

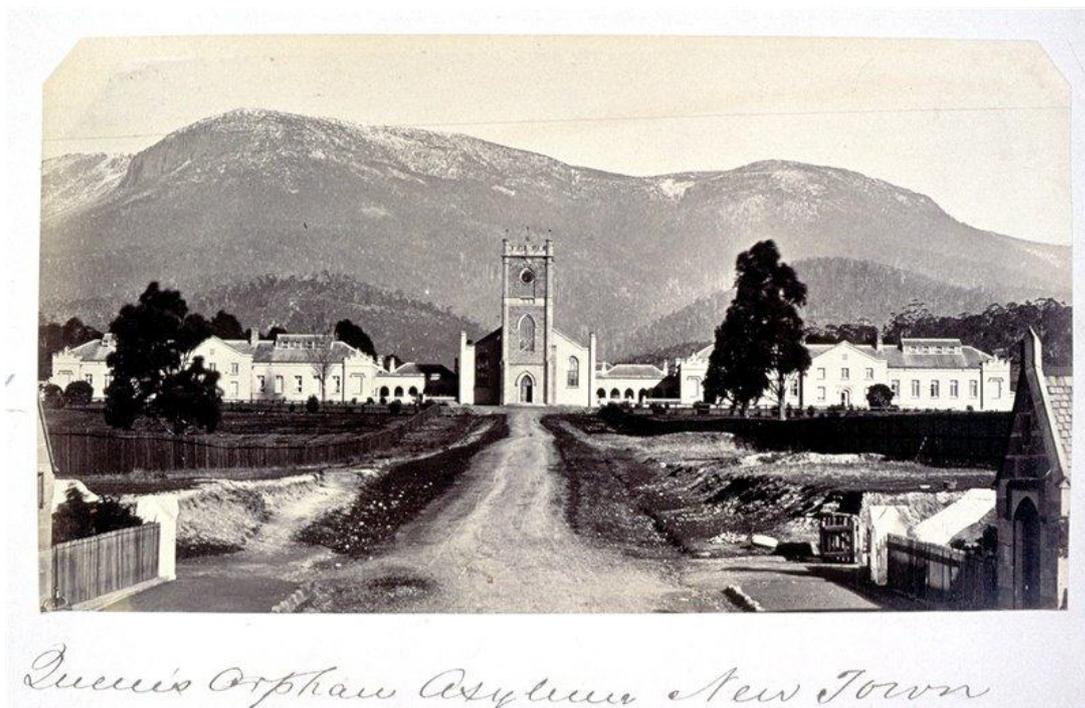
*Protecting the Children: Early Years of the King's Orphan Schools in Van  
Diemen's Land*

**Lucy Frost**

**Copyright©2013 Lucy Frost. This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged.**

**Abstract:** In the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Australian government has encountered a barrage of criticism from people outraged by its treatment of refugees. The Immigration Minister, accused of failing in his obligation to act as guardian of asylum-seeking children, has talked 'tough'. Nearly two hundred years earlier, when Lieutenant-Governor George Arthur confronted the problems of administering Australia's second colony, Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania), his approach was radically different. This paper considers how the colony under Arthur struggled with the government's responsibility to protect vulnerable children in its midst.

**Keywords:** Orphan Schools; Female Convicts; Colonial Australia



Source: W L Crowther Library, Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office

One of Australia's oldest institutions for children still stands in a suburb of Hobart, Tasmania. Buildings commonly known as the Queen's Orphan Schools are usually remembered—if they are remembered at all—as housing the children of convicts. There is about the Queen's Orphan Schools an aura of 'the convict stain'. But in earlier days before Victoria ascended her throne in 1837, the children in the King's Orphan Schools came from very diverse backgrounds, and the institutions played a far more complex role in the frontier community because the emphasis was on protection rather than confinement.

Within twenty years of the colony's founding (1804), it became clear that many children were not being well looked after. When George Arthur became Lieutenant Governor in 1824, one of his top priorities was the care of children at risk. Arthur, the colony's first genuinely effective administrator, was a social reformer who wanted efficient institutions designed to implement a vision grounded in his own deeply held evangelical beliefs. He brought order into the running of the penal colony, and at the same time set about establishing institutions to meet the needs of a civil society.

Using the existing network of reporting, he asked each district across the colony for the names of children who might be 'fit objects of admission into an Orphan School'.<sup>i</sup> While these reports were coming in, a clergyman sent Arthur a thoughtful letter based on his own experience 'in similar Institutions'.<sup>ii</sup> 'I should suppose', he wrote, 'the object of the Establishment is to afford protection & Instruction to children who have not their parents, or whose parents are unable or unfit to take proper care of them'.<sup>iii</sup> This was indeed 'the object' Arthur had in mind, as the surviving archive makes clear. No distinction was drawn between the children of convicts and of free parents. Concern focused on the circumstances of the children, whoever their parents might be.

