Bringing up Harry Penrith: Injustice and Becoming Burnum Burnum

The formative years of a Child of the Stolen Generation

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In the little world in which children have their existence, whosoever brings them up, there is nothing so finely perceived and so finely felt, as injustice.

(Charles Dickens, Great Expectations, Folio Society Edition, London, 200 i. p. 58:

The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations recognises Harry Penrith's ironic public declaration as Burnum Burnum on 26 January 1988, the official Bicentenary celebration day of the white invasion, settlement and occupation of Australia:

We wish no harm to England's native people. We are here to bring you good manners, refinement and an opportunity to make a Koompartoo, a fresh start. 1

He is the only Australian Aborigine activist to be recognised and appear thus far in this renowned publication.

His words were articulated on the heights of the White Cliffs of Dover near Folkestone Harbour, England, at dawn with the sun still slightly hidden below the horizon. BBC cameras rolled and captured the symbolic media event. Burnum's symbolic invasion of Great Britain was a publicity triumph and most probably the defining moment of his life. His performance appeared on television news reports and current affairs programs around the world. For the occasion, white-bearded like the bard, he was ceremoniously dressed and appointed and in his right hand he clasped a large Aboriginal gold, red and black flag, which flapped majestically in the seashore wind. His proud, stern face was traditionally decorated with white paint.

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Before the cameras he elaborated, freely admitting that he represented no particular Aboriginal community or recognised body of Aboriginal thought other than himself — he was simply on a personal mission to highlight to the international community the plight of his people. He claimed that Britain was now under Aboriginal sovereignty, but promised not to poison British waterholes or lace flour with strychnine nor 'pickle [British] skulls for public display' (as invading Europeans had done to Aboriginal Australians). He also pledged not to 'sterilise young women, nor separate children from their families'. His claim was pure theatre, but based on the historical truth of European treatment of Aborigines in Australia. He had no real intention of launching an invasion.² But the message was universally received in January 1988 and eventually in August 1997 it became part of his obituary.³ His media onslaught was to have a lasting impact. The whole performance was a sublime act of self-representation.

Harry Penrith was born on 10 January 1936 at Wallaga Lake on the southern coastal border of New South Wales. The Mumbulla Mountain to the west provided a theatrical and picturesque backdrop. According to Harry's romantic account after he had researched his origins in his maturity, his mother gave birth to him under the ancestral gum tree on Mosquito Point by the side of the lake, which was situated on Wallaga Lake Aboriginal Reserve. As a child growing up in a state institution, he knew nothing of his family of procreation. He only found out more when he began to reconstruct the ancestral side of his identity as an adult.

Below Harry's vividly imaged 'family gum tree' at the time of his birth was a small, makeshift corrugated iron dwelling hastily erected by his father Charles ('Charlie') Penrith with the help of some Aboriginal friends. It was inside this small dismal hut that Harry's mother, Lily, bore him. At the time she was nearly twenty-two years of age, already suffering badly from pulmonary tuberculosis, which she was to die from before the year was out. Harry was immediately put under the care of his Aunty Ruby, his father's youngest sister, because of the highly infectious nature of his mother's illness. Already in Ruby's care were Harry's older brother and sister — Clem aged three and Irene aged two. Another sister, Phyllis, had died at birth the year before Harry's arrival.

Three months later all three of Charlie and Lily Penrith's children were taken by welfare agents under government directives and placed in a state-funded orphanage, the United Aborigines Mission's Children's Home at Bomaderry near Nowra on the mid south coast of New South Wales. The home catered exclusively for neglected state wards of Aboriginal descent.

Not long before Lily Penrith's death and two days after she had turned twenty-two, she had travelled on 30 January 1936 to the nearby dairy

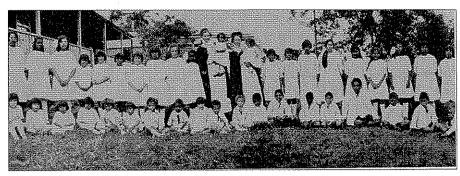
farming town of Bega to register officially Harry's birth. He was named 'Henry James Penrith'. She did not take Harry with her on this trip, so he was recorded as 'not present' on the Bega registry of births, deaths and marriages. The birth certificate also records that his mother 'Jemima Ellen Lily McRae of Healesville, Victoria' was married to 'Clement Charles Penrith, labourer, of Wallaga Lake' on 7 March 1931 at Bega. 'Clement C. and Irene M.' are also cited on the certificate as living siblings with 'one female deceased'. Harry's birth was recorded as having occurred on 10 January 1936.6

Within the space of three months Harry Penrith suffered a three-fold loss that was to profoundly affect his formative years: the loss of his mother, the loss of his family and the loss of his Aboriginal culture. He thus became part of the 'stolen generation' of the 1930s and 'removed' by the state to become 'a displaced person' with no family, no ancestry, no cultural tradition. It was to be 'a long hard road' for him and a ceaseless search for his own identity.

