

7. 'Would have known it by the smell of it'

Ella Hiscocks

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When Ella Hiscocks visited the Cootamundra Home for Aboriginal Girls in the early 1940s she recalled 'I would have known it by the smell of it.'¹ She had been to the girls' home once before, escorting a young Aboriginal girl there, and had not been impressed. Yet when offered the position of matron at the home by the Chairman of the Aborigines Welfare Board in 1945, she took it, reluctantly, for three months. She was under threat of a transfer 'way outback' by the Department of Education and, being recently widowed, was without recourse to her husband's income or to the role of wife of a station manager.² Hiscocks would retire a little over 20 years later, a story in the *Cootamundra Herald* noting she had become the home's longest serving matron.³

The Cootamundra Domestic Training Home for Aboriginal Girls, as it was officially known, was set up in 1911 in an old hospital just out of Cootamundra, a country town 380 kilometres south-west of Sydney. It was established as a 'training institution' for Aboriginal girls too young to be 'apprenticed' out to domestic service. It ran from 1911 until 1967 under the regime of first the Aborigines Protection Board and later the Aborigines Welfare Board.

The Aborigines Welfare Board

In 1939 the Aborigines Protection Board, which had overseen the removal of Aboriginal children since 1909, was replaced by the

Aborigines Welfare Board. Its new Chairman was Mr Alfred Lipscombe, ex-superintendent of Dr Barnardo's Homes and the author of *Breeding and management of livestock*.⁴ The objective of 'assimilation' was formally added to the board's first annual report in this year. To decide on policy and make rulings that affected the day-to-day lives of Aboriginal people across the state, this board, made up of 11 male, non-Aboriginal bureaucrats, met for two hours each month in a central office in Sydney.

The new policy and administrative guidelines for the Aborigines Welfare Board were set out in a Public Service Board report which stipulated a 'more detailed administration and an increase in staff to enact comprehensive techniques of surveillance'.⁵ In answering criticisms of Aborigines Protection Board staff and conditions made by Aboriginal and some feminist and humanitarian lobby groups, the Public Service Board report stressed the need for more detailed methods of surveillance, both of Aborigines Welfare Board staff and Aboriginal people.

Previously, staff had been employed as ministerial employees under the sole direction of the board. Under the new board, the superintendent and other employees were to be subject to the provisions of the *Public Service Act 1922* (Cwlth). This formalised staff employment and began the long process of mainstreaming the board within pre-existing structures of administration. Thus the Aborigines Welfare Board, responsible for administering the new official policy of assimilation, marked a period of increased bureaucratic standardisation.

One of the most immediate consequences of this reconstitution of the Aborigines 'Protection' to the Aborigines 'Welfare' Board for Aboriginal people, particularly those living on government stations, was an increase in bureaucratic procedures associated with the surveillance of the domestic sphere.⁶ Under this new bureaucracy the management and control of Aboriginal girls and women, specifically the control and surveillance of their domestic arrangements, was an integral part of the new 'standardised practices' of administration.⁷ Moves to regulate the work of managers and matrons on board stations and institutions were part of such attempts at standardisation. In 1940 the duties of both manager and matron were codified in the *Manual of instructions to managers and matrons of Aboriginal stations and other field officers*, which was distributed across New South Wales.⁸ New report forms, to be filled out by managers and matrons daily, weekly and monthly, were introduced with the manual. The manual contained specific directives that codified the role matrons were

expected to play in surveying and reporting on women's and children's behaviour. It was the matron's responsibility to report to head office about school attendance; the cleanliness of homes and bodies; attitudes towards housework; 'baby care' aptitude; the diet of mothers and children; the amount of instruction in sewing and domestic work, and the number of girls who attended these classes; as well as on 'leisure activities' of station residents. Institutions such as Cootamundra played a central role in these bureaucratic attempts to deeply interfere with and shape Aboriginal girls' and young women's domestic lives.

In the decades that followed the Second World War, white women increasingly worked as matrons at the Aborigines Welfare Board's children's institutions around the state of New South Wales, and on Aboriginal stations as 'lady' welfare officers, as teachers and nurses, and, later, as witnesses and government representatives at a parliamentary inquiry in the late 1960s, which contributed to the end of the board. Assumptions about their special responsibility for socialising Aboriginal women and children, educating them in cleanliness and hygiene and regulating sexuality interacted closely with post-war racial policy and contributed to women's central and largely forgotten role in the administrative and symbolic world of the New South Wales Aborigines Welfare Board.

While the board was attempting a new level of surveillance and bureaucratic control, it simultaneously experienced a reduction in its budget during the Second World War, and in the post-war era.⁹ One way to fill the gap between the extended policy and the shrinking budget was to increase the unpaid workload of female employees of the administration.¹⁰ Thus these assumptions about the role that white women could play at what was considered the racial 'boundary' between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities – training for assimilation by monitoring the domestic sphere of Aboriginal lives – interacted with an administrative stress on increased surveillance at a time of budgetary cutbacks.

