

*One final attempt at a convict nursery:
Yard 4 of the Cascades Female Factory*

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A nursery inside a prison is a strange place. Prisons exist for punishment, and the mothers of the children in the convict nursery were in the prison to be punished. They had been judged guilty of crimes and misdemeanours in accordance with the procedures of the state. A verdict of guilty gave the state control over the body of the prisoner. Within the convict system of Van Diemen's Land, control over the body of a female prisoner extended to control over the bodies of children arriving with her on a convict ship, or born to her while under sentence, or accompanying her when she was sent to a female factory for further punishment. Mothers could not be punished without affecting their children.

Children, however, were children, whoever their parents might be. This simple truism put pressure on the administrators of Van Diemen's Land, pressure which explains why the convict nurseries were moved so many times. Between 1828 when the Cascades Female Factory opened with a specifically designated nursery yard and 1854, when the convict nursery for Hobart Town left Cascades for good, the nursery was frequently on the move, housed at various times in the corner of Yard 1 at Cascades; in a rented house in Liverpool Street; in another rented property, Dynnyrne House, in South Hobart; at the Brickfields establishment in North Hobart; at the New Town Farm; at an Infirmary in central Hobart, and in Yard 4 of the Female Factory.

The first nursery at the Cascades Female Factory, built onto the perimeter wall in a corner of Yard 1, was abandoned in 1838, ten years after the prison opened, because a newspaper campaign exposed a shocking place of filth, disease, and death, an appalling place for children. In response to community outrage, the nursery was moved to temporary premises, houses refitted for institutional use, first in Liverpool Street and then (for 8 years) at Dynnyrne House. In the late 1840s one final attempt was made to design a convict nursery, to plan rather than adapt.

In November 1847 Lt Governor Denison sent plans for a new nursery to Earl Grey in London. "At present", wrote Denison, "the Female Convicts about to become the mothers of illegitimate children are placed in a building called the Dynnyrne Nursery, about a mile and a half from Hobart Town. This building is rented by the Government, and although it is the best adapted for the purpose of any that could be obtained, it is in every respect deficient in the accommodation requisite to carry on a well ordered Establishment."¹ Denison did not elaborate on the "many and serious evils" attributed to "the present defective Establishment" but asserted that "no other remedy can be provided but by erecting a new building". The building he proposed would accommodate 60 women; he doesn't say how many children. The cost was estimated at £4610.²

However misguided the project of building a nursery within a prison, this particular version was further hamstrung from the beginning by the ultimately dominant paradigm we recognise from our value system today: economics. No, came the reply from London in a response dated 30 June 1848. Too expensive. Rather than a costly new building to house convict mothers and their illegitimate children, the focus should be on reducing the need:

It is to be hoped that the more efficient control which it is intended to aim at establishing over the females will render so large an Institution, for the particular object in question, less necessary, and, at any rate, I wish you to consider of some less costly plan for meeting the want you describe.³

Stymied in his effort to get funds approved by the imperial government, Denison turned to a local solution. He asked George Hamilton, the commanding officer of the Royal Engineers stationed in Hobart Town, to tackle the problem. Hamilton complied. He had a solution for cutting the cost right down: "I now recommend that a new nursery should be built at the Cascade Factory on a plan which will admit of the boundary wall of the new separate apartments forming one side of the Nursery." Use the perimeter wall as an internal wall, and build the accommodation all along the side. Much cheaper than a free-standing building. Even better, more nursing mothers can be fitted in, 88 women instead of 60. Add 150 children (a nursing mother might be assigned one or two weaned children as well), and the total accommodation available soars to 238. We can even build "Matron & Submatrons Quarters two small rooms and a kitchen for each".⁴ And

all for £1865-12-5, *much* reduced from the earlier design. Lt Gov Denison was pleased. "I think", he wrote on 10 May 1849, "the arrangement proposed will be cheap and effective".⁵

There was some disagreement among the officers advising the Lt Governor about whether the plans should be re-submitted to London before proceeding, but the Colonial Secretary was of the opinion that the proposal met Earl Grey's instructions to consider "some less costly plan".⁶ In September 1849 Denison signed off on the project and in December he wrote to Earl Grey to "report that I have sanctioned the erection of a nursery" at a cost "little more than one-third of that to which Her Majesty's Government had objected".⁷

In July the following year, the buildings were completed in time to receive convict mothers and their unweaned children disembarking from the *Baretto Junior*. On the ship's voyage out, two children died of the 22 embarked. The *Baretto Junior* arrived from England on 25 July 1850; by Christmas that year, another seven of the *Baretto* children had died in the new nursery, including the only child born on the voyage, and named for the ship, Baretta Sullivan.

The new accommodation was described as "an excellent building" in a report dated 1 January 1852, submitted by J. M. May who had replaced John Hutchinson as the Female Factory's superintendent in mid 1851. May wrote glowingly that the building "is furnished with every convenience suitable for such an institution".⁸ Murray Burgess, who served as clerk in the Convict Medical Department for more than a decade, would later paint a starkly different picture in his evidence to a Parliamentary Select Committee. The location of the nursery, he said, "was not healthy, it was extremely damp; in winter time the walls would be saturated with moisture".⁹ Hardly a surprise, given that one wall of each room was the perimeter wall for Yard 3.

