

Stanley, Elizabeth. *The Road to Hell: State Violence against Children in Postwar New Zealand*. Oxford: Auckland University Press, 2016. Pp.285. Paper: \$45.00.

Over the past quarter century many Western nations have instigated inquiries into the historical abuse of children in institutional care. New Zealand, however, stands out as an exception to this trend, steadfastly rejecting claims from care leavers to publicly testify about their experiences. Elizabeth Stanley's book, *The Road to Hell*, calls for this decision to be reversed, arguing that the 100,000 children removed to state care from the 1950s to the 1980s were the victims of 'abysmal conditions, inadequate resources, dysfunctional workers, social isolation and cultural dislocation' (2), which left them ill prepared for adult life.

The book is based on the experiences of 105 people who have or are in the process of taking action against the government through a law firm specialising in such cases. The sample, Stanley concedes, is unbalanced, reflecting those who are prepared to go through this process, primarily Pakeha (white) males, and makes no claim for the findings to be universal. The focus is on state institutions, so the experiences of those placed in religious institutions or foster homes, sites which have proved significant in similar countries, are not included. Nor does the study seek to explore the views of the caregivers and policy makers in the sector. Through a mix of interviews, documentary and case file analysis she constructs a picture of a system that was dysfunctional while consistently blaming its failure on the problems of individuals.

Despite the limits of the study, Stanley's findings parallel those of the much larger public inquiries in Australia and other similar countries. The postwar faith in institutions led to a reliance on institutions rather than preventive services for struggling families. Whatever their background, children entering the care system were 'othered', seen both as a problem and a potential threat to the future of the nation. This categorisation then justified both a standard of care and a disciplinary model that fell far short of that offered to most children in the community. The institutions in which they were confined were poorly staffed and subject to minimal inspection with the emphasis always being on control rather than care. The 105 stories explored here expose a reliance on psychiatric medication rather than therapy, labour rather than education, in an environment ruled by violence and abuse. Such experiences in childhood left survivors estranged from their families and ill equipped to make meaningful relationships and build satisfying careers. Nor does the system make it simple for victims to seek compensation. Records are often minimal, and almost universally negative, and access is difficult, and the documents that are released are subject to redaction.

By refusing to institute an inquiry, Stanley contends that the New Zealand state is denying its complicity in such systematic abuse, a complicity which she condemns. For victims to get justice, she believes, the government should institute a tripartite commission similar to the Irish inquiry and the current Australian Royal Commission. Its recognition committee would

hear the victims' testimonies in order to educate the public about the conditions they endured. A repair committee would be charged with providing structured redress to assist the victims to live more meaningful lives, and a prevention committee would make recommendations to ensure that similar abuse is not allowed to occur in the future.

Such a commission Stanley believes would transform the current image of victims as ungrateful and money-grubbing, shifting the focus of blame from the individual to the state. Certainly similar inquiries in other countries have been successful in raising the profile of victims, however, that shift can be threatened when the argument moves to economics, with the issue of monetary compensation rarely adequately resolved.

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