

Rabbit-Proof Fence



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Film Guide **Brendan Maher**

Rabbit Proof Fence

Director Philip Noyce

Australia - USA/90 mins/2002/Colour

Cast

Everlyn Sampi Molly Craig

Tianna Sansbury Daisy Kadibill

Laura Monaghan Gracie Fields

David Gulpilil Moodoo

Ningali Lawford Maud

Myarn Lawford Molly's Grandmother

Deborah Mailman Mavis

Jason Clarke Constable Riggs

Kenneth Branagh A.O. Neville

Natasha Wanganeen

Nina, Dormitory Boss

Garry McDonald

Mr. Neal at Moore River

Roy Billing Police Inspector

Daisy Craig Kadibill Herself

Molly Craig Herself

Crew

Director/Producer Phillip Noyce

Producer Christine Olsen

Producer John Winter

Original Music Peter Gabriel

Director of Photography

Christopher Doyle

Editors Veronika Jenet, John Scott

Casting Christine King

Production Design Roger Ford

Art Director Laurie Faen

Set Decorator Rebecca Cohen

Costume Designer Roger Ford

Introduction

Set in 1930's Australia, *Rabbit Proof Fence* details the true story of a nine week trek made by three Aboriginal girls from the adoptive state home where they were forcibly taken, back to their family home. Philip Noyce's film tells us of a generation of Aboriginal children who, because of State Law in Australia, were removed from their homes in order to be re-educated and assimilated into the white community. *Rabbit Proof Fence* recounts the bravery of these individual children whilst also depicting the social and political views which caused their flight. The children's story is but one for what has become known in Australia as 'The Stolen Generation'

Director Philip Noyce

New South Wales-born, Philip Noyce is probably best known for his American films *Clear and Present Danger*, *Patriot Games* and *The Bone Collector*.

Despite these films being in the action/thriller genre, Noyce is also known for more studied pieces such as *The Quiet American* and *Rabbit Proof Fence*. Making films since he was a teenager (he used to sell roles to his friends to finance his films), Noyce was picked to study at the inaugural Australian Film School in Sydney in 1973. *Castor and Pollux* a 50 - minute documentary about two rebellious brothers, which he made at College, won the award for the best Australian short film in 1974.

Noyce first visited an Aboriginal theme in 1977 when he directed *Backroads* which starred activist Gary Foley. The film was a road movie following five companions across Australia. In 1978, Noyce directed and co-wrote *Newsfront* an award laden and commercial hit in Australia. Following a number of years directing American TV shows such as *The Hitchhiker*, Noyce's introduction into the Hollywood mainstream came by way of the well-

received *Dead Calm* in 1989. The film featured Nicole Kidman and Sam Neill.

Noyce continued to work in the thriller genre with films such as *Sliver* (1993) and *The Saint* (1997). His two films from Tom Clancy's books *Patriot Games* (1992) and *Clear and Present Danger* (1994) were generally well received. In advance of making *Rabbit Proof Fence*, he said:

"After ten years in Hollywood, I'm still an outsider, a migrant guest worker telling other people's stories. As a citizen of the world, without nationality, I've become the ultimate Hollywood foot soldier, directing action/adventure, escapist stories designed to mesmerize across all boundaries. I know that black-themed films have never worked at the Australian Cinema box office. But it's time to go home."

Noyce has most recently directed *Catch A Fire* (2006) - a film set in South Africa during the Apartheid years, detailing government oppression against white South Africans who opposed the regime.

Story Synopsis

The year is 1931, Molly, Gracie and Daisy are three Aboriginal girls of mixed parentage. They live with their mother Maud in the Bush near the remote depot of Jingalong in Western Australia.

The depot runs close to the State Barrier Fence, a wire construction that runs the length of the continent, designed to keep rabbits and other vermin from entering the area and eating the crops and vegetation.

As 'half-castes', the three girls have been ear-marked by the Chief Protector of Aborigines A.O. Neville and his Government department as suitable candidates for assimilation into white Australian society. This is part of Government policy.

