

ASHLEY MALLETT

*THE BOYS FROM ST FRANCIS: STORIES
OF THE REMARKABLE ABORIGINAL
ACTIVISTS, ARTISTS AND ATHLETES WHO
GREW UP IN ONE SEASIDE HOME*
WAKEFIELD PRESS, 2018
ISBN: 9781743055809 (PAPERBACK)

St Francis House was operational from 1946 to 1959. Established in the South Australian suburb of Semaphore by Father Percy Smith of the Australian Board of Missions, St Francis' House provided accommodation to Aboriginal boys from the Northern Territory as they attended school. The first six boys who travelled south to Adelaide had been chosen by Smith; they went with the permission of their parents, given on the understanding that the boys would have access to better education than was available to them in Alice Springs. Some of the boys that followed did so under a similar arrangement; but others had been removed from their families and taken to Adelaide against their will. Ashley Mallett, who wrote this book at the behest of one of the former boys from St Francis, Vince Copley, draws on the experiences of the former residents to create a loose narrative around the thirteen years that St Francis' was operational, and the lives of residents after they left. The value of this book is in Mallett's relationship with Copley, and his interviews with many of the other former 'boys from St Francis'.

The narrative structure of this book is mostly linear, interspersed with chapters that begin by focussing on one subject or episode, but that veer into an aside on sport or political activism. The frequent detours to vignettes that are only tenuously relevant, and the occasional lapse into nostalgia, hints of fiction or an exposition on an entirely unrelated event, are a distraction from the real work of this book, which is the foregrounding of the remembered lived experiences of the men who were the titular 'Boys from St Francis.' A more robust and disciplined structure—with more attention devoted to the story of each of Mallett's subjects—could have allowed for a more thorough investigation into why it is that these stories are important and valuable.

The importance of sport to the lives of many of the men who lived at St Francis is explored at length. Mallett's focus on the athleticism of the boys and their capacity to use their skill as sportsmen to create relationships and opportunities for themselves that may not have otherwise been available is a familiar theme to Indigenous biographies and a topic that is clearly close to Mallett's heart. These experiences in the sporting world included instances of racial discrimination, but also of greater respect and acceptance from non-Aboriginal people. Max Wilson recalled having a 'rotten time at St Francis House', until the teachers

and other children at the school they attended 'found we had something they wanted—or if they didn't want it they admired us—because of our sporting ability.' (76). Mallett does not undertake any effort to problematise how and why sport has been an important space for Indigenous people to 'get [their] own back', as Vince Copely put it, and given his experience as a sports person himself, and as a sports journalist, this is a bit of a cop out (x).

Mallett touches on the discriminatory legislation of South Australia in creating barriers to freedom of movement, particularly when it came to travel for sport, but as with the political activism of former residents of St Francis—including John Moriarty, Malcolm Cooper, Vince Coply, Gordon Briscoe, and Charlie Perkins—it does not receive the examination that it deserves. In a late chapter, 'A white black man? Never!', Mallett careens from exemption, to activism, to football, to the involvement of the South Australian parliament in the Point Pearce community, to the appointment of Sir Doug Nicholls as the governor, to a murder case—all within just seven pages. A more concerted effort to examine why political activism became central to the lives of former residents of St Francis, and how this connected to their experiences at St Francis, would have been welcome.

The book grapples, not very successfully, with how best to represent the ideology and policy context behind the development and operation of St Francis House. Mallett seems unsure himself as to how to understand Father Smith's approach: he quotes Smith's reflections on the establishment of St Francis Home 'what we were aiming at was assimilation', and that the 'best way to help these people is to assimilate them', (27). Mallett condemns the policy of assimilation, but comes close to condoning it when he uses his own measure to judge the success of his subjects:

By now dear reader you will have delighted in the success rate among the boys who attended St Francis House... There were varying degrees of achievement among the boys, however, to a man they all went on to better themselves and become good citizens (209).

This framing of St Francis' House as a place of positive transformation sits uneasily alongside stories of abuse, hunger and the highly controlled daily life of the residents. Mallett's own views on success are not considered in relation to the complexity of the conditions that lead to many of the boys being residents at the House in the first place.

Vince Copely, who commissioned Mallett to write this book, includes a directive in his foreword to this book that 'All Australians should read *The Boys from St Francis*.', (xi). This is an important story that deserves wider historical attention, and it could have been better served here had Mallett developed a more rigorous historical understanding of the context in which St Francis House was developed, and the subsequent years of its operation. Mallett considers this book to be his most important work and acknowledges that writing it was a highly emotional experience, and his position is evident throughout the text. This is not the work of an historian. Mallett has drawn on minimal archival material and any that is included is not referenced; he has not engaged in historical analysis and has not drawn any historical conclusions. For academic readers, this will undoubtedly prove to be frustrating. Yet this book contains value in that serves as a vehicle for the voices of the Indigenous men who Mallett interviewed, and in doing so, provides important, complex and personal perspective to the historical discourse of Aboriginal childhood and adolescence in the mid-twentieth century.

Beth Marsden

UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE