

Lost boys of *Point Puer*

In colonial Tasmania, gruel, floggings and isolation were the order of the day if you had the misfortune of being a 'convict' child. **Stephen Orr** tells us how Point Puer Boys' Prison stamped the youth and spirit out of its troubled inmates.

IMAGINE: TEN years old, brought up in the East End of Victorian London, abandoned by your parents, left to find your own Artful Dodger and make your own way in the world. Your first picked pocket, or break in, and you're up in front of the 'beak'. He looks at you and tells you you're no good and suggests a few years in Hobart Town might do some good. Five months later you and 100 other 10 to 14 year olds are lined up in the bleak southern capital and inspected by farmers and factory owners in search of free labour. It's called the Assignment Scheme, but you've got another name for it. After a hellish journey, packed into a dark hold, fed on gruel and biscuits (just in case you were in any sort of condition) the Board has decided you are, after all, no good for coal mining, quarrying or building roads. So, it's back to the barracks, and the thieves and murderers destined for the Port Arthur penal colony.

By now you're learning how to protect yourself from abuse, to obtain your share of food and water, to stay sane at an age when other children are playing with tin soldiers and paper windmills.

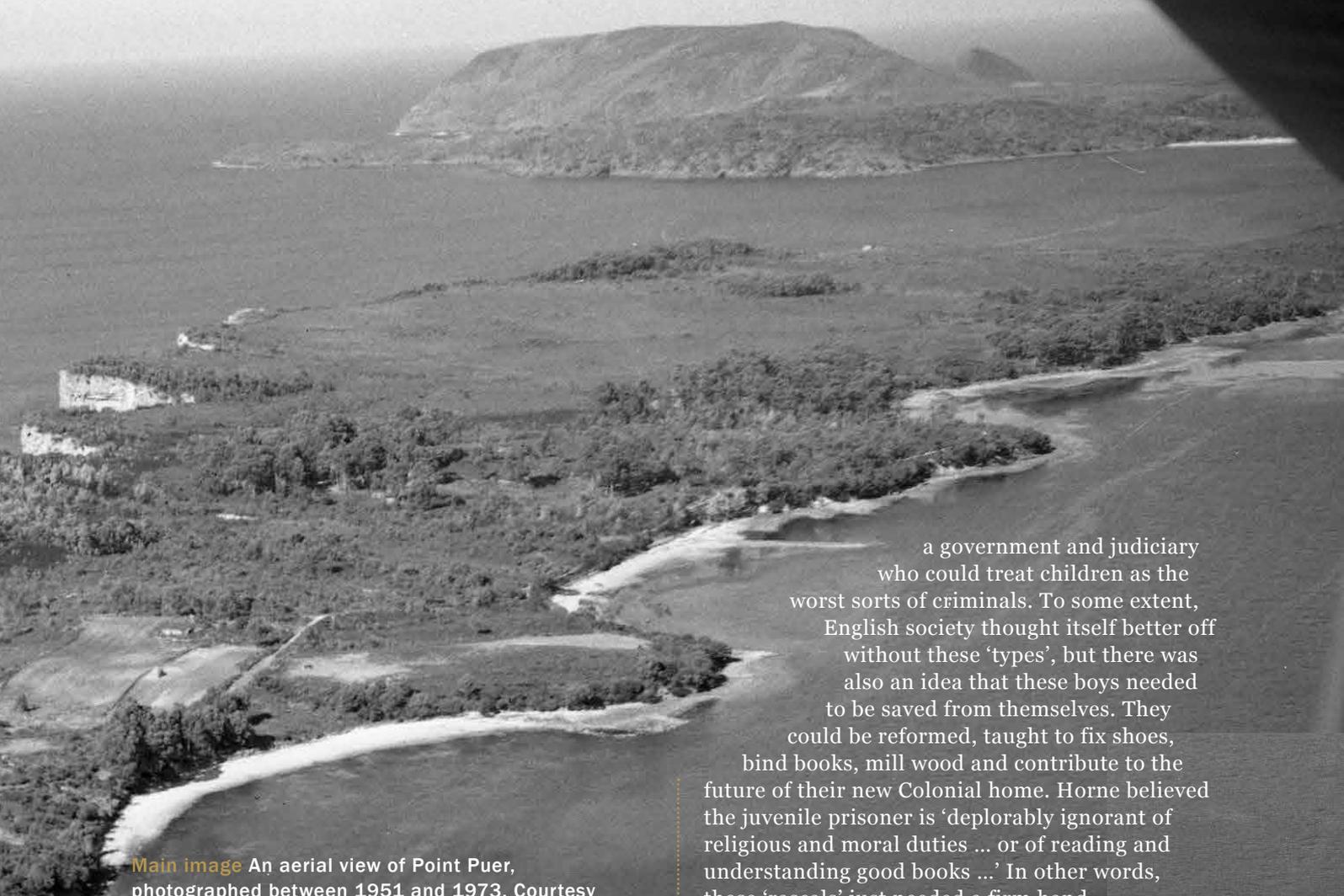
Soon, you learn you'll be sent to Point Puer Boys' Prison. The name is muttered as some sort of omen, or warning, or damnation. You realise it doesn't sound good.

