Loach, J. (Director), 2011, *Oranges and Sunshine*, [DVD], New South Wales, Icon Film Distribution Pty Ltd. Reviewed by Karen Agutter

*Oranges and Sunshine* tells the story of Nottingham Social Worker Margaret Humphreys (Emily Watson) who, in the 1980s, almost singlehandedly exposed the well hidden secret of the British government’s forced migration of children from the United Kingdom to Australia in the years surrounding the Second World War. Based on true events, and inspired by Humphrey’s own account, *Empty Cradles*¹, the film’s title arises from the promises made to the children of oranges and sunshine, when in reality what faced them was hardship, hard labour, sometimes infamous institutions and a loss of identity.

This is a topic rarely covered in film. In fact filmic depictions have been limited to the 1989 British television documentary *Lost Children of the Empire*² and the 1992 ABC/BBC television miniseries *The Leaving of Liverpool*³. Indeed, outside of the furore of the 1980s and the recent, and much belated, governmental apologies⁴, this is a topic that remains relatively unknown amongst the general populace and for this reason alone this is a valuable film.

Director Loach tells this story well aided by good performances by the main characters. The audience sees the incredible courage and dedication of Humphreys, they feel her pain, her disbelief and her anguish, and yet this is not primarily a film about one woman against the bureaucracy. While her undeniably extraordinary feats are tangible (and would in 1993 earn her an Order of Australia), this is a film about the children, albeit through their adult eyes. The overwhelming concern of this film therefore, is to capture the long, and short term experiences and horrors these migrants faced.

Due to the years of denial, the number of organisations involved and the very nature of this migration, the figures around the number of children affected are rubbery with Humphreys herself estimating that around 7,000 were sent to Australia in the period of this film. Sent “for their own good” many of these children were told that they were orphans, that their parents had died or abandoned them. Parents were generally told
their children had been placed for adoption elsewhere in Great Britain. Although the experiences of these children are as individual as they are, there are also great similarities and collective emotions. The film covers this gamut of experiences primarily through its focus on two former child migrants, Jack (Hugo Weaving) and Len (David Wenham).

In Jack we see a nervous man, lost and confused, divorced and the survivor of suicide attempts. He is, in his own words, suffering from an ‘emptiness’ inside and his character represents so many of the voices who testified at the 2001 *Lost Innocents: Righting the Record* Senate enquiry, adults who reported spending ‘their entire lives feeling lost or separated and even abandoned...with a hole at the centre of [their] being.’

Len, by contrast is brash and outspoken, aggressive and proud of having ‘paid his debts to the brothers who raised him’. As the film goes on it is soon apparent that despite Len’s outward bravado and apparent good fortune, at least monetarily, at being sent to Australia, he is in fact as Humphrey’s character states ‘a hurt little boy.’ Through Len and his mates the film explores the most notorious of all institutions, Bindoon. The horror and abuse felt by so many is evident by the testimonies of the minor characters who file through Humphrey’s newly established offices in Australia. These characters could well have been reading from the *Lost Innocents Report* as they describe the physical and sexual abuse they suffered at the hands of the brothers and this helps to reinforce the historical accuracy of this film.

Subplots and vignettes within the film capture some of the other long term sufferings these people have had to endure. Consider the cleaner who has been mopping floors for 40 years thanks to the lack of education she received as a child migrant. Or the man who discovers that the name he has lived with for most of his life, is not his own, but one given to him by the system. There are also happy episodes such as the story of Charlotte and Vera, daughter and newly found mother, who are ‘now whole’ thanks to Humphreys. Meanwhile, the denial and apparent lack of interest of the British government is covered succinctly but sufficiently to draw anger and disbelief. The outrage at the accusations made against long standing institutions in Australian society are also condensed into the physical and verbal abuse the Humphreys’ suffers.
One negative of this film are the locations used. Whilst Nottingham is accurate, for those familiar with South Australia it is obvious that many scenes are shot at the Barr Smith Library, suburban Adelaide, the Flinders Ranges and so forth rather than the claimed and more accurate locations in Western Australia, but this is a minor point and would most probably remain unnoticed by many who see this film.

*Oranges and Sunshine* portrays beautifully the anguish, the emptiness, the ongoing loss of these child migrants who struggle in life to do even simple things such as answer the ‘questionnaires necessary to borrow money, obtain a passport or join the local golf club’ because these forms ask for personal details such as mother’s maiden name and these are questions that most child migrants cannot answer. Despite the best efforts of Margaret Humphreys and the Child Migrant Trust to reunite families, for many time has meant that they were just too late, these people continue to suffer terribly. On 16 November 2009, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said sorry to these ‘forgotten Australians’. He acknowledged the lies, the abuse, the absence of love, the childhoods lost, the lack of preparation for life, and the ongoing suffering carried, not only by these migrants, but also by their partners, children and friends. In some ways this film adds to this apology and hopefully it continues to raise awareness of an issue that too many people are still unaware of. This is a moving and relatively accurate portrayal of an important and ongoing issue in Australia’s history.

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3 Jenkins, M., *The Leaving of Liverpool*, TV miniseries, 1992
4 November 2009 PM Kevin Rudd apologised to these forgotten children, while British PM Gordon Brown followed suit in February 2010
7 Submission No.126 *Lost Innocents: Righting the Record - Report on child migration*, page 137