Working women, such as Matron Hiscocks, did not leave collections of letters or journals for future historians, as did many of their better-off, middle-class reformist contemporaries. Their days were filled with attempts to 'fight dirt', order domestic environments, 'train' and educate Aboriginal women and children, and, in some instances, openly criticise the board's authority. But these women's historical traces, as left in the official record and in interviews, are particularly revealing of the different ways ideas about the mission of white

femininity cross-cut with racial administration and the government's efforts to order the domestic worlds of Aboriginal families and communities.¹¹

Matron Ella Hiscocks

Hundreds of Aboriginal girls and young women passed through the institution at Cootamundra under the authority of the Protection and Welfare boards. The home is remembered today with pain, grief and mixed emotions by many who were sent there.¹² Matron Ella Hiscocks' life and work for the board embodied some of the inherent contradictions in its policy and administration, and its attempts at increased bureaucratic control alongside a limited budget. This is reflected in her ambivalent memories of the place. Through Hiscocks' ambiguous position we can see how women's roles as board employees and their perceived special responsibility as 'protectors' and 'carers' were fundamentally irreconcilable. Played out unhappily in the life and work of Hiscocks is the essential incompatibility between her role as 'surrogate mother' to hundreds of Aboriginal girls and her wider role in a state-sanctioned policy of enforced 'assimilation' and the attempted destruction of Aboriginal family life. Reconstructing the working life of Hiscocks may help our understanding of the ideology and circumstances under which ordinary, 'good' women came to work for, and rationalise, what we know now to be extraordinarily brutal ends, with ongoing repercussions for Aboriginal families and communities today.

Ella Hiscocks was born in rural New South Wales in 1901 and began her career in 1922 as a teacher in the segregated school at the Pilliga Aboriginal Reserve, in the north-west of the state. She lived alone in town, riding out each day on a bicycle to the Aboriginal reserve. Her work at Pilliga as a young, unmarried woman gave her a lasting impression of conditions experienced on the Aborigines Protection Board reserves during the 1920s. Her memories of the people she met and worked with at that time recall the impoverishment and ill-health experienced by residents. She remembered that many of the Aboriginal people at the reserve were 'half-starved'. These first-hand impressions of conditions on Aboriginal reserves contributed in future years to her ambivalent relationship with the administration during the course of her career with the board.

From the Pilliga reserve school, she moved to an Aboriginal settlement near Lismore and was again put in charge of the school there. She married soon after. As she remembers, it was partly because of her influence that her husband, a farmer's son with little prior involvement with Aboriginal people and no formal training in book-keeping, became manager of an Aboriginal station south of Quirindi.¹³ The employment of inexperienced and unqualified men like Hiscocks' husband reflected the idea held by the Protection and Welfare boards that white people possessed racialised skills for living which they could pass on to Aboriginal people. Ella became the station's matron: ironically, a position open to her exclusively because of her status as wife of the manager. The Aborigines Welfare Board at that time only employed women as station matrons if they were married to the manager. As an ex-matron from Brewarrina Station recalls: 'We were a package deal.'¹⁴ Station matrons were paid for only three or four hours a day but were expected to be on call at all hours and overall received considerably less than their manager husbands.¹⁵ In particular, matrons were expected to take special responsibility for monitoring and reporting on Aboriginal women and children in their homes, or 'dwellings' as they were more often referred to in board reports and correspondence.

From Quirindi the board moved the Hiscocks husband and wife team to Cumerogunga, where they stayed for three years. When Ella's husband died prematurely from a ruptured appendix she returned to work as a teacher at the Aboriginal school in Lismore, the position of station matron no longer open to her as a single woman. Over the next few years, she taught at Aboriginal segregated schools in Lismore, Tuncester, Yass and Coraki.¹⁶ It was during a visit Hiscocks made to the Cootamundra Girls' Home in 1945 that Alfred Lipscombe, the Chairman of the Aborigines Welfare Board, asked her to fill in at the home for three months.¹⁷

Working for the board

The welfare caused us so much loss and pain. When can we start our grieving? How long are we going to have to grieve? And sometimes I think about how they don't want to spend any money to put things right – but how much did they spend taking the kids away? How much did it cost them? How many of them got jobs and supported their families by taking ours away?¹⁸

