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Transforming the Female Orphan School

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Presented at AARE 2005 conference
Creative Dissent: Constructive solutions

Abstract

The Female Orphan School has been referred to as a national heirloom, Sydney’s forgotten colonial icon, a jewel and a national treasure, but how much do we know about the original purposes of this building? And should we care? This paper reviews the transformation of this building from orphan school to hospital for the insane to university research centre. The case study data is drawn from historical documents, art works, newspaper reports and interviews with architects and heritage consultants. This material is analysed using a combination of critical discourse analysis and a theoretical framework developed largely from the work Michel de Certeau. The paper argues that while the building’s status as an icon, its importance to the local area and Australia’s history is strongly promoted in the press, this appreciation is largely superficial. The paper concludes that the greater significance of the Orphan School that we should seek lies in the ways that the building has been discursively formed to produce a range of ideological representations.

Introduction

The impetus for this paper came from a desire to document the ways in which our understandings of the Female Orphan School have been distorted by reporting of it as a recent acquisition of the University of Western Sydney (UWS).

I suspected that in the University’s enthusiasm to gain prominence and market advantage by claiming a piece of Australian cultural heritage as its own some aspects of the institution’s history would have been overlooked, while other aspects emphasized.

The ‘transformation’, then, was originally meant to refer to a presumed distortion of our recollections of the past. However, I discovered not a single transformation, but a number which include the following:

1. The creation of the Female Orphan School by Governor King in 1800
2. Governor Macquarie’s creation of the building at Parramatta, opened in 1818
3. The transfer of boys from the Male Orphan School in 1850 and the facility becoming the Protestant Orphan School and its eventual closure in 1887
4. Becoming Rydalmere Hospital for the Insane 1888, new buildings constructed, being renamed Rydalmere Psychiatric Hospital and closing from 1985

5. The growth of the ‘heritage movement’ and the campaign by the SMH, from December 1991, to save the derelict Orphan School buildings

6. The hospital precinct purchased by UWS Nepean from the State government and becoming the Parramatta campus in 1995

7. The commencement of restoration the buildings in 1998

8. The academic appropriation of the Orphan School history in 1999

9. Reopening of the Female Orphan school buildings in November 2003 and the Whitlam Institute, in the former Medical Superintendent house

10. The winning of the heritage awards (National Trust, April 2004; UNESCO, October 2004) and the marketing of a heritage icon

In the paper these transformations will be outlined with emphasis being given to those of particular educational significance.

From rescue to moral restoration

One of the earliest references to children in the colony of New South Wales was included in a report on the condition of Norfolk Island, dated 18 October 1796, by Lieutenant-Governor King. Most of the report concerns matters of food production, trade and the cost of running the settlement, but an itemised inventory the report notes that out of the 887 people in the settlement there were 64 children supported by their parents and 99 victualled from the stores. To occupy these children King had established two schools and an institution “for the reception of such orphan female children have been lost or deserted by their parents-most of them are of such an age as to require a strict hand and eye over them” (King, 1895, p. 160). It was also noted that a fund had been set up to clothe these orphans.

When King was put in charge of the whole colony in 1800, after the departure of Governor Hunter, he continued to express a concern for the welfare of the children of the colony. In a despatch to the Secretaries of the Treasury he notes,

Finding the greater part of the children in this colony so much abandoned to every kind of wretchedness and vice, I perceived the absolute necessity of something being attempted to withdraw them from the vicious examples of their abandoned parents (King, 1914b, p. 525).

For their accommodation King planned to build a “large building for the reception and education of those children” and, as he had done on Norfolk Island, proposed to finance the project from the proceeds of duties, fines and donations. Until this asylum could be built King had undertaken to purchase a “spacious brick dwelling-house” formerly owned by Captain Kent who was returning to England. King hoped that his taking “possession of this house for this humane and necessary purpose might excuse any impropriety in
making a conditional agreement with Captain Kent” (King, 1914b, p. 525). It should be noted that King was not intending to accommodate only orphans, but to remove any children from their parents if he considered it warranted.

