

# 'A most shocking tissue of barbarous cruelty': scandal and death in the Queen's Orphan Schools

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*In a previous article,<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Kippen outlined the terrible conditions in the Hobart convict nurseries—where the infant children of convict women were kept—and how in the early 1850s, Dr Edward Swarbreck Hall exposed these conditions and the high death rate, and how he was successful in reducing mortality. In this article, Dr Hall turns his attention to the Queen's Orphan Schools.*

The Queen's Orphan Schools,<sup>2</sup> with separate establishments for boys and girls, opened at St John's Park, New Town in 1833. From early on, the local press and government correspondence documented a series of scandals at the Orphan Schools involving accusations of sexual abuse, lashings, other ill-treatment and neglect, and fraud and embezzlement.<sup>3</sup>

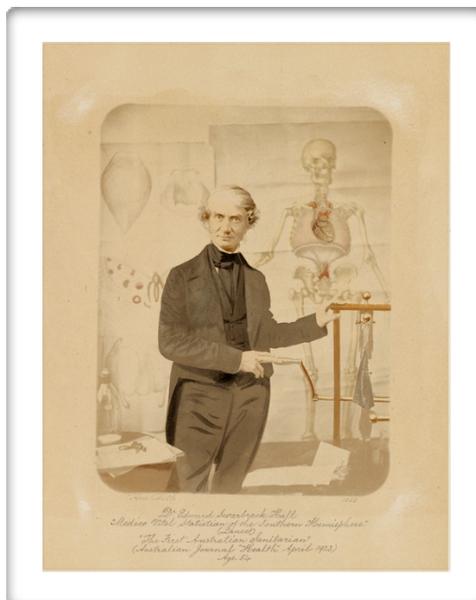
In 1857, Dr Edward Swarbreck Hall again raised the spectre of scandal in a paper published in the *Australian Medical Journal*, innocuously titled 'On the medical topography and vital statistics of the city of Hobarton, Tasmania, and its southern subdistricts, for 1855'.<sup>4</sup>

In the paper, Dr Hall carried out the same careful analysis he had undertaken for the convict nurseries, calculating annual mortality rates and comparing them to those for the population of the same age in the general community. He found that in 1855 there were 38 deaths in the Orphan School out of an average strength of 405, or a death rate approaching ten per cent. Breaking down his figures by age, he found that mortality in the Orphan School was six to eight times that of children in Hobart outside the School.

Hall concluded that it was:

the imperative duty of every man of science—every conservator of public health—every friend of humanity in Tasmania, to lend a helping hand...to ascertain the cause...of such havoc from disease in the Queen's Orphan Schools...and endeavour to remove them.<sup>5</sup>

He had his own thoughts on the subject, pointing to ill-ventilated and overcrowded dormitories and utterly inadequate food rations, which were not differentiated by age.



Dr Edward Swarbreck Hall, 1858, photographed by Fred Frith. Reproduced by permission of the Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW.

When Hall was accused of choosing an anomalous year, in which mortality was unusually high in the Orphan Schools, he simply analysed more years of data, showing that Orphan School death rates had been consistently several times those of the general community for at least two decades.<sup>6</sup>

In the *Australian Medical Journal* article and other writings about the orphan school, Hall proposed such novelties as 'an unlimited daily supply of plain wholesome and nutritious food according to the natural wants of the body' for each child, rather than limited rations,<sup>7</sup> the installation of swimming baths for exercise,<sup>8</sup> toys for the younger

children, and individual washing water and towels for each child, rather than these being shared between dozens of inmates.<sup>9</sup>

Hall wrote to the government a number of times outlining his mortality findings until a Commission of Enquiry was set up in 1859. Hall was called to give evidence and attended the Enquiry armed with 'a large mass of documentary and other proofs'. These included correspondence with the surgeon of Chelsea's Military Orphan Asylum on nutritional and sanitary best practice in children's institutions. In addition, Hall produced edible props:

exhibiting before [the Commission] the single potatoes, small mutton chop, quarter pint of milk, pound and a quarter of bread, and pinches of rice, tea, and sugar which have hitherto been thought sufficient to nourish children,—irrespective of age, from one year old up to fourteen or more.<sup>10</sup>

