

A Fragment of the Maltese Exodus: Child Migration to Australia 1953 – 1965

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1. Introduction

In March 2009, Maltese Prime Minister Gonzi unveiled a memorial to child migration in Grand Harbour. The wording to the monument notes that there were 310 such migrants. It records respect for the achievements of these migrants, joy at their successes and regret at any unintended consequences of child migration. It is evident from letters to the press at the time and from other sources that many in Malta had little knowledge of such migration, and that others did not understand the concept of ‘child migration’. This paper seeks to correct these deficiencies. In doing so it is broken into a number of sections. The next section locates the Maltese experience within the contours of British child migration and to this end provides an historical overview. Section 3 explores the push and pull factors resulting in the commencement of Maltese child migration in 1953. Section 4 provides details of the mechanics of child migration and Section 5 reflects on the child migrant experience. The final section is by way of summary and conclusion.

2. Child Migration – An Overview²

The term ‘child migration’ connotes the transportation of unaccompanied minors from their country of origin to another country.³ Such migration formed a part of British policy and practice from 1618 to 1967. Over this 350 year period about 150,000 children were dispatched but the volume and form of migration varied reflecting different motives and forces at different times. As Coldrey (1999) has

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² This section is based primarily on official UK and Australian government reports. See, in particular, HC Report (1998) and *Australian Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee (2001 and 2004): Lost innocents: righting the record*, AGSP, Canberra. Other informative publications include B.M.Coldrey, *Child Migration, the Australian Government and the Catholic Church, 1926-1966*, Tamanaraik Press, Melbourne, 1991; B.M.Coldrey, *The Scheme: the Christian Brothers and Child Care in Western Australia*, Argyle Pacific, Perth, 1993; A.Gill, *Orphans of the Empire: The Shocking Story of Child Migration to Australia*, Methuen, Sydney, 1997; M.Humphries, *Empty Cradles*, Doubleday, London, 1994.

³ Children were generally between the ages of 7 and 14, though where siblings were involved they could be younger. ‘Unaccompanied’ here means the lack of parental or family accompaniment. Children, however, were usually accompanied by supervisors to their destinations.

noted, child migration was not a 'single policy pursued continuously: rather it was a complex tangle of competing private schemes, government initiatives, charismatic personalities, muddled priorities and confused agendas. It was critically affected by the economic, political and social pressures of particular times'.⁴ Over the period, four broad epochs can be identified.

The first of these had to do with the provision of cheap indentured and convict labour to the American colonies. In 1615 the Privy Council sanctioned the transportation of convicts to Virginia and the West Indies. Two years later the Virginia Company and the London Common Council proposed the sending of 'vagrant' children to America and in 1619, 100 'vagrant' children were rounded up and dispatched. This practice was sanctioned by the Privy Council the following year when further 'vagrants' were transported. This source of cheap labour led to the kidnapping of children for work in America, leading to a 1645 parliamentary ordinance making the spiriting of children a felony. This ordinance was ineffective. In 1698, one British newspaper reported about 200 kidnapped children aboard a ship departing to America, and some 40 years later 500 children were reported kidnapped in Aberdeen. This was not an isolated incident. In 1757 civil action was taken against a number of Aberdeen merchants and magistrates for complicity in the trafficking of children. The American War of Independence (1775 - 1783) brought an end of transportation to the American colonies. Instead, convicts were transported to Australia, including a number of 'junior' felons. Thus, the first convict fleet to Australia (1788) included 50 children.⁵

The second epoch, from about 1830 until 1914, was one in which a large number of philanthropic and religious societies became involved in the emigration of children, initially to Canada, but subsequently to other parts of the British Empire. At its peak, over 50 organisations were involved in the collecting and despatching of orphaned or neglected children to the colonies. In 1830 the Children's Friend Society, dedicated to 'reformation and emigration of outcast youth,' arranged for nearly 800 boys to be sent to the Cape Colony and Toronto, and subsequently sent another 400 children. Several years later the Ragged School Movement arranged for 150 children to be sent to Australia while the St Pancras Poor Law Guardians arranged for children to be sent to the West Indies. The latter was facilitated by parliamentary action that allowed Poor Law Guardians to fund the emigration of children in their care.

What began as a trickle became a flood as more and more societies became active, and as these societies became better connected and better funded. Institutions operated by evangelical Christians were responsible for over 24,500 child migrants in the late 1800s.⁶ The Quarrier's Homes (established 1871) sent over 7,300 children to Canada. The Church of England Waifs and Strays Society (1881) over 3,000 to the same country, and the Methodist-based National Children's Home and Orphanages (1869) over 3,000. In 1869 Dr Thomas Barnardo commenced his work for the London poor and within a decade had established over 50 orphanages. He came to embrace child migration, and by 1930 his organisation had sponsored 20,000 children to

⁴ B.M. Coldrey, *Good British stock: child and youth migration to Australia 1901 - 83*, Research Guide No 11, National Archives Australia, Canberra, 1999.

⁵ R.Holden, *Orphans of history: the forgotten children of the first fleet*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, 1999.

⁶ The most prominent of these evangelicals were Maria Rye, Annie Macpherson, Louisa Birt and John Middlemore.

Canada.⁷ At the Catholic level, a number of child migration bodies were centralised through the 'Crusade of Rescue' in the Archdiocese of Westminster.

Unlike the previous epoch, during this long period in which about 100,000 children were assisted to emigrate, the motive was not labour exploitation but rather philanthropic, economic and racist. The Health (Third) Report captures the spirit of the times:

The motivation underlying child migration policy was mixed. On the one hand, there was a genuine philanthropic desire to rescue children from destitution and neglect in Britain and send them to a better life in the Colonies. This went hand in hand with a wish to protect children from 'moral danger' arising from their home circumstances – for instance, if their mothers were prostitutes. In 1870, Thomas Barnardo wrote that 'to behold young men and women crowded together in pestilential rookeries without the least provision for decency and in such conditions of abominable filth, atmospheric impurity and immoral association as to make the maintenance of virtue impossible, is almost enough to fill the bravest reformer with despair.' Within a generation, the agency founded by Dr Barnardo would be sending 1,000 children a year to Canada to escape such conditions. ... Child migration was also seen to be of economic benefit both to Britain (because it relieved the burden on public finances of looking after these children) and the receiving countries (because child migrants were seen as being potential members of a healthy and well-trained workforce). ... A further motive was racist: the importation of 'good white stock' was seen as a desirable policy objective in the developing British Colonies.⁸

The First World War, commencing in 1914, brought about a cessation to this period of child migration.

