

**Recovering boarding school trauma narratives: Christopher Robin Milne as a psychological companion on the journey to healing***Christine Jack*

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Best read as an intellectual memoir of a survivor of childhood trauma, this book easily fits within the genre of *testimonio* or survivor-witness account, as the author herself ultimately concludes. From the opening of the text, Jack argues for the importance of writing herself and her journey – in which memory-recovery and self-discovery are intertwined – explicitly into the book, and for defying some of the conventions that traditional histories might apply in determining what should count as acceptable sources for analysis. For example, in recounting some of her experiences of recovering and understanding childhood memories, Jack weaves reflection on her own dreams together with narration of her childhood and discussions of theories by scholars from a range of disciplines. The engagement with psychological theorists is strong throughout the book, although these are applied more powerfully and convincingly in reflecting on her own life than on that of Christopher Robin Milne.

For readers seeking further understanding of Milne than might be available through other sources, this is not the right book, but his presence throughout the text is profound. In the opening pages Jack explains the painfulness of revisiting and grappling with her childhood spent in boarding schools. She reveals that through examining Milne's (in many ways comparable) memories of boarding school and childhood, she came to see him as a conceptual companion and support on Jack's own exploration of self. Milne, and the testimony of other boarding school survivors, thus serve as both a contrapuntal narrative and a methodological tool that made Jack's self-interrogation more manageable and more probing. Indeed, although Jack argues for the innate legitimacy of her personal experience of boarding school, regardless of whether others share her sense of how traumatic such a childhood could be, there is a persistent sense that finding resonances between her own experiences and those of others has been a significant part of her journey to reaching the understanding of her childhood that she presents in this book. For those with an interest in approaches to understanding childhood trauma and the complexities of memory, the book has much to offer.

In the conclusion Jack argues that boarding schools are inherently problematic. While the specific historical contexts and understandings of childhood that she accurately identifies as shaping some of the most depriving aspects of her life have changed, and despite major reforms to boarding schools themselves, they simply have not (cannot) change enough. Although Jack does not directly express it in these terms, as an historian of children's institutions it was clear to me throughout the text that Jack was describing an institutionalised childhood. So much of what she wrote resonates with testimonies of people who grew up as wards of the state – Indigenous and non-Indigenous – from the enforced suppression of emotion and deprivation of affection, to the policing of children's



bodies and the shaming of their sexuality. For Jack, as for the many survivors who testified at the *Bringing Them Home*, *Lost Innocents* and *Forgotten Australians* national inquiries, the harmful impacts of such a childhood are lifelong. To be clear, this is a comparison that I am drawing and not one offered by Jack herself. Indeed, she recognises that despite the distress of being separated from her family, she did have communication with them, and it was apparent that they had affection and concern for her well-being – even if they ultimately deferred to the expertise of the powerful institutions of the school and Church. She also acknowledges that the nuns who ran the boarding schools she attended did value her, even if they lacked the capacity to give her what she needed for healthy mental and emotional development. In these ways Jack was in a different position to many who grew up as wards of the state, yet the fundamental alienation and deprivation of an institutionalised childhood emerges from the pages of this book.

Jack's writing is bold and honest. She openly acknowledges that exposing parts of her story, such as her early experiences of being shamed for masturbating as a young girl and her later suicidal thoughts, was not easy. However, without them she felt that she could not explain or understand herself. Ultimately, the book is one which insists on being accepted on its own terms. Jack reflects on considering feedback about the appropriateness of using words like torture to describe her experience of solitary confinement and thoughtfully concludes that the experience needed to be conveyed in terms which reflected its impact on her. The sense of fraught confidence, along with the breadth of scholarship which has informed this book, give it a distinct voice – one which makes a useful addition to the growing scholarship around childhood, institutions, trauma and memory.

**Nell Musgrove**

*Australian Catholic University, Fitzroy, Australia*