Initially the key institutional links were between the Orphan Schools and the Church, not (as was the case a decade later) between the Orphan Schools and the Convict Department. When Arthur appointed the first Committee of Management on 24 April 1828, two of its five members were clergyman: the Venerable Archdeacon Thomas Hobbes Scott and the Rev William Bedford. Scott was the highest-ranking Anglican clergyman in the Australian colonies. When the archdeaconry of New South Wales was created in the diocese of Calcutta, Scott was appointed to the position, and according to his entry in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, 'was given almost complete control of ecclesiastical matters' in New South Wales and its dependencies—including Van Diemen's Land.<sup>iv</sup> The order establishing the Orphan Schools was promulgated while Scott was on an extended visit to his island constituency, and according to historian Peter Chapman, it was on the Archdeacon's recommendation, 'strongly endorsed by Arthur, [that] the Orphan Schools were founded in 1828'.<sup>v</sup> Scott, says Chapman, was 'exercised by the dubious "moral climate"' of the colony.<sup>vi</sup> In Scott's words: 'Vice and immorality have extended widely...many native-born youths have been brought to an untimely end by Justice, and it is known that seduction and prostitution have destroyed the happiness of nearly as many unfortunate girls'.<sup>vii</sup> Even though Scott would soon be returning to his base in Sydney, the evangelical Lieutenant Governor appointed the crusading Archdeacon to chair the new Committee of Management, and the minutebook bears his signature as chair for the initial meetings.<sup>viii</sup>

The Committee's second clergyman, the Rev William Bedford, as Senior Chaplain was the highest-ranking clergyman resident in Van Diemen's Land. Bedford had been in the colony only four years. When he took his wife and family away from their English home to his new colonial posting, Bedford was already middle-aged, a clergyman who had not been ordained until he was forty years old. According to the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, he 'was reputed to have been a staymaker',<sup>ix</sup> a protégée of the Quaker prison reformer Elizabeth Fry, and involved with her work at Newgate Prison. Bedford also assisted in parishes in London's East End, that impoverished area which had been home to many convict transportees, and as part of his invisible cultural baggage Bedford brought to Van Diemen's Land his experience in

ministering to people just like the convicts. He and Lieutenant Governor Arthur shared an evangelical vision, and although Bedford's drinking and financial pilfering would ultimately discredit him with Arthur and with much of the community, in the early years of the Orphan Schools he was still a man of credibility, and the minutebook shows him energetically devoted to the project of protecting the colony's children.

The other three Committee members also represented significant sectors of the community outside the Convict Department. Major Kirkwood was the colony's senior military officer. Affleck Moodie, who like Kirkwood was a veteran of the Peninsular War, was in charge of the Commissariat. Joseph Hone was Master of the Supreme Court. Being a member of the Committee of Management was a time-consuming task for those who attended the weekly meetings in the vestry of St David's Church. Scott soon returned to Sydney, and Kirkwood seems to have attended no meetings before his regiment was transferred, so the workload was carried by Bedford, Hone, and Affleck. In the early days, all expenditures, however minute, had to be approved and minuted.

The Committee members took their responsibilities seriously. As Joan C Brown, the historian of social services in Tasmania, says in *Poverty is not a Crime*: 'The members of the Committee of Management were an energetic and conscientious group of men'.<sup>x</sup> They devoted time and attention not only to weekly meetings which sometimes lasted for hours, but also to preparing for the meetings by investigating the circumstances of the applicants for admission—and there was a steady stream of applications. 'Twenty children', according to Brown, 'were admitted in the first week, by the end of 1828 numbers had reached 133, and 235 by October 1833'.<sup>xi</sup> The powers of the Committee, however, were limited. While they could recommend or not recommend admission, it was Lieutenant Governor Arthur who made the final decision as he micro-managed his colony.

The minutes were supposed to be written up immediately after the meeting and sent straight on to the Lieutenant Governor, but that did not always happen as quickly as Arthur would have liked. In 1830 he decided to solve the problem by making the Committee's secretariat a paid position, and appointing the newly arrived auditor of civil accounts, G T W B Boyes, another Peninsular War veteran. Boyes, who was keeping a diary, wrote on 5 June 1830 that he had received a letter from the Colonial Secretary telling him that he would be paid 'a salary of £100' per annum for this position.<sup>xii</sup> Boyes also records a conversation with Arthur on the subject, in which the Lieutenant Governor said 'that though he should report One hundred I might probably be allowed to draw £150—or something to that effect'.<sup>xiii</sup> This new appointment of a *salaried* secretariat placed a volunteer committee on a more professional footing within the *civil* establishment.

