

PRINT UNIT

Rabbit-Proof Fence
– Is it good history?



Making a film

1 Imagine that you have the chance to make a film. Your choices are:

- Make a big Hollywood blockbuster movie.
- Make a small Australian film for which you have little finance.

What do you do and why? Discuss your answer.

This was the choice facing the famous Australian film director Phillip Noyce.

He chose to make the small Australian film — that you know today as *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. It was released in 2002, and won many significant Australian film awards.

It is based on the book *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* by Doris Pilkington (Nugi Garimara), which tells the story of Doris' mother, Molly.

The story occurred in 1931 at Jigalong, in Western Australia. Three mixed-race girls, Molly (aged 14), Gracie (11) and Daisy (8) were taken from their outback Aboriginal community to the Aboriginal training institution at Moore River, in Mogumber, near Perth.

Here they were to be educated, and taught skills that would enable them to become part of the Australian economy and society — mostly as domestic workers.

They escaped after their first day there, and set out to walk back home to Jigalong from Mogumber.

They kept their direction by following a fence built to stop the migration of rabbits into Western Australian pastoral areas. At the same time they had to evade the government agents sent to return them to Moore River.

The film provides a very powerful and human illustration of Australia's 'Stolen Generations' policy — the policy that led to the forcible removal of an unknown number of young part-Aboriginal children from their parents.

2 Now imagine that you have been asked to advise Phillip Noyce on how to structure the film, how to tell the story and get across the messages that are important in the film. List the scenes that you might include. For example, how do you establish the main characters? How do you explain the government policy of taking children? How do you show why the children chose to escape?

List the key scenes here, then organise them into a sequence that tells the story effectively.

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1B

Some people have criticised the policy of taking children as a form of genocide — the destruction of a race — and see it as a major cause of personal and social problems in many Indigenous people today.

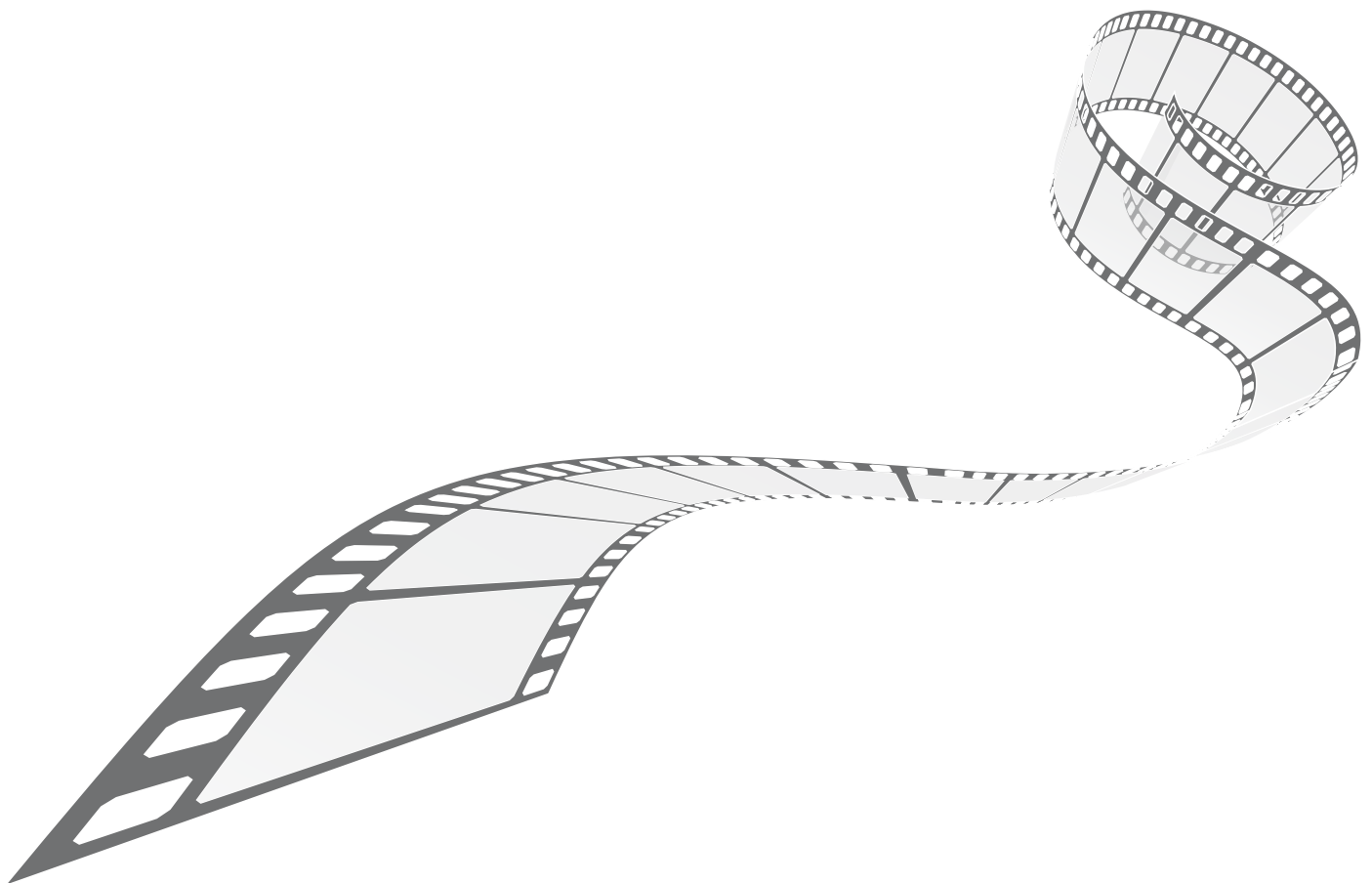
Others have claimed that, while it was very hard and undoubtedly did much harm to some people, it was done with good intentions — to ‘save’ children from terrible conditions and treatment in their Indigenous communities rather than ‘steal’ them from their parents and race.

