

**‘And the Mortality Frightful’:
Infant and Child Mortality in the Convict Nurseries of Van Diemen’s Land**

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1. INTRODUCTION

Levels of infant and child mortality are regarded as a barometer of the quality of life in a society, with gross disparities in mortality indicative of inequity. Social or environmental factors peculiar to particular subpopulations may put them at greater risk of sickness or death;¹ however often these factors are not innate, but are rather imposed by government or community, either overtly or as an unintended consequence of custom, law or policy.

In mid-nineteenth-century Van Diemen’s Land (now known as Tasmania), the illegitimate children of convict women suffered mortality levels around four times those of children in the general community. Although children born out of wedlock are typically at higher risk of death, the convicts’ children also underwent incarceration with their mothers, and privation inflicted by authorities indifferent to their fate.

This paper begins with a brief description of transportation, followed by an outline of the data and method used to calculate infant mortality rates for Van Diemen’s Land. It then details the history of convict nurseries in Hobart, Van Diemen’s Land, from the 1820s to the 1850s, focusing on the proximate determinants of high infant and child mortality. The paper concludes with a discussion of the reasons children of convict women were institutionalized, and why their high levels of mortality were permitted to persist for so long. This discussion draws parallels with institutional conditions in nineteenth-century Britain, and the systematic removal of indigenous children from their families in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Australia.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

From the early 1600s, Britain transported a significant number of its convicts to the American colonies. Transportation was believed to have numerous advantages. It was merciful (in comparison to execution) and yet acted as a deterrent to other would-be criminals. It supplied labourers required in the colonies and was therefore an inexpensive solution, as the convicts could work for their keep. Hard work was also believed to have a reformatory effect. Perhaps best of all, transportation meant ‘out of sight, out of mind’. The lawbreaking dregs of society were removed and became someone else’s problem.²

The American War of Independence in the 1770s meant that convicts could no longer be transported to America, forcing the British Government to find an alternative dumping ground for its criminal citizenry. A convict colony was established in New South Wales in 1788, and in Van Diemen’s Land, in 1803. Over the next 20 years, the British population of Van Diemen’s Land grew from zero to 10,000, more than half of whom were convicts. Male convicts outnumbered their female counterparts by more than ten to one.³ Most female convicts sent to Van Diemen’s Land were transported for petty theft. Almost 90 per cent were aged between 18 and 40 years, with an average age of 27.⁴

Most female convicts lived and worked in the community under a system of assignment to free settlers. However, if they were unmarried and became pregnant, they were sent to the Female House of Correction, also known as the Female Factory, to give birth in the convict nursery. For example, in 1828, Prudence Clare was returned to the Female Factory ‘being unable from

pregnancy to be any longer of service to her Master'.⁵ The Female Factories were synonymous with convict mothers and their children, one visitor to the colony noting that the 'greatest part of the women seemed to have been sent there to be confined in more senses than one, for nearly every one of them had a child in her arms, or by the hand'.⁶ Once a child was weaned, her mother was sent back out to service, leaving the child behind. At the age of three years, children in the convict nurseries were sent to the Orphan School.

The Female Factory was run very much along the lines of workhouses back in England, with a superintendent and matron—usually a married couple—in charge, a part-time medical officer, and several subordinate positions held by inmates of the institution.

3. INFANT MORTALITY RATES IN THE CONVICT NURSERIES

Also like the workhouses, infant mortality in the Female Factories was inordinately high. Civil registration of births, deaths and marriages began in Van Diemen's Land in 1838. These data, now computerized, can be used to calculate levels of infant mortality in the convict establishments of Van Diemen's Land, and comparative levels of infant mortality in the general community. The births and deaths of convicts' infants who were born, and died, in the convict nurseries are readily identifiable from the civil registers. The registration of these events was the responsibility of prison officials, whose description (such as 'Superintendent' or 'Matron') and residence (such as 'Female House of Correction' or 'Dydney Nursery') recorded in the registers identified them as such. Additionally, 'Female convict' was appended to the surname of the mother in the birth registers, and in the death registers, 'Female convict's child' or 'Mother a prisoner' was usually entered as the 'Rank or Profession'.

If the populations from which these births and deaths are drawn were identical, then the calculation of infant mortality rates for the convict nurseries would be straightforward. However, it appears from the registers that some infants born outside the nurseries died in the nurseries, perhaps because mothers, imprisoned soon after the birth of a child, took the child with them into detention. Other infants were born in the nurseries and died outside, perhaps because their mothers, concerned about the impact of prison conditions on their children, arranged for their child to be cared for elsewhere. Presumably still others spent some time in the nurseries without either starting life or dying there. Therefore, since the populations from which the convict-nursery births and deaths are drawn are different, mortality cannot be calculated simply from counts of these events.