At the conclusion of his evidence, Hall read out a statement which condemned the composition of the Commission. Two of its members—including Dr Bedford, the Schools' medical officer—were implicated in mismanagement of the Schools and 'must either have been incompetent for, or negligent in, the duties that devolved upon them'. Hall strongly objected to these men 'sitting in judgment on their own acts of commission or omission' and to enduring their cross-examination when he had no like opportunity to question them.<sup>11</sup>

An editorial in the *Australian Medical Journal* depicted the Enquiry as a contest between Dr Hall acting 'in defence of the commonest rights of humanity' and those in charge of the Orphan School who had perpetuated 'a most shocking tissue of barbarous cruelty'.<sup>12</sup>

Unsurprisingly, given its composition, the Commission of Enquiry found no fault with the orphans' living

conditions. The report was not complimentary to Dr Hall. The *Hobart Town Daily Mercury* noted:

We never saw a Report from a Commission on any sanitary matter yet in this colony which did not bear three distinguishing characteristics :—a gross violation of all rules of grammar and English composition, an attack upon Dr. HALL and a protest by Dr. BEDFORD. In the present Report we have all three in perfection.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, as a result of Hall's efforts, the children's dietary rations were substantially increased. All children had their milk allowance quadrupled. Children above eight years of age had their meat and vegetables doubled, and children between six and eight their vegetables doubled, and their meat increased by half.<sup>14</sup> The children's accommodation was also improved.<sup>15</sup>

At the beginning of 1860, administration of the Orphan Schools was transferred from Imperial to colonial governance, and a new Board of Management was appointed. Dr Hall offered to serve on the Board in an honorary capacity but his offer was rejected.<sup>16</sup> There was a public outcry. Not only because Hall had been passed over, but because Dr Bedford was quietly added to the Board after the official announcement, and no Catholics had been appointed to the Board, although many of the children in the Schools were of that religion.<sup>17</sup> The *Hobart Town Daily Mercury* noted that 'such bigotry as this in the nineteenth century is intolerable'.<sup>18</sup>

One year after his initial rejection, Hall was appointed to the Board of the Orphan Schools,<sup>19</sup> thus answering two of the complaints above, since Hall was a prominent local Catholic. As could be expected, Hall took his new duties very seriously, seeing himself and other Board members *in loco parentis*. He frequently visited the Schools, and checked whether the 'Rules and regulations' and 'Resolutions of the Board' were being satisfactorily put into practice. Where procedures fell short, Hall entered his concerns in the official Visitors Book and raised them at Board meetings.<sup>20</sup> He also continued to write long letters on conditions in the Orphan Schools for publication in the press.<sup>21</sup>

In 1864, Hall was able to state that, due to the improvements implemented, 'the children in the institution now were healthier than the children of corresponding ages out of it...the deaths last year, out of a daily average strength of nearly 500, were only two...in the previous year, 1862, there was not a single death in the establishment.'<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> R Kippen 2009. 'The convict nursery at the Cascades Female Factory, Hobart', *Chainletter*, Newsletter of the *Founders and Survivors* Project, 3: 5–8.

<sup>2</sup> Called the King's Orphan Schools until Victoria ascended the British Throne in 1837.

<sup>3</sup> K Pearce 1998. 'The Queen's Orphan Asylum—New Town', in I Terry and K Evans (eds) *Hobart's History: The First Two Hundred Years*, Professional Historians Association of Tasmania, Hobart.

<sup>4</sup> ES Hall 1857. 'On the medical topography and vital statistics of the city of Hobart, Tasmania, and its southern subdistricts, for 1855', *Australian Medical Journal*, 2: 81–110.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> 'A sanitarian in Tasmania', *The Lancet*, 23 June 1860, 626; ES Hall 1860. 'Review of the Sanitary Commission Report on the Queen's Orphan Schools No.II', *Hobart Town Daily Mercury*, 22 March; ES Hall 1861. 'The Queen's Orphan Schools', *The Mercury*, 10 September.

<sup>7</sup> ES Hall 1860. *Daily Mercury*, 21 March.

