

SPEECH DELIVERED BY CHRISTOPHER BEVAN, AUTHOR, ON THE LAUNCH OF HIS NOVEL, *A KINCHELA BOY*, ON THURSDAY, 4 NOVEMBER 2010 BY HER EXCELLENCY, PROF. MARIE BASHIR, AC CVO, GOVERNOR OF NEW SOUTH WALES, IN THE PRESENCE OF SIR GERARD BRENNAN, AC KBE QC AND CECIL BOWDEN, A KINCHELA BOYS' HOME SURVIVOR AND ONE OF THE KINCHELA BOYS ON WHOM THE NOVEL IS BASED

Your Excellency, Sir Gerard Brennan, Cecil Bowden, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

I acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, on whose land we stand, and the Dungutti people of the Macleay River District of New South Wales, whose story I have told in my novel as much as I have told the Kinchela Boys' story.

I acknowledge the Kinchela Boys' Association, the survivors of Kinchela Boys' Home, who count themselves amongst this nation's infamous Stolen Generations.

I acknowledge the late Sir Ronald Wilson, one of Sir Gerard's brethren, and author of *Bringing Them Home*, the Report on the 1994 National Enquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families.

That report was as much the genesis of my novel as were my own experiences in Kempsey – near Kinchela Boys' Home - from 1980-1989 as a young solicitor.

Finally, I acknowledge Kevin Rudd, now this country's Foreign Minister, for his official apology to the Stolen Generations from the floor of the Commonwealth Parliament in 2008.

Kevin Rudd's watershed apology, made as the Prime Minister and leader of a new Government, enabled me to publish a novel about the Stolen Generations after a 12 year period during which any concept of an official apology was frowned upon.

It was frowned upon by the previous government and by many of our fellow Australians as the high water mark of the "Black arm-band view of history". It was an attitude to the Stolen Generations which made the successful publication of this short novel well-nigh impossible; at least, it made it impossible for 12 years (1996-2008).

Kevin Rudd's national apology engaged the Australian public on an issue it had been in denial about, not merely for 12 years, but for 40 years since the State laws all around Australia which implemented the ill-fated Aboriginal assimilation policies that created the Stolen Generations were repealed in 1970, after 50 years of official childhood separation of Aboriginal children with some (any) white heritage.

Finally, I thank those present for coming to listen to me explain how he came to write a fictional account of the first decade of his practice of the law by writing the story of every boy who set foot in this State's largest home for aboriginal boys after removal from their families as preschoolers and primary schoolers in the name of racial assimilation, and I thank Goanna Press, a small independent publishing house, for having the courage to publish a novel no other publisher would publish.

In July 1980, I arrived in Kempsey, northern New South Wales, to practise law. I had just turned 23. I knew nothing – absolutely nothing – about this nation's Stolen Generations. But I learnt about them once I arrived in Kempsey; I learnt fast.

Much of my work was appearing in criminal courts up and down the North Coast and Northern Tablelands for people on Legal Aid and Aboriginal Legal Aid. I heard stories about Kinchela

Boys' Home from the families of people I appeared for. It seemed that if they were not in Kinchela then they knew someone who was.

Kinchela Boys never – or hardly ever – spoke about their own experiences there. But the families spoke of the experiences of their friends and fathers in Kinchela.

As I got to know aboriginal families of the Macleay, Hastings and Manning River Districts and Northern Tablelands, through my work for them, they endeared themselves to me with their shy, almost introverted manner, their abiding sense of humour and self-deprecation, and above all else their emotional resilience in the face of daily hardships: hardships at the hands of the criminal justice system, the social welfare system, their constant struggle with alcohol abuse and clan violence.

My firm had an office in South West Rocks - I drove to it regularly to see clients. It was the highlight of my week, both the drive there and back and my time there.

It is one of the prettiest stretches of road in Australia, following the southern bank of the mighty Macleay River for most of the second half of the journey after leaving Gladstone, an undulating road surface from many floods over the years requires a slow pace, as does the proximity of the narrow road to the river bank.

On the right hand side of the road is Kinchela, two kilometres past the Hat Head turnoff, just over the bridge at Killick Creek. There stands the old Kinchela Boys' Home.

In 1980 – 10 years after its closure as a boys' home – it was being used as a new drug and alcohol rehabilitation centre for aboriginal people: Bennelong's Haven.

By then it was on Dungutti land. The New South Wales Government had given the Dungutti people back their land in the late 1970s - and with it the buildings that housed the boys' home – and above all else, the bone-dry swimming pool . All but the swimming pool remain to this day. In 1980 it was in original condition: dormitories on poles above the floodwaters covered in peeling pale blue paint.

I had to pinch myself when I came to learn the history of the boys' home that was Bennelong's Haven. On the land of the proud Dungutti people stood the boys' home that turned so many of its own boys into men who needed drug and alcohol rehabilitation. The irony of that grand gesture by our State Government never left me.

Each time I drove past the boys' home I swear I could hear the voices of 50 adolescent boys laughing and hoo-haa-ing and shouting out taunts to each other.

The front gate – a galvanised steel affair with cyclone wire mesh – had long gone. I am told one of the Kinchela boys now has it as a souvenir. How appropriate.

During the first years of the boys' home, in the 1930s, the depths of the Great Depression, the boys in the machine shop made up letters which spelt in block letters 'KINCHELA BOYS HOME' without the apostrophe , on top of the gate.

A drawing of it appears on the back cover of the novel. It looks so homely, but it is beguiling, suggesting a threshold to a boarding school instead of a living purgatory.