In 1843 **Benjamin Horne** visited Point Puer to observe and write a report on conditions for the

governor, **Sir John Franklin**. His notes make it clear that this wasn't a place for the faint-hearted:

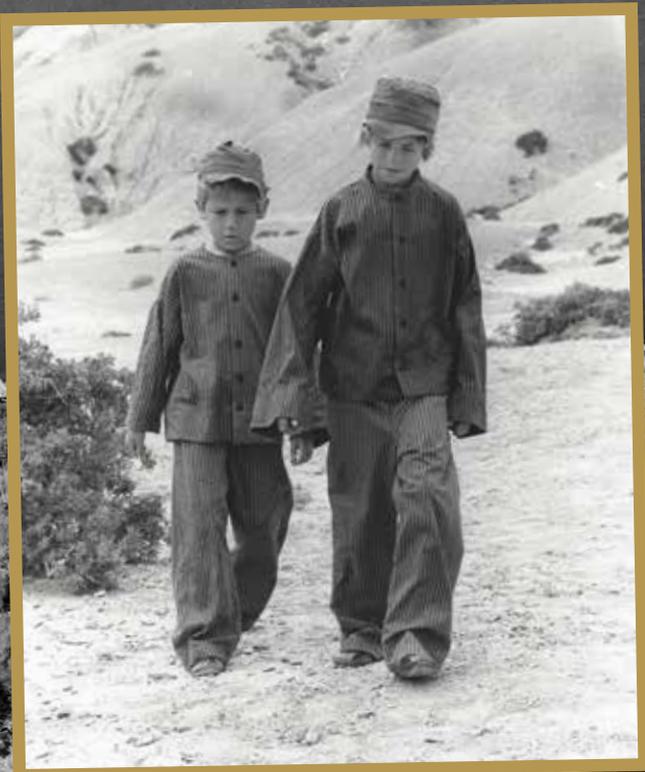
In the sleeping apartments lights are kept burning during the night, and they [the boys] are constantly watched by Overseers, but the efficiency of this system must depend wholly upon the moral character and vigilance of these Officers. Sometimes the Overseer relaxes his vigilance and falls asleep, and, if he is not a favourite with the boys, they put out the lights and invert and empty a night-tub over his head and shoulders. This trick which is called 'Crowning the Overseer' has occurred once during my visit.

Point Puer was established to cater for boys who had been sentenced to transportation. It's difficult for us to fathom



Main image An aerial view of Point Puer, photographed between 1951 and 1973. Courtesy Archives Office of Tasmania, ID AB713-1-3988.

Below A still from the film adaptation, *For the Term of His Natural Life*, which features a character from Point Puer prison.



a government and judiciary who could treat children as the worst sorts of criminals. To some extent, English society thought itself better off without these ‘types’, but there was also an idea that these boys needed to be saved from themselves. They could be reformed, taught to fix shoes,

bind books, mill wood and contribute to the future of their new Colonial home. Horne believed the juvenile prisoner is ‘deplorably ignorant of religious and moral duties ... or of reading and understanding good books ...’ In other words, these ‘rascals’ just needed a firm hand.

