

‘On the same lines as those in England’:

English influences on an Australian institution for people with learning disabilities

In 1892, Dr James McCreery described the establishment of Kew Cottages, Australia’s ‘first specialist institution’ for people with learning disability,¹ to a meeting of the Intercolonial Medical Congress of Australasia. McCreery, the Superintendent at Kew, explained to his audience that while there were some initial problems in recruiting suitable staff, the institution was fortunate to have obtained ‘a head-teacher who had been employed for eight years at the Royal Albert Institution in the north of England...and so we were able to start in the right direction’.² As his remark reveals, in nineteenth-century Australia institutional authorities often looked ‘home’ to Britain for knowledge about how best to treat people with learning disability. This paper begins to examine how English ideas and individuals influenced the establishment and early history of Kew Cottages.

Dr Edward Paley, Inspector of Asylums in Victoria (the Australian colony in which Kew Cottages were located), first proposed the creation of a separate institution for children with learning disability in 1875.³ Paley immigrated to the colony from England in 1862, recruited by the government to superintend the colony’s first ‘lunatic’ asylum.⁴ He made his suggestion for a separate institution only a few years after the establishment of several English ‘asylums’ for children with learning disability and he hoped the new Victorian institution might be modelled on them. This desire to establish ‘an institution for the care and training of feeble-minded children’ reflected the ‘positive optimism’ about the developmental potential of people with learning disability then prevalent.⁵ However, it took until May 1887 to establish such an institution successfully in Victoria.

Five years later, McCreery told the Medical Congress that: ‘A separate place for feeble-minded children was a new departure for Victoria, and it was determined to carry it on, as far as possible, on the same lines as those in England’. Two principles consequently governed its operation: the first limited admission to the institution to those with learning disability, the second dictated that it be worked ‘as a training school, in which the physical, mental and moral powers of the inmates would be developed’. Comparing family and institutional care, McCreery declared that ‘a training institution carried on like the Royal Albert, gives the best possible results’.⁶

That Kew Cottages could be ‘carried on like the Royal Albert’ was, as he explained, due to the good fortune of finding a Head Teacher with considerable experience at the English institution. The man he referred to was Theophilus J. Eastham, born in Lancashire, Preston in June 1850. Eastham began work at the Royal Albert in late 1872 or 1873 and remained for several years, working mostly as a ‘school-attendant’, before immigrating to the antipodean colonies in late 1879 or early 1880. Victoria’s asylum officials considered him eminently qualified by this experience to be the Head Teacher at their new institution and went to some lengths to ensure his appointment.⁷

Comparisons between Kew and the English ‘asylums’ that inspired it suggest that it was, indeed, modelled on them to a considerable extent, very likely due in large part to Eastham’s influence.⁸ The organisation of the schoolwork, for which he was entirely responsible, certainly resembled English teaching practices. In addition to instruction in reading, writing and arithmetic, the children received colour, clock and object lessons, as well as singing and drawing, all subjects taught in the ‘home’ asylums.⁹ Some methods of instruction, such as the ‘cultivation’ of the senses by means of a weekly ‘shop lesson’, Eastham clearly introduced directly from the Royal Albert.¹⁰ Some attempt was also made to organise classes according to the ability of pupils, as was the case in English institutions.¹¹ Physical training, too, followed similar lines, McCreery explaining to the 1892 Congress that ‘the means used...were the same as in English schools - light dumb-bells, marching in order, walking on ladder steps, general drill movements for the arms and body’.¹² Like its English counterparts, Kew Cottages also endeavoured to train the ‘habits and conduct’ of inmates. This ‘moral training’ encompassed the teaching of ‘cleanly habits ... proper behaviour at meals and self-control’.¹³ Finally, the occupations in which inmates found themselves employed - sewing, laundry and house work for the female patients; tailoring, mat making, basketwork and boot repair, as well as house, garden and farm work for the male residents - were also common in the ‘home’ institutions.¹⁴

While Victoria’s asylum officials strove to establish an institution for children with learning disabilities ‘on the same lines as those in England’, significant hurdles stood in the way of fully realising that ambition. Perhaps the most serious was their inability to control admissions. In 1900, McCreery declared that Victoria was unique in offering ‘accommodation and training’ for all children with learning disability living in the colony and ‘in this respect at least is in advance of other places’.¹⁵ His claim made a virtue of necessity: unlike the ‘voluntary’ English institutions that inspired it, Kew, as a state institution, could not practice selective admission. The obligation to accept all for whom admittance was sought was thought by some to hamper Kew’s ‘usefulness’ as a training institution. Only a year after it opened, the Inspector suggested restricting entry to those children ‘offering some promise of being teachable’.¹⁶ In 1902, McCreery reiterated his claim that Victoria’s ‘provision’ for children with learning disability was ‘in advance of that made for similar cases in any part of the world’.¹⁷ His assertions were seemingly a response to the government’s increasing scepticism about the institution’s efficacy. By 1903, government officials were refusing to increase expenditure at the institution, asking instead: ‘Cannot the staff of the Idiot Asylum be reduced without lessening efficiency. The school teaching does not appear to be attended with results that justify its continuance on the present scale’.¹⁸

James McCreery retired in 1905, the Annual Report for that year praising his superintendence at the Cottages as ‘work of the highest humanity and utility. Two years later, on the recommendation of a new Inspector-General, the government abolished Eastham’s position as Head Teacher and he retired from government service due to ill health. That same year a severe typhoid epidemic in the Cottages saw the schoolroom converted into a makeshift isolation ward.¹⁹ Despite sustained campaigning, formal schooling did not resume at Kew until 1929. These changes marked the end of the attempt to establish an ‘asylum’ for people with learning disability on the nineteenth-century English model, but they did not signify the waning of English influence on the institution and its inmates. The ideas about people with learning disability authorities drew from ‘home’ in the new century were, however, very different and would see the institution transformed.²⁰

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For information on the Kew Cottages History Project, visit
http://www.latrobe.edu.au/history/kew_project.html

¹ Charles Fox, “Forehead Low, Aspect Idiotic”: Intellectual Disability in Victorian Asylums, 1870-1887’, in Catharine Coleborne and Dolly MacKinnon (eds) *Madness in Australia: Histories, Heritage and the Asylum*, St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 2003, 145, 155.

