Community Affairs Adoption Inquiry Submission. by Maurice Wills 8/4/2011

I was an inmate at the Melbourne Orphanage for 17 years. My childhood experiences have been recorded in my book *'the envelope'*, in which I am the character 'Ted Richardson'.

'the envelope' was commenced in 1985 and has been used as reference book and text book on the lifestyle in Australian Orphanages 1930's to 1950's. In all I sold 5 editions of the book and received hundreds of letters from readers.

These letters and my experiences while selling form the greater part of my just completed book '*the reply*'. This latest book is now with the printer.

Many of these letters I received dealt with institutional life, others with adoption.

I include here a copy of one such letter regarding adoption, and my reply.

Dear Mr Wills, *SA 5271 27th May 1994*

You do not know me; however we met briefly in March 1993, when I purchased a copy of your book 'the envelope'.

I found your book, honest, sensitive and enlightening. I had a special reason for reading it, and feel compelled to write to you as a result. I wanted to speak to you when I bought the book, but did not wish to intrude upon you, just as I do not wish to intrude now, so please do not reply to me if you do not want to.

Early in 1991 my husband and I travelled to Thailand to collect our fifth child by adoption. He was eight years old when we began negotiations to adopt him and ten years old when we collected him. He had been in an institution since he was eight months old.

At the time of meeting you, I felt as though I had a hundred questions I wanted to ask you. However at that time we were battling to even communicate with S, as he spoke no English and we spoke no Thai.

As he began to bond with us as a family, he settled wonderfully and seemed very happy to be in Australia. However there is so much about him that I feel he is not able or prepared to share. I do not know if I should attempt to pry behind what I call his 'veil', or whether it is better to respect his privacy.

At times I despair for S's emotional well being, especially as he is approaching adolescence. He has little real concept of family and relationships, which has been complicated by the fact that my husband and I have now separated. I feel you may have some insight into what S may be grappling with, and wonder if you may be able to offer any suggestions, other than what I have found in your book.

I guess what I really need help with, is how you coped with life once you entered society at large?

S seems to have very low self esteem, and somehow is ashamed of his past. I really worry about his ability to cope with adulthood, but have no idea how to help him.

I have a second reason for wanting to contact you (pushy aren't I). I believe you published your book, yourself.

In 1992, a manuscript I had written about my other son J, who is also adopted from overseas, and multiply disabled, was put under contract to a publishing company here in South Australia. They advanced me some royalty money, which helped pay for S, and fortunately was not repayable if the book were a flop. They did not publish by the due date in the contract which was September 1993. This did not particularly worry me.

The publisher contacted me near Christmas time and said they were holding the manuscript over until the New Year. When my husband and I split, I decided to leave work because we both work for the same company.

I thought I may like to dabble putting one or two other stories on paper, considering I would have available time.
Imagine my surprise when in March I received a letter from the publisher saying they had revised their guidelines and that J's manuscript no longer fitted their criteria. I am only disappointed they are not going to publish because obviously if I had something in print, it would assist anything else I may complete.
I don't believe there is any way I can legally make them publish the manuscript, and it's probably not worth pursuing damages for breach of contract.
So I am considering the option of self publication. I recall you mentioned it had been a worthwhile experience, and had allowed you to see the country. Once again I would greatly appreciate any assistance you may be able to offer.
In conclusion, may I say I was honoured to be able to share your story. You made an impression on me, just coming into my office, even before I read the book. It was as I expected, an insight into the difficulties of growing up in an institution.
Thank you for bothering to read this letter, and for the help you have already given me.
Yours sincerely

My reply to 3/6/1994

Dear

I have listed some matters for you to consider when dealing with children from orphanages:
Be honest with the child at all times.
Explain that in the future he/she will be able, with your help, to investigate the family background.
Remember by age 10 a child has been 'close' to many children in the orphanage. It would be a major separation on leaving them.
Ask the child to talk about the experiences in an orphanage. He/she may not want to do this, so suggest he write to the orphanage enquiring about his/her friends - maybe start a penfriend relationship.
Make contact with other children in the same position who are staying with families in Australia.
They have a need for re-uniting with former 'orphanage' friends. They were his "family" for years, and will always be on his mind.
Counselling for prospective adoptive parents. Don't let him feel he has to cut all ties with the past.
There will be more points. I will discuss them with my former inmates of the Melbourne Orphanage.
There are probably very few who have had the experience to do this well; the real experts should come from those who spent their childhood in an orphanage, but they are ignored.

