

THE SHAMEFUL ISLES

DAVID PRICE

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YEAR LEVEL: Y11–12

CROSS-CURRICULUM PRIORITY: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures

ABOUT THE BOOK

In 1907, the Western Australian government began a program of forcibly removing supposedly ill Aboriginal people to purpose-built lock hospitals on Bernier and Dorre Islands, off the coast of Carnarvon.

There, they were trapped against their will and exposed to experimental drugs and procedures. Many never returned and are buried in unmarked graves in the sandhills of Bernier and Dorre.

Comprised of meticulous research and contemporaneous accounts of patient-prisoners, politicians, stockmen, nurses, policemen and journalists, *The Shameful Isles* reveals one of Western Australia's most tragic acts of state-sponsored oppression from which First Nations peoples are still recovering.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Price is a Western Australian educator and writer who grew up in the small northwest town of Carnarvon. His first book, *Dark Tales from the Long River*, was published by Fremantle Press in 2020 and explored some lesser-known and sadder historical events of the Gascoyne and Murchison regions. Now living in Perth, David continues to be intrigued by the unspoken history of his home state and is committed to bringing sometimes uncomfortable truths into the light.

THEMES

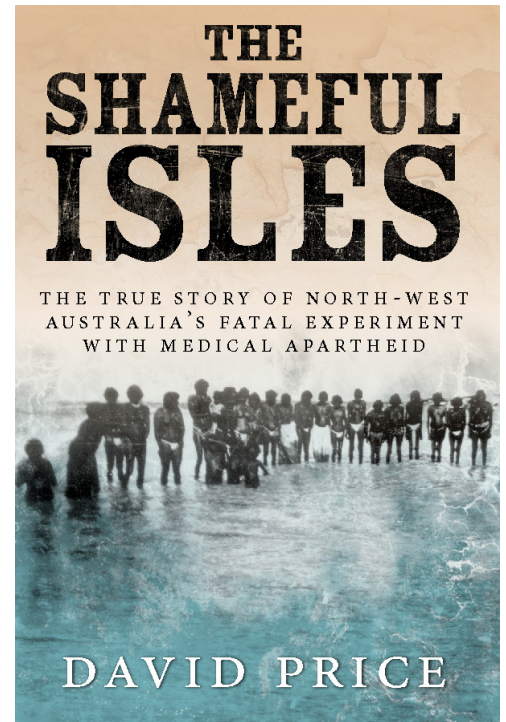
- Racism against First Nations peoples
- Impact of colonialism on First Nations peoples
- Isolation and segregation
- Dispossession and loss

AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM OUTCOMES

- ATAR Aboriginal and Intercultural Studies Unit 1 (Year 11)
- ATAR Aboriginal and Intercultural Studies Unit 4 (Year 12)

USEFUL WEBSITES

- Biography of the author: fremantlepress.com.au/contributor/david-price
- ABC News: abc.net.au/news/2018-12-19/indigenous-lock-hospitals-onbernier-and-dorre-islands/10634122
- University of WA: research-repository.uwa.edu.au/en/publications/surviving-the-cure-life-on-bernier-and-dorre-islands-under-the-lo-2



CLASSROOM IDEAS

Discussion questions

1. In small groups, ask students to look up definitions of important vocabulary in the text that may be unfamiliar, e.g. 'venereal disease' (p. 11), 'gin' (p. 79), 'vociferous' (p. 90), 'maudlin' (p. 92).
2. The author outlines three key misconceptions on which the **'partisan white lens'** (p. 9) view of Australian history is based. Divide the class into three groups and allocate each group a misconception to explore.
3. Discuss the practice of **'blackbirding'** (p. 44) and why it was so harmful to the relationship between the colonisers and First Nations peoples.
4. **'The social fabric woven over hundreds of generations is ripped apart, shredded and cast aside'** (pp. 53–54). Explore the example of dispossession and removal from Country that leads to this statement by the author.
5. What is meant by the term the **'Aboriginal question'** (p. 53) and what solution begins to appeal to the colonisers of Western Australia?
6. **'The Act will open the gates to the exile of generations of Aboriginal people within and beyond their own traditional lands'** (p. 93). Which Act does this refer to and what negative impact does it have on First Nations peoples?
7. What are the Stolen Generations in Australian history?
 - a. What were the primary motivations behind the forced removal of 'half-castes'?
 - b. How did the forced removals impact First Nations communities?
8. How does Austin Alvis Horan MLA use international precedent to justify colonialism and the concept of a White Australia? (p. 96) What impact did the legislations of the White Australia policy (1901) have on First Nations communities?
9. What does the extract from the *Sunday Times* newspaper on page 97 reveal about the perspective of some colonisers on the treatment of First Nations peoples at the time?
10. What comparison is made between the **'suffering of white mothers'** (p. 117) and that of Aboriginal mothers, and what is it used to justify?
11. Explore examples in the text that highlight the colonisers' view of First Nations peoples and discuss what these reveal about the values and attitudes of the time, e.g. **'... Indigenous women when their lives are rated less than flour, sugar and a leg of mutton?'** (p. 39) or **'... their women are as valuable to these natives as our flocks are to us.'** (p. 49)
12. Discuss the ethics behind the experimentation of a new treatment for syphilis on the Aboriginal patients of the island hospitals, without their knowledge or consent (p. 172).
13. Discuss the example of a disruption to culture on page 173 in the treatment of a deceased patient's body by nurse Harriet Lenihan.
14. What statement does Henry Underwood MLA (pp. 193–94) make regarding the future of First Nations peoples? Is this reflective of the widespread values and attitudes of the settler society by 1912?
15. In reference to the island hospitals, the author describes the **'scores of wretched souls who have lost their freedom and country, their names and dignity, and even their lives'** (p. 214). Investigate how this example of oppression and injustice for Australian First Nations peoples impacted communities at the time and generations to follow.
16. For the Protector of Aborigines in 1916, Mr AO Neville, the author describes First Nations peoples as meaning **'little more than artefacts of a fading past, their stories heard faintly from a distance, and their needs refracted through the prism of white sensibilities'** (p. 230). Discuss the significance of this statement and how it relates to modern Australian society's knowledge of the atrocities that occurred on the island hospitals of Bernier and Dorre.



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