Introduction

War Refugee Children, Humanitarianism and Transnationalism

In November 1919, the Adelaide *Advertiser* reported that, among the Australian troops who had disembarked from the warship *Port Sydney* returning from the theatre of war, was a Belgian boy. Described as a 'diminutive figure', dressed in an Australian military uniform, the twelve-year-old became known as Albert. It was reported that his father had been killed while serving in the Belgian army and his mother had died of starvation, and that an Australian soldier, Private George Leahy, had 'adopted' him. Albert was referred to as a 'war waif'.1 After being snatched from the battlefields of Europe, Albert Dussart remained in Australia for the rest of his life. Leahy had, according to these reports, stuffed him in his chaff bag and brought him to Australia. Tasmanian newspaper the *World* reported that the story 'is surely one of the most human and touching that the whole of the war has produced'.2

About six months earlier, another boy, this time from France, had also been smuggled into Australia. On board the troopship, *Karagola*, which returned to Melbourne in June 1919, was thirteen-year-old Jean Berthe. Berthe had been found by Australian soldiers on the battlefield of the Somme in 1918. Australian soldier Private Robert Simpson believed the boy should not be left behind and he travelled with Australian soldiers until he arrived in Australia, when Simpson took Berthe into his family in Gippsland. He became a fisherman, a footballer and government employee in his local community. Twelve-year-old Honoré Hemene, nicknamed Henri or the 'Digger', was another boy who experienced the same fate. This time it was air mechanic Tom Tovell and his brother Ted who smuggled Henri on board the RMS *Kaisar-i-Hind*, putting him into a sack, and taking him to the Tovell family farm northwest of Brisbane. He grew up with the family, but died tragically in a car accident in 1928.

These stories are well documented and, in the case of Hemene and Berthe, full-length books have been written about them. In the retelling of these

1 *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 14 November 1919, 7; *West Australian*, 5 November 1919, 8.
2 *World* (Hobart), 20 November 1919, 8.
events, the kindness of the soldiers has been celebrated and a humanitarian spirit identified that motivated saving these war orphans.³

In what amounted in each case to child abduction, theft and smuggling, the Australian authorities succumbed to popular opinion and sentiment: it did not challenge the soldiers’ actions and allowed each of the returned servicemen to adopt the orphaned boys. These acts were unanimously embraced by the Australian community at the time as humanitarian, reflecting the theme of ‘saving’ children in war which was so prevalent during and at the end of the First World War. The impact of the First World War on children was severe, immediate and profound. In Serbia, a nation defeated by Austria, the flight of both civilians and soldiers led to half a million refugees leaving the country and dispersing throughout Europe. The Serbian Relief Fund, in particular, was central to bringing refugee children into Britain. Belgium also experienced a vast exodus of refugees, as did Russia and Armenia, where children have especially been the focus of study.⁴ During the war, more than 50,000 Belgian children were part of a mass exodus after Germany’s invasion of Belgium. Serbian refugee children joined civilians and soldiers who left Serbia after invasion.⁵ Far away from the European theatre of war, Australia appeared a distant, remote but safe haven for child war refugees.

Throughout the twentieth century and across many wars, Australia would be seen in this way, and many efforts were made to bring war refugee children to Australia. It was only after 1945, with Australia’s newly devised migration policy, that children arrived in large numbers. But the history of Australia’s relationship with child refugees begins well before post-war migration, through the myriad of humanitarian and international organisations that sought to offer support to the children and the individual Australians who became advocates for their cause and sought to act on their behalf.

The Humanitarians: War Child Refugees, Australian Humanitarianism in a Transnational World 1919–1975, begins with the formation of the Save the Children Fund in 1919 and ends with humanitarian interventions during the Vietnam War. This longitudinal study spans six decades to map the national and international humanitarian efforts undertaken by Australians on behalf of child refugees. This examination is framed by conceptualisations of the history of emotions, and the limits as well as the possibilities afforded by empathy and


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compassion; gender history and women’s role as international commentators through their work with children; biographical studies of unknown, and yet significant, humanitarian workers and the style of their humanitarian practice; and the traumatic experience of international humanitarian work itself. It explores the shifting forms and understandings of humanitarian activity related to war refugee children over the twentieth century, such as child sponsorship; the establishment of orphanages; fundraising as well as anti-humanitarianism; aid and development schemes; and campaigns for inter-country adoption. Based on previously unused records, letters and archival materials, this book brings together unexamined histories to chart the multilayered intersections between child refugees, humanitarianism and transnationalism.

