

Flight Katharine Susannah Prichard

Katharine Susannah Prichard (1863–1969) was an Australian journalist and writer who lived for most of her life on the outskirts of Perth in Greenmount, Western Australia. Her first prize-winning novel, The Pioneers, was published in 1915 while she was living and working in London. Her time in London, her first-hand experience of the WWI battlefields in northern France and the impact of the Russian revolution in 1917 confirmed her belief in pacifism and Marxism. In 1921, she became one of the founding members of the Communist Party of Australia.

This extract from Prichard's short story deals with removal of Aboriginal children from their families. This policy of cultural assimilation became legal practice in Australia in 1869 and remained so for the next one hundred years. It is estimated that at least 100,000 children were forcibly removed from their parents during this time. These children are sometimes called the 'stolen generation'.



Constable John O'Shea was an angry man as he rode away from Movingunda with three little half-caste girls strapped on behind him.

5 The only three white men on the station had watched, laughing and slinging off as he mounted and set out, a horde of aboriginal mothers and dogs yelping after him. Most of the native men were out mustering – thank God, O'Shea reflected – or there might have been more trouble.

10 For miles the women and dogs ran behind him, yelling and screaming; the children yelled and screamed to them. The women fell back at last, but the children kept on snivelling and wailing. [...]

15 Constable O'Shea resented having to pick up half-caste girls and send them down to government institutions at the request of the Aborigines Department. He considered it no job for a man who had to maintain the prestige of the force and uphold law and order in an outlying district.

20 But he had received instructions that three half-caste female children on Movingunda were to be sent down by the train which passed through Lorgans on the eighth of the month. So there was nothing for it but to collect the children, and hand them over to the officer who would be on the train.

25 A rotten business, it had been, removing the youngsters from their mothers. What a shrieking and howling, jabbering and imploring, with attempts to hide the children and run away with them into the bush! One of the gins and her terror-stricken kid had climbed a tree near the creek. It was not until after dark he had got that one, when mother and child crept back and were sleeping by the camp-fire.

30 Constable O'Shea sweated and swore as he thought of it, and the laughing-stock he had been to the white men on Movingunda, not one of whom would lend a hand to help him. He knew better than to try to make them. Murphy kept the fun going, a father of one of the kids – but not game to admit it. You couldn't blame him. There was a penalty, these days, for cohabiting with

3 half-caste (*offensive*) person whose parents are from different races

6 sling off (*AustralE*) laugh at sb. in an unkind way

8 muster (*AustralE*) gather together sheep or cows

10 yell shout loudly

12 snivel tending to cry or complain a lot in a way that annoys people

23 gin (*AustralE, offensive*) Australian Aboriginal woman

24 creek small river or stream

27 laughing-stock person that everybody laughs at

31 cohabiting to live together and have a sexual relationship without being married

native women. But Fitz Murphy had been living with a gin for years, and had several children by her, everybody knew.

McEacharn, at least, made his position clear. 'No,' he said, 'they're not my kids. If they were, you wouldn't get them, O'Shea.'

There had been all the writing to do for official purposes also, giving the kids' names, without reference to their parents, black or white – just labels to differentiate them by. Waste of time, O'Shea told himself, since the object of the drive was to separate the children from their aboriginal parents and environment.

Constable O'Shea was at his wits' end inventing names for half-caste brats. This was not the first lot he had to register. The name a girl was known by in the camp or on the station might be used, but a surname had to be attached. O'Shea cursed the regulations.

This time he had got the native names of the children – Mynie, Nanja and Coorin. Molly, Polly and Dolly were easier to remember, so he put them down as Molly, Polly and Dolly. But surnames – he racked his brains about surnames for the bunch. A girl's father could not afford to be implicated, although occasionally the name of a station or locality might be adopted with certain satisfaction.

'What does Movingunda mean in the blacks' lingo?' he asked McEacharn. 'Ant-hill.'

'That'll do,' O'Shea grinned, and wrote 'Anthill' beside 'Molly'.

'How about you chaps,' he continued, 'any of you willing to lend a kid a name?'

'Not on your life,' Murphy blustered.

'Anything you say may be used in evidence against you, eh, Murphy?' O'Shea remarked dryly. The men guffawed.

'You can name the whole damned lot after me, if you like,' McEacharn growled, 'though God knows I've left the gins alone.'

'Right!'

O'Shea scrawled McEacharn for the next child.

'And the youngest?'

Mick Donovan, the old prospector, who had come into the station for stores, chuckled: 'She's the one gave you such a run for your money, Sarge.'

'Call her Small and be done with,' McEacharn advised.

O'Shea was grateful for the suggestion.