This issue of the ‘Stolen Generations’ is an important one in Australia today. On 13 February 2008, Australia stopped as Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delivered an historic apology to the Stolen Generations victims for the harm that government policies had done to them. Not all Australians accepted the wording of the apology, and there was some hostility towards the speech by Leader of the Opposition in Parliament, Brendan Nelson, who argued that there were benefits that had resulted to some of the Aboriginal children who were protected and educated under the system.

The film is an excellent vehicle for studying a number of questions:

- What can we learn about the Stolen Generations issue?
- How do filmmakers represent history?
- What if this film had never been made — would it affect our society?
- How can we ensure that important films telling Australians’ stories can continue to be made?

You should try to watch the film if possible, but the issues raised in this unit can be explored without having watched it.



How the film was made

We have seen that Phillip Noyce chose to make this film. Sounds easy! But look at this account he has given of the process, and answer the questions on **Resource Page 3**.

3.30 AM October 1999

Fast asleep at my home in the Hollywood hills of Los Angeles. A deep and contented sleep. Deep because post-production on *The Bone Collector* [Phillip Noyce, 1999] is finally over and already early pre-production has started on *The Sum of All Fears* [Phil Alden Robinson, 2002]. Contented because I'm being paid millions of dollars to direct Hollywood blockbusters, featuring stars that will guarantee a gigantic first weekend box office and further inflate my market value as a director. Life couldn't be better.

Then the phone rings. The phone number that nobody except my agent, studio heads and immediate family have access to. At this hour it must be trouble. Big trouble — it's a scriptwriter. An Australian woman who has confused the time difference, tells me something one hears almost everyday in Hollywood, 'I've written the perfect script and you're the perfect director for my story.' Gently, I encourage her to call my office during daylight. I immediately leave a message for my assistant, warning him not to encourage her and to announce that I've had to leave hurriedly for New York.

Three months later, after three employees have pleaded with me to read the manuscript that the mysterious caller had sent, I finally relent. I had become such a part of the 'machine' that I'm convinced nothing worthwhile could possibly reach my desk except through the Hollywood filtering process of studio executives and agents. Worse, the dawn caller (or the crazy lady as I've now christened her) has never written a screenplay before. Her name is Christine Olsen and you'll now find her name on the poster for *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, credited as screenwriter and producer.

Ten pages into the screenplay I ask myself if I'm experiencing a late mid-life crisis occasioned by my imminent fiftieth birthday? I find myself crying. It's the story of three Australian Aboriginal girls, forcibly removed from their outback families in 1931 to be transported 2,400 kilometres to an infamous

government institution where they are to be re-programmed to take their places in white society. Led by the eldest kid, they escape.

As I read, those children quickly become my children and strangely I become a child again, yearning to find the rabbit-proof fence that bisects the Australian continent and just might be the way back home. For me and for them. After ten years in Hollywood, I'm still an outsider, a migrant guest worker telling other people's stories. As a citizen of the world, without nationality, I've become the ultimate Hollywood foot soldier, directing action/adventure, escapist stories designed to mesmerize across all boundaries. I know that black-themed films have never worked at the Australian Cinema box office. But it's time to go home.

Five months later

I'm travelling along the remnants of that fence in outback Western Australia, crossing the vast flat desert landscape that will lead me finally to the tiny Aboriginal settlement of Jigalong. I've left behind a \$US 6 million fee promised for directing the \$US 90 million budgeted *The Sum of All Fears — Rabbit-Proof Fence* will cost \$US 6 million in total.

At Jigalong I meet 86-year-old Molly Craig and her sister, Daisy Kadibill Craig (79). Seventy years previously they had walked 2,400 kilometres across the desert that I've just traversed for three days in an air-conditioned four-wheel drive. Molly's face is etched by the desert winds. But it's the legs that one cannot help but notice. The legs of a thoroughbred. Long and strong. Molly made the journey twice. The second time she carried her infant daughter, rescued from capture after the authorities had seized her own children. A year later, the Chief Protector of Aborigines would order the youngster to be seized again. In 2001, Molly still waits for little Anabell to come home.



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2B

Molly and Daisy are but two of the tens of thousands of indigenous children forcibly removed from their families over a seventy year period in what a 1997 judicial inquiry would label 'genocide'. In Australia, we call these kids 'The Stolen Generations'. For me, *Rabbit-Proof Fence* the movie will be as much about stolen history. History that we Australians needed to reclaim.

Back in the nineteenth century, a British settler had thought to cure the boredom of colonial life by importing some English rabbits to hunt. With no natural predator in sight, the rabbits soon outnumbered humans a million to one. In the early twentieth century, the Western Australian Government decided to stop the rabbit plague. Completed in 1907, the rabbit-proof fence would be the longest continuous fence in the world, running from the top to the bottom of Australia and keeping the hungry rabbits out of the new pasture lands. The fathers of our three heroines were workers on the rabbit-proof fence, the first whites the Aboriginal families in the area had ever seen.