Harry with his older brother and sister arrived by train at the interdenominational Protestant home at Bomaderry in April 1936 completely cut off from their former short lives. It was an extremely difficult time in the worst year of the Great Depression when resources were scarce and conditions in institutions harsh.

The Home at Bomaderry in the Nowra coastal dairy farming district had been established in August 1908 by the New South Wales United Aborigines Mission Society, which was supported by several Protestant churches in the inner suburbs of Sydney, which in turn were inspired by the Christian Endeavour movement. At first a sole female missionary at the new home fed, sheltered, clothed, nurtured and trained for 'useful service' the first inmates — seven 'neglected' young Aboriginal children of varying ages. The charitable institution as it gradually expanded was supported by private voluntary subscriptions by church people, local fund-raising initiatives and the government agency the New South Wales Aboriginal Protection Board, which later became in the 1930s the New South Wales Aboriginal Welfare Board.

The number of Aboriginal child inmates grew steadily in the Great War period and the 1920s and very rapidly during the 1930s Great Depression. Miss A.V. Darby entered the service of the missionary society in 1931 at its headquarters at La Perouse and was eventually appointed Acting Matron of the Bomaderry Children's Home in October 1933. She was later appointed matron and retained this position and role throughout the time that Harry Penrith and his brother and sister were inmates there. To Harry she was a significant other.



Children at Bomaderry Children's Home circa 1940. Harry Penrith is the tenth child (left to right) front row.

The United Aborigines missionaries in the 1930s portrayed the Children's Home in a triumphant manner that was typical in the literature of evangelical ameliorators:

Some of the [official visitors'] party were shivering with the cold. Others had wet feet after the walk through the long grass. How cheerless everything was. The clothes wouldn't dry and the fire wouldn't burn, and the dull clouds held back the warmth from the sun. As the visitors neared the Home, they were suddenly startled out of their depression by the sound of a glad and cheerful song, coming in full-throated melody from the boys and girls of Bomaderry

'Cheer up, cheer up, the sun will shine again on you, Cheer up, cheer up, the promises of God, of God are true.'

Depression was dispelled, gloom was gone, and visitors found themselves rejoicing in the thought that many of these little ones, whose tuneful voices echoes through the forest on that bitter morning had been rescued from worse that death and were now being lovingly cared for by the kind sisters of the Home. ¹⁰

Bomaderry, the first formative influence on the infant Harry Penrith, was based on the surrogate family principle of the evangelical persuasion. In such a situation the ideology expounded that the Matron and the missionary sisters replaced the influence of the natural parents and particularly the natural mother. It was a cottage-style rather than a military-barracks style child-rescue institution. As part of their training for future domestic service or parenthood, close attachment was encouraged between the older girls and the young children, infants and the babies like Harry. Visits to the Home by natural parents or Aboriginal relatives were strictly forbidden on any occasion. The Aboriginal past of the inmate was meant to be blotted out as they became indoctrinated with so-called Christian civilisation of the Protestant variety.

The inmates of the Home of school age nevertheless attended Bomaderry Public School on a daily basis, returning to the Home in the late afternoon. The government head teacher of the Public School occasionally allowed visiting natural parents or relatives limited access to the Home's children during school hours - usually at recess or the lunch time break. Harry Penrith could only vaguely remember a solitary brief visit to the school from his father in 1942 when he was six years of age. His brother and sister, being older, soon disappeared at the age of ten to the state's institutions - Kinchela Training Home near Kempsey for Clem and Cootamundra Girls' Home on the distant western plains of New South Wales for Irene. As an adult, Harry was to see his father only one more time; the family in effect had been permanently split up. After the first ten formative years of his life spent at Bomaderry, Harry saw his sister again for a total of ten hours. Once was over coffee in Sydney after he had begun to work there. The second time was at the Rockdale Mortuary in the inner Sydney suburb where he had to identify her body. She had been murdered by her white lover. Harry understood at the time that she 'was said to be working as a prostitute'11 in the city. Such was the tragedy of life as far as it concerned a number of stolen generation of Aboriginal children of the 1930s. 12

