



Likely Lads *and Lasses*

Youth Migration to Australia 1911–1983

By Alan Gill

Bestselling author of *Orphans of the Empire*.



From Wigan to Wagga Wagga...

Lawsuits, negative publicity and compensation packages by the British and Australian Governments have made many people aware of the traffic in 'orphan' children that was child migration.

Less well known, though the numbers involved were far greater, were patriotic schemes intended to turn British school leavers – average age 15 – into learner farmers in rural Australia.

The Dreadnought Scheme, started in 1911 with money originally intended to buy a battleship, was followed in the 1920s by the Big Brother Movement, which operated on the basis of a settled, adult Australian taking on a guardian role for unaccompanied migrant youths.

The aim of all these movements was simple – to fill Australia's empty spaces with young people of white, essentially Anglo-Saxon stock. Ridiculed by satirists – one group of new arrivals were taught milking on an artificial cow – the public held them in esteem. In addition to 'farm lads', as they were officially called, there were schemes for teenage girls to migrate as domestic servants. Both groups – unlike the child migrants with whom they are often confused – were genuine volunteers and came with the blessing of parents and guardians.

Though spared the indignities of institutional life, youth migrants – particularly in the early years – suffered a degree of trauma. Many were sent to work on remote rural properties, deprived of proper accommodation and even of food by taskmasters who considered them cheap labour.

After World War II the insistence upon rural employment was gradually relaxed. One Little Brother became a snake handler, another a deep sea diver. Former youth migrants have been represented in Parliament, the trade unions, media and entertainment, and in the upper echelons of the public service and armed forces.

All in all, some 50,000 young people were brought to Australia under the youth migration schemes. This book tells, for the first time, their collective story.

Publication of this book coincides with a Sydney tribute to the Dreadnought Boys and the 80th anniversary of the Big Brother Movement, which still survives – albeit now operating in a new and exciting direction.

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