To expedite this matter, King formed a committee of trustees to manage the affairs of the Orphan Institute. In a letter to the designated members of the committee King explained his reasons for establishing an orphan asylum thus,

Soon after my arrival in this colony I had frequent opportunities of observing the numerous children of both sexes going about the streets in a most neglected manner. This observation was confirmed by the many distressing relations made to me of the early abuses the female part suffered, not only from the unprotected state they were in, but also from the abandoned examples of their parents, and those to whose care the orphans are committed. These circumstances, joined to the success of the asylum I formed at Norfolk Island for the care of female orphans, induced me to turn my attention as early as possible towards commencing a similar institution here for the purpose of withdrawing those real objects of charity and benevolence from the destructive connexions and examples of their dissolute parents in whom no reform can be expected, whatever good success may attend out endeavours to protect and instil proper notions in the minds of the younger part; altho’ [sic] I am well aware that even amongst the oldest of them there will be much to eradicate (King, 1914a, pp. 534-5).

The committee was also informed of the reasons for the purchase of house owned by Captain Kent, the plans to extend this building and of King’s intentions to construct a larger asylum at Parramatta that would hold about 200 children twice as many as could be accommodated in Kent’s house.

Some observations need to be made here. Firstly, while there was a stated concern for the welfare of the orphaned girls, there was a greater concern to introduce reforms through the creation of the Orphan Institution. A large number of the girls destined for the Institution were not orphaned, but would be removed from their parent or parents, or would be taken from those providing care. Establishing an asylum allowed King the potential to ‘exile’ a large proportion of the young female members of the colony and this withdrawal could be seen as a penalty to the rest of the community and as an opportunity to reform and re-educate the individuals removed. Either way it was a demonstration of the power of the Governor. The convicts, already exiled and obliged to labour, and other inhabitants were being shown a form of disciplinary power that regularly operated from the beginning of the nineteenth century in the “psychiatric asylum, the penitentiary, the reformatory, the approved school and to some extent, the hospital” (Foucault, 1979, p. 199). This was disciplinary power in the guise of benevolence. However, the power would be more effectively exercised if the exiles were removed from view, and this was not possible in a house in the centre of Sydney.

In a despatch to the Duke of Portland King then stated his intention to construct an asylum away from Sydney. “An extensive and appropriate building is also commencing at Parramatta for the same purpose (as the house at Sydney will not hold more than one hundred children)” (King, 1914c, p. 533). Portland approved of King’s plans but warned
that the institution should not be available to those families who could provide support
(Portland, 1915). There was, however, a delay of eight to twelve months between sending
and receiving despatches and while this message was in transit King continued to develop
case for using the Orphan Institution as an approach to ‘rescuing’ the colony. In a
despatch of March 1801 he argued “[i]n this plan I mean to persevere, as the only means
of obtaining any reform among the inhabitants of which this colony is composed” (King,
1915a, p. 13). In an August despatch King proclaimed that “the Orphan house at Sydney
is inhabited by those deserted young female orphans who are rescued from those scenes
of prostitution and iniquity that disgraces the major part of the inhabitants of this colony,
many of whom are from nine to fourteen years old” (King, 1915a, p. 123).

After a year in command of the colony, King sent to Portland an overview of the
settlement. In this document he again took the opportunity to comment on the civil,
judicial and military establishments, the settlers (both free and former convicts), convicts
and finally the children of the colony. Again King lamented “the sight of so many girls
between the ages of eight and twelve, verging on that brink of ruin and prostitution which
several had fallen into” and the steps he had taken to rescue “the elder girls from the
snares laid for them, and which the horrible example and treatment of many of their
parents hurried them into” (King, 1915b, p. 425). We were told that the forty-nine girls in
the Orphan House were taught needlework, reading, spinning and some few writing.
King also took the opportunity to extol the virtues of the Orphan House in Sydney, the
committee to manage the institution headed by Mrs King and Mrs Paterson, and of the
means of funding the project. It was also mentioned that materials were being collected
for a larger building (at Parramatta), though we might wonder why this process was
taking so long.