Schools No.II', *Hobart Town Daily Mercury*, 22 March

<sup>8</sup> 'Review of the Sanitary Commission Report on the Queen's Orphan Schools No.I', *Hobart Town Commission Report on the Queen's Orphan*.

<sup>9</sup> ES Hall 1862. Letter to the Editor, *The Mercury*, 13 August.

<sup>10</sup> ES Hall 1859. 'Queen's Orphan Schools', *Hobart Town Daily Mercury*, 22 December.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> 'Medical news', *Australian Medical Journal*, 1859, 2: 305–306.

<sup>13</sup> Editorial, *Hobart Town Daily Mercury*, 9 March 1860.

<sup>14</sup> *Hobart Town Daily Mercury*, 16 August 1859.

<sup>15</sup> Editorial, *Hobart Town Daily Mercury*, 9 March 1860.

<sup>16</sup> ES Hall 1859. 'Queen's Orphan Schools', *Hobart Town Daily Mercury*, 22 December.

<sup>17</sup> 'The Orphan School', *Hobart Town Daily Mercury*, 21 December 1859; Editorial, *Hobart Town Daily Mercury*, 22 December 1859; *Hobart Town Daily Mercury*, 23 December 1859.

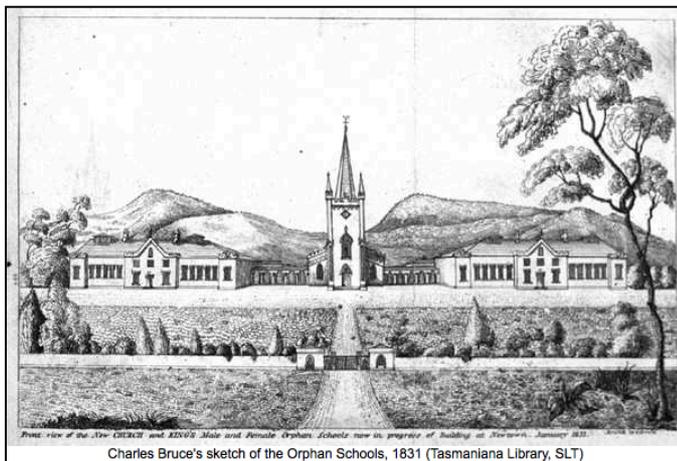
<sup>18</sup> *Hobart Town Daily Mercury*, 23 December 1859.

<sup>19</sup> *The Mercury*, 1 January 1861.

<sup>20</sup> ES Hall 1861. 'Queen's Orphan Schools', *The Mercury*, 9 August.

<sup>21</sup> K Pearce 1998. 'The Queen's Orphan Asylum—New Town', in I Terry and K Evans (eds) *Hobart's History: The First Two Hundred Years*, Professional Historians Association of Tasmania, Hobart.

<sup>22</sup> ES Hall 1864. 'Queen's Asylum for Destitute Children', *The Mercury*, 6 February.



**Orphan Schools** (King's Orphan Schools, Queen's Orphan Schools, Queen's Orphan Asylum) were established in 1828. Boys were placed in a converted distillery on New Town Rivulet, girls in a private house in Davey Street. These were superseded by the Orphan School building, designed by John Lee Archer (1833), which still stands at the top of St John's Avenue, New Town.

Children admitted were entirely destitute, had one parent living, or had parents who could not afford their education. Most came from convict backgrounds, with parents more likely to be in gaol, unemployed or perceived by the authorities as leading immoral lives. Some Aboriginal children were institutionalised as well.

The institution's administration continued in turmoil, due to poor management, numerous scandals and the internal machinations of its staff. Other factors such as sectarianism were never far from the surface. From the late 1860s the number of children declined owing to a less restricted system of outdoor relief, and the introduction of the boarding-out system and industrial schools. The Orphan Schools closed in 1879, with the remaining children sent to other institutions such as the **Kennerley** Boys' Home and the Catholic orphanage, St Joseph's. (See also **Children's Homes**.) —Kim Pearce, [http://www.utas.edu.au/library/companion\\_to\\_tasmanian\\_history/O/Orphan%20Schools.htm](http://www.utas.edu.au/library/companion_to_tasmanian_history/O/Orphan%20Schools.htm)