

Old reports make nonsense of cruelty claim

Alleged experiences of cruelty claimed by some former residents of Catholic institutions cannot be condoned but the allegations are coming from only a handful of hundreds who received care, says Christian Brother Gerald Faulkner, the WA-SA provincial superior.

"It is a pity the positive experiences are not being recorded also," Brother Faulkner said.

He was referring to allegations circulating in the wake of an English television documentary and an accompanying book that has received much publicity in England.

The book covers child migration from England over 300 years but focuses on allegations of abusive and cruel treatment of child migrants to Australia after World War II.

A number of voluntary agencies, of many churches, were involved in the scheme, and some of the allegations are made against the Christian Brother establishments at Clontarf and Bindoon.

"It is estimated that some 10,000 children came to Australia from England during a 30-year period that ended in 1967," Brother Faulkner said, "and it is important to view the whole child migration scheme in the light of social and economic circumstances of the times," he said.

In a statement, Brother Faulkner said:

The "Child Guardian Act" of 1946 (England)

was a formal agreement between the Governments of the United Kingdom and Australia.

Under the terms of this Act, the Commonwealth Minister for Migration was the sole guardian of these children until they reached the age of 21.

This responsibility was usually delegated (in Australia) to State Directors of Child Welfare and (for Catholic agencies) to the Catholic Episcopal Migration and Welfare Association.

Homes such as Clontarf and Bindoon were subject to regular inspection from both medical and educational supervisors.

Dr Stang reports (27/6/1949) after an inspection of Boys' Town Bindoon:

I have not the slightest hesitation in saying that the children at Bindoon were the happiest lot of children that I have seen in one place — their physical development in just 18 months is amazing.

I think the brothers and those in charge are to be highly congratulated for the very great improvement which has taken place in these children in the short space of time that they have been in their care.

There was no evidence of repression or inhibition at all. There was no evidence of fear or repression of all, this was really quite outstanding.

Their physical development would not have been so pronounced had there been any mental worries or unhappiness.

A report from Mr H. Jones (District Superin-

tendent Education Department) in July 1949 says:

I was much impressed by the happiness of the children, their willingness, courteousness and obvious good health. There is a complete absence of restraint.

Competition confined largely to letter writing and I cannot in this procedure Arithmetic in Group A work in level of Class with some added mensuration is being attempted and progress is noted.

From 1946, Boys' Town Bindoon was under the supervision of the Child Welfare Department in WA.

It would seem impossible to corroborate allegations of neglect or cruelty after such a long period of time.

Certainly they should be interpreted in the light of the prevailing circumstances of the times, and in the context of official reports such as those quoted above.

Nevertheless, there could be no justification for such incidents as are alleged to have happened.

While Governments and private agencies apparently operated the child migration scheme with good will, believing they were providing a better opportunity for underprivileged and

neglected children, it is clear to us now that many children suffered long-term emotional stress, especially concerning their origins and identities as human persons.

I believe that all agencies must continue to assist former child migrants in whatever ways seem appropriate.

The Record, July 13, 1989 3