

NOTES FROM THE 2015 LESLEY MUIR ADDRESS DELIVERED BY DAVID HILL

The Lesley Muir Address at the 2015 RAHS Conference in Bankstown, Sydney, was delivered by Mr David Hill. During his remarkable career, David has been Chairman, then Managing Director of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, and has held a number of other executive appointments and committee chair positions in the areas of sport, transport, international radio broadcasting, international news providers, politics, fiscal management and city parks. We were very fortunate to have David speak of his experience as a British child migrant and of a Bankstown close to his heart; an area of Sydney which became his first home in Australia after arriving in the country as a thirteen year old boy. Camping with his two brothers “next to the dunny” in the backyard of his uncle and aunt’s two-bedroom fibro housing commission house in Revesby, David remembers the house as a palace, since, for migrants, gaining housing in Australia upon arrival proved difficult.

As David explained, child migrants arriving in Australia faced particularly hard times, and the scale and duration of this rather recent phenomenon is significant to the Australian migration story. Australian Child Migration Schemes lasted almost seventy years through to 1980: “About 10,000 British migrant children were sent to Australia without parents”, he said, adding that Child Migration Centres were established

across the country – there were 26 in total by the 1950s. Very few child migrants were orphans but all were poor.

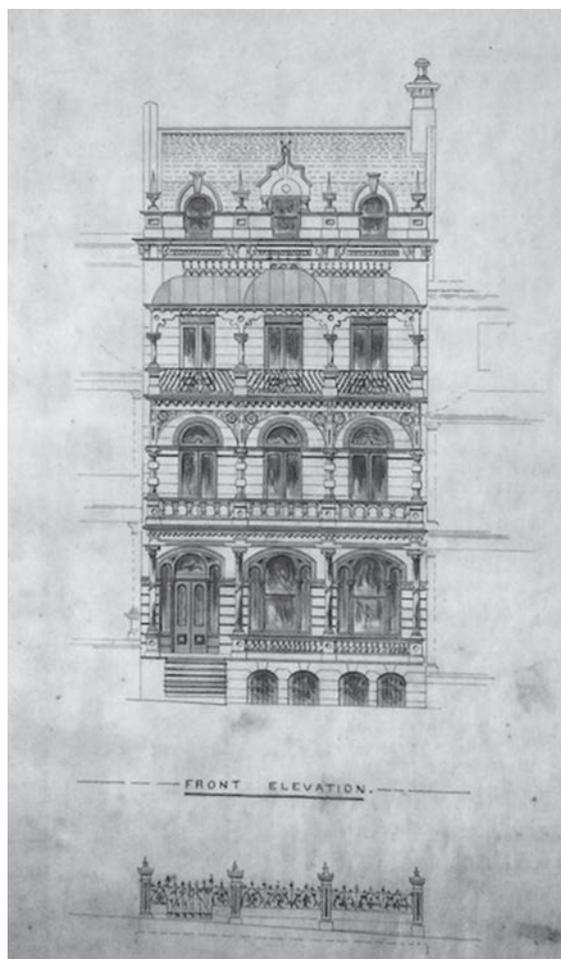
David Hill attended Fairbridge Farm School near Molong NSW; the school operated from 1938 until 1974, and resulted from the ideas of Rhodesian British Colonist Kingsley Fairbridge; as David remarked, Fairbridge was “a brilliant piece of Edwardian social engineering”.

Our speaker continued with an insight into how the Child Migration Scheme came to be: “In 1908 at Oxford [Kingsley Fairbridge] produced a pamphlet, which still survives. It was titled ‘Two Problems and a Solution’ and the two problems were:

1. How to extend the white settlement of the Empire’s colonies, and
2. What to do with Britain’s poor and destitute children.

The solution was simply to put them together. He said this in an address to the Oxford Colonial Club that backed his Child Migration Scheme.”

David followed with Kingsley Fairbridge’s address: “I propose to establish a society in England for the furtherance of immigration from the ranks of young children of orphans and the waif class to the colonies. I propose therefore to take out children from the age of 8 - 10 before they have required the vices of professional pauperism and before



INVITATION New members' evening

Wednesday 16th March, 2016

History House

133 Macquarie St, Sydney 5.00 pm - 7.00 pm

Join us at History House for an opportunity to meet our new members who we hope will gain a great deal of satisfaction in the information, camaraderie, resources and opportunities that RAHS membership provides. More seasoned members, who would like to help us welcome new members, are also warmly invited to this event. The New Members Evening is a lively and enjoyable event that includes a library tour and light refreshments. The RAHS is sincerely grateful to all members, both new and long-standing, for their ongoing support.