The case study of Australia and the transnational intersection with the world, including both Europe and Asia, presents a unique prism through which to explore the significant and dramatic change over this time of the historical meanings of humanitarianism and transnationalism. Over the first part of the twentieth century, it captures shifts across the British Empire and Australia’s ongoing imperial ties and examines these links. The interwar years show activities both dependent and independent of imperial connections, given Australian humanitarians distinctive response to the Armenian genocide (1915–1923) and the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). After the Second World War (1939–1945), Australia’s central role in the Asia region gave rise to concepts of social justice and humanitarian rights, which were shaped by views of the adoption of child refugees, especially those from the Korean War (1950–1953) and Vietnam War (1955–1975). The focus of this work is on humanitarians. One of the major aims is to discuss the experience, views and perspectives of humanitarians working on behalf of child refugees across four civil wars as well as the two world wars within one overarching narrative. Despite the Declaration of the Rights of the Child announced through the League of Nations in 1924, and again, in the revised version in 1959 through the United Nations, concepts of the rights of children rarely entered their lexicon. Their actions were made possible because the child was viewed as vulnerable, innocent, without agency or empowerment. These views underpinned their approach and were reflected in the programmes they adopted and in the acts they took, an examination of which is the basis of this book.

My aim is to present humanitarianism and transnationalism not as given, a priori categories but rather as dynamic, shifting historically contingent constructs defined by context, time and place. Towards this end, the study is structured around four key concepts relating to the history of children and war: saving, evacuating, assimilating and adopting. These categories overlap and intersect across time, but each provides a broad framework within which to explore the shifting nature of how child refugees were perceived and the most effective humanitarian interventions to assist them. The biographical
frame allows for the role of women in particular to be centrally situated within this story, and the efforts by many women on behalf of children are documented here for the first time.

Further, the present work offers an innovative perspective on the aftermath of war, especially in terms of children and their relationship to a country like Australia. By examining its short- and long-term impacts and the ideologies that shift over time in relation to children and war, *The Humanitarians* draws together a wider canvas, examining the influence of ideas about the welfare of child refugees in shaping broader political questions related to migration, race, ethnicity and gender. While the symbol of the child garnered universal support, there were of course, limits to this unifying image for vulnerable children when the state and governments mobilised for war. This was an inherent contradiction of support in certain times, but then dramatic, and even cruel, abandonment during periods of conflict.

Limits to the scope and scale of humanitarianism and transnationalism were imposed by the ubiquitous White Australia policy, which dominated and pervaded twentieth-century politics in Australia. The *Immigration Restriction Act* of 1901 introduced the White Australia policy to keep Australia ‘white’ and British, aspiring to ‘racial purity’. The policy aimed particularly to exclude non-Europeans through the use of a dictation test, whereby entry depended on an immigrant writing fifty words in any European language as directed by the immigration officer. The policy defined Australian efforts to limit migration and ensure British imperial values continued to be promoted and advanced. The migration policy after the Second World War prioritised national groups, preferring those from Britain and Nordic countries to those from Southern Europe, who were deemed less desirable, in an explicit hierarchy of racial preferences. This long history of the Australian White imaginary was forged through settler-colonialism, which is based on racialised hierarchies designed to build a White Australia through the violent enslavement of Indigenous Australians. This internal narrative bleeds into discrediting those not deemed White coming into the country. This book spans the initiation and duration of the White Australia policy and its settler-colonial underpinnings, and it ends just as the policy was beginning to be dismantled in 1975.  

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The White Australia policy is experienced and referenced in various ways in this book. It is articulated as a celebration of British imperial whiteness which informed humanitarian campaigns during the interwar period. During the Second World War it is explicitly manifest in the contrasting racialised treatments by government authorities of Jewish refugee children and British evacuees to Australia. In the post-war period and during the period of assimilation of the 1950s–1970s, becoming Australian was conflated with the adoption of Anglocentric values. When humanitarian efforts were extended to appeals abroad, these reflected racial anxieties and a Western imaginary of cultural superiority. By definition, understandings of humanitarianism as a practice and theory, and transnationalism across the century were selective and contested given the prevalence of the White Australia policy.