The girls are forcibly taken away from their mother and brought to the Moore River camp. This camp is a starting point, where the girls will learn English and be trained in basic tasks,



making them suitable for employment as domestic workers when they are older. The Camp is run strictly and wrongdoers are punished.

Molly decides to escape and takes her sisters with her. The children are discovered missing and an Aboriginal tracker Moodoo is sent after them. The girls keep ahead of Moodoo and live on what they can scavenge from the locations they find themselves in. One white woman gives them some food and tells them of the Rabbit Proof Fence that stretches close to her property. Molly realises that this fence, if followed, can logically lead them back to Jingalong.

They walk the length of the fence, dealing with drifters and farmers as they go. Gracie is captured again by the police, after taking a different route to reach her father. The government in Perth attempt to track the children, realising that they are using the State

Fence as a guide. But lack of funding and the difficult terrain frustrate the search and the children slip through.

The two girls cross the most hostile part of the terrain – the desert, guided in a mysterious way by a totemic bird. Maud is waiting for them at Jingalong and must ward off the local policeman by threatening violence. Reunited after the girl's 1,500 mile journey, the family head into the bush, safe for a while, out of reach of Government agencies.

The film moves forward to the present and we see the real Molly and Daisy walking in the bush.

Historical Context Modern Australian History and the Aborigines

In 1788 there were an estimated 750,000 Aborigines on the Australian continent. By the 1890's, there were only 100,000 with three and a half million European settlers now living there.

Australia was initially used as a penal colony to cope with the overflow from British mainland and colonial prisons, as well as naval stop-off for trade with China. Settlement began in earnest in the 1840's and vast tracts of land were cleared for farming, forcing the indigenous Aboriginal population (who it's estimated had lived on the continent for 40,000 years previously) back from the traditional tribal areas. There were many small-scale violent clashes, but the Aborigines, with poorly developed weapons, were no match for the settlers and their attendant army firepower.

This forced dispossession of their land was one thing, given that the Aboriginal culture was very much linked to the land, but the Aborigines also came in contact with European diseases, which they had no immunity from. These diseases such as chickenpox, smallpox, influenza and



measles actually caused the majority of deaths amongst the native population.

The Aboriginal population eventually moved to the more arid and unuseable areas of the continent, where European settlement was sparse, or else became linked to fringe settlements near white villages and cities, eeking out a living from labouring or menial work. Some began to live on Christian mission stations, where they were educated and fed.

Historical Context The Stolen Generations

By the 1930's, when *Rabbit Proof Fence* is set, the native population had been drastically weakened. The Government regarded the indigenous population as a problem and thus looked at ways of solving that problem. One element of the problem was the existence of 'half castes' – children of mixed indigenous and European (white) parentage

The 1937 Federal Government Conference on Native Welfare concluded in its final report that: "...the destiny of the natives of Aboriginal origin, but not of the full blood, lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth, and it therefore recommends that all efforts be directed to that end."

This is related to the fact that the Government felt full blooded Aboriginal people were destined to be eventually

wiped out either through assimilation or a basic inability to survive and adapt to modern life.

The stated aims of the conference in regard to mixed-race children were: - to culturally assimilate mixed-descent Aborigines into contemporary Australian society so as to aid in the biological assimilation of the native race.

"Generally by the fifth and invariably by the sixth generation, all native characteristics of the Australian Aborigine are eradicated. The problem of our half-castes will quickly be eliminated by the complete disappearance of the black race, and the swift submergence of their progeny in the white."

Dr Cecil Cook - Aboriginal Protector, Northern Territory

This statement is made visible by the lecture given by A.O. Neville in the film where he shows in slides the visual features of an Aborigine who has descended through generations of white relations.

It is estimated that between the 1900's and 1969 (when the policy officially ended) 100,000 mixed race children were taken from their parents and forcibly brought to white foster parents, missions or other government institutions. Here their native culture and language was disallowed and they were educated in English and in basic labouring jobs and thus assimilated into white culture.

