The Road to Hell.

State Violence against Children in Postwar New Zealand.

Elizabeth Stanley.

A SEARING STUDY OF INSTITUTIONALISED CHILDREN FAILED BY THE STATE, WHOSE 'GOOD INTENTIONS' FOR THIRTY YEARS PUT VULNERABLE CHILDREN ON THE ROAD TO HELL.

From the 1950s to the 1980s, the New Zealand government took more than 100,000 children from experiences of strife, neglect, poverty or family violence and placed them under state care in residential facilities. In homes like Epuni and Kingslea, Kohitere and Allendale, the state took over as parent. The state failed. Within institutions, children faced abysmal conditions, limited education and social isolation. They endured physical, sexual and psychological violence, as well as secure cells, knock-out sedatives and electro-convulsive therapy.

This book tells the story of 105 New Zealanders who experienced this mass institutionalisation. Informed by thousands of pages of Child Welfare accounts, letters, health reports, legal statements as well as interviews, Stanley tells the children's story: growing up in homes characterised by violence and neglect; removal into the State's 'care' network; daily life in the institutions; violence and punishment; and the legacy of this treatment for victims today.

> *He said to me 'You're going somewhere'. He said it with glee. 'You're going somewhere where they know how to treat people like you'. It was like he knew what the place [Hokio] was like and what was in store for me and it gave him a great deal of pleasure. I find that really cruel* – RAY

> *. . . I remember looking out the window and said 'There's police out there, what's going on?' Yeah and they'd come to pick me up, to put me in the girls' home . . . I was just in shock . . . they wanted to take me. 'What have I done? . . . The police just took me down to the station…and then the social worker took me from there to Bollard and then I was chucked in the cells.* – NANETTE

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INTRODUCTION

IN THE EARLY 1950S, Child Welfare[1] placed two-week-old Sue with adoptive parents. In their care, she suffered violence and sexual assaults and, by the age of ten, she was frequently running away, and drinking cheap wine or methylated spirits to forget her short life. At thirteen, the state became her parents.

Authorities removed her to Allendale girls' home. From there she ricocheted through Kingslea girls' as well as foster and family homes. She spent extensive periods alone, suffered damaging gynaecological examinations, witnessed violence, experienced degrading conditions and had no schooling. A few years later, still under state guardianship, Sue returned to the streets of Auckland. It was the first day of 1970:

> *I can remember being on Queen Street and the cops stopped me. 'How much money have you got in your pocket?' I had nothing, you know. 'Where are you living?' And they were turning my pockets out and the next moment I knew what was coming. They handcuffed me to a post and I ended up in court.*

After putting her address down as Auckland Railway Yard, police charged her with being 'idle and disorderly' and authorities admitted her to Mount Eden prison. More official placements followed over the next six months – family homes, hospitals, work on a farm, a boarding house – and then, after receiving a charge of theft, magistrates sent her to Arohata borstal. She miscarried twins there after a physical attack by a staff member. At this point, she *broke*. Authorities admitted her to Porirua hospital. She was just sixteen.

A fortnight after Child Welfare became Sue's guardians, Peter was born. A gentle child, he found his life turned upside down at the age of four when his father died. With a new sister and another baby on the way, his mother struggled to cope:

> *Resources were really limited . . . she was loving as a mother but she also had issues with taking prescription medication and alcohol to deal with the death of her partner . . . and it proved too much . . . So I ended up being sacrificed on the altar of social welfare care.*

Child Welfare placed him in St Joseph's orphanage in Christchurch. There, Peter told nuns about an abusive cub master, who received nine months' imprisonment for the molestation of several boys. After a short spell at a family home, authorities moved twelve-year-old Peter to Stanmore Road, and then Lookout Point home in Dunedin. He went on to further community placements before he arrived at the doors of Kohitere, the most secure of state institutions for boys. He left, aged fifteen, for another short stint at Stanmore Road, and then corrective training in Addington prison. He recalls his teenage years in these institutions as exceptionally violent. Along the way, he learned to fight, to withstand the degradations of secure cells, and to keep his mouth shut.