Thirteen-year-old Walter Paisley was sentenced to seven years’ transportation for housebreaking. He was one of Point Puer’s first arrivals. He was no angel. During his time at the prison 44 charges were brought against him for insubordination, stealing and assaulting overseers and superintendents. Mostly, the punishment was solitary confinement, but this didn’t bother him. A few weeks after his arrival he was sentenced to the cells for a week for insubordination. A few months later he was back for smuggling tobacco. He sat singing, shouting obscenities, determined to make life difficult for his captors. After his release he struck the school-master, stole a chicken from the superintendent’s garden and assaulted a boy who had given evidence against him.

The first few years at Point Puer were tough. Discipline was strict. The boys were mostly a product of the slums within growing cities such as London, Birmingham and Manchester. Either this, or used as free farm labour from an early age. Despite not having chosen their own path through childhood, they were seen by authorities as ‘very depraved and difficult to manage, perhaps more so than grown men.’

Boys were up at 5am, rolling their mattresses and washing in tanks of Point Puer’s scarce water. After which came prayers (‘Singing is not ▶

taught, and the consequence is that this part of the Divine Service is very badly conducted. In fact the screaming is almost intolerable to any person whose ears have not by rendered callous by hearing it continually'). If it was warm enough the boys could take a 'sea bath' between five and six in the morning (tide permitting). A near freezing dip would be enough to get anyone's day started.

As with Port Arthur, the location of Point Puer, on a fat finger of land stretching out into the bay, was meant to deter any thoughts of escape. The south-eastern tip of Tasmania is rugged, ocean-beaten, wind-swept, heavily-wooded. On the journey from Hobart boys would have passed Two Island, Curio, Tunnel and Raoul Bays, the latter with its 180-metre high dolerite columns soaring into the sub-Arctic sky as some sort of warning of what's to come. At one point Cape Raoul had its own signal station. Years after it was closed (due to inaccessibility) the skeleton of an escaped convict who'd starved to death was found in the Signalman's hut.

The boys would have then sailed north past heavily wooded country, eventually arriving at their new home, a rocky peninsula suggestively pointing to the Isle of the Dead (Port Arthur's burial island). They would have looked across Carnarvon Bay and seen Port Arthur itself, its grim, chiselled face warning them there would be no escape.

Their prison was surrounded on three sides by water, and strong currents that carried small, underfed bodies out to sea. This 'Junior Port Arthur' was an early version of San Francisco's Alcatraz Prison. To the west, sheer cliffs and a rock pavement ensured no one was going anywhere.

Point Puer featured in Marcus Clarke's novel *For the Term of His Natural Life*. The story was published in the *Australian Journal* between 1870 and 1872. It concerns Rufus Dawes, a young man transported for a murder he didn't commit. The loosely connected stories outline his struggles as a convict in Van Diemen's Land. In the novel, Clarke introduces us to 12-year-old Peter Brown, a 'refractory little thief' who jumps off the Point Puer rocks and drowns himself. Clarke's sense of drama was laced with social conscience. 'Just so! The magnificent system starved and tortured

a child of 12 until he killed himself. That was the way of it.' His indignant superintendent, Burgess, is enraged at this 'jumping off'. 'If he could by any possibility have brought the corpse of poor little Peter Brown to life again, he would have soundly whipped it for impertinence...'

Childhood suicide was probably the extreme.

Many boys tried to escape but the road back to Port Arthur was patrolled by soldiers stationed in a barracks on a 'demarcation' line between the two prisons. There were three recorded successes, but there were probably more, and probably more small bodies lost in the bush. One Commandant, William Champ, described the location as a 'bleak, barren spot without water, wood for fuel, or an inch of soil ...'

Horne agreed. His report said that water was brought from the mainland in a ditch but 'from the porous nature of the soil this could scarcely have succeeded ... At present water is brought from Port Arthur by sea ...' He described how an attempt had been

made to improve the soil using 'seaweed, night soil etc'. Also, 'the wood on the Point is exhausted and firewood is also brought from the Penal settlement.'

None of this was good news for the boys.

Mostly, the Point Puer inmates were not misunderstood angels. Several months after Horne forwarded his report to the Governor an overseer was murdered by two boys. Discipline ranged from confinement to cells to solitary confinement on bread and water for up to 14 days, corporal punishment (up to 36 lashes) and, 'in very bad cases', transfer to Port Arthur itself. It's hard to imagine how bad a boy would have to be to warrant removal to one of the toughest prisons in the world. The weekly Magistrate's visit attracted between 10 and 60 hearings. Horne explained, 'A removal to the Jail is very little feared by a bad boy ... A boy who has perhaps a little moral principle remaining is sent to the Jail for two or three Months, associates daily with other boys still worse than himself, and returns to the General Class thoroughly corrupted.'