² James V. McCreery, ‘Idiocy and Juvenile Insanity in Victoria’, in *Intercolonial Medical Congress of Australasia: Transactions of the Third Session, held in Sydney, New South Wales, September, 1892*, edited under the Direction of the Literary Committee by L. Ralston Huxtable, Sydney: Charles Potter, Government Printer, 1893, 665.

³ Report of Inspector of Asylums on the Hospitals for the Insane for the Year 1872, *Victoria: Papers Presented to Parliament*, 1873, vol. III, 11.

⁴ Andrew Crowther, ‘Administration and the Asylum in Victoria, 1860s-1880s’, in Coleborne and MacKinnon, 86-7.

⁵ David Gladstone, ‘The Changing Dynamic of Institutional Care: The Western Counties Idiot Asylum, 1864-1914’, in David Wright & Anne Digby (eds), *From Idiocy to Mental Deficiency: Historical Perspectives on People With Learning Disabilities*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996, 137-9; Report of the Inspector of Asylums on the Hospitals for the Insane for the Year ending 1887, *Victoria. Papers Presented to Parliament*, 1888, vol. III, Appendix C, 46; Fox, 153-5.

⁶ McCreery, 665.

⁷ PROV, VA 475, VPRS 3992, Box 194, File 87/J7408.

⁸ PROV, VA 475, VPRS 3992, Box 194, File 87/J7408; Box 200, File 87/8666; Box 705, File 98/H2443.

⁹ PROV, VA 475, VPRS 3992, Box 300, File 87/J8666; Report of Inspector of Asylums on the Hospitals for the Insane for the Year 1887, *Victoria. Papers Presented to Parliament*, 1888, vol. III, 15; McCreery, 667; PROV, VA 475, VPRS 3992, Box 194, File 87/J7408; Gladstone, 151-2; Joe Alston, *The Royal Albert: Chronicles of an Era*, Lancaster: Centre for North-West Regional Studies, University of Lancaster, 1992, 12-32, *passim*; C. Miller, *Broken Gleams*, Lancaster: Published for the benefit of the Royal Albert Idiot Asylum, Lancaster, 1873, 15-22.

¹⁰ PROV, VA 475, VPRS 3992, Box 194, File 87/J7408; Alston, ‘A Visit to the Royal Albert’, 24; Miller, 19.

¹¹ Report of Inspector of Asylums on the Hospitals for the Insane for the Year ended 1887, *Victoria. Papers Presented to Parliament*, 1888, vol. III, 15; Gladstone, 152; Alston, 15-30, *passim*; Miller, 13.

¹² McCreery, 667; ‘Work of the School and Workrooms: “A Morning in the Royal Albert Asylum”’ in Alston, 22 and ‘A Visit to the Royal Albert’, 27; Miller, 18-19.

¹³ Gladstone, 139; Miller, 13-14, 21, 26; PROV, VA 475, VPRS 3992, Box 341, File 90/P3520, memo, 6 March 1890; McCreery, 667.

¹⁴ Hospitals for the Insane. Report of the Inspector of Lunatic Asylums for the Year 1892, *Victoria. Papers Presented to Parliament*, 1893, vol. II, 14; McCreery, 667; PROV, VA 2852, VPRS 7420, vols 1-3; Alston, 13-41, *passim*; Miller, 24-6; Gladstone, 152-3.

¹⁵ Hospitals for the Insane. Report of the Inspector of Lunatic Asylums for the Year Ended 31st December, 1900, *Papers Presented to Parliament*, 1901, vol. II, 14.

¹⁶ Report of the Inspector of Lunatic Asylums on the Hospitals for the Insane for the Year Ended 31st December, 1888, *Victoria. Papers Presented to Parliament*, 1889, vol. IV, 15; Hospitals for the Insane. Report of the Inspector of Lunatic Asylums for the Year ended 31st December 1889, *Victoria. Papers Presented to Parliament*, 1890, vol. III, 16-17.

¹⁷ Hospitals for the Insane. Report of the Inspector of Lunatic Asylums for the Year Ended 31st December 1902, *Papers Presented to Parliament*, 1903, vol. II, 15.

¹⁸ PROV, VA 475, VPRS 3992, Box 937, File 1903/S6965.

¹⁹ Hospitals for the Insane. Report of the Inspector-General of the Insane for the Year Ended 31st December 1905, *Victoria. Papers Presented to Parliament*, 1906, vol. II, 34; PROV, VA 475, VPRS 3992, Box 1136, File 1909/F7415; Hospitals for the Insane. Report of the Inspector-General of the Insane for the Year ended 31st December 1907, *Victoria. Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly*, vol. 1, 31.

²⁰ Fox, 155-6.