aboriginal community on the edge of the Little Sandy Desert in northwest Australia, and transported thousands of kilometres south to the notorious Moore River Native Settlement near Perth, the Western Australian state capital.

On arrival, they were told they could not speak Mardjara, their tribal language, and should forget their mothers and begin a new life. The girls had no intention of complying. Under Molly's leadership they fled the settlement and during the next three months walked over

2,000 kilometres through farmland, thick bush and semi-desert, in an attempt to rejoin their community in the far north of the state.

Their epic journey followed Western Australia's rabbit proof fence which bisected the state from north to south. Erected by the government in 1907, the fence was supposed to stop rabbits moving into West Australian sheep and cattle grazing lands from Australia's eastern states. For the girls, it provided a guiding link through the harsh terrain to their homes in Jigalong.

Molly, Daisy and Gracie's escape from Moore River and their determined and difficult journey took place in defiance of the government's so-called assimilation program—measures implemented throughout Australia in the early 1900s and continued over the next 70 years with the aim of wiping out the country's Aboriginal population. This policy formed part of an ongoing war against Australia's indigenous people by the British colonial settlers and local administrations throughout the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries.

Prior to European settlement in the late 1700s, the Australian Aborigines led a relatively simple and peaceful hunter-gatherer life with few possessions and no conception of individual land ownership or private property. Religious ceremony and social life was derived and regulated according to the seasons and the immediate natural environment. While figures vary widely, an estimated 750,000 Aborigines inhabited the country at the beginning of European settlement, spread out across the vast continent in hundreds of small tribes.

This existence, which lasted for tens of thousands of years, could not, however, peacefully co-exist with the new forms of social organisation—private land ownership and the profit system—being introduced by the newly arrived British settlers.

For the colonial bureaucrats and farmer settlers, the Aborigines and their communal lifestyle constituted an obstruction to potential profits from the export of wool and wheat and had to be removed from all areas which could produce these commodities. The Aborigines were either duped into signing away traditional hunting areas or

physically driven from land they had occupied for thousands of years. Those who resisted were hunted and killed like wild animals. Aboriginal women were raped, waterholes and food poisoned and tribal elders exiled or jailed by the new state power armed with guns that easily overwhelmed the Aborigine's primitive weapons.

This brutal, undeclared war took a terrible toll on the native population, as did various European diseases. Few records were ever kept of the number of Aborigines killed by police, vigilante groupings and settlers during this period but after 120 years of British settlement the native population was reduced from an estimated 750,000 in the late 1700s to 31,000 by the early 1900s.

Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence provides useful background material on this dark period using historical documents and some fictionalised vignettes about the Nyungar people—the Aborigines inhabiting the southwest of Western Australia. Pilkington describes their life prior to, and in the aftermath of, the first contact with the whalers, colonial administrators and farmers who began arriving in these areas during the early 1800s.

She also briefly traces the dispersal of her own ancestors from Mardu tribal territories in the northwest of the state to the government depots and cattle farms near Jigalong where some were employed as labourers and domestic servants. Molly, Pilkington's mother, was the first child of mixed race parentage born to Aborigines in Jigalong. Her father was one of the inspectors employed to help maintain the rabbit proof fence.

By the end of the nineteenth century, having driven the Aborigines from the most fertile land, government authorities began establishing native reservations, where they herded the survivors. In exchange for small amounts of tea, flour, tobacco and occasional meat, the Aborigines were placed under government or church mission control. This policy became known as “protection” and officials were appointed as “protectors” to administer and control the lives and geographical location of these previously nomadic people.

Aborigines were deemed to be a “dying race” by government legislators, who began introducing the infamous “assimilation” or “breeding out” programs. These policies, they believed, would be the final chapter in the dispersal and destruction of the native population. Calls by state administrators for the sterilisation of Aborigines were not uncommon.

According to official guidelines, full-blooded Aborigines were to be confined to the poverty stricken settlements and left to gradually die out, while children of mixed race parentage, labelled as “half-castes” by the government, were taken from their mothers. Welfare officers would enter

Aboriginal settlements and round up the lighter colored children like cattle, with police holding back any parents trying to stop them.

Once captured and dispatched to the settlements, siblings, in most cases, were separated in order to obliterate any memory of their previous lives. Conditions in the settlements were harsh and prison-like, with beatings and sexual abuse common. Those who survived were psychologically scarred for life. Only a handful ever re-established contact with their parents or brothers and sisters.

The “assimilation” policy, according to Western Australia's Chief Protector of Aborigines A.O. Neville, was aimed at “merg[ing] them into our white community and eventually to forget[ting] that there were any Aborigines in Australia.”

Molly, Daisy and Gracie had no idea of the extent of, or the reasons for their kidnapping. And were never told. But their stubborn refusal to accept it represented an elemental resistance to policies which can only be scientifically defined as genocidal—the deliberate attempt to eliminate a race of people.

Doris Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* is not the first account of the “stolen generation”. Over the last two decades an ever-increasing number of first-hand accounts, novels, poetry, drama and songs has been written detailing aspects of the devastating human cost of the policy on Australia's Aborigines. The unique contribution of *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence*, however, is its account of the courage and determination of three young girls to defy the policy and all the state officials who tried to implement it.

While a comprehensive and detailed examination of the genocidal massacres and other violent crimes committed against Australia's Aborigines has yet to be made, Doris Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit Proof Fence* is a vital contribution to the ongoing struggle to expose what is undeniably one of the dirtiest secrets of Australian capitalism. Its translation into French helps to bring this previously suppressed history to a wider global audience.



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