

## NATIONAL NEWS

**I**N NOVEMBER, the National Library will publish *Many Voices: Reflections on Experiences of Indigenous Child Separation*, which is the culmination of four years of project work in an area of crucial importance in Australia's history. Arising from the *Bringing Them Home* Oral History Project, the publication is a distillation of the interviews conducted during the Project. The book covers only a fragment of the hundreds of hours of recording and thousands of pages of transcript. It reflects, however, the diverse perspectives contained in the collection, and leaves readers free to experience events through the participants' own words and perspectives.

The Project was established following the Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, *Bringing Them Home*. In 1997 Senator Herron, then Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, told parliament that a number of responsive initiatives would be funded. One was an oral history project to be managed by the NLA and to commence in 1998 as a feasibility study. The full three-year project carried on from this feasibility year.

A central aim was to interview a wide range of people who had been directly affected by, or involved in, the removal of indigenous children to state or non-family care. The group would include those who had been separated as children from their kin, as well as their parents and other relatives. It would also include adoptive parents or foster and institutional carers, and those who were involved in administration, policy and implementation. The latter group included police officers, welfare officers, senior administrators, lawyers and others whose work brought them into contact with separated families or involved them in the issues and policy frameworks that supported the separations.

The Project allowed many people not previously heard to speak publicly about these matters — to present their perspective, without pressure or a sense of being scrutinised. That these disparate experiences are all represented in the NLA's collection conveys the singular nature of the Project. The benefits of being able to explore the myriad layers of linkage and connection between those involved in this history will be quickly apparent to listeners and readers.

To expedite the compilation of this complex volume in such a short time, some twenty writers contributed chapters and shorter pieces of text. A preliminary meeting of the writers and discussion about methodologies with the editors was an essential part of the process, and established the collabora-

tive nature of the process. Through editorial familiarity with the content of the collection, and the work of researchers who identified interviews relevant to various chapters, transcript material was dispatched to the writers, who lived right around Australia. One of the most complex of editorial tasks was to ensure the integration of content and style in various chapters, and to ensure that the range of views articulated by interviewees was well represented. The administration of this process was also complex, especially given the rigorous permissions process. The book was envisaged as a medium for the voices in the collection, so hundreds of extracts were used, each one approved by the interviewee.

Many moving stories are featured in the book. Trevor Deshong's recollection of a train journey during which he met his mother is a poignant example. At the time, Trevor was fourteen years old and running away from an institutional care situation in Queensland. Although he spent two days with the woman at her uncle's house, he did not find out until years later that she was in fact his mother, nor that she had thought she recognised him, despite not having seen him since he was three months old. Trevor Deshong's institutional experience was not a happy one. Nevertheless, many who were cared for by cottage mothers, such as Margaret Somerville on Croker Island in the Northern Territory, enjoyed their connection with such dedicated people, despite the suffering caused by loss of family. Margaret, now in her nineties, is still producing items that are retailed in Sydney to raise money for the Uniting Church's social service activities.

Through the generosity of people like Margaret Somerville and Trevor Deshong, the Australian community is now able to explore some of the personal experiences and histories recounted during *Bringing Them Home* Oral History Project interviews. Both the interviews and the book make it possible to gain a better understanding of the history, the life experiences, and the policy and legislative decisions that led to many Australian indigenous children being removed from their homes and kin and placed in non-family care. The interviews, now in the NLA's Collection, encompass both the broad sweep of historical events and the intimate and personal experience of individual lives.

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