In 1989 I left Kempsey I came to live in Sydney after a decade as an advocate for the Kinchela Boys and their families and solicitor for the Dungutti Land Council.

The Kinchela Boys' story stayed with me all the time after I came back to Sydney. It stayed with me after my life took a different direction, for their story was now part of my own life story. It was part of my own experience of the Macleay River District. I was fascinated with the Kinchela Boys' story and the Dungutti people's story. I knew my fellow Australians would be. I thought I could tell their stories for them in a way which would be true to them and myself, in a way which would honour my time with them as their lawyer and friend, and now as their biographer.

The Kinchela Boys' story festered inside me like an infected. I knew that the only way to close the wound was to expel the story. I wanted to tell it but did not know how. I had no training as a professional writer.

I wanted to tell the Kinchela Boys' story and the story of the Dungutti people, but I had no time: I had a wife, four children, and a busy practice at the NSW Bar.

Time wore on. As it did, a picture of Mick Mahoney started to form in my mind - It became even clearer when I read Sir Ronald's Stolen Generations' report. It is redolent with true stories – heart-rending anecdotes – about Kinchela Boys' Home. That detailed anecdotal evidence told me what they themselves could not tell me. Mick's character became real in my mind's eye. I had come to know him well.

A decade ago I bought a large painting, *Two Aboriginal Stockmen at the Races*, which I had had my eye on for 15 years. It is an acrylic on board work by the late Patrick Hockey: life-sized figures of two aboriginal stockmen in Stetsons beside an outback racetrack. It is a large work with a bright blue sky and a flock of kites.

The figure on the right is skinny and diminutive. I called him Mick Mahoney. His figure – the stripling in the green shirt – is on the front cover of the novel. I knew straight away he was my central character and that is what he looks like. His pot-bellied friend, perhaps 15 years older, I called Cecil Hoeben, Keg to his friends, who are Kinchela Boys, the tribe which Keg leads inside Grafton Gaol.

I had my foil, a strong man: Mick's guardian angel, his big brother and mentor. But I still had no time. I was working 60 hours a week as a journeyman advocate. I was also working as a lecturer on taxation law, writing text books on capital gains tax, corporations law and stamp duties, and also trying to be a father to four children.

I also had no skill at writing. I have never attended so much as a creative writing workshop let alone taken a degree in creative writing or even in English literature.

In 2002, I hit the wall. I had one serious illness after another for the next 6 years. Many of you here at the NSW Bar know my story. You well know that I consider myself very lucky just to be here thanking Her Excellency for launching my novel.

The Lord works in mysterious ways. For the first time in my life I had time on my hands: time to think, time to re-order my thoughts, time to reassess my priorities. He was talking to me: "I have given you time, use it well, use it to learn to write".

I realised now was the time to write the Kinchela Boys' story, to tell it candidly. But first I had to teach myself to write fiction – a spare, flinty brand of fiction.

So in my long periods of convalescence I turned to reading books on the art of fiction and I increased my reading and re-reading of the works of great novelists.

In the course of reading I came across a statement by the 19th century American novelist, Henry James. It was a turning point in my life as a literary neophyte, a status I acknowledge I will always retain, having come to writing fiction in mid-life with no apprenticeship as a journalist, scriptwriter, short-story writer or essayist.

James said: To tell an aspect of the human condition which changes the reader's outlook on their fellow man, do not write about mankind; write about **a** man. For it is only by allowing readers to live the life of that one man – to feel what he feels, to cry when he cries, to laugh when he laughs – that they can ever come to develop a new insight into the human condition, one they have never had before.

So I sat down and wrote the Kinchela Boys' story over 6 years: in long periods of convalescence and at night after arriving home from Chambers. On weekends, Saturday was set aside for the children's sports fixtures and preparation of next Monday's case. But Sunday was my writing day. Sunday became sacrosanct. I am indebted to my wife, Jenny, for her support of me as a writer learning his craft.

I admit it was hard: it was the hardest thing I have ever attempted in my life. When I finished it I had new friends: Mick and Keg and Simon Hanley and Adam Rhodes, all of them good friends I will carry with me forever. It may sound silly: befriending fictional characters, but it happens; it is the power of words as art. For Mick is an everyman: he is every Kinchela Boy I knew and heard about and read about, all rolled into one diminutive man who I consider to be a truly heroic figure.

A Kinchela Boy is also a story about the Dungutti people. I had the privilege to serve them until 1989 as their land council solicitor for most of that decade. They are a proud people and their story deserves to be rendered with exactly the same truth, empathy and, above all else, heroism as the Kinchela Boys' story deserves.

I trust I have done the cause of the Kinchela Boys and the Dungutti people justice. I hope that I have touched the same chord in them that I have in other readers, and I know I have done that to the latter from the feedback I have received from readers of the novel over the last few months.

I want to finish this speech by quoting from the novel. A row occurs between Mick and his de facto wife, Mary, on their way home from the Hat Head Surf Club reunion. It is told as flashback one year later when Mick is standing trial for Mary's murder.

Mary says these words to Mick which encapsulate the whole *Stolen Generations'* story for me:

“Mick ... I'm never going to really know who you are ... not till I know what you went through as a kid. ... what they did to you boys. Mum ... reckons you're still at the boys' home in your head but you won't ever let them let you go free, like your body left there all those years ago but your head's still stuck there. ... I'm not marrying no fella that's still stuck back at the boys' home, stuck there in his head, even if his body's free to come and go as it pleases. You following me, Mick ...?”

Thank you all for coming tonight.