The third epoch was the inter war period from 1920 to 1938. This was a period of greater government involvement but also of diminished emigration. It also saw the first attempts to include child migrants from Malta. In 1920 the societies which had been active in sending children to Canada recommenced their efforts, but on a smaller scale and with less Canadian government support. Indeed, with the advent of depression, the Canadian government proscribed the immigration of child migrants under the age of 14. This led to efforts being directed towards other countries, notably South Africa, Rhodesia (as it was then called), Australia and New Zealand.

This period witnessed the emergence of the Fairbridge Farm Scheme which was to have an influence on Catholic child migration. The scheme had been instigated just before WWI and in 1913 some 37 children were dispatched to the Fairbridge Farm in Pinjarra, about 40 kilometres south of Perth.⁹ Fairbridge, a Rhodes scholar from Rhodesia, 'was appalled at the conditions of thousands of under-privileged children in England who faced a life of poverty and probable degradation. He wanted to

⁷ The last of the child migrants was sponsored by Barnardos in 1965. By then it had sponsored over 30,000 child migrants to different parts the British Commonwealth.

⁸ HC 1997, Clauses 15, 16 and 18, UK House of Commons Health Committee (HC), *The welfare of former British child migrant*, HC paper no. 755, London, 1997-1998.

⁹ For more information on the Fairbridge Farm Scheme see K.Fairbridge, *The Story of Kingsley Fairbirdge*, Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 1910/1959 and R.Fairbridge, *Fairbirdge Farm: the Building of a Farm School*, Oxford University Press, London, 1938.

transplant such children to the “wide-open spaces” in colonies’.¹⁰ The Scheme’s post war development, as well as that of child migration in general, was greatly assisted by the Empire Settlement Act of 1923 which provided monies for the British Government to assist emigration, including child migration. The name of the Act signifies the patriotic sentiments attached to emigration at this time. Fairbridge Farm schools were established not only in Pinjarra, but also in Molong (New South Wales) and Bacchus Marsh (Victoria). Further establishments were made in British Columbia and Rhodesia. It is estimated that the Fairbridge Society was responsible for sending nearly 3,000 children to its farm schools.

The genesis of Catholic child migration to Western Australia is linked to the Fairbridge developments. Child migration to the Pinjarra farm resumed after the war, and came to include a number of Catholic children. Though the evidence suggests that efforts were made to enable these children to continue to practise their faith, the notion of Catholic children in an Anglican institution was not one that could be entertained by the hierarchy at a time when religious bigotry was a part of Australian life. This led to efforts to develop a Catholic equivalent of Fairbridge.

During the 1920s, with the assistance of the Knights of the Southern Cross and the St Vincent de Paul Society, the Christian Brothers sought to develop their own farm school. Some 27,000 acres were secured in marginal wheat country centred on a railway siding called ‘Tardun’ nearly 500 kilometres north of Perth. It was envisioned that boys would continue to undertake their schooling at the existing Clontarf institution and then, if they so wished, would transfer to Tardun for farm training. The Tardun Scheme had three intentions: bringing up youth in a rural environment, training them in farm skills so that they could be employed on farms (which accounted for about one third of the workforce at the time), and settling a number of boys on the land as farmers in their own right.

The first 14 boys left Clontarf for Tardun in 1928, and smaller groups were added in subsequent years. The farm struggled because of drought and poor wheat prices and the Brothers gave serious consideration to closing the institution. The then Deputy Provincial, Br Conlon, strongly supported the retention of the Scheme, had himself appointed as superior of the struggling community, and set about putting the institution on firm foundations.¹¹

As a replication of Fairbridge, it was always conceived that Tardun would be a child migrant institution. Br Keaney, superior of Clontarf, indicated in correspondence that ‘In Tardun the huge outlay the Brothers have incurred was primarily made on the understanding that ample supplies of boys would be available from overseas to justify the expenditure’.¹² However, efforts to secure government approval for such migrants proved futile for many years. Consideration was given to including Maltese child migrants at a very early stage. In 1928 Father Raphael Pace said the first mass at the Brothers’ primitive camp and urged consideration be given to including Maltese children in the scheme. Pace, who was ordained in Malta in 1912, was recruited for the Perth mission the following year. He served as the Archbishop’s secretary (1913 – 1919) as well as the chaplain to the small Maltese community. He suffered from diabetes which led to total blindness by 1935. He died in 1953 and is buried at Karrakatta (Perth). His headstone is distinguishable from those of other priests by its Maltese cross.

¹⁰ A.Lawby, *The Kingsley Fairbridge ideal*, Child Emigration Society, London, 1926.

¹¹ For a history of the Tardun Farm Scheme see Plowman, 2003.

¹² Keaney to Conlon, nd., c. 1928, Tardun File, Christian Brothers Archive, Westcourt, Manning, Western Australia.

In 1933, after years of futile correspondence and negotiations with federal and state governments, the Western Australian Catholic bishops put Br Conlon in charge of the child migration. Despite the Immigration Commission opining that the Fairbridge scheme was ‘unsound economically from a migration point-of-view’ and that the Clontarf scheme would be equally uneconomical.¹³ Conlon’s merciless lobbying and voluminous correspondence resulted in the Australian government acquiescing. In February 1938 he sailed to England to deal at first hand with UK authorities. He returned to Australia in July with the first group of 37 boys. A week later another group of 31 boys left London, followed by a third group of 31 in February 1939. Of the 110 migrants, 49 were sent to Tardun. Impending hostilities brought an end to this migration which, despite Conlon also concluding an agreement with Maltese immigration authorities, did not come to include child migrants from Malta at this time.

No doubt as the result of Pace’s efforts, in 1934 the Maltese government requested its Commissioner (Mr Corder) to negotiate with the Australian authorities about bringing 20 orphans a year to Catholic institutions in Western Australia. The matter lapsed with little action. In 1936 the new Commissioner, Captain Curmi, renewed the request to the Western Australian government. Troy, the Minister for Agriculture with responsibility for immigration, then wrote to the Prime Minister about financial assistance for the maintenance of Maltese child migrants along similar lines to the Fairbridge scheme. The Western Australian government indicated support, but the federal government declared opposition. A senior member of this Department, R. H. Wheeler, reported: ‘Personally I am strongly opposed to the proposal. Generally speaking Maltese subjects (though British) are universally accepted as being very low in the social strata, much below the average southern European and the proposal to assist this type of settler financially seems preposterous’.¹⁴ Such racial prejudice continued to affect migration from Malta for years to come.