When Harry Penrith arrived at the Bomaderry Home in April 1936, his first five years there seemed to be happy ones. He had known little experience of life itself. In a written autobiographical fragment he recognised the love that he had received from the institution's sisters despite the strict gender taboos of the place. This was despite or because of the emphasis there on the inculcation of imperial Protestant Christianity.

Dawn, the government magazine of the New South Wales Aboriginal Welfare Board, in July 1963, described Harry Penrith as a coming leader of Aboriginal Affairs, and then referred to his initial ten years spent at Bomaderry as one of the major influences in 'moulding' his character and quoted his own impressions:

'I am sure that this home, run by devout Christian women of the United Aborigines Mission has been a great influence on my later life. There I learned the reality of God's love for me. I would wish that all Government institutions for Aborigines were continually staffed by officers of active Christian beliefs'. ¹⁴

His 'moulding' took place in an all-encompassing institution, a concept once proposed by Goffman, 15 which housed forty or so children. A moving photograph of 'Bomaderry and her Bairns' taken in the 1930s by one of the missionaries while Harry was there is revealing. All of the children are dressed in white (apparently their Sunday best) with the boys in black lace

ties as a signifier of their gender. The Matron and a sister are each holding an Aboriginal baby. There are nineteen girls of varying age including adolescents who were apprenticed to the institution itself to care for the younger inmates on a daily basis. One boy in the photograph could be about twelve (also probably apprenticed in the same manner to help with the heavier work around the institution). The rest in the photograph are all infants — nine boys and nine girls. The older female children are all obviously assistant helpers but not apprentices. The verandah of one of the wooden dormitories can be seen in the background along with the surrounding bush of the isolated location of the institution found at the end of a dusty track off a country dirt road. ¹⁶

At Bomaderry Harry Penrith began to attend Bomaderry Public School in the Infants Department on 22 September 1941 aged five years and eight months. He was registered in the school's admission register as number 239, 'Methodist' by religion and listed as an inmate of the 'Aboriginal Mission Home' (several other children had the same address). 17 Marlene Norst, Burnum Burnum's official biographer and authorised by him, has recounted how the walk to and from the school was about four and a half kilometres for Harry and his co-patriots. All of the Home's children had their lunches packed in a large sugar bag, which one of them carried to and from school where they were distributed. The walk was a taste of freedom enjoyed by Harry and the others. According to all reports of his time at Bomaderry Public School, Harry was well behaved in class and he enjoyed belonging to the school. He performed well academically at the head of his class and was well liked by his teachers for his enthusiasm and out-going personality. Nevertheless, he experienced on occasions a taste of racism from the white children who attended the school. 18

At the age of ten Harry was removed from the female controlled Bomaderry Children's Home to the state run and male controlled Kinchela Boys' Home near Kempsey on the mid north coast of New South Wales. The pain of separation was again palpable, but none of this was revealed in Dawn's positive description of Harry's experience at Kinchela:

Christian teachers ensured his excellent progress in academic work, and outside school hours, further developed his grasp of moral and spiritual principles for which he is grateful. 19

This statement tended to be mere propaganda for the institution. While there is no denying his 'excellent progress' academically, in his later life Harry Penrith (now self-named Burnum Burnum) was able to expose what lay behind the façade of the all-encompassing institution:

It was at Kinchela Boys' Home that I spent my teenage years, as we were trained to become farm labourers for rich landowners. Apart from the pain of being

separated from my beloved sister ... like all the boys at Kinchela I felt the devastation caused by the absence of any female role model in my life. Denied any perception of the influence of a sister, mother, aunt or grandmother, we all suffered significant problems later in life coping with society in general and women in particular. Our substitute parent at Kinchela was a homosexual sadist. One time, when I accidentally broke a window while playing cricket, I was forced to drop my pants and bend over to receive lashes with a stockwhip, the scars of which are still in my mind and on my buttocks. ²⁰

