

AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

SERIES 11

A SERIES THAT PROFILES SOME OF THE MOST
EXTRAORDINARY AUSTRALIANS OF OUR TIME



PHOTO BY DAVID DARE PARKER. © NFSA

MAY O'BRIEN

EDUCATOR, WRITER



IMAGES COURTESY OF MAY O'BRIEN.



MAY O'BRIEN (1933 -)

INTRODUCTION

This program is an episode of Australian Biography (Series 11) produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

SYNOPSIS

Born into the traditional life of the Wongatha people of Western Australia and educated on the remote Mount Margaret Mission, Aboriginal author and educator May O'Brien has profoundly influenced Indigenous education.

May became the first female Aboriginal teacher in Western Australia, fulfilling her dream and returning to the mission to teach. As an educator over 25 years, May fought for Aboriginal rights and helped create opportunities for her people, bridging the gap between cultures. She helped establish Aboriginal committees on education around Western Australia and worked on the first report into Aboriginal education. In 1984 she was awarded a Churchill Fellowship to study programs on Indigenous issues in the USA, Canada and Great Britain and went on to hold senior positions in the Department of Education. Since retiring, May has been writing children's books which include Aboriginal language. As an ambassador for numeracy and literacy, she remains involved in a wide range of community activities.

In this interview, May discusses growing up in a bush camp, early years on a remote mission, her lifelong fight to get better education for Aboriginal children and more Aboriginal teachers, working in a male-dominated system and the joy of writing books which include her own language.

CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include English, SOSE/HSIE, Australian Studies, History, Indigenous Studies, Education and Media.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The following study guide material considers some of the historical background to the Stolen Generations and missions for Aboriginal children. It then continues to look at education as a human right, the role of language in society, and the importance of activism.

BACKGROUND

May O'Brien is part of several generations of Aboriginal children who were displaced from their families and communities. In the interview, May shares her experiences of being raised in a traditional Aboriginal community, as well as her journey through non-Indigenous institutions as a child.

May is of mixed descent—her mother was a Wongi woman (from Wongatha, WA), while her father, who deserted the family when May was born, was Anglo-Australian. May explains her mother's neglect, and how a part Aboriginal couple took her under their wings. They wanted to adopt her, but under the 'native welfare' laws at the time the adoption was not permitted. We hear May say that the couple was trying to gain their Australian citizenship, so they had little choice but to sever their connection with her, and eventually took her to the Mount Margaret Mission. There, May joined other displaced Aboriginal children, many of whom were removed from their families by force or under duress—these were the children of the 'Stolen Generations'. While she was not 'stolen', May's experiences in the institutions are very similar to those who were.

The Stolen Generations

The removal of Aboriginal children from their families and communities first took place during the early period of settlement. Indigenous children often were separated from their families for use as cheap labour on farms and inland stations, while others, notably the girls, were used as domestics.

By the early 1900s, each Australian state and territory had Aboriginal protection laws in place—the first formal government policy authorising the separations. In part, the laws sought to protect Indigenous people from the negative effects of colonisation and settlement, and did so through two main strategies: segregation (by creating reserves to which Indigenous communities were relocated) and education of the young.

Ultimately, however, the laws created a process for systematically removing children from their families. 'Protectors' were appointed and given significant control over the lives of Indigenous people—this was especially true for their children, all of whom were placed under the legal guardianship of the state. This sweeping change of guardianship took place without consulting Indigenous parents or communities.

Full-descent Indigenous populations gradually declined, while mixed-descent populations increased. Policies began to focus more on merging (assimilating) this mixed-descent population into the non-Indigenous community. Indigenous young people were sent to schools that would prepare them for absorption into the non-Indigenous society as adults, while the younger children were usually sent to missions. Conditions in these institutions could be harsh and the occupants often lacked adequate food, basic facilities and medical treatment. Many schools also prohibited customary Indigenous practices and languages.

May spent 10 years at Mount Margaret Mission, from the age of seven. She grew up in a time and place where laws relating to Aboriginal people were particularly overprotective. The Native Administration Act of 1936 extended the Chief Protector's powers in WA, giving him personal control over every area of life for an Aboriginal person: marriage, children, health, employment, education, residence and legal representation. The Chief Protector at the time was AO Neville, who is depicted in the feature film *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Phillip Noyce, 2002), and had particularly strong ideas about assimilating Aboriginal people.