The King's Orphan Schools were not convict institutions. It is true that the children of convicts *were* admitted but the practice was not institutionalised as a norm, and Arthur was still trying to persuade the London authorities that the Orphan Schools could be useful as a tool within the convict system. 'By receiving the Children into them', he wrote in a despatch dated 26 September 1828, 'the [convict] Mothers become at once disposable to Settlers, or, can be kept at hard labour!'<sup>xiv</sup> Meantime, the admission of convicts' children was scrutinised case by case, and staff at the Cascades Female Factory had to apply for the admission of children from their nurseries. On 4 October 1832, the minutes record that: 'The Committee in consequence of the great number and crowded state of the children in the Female Factory beg leave to recommend to His Excellency that eight of the Eldest Boys at present in that Establishment be selected and transferred to the male orphan school'.<sup>xv</sup> Because the Orphan Schools were *not* part of the convict system, the Committee was incensed a few months later when children from the Female Factory simply arrived without warning. The Secretary reported:

... that he had late the previous day between the hours of 4 & 5 o'clock received an intimation from the Master of the Female Orphan School that 41 Boys & Girls

in 4 carts with some Bedding had arrived at the school from the Female Factory and that he wished to know if he was to admit them & that [the Secretary] had by a note requested the master to receive them as they must have been sent by some authority however irregular.<sup>xvi</sup>

The Committee was clearly irritated to discover that 'some authority' was sending cartloads of children from the convict nursery without applying for their admission case by case.

The children on the carts, like most children of convicts admitted to the Orphan Schools, had either arrived on the ships with their mothers or had been born in the convict nursery. Other children of convicts were admitted after their parents were convicted in the local courts. On 7 March 1829, an eight-year-old girl, Mary Ann Perkins, was admitted two days before her father was hung for the murder of her mother.<sup>xvii</sup> Most local convictions were less sensational.

On 16 May 1833, the Committee considered the petition for a 'distraught & destitute family' whose father had been sent to Port Arthur after his conviction for receiving 614 pounds of barley, the property of the Crown, knowing it to be stolen.<sup>xviii</sup> For this theft from 'our sovereign Lord the King', Vizenza Buccheri was sentenced to seven years' transportation. Buccheri and his wife Mary Foley were among the colony's earliest convicts. Before female transports began sailing directly to Van Diemen's Land, Mary had been sent from Dublin to Sydney and then on to Hobart, arriving in 1817. Sentenced to seven years' transportation in 1815, she was free by 1824, two years before she married Buccheri, with whom she had been living for most of her time as a prisoner. Buccheri, a Sicilian by birth, was illiterate and never learned to speak English very well,<sup>xix</sup> but in these years before Arthur arrived to regulate the convict system, he managed to purchase a cart and four working bullocks, the source of support for his growing family—ten children were born to the convict couple, though three at least died quite early. Buccheri had an unusual background. He had been a private in a Sicilian regiment serving with the British when he deserted in Malta, was caught, tried by a court martial in 1809, sentenced to transportation for life — and then sent to London to be put on the ship which would take him to the ends of the earth. In 1814 he participated in a bold attempt to escape the penal island, and might have succeeded in making it to South America with his co-conspirators if they had paid as much attention to their water casks as to the boat they built.<sup>xx</sup> Almost twenty years later, his conviction for receiving the stolen barley looks like another wild scheme gone wrong.

It certainly left his children unprotected. The Committee of Management recorded finding them 'in a most neglected state, some of the children almost blind'.<sup>xxi</sup> Rev Bedford had performed the marriage ceremony for the parents in 1826 after they had six children, only three of them living,<sup>xxii</sup> and had been concerned about the abject poverty of this family ever since.<sup>xxiii</sup> Now that their father was locked up, he arranged for all the children to be removed from their home to the hospital. 'The eldest a girl of 11 years of age of most abandoned habits has been sent to the Female Factory'.<sup>xxiv</sup> Suddenly, by despatching an 11-year-old girl to a women's prison, the concept of 'protection' turns darker.

Some sort of struggle may have ensued between the impoverished mother and the determined clergyman, because even though the Committee agreed to admit 6-year-old Harriet and 4-year-old Thomas in May 1833, the children did not actually go on the record books until late November, six months later. Their oldest sister, Elizabeth, managed to get out of the Female Factory and into the Orphan School the following February. At least two children were still at home, baby Agnes and the blind Mary Ann; in June 1836 they also entered the Orphan School.

Getting out was not easy. On 30 June 1838, after Buccheri had returned from Port Arthur and was granted a ticket of leave to live in New Norfolk, he retrieved his eldest daughter Elizabeth who was now 16 and could be sent out to work. The next year, Thomas, aged 10, absconded and never returned to the Orphan School. In 1841, Buccheri retrieved his youngest child, Agnes, perhaps a sentimental favourite. In 1842 Harriet, after almost nine years in the institution, was apprenticed. Now all the siblings were gone except the blind Mary Ann, who faced another ten

years in the Orphan Schools before she was 'removed to the infirmary, Hobart', aged almost 30. How did she feel about leaving a place full of children, almost the only place she could remember as home?

