

## **Beagle Bay: Irish nuns and Stolen Children.**

**A documentary on Aboriginal Stolen Children and their carers.**

**Produced by Siobhan McHugh, May 2000**

### **Introduction: Norman Swan.**

Four years ago, before 'Bringing Them Home', the stolen generations report, was published, the Saint John of God nuns in Broome in North Western Australia visited local Aboriginal communities and formally apologised for the part they played in the tragedy of the stolen generations. Many of the children educated at the Catholic Missions at Lombadina and Beagle Bay, or at the Holy Child Orphanage in Broome, had been taken from their families because they had mixed blood. Others who were full blood were taught by the nuns, but had their families close by.

The mostly Irish Saint John of God nuns were an intrepid bunch who travelled to Beagle Bay in 1907 lashed to the deck of a pearling lugger - the only access to the isolated mission for many years. When Siobhan McHugh met the nuns and their former pupils in Broome recently, she found that their relationship was deep, honest, and complex. It also revealed a lot about the nature of black/white relations in an assimilationist era.

### **Esther Bevan**

To me they were surrogate mothers when I were growing up; when I left school and began work they were more like really special friends. The thing they stressed to us always was that you are as good as, if not better than, everyone else. It is up to you. I grew up with a very, very positive outlook on life because of that.

### **Vera Dann**

And when it was Saint Patrick's Day at Beagle Bay we were looking forward to the 17<sup>th</sup> of March to come because we knew we'd have a holiday that day'

### **SMH.**

Would you sing Irish songs?

'Yes, **(sings)** *'Hail glorious Saint Patrick dear Saint of our isle, on us thy poor children give us a big smile, and now thou art high in thy mansions above, for God and Saint Patrick and our native land'*.

**SMH.**

So they must have really drummed those songs into you!

**VD**

Yes, yes, I'm 75 – 76 now, and I've still got it here.

**SMH.**

As Esther Bevan and Vera Dann, who was singing there, can recall, the Irish nuns made a huge impression around Broome and Beagle Bay. Jimmy Chi, another ex pupil, even wrote them into his hit musical, *Bran Nu Dae*. Somewhat marginalized within the Church, they lived as frontier women in an isolated environment. As a result they interacted with the Aboriginal community on a human, practical level, their priorities often different from those demanded by church or government policy.

Full blood students like Esther and Vera moved with relative ease between the black and white worlds, but for others the nuns' love could never adequately compensate for the real mothers they'd lost. Phyllis Bin Barka and Daisy Howard were stolen from the East Kimberley as toddlers. Phyllis grew up in the orphanage at Broome. At 18 she was working in the native hospital in Derby when she heard she had a visitor.

**Phyllis Bin Barka**

It just happened that my mother came once to see me, but she was sad, I could understand, she was upset. After being taken as a small child and going to see her as an adult, well, she said that I wasn't her daughter. You know, with all the hardship and the loss of her child, I suppose she felt it very bad that way, and she never, never talked about it.

**SMH.**

Did she get upset, did she just say, 'you're not my daughter', or did she look at you or.....

**PBB**

She just looked at me and said, 'you're not my daughter'. It was a long time you know? I mean taking a child away at a small age and then going back to see the mother, as an adult – well, she would be shocked I suppose, thinking, oh you're not my daughter. That was the first and the last I've seen her.

She didn't even let the other old people know about she had another daughter because it hurt her. She was broken up inside. She never mentioned she had another daughter. It's just recently, when the people say, "oh, it's your mum and all this and that", they always say, "oh, she never said anything about it, she never told us". Well I said, because she

was upset and she had a broken heart. And that's how she went to her grave, with a broken heart.

**SMH.**

Do you know who was your father?

**PBB**

It took a long time before I knew - when my son got my papers from the welfare. My father, he run a station out of Derby, but in the meantime he would come up and down, but as I was growing up he used to be around the orphanage. I don't know what he done, but I never spoke to him or anything like that.

**SMH.**

Do you think he came to the orphanage to try and see you?

**PBB**

I don't think so, no. I don't know what was in his heart: I don't know how he felt\.

**SMH.**

Do you have any memory of when you were taken?

**PBB**

I don't have nothin'. I can't remember a thing really.

**SMH.**

Did you ever manage to hang on to anything about Aboriginal culture?

**PBB**

No. I lost all that when I was taken away, and until today I don't know anything about Aboriginal culture. We lost our homeland, we lost our parents; we lost our culture.

**SMH.**

So tell me about the orphanage then. So you were brought in it at the age of three...