This re-absorption programme did wipe out the native cultural heritage of many young Australians, but it has been found that such a re-socialisation process did not have the success it was hoped for. Leaving governmental control at the age of eighteen, the removed children in line with the rest of the native population showed high levels of substance abuse and crime (they were three times as likely to have a police record). Astonishingly, they were also less likely to have received a secondary education. The main advantage noted, was that they usually had a higher level of income, mainly due to the fact that many had moved to urban areas, where work was more plentiful.

Many of the 'Stolen Generations' report as adults, of difficulties in coming to terms with their background and with their heritage. Much initial governmental documentation was lost or not even taken down, so some of the individuals have no way of finding their parents or forebears.

The actual Rabbit-Proof Fence

The rabbit proof fence that the children use as their guide to get home actually exists in Western Australia.

The fence was erected due to the introduction of European animals to Australia. Rabbits were released into the Australian wild as early as 1756 as a sport for hunters. Quickly large groups bred and in eating the natural vegetation, could clear vast swathes of crops or foliage on the land. This led to soil erosion (the lack of vegetative growth caused the roots to loosen the soil) and to the destruction of other animal life due to the lack of a food source in the areas affected.

This problem was so acute that between 1901 and 1907, the No 1 Rabbit Proof Fence, also known as State Barrier Fence was put up. It stretches 1822 kilometres from Starvation

Harbour in the south to Walla near Port Hedland in the north. The aim is to keep rabbits and other vermin out of Western Australia.

The first fence failed even as it was being put up and two other fences were built. No. 2 Fence is shorter and to the West, and the smaller east-west directional No. 3 fence. All three fences together are over 3,000 km long. The Fence required a large amount of maintenance with horses, camels, bicycles and cars all being used at one point or another to bring fence inspectors and workmen along the route.

The use of the viral disease 'myxomatosis' was allowed in the early 1950's. The disease only affects rabbits and is transmitted by mosquitoes. The disease killed millions of rabbits and halted the rabbit explosion for a time. Other controls and poisons were used in the latter part of the century, however it is still estimated that rabbits cost farmers in Australia upwards of \$Au600m a year

The use of such fences is common in Australia – the Dingo Fence was erected in the late 1800's and was used to protect sheep flocks in Queensland (5,000 km long) and recently, there was a request that a fence be erected in the Northern Territory to protect areas from the cane toad.

Characterisation A.O. Neville

There has been some controversy about the depiction of the real life A.O. Neville (played by Kenneth Branagh) in the film.

As shown in the film, he was the Chief Protector of Aborigines and was assigned that role in 1915. This role gave him the powers to protect the native population from acts of oppression and encroachment on their territory. It also has been suggested that the role became one of social control and that the Protector's Office assumed many other duties including

designating where an Aboriginal person could or couldn't live; making local regulations governing their conduct and controlling their assets. He also had the power to decide who Aborigines could or couldn't marry and who could and couldn't work.

In the film, Neville is shown as a rigid authoritarian figure. He believes that he is helping the Aboriginal population and the policy of assimilation will ultimately be of benefit to them. This leads us to think that he may actually be well meaning despite holding beliefs that have long been discredited. Allied to that, he is the symbol of the Government and educated white opinion in the film. He believes in and presides over a policy of Social Darwinism.

Neville is also shown as being concerned with money – he asks the police official to cover the costs of the search and there is mention of costs and budgets throughout the film. This seems to refer to historical fact that the Government Centres where the children were kept were poorly run and in bad repair. However it is recorded that Neville once disagreed with the viewpoint that his charges should have as much food as convicts, saying that this would make the Aborigines idle.

Despite being seen in an office, for most of the film, Neville is not afraid in being involved in the day-to-day task of assessing the children. Visiting the Moore River Centre, he checks their skin colour to see which of the children can be further integrated. However, he seems to view the children as livestock of some sort. This scene suggests that his viewpoint is somewhat arbitrary but one not to be disagreed with.

One of the unusual decisions in the film is to shoot Neville's office scenes at a slight angle. This type of angle is called a 'dutch angle' where the camera is placed in such a way as to unbalance the normal horizontal aspect of the frame. The angle

Social Darwinism

One of the more unfortunate ways of adapting one theory to fit into a field where it clearly is at odds is the notion of Social Darwinism. Taking Charles Darwin's axiom of the strongest and fittest surviving from his theories, which suggested that a process of natural selection is at play as a species evolves over the course of generations. (*Origin of the Species* – 1859) was the starting point.