While Conlon was in London negotiating with British authorities he received a letter from Captain Curmi concerning child migration from Malta. The letter read in part:

I have not ceased to consider of having some young boys from Malta in your institutions in Western Australia and very recently at Canberra I brought up the matter again in conference with the Minister for the Interior. I was led to expect favourable consideration and I am quite certain that the Government of Malta will be glad to take up the question in a practical way. We shall probably start by having some boys entirely at the expense of the Government of Malta, that is on the payment of the rate that you mentioned to me, 12/- [\$1.20] per week.¹⁵

In May, Conlon received a cable from the Maltese Government inviting him to Malta and offering to pay his travel expenses. Within ten days he had travelled to Malta and

¹³ Immigration Commission, *Report to the Minister*, Internal Report, 6 June, 1927.

¹⁴ Department of Interior, 1937, File A461, Child Migration, Australian Archives, Mitchell, ACT.

¹⁵ Curmi to Conlon, 23 Feb. 1938, Tardun File, Christian Brothers Archives, Westcort, Manning, WA.

had concluded an agreement.¹⁶ This agreement, however, was never signed nor implemented. Its conditions were more demanding than required of the British government. For example, the agreement provided that any boy who became permanently disabled before the age of 18 would be repatriated to Malta at its government's expense. The agreement required the Maltese government to pay a maintenance charge that was shared by three governments in the case of British child migrants. However, the lack of implementation of the agreement was put down to other factors as Curmi explained to Conlon:

I was very pleased indeed that you found it possible to go to Malta and from what I have heard there is no doubt that you have made a very good impression. The Governor-General is certainly most interested in your scheme and I certainly hope that practical results will follow as soon as possible. I say 'as soon as possible' because for some time the changes that are being introduced into the Constitution of Malta, and a good many things will, I am sure, have to be postponed for some little time.¹⁷

Malta did not have the luxury of that 'little time'. It was soon fighting for its survival and enmeshed in World War II. Any child migration would have to await the end of hostilities

With the end of war hostilities, all forms of emigration were restricted because of the shortage of shipping. It was not until 1947 that the first post-World War II child migrants arrived in Australia. This marks the beginning of the fourth epoch which ended in 1967, the year of the last British child migrants. This epoch was characterised by increased Catholic activity particularly in Western Australia, by the advent of child migration from Malta, by a reduction in the number of child migrants, and by less public support for such emigration.

The diminished public support resulted, in large measure, from two sources. The first was increased living standards which obviated the need for much emigration. The second was the United Kingdom Care of Children (Curtis) Committee Report of 1944 which heralded a different approach to child care principles. Sherington and Jeffrey also note that the evacuation and billeting children during the War had created a greater general awareness of the inadequacies of child welfare:

In Britain ... the events of war also placed a new focus on the family. The evacuation of working-class children from British cities in 1939-40 re-opened the debate on the health and welfare of the British young. Upper and middle class society was stunned at the physical state and behaviour of many children who were now billeted in their homes. As such, evacuation raised matters of child welfare not only for children in families but also those without family support. The 1944 Education Act, which established the principle of secondary education for all, also reinforced the responsibilities of the state and local authorities for the health and physical well-being of children.¹⁸

¹⁶ B.M. Coldrey, *Child migration from Malta to Australia after World War II – 1920s – 1960s*, Tamanariak Press, Melbourne, 2003, 5.

¹⁷ Curmi to Conlon, 5 Sept. 1938, Tardun File, Christian Brothers Archives, Westcourt, Manning, WA.

¹⁸ G. Sherington and C. Jefferey, *Fairbridge: empire and child migration*, Woburn, London, 1998, 19.

This Curtis Report led to the Children's Act of 1948 which created the Children's Department. It also led to greater professional and psychological approaches to child welfare and greater efforts to keep children in their families. These new principles made institutional approaches to child care less and less appropriate. As child migration was based on drawing children from institutions, it was only a matter of time before the de-institutionalisation of child care would impact on child migration. This approach was reinforced by the 1956 visit of the Home Office-Fact Finding Committee to Australia. This Committee examined those institutions taking child migrants. Its (secret) report was critical of some institutions and cold on the idea of child migration and directly resulted in United Kingdom Catholic authorities terminating their child migration activities. Despite governments renewing the Commonwealth Settlement Act in 1957, it is estimated that only between 3,500 to 4,000 child migrants came to Australia after World War II. Thus, child migration from Malta was initiated at a time when such migration was falling out of favour in Britain.

3. Push and Pull

Maltese post war child migration cannot be excised from the general post war emigration from the islands. Indeed, as noted below, many child migrants resulted from parental pragmatism in having some or all of their children taken to Australia as child migrants with the intent of being re-united once other members of the family had also migrated. This pragmatism reduced the costs of family emigration and provided a home for the children during the period of separation. About half of the Maltese child migrants were reunited with family within two years of their leaving Malta.

The factors impelling emigration from Malta following WWII are reflected in the title of Attard's history for Maltese emigration at this time, namely *The Safety Valve*. He writes:

Emigration on a large scale has been a feature of Maltese life since the early years of the nineteenth century, but when the mad fury of the Second World War finally abated organised and subsidised emigration became a basic policy of those who ruled the Maltese from 1945 to the middle years of the 1970s.

The people of Malta were told that emigration was the only solution to the problem of over-population and unemployment. ... They had either to emigrate or else face stark economic hardship. In the words of those who held power in their hands emigration was hailed as the *Safely Valve* of the nation. Intensive propaganda was carried out to the squares of every town and village so much so that many had the impression that to solve their problems all they had to do was to pack their belongings and leave.

The efforts to convince those who were unemployed or else had poorly paid jobs soon produced the desired effects. From 1945 to 1979 almost

140,000 men, women and children left the land of their birth with a population that averaged about 300, 000.¹⁹

Attard documents how governments of all persuasions – colonial, Labour and Nationalist – came to embrace and support the safety valve concept.

