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The Road to Hell: State Violence against Children in Postwar New Zealand

By Elizabeth Stanley, Auckland University Press, 2016

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THE ROAD TO Hell is a compelling, yet disturbing, narrative that exposes the institutional abuse of children in state care in Aotearoa New Zealand from the 1950s through to the 1980s and beyond. It traces the lived experiences of 105 contributors (the author's term) who were subjected to horrific and inhumane treatment as children after being removed from their whānau and families to be 'parented' by the state.

Taking a reflexive approach, Stanley introduces the topic, methodology, and research agenda. Her aims are to write against, not about, victimisation and challenge the denial of violence, which she achieves throughout the book. For instance, readers are implored to resist pathologising the individual child and consider the social power relations that underpin institutional violence towards children. Stanley reminds the reader to

ignore any ‘social reticence to hear painful stories that challenge common-sense notions of state protection’ because the tragedy inherent in these stories must be recognised and heard (158). By ‘respectfully hearing their accounts, contributors claim a sense of dignity. The resulting boost to self-esteem allows them to stand, as peers, alongside others’ (161).

More than 100,000 children were placed under state care and subjected to abhorrent treatment, which is unquestionably concerning, especially when we consider that abuse and neglect also affect successive generations and wider whānau and family units. The contributors in this work were necessarily purposeful (as in access to legal claimants) and represent particular demographics and experiences within state-run institutional care which, as Stanley states astutely, means the work is a partial telling. The author acknowledges that these stories are a particular version of events in state care and encourages further research in order to understand the implications of gender, ethnicity, age, sexuality, and so forth. Of the contributors who were interviewed, 41 were men because few women are legal claimants. It is also imperative to understand positive or supportive experiences while in state care.

To make sense of the contributors’ experiences, *The Road to Hell* follows a chronological trajectory starting with the early-childhood victimisation that precipitated the institutional incarceration. Stanley considers Aotearoa New Zealand’s reprehensible history of family violence and does well to recognise the contextual factors that exacerbate such issues; there are stories of poverty, neglect, discrimination, and social marginalisation. She does well not to place blame on whānau or family and instead acknowledges the social contexts in which the violence is produced.

The book presents a historical analysis of the political and social climates that enabled state intervention in child-

care practices. Social discourses located blame for ‘problematic’ behaviour on children and argued that state care would restore morality and social control for those children. The painful, and often deceitful, process of removing children from whānau and families is described alongside the children’s initial experiences of adjusting to institutional hell. The conditions that cultivated the abhorrent treatment of the children are powerfully depicted. The work delineates the lack of adequate resourcing, staff training, administrative processes, and an ethics of care, which also contributed to the long-term operation of child-care institutions in Aotearoa New Zealand.

There are a number of chapters dedicated to exploring the contributors’ experiences and Stanley does an exemplary and sensitive job of describing the children’s plight in the bleak and abusive institutional settings. Although troubling to read, these chapters expose racism, discrimination, stigma, fear, violence, punishment, and control. Stanley mentions the over-representation of Māori in state institutions and adequately identifies the racist stereotyping that perpetuated many Māori being taken from whānau care; however, in my view there is room to explore further the practices of colonisation on the taking of Māori children forcefully by the state.

The Road to Hell also discusses the strategies children developed to survive the abusive environments and the ongoing lived consequences of being subjected to institutional harm. Lives lived in social isolation and exclusion, disadvantage, gangs, and substance abuse are described alongside stories of law-abiding outcomes and social success.

The last two chapters focus on how contributors deal with the past and how we as a nation should redress the wrongs. That contributors can challenge the state and seek justice is important to healing their whakapapa mamae (history of hurting). I commend the author for acknowledging the tension for

contributors as they rely on institutions of the state (for example Historical Claims Unit or Ministry of Social Development) to challenge the very actions of that state. The efficacy of work is realised with the comprehensive discussion on processes of recognition, reparation, and prevention to attend to the systematic victimisation of children by state authorities.

Stanley makes some sensible suggestions as to how the state's denial of institutional abuse and ways in which to address victimisation could be attended to. She recommends engaging a tripartite commission that officially recognises the harm endured, offers flexible and practical support for victims to repair their lives, and prevents children today from experiencing victimisation. A main source of concern and motivation for taking legal action for the contributors in the book is the hope that no other children should suffer needlessly as they did. Stanley provides an elaborate list of issues that children face today. It includes poverty, the continued pathologising and blaming of children, whānau and families when problems arise, over-representation of Māori and Pasifika children in care, and the lack of culturally appropriate responses.

Overall, the book provides an intriguing balance between academic rigour and lived experiences as the contributors' testimonies are interspersed throughout the text. At times themes seem repetitive, but that could be due to the multifaceted and interconnected tentacles that encompass the many issues. Child Welfare records, psychiatric reports, physical health records, correctional, legal and governmental documents, and personal letters provide a comprehensive and contextual account of the contributors' experiences, the institutional settings, and the historical and political climate that engineered state care. The appendices provide interesting contextual information on the contributors and useful synopses of the state-run institutions.

The Road to Hell invokes a range of raw and uncomfortable emotions as it reveals details of abuse of innocent and defenceless children. I wonder if this is especially poignant for readers like me—children of the 70s and 80s—who experienced the social and political conditions of the time and who know of whānau and children who were in state care. Nevertheless, as distressing as it can be to read about the abuse of children and the epic failure of the state to protect and uphold its position of care, this is an important part of Aotearoa New Zealand’s human-rights history and, as such, it should not be denied. I commend the author for her unapologetic political crusade to expose the injustice and I humbly acknowledge the 105 contributors courageous enough to confront Aotearoa New Zealand’s abhorrent history of child welfare.

Further, this book brings to life and provides evidence to support the ongoing calls for a formal inquiry into the systemic abuse. While the state has compensated and apologised on a case-by-case basis, it refuses to hold an official inquiry, arguing that it would not resolve any claims and simply ‘revictimise’ the victims. However, enraged and astounded at the consistent refusal to grant an inquiry (another form of abuse by the state), ngā mōrehu, survivors of state care, and other concerned parties recently petitioned the government to conduct an inquiry and apologise for the injustices that were endured. A Waitangi Tribunal claim has also been lodged calling for an independent inquiry to unpack the reasons why a disproportionate number of ngā mōrehu are Māori. Māori were overtly targeted and forced into state care; practices of institutional racism and discrimination occurred.

Without an inquiry, the magnitude of the abuse and the ongoing implications will remain unknown. With an inquiry, the state can develop more ethically informed and culturally sensitive childcare policies and practices. *The Road to Hell* is a timely

reminder for our recently restructured Ministry of Vulnerable Children that the state must take responsibility for and accept its role in the historical abuse of children in its many forms and address its problematic institutional practices so it does not repeat mistakes and our future generations have a much better chance to enjoy a life well-lived.

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