



ROUTLEDGE STUDIES IN INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND POLICY

GREENLAND'S STOLEN INDIGENOUS CHILDREN

A PERSONAL TESTIMONY

HELENE THIESEN
Translated by **STEPHEN JAMES MINTON**



GREENLAND'S STOLEN INDIGENOUS CHILDREN

In this book, author Helene Thiesen recounts her experience of being removed from her family in Greenland as a young Inuk child, to be 're-educated' in Denmark and an orphanage in Greenland.

The practice of forcible assimilation of Indigenous children into colonial societies through 'education' has echoes in North America and Australasia, and the painful legacy of these practices remains under-acknowledged. In this poignant book, Helene recounts in detail the process of being taken from her family in 1951, aged seven, along with twenty-one other children, in the attempt to re-make them into 'model Danish citizens', in a social 'experiment' led by the Danish government and Save the Children Denmark. When the children returned to Greenland a year and a half later, they were sent to live in a Danish Red Cross orphanage, where they were forbidden to speak their native languages, and were compelled to adopt Danish language, culture and customs. With a detailed introductory analysis from Dr Stephen James Minton, who also provides the translation, Helene's account serves as a compelling and powerful testimony of a devastating colonial experiment.

Richly illustrated with forty photos to help to situate the reader, this book provides an invaluable case study for researchers and students in the fields of Indigenous Studies, Critical Pedagogy and Education, Psychology, European History, and Cultural Studies.

Helene Thiesen was one of the twenty-two Inuit children who, in 1951, were taken from their families in Greenland to be 're-educated' in Denmark. After a career in children's education herself, she has written a book about her experiences, which appears here in English for the first time.

Stephen James Minton is the translator and editor of this book. He is an Associate Professor in Applied Psychology at the University of Plymouth, UK, and a part-time Associate Professor in the Department of Education at the University of Southeastern Norway.



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A Personal Testimony

Helene Thiesen, translated by Stephen James Minton

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A Personal Testimony

Helene Thiesen

*Translated, and with an Introductory chapter by,
Stephen James Minton*

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Frontispiece: Bishop Hans Fuglsang-Damgaard and his wife, who had been Barse-laj's foster parents, visited the Danish Red Cross Orphanage in Nuuk in the summer of 1953. From left, top row: Miss Blom, Bishop Fuglsang-Damgaard. Second from top row: Bodil, Big Kristine, Lene, Karen, Benze and Mrs. Fuglsang-Damgaard. Next rows: Eli, Eva, Agnethe, little Bodil and Ane Sofie, Albert, Marie, Regine, Little Kristine and me, Gabriel, Aron and Karl. Bottom row: Helge, Barse-laj, Dorthe, Little Karl and Sâmo.



Front cover photograph: Me, on my eighth birthday – April 21, 1952. I had hidden myself at the back of orphanage, so that I could be away from the others, but one of the adults had run to find me, in order to take a photograph of the ‘happy birthday child’. When they see it, people often say to me, ‘How cute you are, in that picture!’ But I want people to know how sad I was feeling at the time. I had been robbed of all of the most important things in my life. I had lost my father when I was six years old. I had been taken away from my mother and siblings when I was seven years old. And shortly before this photograph was taken, I had been told that I would not be permitted to even visit my mother and siblings, despite the fact that they lived only ten minutes away. My heart was bleeding – what did I have left? Only my doll, Tove, and my birthday present, Pluto – and no-one was going to take them away from me! When I got into bed, I hugged them tightly, feeling powerless and lonely, and crying inside myself: ‘Why?’ The photographer disturbed me in my feelings of grief and loss; at the time, I was wondering about whether it was worth celebrating my birthday at all, given that I was not allowed to live with, or even see, my mother and my siblings.

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NAMES OF PLACES IN GREENLANDIC AND DANISH

In this book, the old Danish names for the towns in Greenland have been used:

<i>Danish</i>		<i>Greenlandic</i>
Godthåb	=	Nuuk
Frederikshåb	=	Paamiut
Julianehåb	=	Qaqortoq
Sukkertoppen	=	Maniitsoq
Holsteinsborg	=	Sisimiut
Jakobshavn	=	Ilulissat
Egedesminde	=	Aasiaat



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TRANSLATOR'S FOREWORD

Stephen James Minton

I began corresponding with Helene Thiesen in 2018, when I was inviting authors to contribute to a book that I was compiling and editing at the time, which was entitled, *Residential Schools and Indigenous Peoples: From Genocide via Education to the Possibilities for Truth, Restitution, Reconciliation and Reclamation* (Routledge, 2020a). A chance meeting that I had with some Greenlandic Inuit people in Copenhagen in 1997 meant that I had learnt *something* from first-hand sources about the lived experiences of Greenlandic Inuit people, with particular respect to the troubled relationship between Denmark and its former colony. (The Inuit people I met were enthusiastic about teaching this hitherto ignorant Englishman, and I was very willing to hear whatever they felt like telling me.) My learning in this area continued over the years, albeit accrued from reading various second-hand sources, which amounted to the very little that had been written in English about these matters. When I came to invite contributions to the *Residential Schools and Indigenous Peoples* book, I was keen that a chapter on Greenland should be included.