From the 1950s to the 1980s, the New Zealand government took more than 100,000 children like Sue and Peter away from experiences of strife, neglect, poverty and family violence and placed them under state care in residential facilities.[2] Under a discourse of protection for delinquent, out of control or abused children, the state took over as parents. Yet, in this role, the state failed. In these institutions, children endured abysmal conditions, inadequate resources, dysfunctional workers, social isolation and cultural dislocation. Children removed from their parents for truanting often did not see a curriculum or even teachers. Institutional conditions provided fertile ground for other forms of physical violence to thrive, increasing the exposure of children to sexual assault from adults and other children. Children became isolated, losing opportunities to see their family, whānau or friends, and having no independent advocates to support them. When children struggled against their situation, officials took control. Workers isolated them in secure cells, they shamed them in front of their peers, they placed healthy children on knock-out sedatives, they transferred them to mental health institutions for seclusion or electro-convulsive therapy (ECT), and they up-tariffed children to adult prisons. In short, the state masqueraded as good parents, but its violence and negligence made things far worse for children in its care.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Trouble and Survival

ENDURING ADULT SCORN, LOSING the chance to be educated, witnessing violence and being hurt, all under the care of the state, took their toll on children. Children generally responded in negative ways.[1] They often had little capacity, experience or support to summon positive responses. Instead, some boys and girls directed their frustrations upon themselves, engaging in self-harm and isolating themselves as much as possible. Unable to cope, they withdrew. Many others threw themselves into trouble and confrontation: challenging authority, committing crime and running away.

We might see life in an institution as nothing more than passive survival, with children acting and reacting to their circumstances with little agency or forethought. Yet children saw their actions as completely rational given the circumstances. Confrontation might provide a sense of agency or power but it could also be a lot of fun to wind up Departmental workers who showed little care for them. The authorities didn't take the same perspective. They viewed any problematic behaviour as further indicators of the delinquent, damaged nature of those in care. Broader explanations did not enter the debate. For them, and for society at large, these ever increasing cohorts of unruly children were *the* problem.

Acts of Desperation

Sometimes, children responded to their institutionalisation and victimisation with desperate acts. They psychologically unravelled. They struggled to eat, lost concentration, developed sleeping difficulties and began to wet the bed. These outcomes did not guarantee a sympathetic response. Some staff members equated bedwetting with delinquency – they stripped these offenders, belted them across the buttocks, forced them into cold baths and nappies, or paraded them as dirty creatures.[2]

Children also demonstrated their unhappiness and grief with acts of self-harm. Several interviewees still have the bodily signs of attempts to cut themselves while they were in the institutions. The harshness of their experiences made *some children completely suicidal* (Nicholas). Feeling despair in not being loved or being *treated like a number* (Maui), they could even see death as a better alternative to abuse and a bleak future. We do not know how many children died in the institutions.[3]

Busy workers, dealing with the multiple problems of numerous children, had little chance to seriously engage with those who self-harmed. Instead, they funnelled a steady stream of boys and girls into psychiatric hospitals, isolated them in secure, and sometimes saw their cries for help as troublemaking. For example, after Bill damaged a secure cell in an attempted suicide at Epuni in the mid-1960s, staff saved him but then:

> *. . . once I'd recovered, they made me go back and clean it all up, clean up the mess that I'd made. They didn't ask why I did it or nothing . . . they put me in the police cells up in Lower Hutt, and I was taken before a magistrate and he just said, 'Oh well, got to send you to Kohitere, got no choice'.*

Assuming that these children were trouble, workers could re-designate these despairing acts as vindictive, confronting behaviours. The child required tightened security or discipline. In doing so, they just exacerbated children's problems. Further, even when workers took a more benign listening approach, they could pursue initiatives with a degree of naivety. In the mid-1970s, Epuni staff bravely pursued talking-out sessions about past sexual abuse. The despair felt by one boy in participating was such that he subsequently attempted suicide.[4]

Withdrawal and Avoidance

For most children, institutional life could be improved with the strategies of head down, stay nice and quiet, and if possible blend into the walls. They tried to make the best of it by removing themselves, mentally (by daydreaming) or physically. While they lived side by side with others, they kept friendships to a minimum and dodged unwanted attention. To avoid standovers at Owairaka in the early 1980s, Lee made himself invisible:

> *I tried to keep myself away from them as much as I could. A lot of it was just ducking out, or keeping quiet, saying nothing you know. Not having an opinion.*

Side-stepping those who they saw as freaks, standovers or bullies, these children sought isolation whenever they could: Gresham spent most of his Hokio days *hiding in the sand dunes* while Nanette spent days at her own request in Kingslea's secure cells, to escape extreme bullying; staff never bothered to ask her why she wanted to be there.