The 1940s saw a move away from policies directed especially to Aboriginal children—a uniform set of child welfare laws was introduced and applied to Indigenous and non-Indigenous children alike. Children could only be removed if they were found to be 'neglected', 'destitute' or 'uncontrollable'. Despite their equal application, the laws did little to reduce the number of Indigenous children removed. Non-Indigenous standards of 'neglect' were applied so that 'poverty' was considered neglect. Also, by then neglect and destitution were features of many Indigenous people's lives precisely because of a history of dispossession and dislocation.

When, in 1967, Indigenous people 18 years and over were granted the right to vote in national elections, Aboriginal protest and lobbying developed a stronger and more politically potent agenda. Among other things, they called for land rights, cultural heritage rights and recognition of the disadvantage caused by colonisation and settlement (including the separation of children from their families). From the 1970s, governments moved away from promoting assimilation and towards policies of self-determination and participation.

In 1997, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) conducted a formal, independent inquiry—the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families. The resulting report details the extent of the separations, as well as the impact on individual lives, families and communities.

Ten years later, on 13 February 2008, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd led a formal national apology to the Stolen Generations, which was passed through both houses of parliament.

- How does May describe her early years growing up in a traditional Aboriginal community?
- Give examples of some of the discriminatory laws and practices mentioned by May.
- What legacies do you think the removals might have left for Aboriginal families and communities?

Missions

May O'Brien spent many years on the missions—first as a student, then as a teacher. From ages 7 to 17, she went to the Mount Margaret Mission, founded in 1927 and run by the United Aborigines Missions. After attending school and college, May was appointed as a teacher at Mount Margaret in 1954.

Aboriginal Australians have had contact with missionaries and their missions since colonisation. The missions were run both by non-Aboriginal Christian churches, as well as governments.

While the chief aim of church-run missions was evangelising Indigenous populations, they also helped promote economic development, literacy, education, health care and child welfare among Aboriginal Australians.

Whether operated by religious groups or the government, the missions were instrumental in implementing the governments' policies of protectionism and assimilation, removing children from their families in order to maximise control over their education into non-Aboriginal and Christian ways.

In his apology speech to Parliament, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd told the story of one member of the Stolen Generations—Nungalo Fejo. He retold her experiences of being removed and sent to a mission.

"A few years later, government policy changed. Now the children would be handed over to the missions to be cared for by the churches. But which church would care for them? The kids were simply told to line up in three lines. Nanna Fejo and her sister stood in the middle line, her older brother and cousin on her left. Those on the left were told that they had become Catholics; those in the middle Methodists and those on the right Church of England. That is how the complex questions of post-Reformation theology were resolved in the Australian outback in the 1930s. It was as crude as that. She and her sister were sent to a Methodist mission on Goulburn Island and then Croker Island. Her Catholic brother was sent to work at a cattle station and her cousin to a Catholic mission."

Conditions on the missions were relatively poor with very little financial support from government, especially on the church-run missions. One of the more notorious missions was the one at the Moore River Settlement. May O'Brien narrowly escaped being sent there.

- Why was she taken to Mount Margaret Mission and not kept with her foster carers?
- How does May describe her time on the mission?
- What different motivations might those non-Aboriginal people working at the missions have had?
- Discuss some of the differences between the traditional Aboriginal lifestyle and life on the mission, referring to examples from the interview.
- How does May describe the mission on the Moore River Settlement?



IMAGE COURTESY OF MAY O'BRIEN.

Activities

School visit. Arrange for a representative of the local Aboriginal community to visit and speak about the history of Aboriginal people in the area, their experiences of removal and discrimination, and what changes have taken place since.

Research. Missions operated all over Australia. Find out about some of the missions that operated in your state. Choose one to report on, looking at when the mission operated, whether there are primary or secondary accounts of conditions, etc.