July 2000

Now I needed to find three girls who could play these outback Aboriginal children. Indigenous kids in the cities and towns seemed to have become homogenised by the MTV culture that is rapidly making children all over the world identical. I realised we'd have to search in the remote northwest of the country, where black and white had 'contacted' as late as the 1970s and where isolated communities were still living in touch with traditional ways. I travelled with casting director Christine King by light airplane, four-wheel drive and boat to scores of tiny communities. In Djarindjin, on February 2002 the Dampier Peninsula outside Broome in the Northwest, we found eleven-year-old Everlyn Sampi. She would become the star of our movie and the face that adorns the film's poster worldwide. Everlyn knew the story of The Stolen Generations because she'd lived it. Her mum was taken at age four and is still today haunted by her experiences, not sure if her own mother had abandoned her as the authorities claimed, or if she'd been stolen, as she now suspected. Like the character she plays, Everlyn was feisty and independent. She ran away from us twice, even before shooting commenced.

Nine-year-old Laura Monaghan, who plays Gracie, would appear on a videotape recorded at her primary school in Port Hedland, Western Australia. Seven-year-old Tianna Sansbury would join our cast just four days before shooting commenced, after the original choice to play Daisy had become homesick for her outback desert community. These three children were gifts from the past — in touch with nature and Aboriginal culture in ways that could never be taught or acted. My task would not be to get them to perform, but just 'to let them be', a process that involved overturning every truism the Hollywood star system had inculcated in me.

December 2000

Having completed seven weeks of shooting in the barren Flinders Ranges of South Australia, Cinematographer Chris Doyle and I fly directly to Ho Chi Minh City to begin Pre-Production on *The Quiet American* [Phillip Noyce, 2002] At the Metropolitan Hotel I meet up with Peter Gabriel and offer him the choice of two film projects as composer. *The Quiet American* comes with a music budget of half a million dollars. On a whim, I also tell him the story of *Rabbit-Proof Fence* though I can't help but honestly report that we can only afford recording costs — there is no money for a composer's fee. From that night to this I've never seen Peter Gabriel in person again. But for the next ten months we enjoyed one of the closest collaborations I've ever had with a film composer.



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2C

When he accepted the job, Peter said that he wanted to make music that ‘came out of the earth itself.’ Month after month my sound team would send the real sounds of the Australian bush to Peter’s studios in Bath, England. Via MP3 file, Peter emails back the results of the samples that he and his team have orchestrated into a musical score. My assistant downloads the files, presses countless CDs and we experiment mixing the music with the film’s soundtrack in a continuous five-month sound mix. It’s as if our mixing console at Fox Studios in Sydney is linked via the Internet to Real World Studios in Bath.

February 2002

World premiere night for an audience of two. Molly’s grandson has dismantled an old 35mm projector from a cinema in Perth and transported it by truck to Jigalong. We inflate the giant movie screen imported from Germany and test the Dolby Stereo Surround Sound that has been set-up in the desert outside Molly’s house.

Two days later, the two hundred residents of Jigalong are joined by 800 black figures that materialise from the desert haze. The dark storm clouds blow over, replaced by a canopy of stars behind the screen. A half hour before sunset, Molly Craig and her sister Daisy Kadibill Craig arrive for the first movie they have ever seen on a cinema screen. The crowd parts as the flashbulbs pop and a thousand people sit down to watch Molly’s story. As the movie proper finishes and the end credits roll, a giant moth flies into the projector and burns up on screen. The film disintegrates and breaks.

From the day the movie opens in ninety-six Australian cinemas, the bitter attacks begin. Unable to simply celebrate the glorious bravery of three Australian heroines, right-wing commentators start a media campaign to discredit the movie. They claim the film distorts the manner in which the kids were removed from their parents and exaggerates the general suffering in the government re-education centres. Politicians join in, with one minister using government funds to print leaflets warning his constituents against seeing the film. The controversy fuels enormous audience interest. The movie’s weekly grosses actually rise in its third month of screening. After twenty-six weeks, *Rabbit-Proof Fence* ends its cinema run in Australia. As the most successful Australian film of 2002 it has overturned conventional Oz film industry wisdom. Films with black content are no longer box office poison.

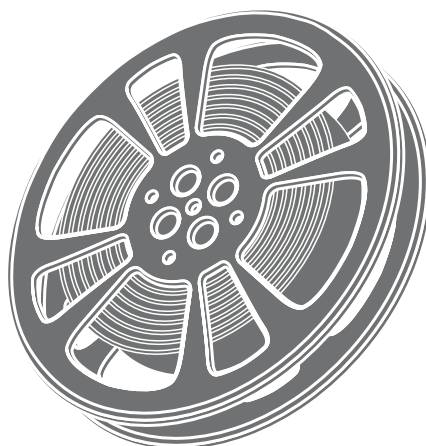
August 2002

I return to Hollywood to prepare for November openings in the US and UK of both *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and *The Quiet American*.

October 2002

I apologise to Sherry Lansing, head of Paramount Pictures, for leaving *The Sum of All Fears* after promising to her that I’d direct the film. The action/adventure scripts start piling up on my desk. I ponder my future, remembering Billy Zane’s line to Nicole Kidman in *Dead Calm* [Phillip Noyce, 1989] ‘There’s no going back Rae. There’s no going back.’

Rabbit-Proof Fence: Phillip Noyce’s Diary Adapted from www.landmarktheatres.com/Stories/rabbit_frame.html



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3

1 Phillip Noyce sacrificed a lot to make *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. Why did he choose to make it?