However, the infant mortality rate can be calculated by considering births occurring in the convict nurseries over a certain time period, and matching these with infant deaths over the next year, to ascertain how many of the children born in the nurseries died within one year of birth, either in or outside of the nursery. This was done, using the birth and death registers, for births in the years 1849–1857. The resulting infant mortality rates, for both those born in the convict nurseries and those born outside the nurseries, are shown in Figure 1, along with total infant mortality rates for the years 1845–1870.

For the late 1840s and early 1850s, infant mortality of those born in the convict nurseries was around 35 to 40 per cent, two to three times the level of infant mortality in the general community. However these rates probably underestimate the true level of mortality, because of under-registration. The officials responsible for registering births and deaths in the nurseries were notoriously lax in their duties. For example, in 1846 and 1847 there were no deaths at all registered in the convict nurseries, although deaths certainly took place in those years. It is likely that the level of mortality was just as high in the 1830s and early 1840s.

For these infants born in the convict nurseries who died in their first year of life, 41 per cent of their deaths were attributed to diarrhoeal disease, as opposed to 12 per cent of deaths of infants not born in the convict nurseries, although the age distribution of deaths (in days) were very similar for both populations. When causes of deaths of *all* children in the convict nurseries are considered, identical percentages emerge. Over the period 1838–1858, 963 deaths of children aged under three years were recorded as occurring in the Van Diemonian convict nurseries. Forty-one per cent of these deaths were caused by diarrhoeal disease. Over the same period, 6,721 deaths under the age of

three years occurring outside the convict nurseries were registered. Of these, 12 per cent were attributed to diarrhoeal disease.

4. THE CASCADES FEMALE FACTORY

At the end of 1828 a new Female Factory was opened in a remodeled distillery at Cascades, near Hobart. At this time the British population of Van Diemen's Land was estimated to be around 18,000. Of these, 725 were female convicts.⁷ About 100 of these women were sent to the new Factory.⁸ The Cascades Factory was criticized by the local newspapers before it even opened for business. It sat in a swamp at the bottom of Mount Wellington, was always cold and damp and received very little sun.⁹

The Factory quickly became notorious. Within a year there were almost 200 women and children located there. The *Colonial Times* reported that a 'great number of deaths...constantly occur at the new Female Factory...so many as six or seven children have laid dead there at the same time'.¹⁰ There were lurid rumours that 'the corpses of children [were] conveyed secretly out of the Factory, without the slightest regard to ceremony'.¹¹ In 1830, a woman convicted of killing her infant child in the new Factory became the first woman hanged in the colony.¹²

The reasons for the high mortality were not hard to ascertain. The location was cold, damp and sunless. The women and children were crowded together, dozens to a room, and they received inadequate food and clothing for good health. The regulation diet was very poor but often the women and children did not even receive that. For example, in 1830 the Lieutenant Governor wrote asking whether the stipulated rations were being adhered to in the Female Factory. The rations were, for breakfast, a quarter pound of bread and a pint of gruel; for dinner, half a pound of bread and a pint of soup; and for supper, a quarter pound of bread and a pint of soup. For the soup, there were to be 25 pounds of meat to every 150 quarts of soup, which was to be thickened with vegetables and peas or barley. This diet, even if fully supplied, was totally inadequate for pregnant and breastfeeding mothers. The superintendent wrote back to the Lieutenant Governor and said that he was 'unable to comply' with the regulations because no vegetables were available.¹³ Consequently, the so-called 'soup' consisted of water with a couple of chunks of meat floating in it.

However the superintendent had misunderstood the Lieutenant Governor. The Governor simply wanted to ensure that the women were not getting more meat than was stipulated in the regulations and that they were not getting any meat in solid form, although, of course, 'vegetables with the necessary quantity of barley and peas must be regularly supplied'.¹⁴ The diet of the weaned children was inadequate as well. In 1831 the attending doctor noted that their present rations were 'insufficient to preserve them in good health' and requested that a quarter pint of oatmeal be added to their daily allowance.¹⁵ Over the years there were also many complaints about non-compliance with dietary regulations,¹⁶ accompanied by accusations that officials in convict establishments were pilfering food meant for the prisoners and selling it for their own profit.¹⁷