Another common tool for protection was hypervigilance. Armed with knowledge about who was dangerous, children could become intensely watchful when abusers arrived on the scene. When a well-known 1970s Holdsworth sexual abuser entered the room, most boys would drop their heads and *look at the floor* (Shane). Avoiding eye contact helped to reduce social engagement with the worker. Children dovetailed these passive responses with direct action. In the early 1960s, Ray learned about a sexual abuser in Hokio, who preyed on boys needing the toilet at night. So he made sure that he never needed the toilet at night and he conditioned his bowels to be certain. In other circumstances, children felt vulnerable if they stayed in bed. Fearful of the night watchman at Holdsworth, Shane put pillows in his bed and slept elsewhere, in the toilets or outside, so that he would not be assaulted. A housemaster punished him for doing so, but he saw that as a lesser assault.

Children also understood that pre-emptive actions might prevent attacks. They worked hard to fit in. Ray *became the clown* so that other boys would be less likely to pick on him, and Derek focused on compliance, *not questioning anything, not answering back, doing what was expected of me*, so that staff would be less likely to pick on him. Others used their long history in the institutions to guide workers and peers in their own interests. For example, Rangi, who spent many years in residences, had a very good *sense of home rules and policy*. This was so much so that his Holdsworth housemaster commented in 1973, 'He has the advantage . . . in that he knows the system inside out and can thus play on the nascience of the virgin masters'.[5] With years of experience under their belts, children effectively challenged institutional structures of power.[6]

While children might guide staff members, they also had the capacity to influence their peers. Ray reflected on a Māori boy at Hokio who led others to avoid violence, while Nanette saw a Māori girl as being special for persuading girls to stop bullying at Kingslea. These children took action and created better relationships and conditions. Against the odds, they shunned conflict.

To evade harm, children teetered along the contradictory dynamics of the institutions . . . they isolated themselves and tried to look invisible, they became hypervigilant, but they also sought to fit in. Faced with an ever changing environment, children had to use their initiative. A few boys and girls were able to contest relations of power within the institution. On account of their position and skills, they moved themselves and others away from violence. Yet these were rare events. And, within the context of institutional hierarchies, many children saw no other path but to survive by playing up.

Challenging Authority

The kingpin system emphasised the necessity of violence within the institutions. The need to take a place in the pecking order led children to use violence, often for the first time. Along the way, they learned that violence could mean extra food at mealtimes, extra privileges as well as outings. Violence added a buzz to the day, or dispelled its boredom.[7] Further, *angry, violent kids* demanded attention, being *the only ones that staff actually listened to* (Peter). Subsequently, many children made the decision to harden up:

> *If a boy couldn't handle it, he would end up with huge mental problems. I think that my way of coping was to put a wall around me . . . this turned me from a happy-go-lucky kid into a hardened, seemingly unfeeling one. (Rodney)*
>
> *I didn't make friends very easily because I was always scared all the time . . . I soon learnt that I had to harden up if I was going to get anywhere because . . . I got the snot beaten out of me. If it wasn't from the staff it was from the other girls . . . And . . . yeah as I started getting older I learnt to handle myself a lot better and then I started doing the tattoos and the drugs thing and the smoking so I'd fit in more, you know. I didn't want to . . . look like the oddball, so I started mimicking all the behaviours they had . . . and I learnt to be really hard. (Raewyn)*

Hardening up and using violence became tools of self-preservation. This *dog eat dog world* (Des) meant children *had to stand their ground* (Wayne) or *everybody would just take advantage* (Roger). Yet, these responses were not just directed at their peers. Many also saw violence as the main route to challenge officials.

Some boys and girls arrived at the institutions with a well-honed dislike for authorities. Aggrieved at official treatments of their family, whānau or themselves, they regarded the police, welfare and the courts with disdain. A few had no respect for any adult. Peterboi, for instance, recounted that by the time he reached Wesleydale in the late 1970s, at age eleven:

> *My attitude was one of resentment. I was angry towards everyone . . . to my family for allowing this to happen and to the system for taking me away. I had lost all respect for other people.*

For others, attitudes hardened alongside the everyday degradations in the institutions. Records show children being gentle souls on arrival, but they quickly changed. For example, in the 1980s, social workers portrayed Eliott in positive ways. In their interactions, they described him as 'pleasant', 'polite', 'honest' and 'charming',[9] yet he became violent and destructive. He reflected on how his victimisation led to his own violence:

> *I started hating screws and people that were locking me up all the time and I just started being a c*** to them. Yeah, an arsehole. It was just the way I was being brought up, how they treated us like that. So I used to treat them all like that.*

Feeling anger, bitterness and despair, children wholeheartedly blamed the Department for their experiences.[10] The authorities became the enemy:

> *[The institutions] did the opposite of turning us around. It made us bitter and go inwards . . . yeah, you had a lot of hatred in you, a lot of resentment because the system had taken you in and was supposed to look after you and guide you straight but it just twisted you inside out. (Greg)*
>
> *It was actually at Hokio where I learned to fight back . . . that's where I started to go right against authority, and I mean that. Anyone in a position of authority and that was it, you know. Yeah, I was there. (Garry)*

With these kinds of attitudes, a few built themselves up to become volatile. They saw that lashing out was a better option to feeling defenceless, and to hell with the consequences:

> *I'd had enough . . . they just all thought I was a mad bastard and just leave him alone. You know they never went near me again. They thought I needed a straitjacket and I probably did. (Bill)*

> *I became hard. I remember when I was down in the secure unit and he [staff abuser] had the audacity to . . . put it on me again . . . I was scared all right but . . . I had already picked my spots . . . I was just going to go hard and bite, scratch, whatever, punch, anything. I wasn't scared no more in that sense . . . that sealed it for me. This is what I must do in order for me to make an impact on people. This is what says, 'Don't fuck with me because I will fuck you up' and that's what I did. (Peterboi)*

Usually, children were not so strategic; instead, they acted out when they felt pushed to the limits. As an example, consider Shane's situation in 1970s Hokio. Workers made him clean out blocked toilets, filled with faeces, with his bare hands. When he started to vomit, the supervisor *hurled encouragement*. In response, Shane threw shit at him, and then ran. He hid in the sand dunes for the rest of the day. Aged thirteen, and with nowhere else to go, he returned to his fate – a period in secure and a beating.

Alongside individual confrontations, children occasionally formed groups to attack staff, destroy property or momentarily assert their control over institutions. In 1965, a major riot erupted at Fareham House 'after the Principal was run over by a car while trying to prevent some of the residents from absconding'. A 'state of chaos' ensued: 'girls armed with knives were *swooping* on the building from among the trees while others hurled rocks and mattresses from the balcony' as staff members hid. A few years later, in 1968, a 'rumble' involving nineteen Kingslea girls led to four of them being taken into police custody.[11] These sorts of incidents were relatively rare, perhaps as institutions inspired cultures of divide and rule rather than solidarity among children.

These violent challenges to authority were grounded in children's feelings of anger, hate, fear and bitterness at their situation. Having lost respect for the system, they wanted to defy it, sometimes at every turn. Of course, these expressions of frustration and despair found little Departmental or public favour. It was further confirmation of the need for enhanced discipline and controls.

Crime and Peer Pressure

The Department's insistence on mixing children with different backgrounds assisted their transformation from naive to streetwise youngsters:

> *. . . there were people put in there because of theft, violence and other things. So when . . . you're mixing with those sorts of people it doesn't take long before you pick it up. (Tyrone)*

> *Streetwise young criminals mixed with kids awaiting placements to foster homes. I knew nothing about crime before the age of ten, but by the time I was twelve years old, I knew most of what it took to live on one's wits. (Paul F)*[12]

Since the 1970s, research has charted the problems of detaining mixed behaviour children together in institutions. Such mixing escalates criminal or socially unacceptable behaviours.[13] Given the power plays within institutions, children offend to survive, make friends and develop their status.[14] Contributors argued that the main reason for getting involved in illegal activities was to fit in. They recounted how institutional or group norms led them into smoking, substance use or crime.[15] Peer-pressured children picked up bad habits from the crowd. After all, with few other opportunities for interaction, 'institutionalised adolescents are probably more socialised by their peers than any other group in society'.[16] These lessons involved theory and practical experience:

> *In [1960s] Hokio, I learned how to pinch cars, wouldn't have had a bloody clue prior to that, you know. (Garry)*

> *[In early 1980s Owairaka], I learnt how to steal cars and how to do armed robberies, just in the conversations. You just sit there quiet but you're picking it up. (Lee)*

> *[In Wesleydale in the early 1980s], you had fellows standing over you. We had to go with them because we were the smallest ones in there. And you'd get to a house and they couldn't get through the window, so they'd throw you through to go and unlock the door. So that's where it [offending] all started from. (Roger)*

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