Kinchela, then, revealed as a chamber of horrors and a place of fearful anxieties for inmates, became a devastating experience for Penrith as a youth, despite being the scene of his self-described 'teenage triumphs'. He was but one, albeit unintended, of the victims of government institutionalisation on a massive scale across the nation, part of 'a lonely, lost and sad displaced group'. 22

Kinchela was often optimistically portrayed in the official government magazine Dawn in the 1950s as a 'model home' where the boys were 'happy and well trained'. 23 The age range of inmates placed there was from five to eighteen years and the institution housed about forty-five boys, sometimes a few more. The resident manager in the 1950s, Frank White and his wife, who was matron, were described in Dawn as young, very kindly and friendly people. They had separate cottage accommodation in the grounds of the institution. As the purpose of the child-saving institution, based on the famous Mettray model,24 was to train boys for farm work in rural areas, there was 'an agricultural expert' on the staff as well as other supervisors who resided in the same building as the dormitories. The ideology was centred on the notion that training in farm work would ensure for the boys 'a successful way of life' - a Roussealan ideal typical of some prominent child-saving institutions in the Western world of the second half of the nineteenth century - an agrarian myth of reformation or re-education away from the so-called evils of city life. Such a myth worked against the reality of the 1940s and 1950s of expanding job opportunities in the city rather than the countryside.

In the official propaganda Kinchela had no 'delinquent' inmates amongst the 'Aboriginal lads', but they were frequently described as 'orphaned or neglected'. Kinchela was directly under the administration of the New South Wales state government's Aboriginal Welfare Board and set in what were described as 'spacious grounds'. The inmates were wards of the state under the *New South Wales Aborigines Protection Act of 1909*. The stated aim of the institutionalised training of the state wards was 'to fit them to take their place in the community' and become 'good and useful citizens'. Kinchela, sixteen miles from the town of Kempsey, stood on thirty-two acres of 'good' agricultural river flats and was laid out with

lawns, gardens, a swimming pool and a playground. The institution's model farm included a dairy farm and vegetable gardens where the boys were trained in 'practical farming'. An elementary schoolroom was also attached to the institution.²⁵

From the early 1950s, Kinchela inmates, in the case of those who showed some academic ability and interest, were allowed to attend Kempsey High School on a daily basis, returning each afternoon to the Home. 26 Harry Penrith was one of the few chosen. The local co-educational High School became one of the scenes of Harry's 'triumph' over adversity and he quickly became popular with both teachers and fellow students.

After the Second World War Kinchela placed an increased and special emphasis on sport and physical culture and the inmates participated in cricket, rugby, football, athletics, swimming and boxing, all part of the 'muscular Christianity' ethics of character development. Harry managed to excel in all the physical activities provided for.

The inmates of Kinchela slept in dormitories with mosquito nets above their beds. Weekly church services were held at the Home and one of the resident supervisors of the dormitories conducted Sunday School. Films were occasionally screened in the recreation hall and the boys were encouraged to listen to the news and current affairs on radio. The manager periodically gave lectures on current affairs.²⁷ The work of the Home was conducted on a roster system in which each boy undertook specific tasks each month: sweeping, cleaning toilets and windows, assisting the cook and so on. They also worked on the dairy farm milking and in the vegetable gardens.²⁸

Harry Penrith's 'teenage triumphs' seem to have started in earnest when he turned sixteen. They were heavily underlined in the September 1952 issue of *Dawn*:

Harry Penrith, captain of Kinchela Boys' Home and a pupil of Kempsey High School has brought honour to the Home in many ways. He recently represented Kempsey High School senior rugby football [Rugby League] team as inside centre in matches against Tamworth, Grafton and Kempsey [High Schools] Mr. White, the Manager of the Boys' Home, has received a communication from the Kempsey High School coach and sports master concerning the impression of a lady in whose home he was billeted on his recent trip to Grafton

Quite unsolicited the Headmaster of Grafton High School told me that the lady billeting Harry had told him how impressed she was with Harry and that if her two sons were such gentlemen when visiting other schools, she would be very proud.²⁹

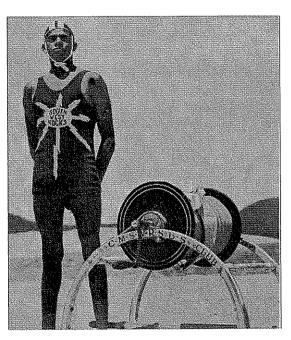
High praise indeed! And the praise continued to flow in, as Harry completed his High School education and stay at Kinchela: on the

weekends he played impressively in the local Smithtown Rugby League Under 18s team.³⁰