Another recurring problem was cleanliness, or lack thereof. In 1832 the Lieutenant Governor paid a surprise visit to the Female Factory. He found it in a 'very dirty state'. Rubbish had accumulated in every building, the walls and floors were crawling with bugs and the blankets were 'quite black with fleas'. The children's rooms were 'particularly bad', which the Governor thought partly accounted for the sickly state of the children. He ordered the problem be fixed immediately through obtaining extra quantities of soap 'or anything else that may be necessary for putting the Establishment in a clean and wholesome state'.¹⁸ The problem may have been temporarily fixed¹⁹ but keeping the Factory and the nursery clean was a constant challenge. Settlers frequently complained that women from the Female Factory were sent to their service 'in a filthy state', sometimes with their hair 'full of vermin'.²⁰ Although the superintendent of the Factory argued that 'our women' were 'free from Filth and Dirt', he did acknowledge that it was impossible to maintain complete cleanliness given that bedding from prison ships, which were 'generally covered with vermin', were washed in the Factory by the women.²¹

In the early 1830s the government became alarmed at the enormous increase in the number of women and children being accommodated in the Factory. This was simply caused by the increase

in the number of women being transported. The number of female convicts in Van Diemen's Land increased from 725 in 1828 to more than 1,600 in 1832.²² However instead of providing more and better accommodation, the government decided it would try to prevent convict women becoming pregnant by making the 'offence of an illegitimate child' a jailable crime. Once their children had been weaned, the women would be sent to the Crime Class²³ for six months, then sent back out to work.²⁴

This new regulation applied to women who were already in the Factory with their children. These women wrote to the Lieutenant Governor begging that the sentence not apply to them saying that 'none of us that is in now came in for a sentence only the crime of being pregnant'. They appealed to the Lieutenant Governor as 'our father and our friend' to treat them not as 'objects of guilt but pity'.²⁵ However the law was not changed. The Principal Superintendent of Convicts was satisfied that the regulation was 'the best check...of immorality' and that it would 'restrain the promiscuous intercourse of these depraved women'.²⁶ The law was a complete disaster. It did not prevent the women from becoming pregnant and simply led to even more overcrowding in the Factory. A later inquiry on female prison discipline heard from the superintendent of the Factory that the punishment did not prevent repeat pregnancies.²⁷

Although the government seemed highly concerned about the morals of convict women, it did not make it easy for them to marry the fathers of their children, even if both parties were willing. Convicts had to apply for permission to marry. Sometimes this was denied on the grounds of previous misconduct, sometimes because one party could not prove that they were not already married. Exorbitant fees were demanded for the permission and performance of the marriage ceremony and those applying often received insolent treatment.²⁸

5. DR EDWARD BEDFORD

In January 1834, Dr Edward Bedford, a 25-year-old assistant government doctor, was assigned as the Factory's medical officer. He wrote a report on the state of the Factory nursery. The nursery rooms did 'not afford sufficient accommodation'. Twenty-seven women and 28 children were crowded into two rooms in which they spent their sleeping and waking hours. In the children's nursery there were 9 women and 30 children.²⁹

Bedford recommended that the children get more room and be removed from the Factory 'at as early an age as possible' for their 'health and well being'. He also recommended that weaned children be sent to the Female Orphan School. This would have the double advantage of removing the children from the crowded Factory and allowing the older girls in the Orphan School to be 'brought up to a description of Service they could not otherwise learn'; that is, raising the younger children.³⁰

Two months later, Bedford again wrote urging that a nursery be attached to the Orphan School. He stated that 'bad feeding, bad nursing, confinement to one spot and want of exercise' was causing 'exceedingly great' mortality among the children. So long as the children were still breastfeeding, they did well. However once weaned the 'deaths [were] very numerous indeed'. He cited the example of two very healthy children, 'to whom the mothers had been most attentive'. Within a month of being weaned, the children were again placed with their mothers 'to try and save their lives'. The prisoners in charge of the children had showed them sufficient care and attention, and yet the children 'gradually declined'.³¹

As on many other occasions when medical officers protested about the management and treatment of the children,³² no real action was taken by the convict authorities. The medical officers attached to the Convict Department had no power to effect change. Any suggestions they made were simply ignored.