2 The film might never have happened. What were the key elements that ensured that it did happen?



3 What difficulties did Noyce face in making the film?



4 How did Noyce's international experience contribute to the making of the film?



5 Was the film worth making?



6 How is the film, whether you have seen it or not, part of your life?



7 The other person who struggled to make this film is the writer, Christine Olsen. She later became a co-producer of the film. What difficulties did she face in having her script accepted?



8 Why do you think she persisted over several years to work towards having her vision realised in film?



9 The film claims to be a historically accurate and true picture of events. How might you be able to test whether it is true or not?



Permission and copyright in making a film

Another issue associated with a film is the question of copyright and permissions. Imagine that you have been asked to be involved in the making of *Rabbit-Proof Fence*. The producer asks you to give your opinion on whether permission and copyright clearance are needed for each of these aspects of the film. What do you think? Record your ideas. You will be able to see the actual answers later.

ASPECTS OF THE FILM	PERMISSION NEEDED?	WHY?	COPYRIGHT CLEARANCE NEEDED?	WHY?
Location shooting →				
Adapting the book <i>Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence</i> →				
The historical characters involved →				
Traditional music used →				
New music written for the film →				
Aboriginal cultural elements →				
European cultural aspects →				
Artefacts used such as A.O. Neville's slides →				
Script →				
Cinematography →				

Thinking about the subject of the film

From the film, or from your knowledge of the film so far, answer these questions:

1 What is the film about? →	
2 When and where is it set? →	
3 Look at this map of the journeys shown in the film. Use an atlas or other maps from the internet to work out the distance between Mogumber and Jigalong. →	
4 What does the phrase 'Stolen Generations' mean to you? →	
5 Why do you think governments in Australia would have had a policy of removing some children from their families? (You may have several different possible reasons in mind here). →	
6 <i>Rabbit-Proof Fence</i> is a film. Why should we believe what a film tells us about our history? →	
7 The film is set in the past. What does that have to do with your society today? →	
8 Who would you say is the main audience for the film – historians? Indigenous people? Young Australians? Someone else? Discuss your ideas. →	

Now look at the following pages to test further some of the ideas you have listed here.

Deciding: Is Rabbit Proof Fence good history?

Rabbit-Proof Fence is an important film because it deals with a significant issue in Australian History — the ‘Stolen Generations’.

It is a popular film, and is influential in shaping many people’s knowledge and understanding of this part of Australia’s history — and therefore of our identity. So it should get it right.

Some people find the film to be a powerful and moving one, and accept what it has to say as fair and accurate. They believe it tells the truth.

Other people have challenged this, and say it is not fully accurate, and not fully honest. They say it actually distorts and misrepresents the truth, and causes us to see ourselves in an inaccurate way.

Look at the two articles that follow. One, by journalist Andrew Bolt, sets out what he sees as eight significant inaccuracies or distortions in the film. The second, by the scriptwriter of the film, Christine Olsen, challenges Bolt’s arguments, and says that he has distorted and misrepresented the situation.

- 1 Read the introductions and conclusions to the two articles in **Resource Page 7** to get a sense of their attitudes.
- 2 Then have small groups each look at one or two of the more detailed comments about the film in **Resource Pages 8-9**. Report to the whole class so that everybody can fill in the table below. One example has been done to help you.



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6B

EIGHT ASPECTS IN THE FILM THAT HAVE BEEN CHALLENGED	THE CRITIC'S VIEW — BOLT	THE DEFENDER'S VIEW — OLSEN
<p>1 THE FILM opens at Jigalong in 1931, and shows a neat bush camp. Molly Craig is happy and healthy. Her mother is well-groomed. All is well.</p> <p>→</p>		
<p>2 THE FILM shows Molly playing with other children at Jigalong. Everyone is smiling and seems happy.</p> <p>→</p>		
<p>3 THE FILM suggests Molly and her cousins were removed from Jigalong only because the state's Chief Protector of Aborigines, A.O. Neville, was a genocidal racist who wanted to 'breed out the Aborigine'.</p> <p>→</p>	<p><i>Says the girls were removed because Neville received evidence that they were in danger.</i></p>	<p><i>Says that Bolt does not tell us that the complaint was withdrawn, that the girls were accepted by the community, and that Neville had a deliberate policy of letting Aboriginal people die out, and having 'half-castes' become 'white' over several generations.</i></p>
<p>4 THE FILM shows a policeman chasing the girls in his car and ripping them from Molly's screaming mother. According to Noyce, this scene 'tells the whole story' of his film.</p> <p>→</p>		

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6B

EIGHT ASPECTS IN THE FILM THAT HAVE BEEN CHALLENGED	THE CRITIC'S VIEW — BOLT	THE DEFENDER'S VIEW — OLSEN
<p>5 THE FILM then shows the girls on a train, locked in an iron-barred box for dogs. They travel the last leg to Moore River tossed in the open tray of a truck.</p> <p>→</p>		
<p>6 THE FILM shows the girls arriving at Moore River, where they wear prison-style sacks and are woken in the morning by a guard who screams and belts the walls of their room with a club.</p> <p>→</p>		
<p>7 THE FILM shows children at Moore River singing 'Way Down Upon the Swanee River' for visitors. This shows they're so robbed of their black culture that they sing fake Negro songs instead.</p> <p>→</p>		
<p>8 THE FILM shows babies left to cry in a room of cots. They, too, seem 'stolen'.</p> <p>→</p>		

Overview: the critic

‘RABBIT-PROOF MYTHS’ By Andrew Bolt, *Herald Sun*, 14 February 2004

The truth of Australia’s past is hard enough to face, and untruths and exaggerations now will only divide us.

Phillip Noyce claims his new film, *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, is a true story.

The Hollywood director’s publicity blurb repeats the boast: ‘A true story.’

Even the first spoken words in the hyped film, which opens next week, are: ‘This is a true story.’

Wrong.

Crucial parts of this ‘true story’ about a ‘stolen generations’ child called Molly Craig are false or misleading. And shamefully so.

No wonder that when Craig saw *Rabbit-Proof Fence* at a special screening in her bush settlement last month, she seem surprised.

‘That’s not my story,’ she said as the credits rolled.

No, it isn’t.

Instead, it is Craig’s story told in a way that would help ‘prove’ the ‘stolen generations’ are no myth — that thousands of Aboriginal children were indeed torn from the arms of loving parents by racist police.

In saying this, I mean no disrespect to Craig. She has had a film (supported by \$5.3 million of taxpayers’ money) made of an episode of her life in which she showed extraordinary courage, endurance and willpower — but it’s a film which can’t be trusted to tell the whole truth. Who could value its praise?

It was 1931 and Molly Craig was just 14, when she and two of her younger cousins — Daisy, 8, and Gracie, 11 — were taken from an Aboriginal camp at Jigalong, in Western Australia’s north, and sent to the Moore River Native Settlement, 2000km south.

There these girls were to live with other ‘half-castes’ and to go to school, learning skills to help them to adapt to non-Aboriginal society. But the girls fled after one night and, in an amazing nine-week epic, walked home to Jigalong — all but Gracie, that is, who was found by police at Wiluna.

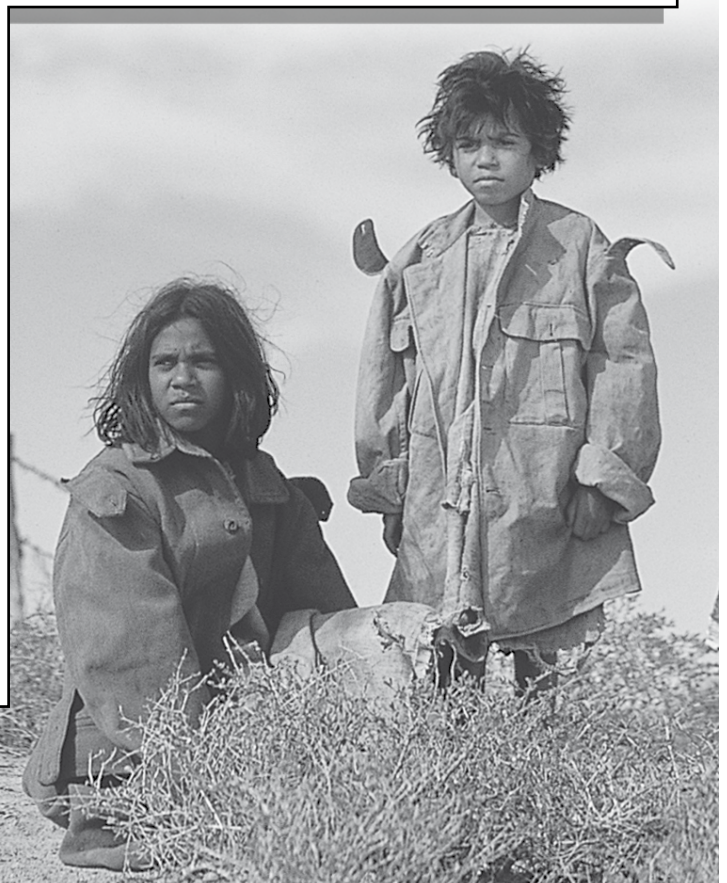
Craig’s feat made the papers but was not written up in full until 1996, when her daughter, Doris Pilkington, who was herself raised at Moore River, wrote the book on which Noyce has based his film.

But Noyce and his scriptwriter didn’t stick to the facts Pilkington uncovered. Instead, the story was rewritten and now supports a monstrous falsehood — that we have a genocidal past that is, as Noyce’s publicity material declares, ‘more cruel than could ever be imagined’.

Such distortions of the truth, and for what? There are enough cruelties in our past we must confront — the theft of black lands, the half-caste children abandoned by white fathers, and the years of neglect of a people whose culture and communities are now shattered.

There is so much to make good — which is why the lies of the ‘stolen generations’ activists are unforgivable. The Aboriginal leaders who falsely claim they were ‘stolen’, the writers who exaggerate the number of children removed, the silly compensation cases that collapse and the slick claims of genocide all risk making every claim of black suffering seem a cynical try-on.

The truth of our past is hard enough to face. Untruths and exaggerations now will only divide us. Your film shames not us, Phillip Noyce, but you.



Overview: the defender

RABBIT-PROOF FENCE WRITER CHRISTINE OLSEN REGARDING SOME OF THE 'FACT' STATEMENTS MADE BY ANDREW BOLT

Letters, *Herald Sun*, 2 March 2004

Andrew Bolt (*Herald Sun* 14 Feb) wants to demolish the truth behind the film, *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, by either selectively quoting or misquoting from some of the historical records available about Molly Craig's remarkable story.

Molly's story has indeed been extremely well documented by Mr Neville, The Chief Protector of Aborigines in Western Australia at the time.