Thus, child migration from Malta forms but a small part of a general exodus. It is a product, not only of the push factors on the Maltese side, but also pull factors on the Australian side. These pull factors included the Western Australian and Australian governments, the Western Australian Catholic Bishops and in particular the Christian Brothers whose child welfare institutions increasingly depended on child migrants.²⁰

The official Australian mindset in the aftermath of World War II was similar to that following WWI, namely ‘populate or perish’. The Commonwealth moved to expand immigration, including that of child migrants. As early as 1941, the Deputy Prime Minister (Mr F. Forde) indicated the need for population growth and the contribution that could be made by migrants, particularly child migrants:

The war has shown us more vividly than ever that if we are to hold this country down the years we must increase our present population by several millions ... Of all immigrants, children are the most readily made into good Australians. They have no preconceived ideas. They will need careful nursing after the war. Australian food and sunshine will do the rest. In the demobilised period, the child immigrants will not compete for jobs; they will not need family housing.²¹

In October 1943, the government established an Inter-Departmental Committee to examine, among other things, the commencement of immigration after the war. By 1944 this Committee had finalised eight reports for Government consideration. These included papers on the re-establishment of immigration, and British, Maltese, Jewish, alien and child immigration. The last item included consideration of a paper prepared by Archbishop Simmonds (Melbourne) and Br Conlon. The Secretary of the Committee (Dr H. C. Coombes) noted, ‘The Minister is very much interested in the possibilities of large-scale child migration to Australia of war orphans in the period immediately following the cessation of hostilities’.²²

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Arthur Caldwell) announced the government’s immigration policy in August 1945. This sought to substantially increase Australia’s population by way of immigration, including provision for 50,000 child migrants in three years. This was a fertile context for the re-establishment of child migration. Though such migrants came to include Maltese children, this was not a matter of preference but rather the result of difficulties in obtaining the targeted number of migrants from Britain.

In 1946 Br Conlon was again dispatched to London to resurrect the child migration scheme. He was severely handicapped since authorities in the UK and Ireland were preoccupied with other post war remedies, and because of shipping difficulties. Much of Britain’s merchant fleet had been lost during the war, and the Government had requisitioned much of the remainder.

¹⁹ L.Attard, *The Safety Valve*, PEG, 1997, 13.

²⁰ It is estimated that child migrants constituted between 85% and 98% of children in the Brothers’ institutions between 1949 and 1960.

²¹ F.M., Forde, *Address to ACTU Conference*, Melbourne, 1941.

²² Coombes to Secretary of the Army, 5 Nov.1943, File IDC, AA, Australian Archives, Mitchell, ACT.

Archbishop Simmonds joined Conlon in London in May 1946 and together they prepared 'The Bishops' Plan' for the accommodation and training of migrant boys. In summary, this provided that boys would be placed in institutions conducted by Religious Brothers. These would receive primary education up to school leaving age and in addition, 'receive training in gardening, dairying, pig and poultry raising, fruit growing and general farming.' In the Trades Schools, the migrants would be taught bricklaying, carpentry, plumbing, plastering and other construction-related trades. They would also be taught truck and tractor driving, horse teamwork and sheep and horse raising. Those boys of outstanding ability and good character would be given a full secondary education if they so desired. In a few farm schools, those with special aptitude for farm work would be given the opportunity to become owners of farms. The Plan noted that the Bishops 'favour the admission of migrant boys into private families'. The Commonwealth accepted this 'Plan' except for the final point. It did not want child migrants placed into private families.²³

Following assistance from the Minister for Immigration who visited London in 1947 (and who entertained ideas of using the aircraft carrier *HMS Victorious* to transport children to Australia!) Conlon returned to Australia with 150 child migrants. He also made arrangements for further shipments and by the end of 1948 over 400 boys and girls had been placed in Western Australian institutions. These shipments practically filled the Catholic welfare institutions in the State, and there was little further child migration from the United Kingdom until 1950. The last substantial number of migrants arrived in 1952 and 1953 and thereafter child migration from Britain quickly fell away.

Though the Australian government had imagined that there would be a large number of UK children available for migration, this did not prove to be the case. In all, only about 3,000 children formed part of the post-war immigration scheme to Australia. The Government did consider casting its net wider. In 1946 Br Quirke, Superior at Tardun, was asked about the school's preparedness to receive Polish boys. There were also communications concerning Italian and Dutch child migrants, but nothing came from these inquiries.²⁴ Reluctantly the government looked to Malta.

Malta's heroic war efforts created a more receptive approach to immigration from that country. In October 1944, Wheeler, who earlier had opposed Maltese child migration, reported on the Prime Minister's visit to London: 'Mr Curtin during his visit to the United Kingdom ... considered that in view of the excellent part played by the Maltese in the defence of their islands, they should be placed on all fours with other white British subjects for emigration purposes'.²⁵

Earlier that year, Captain Curmi had been invited to a meeting of the Inter-Departmental Committee that was considering proposed post war migration from Malta. The Commissioner stressed the rising literacy levels in his country, and that English had been a compulsory subject at school for the previous two decades. The Committee recommended, 'that for the purpose of admission into Australia, Maltese be placed in the same category as other white British subjects and be eligible to enter Australia'.²⁶ There was a catch, however, to the Committee's recommendation. Though it had recommended, and the Government had accepted, assisted passage for

²³ B.M. Coldrey, *The Scheme: the Christian Brothers and Child Care in Western Australia*, Argyle Pacific, Perth, 1993, 137.

²⁴ Br Quirke to Br Mc Cann, 11 Sept. 1947, Tardun File, Christian Brothers Archives, Westcourt, Manning, WA.

²⁵ Wheeler to Wiseman, 9 Oct. 1944, A641 M 349, Australian Archives, Mitchell, ACT.

²⁶ Minutes, Inter-Departmental Committee, 2 Mar. 1944.

UK immigrants, in the case of Maltese immigrants the Committee recommended that the matter of assisted passage be held in abeyance. This seriously limited Maltese migration as few could afford the full passage.²⁷

The issue of assisted passage highlights the Australian government's ambivalence and prevarication. It wanted migrants and it had come round to accepting Maltese as 'white' for immigrant purposes. However, it still preferred immigrants from the 'mother country'. Though assisted passage for UK migrants was in place as early as 1943, in the case of Malta no assisted passage was available until 1949. By then the Australian government had been forced to realise that it was not going to fill its migration targets from Britain.