In the years before I made contact with Helene, I had seen her name in some of the aforementioned English-language sources, and on finding an article which was connected to previous BBC Radio broadcasts, I realised that I had heard something (again, second-hand) about Helene's life story already. This time, the source was my Mum (Rosemary Fox) who, as an avid BBC Radio Four listener, would often tell me about the more interesting programmes that she had listened to. My Mum, who died in May 2020 in the COVID-19 pandemic, was a true humanitarian, with a deep, personal sense of social justice. Accordingly, she was very touched by the programme – alternately saddened and outraged by what had happened to Helene, and deeply affected by her sense of Helene's personal warmth – as I am sure that any sensitive reader of Helene's work will be. In 2018,

the author that I had previously engaged to write the chapter on Greenland for *Residential Schools and Indigenous Peoples* had to withdraw, and she suggested that I contact Helene in this respect, cautioning me that Helene was a retired lady, and might not have perfect English. None of that mattered; Helene and I found ways of working together on that chapter, as we have done on this book.

The chapter on Greenland in *Residential Schools and Indigenous Peoples* marked the first time that (a necessarily shortened version of) Helene's story had been published in an English-language academic text. What the reader now holds in their hands is much better – this is the full version of Helene's story, in her own words (in English translation). Helene and I have worked hard in bringing this book to fruition, and the personal and professional support we received from the series editor at Routledge, Professor Jerry White, and the editors Rosie Anderson and Helena Hurd, has been nothing short of incredible. Many people, it seems (including the reviewers of this book at its proposal stage, who I also wish to thank for their insights), now want to bring Helene's account of what happened to her as a child – the truth of which was kept hidden from everyone, including Helene herself, for forty-two years – to the Anglophone world. Amongst these have been my daughter, Anna; and my partner, Julie, who makes so many worthwhile things much more possible. For their encouragement of our efforts with this publication, and for so many other reasons, I send them both my love and thanks. I am extremely grateful to Lene Therkildsen, the owner and director of Milik Publishing (who published Helene's book in Danish and Greenlandic in 2011), for her agreement to this translation, and for her support of and interest in it. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to the friends and colleagues who read and commented on my introductory chapter – Dr Hadi Strømmen Lile (University College of Østfold), Dr Julie Vane (British clinical psychologist), Dr Shawn Wilson (University of British Columbia Okanagan), and Arnbjörg Engenes, Dr Camilla Wiig, and Professor Willy Aagre (University of Southeastern Norway). Without the benefit of their suggestions for improvements, my chapter would have been considerably poorer.

On a technical note, the translation that follows was made from the Danish version of Helene's book, *For flid og god opførsel: vidnesbyrd fra et eksperiment* ['For Diligence and Good Behaviour: Testimony from an Experiment'] (2011, Milik Publishing). I have translated all of the Danish parts of the text into British English; words in Greenlandic are italicised, as they were in the Danish text, where Helene provided Danish translations of the Greenlandic. Over the course of this translation, I have provided some notes. Naturally, I have attempted to keep these intrusions to an absolute minimum, and have made them where Helene referred to things that would be familiar to Danes and Greenlanders, but in my view, less familiar to English-speakers. These include places in Greenland and Denmark, songs, stories, food and drink, and specific aspects of religious holiday celebrations. The photographs that appear in this text are all from Helene's private collection.

It is, of course, the primary authorship of this book that matters. Helene is one of only six survivors of the twenty-two Greenlandic Inuit people who shared her childhood experiences in a social 'experiment' of the early 1950s. Therefore, she is one of the few people who could give a first-hand account of these experiences, and as Helene is now into her late seventies, she is perhaps the only person who is ever likely to write this type of book. Amongst the many things I have learnt from my Indigenous researcher colleagues is the ethical value that if someone gives you their story, then you take on a responsibility for it. I have experienced that responsibility as the absolute privilege of working together with Helene on the translation and publication of her work in English. It has suited (and it still suits) many people to turn away from Helene's experiences, and from experiences like them. So as the translator, I thank the reader for having picked up this book; and I earnestly hope that my work on it, which I would like to dedicate to my late Mum, does the original author justice.

Exeter, England
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FOREWORD TO THE DANISH- AND GREENLANDIC-LANGUAGE EDITIONS

Tine Bryld, 2011

I first met Helene Thiesen in 1990, when I was working on two books about the Greenlandic convicts sent to the closed prison, Herstedvester, for periods of indefinite duration. Helene said that she was a guardian for the mentally ill, convicted Greenlanders who, like the hereditary prisoners in the prison, had been sent to the Amts hospital in Vordingborg – indefinitely. I asked if there was a particular reason why she had taken on the difficult task of being a legal guardian. She replied, quite briefly, that as a child, she had been sent away to Denmark, and a year and a half later, had been sent back to an orphanage in Godthåb. I wondered. She had had her mother, and two siblings in town. Helene couldn't help me to find an explanation, except to say that she had felt very despondent, and rejected by her family. She had contact with a few other children from that time, and together we advertised for several of those who had been sent to Denmark, and back to the orphanage in Godthåb, to come forward.