The job of matron-in-charge at the board's Cootamundra Girls' Home was one of the most significant roles played by a non-Aboriginal woman working for the 'Aboriginal' administration. In recognition of her work among Aboriginal children, Matron Hiscocks was awarded an MBE at the end of her career.¹⁹ Ex-inmates of the home remember her 'work among Aboriginal children' differently.²⁰ Many have mixed memories of Hiscocks, who acted partly as a 'surrogate mother' to hundreds of Aboriginal girls removed from their parents. Betty Ellis, in Cootamundra from the ages of three to 15, has 'good and bad' memories of Hiscocks: 'She was strict, very distant...didn't have much rapport with the girls. "I'm the Matron and you're the girls"... that sort of thing.' But, Ellis concluded, 'the only way to live is to forgive'. She attended Ella Hiscocks' funeral in 1998 and estimated that about 50 other ex-Coota girls turned up as well. One former Cootamundra girl, now a woman in her 50s, asked me not to be too hard on Hiscocks. 'She was only trying to do her best,' she urged me to remember.²¹

During her time as matron of the Cootamundra home, Ella Hiscocks adopted an Aboriginal ward, who had been removed from her family and placed in the home at the age of five months.²² A memory retained by the girl, now a grown woman, is from about the age of five. Each night before she went to bed the matron would sit with her and make her pull her nose: '...stroke my nose down the side saying it would make it straight'.²³ This intimate example is a clue to the ways in which the rationale that led to the establishment of homes such as Cootamundra infused the daily actions and interactions of the board's employees. Individuals working for the administration may have believed themselves to be 'humane' in their relationships with Aboriginal wards, yet in their day-to-day work, and in their attitudes towards Aboriginality, they contributed to a daily undermining of the self-esteem and identity of the children and young adults in their care.

More overtly, memories of Hiscocks' humanity are matched with accounts of emotional abuse and the unremitting repression and deprivation experienced under her strict rule.²⁴ Others remember physical punishments, restrictions and a harsh authoritarianism. One woman told how as an adult she had finally 'forgiven Matron' who had 'held her spirit captive all her adult life'. She visited Hiscocks, by then in a state of advanced senile dementia, in a nursing home in Cootamundra in 1998.

'She lies there now looking very undignified,' recalled the ex-ward of the state with relief.²⁵

In an interview recorded in 1980 with historian Peter Read, Ella Hiscocks stressed her disagreements and frustrations with the Sydney-based Aborigines Welfare Board and the miserable economic conditions she had worked under in the 1940s through to the 1960s. Describing the exhausting and ceaseless nature of her work, Hiscocks presented herself as a victim of the board's limited budget and their insistence on time-consuming bureaucratic processes. The long hours she worked, her heavy workload, the isolated geographic location of the home and the slow bureaucratic procedures associated with the centralised board were her main recollections of her working life. She remembered herself alone in her special responsibilities, stressing that while all the other staff would only work their set hours she was on call 'night and day'.²⁶

Hiscocks remembered in particular the way the bureaucratic processes of the board interacted with the mainstream, 'white', welfare administration to frustrate her efforts to improve life for the girls at the home. The supply of both food and clothing at Cootamundra came from the mainstream state welfare agencies.²⁷ Food was ordered each week from a central government store, and each week Hiscocks had to submit quotes for each individual item.²⁸ This over-complicated the process of buying food, which could, if Matron Hiscocks had been entrusted with her own account, have been bought more simply in the nearby town of Cootamundra. The Prisons Department supplied the girls with clothing, which was of poor quality and inappropriate. Shoes, for example, were frequently too big and Hiscocks recalls that on more than one occasion they 'didn't match up'.²⁹

Even in organising sport and recreation for the girls Hiscocks remembers being hamstrung by a central bureaucracy: 'I'll tell you something else that made me mad...the children liked sport and I had to send down to the Board for permission to take them anywhere... They'd take a long time to get back...sometimes the children would miss out because of it.'³⁰

But direct criticism of board members, or policy itself, was not part of the matron's discourse. A widow throughout the 22 years she worked at Cootamundra, Hiscocks remembered fondly some of the men working for the board. Inspector Donaldson, loathed and feared among Aboriginal people throughout New South Wales for his tactics of child abduction, was, in her estimation, 'a fine old gentleman...did very good work amongst them'. (Her husband had applied for the job of inspector held by Donaldson, but died before he could begin.)³¹



Ella Hiscocks with a 15-month-old 'inmate' of the Cootamundra Girls' Home. Cootamundra Herald, 22 March 1967. National Library of Australia.

Her loyalty and evident fondness of the men working for the board sit in an ambivalent relationship to the anger and frustration evident in her memories of the ceaseless workload, the slowness of the central bureaucracy to support her basic needs, her lack of financial autonomy, and her persistent sense of isolation from the Sydney-based administration.