Over the next year a power struggle went on between Bedford and the convict authorities. The Rules and Regulations of the House of Correction for Females stated that the 'internal economy of the Hospital and Nursery Yards will be regulated by the Medical Attendant'. Bedford wrote to his boss citing this regulation and requesting that it be 'clearly understood that the Medical Officer was in charge of the hospital and Nursery Yards'.³³

The Principal Superintendent of Convicts, Mr Spode, strongly protested against this request. He considered that it would be 'highly detrimental in every shape to the Establishment'. He claimed that he had 'never interfered' with 'the medical duties of the Attendant Surgeon', and quoted the regulations stating that he was 'charged with the general direction of the Establishment'. He also argued that the Female Factory was primarily a convict establishment, not a medical one.³⁴

The matter was still simmering in July when Bedford again wrote to the Colonial Surgeon asking for the matter to again be brought before the Lieutenant Governor as to 'what Officer is in truth to have the responsibility of the Hospital at the House of Correction for Females'. He complained that 'interferences occur daily' that prevented him from 'properly discharging his duties', indicating to the female inmates that he was 'the only officer who in effect has no authority in the management of the Hospital'.³⁵

In August of 1834 the dispute between Bedford and Spode again flared when Spode entered the Dispensary where Bedford was working and, in front of a number of female convicts, addressed him in a 'highly improper style'. The argument degenerated into the two men writing snide remarks to each other in the Magistrates' Memorandum book.³⁶

6. INQUESTS ON DEATHS IN THE NURSERIES

Over the next few years, the continuing terrible conditions in the nursery were occasionally brought to public attention through inquests which were held on deaths occurring there. These inquests have a depressing similarity about them. The child in question dies of some sort of bowel complaint, often soon after being weaned. The coroner is appalled at the overcrowded conditions, sometimes at the meagre diet, and recommends immediate remedial action. The coroner's recommendations are promptly ignored by the authorities.

For example, around the middle of 1834 no fewer than ten children died at Cascades within six weeks. One of these deaths was the subject of a coronial inquest. The coroner's jury went to Cascades to examine the accommodation. They resolved that a 'strong and respectful remonstrance' should be made by the coroner, as to the total unsuitability of the nursery. The dormitory for weaned children was only 40 feet long by 11 feet wide and held 26 children and 13 women. It had held more than 60 women and children, a number in the jury's judgement so 'totally disproportionate to the accommodation afforded that they felt it a duty to remark on it'.³⁷

Elizabeth Lush, who was the subject of the inquest, had been weaned just before she came to the nursery, and her mother was sent out to service. The overseer of the nursery thought that she had died of a fever and bowel complaint. Elizabeth had been kept in a room over the cookhouse, where there were seven beds for seven women and thirteen children. Two other children had died in the same room the day before; and one the previous Saturday. Every child in the nursery had been ill within the last month, and three of them were still very ill.³⁸

The coroner's finding was that Elizabeth Lush 'came to her death in a natural way and not through neglect or injury from any other person'.³⁹ The coroner deplored the 'present system of management', and the fact that unmarried female convicts who became pregnant were punished 'whilst the Father of the child whether he be the Seducer, or paramour, is rarely if ever punished'. However his main concern appeared to be that female prisoners or their children who died in the convict lying-in hospital or nursery were the subject of inquests. The Law required that inquests be held on all deaths in convict institutions. He recommended that a new hospital and nursery be built close to, but outside, the Factory, in order to avoid the necessity of holding an inquest on every death therein. This would minimize administrative expense and avoid 'excit[ing]...the Public Mind' through inquests being held on 'ordinary and unavoidable cases'.⁴⁰

In March of 1838 the newspaper the *True Colonist* strongly criticized the convict authorities. It railed that the Cascades Factory, a 'miserable place', was 'the most unfitting place in the whole colony for the prison of women, children and infants'.⁴¹ The paper called for an inquiry into conditions and treatment of children at the Factory.⁴² There had been 208 deaths of children within the Factory out of 794 admitted or born in the Factory since its opening in 1830.⁴³

These stories were followed with another on a child in the Factory, aged 20 months, who was 'literally a skeleton'.⁴⁴ This was attributed to the dank, sunless position of the Factory, the crowded conditions that led to such a foul atmosphere that the jailers fled when the doors were opened in the morning and the methods of feeding the children. Several children were fed at one time by one woman, who offered the spoon to each of them in turn. If the children were asleep at the designated meal time, they were woken up, or were not fed until the next meal, several hours on.⁴⁵

Again in March 1838, yet another inquest was held, this time on a female prisoner at the Female Factory. The jury found that ill health among the children was caused by the 'crowded state of the nurseries, the limited size of the yard, and the obstruction which the high walls give to the sun shining on the flagging of that yard and the lower part of the buildings'. The only place children could take exercise was in the wet yard where the sun did not shine for four months of the year. Sixteen women and 16 children were kept in the upper room of the suckling nursery. The air was 'very close and very bad', especially in summer. The women and children were locked up from six in the evening until six on the morning. By eight or nine at night, the room became 'very offensive and pernicious' from the heat and the smell of excreta. The suckling ward consisted of two rooms, each 28 feet by 12 feet, in which were crammed more than 70 women and children. The jury found the smell of these rooms 'most offensive' even in the daytime.⁴⁶

