RABIES in Tasmania

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On the 19th of January 1867, seven-year-old Thomas Bowering was playing with his younger brother in their backyard in Warwick Street, when two dogs began fighting nearby. Thomas ran to shepherd his brother away, and in the process was bitten through his bottom lip by one of the dogs. Dr Smart was called to dress the wound, which was about one inch long, and the injury healed in less than a fortnight without apparent incident.

On the night of the 12th of February, Thomas uncharacteristically started out of bed and ‘screamed violently’. The next day he was unable to carry out his chores and complained of feeling unwell. On the 15th, Thomas began to refuse food and drink. In spite of a fever, he lay by the fire and said he felt cold. He continued restless and uneasy through the day and that night.

The next morning Dr Smart was again called. He observed:

I found [Thomas Bowering] in bed, sensible and obedient when spoken to; pulse small and quick, face pale, and very serious, pupils dilated, eyes wandering and wild; answered questions, complained of his head, cicatrix of wound examined, and found swollen and inflamed; situation of sutures angry looking, pain complained of in the situation of the bite. My suspicions being aroused, I asked the mother to pour some water slowly from one vessel to another, at some distance from the patient, and out of his sight, and on her doing so the following symptoms were instantly developed, viz, great mental agitation and terror depicted on the countenance, accompanied by violent and continued convulsive inspirations and sobbings with contortions of the face and upper part of the body.

Dr Smart suspected that Thomas was suffering from hydrophobia (rabies), so called because its victims have a fear of water. Thomas exhibited other classic symptoms of the disease, including convulsions, frothy salivation, headache, hallucinations, and difficulty swallowing. The origin was pinpointed as the dog bite four weeks before. It was known that the incubation period for rabies before the onset of symptoms could be several weeks to several months.

We now know that rabies is a viral disease that causes inflammation of the brain. It is most commonly transmitted through a bite from an infected animal, and the incubation period is correlated with the distance of the bite from the brain. Death usually results within one week of symptoms first appearing. The fatality rate of rabies was one hundred per cent before the development of a vaccine in 1885 by Emile Roux and Louis Pasteur.

The next day, the 17th of February, Drs Agnew, Bright, Carns, Doughty and Hall were called in to examine Thomas. All agreed ‘that the case was one of terrible and unmistakable hydrophobia, or rabies, corresponding in every symptom and feature with the disease as witnessed in England’. Tragically, with no effective treatment available, Thomas died in his mother’s arms that afternoon. He was survived by his parents and seven brothers and sisters.

A subsequent investigation found that the dog which had bitten Thomas belonged to the Bowerings’ next-door neighbour, Mrs Baker. The dog had been a great favourite of her family, and always friendly and happy, until the day before the fatal bite. Then, it was seen to be:

unusually vicious, and quarrelsome, and to exhibit certain peculiarities such as darting and biting at every dog that came near it, biting at stones and dirt in the street, frothing at the mouth, &c.

These were all characteristic symptoms of rabies. The dog died four days later.

Other previous cases that could have been rabies soon emerged: a sow which foam at the mouth and could not swallow after being bitten by a dog—the dog died the day after and the sow one week later—and a dog exhibiting classic rabies’ symptoms which was killed by a man defending his own dog from attack. The man had ‘seen mad dogs frequently in England, and was convinced on first sight of the dog he killed that it was mad’.

The day after Thomas Bowering’s death, the case was discussed at the Hobart City Council meeting. Concern was expressed at the large number of stray dogs roaming the town, and the matter was referred to the Mayor and the Health Committee. Dr Hall, who had attended the boy on the day of his death, advised in a letter on the 20th of February:

As the cattle disease has been stamped out in England by the vigorous measures there adopted, so might the canine madness be by similar measures here. No time should be lost to kill the thousands of useless, mischievous, unregistered dogs that roam night and day about our streets, and cause so much annoyance and suffering. All registered dogs ought for some time hence, say 50 to 60 days, to be kept upon the chain, and carefully watched.

Less than a week later, two constables were appointed to round up and shoot the stray dogs of Hobart. However there was some doubt among a few Council members as to whether Thomas Bowering had really contracted and died of rabies. Dr Crowther—who had not seen the boy—was of the opinion that the case was rather one of tetanus.

This was vigorously refuted by Dr Smart, who detailed the symptoms of each disease as outlined in Holmes’ System of Surgery, and carefully demonstrated that the course of...
demonstrated that the course of Thomas' illness corresponded to rabies rather than tetanus. \(^{16}\)

In late March 1867, the Report of the Health Committee was published. After a careful review of evidence from a number of witnesses, including the six doctors and Thomas' mother,\(^{17}\) the Report concluded that Thomas Bowering had died of rabies and confirmed the decision of Hobart Council to capture and kill dogs running loose in the city. \(^{18}\)

Although we cannot know for sure, it seems highly likely that the diagnosis of the six doctors who attended Thomas Bowering was accurate. If so, this is the only documented case of rabies being contracted in Australia. The quick action taken to destroy the stray dogs of Hobart seems to have been effective in eradicating the disease. Tasmania, and Australia in general, was incredibly lucky to have avoided the spread of rabies to the native-animal population. Australia is now one of very few countries free from rabies.

\(^{1}\) 'A case of hydrophobia', The Mercury, 18 February 1867.
\(^{2}\) Letter from Dr Smart to the Health Committee, The Mercury, 27 March 1867.
\(^{3}\) Letter from Dr Smart to the Health Committee, The Mercury, 27 March 1867.
\(^{4}\) Letter from Dr Hall to the Health Committee, The Mercury, 27 March 1867.
\(^{5}\) Letter from Dr Smart to the Health Committee, The Mercury, 27 March 1867.
\(^{6}\) 'A case of hydrophobia', The Mercury, 18 February 1867.
\(^{8}\) Letter from Dr Smart to the Health Committee, The Mercury, 27 March 1867.
\(^{9}\) Letter from Dr Smart, The Mercury, 21 February 1867.
\(^{10}\) ‘Supposed case of hydrophobia’, The Mercury, 25 February 1867.
\(^{11}\) Letter from Dr Hall to the Health Committee, The Mercury, 27 March 1867.
\(^{12}\) ‘City Council’, The Mercury, 19 February 1867.
\(^{13}\) Letter from Dr Hall to the Health Committee, The Mercury, 27 March 1867.
\(^{14}\) ‘Hydrophobia’, The Mercury, 26 February 1867.
\(^{15}\) ‘Hydrophobia’, The Mercury, 26 March 1867.

\(^{16}\) ‘Hydrophobia in Hobart Town’, Australian Medical Journal, June 1867, pp. 166–182.
\(^{17}\) ‘Hydrophobia in Hobart Town’, Australian Medical Journal, June 1867, pp. 166–182.
\(^{18}\) ‘Bowring’s case’, The Mercury, 27 March 1867.

### INFORMATION

#### WANTED

Can you identify the Irwins of Hobart Town

She, the keeper of cows, He, the excellent whistler?

And why did the theft of so much attract such a lenient sentence?

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**Victoria Police Gazette**, 20 February 1868

'Stolen from the dwelling of Eliza Turner, King Street Melbourne, on the afternoon of the 11th, a pair of colonial gold earrings, gold breast pin, gold brooch with white centre, gold brooch with deer in centre, about twelve silver German coins of various sizes, an ivory pen knife with a pencil at one end and a German silver pocket compass and a spotted silk handkerchief.

Warrant issued against one Irwin, supposed Irish, aged 45 or 50, 5 feet 5 or 6 inches high, stiff build, dark complexion, dark hair, whiskers and beard mixed with white, height 4 or 5 inches above the ground, stocky build, with a very small head, grey; a bush carpenter, wore tall hat, a mixture tweed sac coat, black vest, grey; a bush carpenter, wore tall hat, a mixture tweed sac coat, black vest, red trousers. He came about six weeks ago from Hobart Town where he is well-known for his frequenting the Quarryman’s Arms in that city. His wife is said to keep cows in the same street. He is reported to be an excellent whistler. He is thought to have left Melbourne by the Derwent on 12th inst for Launceston, intending to go to Hobart Town.'

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**Victoria Police Gazette**, 5th May 1868.

‘Irwin, arrested by the Hobart Town Police, and remanded to Melbourne, has been sentenced to 1 month’s imprisonment for the robbery on Eliza Turner.’

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**The Founders and Survivors team** is compiling a list of Tasmanian data to 1950 containing individual measures of height and/or weight of children and/or adults. In the future these data will be used to help research long-run patterns and trends in health and living conditions. We would be most grateful if you could let us know of sources other than those below. Contact Associate Professor Hamish Maxwell-Stewart on hamish.maxwellstewart@utas.edu.au. Hamish offers a replica item of convict wear for the best submission made by 28 February 2011!

Here’s what we are aware of so far:

1. All convict records e.g. Con 18, 19, 23, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 41 etc + indents
2. Tasmanian Police Gazettes — 1865-1930
3. Orphan School apprentice absconders
4. GD133/1/1 Applications for appointment as a constable at the (Hobart) Gaol — 1876-86
5. POL324/1/3 Register of the appointment, transfer, registration and dismissal of members of the police establishment — 1855-1955
6. COM1/20/1/1; COM1/20/1/2 Registers of volunteers enrolled in the southern volunteer artillery “A” and “B” Battery — 1879-1899
7. GD67 Physical description of prisoners received — 1860-1936
8. 9 GD69/1 Prisoner weights — 1895-1900
9. POL708/1/5 Photographs of convicted criminals — 1890-1931
10. GD128 Photographic record and description of prisoners — 1895-1902
11. SWD18 Register of persons seeking employment — State Labour Bureaux — 1915-1925
12. 13. First Australian Imperial Force (AIF) service records