He goes on to explain the pointlessness of corporal punishment. 'It tends to degrade and harden, and after having been twice or thrice inflicted is evidently useless.'

Daily life in Point Puer

5am	Rise
6am	Daily wash
½ past 6	Breakfast
½ past 7	Musters
8 to 12	Workshops and General Labor
12 to 1	Play and washing for dinner
1	Dinner
¼ to 2	Muster for School and Work
2 o'clock	One half goes to School and the other half to work on alternate days from 2 to ½ past 5
½ past 6	Supper
7 to 8	In summer play. During the winter Months they are mustered earlier and some time is spent in reading aloud to them in their barracks etc.
8 o'clock	General muster in the different buildings. After this reading the scriptures and prayer
By 9 o'clock	All are in bed



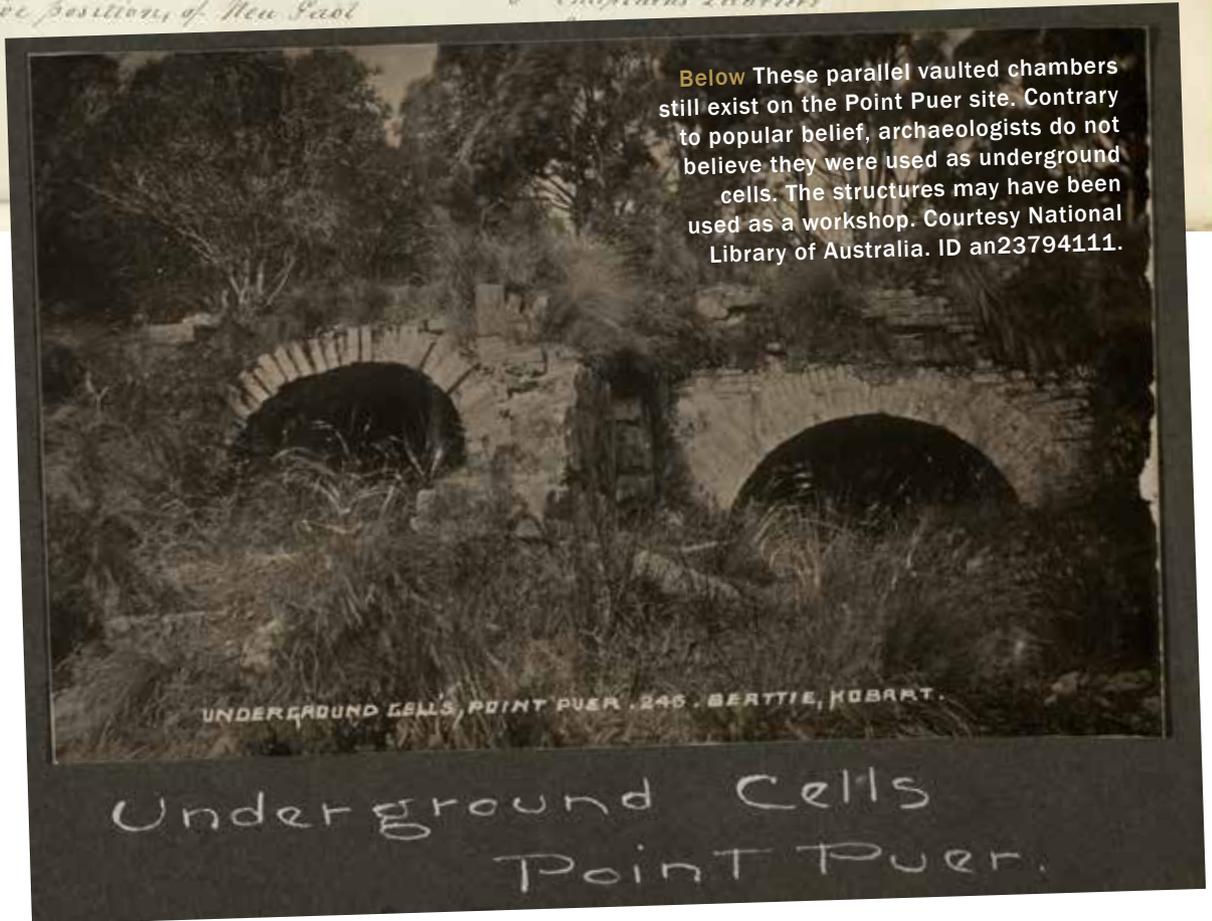
*Boys Establishment,
Point Puer,*

*showing the relative positions of New Gaol
and Settlement.*

Reference

- 1. Work Shops
- 2. Boys Barracks
- 3. Chaplain's Quarters
- 4. Proposed new Gaol
- 5. Superintendent's Quarters