**PBB**

With the nuns, well I must say they were very good to all of us. They didn't have much, but they tried to give us what they could. It was hard in those days for the nuns, they battled very hard. They taught us a lot. They taught us how to sew, how to be clean within ourselves, how to grow up to look after your own children. They showed us how

to cook, wash, iron and I'm very grateful for that. To today I still do that and look after the house, the house-keeping, keep everything spotless. That's the teaching that they gave us and I really appreciate that. They tried to comfort us and gave us everything and made us happy, and that's how we grew up, we never worried about anything else. The main thing was, we had a roof over the head, we had clean beds to lie on; we had food and the love from the nuns.

**Sister Pat Rhatigan**

We gave them the best of what we had; we never gave them second best. OK, the best of all we had, was in our eyes now, certainly not what they should have had, but it was the best of what was there.

When I first came as a postulant or whatever, then I started working at The Holy Child Kindergarten, there was a Kindergarten there, and the big kids minded the little kids like you did in a family, and everybody kind of looked after everybody, and at meal time they didn't have any more or less than what we had, so we bonded together naturally, I think.

And I saw that again in Lombadina, I was 19 in Lombadina, and on Sunday... life was really regimented, because the priests controlled everything (laugh), and on a Sunday, for example, the boys would always go out in the one vehicle that was a Mission truck, with the priest, so they never had to walk. The girls had to walk. And you'd have to be fully clothed in your long black stockings and black shoes and veil and everything.

I can remember at 19 being responsible for these girls. When we'd get out there, or whatever, and I'd get under a tree and I'd take the little ones – they'd leave the little ones with me, and we'd have a bit of water and that's all we would have, so we were dependant on the bigger girls finding us something to eat. It was their job to find some berries and fish and they usually did, and bring it back. If they didn't, well, none of us ate.

**SMH.**

Did it ever occur to you to question why people were taking children away from their parents?

**Sister Pat Rhatigan**

( pause) No, I don't think it did. Religious life didn't allow for that. You only had that hour of recreation in the evening, you didn't access newspapers, and you weren't allowed to listen to the wireless, so there was never an open debate.

They were, I think, as women, we reacted to kids that came and we took them and cared for them, loved them, grew them up, but really didn't know even ourselves, or the other sisters, much about the wider world and what was going on out there.

We would have heard that the kids were there for education. I suppose how they got there we didn't question.

**Daisy Howard**

*(Sings). 'Faith of our fathers' holy faith, we will be true to thee till death. Oh how our heart beat high with joo-oy when 'ere we hear their glorious words. Faith of our Fathers' holy faith....*

.I can't remember my mother; I was taken from her when I was about two or three. I'm just going by my welfare papers now what I got. Taken to **Mullaboola (sp)** haven't seen my mother again, never again. My sister and brother were older than me, I was the youngest. There was another half-caste brother, so the both of us were taken and the other two just stayed. In 1968/9 I went back up there and that's when I seen my sister for the first time at Halls Creek. We were really shy to each other, not close in a way, you know?

**SMH.**

Did your sister ever tell you how your mother felt about you being taken from her; you and your brother?

**Daisy Howard**

No, she said that she can't remember. She said, all of a sudden you wasn't there. We didn't even know where you was taken. When they took me I could speak my language, but we just lost it because there was no one to talk to and keep up our language and culture and everything, we just lost everything. That's what I'm really sorry about. When I see little kids that age now, talking and things, I just always think back what I lost. I feel really sad about it.

[Daisy's grandchild playing and singing in background]

**SMH.**

So when you went to Beagle Bay, what was it like being brought up by the nuns? As a child can you remember how you felt?

**DH**

They really made us feel that we were part of a sort of family you know? We felt really good, but still lonely. Sometimes I remember crying ourself to sleep. But we got on really well with everyone. We loved the nuns. We had jobs to do, like we used to go milking in the morning, work in the gardens, and I worked at the hospital for a little while, and things like that, you know? I didn't see them really hard you know: the nuns. When we had our own children then we knew what to do; I think that gave us good start. When we got married and had our family I think that was a good start for us you know, to have someone there for us.

**SMH.**

So when you go back to where you were originally from, do you still feel a sense of connection to that country?

**DH**

I do, yes. When I go back there I still feel it. I cry too. Like I say, I would rather be brought up that way and knowing everything, than being brought up the other way and not knowing anything. I think it hurts more to know now what happened because, I mean, there's nothing we can do really.

**SMH.**

If you went back to live there would you live in the Aboriginal way or the western kind of European Catholic way, would you do things the traditional custom way, or not?

**DH**

No, I think I always be a Catholic. Like in town and go to Church and things like that. I don't think I'll ever forget that. I went a few times with the people from the language centre. I mean I just pick up a few words here and there – like my Aboriginal name. 'Jangali' is my Aboriginal name.

**SMH.**

Do you think you could fit back in out there in Halls Creek now?