But the relationship between humanitarian interventions and the White Australia policy could also be complicated. At times, humanitarians did challenge the White Australia policy in efforts to increase numbers of children entering into Australia and defy restrictions on the basis of race, paradoxically by arguing that child immigrants would enhance and strengthen White Australia rather than threaten or challenge the policy itself. This argument was mounted by humanitarians for the entry of Armenian, Spanish, Jewish, Japanese and Vietnamese refugee children from each of the respective conflicts that created forced displacement. It was argued that the first three were considered white ‘enough’, while in the case of the last two, assimilation into Australian culture and society could be assured, especially for children borne of Australian soldiers. For all the post-war narratives around fundraising support for causes of humanitarianism, human rights and humanitarian rights in which Australia engaged, these narratives became much more circumscribed when direct migration to Australia was discussed.

Relatedly, a White Australia not only defined global outlooks but also was celebrated within the nation state. While this book is focused on the wars in Europe and Asia as a way of exploring transnationalism and humanitarianism throughout the twentieth century in response to these global conflicts, many of the themes discussed resonate profoundly in Australia with regard to Indigenous Australians. Only a few of the humanitarians explored in the book drew direct parallels between refugee children from global conflicts and the violent displacement and dispossession of Indigenous Australians. Chapter 2 discusses the work of Ernest and Mary Bryce, who saw the plight of Indigenous Australians as similar to that of victims of the Armenian genocide. Chapter 4 describes how the Indigenous Elder and Yorta Yorta man William Cooper protested in 1938 against the genocide of Jews, drawing a direct and explicit connection with the plight of his own First Nations peoples. In the era of assimilation after 1945, efforts to impose racial homogeneity extended to both Indigenous Australians and recently arrived immigrants. The Save the Children Fund in Australia, led by a former First World War nurse, Florence...
Grylls, saw the fund’s mission as including both Indigenous and recently arrived ‘New Australians’ as part of the same assimilationist endeavours. The assumption that Australia was a land of unoccupied wide open spaces where refugees could be resettled denied the reality that such land had been inhabited for tens of thousands of years and had never been ceded by Indigenous Australians.

Humanitarians often mobilised support for their cause couched not in political or cultural terms, but in emotive language especially in relation to children – and was cast as apolitical. To explore the enduring narrative of emotional humanitarian appeals, I position this study within historian Barbara Rosenwein’s concept of ‘emotional communities’. In Rosenwein’s configuration, emotional communities resemble social communities, with the main difference being that the researcher seeks:

above all to uncover systems of feeling; what these communities (and the individuals within them) define and assess as valuable or harmful to them; the evaluations that they make about others’ emotions; the nature of the affective bonds between people that they recognise; and the modes of emotional expression that they expect, encourage, tolerate and deplore.  

I have constructed the humanitarians and their organisations discussed in this book as emotional communities, arguing that a focus specifically on children, refracted through the four categories of saving, evacuating, assimilating and adopting, created particular communities that sought to share similar expression, sentiments, practices and actions. My contention is that a focus on refugee children in each of these categories sought to connect the humanitarian community together in historically specific ways. While the historiography on humanitarianism has of course noted the emotive appeals of humanitarians, the ‘systems of feeling’ between them, and around child refugees, and how this unites them – it also fragments them. Invariably, emotive responses are constructed within the organisations they form, such as the Save the Children Fund (SCF), International Social Service (1924–), UNICEF (1946–), PLAN (1937–) – or programmes such as Youth Aliyah or Children’s Overseas Reception Board. But individuals and groups outside these larger organisations were also drawn together through an emotive response – especially towards humanitarian campaigns for orphans of war in, for instance, Korea and Vietnam. Framing communities of humanitarians as emotional communities in this study makes it distinctive from other histories of humanitarianism. The focus in the historiographies has been on emotional campaigns – and this is crucial. But I want to emphasise here that many of these organisations coalesced around what could be characterised as

emotional communities that bound humanitarians to each other within their organisations as well as connecting them to the wider public to whom they appealed in emotive terms.

The compelling nature of emotional communities also suggests the appeal of these organisations, why humanitarians committed themselves to them, and the longevity of some of them. I argue that, in the context of this study, humanitarians construct ‘emotional communities’ in ways that neutralise the politics of war-child humanitarianism, reducing it to emotive responses rather than critiques of power, structures and oppression. Moreover, while these communities may have shared some characteristics, they were not at all uniform, nor was there a template for them. At times, emotional communities were manifested through specific acts, at other times in rhetoric, narratives or discourse. Often, they were to be found in a combination of both actions and words. Sometimes they were articulated in overt and explicit terms, while in other moments they took shape implicitly, woven deep within the tapestry of events, policies and ideology. I have attempted to apply the term as a consistently productive concept to capture the diverse and multifaceted articulation of such communities within humanitarianism from the early to late twentieth century.

