

Croker Island Mission

1940 – 1968

Details

The Croker Island Mission was established by the Methodist Overseas Mission on Croker Island in 1941. Children from Darwin and Alice Springs were accommodated in temporary cottages until February 1942 when they were evacuated to institutions in New South Wales. In 1946 the children returned to Croker Island where they lived in eight new cottages. The Mission closed in 1968 and children were transferred to Somerville Cottage Homes in Darwin and to placements interstate.

The Croker Island Mission was established by the Methodist Overseas Mission on Croker Island, 290 kilometres east of Darwin. In April 1939 a new Native Affairs Branch, run by a new Director took over control of the lives of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory. Up until that time, Aboriginal children, particularly those deemed to be 'half-caste' were placed in the government-run institutions such as the Kahlin Compound in Darwin and the Bungalow in Alice Springs. In the early 1940s, the government began to discuss the handing over of the care of all Aboriginal children to missionaries.

During 1940-1941, the Methodist Overseas Mission corresponded with the government about the establishment of a Home for children of Methodist faith on Croker Island. They wrote that the Mission Board preferred the 'the cottage system of care and training rather than the large dormitory type'.

The impact of World War II meant that the government was keen to move children away from Darwin. When the Kahlin Compound closed in 1939, a number of children were temporarily accommodated at Pine Creek which had operated as an institution for Aboriginal children during the 1930s. As these buildings were required for military purposes, the government encouraged missionaries to take the children as soon as possible. A number of young boys were sent over to Croker to assist with the building.

During the period May to July 1941, 68 children were transferred from Pine Creek to the Methodist's Goulburn Island Mission to be accommodated temporarily before being moved to Croker Island. More children followed, and in July, 28 children from the Bungalow in Alice Springs were also moved to Goulburn Island. That same month, Keith Wale, who had been appointed to be the Superintendent of the Croker Island Mission, moved to Goulburn Island to prepare for the transfer of the children.

The first 44 children, mostly aged between 2 and 5 years of age, were transferred to Croker Island in November 1941. More children were sent the following month making a total of 95 by the end of the year.

The accommodation on the island at that time consisted of:

four incomplete cottages and a store. One cottage was used by the Croker Island Superintendent, Keith Wale, and his family, while the cottage mothers shared a room in one cottage. All of the cottages had iron roofs, fibro walls and sand floors. Detached kitchens and bathrooms and concrete floors were planned but there had not been time to complete them before the children arrived.

It is not clear from documents and historical accounts where the children lived during this first period on Croker Island which lasted from November 1941 until April 1942. However, three cottage mothers cared for them, Margaret Somerville, Olive Peake and Jess March. Miss March also ran a school.

In February 1942, discussions began about the evacuation of Croker Island due to World War II. After the bombing of Darwin on 19 February 1942, this need became more urgent. The Methodist Overseas Mission explored options for the accommodation of all of the children together in New South Wales. They made arrangements to house most of the children at the Crusaders Camp Mission Hostel at Otford. A smaller number of older girls were to go to the George Brown Training College in Haberfield.

On 5 April 1942, the long and eventful journey to New South Wales began. Over 44 days, the group which included 96 children and three cottage mothers travelled on foot, by boat, canoe, truck and train to Sydney. Upon arrival in Sydney the children were transported to Otford and Haberfield where they remained for four years.

In July 1944 eight boys returned to Croker Island with the Superintendent via an overland route. They assisted with re-establishing the mission station and building new cottages. The rest of the children remained in New South Wales until mid-1946 when return to Croker Island was arranged on a former cargo vessel called the Reynella.

During their absence new cottage accommodation had been built. The government provided assistance with building costs. Most of the cottages had concrete floors and were built from cypress pine timber. In an oral history interview Daisy Ingram, who worked as a cottage mother on the island, explained that the new cottages were named by the cottage mothers and some of the older girls while they were travelling back to the island. Daisy's cottage was named Illawarra, after the area of New South Wales where the children had lived for 4 years. The other cottages were Reynella, named for the ship that brought the children back to Croker Island; Malila, meaning peaceful place in the language of New Britain; Seaview, named because it was the cottage with a view down to the bay; Somerset, named for its cottage mother, Margaret Somerville who had travelled with the children to Otford and back; Alcoomie, an Aboriginal word meaning 'very nice'; Victory, the cottage for the older boys, named for a lugger belonging to the CMS; and Deloraine, chosen later from an atlas.

A 1948 report from the Mission to the government noted that there were 35 boys and 57 girls present at the Mission, spread across the eight cottages. One cottage was used as a recreation hut, six were occupied by boys and girls up to the aged of 10 and one was occupied by boys aged 10 and over.

The report described the cottage homes as follows:

Each cottage is self-contained and has its own Kitchen, laundry, bathroom and latrine. Nine to ten children occupy each cottage and boys up to 10 years of age live in the cottages with the girls. Boys over 10 years of age graduate to the boy's cottage. As far as possible, one of the Sisters lives in each cottage, but at least one Sister supervises two cottages and directs the activities of one of the older girls who acts as a cottage 'mother' or sub-matron. This girl is responsible for the housekeeping, preparation of meals, laundry work etc. of her cottage and each member of the group has his or her work to do. The aim is to develop a home atmosphere and to train the girls in home management.