In a subsequent meeting, the Inter-Department Committee considered the 'Bishops' Plan' prepared by Archbishop Simmonds and Br Conlon while in London. With the growing realisation that relatively few child migrants would be available from Britain (certainly many fewer than the 50,000 targeted in the first three years of post war immigration), the Committee recommended that 'there was no objection in principle to the introduction of foreign child migrants'.²⁸ This effectively cleared the way for child migrants from Malta. Again, assisted passage proved a stumbling block. It was not until 1950 that assisted passage was provided for Maltese child migrants. On March 26 of that year, the first group of 27 boys embarked from the Valletta Grand Harbour for Fremantle on the *Ocean Triumph*.

4. Mechanics of Child Migration

The *Ocean Triumph* docked at Fremantle on April 22 and in a matter of days the child migrants had been dispersed to Tardun and Bindoon. Coldrey describes the general dispersion of children upon arrival in Fremantle:

Within a day or two of their arrival the Maltese boys – and each successive group of boys to arrive – were divided among the four Catholic institutions: Castledare Junior Orphanage, Clontarf Boys' Town, St Mary's Agricultural School, Tardun and St Joseph's Farm and Trade School, Bindoon. Castledare took youngsters up to third Standard Primary; otherwise the basis of selection was perceived academic ability, bearing in mind that in the 1950s most young people left school at fourteen years of age.

Boys who were believed to have academic ability, good physique and excellent character were sent to St Mary's Agricultural School. Here there was a functioning secondary school which took each boy to Junior Certificate after which it was possible for a promising young man to prepare for Senior Certificate at St Patrick's College Geraldton. A few boys who qualified for junior were prepared to take up land on the vast 60,000-acre property; most did a one to two year course and were then placed in employment. Tardun was an elite orphanage – albeit in an isolated part of the state.²⁹

²⁷ Attard, 33-36.

²⁸ Frizel to Director, Australian Security Services, 22 Mar. 1944, File IDC, AA, Australian Archives, Mitchell, ACT.

²⁹ Coldrey, 1993, 179.

Most of the 50 girls who arrived from Malta were accommodated at St Joseph's Orphanage in Subiaco, an inner suburb of Perth. A small number were sent to the Nazareth House Sisters in Geraldton, about 500 kilometres to the north.

The child migration scheme provided for free passage to Australia (paid for by the Australian government) and for a per capita payment by the British, state and federal governments to the institutions looking after the children. With the recommencement of post war child migration in 1948, the Australian government paid 10 shillings per child per week, the British government 6 shillings and three pence, and the state government three shilling and six pence. In addition, the state government required its Lotteries Commission to pay institutions three shillings per child. Thus, institutions were paid £1/2/9 (\$2.29) per week per child from these sources.

As with the United Kingdom, post war child migration from Malta proved irregular and erratic. This can be seen from the table below indicating the number of child migrants in each year from 1950 to 1965. The table includes both boys and girls.

| | |
|--|----|
| 1950 | 48 |
| 1951 | 0 |
| 1952 | 16 |
| 1953 | 91 |
| 1954 | 39 |
| 1955 | 13 |
| 1956 | 11 |
| 1957 | 4 |
| 1958 | 9 |
| 1959 | 0 |
| 1960 | 6 |
| 1961 | 9 |
| 1962 | 4 |
| 1963 | 29 |
| 1964 | 24 |
| 1965 | 7 |
| <i>Source:</i> Compiled from Commonwealth Department of Immigration Records. | |

It can be seen from the table that in only five years did the number of migrants exceed 20. These five years accounted for nearly 75% of all the child migrants. In two years there were no migrants, and in eight less than 10 migrants. The 1953-54 intakes (nearly 40% of all migrants) were the result of the recruiting efforts of Fr Stinson (WA Director of Catholic Migration). The 1963 and 1964 surge was largely the result of the efforts of Mr Axisa, Director of Migration in Malta.

In all only 310 children arrived, far fewer than hoped for by the government and church authorities. A number of factors affected this limited migration: the extended nature of Maltese families which meant that even where children had lost one or both parents others took care of those left destitute; the mass emigration of the time which meant that many potential child migrants became a part of family transportation; lack of effective organising on the part of Australian institutions beyond the initial stages; poor communication between migrants and their families and between institutions and Maltese authorities; and bad publicity resulting from the Clontarf bus accident of December 1955. This accident resulted in one boy being killed, one losing both legs, three losing one leg and a number of others having broken limbs and head injuries. Seven Maltese boys were injured including Anthony Bugeja who lost both legs and Joseph Bugeja who had a foot amputated. In addition, and as already noted in an earlier section, changed approaches to child welfare practices in the post-war period reduced interest in child migration.

There were two other major impediments to large-scale child migration from Malta. One was the continuing undertones of racism in the selection process; the other the perceived abuse of the migration scheme by its beneficiaries. Though the government had placed the Maltese on a par with 'other whites' for migration purposes, this reduced rather than eliminated the discrimination displayed by Australian immigration authorities in their acceptance of would-be migrants. For example, these authorities rejected many applicants on the grounds of health, even though English trained doctors had earlier cleared these rejections. Fr Stinson, who was in Malta to assist with immigration in 1953, noted that 'medical standards' were being used to reject children who were too 'Arab-looking' or 'too dark'. He noted that of the 65 children he had presented to the Selection Team only 21 had been accepted. Stinson reported that 'the Maltese people have no confidence at all in the Australian Selection Team' and that this Team was 'debased by an undercurrent of racial and sectarian bias'.³⁰

For their part, the Western Australia and Commonwealth Governments became increasingly dissatisfied by what they considered the misuse of the child migration scheme. It became evident that a number of migrating parents used this scheme as a method of free passage and child maintenance until they were in a position to reclaim their children. The United Kingdom children had come from institutions and, once in Australia, had remained institutionalised. Though the Commonwealth had sought a similar scheme, in practice most Maltese child migrants did not come from institutions. No sooner had the first boat sailed for Australia than Dr Enrico Mizzi, Nationalist Party leader of the Opposition in the Maltese Parliament (and an opponent of child migration), noted that while the original idea was to send orphans it was 'common knowledge that children with both parents alive were being interviewed'.³¹ Once in Australia, many child migrants joined their parents or other family members after a relatively brief period of institutionalisation. In a small number of cases, relatives claimed their children before the latter even got into institutions. In one case, three siblings did not disembark in Fremantle but continued on to Melbourne where they were united with relatives.