'There,' he said, folding up his report and packing it away with a wad of papers in the breast-pocket of his tunic. 'This batch will start life as young ladies with real classy names.'

The worst of it was, he could not remember which was which, and the kids didn't know which of them was supposed to be Molly, Polly, or Dolly. They would only answer to their native names. But, Hell, a man could not be worried about that! The Department would have to sort them out somehow.

Constable O'Shea's temper did not improve as he rode. His charger, a nervous, powerful brute, took some handling at the best of times, and those three stinking kids on his back irritated him. They didn't weigh much more than a bunch of wild pigeons; but their dangling legs and bony little behinds chafed and upset Chief. He had tried to shift them, more than once, shying and pig-rooting whenever he got a chance. The kids stuck like leeches, strapped together though they were. The eldest hung on to O'Shea's belt, the rest to her. [...]

38 differentiate recognize or show that two things are not the same

41 at his wits' end be so worried by a problem that you do not know what to do next

41 brat child who behaves badly

47 rack sb. brains think very hard or for a long time about sth.

51 lingo language, especially a foreign language

56 bluster (v) talk in an aggressive or threatening way, but with little effect

58 guffaw laugh noisily

64 prospector person who searches an area for gold, oil, etc.

65 sarge (informal) sergeant

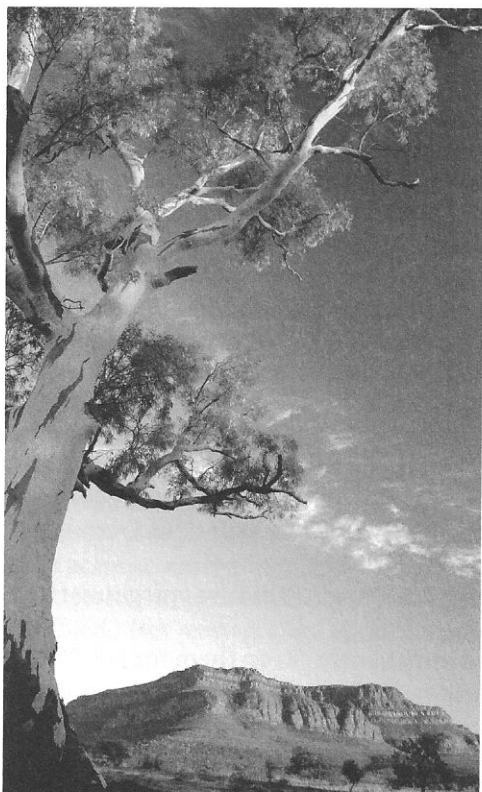
75 temper *Laune*

78 pigeon *Taube*

79 shy (v) turn away with a sudden movement because you are afraid or surprised

80 pig-rooting what pigs do when they search for food by moving things or turning things over

80 leech *Blutegel*



At sunset, when he lifted the children down from the big, bay horse, he would have liked to unfasten the straps knotted round their waists; but he knew very well what would happen if they found themselves free. They would be off and away like greased lightning. They knew this country better than he did, young as they were, and would make their way back to Movingunda. Then what sort of a fool would he look, going back after them, with all the business of catching and getting away with them again? [...]

O'Shea cursed his luck as he hauled a couple of mulga logs together and set them alight. He cursed the hopes of promotion which had brought him to the back-country; cursed Murphy, and every man in the nor'-west, who begot half-castes; cursed McEacharn for making it obvious that he did not intend to facilitate

arrangements for removing youngsters from his station: cursed the Protector of Aborigines and the Department for their penurious habit of pushing on to the police in out-of-the-way places, work that should be done by officers of the Aborigines Department: cursed every well-meaning man and woman who believed that the Government ought to 'do something' for half-caste girls, without proper consideration of what that 'something' ought to be.

The three small girls sat on the ground watching him. Three pairs of beautiful dark eyes followed his every movement, alert and apprehensive. The eldest of the children, he had put down as nine years old, the other two at eight and seven.

Part of Constable O'Shea's grouch, though he would not have admitted it, was due to the way the children looked at him. He could not endure children to look at him as if he were an ogre who might devour them at any moment. A good-looking, kindly young man, he prided himself on carrying out his duties conscientiously but without harshness. [...]

O'Shea was disturbed by the thought that it was dirty work he had been forced to take part in. How would any woman like her kids being yanked away from her, knowing quite well the chances were she would never see them again? His own wife, for example?