Working far from the board's headquarters, Hiscocks formed allegiances outside the central administration. In seeking to improve the clothing ration, for example, the matron turned to the local town doctor, prevailing upon him, unsuccessfully, to add his weight to her complaints to the board about the poor quality of clothing issued to the girls at the home.³² Hiscocks did receive support from locally based women's groups during her employment at Cootamundra. On her retirement, she praised the Cootamundra section of the Business and Professional Women's Association, the Country Women's Association and the Church of England's Women's Guild. Of these organisations Hiscocks said: 'I only had to mention something I wanted, and one or more organisation would respond.'³³ This support from local women's groups indicates, significantly, both an awareness and an endorsement of the work of the Cootamundra Girls' Home among prominent women in the rural community surrounding

Cootamundra.³⁴ This endorsement is today largely un-remembered, and forms part of a deep seam of shame and denial that lies at the heart of contemporary Australian race relations.

The home itself, in the old town hospital, engendered well-remembered feelings of isolation. The schoolroom where Hiscocks taught each day had been the isolation ward of the hospital and she remembered with dismay how ill-equipped and under-resourced it was: 'It was terrible... It was a terrible job to try and work it on your own.'³⁵ Aboriginal women incarcerated in the institution as young girls also recall their associations of the isolation of the old hospital with sickness and death.³⁶ Some recalled that one of the most feared punishments was being locked alone in what was believed to have been the old hospital morgue.³⁷ Rumours about bodies being found underneath the old storeroom where they kept the food still circulate today.³⁸ Several women recall being traumatised as girls by long hours spent locked there as punishment by Hiscocks and other staff members.³⁹

Clean and moral

Keep your bodies and minds clean, for by doing so you will help to form a wholesome personality. Assume the dignity and carriage, which are your heritage and your right.

– Mrs Irene 'Inspector' English,
Aborigines Welfare Board, 1955⁴⁰

Amid Matron Hiscocks' complaints about the poverty of the administration and her ceaseless workload, two key, interrelated themes emerge from her memories that highlight the interaction of racial and gendered discourse: 'cleanliness' and 'morality'. Allusions to these and to the possibility of Aboriginal girls 'going bad' or 'getting into trouble with the opposite sex' proliferate in her accounts of home life.⁴¹

From her first impressions – that she would have 'known it by the smell of it' – Hiscocks ordered her memories of her work at the home through a sensory prism of cleanliness. Cleanliness, in Hiscock's world, was next to whiteness. During her time at the home she conducted a concerted campaign to get the Aboriginal girls from the home accepted at the local 'white' state school. Like the majority of schools around the state at the time, Cootamundra's was segregated when Hiscocks became matron of the home, and Aboriginal girls in her care had to be schooled at the home, in their 'under-resourced

school room'. Hiscocks lobbied the principal of the local high school, the local Parents and Citizens group and the Department of Education's school inspector until she was successful in convincing the school to take the fifth- and sixth-form girls, and eventually (in 1950) girls of all ages.⁴² One of her most persistent and persuasive arguments for why the school should take the girls, said Hiscocks, was that 'her girls' were as 'clean as local white girls'. In her recollection, she finally got the girls accepted at the local school after she had asked the school inspector: 'why the students can't attend the local school. They're *cleaner* [my emphasis] than a lot of the white girls.'⁴³

In framing her argument to the school inspector in these terms, Hiscocks was engaging in what anthropologist Mary Douglas calls a 'dialogue of claims and counter-claims to status' in which ideas about cleanliness, dirt and pollution are crucial.⁴⁴ Wherever ideas of dirt are prominent, argues Douglas, their analysis discloses a play upon 'profound themes'. Reflection on dirt involves, among other things, reflection on the relation of 'order to disorder...form to formlessness'.⁴⁵ In Douglas's well-known summation: dirt is 'matter out of place'.⁴⁶ 'Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements.'⁴⁷

As an agent of the state, Matron Hiscocks' memories of and associations with cleanliness and dirt are revealing of the system of beliefs at the core of the assimilationist policies and practices enacted haphazardly, but ruthlessly, by the Aborigines Welfare Board. The matron's exhausting, and futile, efforts to keep the young Aboriginal girls at Cootamundra clean and free from dirt coincided with a bureaucratic system that identified black as dirty and in need of expunging and assimilating into a 'clean' white culture and identity. Her particular role in the production and demarcation of boundaries between white and black, clean and dirty, coincided both with the broader assimilationist project and with ideas about white femininity.

Cleaning was women's work and in the racialised discourse about the 'deprivation' and 'filth' of Aboriginality Matron Hiscocks' work was never done. Anything that increased the level of 'dirt' also increased the workload of the matron, whose job it was to 'clean' the Aboriginal girls to make them acceptable to white society. She remembered angrily that to get to school each morning the board supplied the home with an old covered truck, 'like they used in the war'.⁴⁸ Each morning on the way to school the dust thrown up on the