In the period 1950 to 1958, 231 child migrants had arrived from Malta. Of these, 14 had already returned to Malta and a further 106 had 'gone to parents or relatives in Australia'. Another 13 had been identified as 'will be going to parents or relatives in

³⁰ Stinson to Archbishop Prendiville, Catholic Immigration Office Archives, Perth.

³¹ Attard, 82.

Australia'.³² Thus, child migration was a part of the general exodus from Malta. Parents were pragmatically exploiting the scheme, and few of the child migrants seemed to meet the intentions of the scheme. 'Child migration was perceived to be for poor, abandoned illegitimate children; and these hardly existed in Malta'.³³ One potential group that would be advantaged by immigration, and would have met the governments' notions of the appropriate migrants in Coldrey's view, was the children of liaisons between Maltese women and British servicemen. In many cases, the latter had 'moved on' as part of their military postings. Coldrey writes, 'such children did have supportive family connections in Malta but they faced a more uncertain future than most. It would be in their interests to emigrate'.³⁴ Immigration records show that, at best, only 27 of the 310 child migrants had English fathers. Some of the latter had not 'moved on' (or if they did, had returned to Malta following their active service) and subsequently joined their children in Australia.

The Australian government was not pleased with these developments; the Western Australian government even less so since few of the parents chose to settle in the state. It was sponsoring a migration scheme for the benefit of other states. As early as 1954 it indicated that it would not accept Maltese child migrants whose parents intended to follow their children to Australia. It recommended to the federal government that 'The parents must be informed clearly that children will come under the guardianship on arrival in Australia, of the Commonwealth Minister for Immigration, and that when they follow at a later date the Federal Minister's authority will prevail against their own natural rights. Parents should come to the same state as their children are already in'.³⁵

In practice, conflicts continued between the Minister's guardianship and the parents' 'natural rights'. These not only reduced the State government's interest in the migration scheme, but also produced some bizarre 'outcomes'. An example was that of Joseph Tonna who arrived in August 1953 and who was placed at Clontarf. Shortly after his arrival, his single mother came to Australia and sought to have him live with her. She was informed that he was a ward of the State and that she could only have custody once he was a 'young adult'. In an attempt to resolve the impasse, the Child Welfare Department is supposed to have proposed that the mother adopt her son.³⁶

Six years after the Secretary of the Child Welfare Department had written to the Department of Immigration concerning the Federal Minister's guardianship role, the Western Australian Government had come to the conclusion that there was little value in the scheme. Its actions led to the scheme's abandonment. In 1960 the Director of Migration in Malta (Mr Axisa), in company with the Commissioner for Malta (Captain Stivala), visited the childcare institutions in Western Australia. Stivala reported to the Christian Brothers' Council that they 'were favourably impressed with the good work being done.' Indicating the concern of both the Maltese and institution authorities regarding child migration, Stivala added that 'in an informal discussion at Tardun on the reasons for the decline in the numbers of children from Malta going to these institutions, the view was expressed that a visit to Malta by a member of the Christian Brothers' community might stimulate interest in the movement'.³⁷

³² Ibid., 82.

³³ Coldrey, 1992, 1.

³⁴ Ibid., v.

³⁵ Director, Child Welfare Department to Secretary Immigration Department, 26 Nov. 1954.

³⁶ *The Malta Herald*, 28 Jan. 1993.

³⁷ Stivala to Br Garvey (Provincial), 21 April 1960.

It was suggested that Br Hewat, Superior of Tardun, visit Malta. The Maltese government undertook to finance his travel expenses. However, in view of diminishing government interest, the Brothers' Provincial Council first sought assurance of continued Government support. This was not forthcoming. In May 1960 the Western Australian government moved to change the maintenance arrangements. Since most migrants did not remain in the State, it now sought to have the Commonwealth pay Western Australia's share of the maintenance. The Commonwealth would not accede to this request. Child migration from Malta petered out, the last seven children arriving in 1965.

5. Retrospective

It is now over 40 years since the child migration schemes ceased. In the interim there have been a number of monographs and articles concerning the phenomenon, including a number of autobiographies by former child migrants. Much of the writing is sensational and critical of the processes and of the institutions involved in such migration. There have also been some spirited defence by former child migrants of their experiences. As one author has noted, 'it is easy to find glowing testimonials from some, and bitter and angry reminiscence from others'.³⁸

There are a number of difficulties in objectively evaluating child migrant writing, much of it based on anecdotal evidence that is difficult to verify. One problem is that much of the negative criticism ends up being little more than a litany of woes from a number of former child migrants with little attempt at balance or objectivity. Even when efforts are made to research the historical records of institutions, this is often merely to confirm the grievances. One does not dispute the grievances – even if only perceived they are real grievances to those affected – but it would be a mistake to represent the whole of the child migrant story through such grievances.

Another difficulty is that most writings attempt to analyse the past experiences in relation to contemporary thought rather than locate the studies within their own time-frame. Not surprisingly, child migration comes out badly in such analyses. It would be well to heed Coldrey on this matter:

The idea of sending unaccompanied children to a distant land to be brought up by strangers appals most people in the affluent years around the millennium. Many people, even forty or fifty years ago, thought differently. They believed that these children would forget the unhappiness of the past and shape themselves anew. Child psychology was an infant science; social workers were few; post-war Britain was facing extreme shortages and widespread hardship. It seems that for some children apparently abandoned and with few prospects, Australia was an attractive option. These decision-makers could not foresee that accelerated social change during the next half century would make child migration seem a ghastly anachronism.³⁹

Yet another difficulty with a number of studies is that they do not seek to locate the institutions or phenomenon studied within the larger social framework, and in

³⁸ B.M. Coldrey, *Child migrants from postwar Britain – Myths and Realities*, unpublished paper, n.d.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

particular do not attempt to benchmark the experiences of the institutions with non-child migrant entities that operated at the time.⁴⁰ There has been little attempt to compare the lot of child migrants with their peers in 'normal' schools and society at large. Thus, one author has noted that, other than on formal occasions, many child migrants did not wear shoes though they might wear sandals. This was a normal part of childhood in most Australian families and was not unique to child migrants. The same can be said of 'hand-me-down' clothing. Physical labour was not limited to children in child migrant institutions, and nor was discipline and corporal punishment.