After many attempts, and with the able assistance of the skilled staff of the National Archives, I was able to find the case of the twenty-two children who had been sent to Denmark in order to learn so much Danish that, after a year, they could travel back to the towns that they came from. The returned children were intended to be 'role models' for their peers who, after the new school reform, were to learn considerably more Danish. But that's not how things worked out. One factor was that a new school law had been passed in parliament on 27 May 1950, along with seven other laws for modernising Greenlandic society. Another thing was the way in which the legislation was implemented in the Greenlandic school system. A clear role was given to Save the Children, who were put in charge of finding the right foster families in Denmark for the children; and also to the Danish Red Cross, who had been given permission to build an orphanage in Godthåb. At that time, Greenland was plagued by great poverty, and many epidemics; child mortality was high in the years after the war.

Denmark was feeling pressure from the outside. Now the colonial power had to act, and to liquidate its colony, as had been the case with many other European countries. Hence, in 1953, Greenland was transitioned from being a Danish colony, to being a part of the Kingdom of Denmark. The twenty-two children were amongst the first to be ‘Danified’ – and in the worst sense of the word. They were not allowed to speak Greenlandic; they could not see their families; they were cut off from playing with Greenlandic playmates; and most of them could not understand or speak Greenlandic at all.

It was an experiment which was doomed to failure. It evolved into a series of on-the-hoof decisions, arrived at during meetings between the relief agencies and the Ministry for Greenland. Everyone was eager to help, and only a few protested when the matter was proposed to the Greenland National Council. At that time, the words of the Dane were almost law. A few years later, the process of sending Greenlandic children away to school in Denmark began. In total, this involved around 1,600 children; many of them can relate to feelings of need and longing, and not least of all, powerlessness. Some of these children’s stories appear periodically throughout this book. For some, the experience was good; for others, it was a failure, and again, an experience of being split between two cultures.

In the 1960s, other experiments took place – anonymous adoptions that were a completely unknown concept in Greenland at the time; physically and mentally disabled Greenlandic people were sent to Danish institutions; and young Greenlandic people who had committed serious crimes were sent to Herstedvester and Vordingborg in Denmark, because there was no closed Greenlandic prison. These abuses can be explained by the fact that whilst Greenland was now officially part of Denmark, and Greenlanders should have had the same treatment as Danes, there were virtually no social services in Greenland itself. The Danish government had instead invested in making the infrastructure, port buildings, housing, and factories work as quickly as possible. This meant that education systems were slow to arrive, and that many vulnerable groups were not offered help in Greenlandic society. Thus, Helene Thiesen and her friends were the first group to put their bodies and lives into an experiment that no one knew about. The worst thing for me has been the fact that no one told the children and their families what it was all about. Only when I found the case in the National Archives were the children’s stories returned to them.

I wrote the book, *I den bedsde mening* [‘With the best of intentions’] in 1998, which in 2010 became the basis of the film *Experimentet* [‘The Experiment’], which got new generations interested in what had really happened back then. In the journal *Social Kritik* [‘Social Criticism’], no. 123/2010, the social policy of the 1960s is described; and now, Helene Thiesen’s own account of how she and her friends were removed from their towns, villages, and families, sent to a foreign country, and split up amongst Danish foster carers is here. They became strangers, stripped of their identities. Back then, Helene and I talked about her writing about her family, the background of the grief that she has lived with for many years, and the failure that she felt. I knew that Helene could write so

personally, and accurately, that one felt almost present in her grief and longing for her own family. The years have gone by, and Helene has been working constantly on her own text. I am convinced that it will mean something fundamentally valuable to all of those who shared their fates with her – those who were sent to Denmark in large numbers as children and who, as adults, have felt the rootlessness and emptiness.

Very few people have articulated their experiences at that time, and so it is of particular importance that the Greenlanders who remember those days write and talk about what they thought then, and what it meant to their lives and families. What was everyday life like? How did their families live? What was it like to have Danish teachers, and not to understand a word of what was being said? I think that Helene Thiesen will be joined by others in the years to come. Previously, for example, the artist Pia Arke, who unfortunately died far too young, wrote *Scoresbysundhistorier* ['Stories of Scoresbysund'], and more recently Ane Sofie Hardenberg and Pia Christensen Bang have published *Kampen for en far* [The Fight for a Father].

Now we have Helene Thiesen's weighty tome, about the child who lost her family in the service of goodness. Without her husband, Ove Thiesen, and her children and grandchildren, this book could not have been written. They have always been there.



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