Above A plan of the establishment at Point Puer showing the position of the new gaol. The road to the top right leads to Port Arthur. Courtesy Archives Office of Tasmania, ID CS051299.



Below These parallel vaulted chambers still exist on the Point Puer site. Contrary to popular belief, archaeologists do not believe they were used as underground cells. The structures may have been used as a workshop. Courtesy National Library of Australia. ID an23794111.

There was a growing view in England, America and Australia that locking up increasing numbers of 'criminals' would achieve nothing. Dickens had already visited American prisons to study new ways forward for the British system, full to overflowing, cruel, heartless, sucking in millions of poor and spitting them out in the Antipodes. Here was Oliver Twist in Van Diemen's Land. Meanwhile, William Blake and the Romantics were de-industrialising childhood in poems such as *Little Boy Lost*.

The weeping child could not be heard,

*The weeping parents wept in vain:
They stripped him to his little shirt,
And bound him in an iron chain.*

Years later, Marcus Clarke would leave no doubt what sent little Peter Brown to his death: '20th November, disorderly conduct, 12 lashes. 24th November, insolence to hospital attendant, diet reduced. 4th December, stealing cap from another prisoner, 12 lashes. 15th December, absenting himself from roll call, two days' cells. 23rd December, insolence and insubordination, two ►

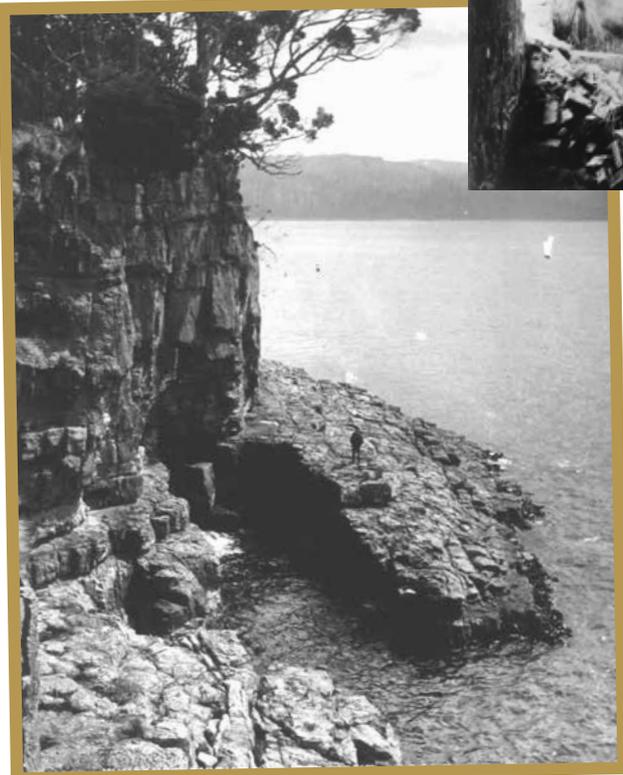
days' cells. 8th January, insolence and insubordination, 12 lashes.'

And so it continues. Later in the book, Brown's friends, Tommy and Billy, succumb to the same horror: 'And so the two babies knelt on the brink of the cliff, and raising their bound hands together, looked up at the sky, and ungrammatically said, "Lord, have pity on we two fatherless children!" and then they kidded each other, and "did it".'

Horne explained that instruction 'in trades and various industrial employment is valuable both as a means of reforming the juvenile delinquent and of preparing him after his liberation to preserve his subsistence by honest labour.' Colonial authorities believed the problem was the boys' 'love of wandering'. If they could be trained and kept working they would become 'habituated' to a life without crime and vagrancy. Soon after its establishment Point Puer was producing junior shoemakers, tailors, sawyers, coopers, quarries, blacksmiths, boat builders, book binders and carpenters. All trades that would be in demand by the developing colonial economy.