Through the despatches from Governor King the Female Orphan School was discursively
constructed as an institution that would restore and preserve the morals of the colony and
in so doing create a new moral standard in the colony. It was s though if the orphan girls
could be contained, isolated and controlled then the colony would become a better place.
The Female Orphan School thus symbolised a relatively new form of disciplinary power.

**An elegant and commodious plan**

Samuel Marsden had the responsibility for supervising the construction of the new
Female Orphan School building at Parramatta. The Committee minutes for 11 October
1800 recorded that a building site had been approved and that the making of bricks had
begun. The committee also sought to involve philanthropists in England noting, with
respect of the Orphan School, “the great benefits that society in general will derive from
the rising generation of this colony being initiated into the practice of morality and good
order” (1896, p. 233). In November 1807 Marsden wrote to Under-Secretary Cooke
arguing the case for an additional clergyman, for two schoolmasters and a married man
and woman for the Female Orphan School to be provided (1898, p. 381). However, no
mention was made of progress on the building at Parramatta and this work did not really
recommence until Governor Macquarie’s arrival in 1810.
The location for the new Orphan School was Arthur’s Hill and a building on this site would be visible from the settlement at Parramatta, about one mile away. In this place the inhabitants of the School would be away from corrupting influences and would be less likely to entice potential corruptors. This situation of the building also conformed to the late eighteenth-century prescription recommended for the siting of a reform prison or an asylum. Andrew Scull noted that according to the Quakers advocating prison reform such a building “should not be cramped among other buildings, but should be in open country- perhaps on a rise to get the full force of the wind, and it should be close to a running stream” (1980, p. 57). The site at Parramatta closely matched this description and hence would have been considered to enhance the prospects for the reform of the inhabitants. Both the Governor and his wife were known to have had an interest in architecture and Elizabeth Macquarie is believed to have brought architectural pattern books with her to Australia (Freeland, 1972). In correspondence to Commissioner Bigge, Marsden indicated that the design for the Orphan School building had originated with Governor and Mrs Macquarie (Marsden, undated), and appeared to have been based on the plan of Elizabeth Macquarie’s family home of ‘Airds’ in Appin, western Scotland.

The design of the Orphan School building at Parramatta is of particular interest whether drafted by Elizabeth Macquarie or not. The building has three storeys and is constructed in the Palladian style with a central block and two smaller two-storey sections to the sides. The two-storey sections are connected to the main block by corridors or ‘hyphens’. The School house had a gabled roof with a hip running parallel to the front face. In the main block, the front wall has central section that is pushed forward and capped by a classical pediment. This section has three rows of three openings; the upper two rows are windows and the lowest, two windows with a central door. The entrances are through a portico. These were also the design features of the house in Appin built by Elizabeth’s grandfather, Donald Campbell “in troubled times” (Cohen, 1979, p. 1). In the case of Airds, the portico has a domed roof, whereas on the Orphan School’s portico (which may have been added later) the roof is gabled, mimicking the pediment.

When first erected, the Female Orphan School building at Parramatta would have appeared large in scale, imposing, and sophisticated, and to an extent still does. The sophistication is in the subtle detail that suggests a high degree of craftsmanship. The vertical corner edges of the front face are finished with blocks of stone that alternate between showing the short and the long faces of the blocks. The storeys are differentiated by rows of contrasting bricks. The building still commands a tranquil power, an air of wealth and an authority, partly due to its situation, but also due to its design that invokes the country manor of a gentleman. Macquarie reported to Earl Bathurst in December 1817 that “A New female Orphan School on a large elegant and Commodious Plan had lately been Erected and Completed at Parramatta under the superintendence and direction of the Rev’d Mr Marsden” (1916, p. 719). However, this appearance had irritated Marsden who later complained to Bigge that “the Female Orphan Institution should not be like a Boarding School for Young Ladies who have Some Prospects in Life, but like a House of Industry” (1821).