The amount of food supplied to the women was extremely limited. The women in the nursery complained that 'the food was not so nutritious for women suckling as they could wish'. The milk was very bad. However the coroner believed that their rations were sufficient considering that the Factory was 'a place of punishment'. The women complained of headaches and found the place very unhealthy. Twenty deaths had taken place within the last three months however the coroner had only been notified of seven. Two children had died within the last ten days without inquests.⁴⁷

This inquest and others were reported in great detail in the local press.⁴⁸ However anything the newspapers said was probably taken with a grain of salt by the public. The newspapers were not known for their veracity. For example, in May of 1838, the *Colonial Times* reported that the Nursery had been removed to a house in the middle of Hobart, and that the move had been totally mismanaged. The women in charge of the children were under no control whatsoever, no-one was in charge, and the children were being greatly neglected. The conduct of the women was openly disgraceful; drunkenness and promiscuous cohabitation were being continually practiced.⁴⁹

The next week the *Colonial Times* was forced to retract this story.⁵⁰ The nursery had not relocated. There were no out-of-control women getting drunk and behaving promiscuously. The children were not being neglected (no more than usual anyway). Of course the paper did not apologize to the women that it had so grievously libeled.

7. LIVERPOOL STREET AND DYNNYRNE HOUSE

Finally, however, these inquests and the attendant bad publicity seem to have had some effect, or at least the appearance of an effect. Soon after, the convict nursery was moved from the Female Factory at Cascades to a 'small, ill-ventilated' house on Liverpool Street in the middle of Hobart.⁵¹ This was supposed to be a temporary arrangement while more suitable accommodation was found,⁵² however the nursery remained there for four years. The overcrowding and high mortality continued.

In 1839 the Lieutenant Governor visited the nursery and found it 'extremely crowded to an unwholesome extent'. He appointed a Board to investigate and recommend other, more suitable premises.⁵³ The Board duly inspected the Nursery and recommended that purpose-built accommodation be constructed.⁵⁴ A site was selected within weeks⁵⁵ but nothing came of it.

In 1841 the Principal Medical Officer proposed a plan to remove the children to 'good air and spacious quarters in the country...the situation of the present Nursery being objectionable'.⁵⁶ However this was vetoed by the Lieutenant Governor who objected to the 'considerable expense' that the move would entail and the impact on discipline, given 'the very bad characters of these women'.⁵⁷

By 1842, 57 women and 96 children were crammed into the Liverpool Street house,⁵⁸ which was in such a dilapidated state that there was concern that part of it might fall down.⁵⁹ So the nursery was moved again, this time to Dynnyrne House, a house with about 20 rooms which it was optimistically believed would hold around 200 women and children.⁶⁰ The Superintendent of Convicts reported that this move had been attended by ‘the most beneficial effects to the comfort and health of the children’.⁶¹ However by 1846 it was reported that the building was so crowded that it was ‘not...possible to maintain order and cleanliness’.⁶² The building was ‘ill-adapted for the purpose [of a nursery], the rooms being low and close’ and the ‘state of the establishment was...far from satisfactory’.⁶³

In 1847 it was again recommended that a nursery be built for housing women and children. However the British Government was not prepared to wear the cost: ‘we cannot think it necessary to incur so large an expense for this purpose’. It was hoped that the local authorities would be able to establish ‘more efficient control’ over the convict women so that more accommodation would not be necessary.⁶⁴ In 1851 the lease on Dynnyrne House ended and the nursery was relocated several times before arriving back at the Cascades Female Factory in April of 1854.⁶⁵

Up until this time there had been a number of well-publicized inquests that had exposed the terrible environment in which the women and children lived in the convict nurseries. Medical officers had tried—and failed—to improve conditions. The high infant and child mortality continued.

8. DR EDWARD SWARBRECK HALL

In June 1854, Doctor Edward Swarbreck Hall took up a temporary appointment as medical officer at Cascades. Hall was an English doctor in his early 50s who was highly experienced in the medical management of institutions. Among other posts, he had had medical charge of an orphanage in Liverpool, and then various of the convict establishments on his emigration to Van Diemen’s Land.⁶⁶ Hall was a great humanitarian who was not afraid of causing trouble in high places to get results.