## **Protecting the children of free parents**

The Committee of Management, aiming to 'afford protection' rather than to service the Convict Department, admitted children from a diverse range of circumstances. At this stage, the King's Orphan Schools were not restricted to orphans, children of convicts, and the poor. There was also a fee-paying class. The colony's first clergyman, Robert Knopwood, agreed to pay the annual fee of £12 when he petitioned the Committee on 10 October 1833 'on behalf of his God son Robert Morrisby aged 9 years, son of Henry and Elizabeth Mary Morrisby, stating that the Mother is dead and the Father a victualler [a publican] and not competent to take due care of the morals of his child'.<sup>xxv</sup> Robert Morrisby may have been Knopwood's grandson as well as his godson. The unmarried clergyman had adopted the boy's mother, leaving people to wonder why he selected her from among the many other children in impoverished circumstances, and now, whatever the motivation of the 70-year-old clergyman, he was keen to take the boy from his father, and willing to pay the annual fee charged to maintain and educate children whose families did not claim charity.

Some fee-paying children came from districts where there was no school, and their parents looked to the Orphan Schools as the equivalent of boarding schools. Another category of children, whose fathers belonged to the New South Wales Veteran Corps, were admitted for half fees, £6 per year. The fee-paying children undoubtedly learned more than reading and writing from others their age whose circumstances were radically different from their own. What has been forgotten in the subsequent stigmatizing of the Orphan Schools, and what I find fascinating, is that children were coming from a wide range of backgrounds, bringing with them a diversity of experience unexpected in similar institutions either then or now. The second part of this discussion introduces a few children one might not expect to find in an orphanage. Three of their fathers held official positions in the colony: Joshua Drabble was Superintendent of the Hobart Female Factory; Roger Henry Woods was the Principal Superintendent of Convicts; Dr Edward Foord Bromley was in effect the colonial treasurer. A fourth father, George Espie, was a prosperous settler. The circumstances leading to the admission of their children is a reminder of how different Australia's colonial history might look if written from the perspective of children.

On 29 May 1828, only a month after the Committee of Management began meeting, Ann Drabble petitioned on behalf of her two sons, George aged 8 and Arthur aged 5½: 'The father is deceased and I have nothing to keep the children with'.<sup>xxvi</sup> And nowhere to live, she might have added. An 'apartment' went with Joshua Drabble's position as Superintendent of the Hobart Town Female Factory, but with his sudden death three months earlier, the family lost their accommodation along with the Superintendent's measly salary of £50 per year. Ann had five children to care for. In addition to the boys, she had two girls from a previous marriage, aged 11 and 14, and a baby six weeks old, born after her husband's death. Her oldest daughter had been married three years earlier, aged 13, after a sexual scandal involving a young society doctor, as a result of which he had to resign his position as a colonial surgeon and seems to have died not long afterwards.<sup>xxvii</sup>

The small boys George and Arthur Drabble had grown up in very peculiar circumstances. Their father, as Hamish Maxwell-Stewart has said in his account of their sister's scandal, 'was forced to write petitions to the lieutenant governor seeking some improvement in the quarters that he and his family shared with the nearly "one hundred turbulent, depraved and diseased characters"

who inhabited the factory'.<sup>xxviii</sup> The dangers were physical as well as moral, the family subjected daily to contagion and disease. Death stalked the children Ann bore in the Factory. In 1826 and 1827, she gave birth to children who died in the year they were born. The little girl born after her father died in 1828 would live only nine months. George, born in London before the family emigrated, and Arthur, born perhaps before his mother grew less healthy in the Factory environment, were the only survivors among the Drabble children.

How difficult their childhoods had already been before they were admitted to the Orphan Schools. I know nothing in detail about their time there, or even when they left, but after three and a half years, George ran away. His mother, reported the Committee's minutebook, 'has promised to take him back [to the School] immediately'.<sup>xxix</sup> At the same time as the boys went into the Orphan Schools, Ann Drabble set herself up as a shopkeeper, advertising that she 'has laid in a general assortment of Groceries, of the very best quality'.<sup>xxx</sup> She also promised to clean Leghorn and Straw Bonnets 'in a superior manner ... having had considerable experience in one of the first houses in London'.<sup>xxxi</sup> Apparently the venture was not a success, because within eight months another hopeful businessman had 'removed to the Premises lately occupied by Mrs Drabble', and was advertising comfortable accommodation for settlers.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Poor Ann Drabble was having a dreadful time, and matters did not improve when she married her third husband on 17 August 1830. His name was entered into the marriage register, William Davis, and also the name of his ship, the *Asia*. Ann Drabble was marrying a convict—not a convict emancipist or even a ticket-of-leave man, but a serving convict with a long record of offences, a record which just kept getting longer after his marriage. Ann left him behind still serving his sentence when she sailed away from Van Diemen's Land on 29 April 1836, taking with her Arthur and George, who at some stage she had retrieved from the Orphan Schools. The boys, now 14 and 16, were off to try their luck in another colony.