The Orphan School building was a symbol of excellent architectural design and was often referred to as being handsome, elegant and commodious. Not just by Macquarie but by
future Governors as well (see Bourke, 1923). While the façade supported this description the same could not be said of the building in other regards. As soon as the School had opened in 1818, Francis Greenway was commissioned to design extensions and supervise renovations to create a workable building to accommodate orphans. While a kitchen was included in the original plan, as in the Airds house, many necessary facilities for catering to a group in excess of one hundred were not. Greenway was requested to design stables, backhouses, lodges and silos (Committee, 1818, p. 19). Surprisingly, the passages linking the central block to the outer pavilions connected to a wall with no door, the passages mimicked the style of the Scottish structure, but were not functional. One of Greenway’s first tasks was to create an access way from the main block to the kitchen by rebuilding the passage ways. Within two years the building also needed to be modified because of poor drainage and consequent problems with damp.

Epitome of progress

The aquatinted engraving, ‘View of the Female Orphan School, near Parramatta, New South Wales’, by Joseph Lycett was completed in 1825 on his return to England. This and other views were produced as a series that would be sold in thirteen monthly parts, each part containing four views and each view being accompanied by a two-page description. The views were also published in a book entitled Views of Australia or New South Wales & Van Diemen’s Land (1825). The author included on the title page a note to his status as ‘Artist to Major General Macquarie, late Governor of those Colonies’. Lycett was one of a number of prominent artists commissioned to produce illustrated
books of scenery life in the Colony. The picture is of particular interest in the context of the others in the collection. Of the twenty-four scenes of New South Wales in *Views of Australia* ten are of countryside or natural features like waterfalls, rivers, lakes, mountains or bays, and seven are of the settlements of Sydney, Parramatta, Liverpool, Windsor, Wilberforce and Newcastle. These views generally include people, settlers and indigenous, and examples of the local fauna and flora. Six of the scenes are of the residences of successful local identities and the view of the Female Orphan School, the only public building emphasised.

Bernard Smith (1960) notes that the artists accompanied voyages of exploration in the late eighteenth-century to sketch and paint flora and fauna for scientific documentation and research. These pictures inspired curiosity and a demand for images of exotic people, plants and animals. As development in the Colony progressed the interest shifted from the exotic and unusual to an interest in the potential commercial benefits to could be gained or displays of wealth accrued. Increasing wealth in England had created a boom in the building of country houses and with it a demand for watercolour paintings of these properties. This sensibility extended to the Colony and, no doubt, some of Lycett’s *Views* were originally works commissioned by the owners of the estates. According to Smith (1979) this shift of interest from exotic curiosity to commercial coincided with a transition from the topographical to romantic painting styles. Country houses featured in both these styles of painting, but where the topographical draughtsman would pay great attention to the architectural features of the building, the romantic artist tended to give less picture-space to the building and emphasise the natural features of the landscape. Lycett was one to closely render the details of buildings. Lycett’s depiction of the Orphan School is interesting both from choice of subject and from the perspective of accuracy.

When Lycett was sent to the settlement at Newcastle his daughter Mary Ann was placed in the Female Orphan School and the engraving may have been made as a mark of gratitude. In the accompanying text the School is described as “this most useful and excellent Institution” (Lycett, 1825, n.p.). Alternately, the picture may have been drawn to show the standard of architecture that had been achieved in the Colony. Lycett needed to interest potential purchasers of his work and it would be to his benefit to impress the British authorities. To this end, perhaps, Lycett distorted the image of the Orphan School. The building is shown fronted by manicured lawns and backed by thick forest. The trees are covered with dense foliage, rather than the more sparse grey-green leaves of eucalypts. People are shown rowing or sailing on a river that is wide and flowing, unlike the Parramatta River at this point shown in the watercolour by Augustus Earle (1825) painted about the same time (see Figure 2. below). The building too is inaccurately drawn, having chimneys where there are none, and more windows. Lycett’s text echoes the concern of the colonial authorities when he notes that “female children are now constantly protected and sheltered from that state of want and woe which the misfortunes or crimes of their wretched parents had entailed upon these innocent and helpless orphans” (1825, n.p.). The view and the text doubtless encouraged readers in England to view the progress of the Colony favourably.
The watercolour by Earle shows a very different style of vegetation and river ecosystem. Where Lycett has created a picture with similarities to scenes of English countryside, Earle has produced a picture showing a scrubby Australian landscape. The river is depicted as swampy with mudflats and mangroves. Earle’s picture bears a strong resemblance to the environment of today.