On his arrival at Cascades, Hall found 60 women and 110 children housed in four damp cold rooms of 20 feet square.⁶⁷ The children were in a feeble and emaciated state, many of them requiring medical treatment on a daily basis, ‘and the mortality frightful’. Dr Hall attributed this to a ‘complication of causes’ under the heading of ‘general mismanagement’.⁶⁸

The children were kept outside all day, whatever the weather, with only an open shed in which to shelter. No heating was available in the rooms. The clothing of both mothers and children was quite insufficient to preserve vital warmth, and was often issued damp. Hall examined the children daily and ‘scarcely ever felt a child’s feet otherwise than stone cold’.⁶⁹ Neither the women nor the children got sufficient food. Breastfeeding mothers were allocated a miserly half diet. The food given to weaned children was often burnt or rancid.⁷⁰ Children were frequently kept in solitary confinement with their mothers.⁷¹

Dr Hall urgently requested that fires be lit in the nursery to ward off the cold and damp. However the authorities ‘appeared afraid of dirtying the grates, or of taking the trouble of lighting fires’.⁷² He ordered extra daily arrowroot for a sick child. For two days the extra rations were not provided. On inquiry, the matron said that the arrowroot could not have been on the requisition otherwise she would have received it from the storekeeper. She was challenged to produce the requisition which would show whether the arrowroot had been ordered or not. Instead of bringing the requisition, the arrowroot was produced with the explanation that it was an oversight. The arrowroot so produced was substantially short of the requested weight. Hall asked for warm woollen cloaks for the children. He was put off, and then eventually told that the cloaks were being made in the workroom. So he went to the workroom where he found that there was no material with which to make them.⁷³

One morning a child was brought to the Factory surgery. Hall asked the mother how she could expect the child to be anything other than ill seeing the child was wet and cold. The mother replied that the child’s clothes had been provided to her in that state. Hall spoke to the officer

responsible for issuing clothes, who said that ‘if the clothes were wet the child must have wetted them’. At this, Dr Hall ‘rose up out of his chair, and said with warmth, having put his hand between the shoulders of the child, “You don’t mean to say a child would have wet itself up here”’.⁷⁴

Dr Hall was frustrated at every turn by the convict authorities who appeared to have no interest in the health of the children. So he arranged to circumvent the authorities altogether by having the mothers and children at Cascades transferred to the Infirmary in Hobart where they would be under the sole care of the Medical Department, rather than the Convict Department. This was done on 5 July 1854.⁷⁵ At this time Hall had been at Cascades for less than one month.

Even though almost all the women and children were suffering from disease, immediately the mortality fell by around 75 per cent and the children ‘thrive[d] better than was ever known before’.⁷⁶ Only ten deaths occurred in the second half of 1854, four of them in July, as opposed to 68 deaths in the first six months of the year.⁷⁷

In March of 1855, Hall was forced to resign from the service. Three months later, the Convict Comptroller General decided to commandeer the Infirmary for office space, and the women and children there were sent to the hiring depot at Brickfields, again under the control of the Convict Department. Within about two months, one quarter of the children moved had died, eight within one week.⁷⁸

Even though he had retired, Hall again took action, this time publicly. He wrote a number of very detailed exposés which were published in the press. Hall accused the Convict Department of a ‘heartless, murderous experiment’ in taking the children from the Infirmary and sending them to Brickfields, ‘which had formerly been so fatal to them, and again proved so’. At the very least there had been ‘reckless indifference to the life or death of the infant children of convict parents’.⁷⁹

Hall had demography on his side, backing up his claims of high mortality with meticulous research. For several weeks he went to the Registrar’s Office every day and compiled statistics on child mortality in the Hobart nurseries and the Hobart district in general. He was also able to include deaths that he knew had occurred in the nursery, but had not been registered. He showed that mortality in the nursery in 1851, 1852 and 1853 was around four times higher than mortality of children of a similar age in the general Hobart district. He calculated death rates under the age of three of around 40 per cent.⁸⁰ He argued:

With the unlimited means at the command of the convict authorities as regards lodgings, ventilation, cleanliness, food, clothing, artificial warmth, nursing, medical attendance, in many of which a great part of the population at large is so ill-provided I can not see any valid grounds on which the mortality in the convict nurseries should not be greatly below, instead of so much above that of the district...It will be patent to all, that at least 269 out of the 371 children that perished in the convict nursery for the three years and a half ending 30th June 1854, might and ought to have been alive, and were sacrificed to mismanagement alone.⁸¹

9. INQUIRY INTO THE CONVICT DEPARTMENT

Around the same time, the local Legislature appointed a committee to investigate accusations of ‘fraud, peculation and embezzlement’ made against officers of the Convict Department. The committee was to also ‘make such other inquiries into the abuses in the Convict Department which may appear to affect the colonial interest’.⁸² These ‘other inquiries’ included the high death toll in the convict nurseries. Dr Edward Swarbreck Hall was their star witness.