<u>Emotional characteristics of institutionalised children:</u>

- pull away from physical contact.
- difficulty in trusting others.
- have had no follow up by orphanage authorities or child welfare organisations.
- Low self esteem, angry and ashamed of past.
- How to express gratitude.

, thank you for your letter, it made me focus on these important points.
It is a matter of you communicating with other adoptive parents, and finding out what established support schemes are available.
The situation is screaming out for a National Forum on this aspect of humanity.

Trust this may be of help.
Maurice Wills.

The impact of adoption fell very heavily upon me as a child. A few extracts on the subject from 'the envelope' follow:-

Page 4. He was the fourth of five children. His earliest recollection of life, whether real or imaginary remained vivid. Ted was standing in a sparsely furnished room where a woman lay dead in bed. Her face looked peaceful. The stillness of the moment was broken with words softly spoken. 'say goodbye to your mother'..... the year was 1936.

Bruce, Mary and Janet were admitted to the orphanage.....Ted was taken to a babies' home.

Page 5. Soon after Ted turned three....taken to the same orphanage where Bruce, Mary and Janet had already been placed.(Ted was unaware of the existence of his younger after whose birth their mother died).

.... Ted had all but lost any recollection of his sisters.

Page 6. A day soon came when Janet didn't go to school....

...I'm going now. The enormity and finality of the words....

Page 7 'Where's my sister Ted blurted.

Ted was devastated by the crushing answer..... 'You haven't got a sister anymore. She's been adopted. 'Even though Isobelle spoke as kindly as possible, her words would leave Ted permanently, deeply scarred.

.... 'Two old ladies have taken Janet to be with your sister Mary. You won't be allowed to see them ever again.'

Isobelle well knew of Mary's adoption some time earlier. Adoptions had not taken place before, and the thought of it struck terror into Isobelle because she had a pretty younger sister who might meet the same fate.

Before Ted could say more, Isobelle picked him up and took him inside. Ted felt her shoulders shaking and when she stood him beside his cot he noticed that her eyes and cheeks were wet.

It was the experience of knowing Janet had been taken away which was to set Ted above others of his age. He was 'alert' from that day'

.... It was assumed he was too young to know and would therefore quickly forget. They were dreadfully wrong.

Ted would wait many years....

It was a long time before Ted stopped asking about Janet. On such occasions he was given the reply that 'Janet was with her sister Mary living a far happier life.'....that Ted was the brother never entered into the answer.

Page 171 Chapter. Adoption Bait.

Page 174 Ted thought, 'No way known will he ever adopt me. He's a pervert.'

There are other references to adoption throughout the book

I will put in one more reference from the chapter **What about my sisters ?**

Page 369 Ted inwardly braced himself and came immediately to the point. ' (the superintendent of the Melbourne orphanage), when will I see my sisters?'

The reflex answer cut deep. 'When you are good enough you will meet them.'

Ted walked away and closed the gate to the wood yard before sitting on a pile of logs. He needed a chance to escape from the battering effect of the words, and he cried for a long time. 'How was it possible for a brother not to be good enough to meet his sisters?' his thought went on. 'If that's what they want then whatever I finish up doing I'll be the best in the world at it.'

My sister has written her story "Waifs and Witches' I do hope she submits some of her writing to the Inquiry.

The above account is very brief but I hope it will be helpful.

Kindest regards

Maurice Wills