**DH**

Yes I do, I go back there a lot of times. I go back every year, and I fit in really well with everyone there. A lot of them just saying to me – come back home, and I just think to myself – where's home, you know? I mean, I know home is there, but I'm sort of between two cultures because my children are here, they were all born in Broome mostly. I mean I suppose if we were younger we could have still go back and sort of feel better by just living with them. I would really love to live in the bush with my mother, but now we've gotta live this life now. The only way we'll ever know, because we don't know the other one.

**(Excerpt from Bran Nu Dae – song)**

**Sr Pat Rhatigan**

I think the sense of that time was that if these kids were going to get anything they had to get education and they had to understand white ways and they had to – well I suppose in a way they had to be white clones in lots of ways. I don't think we ever *thought* that or put it out. I know the kids *had* to speak English because that was the thing that was going to get them somewhere, and also the government required that the missions were

supposed to be educating, they were supposed to be, I suppose, westernizing or growing up these kids. They were to grow them up as a working class, to give them some... and that's what happened all around Australia. They were to be working-class people. They were to know enough English and enough education – not too much education because then they would get “smart blacks” – that was the term, you know? In other words, they would challenge the authority.

**SMH.**

When you say they weren't to get too much education, did you ever feel personally, a pang about that? If you had a bright girl or something and you could really see that she had a thirst for knowledge?

**SPR**

When I went to Beagle Bay, by that time the Pallatine Centre was operating in Rossmoyne [secondary college in Perth] and the brighter ones did have the opportunity, and I saw sisters like Sister Catherine teaching those kids on Saturday and doing plays. Like she had them here in Broome doing Shakespeare – you know Jimmy Chi, those ones. [The musical] Bran Nu Dae is really based on – I mean we have no animosity for Bran Nu Dae, it's true, there's a lot of story and truth in Bran Nu Dae, but any kids who had any inclination that they wanted to, or were in any way bright got the chance to go down to Rossmoyne. The sisters there – what they were doing was really pushing education all the time, pushing the health of the kids, so they'd get good health; they'd grow up properly, and I think that push, all the time to get them out of the lower rung, was there.

**Esther Bevan**

I can always remember – “we are training you, we are teaching you, so you one day will be here and you will take control of your life and you'll be running and managing your own affairs”. That was just *rammed* down my throat by the John of Gods and I have, no matter where I've been – the words keep ringing in my ears. “You are as good, if not better”. That to me is the greatest gift they gave me.

I won a scholarship and I went to the Pallatine Centre in Rossmoyne. I was then with The Native Welfare Department. I was based in Perth for two years and then for the next couple of years I was based in the old office in Halls Creek. I was the first Aboriginal person up here to be employed in the government.

So it has gotten better – much better over the years, but yes, I often think that, when I'm working with people now who are dysfunctional or who are really struggling, I think, yes that was set in place by all those policies, all those years ago and I was one of those people who enforced it, being that public servant there, yes.

I've had people come into the office and apply to get married and it was up to either one of us three in the office, whoever was there at the time, to determine how much – is it

white blood – they could tell you the caste – you are half-caste, three quarter caste, depending on how much white blood you had in you. We could go down to the 16<sup>th</sup>.

**SMH.**

Was there a formula, who was allowed to marry who, according to how much blood....

**EB**

Yes, or if they were suitable, and if we thought that they were responsible people. I didn't think about it then – no, I just accepted it because it was part of my job. It wasn't until *very* much later that I looked back, and when I share with people I say – I did, at one stage look back and say, “my God, I was one of those people that had to grade them”, if you like.

**SMH.**

Did you have to get permission when you married your white husband?

**EB**

No, at that stage all of that was over. The referendum had come in and the citizenship rights and that, we were given equal status in Australia, so no, I didn't need that.

**SMH.**

Do you remember how you felt when that referendum happened, when you got equal rights and you were suddenly now – you know, the first Australians were now allowed to be Australian citizens.

**EB**

**(laughs)** Actually I felt good. I thought, oh thank *God*, we're not part of the unique flora and fauna anymore **(laughs)**. We are people in our own right. And from then on I think Aboriginal people, very slowly at first, started to look into taking control of their lives.

**(Excerpt from Bran Nu Dae)**

**Phyllis Bin Barka**

I feel sad at times not meeting my mother, especially my mother, but in the long run, now that I grew up and I had me own children and I battled hard with my children, so what was more concern was my children. I battled hard for them; I didn't get any help from anyone. So that's all I've got, is my children. That's the happiness I've got from all that – my children come first, and I think it's a wonderful thing to have children.