One commonality emotional communities did share, whatever the complexion or constitution, was that such communities were transnational in nature. As many scholars have shown, humanitarian communities across the globe and throughout the twentieth century were characterised by their global mobility and circulation. Like their counterparts elsewhere, Australian humanitarians travelled extensively and repeatedly, many of them taking Australian perspectives into the global community, and then returning to Australia with ideas, concepts, language and causes that they promoted and disseminated within their organisations and in wider communities. A specific transnational frame of reference allows for an exploration of the ways in which many of the figures in this book, and especially women, became spokespersons for an international cause and political positions on the conflicts in which they engaged. It also allows for a focus to be placed on new voices to be unearthed, and practices to be examined in new ways.8

To capture these aspects, I have approached this topic through a biographical lens as one way of capturing lesser-known activists and tracing shifts in the very practice of humanitarian endeavour and intervention. Recent scholarship on humanitarianism and transnationalism has called for a fuller study of lesser-known activists to consider humanitarianism in action and in situ rather than continue to focus on well-known figures, such as Dorothy Buxton,
Eglantyne Jebb from Britain, and Karen Jeppe from Denmark, and others who have cast a long shadow over the history of twentieth-century humanitarianism. Drawing attention to neglected figures can throw into relief how humanitarianism was intimately linked to transnationalism and to its adaptability over time. But it can also capture the gendered nature of the historical practice of humanitarian work, and how this was manifest and undertaken. It takes up the challenge presented by scholars working in women’s history and gender history, highlighting women’s role in humanitarianism for more than a century.9

An examination across time captures a generation whose connection to humanitarianism and transnationalism was formed, I would argue, during the First World War, which then continued throughout the twentieth century. This book amplifies historian Bruno Cabanes’s argument that the First World War gave rise to the origins of twentieth-century humanitarianism.10 It moves chronologically beyond this, demonstrating that a longitudinal perspective reflects how humanitarianism endured long after the first decade following the First World War, into a Second World War and, in the case of some humanitarians, beyond it. This study also suggests that this legacy was not static or fixed, and, as we shall see, it endured in the case of the Save the Children Fund, which unlike many humanitarian organisations, was adaptable in its approach to how to save children and kept the cause relevant to contemporary times.

In relation to the broader scholarship, this work is positioned within the expanding field of the history of humanitarianism in the twentieth century, which draws on the work of political scientists and historians Michael Barnett, Bruno Cabanes, Peter Gatrell, Joanne Laycock, Johannes Pulman, Andrew Thompson, Keith Watenpaugh, Richard Wilson and Richard Brown – to name a few – to construct the wider contextual and historical developments across the twentieth century.11 On humanitarianism and children, especially

relevant to this study is the extensive work of historians Emily Baughan, Lindsey Dodd, Laura Lee Downs, Kevin Myers, Julia Torrie and Tara Zahra, all of whom have explored the experiences of European children in wartime and, especially, evacuations. This study also expands on the history of the evacuation of refugee children, such as on the Youth Aliyah movement, which has so far attracted too little scholarly attention but was pivotal in marshalling support for the cause of evacuating Jewish children during the Second World War.


The other historiographies this study integrates relate to histories of the methods of humanitarian relief, as well as the scholarship on women and humanitarian campaigns, and the demand for the exploration of unknown humanitarians. The psychological impact of the experiences of war on children requires further analysis and this book builds on existing insights. Organisations such as UNICEF are also a focus, but with a distinctive perspective on Australia’s involvement, as with the history of inter-country adoption. Issues of human rights as a concept emerged in the post-1945 period and also provides the backdrop for current work, as does the debate on the history of human rights, children’s rights and humanitarian rights.


18 Denise Cuthbert, Ceridwen Spark and Kate Murphy, “‘That Was Then, But This Is Now’: Historical Perspectives on Inter-country Adoption and Domestic Child Adoption in Australian Public Policy’, Journal of Historical Sociology, 23:3 (September 2010), 430; Peter Fopp, ‘Inter-country Adoption: Australia’s Position’, Australian Journal of Social Issues, 17:1 (March 1982), 50–61.