Constable O'Shea smiled, trying to imagine any man separating his Nancy from her three linty-haired little girls and small son. But after he had fed the aboriginal children and given them each a drink of water, he took the precaution of tying their hands together with strips of rawhide in case they might try to unfasten the strap round their middles and run away. The children huddled together and fell asleep, wailing a little, but evidently with no hope

90 greased lightning very fast

110 penurious (*here*) in way meant to save money

116 apprehensive worried or frightened that sth. unpleasant may happen

119 grouch bad temper

121 ogre a very frightening person

123 conscientiously taking care to do things carefully and correctly

123 harshness cruelty, unkindness

129 linty-haired soft hair

131 precaution sth. that is done in advance in order to prevent problems

131 rawhide natural leather that has not had any treatment

133 evidently clearly

of escape. Constable O'Shea stretched and dozed uncomfortably on the far side of the fire.

It was evening of the second day when he rode over the ridge by a back track into Lorgans. He had taken care not to arrive until dusk so that no one would see him.

For several years Lorgans had been one of those deserted mining townships, with only the dump and poppet-legs of an old mine, a pub and the ruins of a row of shops to testify to its former prosperity. But the railway still ran about a mile away, and with the re-opening of the mine, the township took a new lease of life. Gold was bringing a good price. [...]

A dog started barking at the sight of him. Mrs O'Shea hurried out of the house as soon as she heard the dog. Her children swarmed about her. A big, fair-haired, youngish woman, she was, Mrs O'Shea, full-bosomed and sonsy. The children were like her, with fair hair and clear rosy skins. All excitement and delight, they ran to meet their father. He swung his son into his arms and the little girls hung onto him.

It was Mrs O'Shea who discovered the three small half-castes, crouched together and staring at her, wide-eyed and woe-begone.

'Oh, Jack,' she exclaimed, 'the poor little things! What are you going to do with them?'

'What do you think?' O'Shea asked impatiently. 'Keep them for pets?'

His daughters guessed just what had happened. They queried maddeningly.

'Did you give them a ride on your horse, Daddy?'

'Why can't we have a ride on your horse, Daddy?'

'Want to sit up behind you on Chief, too, Daddy!'

'Want a ride ...'

'Can't I have a ride, too, Daddy?'

The half-castes gazed at these other children with amazement. How was it possible for them to talk to the policeman so cheekily and light-heartedly?

'But you can't keep them tied up like that,' Mrs O'Shea protested, still concerned about those wretched little figures.

'They're as wild as birds,' Constable O'Shea declared testily. 'If I gave them a chance, they'd be off back to Movingunda like a shot. And I wouldn't go through all I have had to, to get them again, for quids!'

He put his son on the ground, and walked over to a shed of corrugated iron with barbed wire across a small, square window, unlocked the door and flung it back.

'Come along, you feller,' he called. 'Nothing hurt'm. Missus bring'm tucker, d'reckly.'

Mynie, Nanja and Coorin moved slowly, reluctantly, towards the door, their eyes searching desperately for some way to save them from that dark shed.

It served as a lock-up, but was rarely used except for an unruly drunk or native prisoner.

'Don't put them there, Jack,' his wife begged. 'They'll be scared stiff – and it's freezing cold these nights.'

'You can't take them into the house,' O'Shea objected.

'What about the room at the end of the veranda?' Mrs O'Shea persisted. 'They can't do any harm there. I'll take them along while you feed Chief.'

'Have it your own way. They'll have to be scrubbed and disinfected tomorrow.'

138 deserted with no people in it

139 poppet-legs supportive structure for a building above a mining pit

144 swarm (v) move around in a large group

145 sonsy large and shapely

150 woe-begone looking very sad

164 wretched pitiful, making you feel sympathy or pity

165 testily irritable, easily annoyed or irritated

167 not for quids do not want to do something even for money

169 barbed wire strong wire with short sharp points on it, used especially for fences

176 lock-up small prison where prisoners are kept for a short time

177 scared stiff very frightened

183 scrub clean sth. by rubbing it hard, perhaps with a brush and usually with soap and water

185 O'Shea unbuttoned the navy tunic of his uniform, hung it on a post and turned to unsaddle.

'Come on, children,' his wife called cheerily to the half-castes. They trailed behind her as she trundled across the yard. Her own offspring followed curiously.

190 'Go and finish your tea,' their mother said. 'And Phyll, see that Bobbie doesn't spill his cocoa on the table-cloth.'

Constable O'Shea snapped back the surcingle and girths of his saddle, heaved it on to one arm, and the big bay followed him into the stable. He gave his horse a good hard feed, rubbed him down and ran water into the trough
195 by the stable door before going into the house.

His son was sitting in his high chair, and the three little girls, just about the same age as those half-caste children, chattering gleefully as they finished their meal. Very fresh and pretty they looked, with their hair in neat pig-tails and print aprons over their frocks. Nancy was a wonderful mother; always
200 contrived to have the children looking clean and bonny for the evening meal, and everything bright and pleasant when he came back from one of these long trips across country.