I've had my children and looked after then and gave them caring and everything, but I didn't spoke about my background because I never knew anything about it. The minute you talk about these things some of the Europeans say, “oh bullshit”, and all things like



that. And that hurts us, you know? They didn't go through it. And that was the government policy, and I think that the government should recognise these things. But the Prime Minister don't understand anyway'.

**Sr Pat Rhatigan**

When the word came that we were to celebrate the Jubilee [of the John of God order of nuns], we said we really didn't think we should celebrate, because we have done things – and the stolen generation and whatever, so we said that we'd ask the people. But we had something public in which we publicly apologised and that was our way of saying – well – I mean it was a terribly, terribly wrong thing that no matter what, it should never have happened.

No child should be taken from their mother, and the way we judged people and the white and black and all that kind of thing. The negative role of missions, of bosses, of putting the church in powerful situations – but the church was part of the society at the time. They certainly weren't in any way worse.

Good things have happened for people, I guess, to have had a good education and some of the leaders now are the ones who got education, but I think there must have been another way.

**SMH.**

How did the people react when you went round four years ago and apologised?'

**SPR**

Oh, it was fantastic. Yes, it was a lot of sharing; personal emotion. Anger from some people. There are some people who are really hurt and really angry. Some of the girls in the orphanage – why were they there, and all of those kind of things. It was a wonderful thing that happened, and I think it was accepted as genuine because it was done by the sisters. The way they're doing things in a quite a different way – and yes, it was done before it was fashionable to do it.

But I think the terrible legacies – we'll never really know the depth of them. Because they broke up families, they disempowered people. If it was turning back the clock in time and you were able to do it, we must never, and should never have done it or participated in it.

**Daisy Howard**

Yeah I know, there's a lot of people saying sorry and that is very good, but why not the government? That's the part, and they were the responsible people for what happened to us. We don't blame the nuns. A lot of people think that nuns are like the missions, priests and everyone – no we don't see that. It wasn't the nuns and priests that took us, not the church really, just the government.

I used to feel shy even to walk out of my house before – bringing up my children, I should be always home, and I still feel like that today. I mean, I'm not blaming anybody for that sort of thing, but I'm just saying they never give us confidence. A lot of times I used to want to work, but I really didn't know how to start, like to talk to anybody and things like that. And I see everyone else like that. Like we all shy kind of people. We can't talk up for ourself, just like we felt we wasn't – I don't know, not wanted maybe, I don't know.

It's hurting *them* just to say sorry, but what hurt we going through, it's everyday thing for us, everyday thing you know? Sometimes we can think to ourself what could have been, you know? We'd be happy there - we most probably would be, because we'd have our family with us.

Yeah, all of a sudden you know, we're just taken and there's no one responsible for it. Why did they do it in the first place? You can think about it over and over and you get no answer.

**(excerpt from Bran Nu Dae).** *Why are you crying my pretty Colleen, why are your eyes full with tears...*

### **Phyllis Bin Barka**

I'd like to fix my mother's grave for a start. She's buried in Derby but she's thrown in the bush. I mean, they're not animals. Put a tombstone or something there. But I can't do it.

**(excerpt from Bran Nu Dae)** *'Closer come closer, don't throw me away, I am so tired and so blue...'*

### **SMH.**

Would it help you in anyway if the Prime Minister were to say sorry?

### **Daisy Howard**

It would, but he's got to realise and understand these things. If anyone would happen to take his children away, how would he feel? Exactly the same how we felt, with our mothers, not seeing them again. I mean it would be a big worry to you. I mean most people can go silly and lose their memory. It's very hard to take your children away from you. That's half of you.

**(excerpt from Bran Nu Dae)** *'I still remember the old Mission yard, the old days, the old ways, the times that were hard, the friends of my childhood when I was young, the fathers, the brothers and the old Irish Nuns'. (Chorus).*

**Esther Bevan**

Reconciliation, if we're talking about reconciliation, starts with me and you, and the groundswell is just ever widening in this country, of just ordinary people on the ground. **(laughs)** So bugger the government!

**Music ends.**

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**Back announcement: Norman Swan**

That report featured four Aboriginal former pupils of the Saint John of God nuns from Broome and Beagle Bay: Phyllis Bin Barka and Daisy Howard, who were stolen from their mothers in the East Kimberley as toddlers, and Esther Bevan and Vera Dann, who came from the Beagle Bay area in the West Kimberley. You also heard Sister Pat Rhatigan, a Saint John of God nun from the East Kimberley and current Dean of the University of Notre Dame in Broome - possibly the only university in the country where a unit of Aboriginal history is mandatory for every undergraduate. The music came from Bran Nu Dae, a new show written by Jimmy Chi, who was also taught by the nuns.

That report was produced by Siobhan McHugh.

**THE END.**