Child migration persists today, albeit in a different form. It takes the form of adoption of third world children by affluent first world parents and the migration of the adopted to the foster parents' country. Contemporary society condones this system as one of altruism, as one that brings financial relief to the afflicted families and helps educate the children in question. Such adoption is also seen to generate the potential for better employment and life opportunities for those adopted. As the standard of living improves in developing nations, this form of child migration is likely to fall out of favour. When it does, will commentators look at the positive aspects of the adoptions, or merely concern themselves with the darker side – the loss of first family and culture; the convenience provided to affluent career couples to have a family without any interruption to their careers or any of the inconveniences of pregnancy; the exploitation and greed of adoption agencies and bureaucracies? One would hope that what is condoned today will be the subject of balanced analysis in the future. This balanced approach should also apply to former child migration, allowing the scales to fall on either side of the ledger. A number of claims against child migration have been shown to be false when subjected to closer examination, for example in relation to parental consent and the sending of children to institutions that were known to be abusive.⁴¹

We know little of how former child migrants fared through life economically, psychologically, physically and socially compared to their contemporaries. Furthermore, the likely outcomes in the absence of child migration have not been examined. Would those who have done very well in their adopted country have fared as well in the more hierarchical and class conscious home countries? Would those who have been incarcerated have escaped such a fate if they had not been migrated? Would the rate of marriage and long term relationships have been different? Would the level of alcoholism or drug dependency of some have been different? These are but a few of the questions deserving of examination.

This paper does not seek to fill the void. It provides a more modest commentary on some aspects of Maltese child migration.

Maltese child migration differed in a number of respects from its British counterpart, notwithstanding the same receiving institutions. In the first place British child migrants were already institutionalised when they came to Australia. Though it was intended that this would be the case for the Maltese, in practice most of them came from families. This meant that for most Maltese, child migration was accompanied by the rigours of unfamiliar institutionalisation with its disciplined

⁴⁰ For example, one institution has been criticised because 'only about 5%' of its students went onto university. This was at a time when about 3% of school leavers went onto university. There is also criticism at the narrow range of career opportunities provided to female child migrants. Yet the limited choice – domestic service, banking, teaching, nursing and the public service – applied equally to girls educated at other schools.

⁴¹ Ibid.

routine; physical labour; regimented time-table; mass-produced meals; communal dormitories, showering and washing amenities; and a brutal pecking order.

Coldrey has accurately depicted the cultural adjustments of these newly institutionalised migrants:

For Maltese young people, life in Australian institutions posed difficult adjustment problems. Neither Australian carers, nor the other inmates knew anything of Malta, its language, customs or history. The language proved a barrier for some; for most the food was a difficulty. It was institutionalised fare with an Australian emphasis, not Maltese flavour. Discipline was harder than in Maltese institutions; and heavy manual work was part of the daily round in the Farm schools which resembled nothing like the urbanised small world of the Maltese islands. However, for most of the children, the experience prepared them for adjustment to Australian society, and offered them opportunities not currently available in Malta.⁴²

British institutionalisation was largely the result of the children in question being illegitimate at a time when significant stigma attached to both the mother and the child born out of wedlock. To protect these children they were led to believe that they were orphans without any parents. This proved a source of pain and grievance when, in later life, they were appraised of the reality. Though a number were able to make contact with their mothers and other relations, in most cases it was many years later than could have been the case if the true situation had been disclosed. For a number the truth came too late since their mothers had by then died. In some cases, following the tracing of the parent, some former child migrants were rejected for a second time, leading to even greater feelings of rejection and abandonment.⁴³ The Maltese child migrants did not suffer this fate. In every case they came to Australia with parental or guardian approval, and in all cases knew their families. As noted, for over half of these child migrants the separation was a short one of two years or less. For those Maltese not reunited, a different form of family resentment was generated – ‘Why me?’ In a number of cases one or two siblings were sent to Australia while the remainder stayed at home. Not surprisingly, those sent to Australia felt less loved or wanted.

There would also appear to be some different outcomes between former British and Maltese child migrants if the preliminary findings of a current study are confirmed. Some 55 former child migrants from one institution provided the author with some personal details. Thirty seven of these were British and 18 Maltese. All the Maltese respondents were in stable employment, compared with 8 per cent of the British respondents who were on some form of social security. All but one of the Maltese were in long term relationships. By contrast, 37% of the British respondents had either never married or had separated from their partners. A possible explanation for the differences between the two groups may be the early family history of the Maltese compared with the early institutional history of those from the United Kingdom.

⁴² Coldrey, 1992, v.

⁴³ In one unfortunate case the rejection led to the killing of the mother.

There have been some claims, particularly by former Maltese child migrants, that they did not receive an education in Australia. This may have happened in limited cases but the fault may not have been with the institutions. Indeed, Tardun, which as noted was dependent on child migrants, was the first institution in Western Australia (and possibly Australia) to provide secondary education for child welfare students. A number of boys from Tardun were sponsored to complete secondary education at the Brothers' boarding college in Geraldton. Similarly, a number of Clontarf boys were encouraged (and funded) to complete their secondary schooling at the nearby Aquinas College. Secondary education opened up wider career prospects for these students, and as early as 1945 three former Tardun child migrants were enrolled at The University of Western Australia.

Three major factors militated against the education of a number of Maltese child migrants. As a result of their war experience, a number came to Australia with very poor educational backgrounds. A second factor was that a number were not proficient in English. The third major factor was the age of many of the migrants. The child migrant agreement provided that children would be under the age of 12 other than in special circumstances. Despite this, and at a time when the school leaving age was 14, over one third of the Maltese child migrants were 13 years or older. In all, there were 28 migrants aged 14 and a further 15 over that age (including a number aged 16). The Brothers had difficulty fitting these children into the regular schooling system and sought to remedy the situation through the Bindoon trade school. This has led to further accusations of child labour.

Child labour was common in all institutions and is now regarded by many as little more than exploitation. The institutions required their students to undertake work, which could vary according to circumstances. In the case of the farm schools it involved much physical labour. Criticism of this labour many ignore a number of important elements in such labour. In the first place, there was a genuine belief in learning on the job – the best way of learning to drive a tractor was by doing so. Further, work was considered an important element in character development. Work (and sport) were considered important ways of reducing idleness – ‘the devil’s playground’. Work was undertaken by children in general, and at the time students working on farms would not have noticed any difference between themselves and the children of neighbouring farms – at least in respect to labour requirements.