The walls were wet and the rooms were cold, as Dr Edward Swarbreck Hall discovered in June 1854 when he looked after the Cascades Female Factory while its regular doctor was on sick leave. He told the Select Committee that he "found the children in a most pitiable state; a great portion of them requiring daily medical treatment, and the mortality frightful. For the two years ending 30th June, 1854, 227 children died."¹⁰ Hall made it a practice to examine each child daily, and "scarcely ever felt a child's feet otherwise than stone cold".¹¹

They didn't have enough clothing, and the clean clothes they were given were often damp—indeed wet. “The matron”, said Dr Hall, “complained that the washed clothes sent from the Cascades for the use of the women and children were sent so wet as to be dangerous to use.”¹² What else could one expect? Just imagine the difficulty of washing and drying nappies for 150 infants in the middle of winter at the Cascades Female Factory! We all know how difficult it is to get clothes dry when we hang them outside during a Hobart winter.

And not surprisingly, when mothers and babies were crowded together in cold damp rooms, illness spread. But were they “crowded”? Superintendent May was indignant at the very suggestion. “The dormitories...were erected and altered upon plans approved of by the Medical Department. There are but 20 berths in each dormitory, each berth measuring nearly 3 feet in breadth.”¹³ Imagine one of these rooms for a moment. Each of the four dormitory rooms is a little more than 7 metres long and 6 metres wide.¹⁴ Along two walls the bunk beds are built, 10 beds against each wall, 5 above and 5 below.¹⁵ At one end of the narrower wall a door opens onto a staircase, and at the other is a much vaunted (but probably almost useless) fireplace. The bed, less than a metre wide, was, as far as I can tell, the only space the convict woman had for living and sleeping—though there wouldn't have been a great deal of sleeping in a room with 40 bodies, 20 women & 20 children.

Small wonder, then, that Yard 4 did not solve the problem of keeping children healthy in a convict nursery, and that the nursery did not settle into one place, as the planners had hoped. Even after Yard 4 opened, “children”, an officer told the Select Committee, “were removed from one establishment to another in consequence of sickness”.¹⁶ In March 1852 they were sent to the New Town Farm; two months later “in consequences of wet weather setting in”, they returned to Cascades. In September that same year they were sent to the Brickfields where they remained throughout 1853. In April 1854 they went back to Cascades, and were there in June when Dr Hall kicked up such a fuss that by the end of June the unweaned infants were transferred to the Infirmary in Liverpool-street, and the weaned children (all under the aged of 2) were sent to the Orphan Schools.¹⁷ In the 47 months between the opening of Yard 4 in late July 1850 and the removal of the children in late June 1854, the convict nursery

had actually been resident at Cascades for 26 months, little more than half the time since it opened in late July 1850, proving once again that a prison is no place for children.

But that larger lesson was not learned, and in the years after transportation stopped and the buildings of the Cascades Female Factory were handed over to Colonial control, small children often spent time there when their mothers were sentenced to imprisonment. They might also be put into the Cascades if they were found on the streets, or sent there if returned from apprenticeships by disgruntled masters. In one year alone, 1867, 371 children passed through Cascades.¹⁸ The lesson that children do not belong in prison seems so obvious, and yet apparently so difficult to learn. If the lesson had been learned during the Convict period, we in the twenty-first century would not hold the children of criminalised asylum seekers in detention centres.

¹ Denison to Earl Grey 7 Nov 1847, Correspondence of the Comptroller-General of Convicts held in the Mitchell Library, MM62/15/5083.

² Denison to Earl Grey 7 Nov 1847, Correspondence of the Comptroller-General of Convicts held in the Mitchell Library, MM62/15/5083.

³ Earl Grey to Denison, 30 June 1848, Correspondence of the Comptroller-General of Convicts held in the Mitchell Library, MM62/15/5083.

⁴ G Hamilton to Denison, Correspondence of the Comptroller-General of Convicts held in the Mitchell Library, MM62/15/5083.

⁵ Notation from Denison, 10 May 1849, Correspondence of the Comptroller-General of Convicts held in the Mitchell Library, MM62/15/5083.

⁶ Memo from J E Bicheno, Colonial Secretary, 12 Sept 1849, Correspondence of the Comptroller-General of Convicts held in the Mitchell Library, MM62/15/5083.

⁷ Denison to Earl Grey, 15 Dec 1849, *Further Papers Relative to Convict Discipline and Transportation*, Irish University Press (Shannon, Ireland, 1969), p. 403.

⁸ *Crime and Punishment: Transportation*, vol 12 *British Parliamentary Papers*, Irish University Press (Shannon, Ireland, 1969), p. 63.

⁹ *Mercury* 14 Jan 1856, p. 2.

¹⁰ *The Courier* 7 Sept 1855, p 3.

¹¹ *The Courier* 7 Sept 1855, p 3.

¹² *The Courier* 7 Sept 1855, p 3.

¹³ J M May to J. S. Hampton, 14 Sept 1855, Governor's Duplicate Despatches received by the Colonial Office, G033/1/83.

¹⁴ *Hobart Town Advertiser*, 25 Sept 1855.

¹⁵ See Plan for Nursery Yard PWD266_1-398.

¹⁶ *Mercury* 14 Jan 1856, p. 2.

¹⁷ Thomas Atkinson to Comptroller General, 20 Sept 1855, Governor's Duplicate Despatches received by the Colonial Office, G033/1/83; *Mercury* 14 Jan 1856, p. 2.

¹⁸ Joan C. Brown, *Poverty is not a Crime*, (Hobart: Tasmanian Historical Research Association, 1972), p 140.