Letter writing. Put yourself in the shoes of a young Aboriginal child at the time. You are spending your first night away from your family/community at a mission. Write a letter home to your parents describing the experience: how you feel, what the mission and people there are like, and what you think might lie ahead.

EDUCATION RIGHTS

As the program begins, May O'Brien shares one of her greatest wishes—to have gone to university. While she missed this opportunity, May worked very hard throughout her life to ensure others could access a broader education—first in teaching, and then in developing educational policy.

Education is critical to a personal and social development. The UN Declaration of Human Rights states: 'Everyone has the right to education...Education shall be directed to the full development of human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms'. Education provides us with opportunities to develop our personality, broaden our opportunities, and secure economic prosperity. It also allows societies to transmit their values, belief systems and cultural practices to the next generation.

According to *Bringing Them Home*, the education provided on missions and at schools for Aboriginal children was rather limited. Generally, it was aimed at completion of their schooling at the level achieved by a 10-year-old in the state education system. It emphasised domestic science and manual training, thus preparing the children for a future as workers within the government or mission communities, or as cheap labour in the wider community. Also, not only was education in Aboriginal languages and customs absent from curriculum, but its teaching was actively discouraged, if not banned.

Poor participation rates and achievement has been a recurring feature of Aboriginal education in Australia, with disproportionately higher rates of illiteracy and innumeracy. A number of factors have been identified as contributing to this, including:

- the effects of removal from families and subsequent loss of a stable home;
- resistance or opposition to a non-Aboriginal system of schooling; and
- the quality of education provided.

Reports, such as the Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, have identified poor education among Aboriginal people as linked to other issues such as criminal offending, family violence and drug use.

One important factor for under-performance was the general lack of Aboriginal content in curriculum and involvement in education policy. It wasn't until 1975 that a committee of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people was sponsored by the federal government to report on the state of education for Aboriginal Australians. The committee's report, which found that Aboriginal people 'had the worst schooling', led to the funding of special programs to state and territory education systems by the Commonwealth Government to help alleviate the disadvantages of Aboriginal students in the education systems. In more recent years, and with growing involvement of Aboriginal people in education for Aboriginal students, initiatives have included teaching Aboriginal languages and cultures in schools, and providing financial support to Aboriginal students.

In September 2007, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted by the United Nations. It set out the importance of indigenous people having control over the education of their people, stating: 'Indigenous peoples have the right to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning.'

- How did May respond to being asked to go to high school?
- What examples does May give of discrimination against Aboriginal students in the schools?
- May cites some examples of where the education system needed improvement in order to cater for Aboriginal students. What were they?
- How was the Churchill Fellowship of benefit to her?
- Over the past few decades, a number of changes have been made to ensure Aboriginal people have greater access to education. Give some examples.
- Identify some initiatives for inclusiveness in your school.

Activity

Careers. Employment is another area of importance to a person's development. Working in groups, develop a list of policy suggestions for a workplace that is inclusive.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

While Aboriginal languages were spoken at the mission May O'Brien grew up on, it was common practice across missions and schools at the time for Aboriginal students to be discouraged, and even prohibited, from speaking their own language. Later in her life, May O'Brien went on to write a number of children's books that retold stories from her community.

Language is an important part of any community, enabling stories, cultural practices, and traditions to be passed from generation to generation. There are over 200 Aboriginal languages spoken in Australia, including that spoken by the Wongi

people that May belongs to. It is believed that at least 600 Aboriginal languages existed prior to colonisation, with many dying out as children were forced to speak English. Obviously, maintaining languages is integral in sustaining communities.

Given how important language is to communities, one can also imagine how language can lock people out of another culture or society. Think about times when you might be around people speaking a language you do not know. As a teacher at the Aboriginal schools and missions, May O'Brien was a bridge between her Aboriginal students and a non-Aboriginal school system.

Migrants to Australia also encounter similar difficulties. In the interview, May shares her experiences as a teacher at the Mount Hawthorn school, where she came across the children of recently arrived migrants from Italy.

- How did knowing an Aboriginal language help May when she returned to Mount Margaret Mission as a teacher?
- May explains that she was able to experience her life again through the children of newly arrived migrants that were in her class. What similarities might she have found?
- What prompted her to start writing children's books?