Andrew Bolt's main argument is that Molly, Daisy and Gracie were not removed from Jigalong because of Mr Neville's plan to 'breed out the Aborigine' but to remove them from squalid aboriginal camps for their own good.

Yours sincerely,

Christine Olsen, writer/co-producer *Rabbit-Proof Fence*

SOURCE: European Network for Indigenous Australian Rights (ENIAR)
www.eniar.org/news/Bolt.html



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RESOURCE PAGE

8A

The critic says:



- 1** THE FILM opens at Jigalong in 1931, and shows a neat bush camp. Molly Craig is happy and healthy. Her mother is well-groomed. All is well.

THE FACT is many of these bush camps were squalid.

When Doris Pilkington first returned to Jigalong 30 years later, it was still appalling.

‘No one prepared me for the conditions that people lived under,’ she told ABC radio in 1999.

‘It was shocking. I hadn’t seen so many dogs in my life. It was just tin humpies and people just slept anywhere.’

- 2** THE FILM shows Molly playing with other children at Jigalong. Everyone is smiling and seems happy.

THE FACT is Molly was the first ‘half-caste’ of her tribe, and the full-bloods treated her with scorn.

Pilkington says her mother often had to play alone because full-blood children told her she was neither Aboriginal nor white, and was ‘like a mongrel dog’. She had no father to protect her.

- 3** THE FILM suggests Molly and her cousins were removed from Jigalong only because the state’s Chief Protector of Aborigines, A.O. Neville, was a genocidal racist who wanted to ‘breed out the Aborigine’.

It shows Neville outlining his plan to take half-caste children from their families and stop them breeding with full-bloods. We then see him ordering that Molly and her cousins be removed because the youngest girl is ‘promised to a full-blood’.

THE FACT is the girls were taken after Neville learned they were in danger.

In 1930, he had received a letter from the superintendent of Jigalong complaining that Molly and Gracie ‘were not getting a fair chance as the blacks consider the H/Cs (half castes) inferior to them’. He asked that they be removed.

Others were also worried, given how vulnerable half-caste girls then were to sexual exploitation, particularly by whites.

In December, 1930, a Mrs Chellow from Murra Munda station wrote to Neville about the girls, warning:

- 4** THE FILM shows a policeman chasing the girls in his car and ripping them from Molly’s screaming mother.

According to Noyce, this scene ‘tells the whole story’ of his film.

THE FACT, writes Pilkington, is that the officer rode up on horseback to tell Molly’s stepfather he’d take the girls, and ‘the old man nodded’. The officer put Molly and Gracie on a horse, gave them the reins and asked them to follow him.

The next day he picked up Daisy and two sick women at another camp. There was no chase, no struggle.

- 5** THE FILM then shows the girls on a train, locked in an iron-barred box for dogs. They travel the last leg to Moore River tossed in the open tray of a truck.

THE FACT is the girls were not locked in any box, and travelled most of the way south by ship, which Pilkington said they felt was as a ‘most pleasant experience’. They saw porpoises, chatted to the crew and walked the decks before going to bed in a cabin. They rode the last bit not in a truck, but in a car driven by a matron who stopped for sandwiches and lemonade.

‘I think you should see about them, as they are running wild with the whites.’

This fits with what Neville told the 1936 Moseley Royal Commission into the treatment of Aborigines: ‘The children who have been removed as wards of the Chief Protector have been removed because I desired to be satisfied that the conditions surrounding their upbringing were satisfactory, which they certainly were not ...’

Even today we rescue Aboriginal children from abuse and neglect — and in tragically high numbers.

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6 THE FILM shows the girls arriving at Moore River, where they wear prison-style sacks and are woken in the morning by a guard who screams and belts the walls of their room with a club.

THE FACT is photos of children at Moore River show them dressed in European clothes. Pilkington writes that when her mother ran away, she was dressed in 'two dresses, two pairs of calico bloomers and a coat'.

She also says the girls were woken individually and welcomed by one of the female staff.

8 THE FILM shows babies left to cry in a room of cots. They, too, seem 'stolen'.

THE FACT is most Moore River children — 1003 of the 1067 who went there between 1933 and 1936, according to the Moseley commission — were not 'stolen' but sent there by their parents to get a schooling or to be safe. Many had parents living in the camp next door.

7 THE FILM shows children at Moore River singing 'Way Down Upon the Swanee River' for visitors. This shows they're so robbed of their black culture that they sing fake Negro songs instead.

THE FACT is Molly saw no such concert. And Susan Maushart's book *Sort of a Place Like Home: Remembering the Moore River Native Settlement* says this: 'Journalists investigating conditions at Moore River were invariably impressed by the colourful experience of a staged corroboree.'



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9A

The defender says:



- 1** [Bolt] says: In December, 1930, a Mrs Chellow from Murra Munda station wrote to Neville about the girls, warning: 'I think you should see about them, as they are running wild with the whites.'

What he omits from his article is Mr Neville's reply to Mrs Chellow on 30.12.30:

I have to thank you for your letter of the 19th inst. in regard to the girl 'Daisy'. I agree with you that in this case it would be inadvisable to allow 'Daisy' to mate with her tribal husband who is a full-blood, and as legal guardian of this child I desire it to be known that I disapprove of any such proposition and do not wish the matter to be further considered. There are quite a number of respectable half-caste lads from whom no doubt this girl will in due course select a mate, but it is rather early to think of that at present ...