The Croker Island facility operated for over 20 years, with the last of the children leaving on 16 December 1968. Over those years many children from different areas of the Northern Territory were sent to the island by the Welfare Branch.

Changes in policy, a move towards foster care and placement of children interstate, led to the closure of the Croker Island Mission. It was replaced by the Somerville Cottage Homes, based in Darwin, the first of which opened in 1968. All except one of these cottages, which were located in suburbs of Darwin, took on the names of the Croker Island Cottages. Some children from Croker Island moved to the suburban cottages, others were sent to Lentara, Methodist Homes for Children in South Australia. Some children were placed in foster care or adopted.

Croker Island Mission was mentioned in the Bringing Them Home Report (1997) as an institution that housed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children removed from their families.

Gallery



Boys quarters at Methodist mission on Croker Island in the Northern Territory 1958

Description: This image shows the boys' living quarters at the Croker Island Methodist Mission.



Croker Island Mission, Northern Territory, Australian Information Service

Description: Interior of Croker Island cottage.

More info

Related Entries

Run by

- [Methodist Overseas Mission \(c. 1930 - 1980\)](#)

Related Events

- [Interstate movement of Northern Territory children \(1930s - 1970s\)](#)

Related Organisations

- [United Church, North Australia \(1946 - 1977\)](#)

The United Church, North Australia took over the work of the Methodist Overseas Mission when the Croker Island Mission closed and children were moved to Darwin.

- [Crusaders Camp Mission Hostel \(1940? - 1946?\)](#)

- [Lentara \(1960 - 1977\)](#)

- [Methodist Children's Homes \(1924 - 1960\)](#)

- [The Bungalow \(1914 - 1942\)](#)

In 1940, some children were moved from The Bungalow to Croker Island Mission.

- [Somerville Cottage Homes \(1968 - 1980s\)](#)

Many children from the Croker Island Mission were transferred to the Somerville Cottage Homes in Darwin.

- [Trower Road Cottage, Somerville Homes Inc \(1969 - 1976\)](#)

The first group of children in Trower Road Cottage were transferred from Croker Island

- [Chapman Road Cottage \(1969 - 1976\)](#)

The first group of children in Chapman Road Cottage were transferred from Croker Island

- [Henry Street Cottage, Somerville Homes Inc \(1969 - 1981\)](#)

The first group of children in Henry Street Cottage were transferred from Croker Island

Resources

- Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, [Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families](#), 1997. Relevance: Croker Island Mission was mentioned in the Bringing Them Home Report (1997) as an institution that housed

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children removed from their families

- Stolen Generations' Testimonies Foundation, [Stolen Generations' Testimonies](#), 2009. *Relevance: See testimony of Harold Furber*
- McGregor, Steven [director], *Croker Island exodus*, 2012
- Duguid, Charles, *The Aborigines of Darwin and the Tropic North*, 1951
- Sherwood, Matthew & Weeks, Jonny, *'You're Not Given Any Love': The Stories of Australia's Stolen Generations - Photo Essay*, The Guardian, 2016
- *Daisy Ingram and Bob Ingram interviewed by Karen George in the Bringing Them Home Oral History Project [sound recording]*, (2001), 9 April 2001
- *Japarta Maurie Ryan interviewed by Glenys Dimond in the Bringing Them Home Oral History Project [sound recording]*, (2000), 29 December 2000
- *Margaret Somerville interviewed by Franks Heimans in the Bringing Them Home Oral History Project (2001)*, 27 March 2001
- *Una Clarke interviewed by Karen George in the Bringing them home oral history project [sound recording]*, (2000), 15 December 2000
- Commonwealth of Australia, *The Northern Territory Report for 1959-60*, 1961
- Commonwealth of Australia, *The Northern Territory Report for 1960-61*, 1962
- *Half-Caste children from Croker Island on way to Sydney*, Cairns Post, 20 May 1942
- *Long journey for Aboriginal children*, The Argus, 20 May 1942
- *Long journey for Aboriginal children*, Barrier Miner, 22 May 1942
- *Overseas Missions: Rev. R. Piper to show talking film*, The Canberra Times, 21 November 1942
- *Mission to Mansion*, The Australian Women's Weekly, 12 June 1957

Other Resources



Title: Methodist Church of Australia - Care of children (Croker Island Mission) Part 1 (1940 - 1948) [altered from original title]

Type: Image

Date: 1940 - 1948

[Details](#)

Records

For more information and to access your records, follow the links below:

Records held by other organisations

- [Records of Methodist Children's Home/Lentara \(c. 1905 - 1980s\)](#)
Records of Lentara includes records about children moved from Croker Island to Lentara/Magill
- [Church Missionary Society \(New South Wales\) - Records \(1893 - 2003\)](#)
- [Records of the Uniting Church in Australia, Northern Synod \(1940 - 1986\)](#)
- [Records of the Methodist Church of Australasia, Department of Overseas Missions \(1830 - 1980\)](#)
- [Methodist Church of Australia - Care of children \(Croker Island Mission\) Part 1 \[altered from original title\] \(1940 - 1948\)](#)
- [Registration of births after lapse of nine months \[Croker Island, Garden Point, Retta Dixon Home and other areas\] \(1954 - 1955\)](#)
- [List of Northern Territory evacuees, World War II \(1942 - 1942\)](#)