On 14 June 1832, four years after the Drabble brothers entered the Orphan Schools, the four children of Roger Henry Woods were admitted, aged between 6 and 10. Only two years earlier they had been severed from family and friends in England when their father was appointed Principal Superintendent of Convicts in Van Diemen's Land, among the most powerful positions in the colony. Unfortunately he was a noted drunkard, 'undoubtedly one of the worst cases of patronage from Downing Street that Arthur had to contend with'.<sup>xxxiii</sup> After a bitter battle, Arthur suspended Woods, who rushed back to London to complain, leaving his wife and children with no money. Mrs Woods got her children into the Orphan Schools, and then she eloped to Sydney with an overseer. When the Committee of Management realised that her four children would be left as an expense on the colonial coffers, they wrote to warn the Lieutenant Governor that she was on a ship in the harbour and about to flit. Should they stop her? No, replied Arthur, it was his 'express desire' that they were 'not to interfere'.<sup>xxxiv</sup> The children were to be protected from the outrageous behaviour of their feckless parents. And so it was that the state brought up two brothers and two sisters, and arranged their apprenticeships when they turned 14.

The circumstances of the Drabble and Woods children seem straightforward in contrast to the saga of the Bromley family. On 11 September 1835 the Male Orphan School admitted Frederick Bromley Steele, aged 4, and Lawrence George Foord Montmouth Steele, confusingly known as 'Bromley', aged 2. These brothers would spend the next nine years, most of their childhood, in the institution. On the 1 June 1837, some eighteen months after these little boys arrived, another set of brothers were entered into the register, Sydney Smith Bromley, aged 11, and Charles Sussex Bullen Bromley, aged 8. These two sets of brothers, although near contemporaries in age, were the grandchildren and children of Dr Edward Foord Bromley.

Dr Bromley was well-known in Van Diemen's Land. In 1829 the *Colonial Times* while commemorating the death of the Police Magistrate, remarked: 'This gentleman came to the Colony with the first fleet, which brought out Lieutenant Governor Collins in 1804', and his

death 'leaves only three living of the first Civil Establishment which reached this Colony, viz, the Rev Robert Knopwood, M A, Edward Lord, Esquire, and Dr Bromley'.<sup>xxxv</sup> These three survivors from the founding fathers all had family ties to boys in the King's Orphan Schools. As we have already seen, Knopwood arranged for the admission of his godson or grandson, Robert Morrisby. Edward Lord Fry, the illegitimate son of the wealthy merchant Edward Lord and a convict woman, entered the Orphan School in 1833 when he was 6, spent twelve years there, and at the age of 18 was apprenticed. And now here were the sons and grandsons of Dr Bromley.

After Dr Bromley served as senior surgeon on what the newspaper called the colony's 'first fleet', he made three more trips to Australia as surgeon superintendent of convict transports, two male and one female.<sup>xxxvi</sup> On these three voyages only one convict died, compelling evidence that Bromley was a competent and diligent surgeon superintendent. The same cannot be said of his role in Hobart as Naval Officer and Treasurer of the Police Fund—in effect, the colonial treasurer. Not long after his appointment in 1820 Bromley seems to have handed his responsibilities over to his clerk, Bartholomew Broughton, a ticket-of-leave convict. While the affable Bromley spent his days as a leisured gentleman, his convict clerk, whose wages were a shilling a day, began 'living a life of splendor in Hobart'.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

At the end of Bromley's first year in his new job, he married his housekeeper, Sarah Greenow, as he wrote to a friend in Sydney: 'It was doing no more than an act of common justice to a careful deserving young woman and I am much pleased with myself for having courage enough to brave the opinion of the world in so good a cause'.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Sarah was the mother of the two Bromley boys admitted to the Orphan School, but the first child from this marriage had been a girl, Sarah Jane, born shortly before Bromley's two older daughters from another marriage or relationship arrived from England. The oldest of these girls, Julia Louisa, was about 21, a marriageable age, though for some reason she did not marry. Perhaps the epileptic fits which were to blight her later life had already begun. Twenty years after Julia came to the colony, an application would be lodged for her admission to the New Norfolk Asylum. She had been living in Launceston, and would have been utterly destitute if not for the charity of 'a few Ladies'.<sup>xxxix</sup> Understandably, she grew severely depressed, 'her mind being perpetually haunted with the prospect of ultimate want'.<sup>xl</sup> Julia died in the Asylum.

