Launch of '*Voices from the Orphan Schools – the Children's Stories*', by Dianne Snowden

By Saul Eslake, St Johns Park, Newtown, 28th October 2018.

Most of us who went to school in Tasmania, or who have been to Port Arthur, or Sarah Island, probably think we know a fair bit about Tasmania's convict past.

We might have read *For the Term of His Natural Life*, or (more recently) perhaps seen the film *Van Diemen's Land*. We all learned about the road gangs, the floggings, the solitary confinement in the 'Model Prison' at Port Arthur. We know about the dogs on chains across Eaglehawk Neck. We've seen the bridges and the public and private buildings that they helped to erect.

And most of us can recall at least the names of some of the more famous ones – Martin Cash, Mathew Brady, the cannibal Alexander Pierce, to mention three that readily come to mind.

But of course we don't, and can't, know all of them.

Between 1803 and 1853, some 76,000 people – about 63,500 men and 12,500 women, around 65,000 from Britain and 11,000 from Ireland – were transported to Van Diemen's Land, as this island was known until 1856. That's a lot of stories.

And for a long time after transportation ended – even after the last convicts finished serving their sentences, in 1877 – many Tasmanians wanted to erase the convict era from their individual and collective memories.

Sir William Dobson, who was Tasmania's Chief Justice between 1885 and 1898, campaigned to have all convict building and records destroyed "so that the slate of memory could be wiped clean and a phoenix exist without past knowledge"[1].

Joe Lyons, as Education Minister in 1914, recommended that the records of the old convict days which he found in one of his department's old stores be burnt "because Tasmanians should not remind themselves of their past"[2].

As recently as the 1960s, the Library Board refused to allow a PhD student to publish convict names from the records which they held "for fear of embarrassing their descendants"[3].

Of course since the 1970s people have become much more interested in Tasmania's convict history. And having a convict ancestor is now a source of pride for many Tasmanians.

Dr Dianne Snowden has done a great deal to unearth, and bring to our attention, some of the less-well-known stories of people who were transported to Van Diemen's Land.

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[1] Peter Bolger, *Hobart Town*, Australian National University Press, 1973, p. 2.
[2] Lloyd Robson, *A History of Tasmania*, Volume II, Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 288.
[3] Merran Williams, 'Stain or badge of honour? Convict heritage inspires mixed feelings', *The Conversation*, 8th June 2015.

In *Van Diemen's Women,* co-authored with Joan Kavanagh, she told the story of the 138 women who, together with 35 of their children, were transported from Ireland aboard the *Tasmania* in 1845.

One of these women was Diane's great-great-great grandmother.

In *White Rag Burning*, which was launched by Her Excellency the Governor earlier this month, Dianne tells the stories of 79 Irish women who deliberately committed arson in order to be transported to Van Diemen's Land during and after the Potato Famine of the 1840s.

In the book which we are here to launch today, Dianne brings to light the stories of another group of people from the convict era of whom we previously knew very little.

Voices from the Orphan Schools – The Children's Stories tells the stories of some of the children who spent their early years at the Orphan Schools – including the 35 children mentioned in *Van Diemen's Women* – between 1828 and 1879.

The first Orphan Schools were opened in 1828 – for girls in Davey Street, and for boys on the banks of the New Town Rivulet – at the instigation of Lieutenant-Governor Arthur, who thought that the colony had become "overrun with illegitimate children", and saw a need for "a school of industry" where children would be trained as servants or in trades, as well as in reading and writing.

These first premises were only ever intended to be temporary, and in 1833 the Orphan Schools moved to newly-erected buildings on this site, which had been designed by John Lee Archer.

Most of the children who came to the Orphan Schools were in fact *not* orphans. They were, for the most part, children of convict mothers – who either sailed with their mothers on the prison ships, or were born after their mothers arrived. These children were separated from their mothers, and sent to the Orphan Schools. A smaller number of children were brought or sent to the Orphan Schools by parents who found themselves unable to care for them – or by local officials who judged that their parents were unable to care for them.

As Dianne writes, "The children in the Orphan Schools had committed no crime but were nevertheless exposed to a convict-related institution which was prison-like in design and administration".

Inevitably, therefore, many of the individual stories which Dianne relates are sad, or even tragic.

More than 400 children died in the Orphan Schools, many of them from infectious diseases – but some from other causes, such as Henry Osborne, who died at the age of 11 in 1860 after having apparently eaten an inch of candle.

Some children of the Orphan Schools were subsequently re-united with one or both of their parents: but in many cases, children were effectively abandoned when a sole surviving parent formed a new relationship. Such was the fate of, for example, Amelia Esp and Mary Ann Taylor.

Sometimes, mothers who had married (or re-married) subsequently tried to find their children – as Jane Bradshaw did in 1855, for her daughter Mary Jane Connor, who had been admitted to the Orphan School a decade earlier, at the age of 2.

Many of the children who passed through the Schools were, once they were considered old enough, apprenticed as farm labourers or domestic servants. As one might expect, this was not always a happy experience. Adelaide Williams was beaten by her master with a horse whip, because she could not find a stocking. George Jones was repeatedly beaten by his master with a bullock whip, and forced to drink milk mixed with pepper and mustard, when he took some cream.

But Diane also demonstrates that many of these young apprentices felt sufficiently confident, and were able, to make formal complaints about their treatment, and in some cases to obtain redress.

And not all of the stories are sad ones.

Many of the children who passed through the Orphan Schools went on to have families – in some cases very large ones – and become respected members of their communities, either in Tasmania or on the mainland.

A particularly heart-warming story is that of Mary Ann and William Butler, two of the children who came to this island on the *Tasmania* in 1845. William, aged 10, was admitted to the male Orphan School on his arrival, and discharged two years later as an apprentice to a priest in Port Phillip. Mary Ann, eight years his junior, spent five years at the Orphan School before being re-united with her mother, but was re-admitted some 4½ years later after her mother was beaten to death by her husband. She spent another four years in the Orphan School before being 'apprenticed out', and then another year later was living on the south coast of New South Wales. Both William and Mary Ann married and had large families – and somehow managed to become re-acquainted with each other in later life. Diane is able to recount their story in some detail because William Butler was her great-great-grandfather.

Other 'good stories' which Diane tells in this book are those of Walter and Lancelot Keen, who became accomplished entertainers; Robert Wiggins, who became a builder and contractor and whose works include the Infant School on this site, the Elwick grandstand, and a church on the corner of Main Road and Cross Street in New Town; Edward Wallace, who became known in Tasmania, Victoria and New South Wales as 'the blind evangelist'; and Robert Harris, founder of *The Advocate* newspaper.

The Queen's Asylum for Destitute Children, as the Orphan Schools became known as from 1861, closed in May 1879, as foster care began to be a more preferred way of looking after 'destitute children'. In the final year, there were only 88 children at the Schools, compared with between four and five hundred in earlier years.

These buildings then became used for the Male Division of the New Town Charitable Institution, later and for many years known as St Johns Park Hospital, until its closure in 1994.

Diane Snowden has shed new light on an important part of Tasmania's history, and brought to life stories which, though hitherto either unknown or long-forgotten, are part of our story.

It's a great pleasure to have been asked formally to launch *Voice from the Orphan Schools – the Children's Stories* – which I now do.