

## Life and Death at Cascades – from inquest records

### Notes for a talk.

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At least 220 women died at Cascades between 1828 and 1879. Most were convicts, or former convicts. After sudden or unexplained deaths, inquests were held, before a coroner and a jury. The inquest records are a rich resource. Many women who gave evidence were convicts under sentence, and their statements give us a rare insight into the contemporary voice of factory inmates. When testifying, each woman declared who she was, where she worked and what her role entailed. She reported how she knew the woman who died, and how that woman was treated within the factory or the hospital.

One of the earliest inquests, held in 1838, was that of Barbara Henning. *The Hobart Town Courier* reported that she died of ‘diarrhoea and fever, produced by being confined in a crowded unwholesome place, without necessary air and exercise’. The article drew attention to the ‘serious defects both in the internal domestic economy and in the necessary discipline of this establishment which require prompt and rigorous examination’. *The Courier* referred to the ‘offensive condition of the dark cells, in which the jury found the women closely confined upon bread and water, for periods of from seven days to one month’ and it mentioned how the jury questioned why when ‘twenty deaths have taken place since the first of January last, and it is in evidence before the jury, that two have taken place within the last fourteen days, and that inquests have not been held’.<sup>1</sup>

When Margaret Cochrane was admitted to hospital from the pregnant women’s ward in 1850, she was given warm drinks, covered with blankets and fed milk, arrowroot and oatmeal gruel, tea and sugar. She never complained, because the ward was warm and well ventilated and she had plenty of bedding. The doctor assisted her labour by ordering turpentine applied to her belly and by giving her a strong opiate. Margaret died of mortification of the right leg. The doctor noted that there had been serious inflammation among patients that previous month and ordered the hospital cleaned and whitewashed twice, as well as the bedding changed and another ward established.<sup>2</sup>

In 1842, Catherine Dalton was given white bread and milk – in fact, all patients in hospital received white bread. Obviously a treat, if it was recorded at the inquest.<sup>3</sup> Women in the hospital received other medical comforts such as tea, meat, brandy, sago and even port wine! The staff went to great lengths to assure the coroner that the patients were fed well in the hospital and that diet had not contributed to their demise.

Esther McIntyre was a prisoner sentenced to hard labour, yet employed as a yard-woman at the separate apartments. She gave the women in these apartments their meals, serving served breakfast and then water twice before dinner. Esther testified at the inquest of Ellen Parker who died of apoplexy in 1849. One morning, Ellen had bread for breakfast and did her labour, stitching the wristbands for boys’ shirts. For dinner she ate mutton and potatoes but when Esther brought her soup ten minutes later, Ellen was dead. Esther sent for Mrs Hutchinson, the matron, but nothing could be done for Ellen.<sup>4</sup>

Free women died at Cascades too. Elizabeth Davies, a former convict, returned to assist the overseer, handing out work to prisoners. She lived in the cold, separate apartments, but she was not locked in. Her apartment had a boarded floor and was a large one on the

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<sup>1</sup> *Hobart Town Courier* 30 March 1838

<sup>2</sup> SC195/1/27 Inquest 2294 (Margaret Cochrane).

<sup>3</sup> SC195/1/9 Inquest 699 (Catherine Dalton).

<sup>4</sup> SC195/1/24 Inquest 2028 (Ellen Parker).

upper tier. She said preferred it there to being in the yards. Elizabeth was given the normal rations – but to help her typhoid symptoms, she was given porter. It did not help her much.<sup>5</sup>

### **Illnesses and treatments**

Women died at Cascades from the complications of childbirth, venereal disease, diarrhoea, fever, typhus, cholera, dysentery, cancer, tuberculosis, and consumption among other illnesses. In 1838, the Coroner, Josiah Spode, reported on the death of Elizabeth Johns from ‘venereal infection’. He commented that a great many females at the Factory had this infection and he was concerned that they might spread the disease whilst assigned in the community. Ann McKenzie, who was working in the nursery looking after her own child, alerted the doctor to Elizabeth’s affliction and the doctor noted that Elizabeth had covered up her symptoms.<sup>6</sup> Given the attitude of the coroner, are we surprised?

Catherine Dalton died of diarrhoea in 1842, and although only 25, apparently she looked between 40 and 50. The surgeon, William Dermer, recorded that her ‘dissipated life’ was a factor in her death. Mary Budgett, who spent six weeks in hospital with Catherine, testified that Catherine led a ‘dissipated life’ and ‘drank a great deal’.<sup>7</sup> Several inquests in the 1840s followed a similar pattern. The staff reported that ‘she was a hard drinker’, ‘led a dissipated life’, and ‘her constitution destroyed’ by ‘previous habits of intemperance’.

The inquests of these convict women afforded both staff and coroners the opportunity to pass judgement on them, particularly for drunkenness, dissolution and dissipation. These women died from corruption, and not because of ill treatment or hard usage at the Factory! Dr Dermer blamed Mary Ann Meacham for her own death. She died of cold, and neglect on her own part for not applying for medical assistance sooner. After all, Dr Dermer was at the Factory hospital every day and often twice a day.<sup>8</sup> What was to stop her?

