

Mr. Elton Humphrie
Secretary Senate Community Affairs Committee
Parliament House
CANBERRA A.C.T. 2006



Dear Mr. Humphrie,

The institution I found myself in with my elder half-brother and younger sister was named 'Burn Brae'.

It was located about three kilometres from the small town of Byford some fifty kilometres from Perth.

We were deposited there at the beginning of W.W.11.

I do not recall the exact year or even my age. However, from reasoning it must have been 1940 and I would have been six years of age; my elder brother eight and my sister four.

My sister only stayed for a few months and was taken by my maternal grandmother to remain with her until the family was re-united at the end of the war.

Unbeknown to myself at the time, my half-brother Gordon was illegitimate and this had some bearing on our treatment, which only in maturity was I to understand why we both were treated as outcasts.

The staff of Burn Brae consisted of MATRON Holmes who always wore full hospital attire, which fortunately for us, made her visible a good distance away. Next came several women, dressed in blue uniforms whom we always addressed as nurse; the most senior of the 'nurses' was Nurse Tonkin a totally neurotic screaming mis-fit.

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The bane of my life was a Mr. Brown the maintenance cum rouseabout and truck driver. Amongst Mr. Browns' duties was punishment, which he relished and to this day I still suffer from a back injury from his constant bashings.

Mr. Brown in his own words was a half-caste aboriginal, who claimed he had been a pearling lugger captain in Broome. He and his children were evacuated to Perth following the bombing of Broome. Mr. Brown had four children, the eldest Brenda was like a little mother to me, about ten years older and very kind, then was 'Alfie' who was as bad as his father, about four years older than myself, another girl, Kathy, who was my age and a younger girl Ivy. I have mentioned these by name only to show I have excellent recall of all events during my incarceration.

The children of Burn Brae were organised into three groups perhaps not clear-cut; however, my brother Gordon and myself were painfully aware of this distinction. The first group were children whose parents were in the armed services, who visited when possible, I recall the three armed service uniforms and the kindness shown by these visitors.

The second group were the aboriginal children who were treated with patronising hypocritical sanctity, as though they were exotic beings.

Then our group, the charity cases, who were regarded as servants.

We all slept in the same dormitories, except some babies, which I only recall that I had to clean their sleeping quarters occasionally.

There was a school house on an adjoining farm, it was an un-used house. Every week day a fellow from Armadale, some ten kilometres away would arrive on a motorcycle to look after the children who attended. I have always suspected he may have been intellectually- handicapped as he only taught poetry and seemed very innocent.

Some of the older children could read and I believe I was taught by them to read, I do not recall a blackboard or any formal lessons.

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Along with the small number of other charity cases Gordon and myself had chores to do before and after school. Gordon worked at a dairy farm about two hundred metres away for a very kindly farmer Mr. Turner. I was with another assigned to help a farmer Mr. North just with odd jobs and I believe that in turn these farmers gave the institution food- stuff in exchange.

Another farmer was a Mr. Elliot who grew lavender, who we all collectively helped harvest, as we did on the institution spare ground which also had a lavender crop.

The other boy Tom Parry who worked with me at at Mr. Norths property, also was part aboriginal but not treated like the Brown family and with myself, worked the vegetable garden where we carried water in buckets in the dryer weather.

I have a typical Celtic skin and had ginger hair and was constantly sunburnt during the summers. I was also instructed not to wear anything but shorts as the communal shirts I wore to school were in short supply.

Any small demenour, regardless of how petty, received punishment; Alfie Brown was often appointed to supervise group work, such as polishing floors, which were all timber; white washing out- buildings and path- way rocks. Alfie would take great delight in bullying us, both verbally and physically and contantly reporting to Nurse Tonkin that we were lazy!

Although most thrashing were done by Nurse Tonkin, if she considered the punishment required harsher treatment, she or Matron Holmes would order Mr. Brown to use his belt and count out the number of lashes delivered.

There were only a small number of boys, never girls who received this treatment. I recall one girl I only remember her as Veronica, who attacked one of the nurses and received a detention with a bread and water only punishment.

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My brother Gordon always appeared to me to be on the bread and water punishment in addition to his thrashings. One bout was for stealing food from Mr. Turner whom he worked for.

Gordon became very ill and was transferred to the Infectious Disease Hospital in Perth. He later told me it was meningitous. I personally think he had a nervous breakdown, he was treated much better when he returned. He suffered terribly for the rest of his life with nightmares and a terrible inferiority complex. He became a chronic alcoholic and died at forty eight years of age.

About mid-way through our stay the most traumatic happening of my time occurred, when myself included, Gordon and perhaps two other boys we were raped by a builders labourer, who was employed on a construction site at Burn Brae.

This was not reported as we were all convinced that we would receive even worse punishment from those in charge. My major injuries were sustained by a thrashing from Mr. Brown after I bit a lump out of his son Alfies hand.

This came about during one summer, when Tom Parry and myself were attempting to get to school without being way-laid by Alfie and his two mates, who delighted in belting much smaller boys.

I was leading the way along the Beenyup Creek, under an area covered by fern and blackberry- bushes and as I came to an open area, the three bigger boys jumped on me and held my head under water.

I can remember the fear of drowning and with several hands holding my head, the one nearest my mouth I latched onto to a digit and with all the pressure I could muster, bit part of a finger off. The big boys fled; Alfie screaming in agony.

I knew I would be in for a thrashing, so Tom and I went to Mr. Turners farm and I told my story to his wife's mother - Mrs. Christmas! Mrs. Christmas told me she would take me back to Burn Brae and see I was not mistreated. When we arrived there was a reception committee. Matron Holmes with a broom who immediately attacked me with it and then Nurse Tonkin and Mr. Brown dragged me into the main bathroom and roughed me up a bit and then left me.

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After some time being locked in the bathroom, Mr. Brown returned with a horse- strap with a large buckle. I knew the strap, as one of my duties was to look after the resident horse.

Mr. Brown then beat me unconcious and when I awoke I was in a bed on the verandah in front of Matron Holmes quarters.

This was summer and I remained in that bed unable to walk, right through the winter. It was an open verandah and sometimes the rain would touch the bed.

At no time did I receive any sort of medical attention or even first aid from the Matron or any staff member. Although my mother was informed she never visited me during my incarceration. My grandmother later informed me that Matron Holmes informed my mother that I had attacked Alfie unprovoked and badly bitten him. I was a very small boy and even when I started work at thirteen I was less than five feet tall. Alfie was a heavily built boy who was head and shoulders taller than myself.

My only companion/visitor was Brenda Brown during this period; I think it must have been more than four months. Brenda fed me, washed and treated my wounds and read to me. She also taught me to read properly during this time and was the only decent adult in this hell hole.

After my partial recovery, the Matron, nurses and Mr. Brown and on their occassional visits the senior Church Parsons, totally ignored me as if I did not exist for the remainder of my incarceration.

It was a total of two to three months before I was able to leave the building and walk unaided. They did provide me with crutches when I first left my bed to help me get around.

The Institution was under the combined control of the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches. The very Reverands, Tulloch and Moore. God Bless Them!

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I left Burn Brae in 1945? Later leaving school from a foster home at thirteen, to work on a farm at Balingup for some three years.

I am forwarding this account of my experiences at Burn Brae at the suggestion of a staff member of Senator Sue Knowles, who felt my little story should be included along with others that you have received.

Prior to my Age Pension, I was on a Disability Support Pension for some years due to my treatment from Mr. Brown, and Nurse Tonkin.

Yours Faithfully
Robert (Bob) Hadaway

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'R Hadaway', with a long, sweeping tail on the final letter.