In 1837 the barque *Frances Charlotte* brought boys to Van Diemen's Land. They were all from

Below Point Puer was a natural fortress. Courtesy Archives Office of Tasmania PH30-1-4558. **Right** Inside one of the vaulted chambers that may have been used for shaping timber. Courtesy Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority.



Right A plan of the boys' barracks, drawn in 1836 by Henry Laing, a convict draftsman who arrived on the *Thames* in 1829. Courtesy Archives Office of Tasmania, ID CON87-1-57.



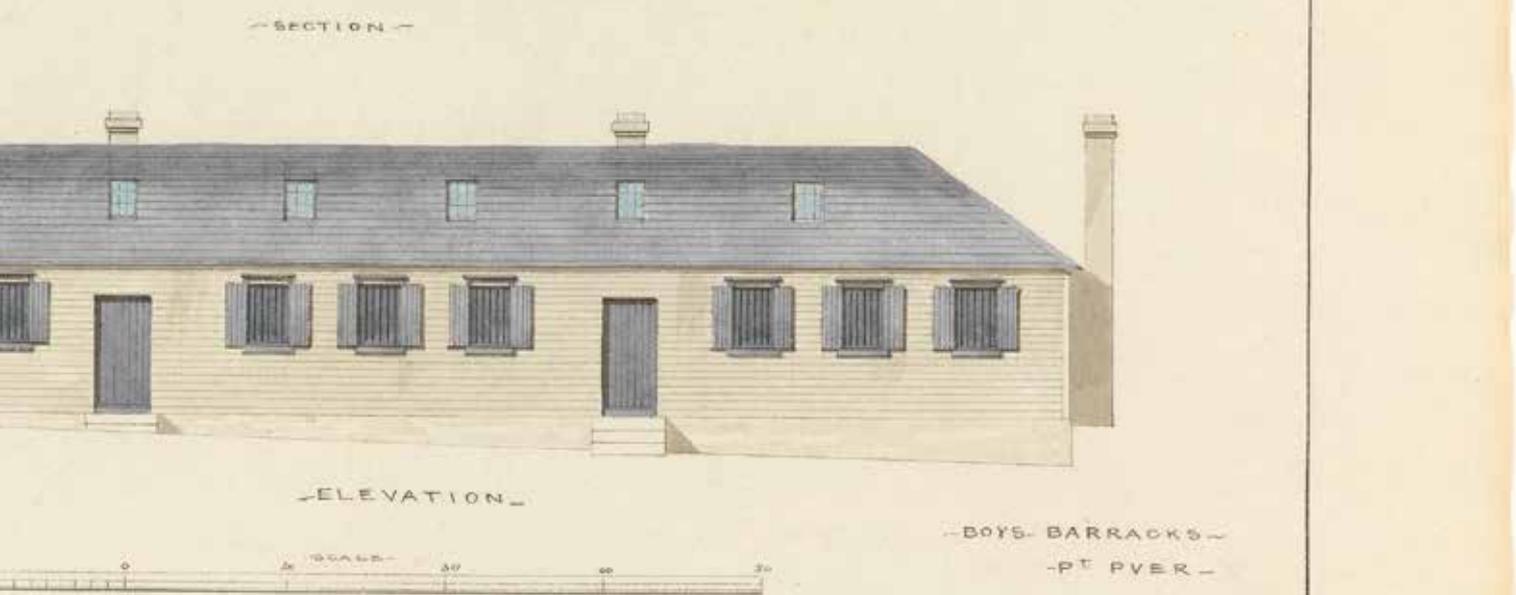
poor backgrounds, uneducated, part of the residuum, or lowest strata of Victorian society. On the journey an attempt was made to train them in manual arts. Instead of learning bad habits from older inmates these young convicts would be taught skills that would aid both them and the colonial authorities during and after their term of incarceration.

Up to 20 per cent of convicts arriving in Australia in the 1830s were boys aged between 10 and 14. In Van Diemen's Land, Lieutenant-Governors Arthur and Franklin and prison commandant Captain O'Hara Booth knew what would come from putting these boys with adult prisoners: apprentice criminals would become actual, gangs would form, power cliques, as well as the dreaded *vice l'anglais* (older and younger boys were separated at night in their Point Puer barracks). The reasoning was, anything a man could do, a boy could try.

