

Preface

The oral histories in this book include those of former female child patients who were sent to Goodna Asylum, later known as Wolston Park, an adult psychiatric facility in Queensland, Australia. This book grew out of a temporary touring exhibition that I curated, 'Inside: Life in Children's Homes and Institutions', which opened at the National Museum of Australia in November 2011. At the opening of that exhibition, I observed both celebration and resolution among former residents of children's institutions who, to this day, suffer the long-term effects of the abuse and neglect they experienced as children. However, there was little joy from the women who had been sent to Goodna. The exhibition did not assuage their feelings of resentment and lack of trust of those who inhabited professional positions. These women had unfinished business. At the launch of the exhibition, they turned to me and asked: 'Are you going to help us get justice?'

Within the wider history of institutionalised 'care' in Australia, I knew that the history of children in Wolston Park was marginalised and deserving of further attention. The 1998 Commission of Inquiry into the Abuse of Children in Queensland Institutions, known as the 'Forde Inquiry', had excluded adult psychiatric facilities from its terms of reference and so these former child inmates were ineligible for the subsequent financial redress scheme. On 24 March 2010, the Queensland Government had apologised to former children under state care who had been placed in adult mental hospitals, and had stated its intention to hold reconciliation talks with survivors. The framed apology document was subsequently lost and the government did not follow through with the reconciliation talks as promised. Even though my temporary position at the National Museum of Australia had concluded, I decided to do what I could—with my own personal resources, and within the bounds of my qualifications and area of professional expertise, as well as academic research ethics—to draw public attention to the experiences of this group of women

survivors. These oral histories are a mere sample of a cohort of former Goodna child patients who had been waiting for recognition of their childhood experiences and a just resolution. The research for this book was thus part of a wider campaign to seek justice for former state wards of adult psychiatric facilities.

The women were well-organised and highly articulate, but those in power continually refused to pay meaningful attention and follow-up of their legitimate and well-founded pleas. I wanted the Queensland Government to know that others, apart from these courageous survivors, were watching, and that their reasonable pleas mattered. I knew that the need for mediation by someone occupying a professional job was a form of elitism. They should have been acknowledged in their own right by those in power, as should their experiences of their own living history. The need for professional mediation and/or the clout from a prestigious organisation was a failure of democracy, in my view. Nevertheless, having been asked to assist, I chose to find out how I could shove my proverbial foot in a parliamentary door, knowing full well that I would likely be injured, discredited and scapegoated. The alternative—doing nothing—was not an option: the prospect of the distress I knew I would feel if I turned my back on these women seemed far worse. Further, in addition to writing and talking *about* a topic, I discovered the imperative to *do* something *with others*.

I applied to become an honorary fellow at The Australian National University (ANU) so that I could have access to research and ethical resources. In supporting my application, and through its ongoing professional disinterested role, ANU has become part of the living history that informs this book—a keen reminder of the need for independent universities. In 2012, the university's strategic communications team played a critical role in co-writing and distributing a media release about my research.¹ Subsequently, Fairfax Press printed a series of newspaper articles, written by Amy Remeikis, about the plight of Wolston Park survivors.² On 6 March 2013, the Queensland Government repeated the apology it had made in 2010, but, yet again, it did not schedule reconciliation talks with survivors.

1 'Remembering Forgotten Australians', 13 August 2012, ANU College of Arts and Social Sciences, accessed 5 October 2019, cass.anu.edu.au/news/remembering-forgotten-australians.

2 See, for example, Amy Remeikis, 'Come Clean on Chambers of Horrors, Sufferers Plead', 19 August 2012, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, accessed 5 October 2019, www.smh.com.au/national/come-clean-on-chambers-of-horrors-sufferers-plead-20120818-24fqx.html.

In 2013, a Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse was established by the Australian Government. I was asked to attend a private hearing on 24 April 2015 at which I spoke, tabled my research, and emphasised the importance of a public case study, as part of the commission, concerning the abuse of children in adult psychiatric facilities. The commission's refusal to act on this prompted me to write, in consultation with survivors, an opinion piece that was published online in 2016.³ Queensland's acting mental health commissioner took notice, contacting me a few days later⁴ and subsequently liaising with others within the Queensland Government. This seemed like a positive development, but there was no way to know whether the government would follow through with restorative justice. In February 2017, the Queensland Department of Health announced a formal reconciliation process for those who, 'as children, were in the care of the State and inappropriately placed in Queensland adult mental health facilities'.⁵

This was definite progress. Yet, no details concerning when the process would commence and whether or not it would result in reparation for survivors was released. Some of the women and I had been talking to journalist Matthew Condon in the hope that he might write a newspaper article informed by the voices of survivors. Condon's 5,000-word feature appeared in the *Courier Mail* on 11 March 2017.⁶ The title captured the struggle: 'House of Horrors—Survivors Fight for Justice after Enduring Unspeakable Abuse as Young Girls in a Brisbane Asylum'. Matthew Condon had joined the ranks of a small number of journalists—namely Ken Blanch, Steve Austin and Amy Remeikis—who understood the need to draw public attention to the women's quest for much needed recompense. Five days after Condon's article was published, Queensland's Minister for Health Cameron Dick spoke on radio about his commitment to an authentic reconciliation process, which, he assured, would include financial reparation.⁷ In October 2017, each of the survivors who had participated in the reconciliation process received letters from the

3 Chynoweth, 'Who Is Protected'.

4 Email to author, 27 March 2016.

5 Queensland Government, *Fact Sheet 1*, 1.

6 Matthew Condon, 'House of Horrors—Survivors Fight for Justice after Enduring Unspeakable Abuse as Young Girls in a Brisbane Asylum', *The Courier Mail*, 11 March 2017.

7 This occurred on ABC Radio, Brisbane, 16 March 2017. The reporter was Steve Austin.

Queensland Government that detailed a list of reparations, including ex gratia payments. It had been almost six years since the opening of the 'Inside' exhibition and the call for justice.

The research that informed our campaign is now made public in these pages. Through *Goodna Girls*, I hope for public acknowledgement of this living history so that it is never repeated. There are implications here for current child protection policies and for an inclusive public history. To those who hold power in the fields of law and government; who advise on policies; who analyse material culture; who keep, write and exhibit narratives; who are paid to care; who teach—I commend the narratives in this book as a baton for your steadfast hold and resolute journey along the path of justice.

Adele Chynoweth
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