A First Class Residence in Macquarie Street'

1871, drawing by George Allen Mansfield

[RAHS Collection]

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their physiques have become lowered by adverse conditions and give them 10 to 12 years through agricultural educations and schools of agriculture”.

Kingsley Fairbridge believed that England needed to retain its upper classes and send out its poor children instead. In Fairbridge’s words “The best immigrant farmers have been the aristocracy of English yeomen such as England can ill afford to lose, the Colony should take something England does not need, the poor children”.

Travelling by sea to Australia with his two brothers on RMS Strathaird was “one hell of an experience” and “a terrific trip” David remembers as he was treated to a most unfamiliar degree of luxury on board. He reached Fairbridge Farm School, and was there for three years. David admits his experience was not typical, as his mother followed and the family “managed to get back together, sort of...” Many other children, however, made the journey alone, some as young as 4 years old, sent to the other side of the world “with emotional privation, social isolation, no adult kindly put an arm around them”.

David recalled “the great lie” – parents told that, if they truly loved their children, they would agree to sign over guardianship, and in doing so would allow for their children to be given what they, themselves, could not provide – education and opportunity. David like many others at the school, left at the age of fifteen; the “great denial of opportunity” – in carrying out research for his book “The Forgotten Children: Fairbridge Farm School and its Betrayal of Australia’s Child Migrants’ David could find no instance of a Fairbridge child becoming a farmer in their own right. Instead, upon leaving school, boys found jobs as farmhands and girls as domestic servants: “...and you know what? That is where most of them still are”.

As he explained, David’s book is about, “typical Fairbridge kids”; and the impact it had on him was “tremendous”. He gratefully acknowledges Andrea Fernandes, formally of

the NSW Migration Heritage Centre (MHC), who, along with the MHC, provided assistance in structuring the Child Migrants’ oral histories that he collected. David described being “staggered” by the consistency of the accounts of abuse at the school, something that he did not expect and clearly found traumatic.

David believes if he had attempted to do this kind of research 20 years previously, he doubts that anyone would have spoken to him about their experiences at Fairbridge because of the harrowing nature of their time at the school. Law firm Slater & Gordon took out a class action and sued for the damages done to the children and, in his book, David chronicles many examples of the Department of Child Welfare being aware of the abuse of children at the school but didn’t correct it. In 2015 adults who were abused at Fairbridge Farm School were awarded \$24 million in compensation: “A record of its kind, but I have to say, you cannot compensate for what happened to them” David added.

David admits to learning a great deal from the experience of researching and writing his book on Fairbridge Farm School, in particular the importance of publishing: “You know there are so many people that are gathering very important information and very important research, but you have got to publish, that’s where the impact is”, he said. He believes the experience gave a voice to a previously under-represented and dispossessed group of people. The process, he said, “empowered people who were previously disempowered”.

David emphasised the importance of the human story – it is this, he said, that separates boring and interesting history. Once a child is abused, he said, the damage can never be repaired. In his own words, “The Forgotten Children: Fairbridge Farm School and its Betrayal of Australia’s Child Migrants’ is “the most important thing I have ever done”.

At the conclusion of his address, David Hill received a standing ovation from his audience.

AUSTRALIA DAY HONOURS 2016

Congratulations to the following recipients in the Australia Day 2016 Honours List, each of whom were awarded for their dedication to history and heritage.

ORDER OF AUSTRALIA MEDAL (OAM)

Associate Professor Donald Stuart Garden of Kew, VIC

For service to community history and heritage preservation organisations. Currently President of the Federation of Australian Historical Societies and the Royal Historical Society of Victoria, Don’s service also includes involvement with the Geographic Place Names Advisory Panel, Professional Historians Association (VIC), Kew Historical Society, University of Melbourne and Australian Heritage Council.

Dr Leah Adele Day of Mittagong, NSW

For service to community history. Leah has been a local and family historian for the Mittagong region of NSW since the mid 1980s. She is also an author, historical consultant, member of the RAHS, Professional Historians Association (NSW) and Berrima District Historical and Family History Society.

Mr Colin Gelling of Hill Top, NSW

For service to the community of Berrima. Colin has been CEO of Berrima Court House since 1996 and is involved in many activities in the Berrima district.

OFFICER OF THE ORDER OF AUSTRALIA (AO)

Mr Michael James Ball of Sutton Forest, NSW

For distinguished service to the community through leadership roles with major urban planning and heritage preservation organisations and for the promotion of the history of cricket. Michael has been involved with the National Capital Authority, National Trust of Australia (NSW) and the establishment of the International Cricket Hall of Fame.