In January 1834 the brig *Tamar* arrived from Hobart Town. Aboard were 21 adults and 68, mostly drunk, boys. Booth explained in his diary:

January 10: Tamar signalled – found on board an increase of 21 Adults and 68 Urchins – on the way down the latter evinced their dexterity by foraging out in the Hold of the Vessel a six dozen Case of Wine for me, had abstracted all but one Bottle – some of which they had handed in to the Adults – the consequences a scene of general intoxication – some of the Boys and Men brutal – landed all Men that were drunk and placed them in the quoad – rather disgusted ...

It was obvious that men and boys had to be kept separate, at all costs. Horne explained that 'boys and men are frequently out as absconders at the same time and may meet ... Very lately, no



fewer than 6 men and 10 boys were missing from the two places on the same evening.’

Point Puer’s first inmates arrived in December 1833 and started building their own accommodation. By the time of Horne’s visit, 10 years later, there was a ‘Barrack’ for the now 716 boys, workshops, bake-house, a building used as a school and chapel, and a gaol, consisting of three buildings, one being for ‘boys under sentence for faults’ and the other for those sentenced for more serious offences. The prison was run by officers, a ‘Catechist’ (who also ran the school), a Superintendent of the gaol, and various tradesmen, most of whom had been or were still prisoners or Ticket of Leave men. This carried its own risk, although perhaps these men were determined to give the boys the sorts of opportunities they’d lacked.

Then again ...

The 1840s saw the demise of transportation to Australia. New South Wales (then most of eastern Australia) stopped the practice in 1840 and convicts were diverted to Van Diemen’s Land. Public opinion here led to the formation of the Anti-Transportation League in the late 1840s and the last convict transport was sent from England in 1853. Four years earlier, in March 1849, the last 162 Point Puer boys were loaded onto a ship and sent to the Cascades in Hobart Town.

Walter Paisley had been released in 1838. Less than a year later he was arrested for house-breaking in Launceston. He was sentenced to transportation for life and sent to Port Arthur, across the bay from his old home. Here he was up on charges six times before being sent to the Colonial Hospital in Hobart in 1844.

Paisley’s life was typical of thousands. A society that had failed so many children had sought to deal with them in the harshest possible way. These early

encounters between child and landscape, menacing convicts and ruthless authority were some of the starkest in the history of our fierce continent. Nightly, the Point Puer boys would have heard the Southern Ocean crashing on the cliffs beside their barracks. They might have thought of lost parents and siblings, friends, lives that seemed so distant they might have never happened. Benjamin Horne’s report to Sir John Franklin is full of statistics and opinions (‘...the criminal should not find that he has improved his condition by breaking the laws of God and man ...’) But nowhere are the boys talked about as children. In a way, they had forfeited their childhoods.

Marcus Clarke knew he had the perfect setting for a novel about man versus nature. He describes the Tasman Peninsula as a ‘wild and terrible coastline, into whose bowels the ravenous sea had bored strange caverns, resonant with perpetual roar of tortured billows ... Forrestier’s Peninsula was an almost impenetrable thicket, growing to the brink of a perpendicular cliff of basalt.’

The boys would have known there wasn’t much point attempting to escape. Some tried. Eleven-year-old William Bickle had his sentence extended by two years for insubordination and being ‘illegally at large.’ During his time at Point Puer he faced 65 charges, served 172 days in solitary confinement and suffered 300 lashes to his buttocks.

Today, Point Puer is gum trees and native grasses, the ruins of bread ovens and a few crumbling walls from workshops where boys carved stone for Port Arthur’s buildings. If you try you can hear Paisley singing inside his cell, the sound of 12 year olds reciting from their primers, perhaps even the sounds of happy voices playing in their hour off. 🐣

Daily rations

¾ lb flour

¾ lb fresh or salt meat

Dinner (lunch)

1 Pint Soup

12 oz meat, reduced by boiling and extraction of bone to 6 oz

9 oz bread

9 oz dumpling

Supper (dinner)

1 Pint gruel

9 oz bread

* Award-winning author Stephen Orr’s new book, XXXXXXXXXXXX, is out xxxxxx