Activities

Mapping Australia. Working in groups, and using the resources listed at the end of this guide, students are to identify and set out on a map the various Aboriginal communities in their state. Students then individually choose one community and research their culture, history and language.

Role play. Working in groups, students present a short role play for the class that shows how language can bind similar people together, exclude difference, and include difference.

ACTIVISM

'Use words instead of fists' was the advice May O'Brien gave to Aboriginal people to campaign for social justice and equality. In the interview, she discusses how she was inspired to fight for Aboriginal rights. She has been a strong activist for Aboriginal rights, particularly in the area of educational policy.

Activism refers to direct action taken by people to achieve certain social or political goals. These goals involve some change to existing circumstances or practices by government that are seen as problematic or unjust.

Activists often draw on civil rights or some other higher values in putting forward their claims. They can take very different kinds of action, such as rallying, letter writing, collective lobbying, signing petitions, advertising or organising passive resistance campaigns.

The two key elements of activism, however, are that it involves some action and that it comes from 'the people'. Some suggest this is based on the view that ultimate power or authority for social change comes from the people.

- Give examples of some issues in education May O'Brien fought for.
- How does she describe hearing Billy Graham's speech? What impact did the speech have on her?

Activity

Research and presentation project. Education is just one social justice issue that Aboriginal people have lobbied about. Working in groups, students are to identify a social justice issue for Aboriginal communities in Australia, and prepare a presentation to the class on the background to the issue, a timeline of developments, what forms of activism were undertaken and some key achievements.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

Children's books by May O'Brien

The Legend of the Seven Sisters: A Traditional Aboriginal Story from Western Australia, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra ACT, 1990 (illustrated by Sue Wyatt)

Wunambi the Water Snake, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1991 (illustrated by Sue Wyatt)

Why the Emu Can't Fly, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, South Fremantle, 1992 (illustrated by Sue Wyatt)

How Crows Became Black, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, South Fremantle, 1992 (illustrated by Angela Leaney)

The Kangaroos Who Wanted to be People, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, South Fremantle, 1992 (illustrated by Angela Leaney)

Barn-Barn Barlala, the Bush Trickster, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, South Fremantle, 1992 (illustrated by Sue Wyatt)

Literacy (books including Aboriginal language) by May O'Brien

What Do You Say?, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, South Fremantle, 1994 (illustrated by Sue Wyatt)

Which Jack?, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, South Fremantle, 1994 (illustrated by Angela Leaney)

Too Big for Your Boots, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, South Fremantle, 1994 (illustrated by Angela Leaney)

Smartie Pants, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, South Fremantle, 1994 (illustrated by Angela Leaney)



IMAGE COURTESY OF MOUNT HAWTHORN PRIMARY SCHOOL.

Resources on May O'Brien

- Australian Women—Biographical entry
www.womenaustralia.info/biogs/IMP0135b.htm

Historical background

- Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Bringing Them Home
Final report: www.humanrights.gov.au/social_justice/bth_report/report/index.html
Teaching module: <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/education/publications/rightsed-bringing-them-home>
- Apology delivered by Prime Minister Rudd to the Australian Parliament <http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/our-country/our-people/apology-to-australias-indigenous-peoples>
- Mission Voices—ABC (with personal stories of experiences on the missions)
<http://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/aboriginal-culture/missions/mission-voices/>

Education

- Ngankat-kalo—Aboriginal Education 1901–2001
<http://ab-ed.bostes.nsw.edu.au/go/aboriginal-studies/timeline/timeline-references>
- Helen McDonald 'Incorporating Aboriginal perspectives and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in SOSE' in Rob Gilbert (ed), *Studying Society and Environment: A Guide for Teachers*, Social Science Press, Sydney, 2003

Aboriginal languages and cultures

- Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies: Aboriginal Australia map
<http://aiatsis.gov.au/aboriginal-studies-press/products/aiatsis-map-indigenous-australia>
- ABC Education: Many Nations, One People - an introduction to Aboriginal culture and society for upper primary and lower secondary school students
www.abc.net.au/schoolstv/nations/default.htm

AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY: MAY O'BRIEN

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