But tonight, as she stood by the fire grilling his steak, Nancy seemed vaguely troubled. Her easy-going, good-natured tolerance of life at Lorgans was
205 overcast.

'I'll be glad when we get a move,' she said, putting a large plate of steak, poached eggs and fried potatoes before her husband. 'It's getting on my nerves – this kidnapping of children.'

210 'You're not more fed-up with it than I am,' O'Shea replied irritably. 'If the Department wants me to do this job, they'll have to provide me with a car, or a buggy at least.'

'It's a rotten shame, the way these kids are taken from their mothers,' Mrs O'Shea exclaimed. 'The gins will be trailing in from Movingunda for months to ask me what's happened to the children. And what can I say?'

215 'Tell them they've gone south to be made into young ladies – like you've done before.'

'They don't believe me. You can't lie to an abo. All I know is, they'll never see their children again. The kids won't remember their mothers and the mothers'll lose all trace of them.'

220 'The great idea,' O'Shea reminded her, 'is that the kids are being saved from leading immoral lives in the native camps.'

'That's all very well,' his wife cried indignantly. 'But how does it work out? The girls learn to read and write, become domestic servants; but more than half of them lead immoral lives in the towns, just the same. Only it's worse for
225 them down there, because they're among strangers. If a half-caste girl has a baby up here, it's taken as a matter of course. But down south, it's a disgrace. And anyhow, why can't the girls be given a chance to come back, work on the stations – and marry? It's because women are so scarce in the back-country that there are half-castes in the first place.'

230 'It's not my fault.' Her husband swung over and sprawled in an easy chair by the fire. He hauled off his riding-boots and stretched his long legs, with thick home-knitted socks pulled up to the end of his breeches. [...]

When her own family had eaten and was satisfied, Mrs O'Shea announced that she was going to take 'those poor little things' something to eat. She
235 turned the key in the lock of the room at the end of the veranda a moment later, and appeared with a plate of bread and jam and mugs of tea on a tray.

188 offspring child

192 surcingle a strap that goes around a horse's stomach, with rings to attach reins

192 girth piece of fabric that keeps the saddle in place

198 pig-tails Zöpfe

199 apron Schürze

199 frock woman or girl's dress

211 buggy light carriage pulled by a horse

217 abo (*offensive*) Aboriginal Australian

222 indignantly feeling or showing anger and surprise because you think that you have been treated unfairly

230 sprawl sit or lie with your arms and legs spread out in a relaxed way

232 breeches short trousers fastened just below the knee

Mynie, Nanja and Coorin watched her as she put an enamel mug before each of them and the plate of bread and jam in the middle. No need to share out the portions. They would do that themselves scrupulously, Mrs O'Shea knew.

Each little girl was strapped one to the other. Their wrists were tied together. Mrs O'Shea hovered over them, smiling and motherly, trying to reassure them. She could not bear to see these children so scared and dumb. Such skinny little things, they were, with great brown eyes and curling lashes, blackish-brown tousled hair, and gina-ginas, no more than scraps of faded blue cotton stuff, on their meagre bodies.

The room was a lock-up cell in all but name, kept for more respectable prisoners. There was a chair and table in it and a bed covered with blue-grey blankets. The window had no glass, but was double-crossed with barbed wire.

There was no way the half-castes could get out when the door was locked, Mrs O'Shea told herself. So she took the law into her own hands: knelt down, and with firm white teeth unfastened the leather thongs which bound them: undid the strips of rawhide biting into those slim brown wrists. [...]

'There, now,' she said cheerily, 'you'll be good girls, won't you? You won't try to run away? The Boss'd kill me if you did.'

237 **enamel** *Email(le)*

239 **scrupulously** careful, paying attention to every detail

241 **wrist** joint between the hand and the arm

243 **skinny** very thin

245 **gina-gina** a kind of dress

246 **meagre** small

253 **thong** narrow strip of leather that is used to fasten sth.

Working with the text

a Looking at the text

- 1 *When and where does the story take place?*
- 2 *Describe the atmosphere in the story. Which images are used to create the atmosphere?*

b Focus on language

- 1 *Collect information from the text that shows the relationship between*
 - *Constable O'Shea and his family,*
 - *Constable O'Shea and the Aboriginal children.*
- 2 *O'Shea is not a bad man, he is just carrying out his orders. Do you agree or disagree? Illustrate your answer with examples from the text.*

c Creative writing

How do you think the story continues? Write your own ending. Find out how Katharine Susannah Prichard's original version ends and compare your versions.