More fame was to come in the following February of 1953 when he appeared on the glossy front cover of *Dawn* magazine in a full length portrait in the life-saving gear of the South West Rocks Amateur Surf Life Saving Club, standing erect behind a surf reel, looking proudly ahead on the surfing beach. Part of the caption read:

With stalwart athletes like this young man guarding the beaches, one can surf in safety

Harry Penrith, one of the most outstanding athletes Kinchela has produced31



Harry Penrith at sixteen. Stalwart athlete of South West Rocks Amateur Surf Life Saving Club, February, 1953.

It is clear Kinchela Home in the 1950s was vigorously attempting to develop a reputation as a breeding ground for fine sportsmen, with Harry Penrith as the centre-piece of the growing image. His name and achievements on and off the sporting field continued to appear frequently on the monthly pages of *Dawn*, which was received by post by every Aboriginal family in New South Wales.³² But there was a darker side to the story. Later Harry Penrith himself reflected on the unpublicised side of life in the carceral institution of Kinchela:

Like prisoners and early convicts, we were fed by government bulk. Tons of white sugar would arrive, white bread of the worst quality, brains, tripe - the

lot. We were ordered to overdose on it to the absolute detriment of our bodies — we all succumbed to the same disease of diabetes — it was the inevitable consequence of government policy \dots^{33}

and

We boys ... were placed in two dormitories facing a common set of doors to our 'substitute' single parent, one Wally Barker. 8pm represented lights out but at ten past eight on many occasions, Barker, the pedophile [sic], came to light. Opening his door with lights ablaze, he would masturbate himself in front of us. Conscientious objectors like me were given the job next morning of being ordered against my will to get on my knees to scrub up his mess. Certain boys pleasured him³⁴

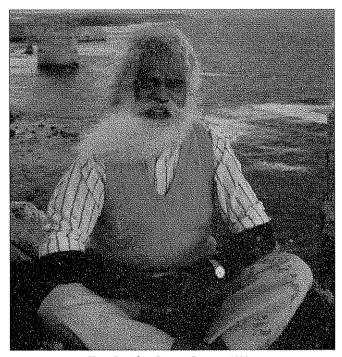
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From the beginning of his life and throughout his childhood and youth, Harry Penrith had been continuously under the control of the New South Wales Aboriginal Welfare Board. As an impressive and talented teenager a good student and sportsperson — he was turned into a government media identity as a means of making known to the general public and to Aboriginal communities the success of the government assimilation policy. In fact, he was made into a celebrated symbol of it. He was famous in the wider community before he moved into adulthood. He only passed beyond total institutionalisation when he successfully completed the Leaving Certificate at Kempsey High School and obtained a good clerical position in the New South Wales Department of Agriculture where he served with growing distinction for thirteen years. For a while when he began work he was placed in a kind of half-way house in Sydney - the Petersham Baptist Young Men's Hostel — where he continued to be monitored by government welfare officers as well as receiving further Protestant socialisation. His sporting career continued to gather apace as a brilliant first-grade rugby union footballer for the premier rugby district club of Parramatta. He later represented Riverina against the touring New Zealand All Blacks. He married and had children. By 1965 he appears to have achieved many of the main goals of his life.

While he continued to achieve, in maturity, his personal life began to unravel in many ways — his first marriage broke down and he began to question the public persona that had been so carefully manufactured for him and imposed on him. He went through a troubled existence of despair made worse by a severe gambling obsession and an acute sense of uncertainty. The impact of the years as an institutionalised, lonely child without a family began to tell. And he began also to realise what had been done to him. He suffered recurring nightmares about his time at Kinchela.