Dr Dermer also recorded that Sarah Dogherty died in 1845 from typhus fever, brought on by ‘the weather and the debilitated state of her constitution, arising from her dissipated life and constant use of ardent spirits’. He made no mention of the fact that she was serving sentence of six months’ hard labour for giving birth to an illegitimate child.<sup>9</sup>

### **Caring for the dying**

Catherine Cahill died after childbirth in 1846. Anne Stevens was a nurse at the Cascades when Catherine was returned there to give birth. Doctors Casey and Bedford attended Catherine and Mrs Hutchinson sat with her most of the afternoon. Anne, who had been a nurse in England, was satisfied that Catherine was ‘treated with every attention’.<sup>10</sup>

Julia Salt was warder of the hospital in 1857 when Catherine Murphy died of syphilitic rheumatism. Julia testified that the ward was ‘warm and well ventilated’, that there was ‘no deficiency in fuel or bedding’ and ‘no restrictions as to the quality of bedding used in the hospital’. Catherine received comforts like arrowroot, milk, wine, gin and meat. Sometimes she had eggs. She spent months in hospital under medical treatment, doing no work. Her doctor reported that she never complained of ill usage or neglect.<sup>11</sup> I see a pattern here – and the pattern continued.

In 1852, Rebecca Daynes was under sentence of hard labour having been caught trying to abscond on a vessel bound for Port Phillip, where she hoped to join her husband. She was housed in G Division at Cascades when she was moved to the hospital in labour to

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<sup>5</sup> SC195/1/24 Inquest 2097 (Elizabeth Davies).

<sup>6</sup> TAHO, CSO 5/109/2456 pp.351–356.

<sup>7</sup> SC195/1/9 Inquest 699 (Catherine Dalton)

<sup>8</sup> SC195/1/13 Inquest 1092 (Mary Ann Meacham).

<sup>9</sup> *Courier*, 13 March 1845.

<sup>10</sup> SC195/1/17 Inquest 1413 (Catherine Cahill).

<sup>11</sup> SC195/1/40 Inquest 3959 (Catherine Murphy).

deliver a son who lived less than an hour. Mary Daley, the nurse, gave evidence that Rebecca ‘never complained of any ill usage’, ‘received medical comforts such as bread, tea, meat, brandy and sago’ was housed in a ‘warm and airy’ room and had ‘sufficient clothing’. Mary, who had been a midwife in England, reported that Rebecca’s labour had not been difficult.<sup>12</sup> Her death was from consumption and not the complications of childbirth that seem so common in the inquest records.

When Martha Hill died of old age, dropsy and bronchitis in 1868, Jane Turn, a nurse and prisoner, reported that Martha ‘received every attention’. Cecilia Eliza Paul, a midwife in the nursery department, said that Martha ‘never complained of anything’.<sup>13</sup>

### **Roles people played**

Many of the staff employed as warders or nurses in the Cascades Factory were former convicts or prisoners under sentence. The inquest records give us a window into their world and invariably when they testify they refer to the good treatment of the deceased women. Sarah Rafferty arrived in 1838 and went straight to the hospital as a nurse, an occupation noted on her description list. She gave evidence that a woman under her care had ‘every due attention’. Sarah Whitby was re-transported in 1846 from New South Wales where she had been sent in 1837. She was a midwife in Ireland and her skills were put to good use at Cascades.

Father Therry, the Catholic priest, frequently visited Mary Connor, who died in 1843, administering the sacraments to her just before her death of consumption.<sup>14</sup> Convict Margaret Shaw reported so at Mary Connor’s inquest. Margaret was employed working as a nurse at the factory.<sup>15</sup> She probably did her job well, and in 1844 she was promoted to the position of nurse at the Female Orphan School.<sup>16</sup>

### **What do we learn from inquest reports?**

- The authorities and the factory staff believed they were doing the best thing for the women in the hospital. They also covered their own backs!
- Better food and bedding was provided in the Factory hospital and the nurses seemed to be sensitive to the needs of their patients. Though perhaps the doctors were not always so.
- Many of these women did not die alone.
- The medical skills of convict women were recognised and used in the factory.
- Attempts were made to improve the hygiene of the hospital.
- The authorities wanted to appear to be doing the right thing. The staff often used a similar script when giving evidence repeating often, the line: ‘she never complained of ill usage or neglect’.

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<sup>12</sup> SC 195/1/30 Inquest 2699 pp.6-10 (Rebecca Daynes)

<sup>13</sup> SC195/1/52 Inquest 6549 (Martha Hill).

<sup>14</sup> SC195/1/11 Inquest 869 (Mary Connor).

<sup>15</sup> CON40-1-10 (Margaret Shaw).

<sup>16</sup> Trudy Cowley and Dianne Snowden, *Patchwork Prisoners*, Hobart, 2012, p. 193.