The poor English and educational background of many Maltese child migrants is evident from the Department of Education reports for Tardun at a time when the Maltese constituted a half or more of classes. In the 1950s the school was forced to place additional emphasis on lower primary and on remedial education. ‘Whereas classes had previously commenced at Grade 6, they now commenced at Grade 3 and for one year (1955) also included Grade 2. This was the result of both younger, and educationally weaker, children coming to Tardun’.⁴⁴ In 1955 the School Inspector wrote that there was the need for much remedial work. He added that ‘as many of these boys are backwards on arrival, reading and number work should be devoted extra time’.⁴⁵ Subsequent Inspectors regarded many of the students as ‘slow and retarded,’ with one claiming that ‘all were well beyond the average age for their grade’.⁴⁶ Another problem was that within each grade or ‘classification,’ it was found necessary to have sub-divisions, thereby adding to the teaching

⁴⁴ Plowman, 2003, 156.

⁴⁵ *Tardun School Report, 1955*, Tardun File, Christian Brothers Archives, Westcourt, Manning, WA.

⁴⁶ *Tardun School Report, 1966*.

difficulties. As the 1957 Inspector remarked, 'although the numbers are small, the task of the Brothers is an exacting and trying one, for the varying standards and ability-quotients of the boys necessitates several sub-divisions. In each class the top group presented good work, but the lower sections were generally slow and retarded. All boys were well beyond the average age for their grade'.⁴⁷ Another Inspector noted, 'Despite the small numbers, justice cannot be done to these boys in the present grouping of classes, with the language problem complicating the situation and with the wide differences in ability from the fairly competent to the extremely weak'.⁴⁸

The above would suggest that the Brothers did make a substantial effort to provide an education for their charges.

The more recent history of child migration has been one characterised by claims of physical, emotional and sexual abuse. There is no doubt that discipline and corporal punishment was the lot of those in institutions run by the Christian Brothers. Such discipline and punishment, however, was not reserved for their child welfare institutions but were a part of the Brothers' approach to education at a time when corporal punishment was a part of the schooling system in general. A thing that may have set child welfare institutions apart was the absence of any parental capacity to moderate such punishment. It may be that corporal punishment was more readily availed of, and more severe, in child welfare institutions.

The most sensational accusations and reporting centre on the sexual abuse of children in the Brothers' institutions. The existence of such abuse is undeniable, its extent a matter of difference. Some reports, such as the Australian Senate Community Reference Committee report would suggest that sexual abuse was widespread if not endemic. A report commissioned by the Christian Brothers suggests that the extent of sexual abuse varied by place and by time and was the outcome of a small number who did not honour their religious commitments. In 1993 the Christian Brothers published a national apology, the text of which includes:

In recent years, controversy has arisen over the treatment of children resident in the W.A. child-care institutions at Clontarf, Castledare, Tardun and Bindoon, especially in the 1940s and 1950s.

Some former students have made serious allegations of ill-treatment and abuse.

Other students of the same era claim such allegations are grossly exaggerated and are not representative of life in these institutions. We have studied the allegations available and have made our own independent inquiries. The evidence is such as to convince us that abuses did take place, abuses that in some cases went well beyond the tough conditions and treatment that were part of life in such institutions in those days. While the extent of the abuse appears to have been exaggerated in some quarters, the fact that such physical and sexual abuse took place at all in some of our institutions cannot be excused and is a source of deep shame and regret.

⁴⁷ *Tardun School Report, 1957.*

⁴⁸ *Tardun School Report, 1961.*

We, the Christian Brothers of today, unreservedly apologise to those individuals who were victims of abuse in these institutions. We do not condone in any way the behaviours of individual Brothers who may have perpetuated such abuse.

In apologising, however, we entreat people not to reflect adversely on the majority of Brothers and their co-workers of the era who went about their work with integrity and deep regard for the children entrusted to their care.⁴⁹

This apology has been followed by many others from governments, religious groups and churches⁵⁰ as have other forms of redress undertaken by the Christian Brothers.

In 1994 The Brothers set up the Christian Brothers Ex-Residents Services (CBERS) an agency that provided a range of services to former child migrants. These included assistance with tracing family and funding for family reunion, CBERS is credited with assisting about 280 former child migrants to visit their homelands. These initiatives have been enlarged by actions of the British, Irish, Australian and Western Australian governments which have provided further funding and who have sought to bring some closure for those still blighted by the effects of child migration. In 2009 the Australian government joined with others in offering a public apology.

6. Conclusion

Though child migration was part of British policy and practice for nearly 350 years and involved the dispatching of over 150,000 children, Maltese child migration took place over a short period (1950 – 1965) and involved relatively few children (310). These children were part of the general exodus from Malta following World War II. Child migration was used pragmatically by a number of parents in order to have their children sent to Australia and cared for until their own arrival. This perceived abuse of the system, together with the fact that the number of child migrants did not meet the expectations of the scheme's planners, led to child migration being abandoned. Despite a number of enquiries and a range of publications, many aspects of child migration are still in need of research. There is strong evidence that child migration was accompanied by psychological, physical and sexual abuse. In recent years religious groups, churches and governments have apologised for this abuse, and have sought to bring closure for those still negatively affected.

Child migration was but a very small part, a fragment, of the general exodus from Malta following World War II. It is, nevertheless, a distinctive part of Maltese

⁴⁹ Australian Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee 2001: *Lost Innocents: righting the record*, AGSP, Canberra, Appendix 7.

⁵⁰ These include: 1996, Australian Catholic Bishops and Leaders of Religious Institutes; 1997 Rockingham Congregation of Sisters of Mercy; 1998, Western Australian Government; 1999, Government of Queensland; 2003, the Salvation Army; 2004, Barnados, Wesley Mission, Synod of Anglican Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn, General Synod of the Anglican Church in Australia, Synod of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney, Uniting Church; 2004, South Australian Government, Government of Tasmania; 2005, Government of New South Wales; 2006, Victorian Government; 2009, Australian Government.

history, and one that should be remembered if we are to learn from our history. The child migrant memorial in Grand Harbour serves as a reminder of that history.