- 2** Andrew Bolt also omits the letter from the Superintendent of Jigalong Fence Depot to Mr Neville, written 19 days after his original letter, in which he retracts his advice that they should be taken, saying they are very much part of the black community:

Yours of the 10th June to hand re female half-castes, Molly and Chrissy. As regards details of parentage appearance & etc. They live with their mothers in the black fellow's camp and therefore have not been in touch with the white people much. They lean very much towards the black and on second thoughts I don't suppose there would be much gained in removing them. I was asked by some of my neighbours if I could do something for them to better their condition hence any letters to you previously.

- 3** Bolt says that there was no policy of 'breeding out'. Andrew Bolt then quotes Neville from the 1936 Moseley Royal Commission into the treatment of Aborigines: 'the children who have been removed as wards of the Chief Protector have been removed because I desired to be satisfied that the conditions surrounding their upbringing were satisfactory, which they certainly were not ...'

What he omits to tell us is what Mr Neville said in the following year, 1937, when leading administrators of Aboriginal affairs assembled in Canberra. He spoke to a journalist from the Brisbane Telegraph.

Mr Neville holds the view that within one hundred years the pure black will be extinct. But the half caste problem was increasing every year. Therefore their idea was to keep the pure blacks segregated and absorb the half-castes into the white population — the pure black was not a quick breeder. On the other hand the half-caste was. In Western Australia there were half-caste families of twenty and upwards. That showed the magnitude of the problem. In order to secure the complete segregation of the children '(they) were left with their mothers (only) until they were two years old. After that they were taken from their mothers and reared in accordance with white ideas.'

A scene in the film depicts Mr Neville lecturing to a group of women about his policy of 'breeding the native out'. One of the lantern slides used, in which he demonstrates his theory of 'breeding out' over three generations, is a copy of the actual slide used by Mr Neville during his lectures. Andrew Bolt makes no reference to this.

- 4** Andrew Bolt suggests that the girls were taken with their parents' consent and he quotes, again selectively, from Doris Pilkington Garimara's book, *Follow The Rabbit-Proof Fence*:

Pilkington writes, 'the officer rode up on horseback to tell Molly's stepfather he'd take the girls, and 'the old man nodded'. The officer put Molly and Gracie on a horse, gave them the reins and asked them to follow him. The next day he picked up Daisy and two sick women at another camp. There was no chase, no struggle.' This is on page 44.

The full sentence reads 'The old man nodded to show that he understood what Riggs was saying.'

What Andrew Bolt chooses to omit is the following on pages 44-45:

'A high pitched wail broke out. The cries of agonised mothers and the women, and the deep sobs of grandfathers, uncles and cousins filled the air. Molly and Gracie looked back just once before they disappeared through the river gums. Behind them, those remaining in the camp found strong sharp objects and gashed themselves and inflicted wounds to their heads and bodies as an expression of their sorrow.'

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- 5** Andrew Bolt would have us believe that places like Moore River Native Settlement were benign institutions.

He says that the clothes worn in the film are not accurate: 'photos of children at Moore River show them dressed in European clothes.' Costumes worn in the film are based on research and actual photographs. Andrew Bolt need look no further than the cover of Susan Maushart's book *Sort of a Place Like Home* to see the exact replica of the costumes worn.

He questions the way the children in the dormitory are woken up at Moore River. 'She (Doris Pilkington in her book, *Follow The Rabbit-Proof Fence*) also says the girls were woken individually and welcomed by one of the female staff.'

What in fact would happen is depicted accurately in the film. The tracker would go into the boys' dormitory 'belting' a board with a stick. Then he would go over to the girls' dormitory and 'bang on the walls over there.' *Sort of a Place Like Home* p45, 47.

- 6** Andrew Bolt says that: 'THE FILM shows children at Moore River singing 'Way Down Upon the Swanee River' for visitors. This shows they're so robbed of their black culture that they sing fake Negro songs instead.'

The fact is that 'The Old Folks at Home' was a song sung to Mr Neville by a small children's choir because it was known to be his favourite song.

- 7** He goes on to suggest that Aboriginal children 'were not robbed of their black culture'. It is here that he damagingly misquotes Susan Maushart's book *Sort of a Place Like Home: Remembering the Moore River Native Settlement*.

He uses this incorrect quote from the book: 'Journalists investigating conditions at Moore River were invariably impressed by the colourful experience of a staged corroboree.'

Here is the passage in its entirety and correctly quoted:

In fact, the performance of corroborees was a rare exception to the ban on traditional activities. The reason for this, Jim Brennan explains, was simply that the corroborees were considered good public relations. He remembers Neal trying to get men to hold corroborees whenever important visitors were due. Various press accounts over the years confirm this. Journalists 'investigating' (Susan Maushart's quotation marks) conditions at Moore River were invariably impressed by the colourful spectacle of a staged corroboree.

These command performances often formed part of a lengthy concert programme of skits, songs and dances. In such a setting, the ages-old ritual was stripped of its power and dignity, becoming just another amusing item in a native minstrel show. As Jim Brennan remembers, it wasn't long before the performers caught on to what was happening. 'Now and again, Neal, he might say, 'There's a big mob of white people comin' up here today. You better put a corroboree on.' We said, 'oh no. No corroboree' ... They wouldn't put the concert on so that he can prove to the whites that everybody's happy, you understand? They're not happy.'

- 8** Andrew Bolt says that the babies in the cots misrepresents the facts:

It accurately represents the facts, at least in 1931, when Molly was taken there.