Hall described conditions at the Cascades during his time there as medical officer and the resistance encountered from officials of the Convict Department, who had ignored his requests for adequate heating, and additional food and clothing for the women and children. He also exposed the petty pilfering of food meant for the convict women and their children. He ‘knew well how plentiful a ration may appear on paper, but how regularly it became “fine by degrees and beautifully less” before it reached the plundered recipients’ hungry mouths’.⁸³

The Committee found that the ‘sickly state of the children’ and ‘excessive mortality’ in the convict nurseries was caused by ‘general mismanagement, exposure to cold, insufficient food and clothing, badly arranged dormitories,...and an insufficient allowance of nourishment to mothers

who were nursing'. This was the fault of the Convict Department which was 'chiefly responsible for a reckless negligence which has resulted in the loss of so many lives'. What is more, the Committee named names, stating that culpability mainly attached to the Convict Superintendent and the Comptroller General.⁸⁴

All those who could share some blame in the staggeringly high level of mortality fell over themselves to prove that the mortality in the nurseries was not so high as Hall stated, or to say that it was not so high compared to other places, or to blame the parents for the high mortality. The Comptroller General—who had been responsible for moving the women and children from the Infirmary—argued that, if mortality was high, it was because the children had 'constitutions tainted by the hereditary diseases derived from their vicious parents'.⁸⁵ Additionally, that he was only trying to save the government money in shifting the women and children from the Infirmary. He also argued that Hall was calculating the level of mortality incorrectly, either through 'ignorance or malevolence'. He thought Hall should have used the actual number of different individuals passing through the Nursery rather than the mean daily strength.⁸⁶

This inquiry into the Convict Department was highly embarrassing for the Lieutenant Governor, who peremptorily shut down parliament before a final report could be produced. However by this time Van Diemen's Land had already received its last load of convicts from Britain. Within a couple of years the convict system had been almost entirely dismantled.

At least up until the 1870s the Cascades Factory was still being used to house female prisoners and their children. In 1872 it held 78 women and 26 young children. However this time the newspapers reported that the women and children were well cared for and received a 'full supply of good and nourishing food'.⁸⁷

Convicts' children of the earlier period who survived their first years were sent to the Orphan School, where they suffered similar privations.⁸⁸ The conditions of their early lives impacted through generations: a study of 9,030 infants born 1857–1883 in Melbourne, Victoria, has found that Tasmanian-born women—likely the daughters or grand-daughters of convicts—had babies of significantly lower birth weight than did women born anywhere else.⁸⁹

10. CONCLUSION

Why were the terrible conditions for convict women and their children, and the attendant high mortality, allowed to persist for so long? There are two issues here. The first is why the children, once weaned, were separated from their mothers, when the consequences for the children's health was so obviously detrimental; the second, why the authorities did so little to ameliorate the children's environment.

With regard to the first, Damousi argues that this separation resulted from discomfort with notions of convict mothering. In general, motherhood was honoured, but convict mothering was not 'valued, romanticized or idealized'.⁹⁰ Large numbers of contemporary observers believed that convict mothers should not be permitted contact with their children, ever. For example, the headmaster of the Orphan Schools—where most inmates were not orphans at all, but rather the children of unmarried convict women—strongly disapproved of mothers visiting their children at the Schools. He claimed that most of the women arrived drunk, some got their children drunk, and prostituted their daughters as soon as they could. He maintained that the children who were true orphans 'invariably turn out the best'.⁹¹

Children's institutional accommodation was established not primarily for the welfare of the inhabitants, but 'to prevent the proliferation of a class of criminal slum-dwellers...by cutting off the source of its juvenile recruits'.⁹² This applied even more strongly to the children of convict women, who—it was believed—were in ever present danger of having their minds and morals polluted by their 'vicious' parents. Convicts were segregated from British society through transportation, and their children were segregated from their parents through institutionalization.