Her younger sister, Elizabeth Foord Henrietta Bromley, known as Eliza, was about 13 when she arrived from England. As a daughter of the well-liked Dr Bromley she would have been welcomed into the social world of the town, but thanks to her father's fecklessness, her comfortable life did not last long. When George Arthur was appointed Lieutenant Governor in 1824 he found that money which should have been in the colonial treasury was not. The unpleasant discovery began to unfold when Bromley reported that one of his assigned servants 'had absconded after stealing money from the Public Chest, the strong-box in which all monies collected by the Naval Office were stored'.<sup>xli</sup> Bromley kept the strong-box—the Public Chest—in his bedroom at home. He could not tell the Lieutenant Governor how much had been stolen because in the three years he had held the position of Naval Officer 'he had never once'—as Don Bradmore exclaims—'counted the money in the Public Chest!'<sup>xlii</sup> After extensive investigation, it was estimated that a total of £8,269 was missing. Bromley was not indicted for theft, but he was made responsible for the debt—and thus utterly ruined. All his assets were sold, and his family would have been left homeless if not for a group of friends 'who clubbed together to purchase [at auction] one of his former properties, "Montford Farm" at Hamilton'.<sup>xliii</sup> This was where Bromley left his wife and children when he sailed for England in April 1829 in an unsuccessful attempt to raise funds to repay that enormous debt to the treasury of Van Diemen's Land. He would never live with his family again.

Before Bromley left, he may have met his new neighbour Henry Boden Torlesse, another retired naval officer turned farmer. Torlesse in turn introduced the household at 'Montford Cottage' to George Steele, whose father Torlesse described as 'a much respected friend'.<sup>xliv</sup> Torlesse and

Steele had arrived from England on the same ship, and it was through Torlesse that Steele was appointed overseer at 'Montford'. On 27 July 1830, a year after Bromley left for England, his 22-year-old daughter Eliza married George Steele, aged 20, though the marriage was not announced in the newspapers, nor was the birth of their son Frederick five months later.

I don't know how large 'Montford' Cottage was, but given the name, I suspect it was *not* large, and probably felt crowded with the Steeles and their baby son living there as well as Eliza's sister Julia, her stepmother Sarah, and Sarah's three young boys (her eldest child and only daughter had already died at the age of five). In November 1831, a year after the Steeles' first son was born, scandal enveloped the household. All assigned servants were removed from the house and farm after two female convicts gave sworn statements to the Police Magistrate at Bothwell. One of these assigned servants presented a lurid account of life in the cottage, including seeing 'Mr Steele in Bed with Mrs Bromley, at the same time as Mrs Steele was in the next room'; the second assigned servant accused George Steele 'of assault with intent to commit a rape'.<sup>xlv</sup> Left suddenly without any help on the farm, Sarah Bromley and George Steele wrote lengthy letters to the Colonial Secretary, protesting that they were innocent, and their convict servants were malicious liars.

In April 1832 a Committee of Enquiry was appointed to look into the matter. Its members were local gentry—including Henry Torlesse, now a Justice of the Peace. The full weight of disgrace descended on the farm when the Committee reported that 'we are of opinion that as long as Mr Steel continues upon Mrs Bromley's farm she ought not to have convict servants assigned to her'.<sup>xlvi</sup> Their judgement, blunt and forthright, was that 'Mr Steel is by no means a proper person to have any authority or control over convict servants'.<sup>xlvii</sup> Two years later Steele's downward spiral again picked up momentum when he was arrested for cattle stealing, and taken to Hobart for trial in the Supreme Court. He was convicted, sentenced to transportation for life, and shipped off to Norfolk Island, leaving forever his pregnant wife and their children.

The next year, when her youngest son turned 2 and was old enough for the Orphan School, Eliza Steele arranged for her sons to be admitted in the fee-paying category, agreeing to pay £7.10 annually for each, a reduced rate for two children from the same family. Less than two years later, Sarah Bromley sent down her two youngest sons as well. Were they relieved to get out of a house where the three adult women must have been deeply, bitterly unhappy, if not actually at each other's throats? All we know for certain is that they were not having a secure and loving childhood.

For the Bromley and Steele brothers, the Orphan Schools offered a kind of refuge. For the Espie children admitted a month after the Steeles, entering the orphanage probably felt like being abandoned. The four Espies, all born in the colony, were described on Orphan School records as having a father living, and 'relatives rich'.<sup>xlviii</sup> When their parents and older brothers arrived as free settlers from northern Ireland in 1820, their father George Espie indicated on his application for a land grant that he had 'at his disposal at least £1,600 from investments which he had brought with him'.<sup>xlix</sup> The Espies came from a farming background, knew how to select land, and over the next fifteen years acquired thousands of acres in the Midlands.

As their landholdings grew, the family itself expanded to include ten children born over twenty years. Eight of the children were sons—perfect for establishing a colonial dynasty. But things did not work out that way, and George Espie's building priorities may hold a clue to the family's larger difficulties in sticking together. In 1826, six years after the Espies arrived, a land commissioner on a routine inspection reported that George Espie 'has a bad house but has built a good Brick Granary, Coach House and Stable'.<sup>1</sup> Two years later he added a substantial woolshed, still standing today, 'built of stone with slits in the walls through which a rifle could be fired', writes a descendant, a 'place where the family went if under attack from Aborigines or bushrangers'.<sup>li</sup> On the lintel above the door were carved George Espie's initials, and the date

1828. Meanwhile, his wife Margaret seems to have been looking after the family, and giving birth to more children in the 'bad' house.