**Scrutiny of the School**

Elizabeth Macquarie did not limit her involvement with the Orphan School to merely suggesting a design for the building. As the patroness of the Institution, Committee member and frequent visitor she monitored the welfare of the girls and provided surveillance of the staff. For example in a letter to the Committee Mrs Macquarie expressed her dissatisfaction with the appearance of the younger children, requested that the cook be discharged for having her children in the kitchen with her, asked that gentlemen be prohibited from visiting the Master and Matron of the school, and that the girls be prohibited from going to Parramatta, as she had heard they had been doing (Committee, 1819). The following day, 14 August 1819, Mrs Macquarie sent another letter with eleven questions regarding the quality of food at the Institution. It was also noted in the minutes of the meeting for 4 July 1820 that the patroness and vice patroness had inspected the ‘domestic conveniences’ of the School and from their visit had recommended that the Master and Matron move out of their bedroom so that it could be used as a school room, that the children be taught to knit and spin, be taught to hoe, weed and sow in the garden, and that the children’s appearance had improved (Committee, 1820).
With the School established in a separate purpose-built premise, the work of reform could begin in earnest. Foucault has suggested that while exile was one means of exercising disciplinary power, ‘partitioning’ was another. Partitioning was the practice of first confining people to an enclosed space that allowed that individuals be “observed at every point … in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events are recorded” (Foucault, 1979, p. 197). These practices were not just conducted by a zealous Elizabeth Macquarie, but by members of later committees too. An account from 1826 details the way that medical checks and inspections of the premises were conducted (Committee, 1826). This inspection recommended that the behaviour of the orphan girls and the staff be regulated in additional ways.

The period beginning with Macquarie’s governorship saw a number of transformations that were particularly significant in the life of the Female Orphan School. The first transformation was from institution of rescue to Institution of exile, to Institution of elegance, to Institution emblematic of progress and Institution of surveillance. It is interesting that in the recent celebrations of heritage, very little of this has been acknowledged.

From Hospital for the Insane to Heritage precinct

The Orphan School buildings endured more discursive transformations from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, though from an educational point of view many of these are less momentous. The Male Orphan School had originally opened in 1818 in the house formerly owned by Captain Kent, when the girls moved to Parramatta. In 1850 the boys School, in Fairfield, closed and the residents moved to Parramatta where the school was renamed the Protestant Orphan School. This facility was closed in 1887 as a result of changes to policies on the way that orphan children would be supported. However the buildings were not vacant for long. In 1888 NSW Premier Henry Parkes recreated the Orphan School site as the Rydalmere Hospital for the Insane to resolve the problems of overcrowding at Parramatta Hospital for the Insane. On the site additional buildings were designed by Walter Liberty Vernon, Government Architect between 1893 and 1904 (Institute, 2003). In time this facility was renamed the Rydalmere Psychiatric Hospital which operated for a number of years and eventually began closing from 1985.

The heritage campaign

While the Orphan School buildings were being used as a mental health facility, they and the Vernon designed structures, were listed with the National Trust in 1975. The Sydney Morning Herald (SMH), primarily through its heritage writer Geraldine O’Brien, embarked on a campaign to save the Orphan School buildings by raising public awareness about their existence and their possible demolition. The paper alerted readers in May 1992 that as with other deteriorating old structures, the Female Orphan School was likely to be demolished (O’Brien, 1992) but a review of the processes of granting heritage status appears to have averted this fate. Once the University of Western Sydney (UWS) purchased the site in 1995 and had sought funding for the restoration project, the SMH resumed its interest, using terms like ‘centrepiece’ and outlining aspects of the
buildings’ history (O'Brien, 1998b). However, it was not until the funding bid was successful in December 1998 that the Telegraph joined the campaign (Daily Telegraph, 1998; O'Brien, 1998a).