Writers such as Herbert Spencer, Thomas Malthus, and Francis Galton then moved this 'survival of the fittest' theory from a biological sphere to a human social study sphere. This inevitably led to some social groups believing that they were superior to other 'weaker' groups. This must be related back to the Enlightenment idea that human society was always developing and progressing. For the Social Darwinist, therefore those societies or societal groups who did not progress, seemed not to wish to progress or lagged behind these developments were somehow inferior.

This belief in the inferiority of some individuals and group led to the viewpoints expressed by Neville in 'Rabbit Proof Fence' and the state policy in Australia at the time. Other countries were also touched to varying degrees as the social darwinist viewpoint came into vogue - most notoriously Nazi Germany and its belief that the Aryan race was superior to all others. The theory perhaps reached its zenith with the writings of Francis Galton, whose adaptation of Darwin's work (1865) came to be known as Eugenics. This theory proposed the eventual elimination of inferior human beings by reducing certain groups (those on welfare, those in asylums etc.) capacity to have offspring.

Some societies (in the 20th Century) eventually activated this theory by the genocide or forced sterilisation of targeted groups.

Rabbit-Proof Fence

creates a sense of unease in the viewer and suggests a world that is out of kilter.

Above all Neville is a paternalistic character, who is happy to offer advice and comment on the Aboriginal issue. Before the Royal Commission in 1934, he defended his policies saying that “they (the Aborigines) have to be protected against themselves whether they like it or not. They cannot remain as they are. The sore spot requires the application of the surgeon’s knife for the good of the patient, and probably against the patients will.”

Music Peter Gabriel

Philip Noyce’s diary recounts British rock singer Peter Gabriel’s involvement on the *Rabbit Proof Fence* soundtrack: “December 2000. Having completed seven weeks of shooting in the barren Flinders Ranges of South Australia, Cinematographer Chris Doyle and I fly directly to Ho Chi Minh City to begin pre-production on *The Quiet American*. From Vietnam I continue to London in search of a Vietnamese actress to fill the role of Michael Caine’s mistress in the Graham Greene story. At the Metropolitan Hotel I meet up with Peter Gabriel and offer him the choice of two film projects as composer. *The*

Quiet American comes with a music budget of half a million dollars. On a whim, I also tell him the story of *Rabbit-Proof Fence* though I can’t help but honestly report that we can only afford recording costs – there is no money for a composer’s fee. From that night to this I’ve never seen Peter Gabriel in person again. But for the next ten months we enjoyed one of the closest collaborations I’ve ever had with a film composer. When he accepted the job Peter said that he wanted to make music that ‘came out of the earth itself.’ Month after month my sound team would send the real sounds of the Australian bush to Peter’s studios in Bath, England. Via mp3 file, Peter emails back the results of the samples that he and his team have orchestrated into a musical score. My assistant downloads the files, presses countless CDs and we experiment mixing the music with the film’s soundtrack in a continuous five month sound mix. It’s as if our mixing console at Fox Studios in Sydney is linked via the internet to Real World Studios in Bath.”

Final Note

Rabbit Proof Fence is an emotional film, detailing in one story the fate of a

generation of young Australian children who were taken from their parents in the mid-part of the last century.

The children’s journey is an epic tale, suggesting a strength of character and understanding of the landscape that belies their young age.

The film deals delicately with forced removal of this generation of children. It maintains a middle-ground between the reality of the cruelties that were inflicted on the young people and their families and not allowing the natural emotion of the story to descend into hysteria.

The film did bring to the attention of the current generation of Australians, the notion of the ‘Stolen Generations’ a group of mixed race native people who had for a number of years been clamoring for recognition of the essential wrong that was perpetrated against them.

Further Information

‘Bringing them Home’ - report on the Stolen Generations: www.austlii.edu.au/au/special/rsjproject/rsjlibrary/hreoc/stolen/

‘Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence’ by Doris Pilkington - University of Queensland Press (1996).