On 26 February 1835, Margaret Espie died suddenly in Hobart, aged 44. She had been visiting her second son David, a 22-year-old who was running a pub instead of working on the properties with his father, a sign that this family was not pulling together as a prospective dynasty needed to do. When Margaret died, her eldest children were young adults—or at least in their teens—but the last four, aged between 2 and 10, could not yet look after themselves. And so they were sent to the Orphan Schools, where the youngest, one of the two girls in the family, soon died. The three 'orphaned' brothers spent the rest of their childhood in the institution, and were then apprenticed. And where was their father? He had sold up and gone off to the newly opened district of Port Phillip across Bass Strait, abandoning his youngest children as he pursued his fortune elsewhere.

Even looking briefly at how a few boys and girls came to be in the King's Orphan Schools suggests what a variety of stories the children must have told each other in an institution with very few staff and very large dormitories. Recent arrivals from the British Isles could conjure up industrial cities almost unimaginable to a boy or girl born in Van Diemen's Land during the frontier days of the 1820s. On the other hand, children from the convict transports or born in the convict nurseries knew virtually nothing of the colony in which they found themselves. Isolated for years—sometimes for a decade or more—inside the fences of the Orphan Schools, they were woefully unprepared to understand how the colony functioned, even on a basic level. Some of these children were physically or mentally disabled. Some were the traumatised survivors of shipwrecks—eight came from the wreck of the *Hibernia* in 1833. And then there were the Aboriginal children, removed from country and kin during the years when George Augustus Robinson was rounding up the last of the tribes. How vulnerable children could be in Van Diemen's Land, part penal colony, part fledgling settlement.

Over time, however, the mix in the schools became less eclectic. On 6 January 1837, Sir John Franklin arrived in Hobart to replace George Arthur as lieutenant governor. Franklin, no social reformer, began following money trails. Within his first few months he set up a committee to enquire into the King's Orphan Schools, and by 30 August was ready to implement changes. Arthur had seen the Schools as a charge upon the colony because their role was to 'take proper care' of the colony's young, whoever their parents might be. Franklin's approach was tellingly different: he directed the Colonial Treasurer and the Collector of Internal Revenues to 'trace out from the commencement of the Institution, the number of the children of Convict parents who have been annually maintained in the Establishment'<sup>liii</sup> in order to ascertain 'the debt due by the British to the Colonial Treasury on account of Convict children maintained in the King's Orphan Schools'.<sup>liiii</sup> The British were to be billed for the children of convicts as if the children themselves were part of the convict system. Because the Schools had never previously differentiated among the children in this way, 'there are no such records at the institution', the Head Master told the investigating officers, and 'the information can alone be gathered from the books & papers' of the civilian Committee of Management which Franklin had just disbanded.<sup>liv</sup> Four months later, at the end of Franklin's first year in the colony, lists were submitted attempting (not always successfully) to sort convicts' children from the free. The children of free parents were to be chased up for outstanding fees, and their children removed if the payments were not up to date.

An era was coming to an end for the Orphan Schools, and for the British Empire. This was the year that Victoria ascended the throne, and on the edge of Hobart the institution founded to protect was morphing into a place designed to confine, funded largely as a convict institution and covered with the stigma of a convict stain. In these days when we continue to confine children behind high fences, refugee children in detention centres and bewildered Indonesian boys in our gaols, we might do well to remember that even in the fledgling penal colony of Van

Diemen's Land, there was once another model for the care of children, a model based squarely on a commitment to protect.