'We felt sorry for them little kids, 'cause they got no mums or dads down the camps, or even aunties and that, like some of us do. And they got to stay in their little pen — *Sort of a Place Like Home* p53. 'And the kindly, see, that's for the kids without no mums'. p69.

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1 Is the film an important one? Explain your reasons.



2 Is it important that a film about an aspect of Australian history gets it right? Why or why not?



3 Some of the criticisms of the film are factual. Does it matter if the filmmaker gets some things wrong, or changes the facts for dramatic impact? Explain your reasons.



4 Some of the criticisms are to do with policies and attitudes at the time. Does it matter what the intentions of the policy-makers were, or is it only important to know what actually happened with those policies? Explain your ideas.



5 Some of the criticisms seem to be based on selective quoting. Does it matter if the critics are not accurate in their criticisms? Why or why not?



6 Based on the Bolt criticism of *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and the Olsen response to those criticisms, what is your opinion about the accuracy and fairness of the film?



7 What does the film, and the responses of the critic and the defender, tell you about what must exist for a film to be good history?



8 The film is about the past, but also about the present. Why can a film have power to influence people's ideas about their identity?



9 The film deals with real people. What, if any, are the rights of these people in the film, and the responsibilities of the filmmaker?



Aftermath

What happened to the *Rabbit-Proof Fence* children?
Here are two accounts of what happened to the girls.

- 1 Both the book and the film tell us what happened to the girls. Gracie was transported back to Moore River settlement after her capture. Later she was sent out as domestic help on farms in the wheat belt, and to institutions in the city. She married and had six children. She never returned to Jigalong and died in 1983. Daisy moved to the Jimalbar goldfields, then to a camp along the rabbit-proof fence south of Jigalong. She married and had four children. Later she lived and worked on a mission. Daisy now lives with her family at Jigalong.

www.landmarktheatres.com/Stories/rabbit_frame.html

- 2 This is what Doris Pilkington tells us about Molly, her mother's life after the trek (*Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, University of Queensland Press, 1996, 2001, pp.131-32):

Molly was trained and employed as a domestic help on Balfour Downs Station where she married Toby Kelly, a stockman. She had two daughters Doris (the author) and Annabelle. On 18 November 1940, after Molly's discharge from Royal Perth Hospital where she had undergone surgery for appendicitis, she was transported once again under ministerial [W.A. government] warrant to Moore River Native Settlement. Nine months later, Molly received a letter from home advising her of the deaths of members of her family at Jigalong. A niece had died of self-inflicted wounds to the head, a customary action of the distressed and anguished and a common expression of grief and despair — others died from whooping cough. Permission to return to Balfour Downs was refused. Unable to settle down, Molly absconded [fled] on 1 January 1941, taking 18-month-old Annabelle with her and leaving Doris behind at the settlement. She and her baby daughter arrived safely at Jigalong months later, following the same route she had taken nine years earlier. She moved back to Balfour Downs Station with her husband Toby and baby Annabelle. Three years later Annabelle was removed and sent south to Sister Kate's Children's Home in Queens Park. Molly has not seen her since. Molly and Toby worked on various stations in the Meekatharra and Newman districts until their retirement in 1972. Toby passed away in October 1973. Molly now lives quietly in Jigalong, although she is still actively involved in community affairs. Under traditional Aboriginal kinship Molly has 18 grandchildren, 29 great-grandchildren and 2 great-great-grandchildren.

The impact of piracy — *What if Rabbit-Proof Fence had never been made?*

Rabbit-Proof Fence might never have been made.

One reason for this might have been that if movie pirates had ripped off Phillip Noyce's previous movies, he might not have been able to afford to make it. If an experienced director wasn't attached to the project, then investors might not risk their money — only four in ten movies recoup their initial investment. Noyce was lucky — his previous films were successful Hollywood ones, and the profits from them, together

with his reputation, allowed him to find backers to make this small-budget Australian film. If all his films had been Australian films with small profit margins he probably could not have made *Rabbit-Proof Fence*.

Would this matter? Here are some statements about what not making *Rabbit-Proof Fence* might have meant. Complete the statements based on your own thoughts.

If *Rabbit-Proof Fence* had never been made:

Many Australian would not have →	
I would probably know less about →	
Picture theatres would not →	
I would not have enjoyed →	
Video shops would not →	
I would not have thought about →	
People living overseas would not have →	

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Notice what you have done: you have come up with a range of ways in which films enrich us personally, benefit the nation economically, and enrich our society.

People who pirate films — by burning, buying or downloading illegally — are having an impact on all the elements of the list you created. With a popular film such as *Rabbit-Proof Fence* many people 'pirate' it — they download copies of the film that they have not paid for.

So what?

This is a good question. The answer basically is: If people make copies illegally there is a good chance that the next *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (that is, an important, significant, entertaining, challenging, controversial and powerful movie about our past and our identity) may not be made.

Here are some of the usual reasons or arguments that people give for their film piracy. Decide how each might be answered. Then decide if you think film piracy is justifiable.

PIRACY JUSTIFICATION	ARGUMENTS AGAINST
Films are too expensive. →	
I wasn't going to see the film anyway. →	
I cannot afford it. →	
There's no victim. →	
The big movie stars don't need my money. →	
Everybody does it. →	
There's no harm done. →	
I buy my favourite ones, these are just occasional entertainment. →	
We're only affecting the rich Hollywood types. →	
I love films and want a good collection and this is the only way I can afford it. →	