Additional funding for restoration was announced in late 2001 (O'Brien, 2001) and after this time the project began to gain local press coverage (Durham, 2003; Hook, 2002; Parramatta Advertiser, 2002). The most frequently cited scholarly article on the Female Orphan School building is one by UWS academic and historian, Carol Liston. The article ‘The Female Orphan School Parramatta-the influence of location’ (Liston, 1999) notes some details about the staff at the School and notes that this ‘landmark’ building contributed to Parramatta’s identity as a place of government institutions. However, apart from naming various individuals associated with the School the article makes no mention of the ways in which the setting was used. Liston, though, is much sought after as a commentator on the Orphan School. After the official opening of the restored building in October 2003 Liston has been interviewed by a variety of newspapers including the Parramatta Advertiser (Durham, 2003), the Blacktown Advocate (2003) and the SMH (Meacham, 2004). In these publications she has usually advanced the thesis that the reason Macquarie placed the Orphan School on Arthur’s Hill was to annoy John McArthur, whose property, Elizabeth Farm, lies across the river. McArthur, Liston believes, would have been displeased to think that the orphan girls were able to look down on him.

**Marketing heritage and historiography**

Once opened, the University began to exploit its heritage asset through press releases written by the UWS Media Unit. As part of Seniors Week in 2004, Sydney’s senior citizens were given an opportunity to view the Orphan School building (Whibley, 2004c). We might assume that the age of the ‘seniors’ made them an obvious group to invite to view an old building, whatever the case it provided an opportunity for exposing the building to a public. It also gave the opportunity to present the story of the UWS involvement with the building. Here we were told that the building had been a “refuge for orphaned girls of the colony”, that it had “undergone two years of painstaking restoration and had now been transformed into a community space for heritage tours, art exhibitions and cultural events” and that this was a “rejuvenated heritage jewel” now given “back to the people”. This information and these sentiments were repeated often in media releases.

Liston also made use of this publicity to pursue a research project and hoped that the seniors might contribute recollections of the building. A similar appeal was made in a media release, during Seniors Week on the day the building was open, 21 March 2004. Here, what was to become a familiar reiteration of the history of the building was retold. We were told that the Orphan School was:

The centrepiece of the UWS Parramatta Campus, the oldest three-storey brick building in Australia, and the nation’s oldest public building … began as a refuge for orphaned girls in the colony …Having stood derelict for over 20 years … undergone painstaking restoration (Whibley, 2004a).
In various media releases Liston is quoted as saying, “[a]s its custodian, UWS has given ownership of this rejuvenated heritage jewel back to the people so that an integral part of our colonial past can live on for future generations to acknowledge, learn from and enjoy”. Further to this,

[ o ]ne of the most challenging but rewarding aspects of the restoration was encompassing each of the buildings different ‘lives’. Rather than restoring the building to its original 1813 state, the architects left layers from different periods so that visitors can get a real sense of the place in history (as cited in Whibley, 2004b; Whibley, 2004c).

The building and its history, as understood through these discursive constructions, is little more than paint layers and a romantic, yet distant, past. Perhaps it is even the salacious appeal of wickedness and wanton behaviour that is evoked by the idea of the Orphan School. This would explain the sub-heading on the article published by the SMH, ‘Steve Meacham discovers how the “daughters of convict sluts” came to live in a palace’ (Meacham, 2004). Neither the ‘convict slut’ nor the ‘palace’ claims are substantiated in the article, but no doubt attract readers. According to the remaining letters of admission to the Orphan School, the majority of girls had parents who had died, were incarcerated or were unable to support them, and other forms of welfare support were not readily available. There is little to support the claim of the building being a palace either.

The Female Orphan School, like most historical artefacts, is discursively formed. What we know of the institution is an understanding gained through analysis of surviving documents. According to Certeau “we should recall that any reading of the past – however much it is controlled by the analysis of documents – is driven by a reading of current events” (1988, p. 23). This is true of our understanding of the Orphan School. Universities under the current arrangements are driven to compete for students, prestige and funds and UWS is utilizing a unique heritage asset. However, a far greater range of understandings are available than those encouraged by the superficial analyses promoted by the media. This paper has identified a variety of perspectives used to represent the colony’s female orphans, the work of the authorities and the operation of the Orphan School. The paper has also shown how these ideological representations have transformed and changed over time.

References


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