- 
- <sup>i</sup> R Robinson to Colonial Secretary, 17 Jan 1826, CSO 1/1/122/3073.
- <sup>ii</sup> R Robinson to Lieutenant Governor, 19 Dec 1825, CSO 1/1/122/3073.
- <sup>iii</sup> R Robinson to Lieutenant Governor, 19 Dec 1825, CSO 1/1/122/3073.
- <sup>iv</sup> 'Thomas Hobbes Scott', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.
- <sup>v</sup> G T W B Boyes, *Diaries and Letters of G.T.W.B. Boyes*, p. 337 n. 15.
- <sup>vi</sup> G T W B Boyes, *Diaries and Letters of G.T.W.B. Boyes*, p. 337 n. 15.
- <sup>vii</sup> Quoted in G T W B Boyes, *Diaries and Letters of G.T.W.B. Boyes*, p. 337 n. 15.
- <sup>viii</sup> Minutebook, Committee of Management, King's Orphan Schools, CSO 24/1/1.
- <sup>ix</sup> 'William Bedford', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.
- <sup>x</sup> Joan C Brown, 'Poverty is not a Crime', p. 27.
- <sup>xi</sup> Joan C Brown, 'Poverty is not a Crime', p. 27.
- <sup>xii</sup> G T W B Boyes, *Diaries and Letters of G.T.W.B. Boyes*, p. 333.
- <sup>xiii</sup> G T W B Boyes, *Diaries and Letters of G.T.W.B. Boyes*, p 334.
- <sup>xiv</sup> *Historical Records of Australia, Series III Vol. VII (1828)*, p. 499.
- <sup>xv</sup> Minutes for 4 Oct 1832, Minutebook, Committee of Management, King's Orphan Schools, CSO 24/1/1.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Minutes for 10 Jan 1833, Minutebook, Committee of Management, King's Orphan Schools, CSO 24/1/1.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Minutes for 7 Mar 1829, Minutebook, Committee of Management, King's Orphan Schools, CSO 24/1/1; *Hobart Town Courier* 21 Feb 1829; Social Welfare Department SWD 24.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Minutes for 16 May 1833, Minutebook, Committee of Management, King's Orphan Schools, CSO 24/1/1; *Hobart Town Courier*, 5 April 1833.
- <sup>xix</sup> Principal Superintendent J Lakeland to Colonial Secretary J Burnett, CSO 1/1/204/4845.
- <sup>xx</sup> Lucy Frost, 'A "Quixotic Escapade"', pp. 217-19.

- <sup>xxi</sup> Minutes for 16 May 1833, Minutebook, Committee of Management, King's Orphan Schools, CSO 24/1/1.
- <sup>xxii</sup> J Dean to Lieutenant Governor, CSO 1/1/234/5671.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Principal Superintendent J Lakeland to Colonial Secretary, CSO 1/1/204/4845.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Minutes for 16 May 1833, Minutebook, Committee of Management, King's Orphan Schools, CSO 24/1/1.
- <sup>xxv</sup> SWD 24 p 457.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Correspondence re Orphan Schools 1825-31, Colonial Secretary's Office CSO 1/1/122, p 144 AOT.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> For a discussion of the scandal, see Hamish Maxwell-Stewart, *Closing Hell's Gates*, pp. 98-104.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> Hamish Maxwell-Stewart, *Hell's Gates*, p 102.
- <sup>xxix</sup> Minutes for 7 Nov 1831, Minutebook, Committee of Management, King's Orphan Schools, CSO 24/1/1.
- <sup>xxx</sup> *Hobart Town Courier* 12 July 1828.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> *Hobart Town Courier* 12 July 1828.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> *Colonial Times* 27 March 1829.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> J R Morris, 'Roger Henry Woods', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> Minutes for 12 June 1833, Minutebook, Committee of Management, King's Orphan Schools, CSO 24/1/1.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> *Colonial Times*, 15 May 1829.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> The *Ocean* arrived in Sydney on 30 June 1816 with 220 male convicts; *Almorah* arrived Sydney 29 Aug 1817 with 180 male convicts; *Lord Wellington* arrived Sydney 20 Jan 1820 with 121 female convicts.
- <sup>xxxvii</sup> Don Bradmore, 'George Steele', p 91.
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> E. F. Bromley to Piper, 7 Dec 1820, Piper Papers.
- <sup>xxxix</sup> 'Petition relative to admission of Miss Bromley into the New Norfolk Asylum', Colonial Secretary's Correspondence, CSO 8/16/527.
- <sup>xl</sup> 'Petition relative to admission of Miss Bromley into the New Norfolk Asylum', Colonial Secretary's Correspondence, CSO 8/16/527.
- <sup>xli</sup> Bradmore, 'Bartholomew Broughton', p 89.



R. Hosking, R. Pannell, N. Bierbaum. Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2009, pp 213-223.

Minutebook, Committee of Management, King's Orphan Schools, 26 April 1828-23 Oct 1833. Colonial Secretary's Office, CSO 24/1/1, Archives Office of Tasmania.

Maxwell-Stewart, *Closing Hell's Gates: the death of a convict station*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2008.

Piper, Captain John, Papers 1827-1838, MLMSS 8098, vol. 1, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.

Report of 1837 Enquiry into King's Orphan Schools, Colonial Secretary's Office, CSO 5/1/60/1387, Archives Office of Tasmania.

Smith, Mary. *The House of Espie in Australia and New Zealand*. Bowenville, Queensland: M. Smith, c1993.

**Lucy Frost** is Emeritus Professor of English at the University of Tasmania. Her current research focuses on the experiences of the convict women and their children transported to Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) during the first half of the nineteenth century. She is the author most recently of *Abandoned Women: Scottish convicts exiled beyond the seas* (Allen & Unwin 2012) and the editor of *Convict Lives at the Ross Female Factory* (Convict Women's Press 2011). She is the President of the Convict Women's Research Centre, and Vice-President of Convict Women's Press. ([L.Frost@utas.edu.au](mailto:L.Frost@utas.edu.au))