Some researchers have drawn explicit parallels between the situation of convicts' children and indigenous children.⁹³ Similar separation of parents and children was forced on the Australian indigenous population by governments throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Indigenous children were systematically removed from their parents and placed in institutions, sometimes the same orphan schools housing non-orphaned children of convicts.⁹⁴ The reasoning for this removal was much the same: the children would be much better off removed from the ‘degenerate influences of their families’.⁹⁵

Of course both the children of convicts and indigenous children were *not* better off incarcerated in institutions away from their families. Morbidity and mortality for both populations was horrendous, and the psychological scarring has echoed—and will continue to echo—through generations. Both populations suffered separation from their loved ones, in places where they endured overcrowding, and severely inadequate food, clothing and shelter, provided by indifferent authorities.⁹⁶

Potts and Campbell have labelled the foundling hospitals and workhouses of Europe ‘institutionalized infanticide machines’.⁹⁷ Governments were not highly motivated to ensure that offspring of the underclass survived childhood, and the more cheaply they could be kept, the better. Motivations of economy are part of the explanation for high mortality in the convict nurseries. The primary purpose of the assignment system—where convicts were assigned as servants to local settlers—was to relieve the Imperial Government of the living costs of prisoners. The settlers were to provide the necessities of life, including food, accommodation and clothing. When the women became pregnant, the cost of their upkeep and their children’s upkeep was thrown back on the British Government, which paid grudgingly. To improve conditions and reduce mortality would have required greatly increased resources which the Government was not willing to provide. Time and again improvements were suggested and time and again they were refused on grounds of cost. Additionally, any improvements would have ‘completely alter[ed] the position of the mothers as prisoners under punishment’.⁹⁸

This preoccupation with the expense of maintaining convict mothers and their children crops up repeatedly in colonial documents. For example, the Rules and Regulations of the Female Factory stated ‘the establishment must necessarily be a heavy charge upon the Government and the most scrupulous attention to economy is therefore expected to pervade the whole system of the Establishment’.⁹⁹

In 1828 there was a short-lived attempt by the government to compel the fathers of children born to unmarried convict mothers to provide for their children’s support. As well as relieving the financial burden on the Government, it was believed that the introduction of financial accountability of the fathers would lead to the ‘suppressing of immorality’.¹⁰⁰

The Principal Superintendent of Convicts started by ordering six known fathers of illegitimate convict children to pay maintenance. Of the orders made, one ticket-of-leave holder—who had already applied to marry the mother of his child—agreed to pay support. All other orders were ignored. The Superintendent of Convicts attempted to bring charges against the offending men, but was rebuffed by the Superintendent of Police with the statement that the Poor Laws of England were not applicable in the colony, and that the police had ‘no jurisdiction over such matters’.¹⁰¹

Children in the convict nurseries were maintained by the British Government. However, once they reached the age of three years and were transferred to the Orphan Schools they became the responsibility of the local Colonial Government, since, technically, the children of single convict women were not themselves convicts. The local government was not averse to attempting some cost-shifting of its own. In 1839, the Lieutenant Governor hit upon the novel idea of reducing monies owed to Great Britain by offsetting them against the cost of maintaining children of convicts in the Orphan Schools.¹⁰² He argued that ‘the penal coercion of the parent renders it inevitable that the child should be maintained by the public; the inference appears to be clear that Great Britain, on whose account that is enforced, should defray the charge’. However the Deputy Commissary General of Accounts responded that ‘the children are themselves free, and therefore ought not to be a charge upon the Home Government’.¹⁰³ Any support was provided grudgingly, whether by the British Government in the convict nurseries or the Colonial Government in the Orphan Schools.

There are also strong parallels between the convict nurseries of Van Diemen's Land and the workhouses of Britain, the conditions of which were amply documented by Dickens. In both, mothers and children were crowded together in unsanitary conditions with inadequate food, clothing and shelter, leading to infant mortality rates of around 35 to 40 per cent. Malnourished babies were more prone to infection, particularly diarrhoeal disease, which spread rapidly in confined conditions where it was impossible to keep the babies clean and there might be one flannel wipe and one feeding spoon between a dozen of them.¹⁰⁴

Apart from the indigenous population, the convict mothers in Van Diemen's Land were probably the most disempowered and voiceless group in the colony, having no recourse for complaint. Half a world away from family and friends, they had nothing to negotiate with and were powerless to prevent the deaths of their children. There were people who fought for change, notably the medical officers attached to the nurseries. However these men also had very little power. The punishment of the mothers, and preoccupation with economy, took precedence over the welfare of the mothers and their children.

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Figure 1. Infant mortality rate, Tasmania (Van Diemen's Land), 1845–70,
(child born in convict nursery/not born in convict nursery/total)

