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| The Ten Big Fictions of Rabbit-Proof Fence  | PDF | Print | E-mail |

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|  Keith WindschuttleMay 2010The 2002 film, *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, directed by Phil Noyce, is advertised as “a true story”. It is anything but. The film tells at least ten major untruths.1. The three girls Molly, Gracie and Daisy were not taken by surprise and removed by force from Jigalong. The violent removal scene in the film is entirely fictional. The girls’ mothers knew beforehand they were to go with Constable Riggs and, without any protest, they reluctantly acquiesced in the removal. The girls left Jigalong on horseback, not locked in a motor car.2. The Western Australian Chief Protector, A.O. Neville, did not remove the girls as part of some government plan to “breed out the colour”. Molly, aged 14, and Gracie, aged 11, were removed because they were having sex with the white fence workers who stopped at the Jigalong depot overnight. Fifteen years earlier, Molly’s mother had done the same with a young English fence inspector, who soon moved on. At the time, in all Australian states, under-age white girls were removed for the same reason.3. Daisy, aged 8, was removed because she was betrothed to marry a full-blood Aboriginal man old enough to be her grandfather. In traditional Aboriginal society, girls this age could be married. They had sexual relations immediately. Daisy could be removed from Jigalong under the 1905 Aboriginal Act because she was a half-caste girl. Had she been a full-blood Aborigine she could not have been legally removed and would have had to go through with the marriage. The lay missionary Mary Bennett told the Moseley Royal Commission in 1934 that if full-blood girls who married at this age conceived, the babies always died either before or during childbirth, and the child mother often died with them.4. The speech in the film to a Perth ladies charity society by actor Kenneth Branagh, playing A.O. Neville, was never made by the real Neville. The words did not come from a transcript found in any historical archive but were created for the film by screenwriter Christine Olsen.5. When the girls were removed in 1931, Neville did not have control over the marriages of all the Aborigines in the state. The Western Australian government never gave him either the legal authority or the funding to manage Aboriginal people’s affairs in the way the film alleges.6. The Moore River Settlement was not an institution solely for children, as the film depicts. It was a welfare settlement for Aborigines of all ages. Most of its children went there with their parents. When the three girls arrived in 1931, unaccompanied children were in a minority, comprising only 64 of the 400 inhabitants. Between 1915 and 1940, an average of only ten unaccompanied children a year were sent to Moore River. In 1931, Molly, Gracie and Daisy were three of only four children in the whole state sent there, out of an Aboriginal population of 29,000.7. The Moore River Settlement was not, as the film portrays it, a prison. Most Aboriginal people went there voluntarily and temporarily to gain access to welfare. Between 1930 and 1934 Moore River admitted 1067 people, but over the same period 1030 people voluntarily left.8. On their great trek home, the girls were not pursued by a sympathetic black tracker.9. They did not receive any help along the way from a sexually-exploited Aboriginal domestic servant. 10. They did not cross the north-western desert unassisted, nearly perishing in the process. The girls were eventually brought home to Jigalong by a white cattle station contractor, riding on his camels.The filmmakers did very little original research themselves. Instead, their main source the book written by Molly’s daughter, Doris Pilkington, called *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996), which they adapted with creative licence. If history teachers insist on discussing this topic, they will find the book a much more reliable resource than the film. Indeed, Pilkington did a good job of research and most of what she says is backed by evidence. Her only serious mistake was to believe that the Moore River Settlement was an institution exclusively for children. Her book does not contain a number of the film’s anachronisms about Neville’s ad­ministration and, unlike the film, does not invent scenes for dramatic effect.All the above information about the three girls is discussed in more detail and with complete references to sources in the Preface to *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History, Volume Three, The Stolen Generations*. Chapter Eight contains a detailed account of the number of admissions, policies and conditions at the Moore River Settlement.In December 2009, the film’s director Phil Noyce and screenwriter Christine Olsen responded in the press to my criticisms of their work. Noyce said I was “either extremely lazy or just plain dishonest” in my examination of the evidence (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 December 2009, p 4). To establish their case, Noyce and Olsen produced a letter by the Superintendent of the Jigalong depot, A.J. Keeling, written on July 10, 1930. Although Keeling had earlier argued for the removal of the three half-caste girls because they “were not getting a fair chance as the blacks consider the half-castes inferior to them”, in this letter he reconsidered his position. “They lean very much towards the black and on second thought I don’t suppose there would be much gained in removing them.” But the letter does not prove anything. When he received Keeling’s letter in July, Neville did not act on it. He did not take a decision to remove the girls until five months later. The real catalyst was a letter he received from a different source. On 9 December 1930, Mrs Chellow of Murra Munda Station near Jigalong wrote to him about Molly and Gracie’s behavior. “I think you should see about them as they are running wild with the whites”. It was only after receiving this letter that Neville put in motion the procedures that would eventually see the girls sent to Moore River in July 1931.At the time, ladies like Mrs Chellow could not frankly discuss sex­ual matters in an official letter, but there is no doubting the message she wanted to convey. “Running wild”, when applied to girls, was a contemporary euphemism for promiscuity; “running wild with the whites” meant Molly and Gracie were having sex with the whites. Doris Pilkington disputes this. She responded to my interpretation by saying her mother told her “running wild” simply meant that the girls were watching musterers catch and brand calves, “cheering them on and all that”. (*The Australian*, 15 December 2009, p 7) It is understandable that Mrs Pilkington would want to defend her mother’s reputation but women of Mrs Chellow’s generation (like my own mother and her friends, who commonly used the term to describe promiscuous teenage girls) knew well what it meant. The phrase came from the title song of the 1923 American musical review “Runnin’ Wild” by Arthur Gibbs, Joseph Grey and Leo Wood. Anyone in doubt about its contemporary meaning should check out the movie *Some Like it Hot* where Marilyn Monroe sings a very raunchy version. |