He became a very prominent and articulate advocate of Aboriginal rights making enemies as well as friends. Eventually he researched his own Aboriginal and family past for the first time and found out much more about his ancestry than he had known. Along the way he had many conflicts with other Aboriginal leaders especially on the issue of land rights, and became a controversial figure with his own people. But his finest hour came with his flamboyant publicity stunt on the White Cliffs of Dover. He had become Burnum Burnum, 'the Warrior of Peace', the storyteller and performer in his final form of self-representation after a troubled journey through childhood to maturity. He had maintained throughout a steady optimism about the future of white/black relationships in Australia that he never wavered from and which he expressed succinctly in his prize-winning essay:

Integration as far as we [the Aboriginal people] are concerned is accepting white man's law and yet at the same time retaining our own culture within the structure of modern society. Ideally both black and white will enjoy and appreciate to the fullest extent the very best aspects of each culture. What could be more beautiful than a Namatjira painting or more relaxing than the pastoral scene in Beethoven's 6th Symphony?³⁵



Harry Penrith as Burnum Burnum, 1988

Having stated his credo, he continued to pursue it emphasising the vital role of education through his life's often troubled journey.

NOTES

- 1. Elizabeth Knowles (ed.), The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations, Fifth Edition, Oxford University Press, 1999, p.169.
- Marlene J. Norst, A Warrior for Peace. Burnum Burnum, Kangaroo Press, Sydney, 1999, p.133.
- 3. Independent, 20 August 1997.
- 4. David Stewart (ed.), Burnum Burnum's Australia. A Traveller's Guide, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1988, p.7, p. 314; Norst, op. cit., p.12.
- 5. Norst, op. cit., p.13.
- 6. Henry James Penrith's birth certificate, NSW Office of Births, Deaths and Marriages; also cited in Norst, op. cit., pp.13-14.
- 7. Norst, op.cit., p.315.
- 8. Brian Grace, 'Harry Penrith "A Life's Dream Emerges", Aboriginal News, Department of Aboriginal Affairs, Canberra, vol.1, no.4, February 1975.
- 9. E.J. Telfer, Amongst Australian Aborigines. Forty Years of Missionary Work. The Story of the United Aborigines' Mission, self published by the Rev. E.J. Telfer, Sydney, 1939, p.144.
- 10. Ibid., p.222.
- 11. Norst, op. cit., pp.15-16.
- 12. For further detail see Carmel Bird (ed.), The Stolen Generation their Stories, Random House, Sydney, 1998, p; Tikka Jan Wilson, In the Best Interest of the Child? Stolen children: Aboriginal pain/ White shame, Link Up (NSW) Aboriginal Corporation of Aboriginal History Inc. 1997, 238p; Bringing Them Home. Report of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, www.austlii.edu.au (Stolen Generation website).
- 13. Unpublished document held in the private collection of his widow, Sydney.
- 14. 'Harry Penrith. A Personality and a Purpose', Dawn, July 1963.
- 15. See Erving Goffman, Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and other Inmates, Aldine, Chicago, 1961.
- 16. Photograph in the private collection of the author.
- 17. Bomaderry Public School Admission Book, NSW Department of Education documents, State Records Office of New South Wales, Kingswood, NSW.
- 18. Norst, op. cit., pp.17-18.
- 19. Harry Penrith. A Personality and a Purpose', op. cit.
- 20. Burnum Burnum's Australia, op.cit., p.65.
- 21. Ibid
- 22. Cited from Bringing them Home Report in Peter Pierce, The Country of Lost Children. An Australian Anxiety, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, p.200.
- 23. 'Kinchela is a Model Home—Boys are happy and well trained', Dawn, December 1954
- 24. See John Ramsland, 'The agricultural colony at Mettray for delinquent boys' in David Stockley (ed.) *Melbourne Studies in Education*, La Trobe University Press, 1989, pp.64-80.
- 25. 'Kinchela Home. A Successful Venture', Dawn, February 1954.
- 26. 'Happy Homes. Children make good progress', Dawn, March 1952.
- 27. Ibid
- 28. 'Kinchela Home. A Successful Venture', op. cit.

- 29. 'Kinchela Notes! Sport. Music. Education. Employment', Dawn, September 1952.
- 30. Ibid.
- 31. Inside front cover, Dawn, February 1953.
- 32. For example, *Dawn*, September 1952, February 1954, June 1954, December 1954, November 1963, July 1965.
- 33. Interview with Harry Penrith, cited in Norst, op. cit., p.19.
- 34. Cited in Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their family (Bringing Them Home Report), Commonwealth Government of Australia, 1997.
- 35. Harry Penrith, 'The Future of Aborigines in Australia', *Dawn* (National Aborigines' Day Observance Day. First place prize-winning essay, senior section), July 1965, pp.5-7.