Dear Sir,

The article in your March issue, *Some Children At Risk in Victoria in the 19th Century*, contains a number of factual errors, some of which have appeared in print before and should, I think, be corrected before they are repeated so often as to become ineradicable. Those dealing with the Melbourne Orphanage can be traced to two sources cited by Dr. Judge and Mrs Emmerson: A.W. Greig’s 1936 paper in the Victorian Historical Magazine and J.C. Butler’s 1951 booklet *The First Hundred Years*. In some cases your contributors seem to have misread these texts while other mistakes stem from Greig’s and Butler’s own use of their source material. Greig frankly based much of his essay on the reminiscences of an old lady, Mrs Eleanor Jane McMicking, who, between 1912 and 1922, had written down her recollection of what her parents had told her about their early years in Melbourne and their many charitable activities. Her main purpose was to record her mother’s role in the founding of Victoria’s first orphanage and this story, although suspect in one or two details, is largely correct. Her mother, Eleanor Nicholson, had arranged for the care of a small group of destitute children as an act of private benevolence in 1849. Then, as more homeless waifs came to Mrs Nicholson’s attention the responsibility was transferred late in 1850 to the St. James’ Dorcas Society of which she was a member. The premises were provided, rent free, by the St James’ Visiting Society to which her husband, Germain Nicholson, belonged. So far so good, but Mrs McMicking is not so accurate about the earlier history of the Dorcas and Visiting Societies. The erroneous foundation dates she gives, 1842 and 1843, are faithfully recorded by Greig and repeated by Butler. The latter adds another mistake by assigning the Dorcas Society’s custody of the orphans to 1849, omitting Mrs Nicholson’s year of personal responsibility. The two paragraphs on p. 12 of *Some Children At Risk* introduce further distortions both by omission and commission. May I give a brief outline of the early history of the Melbourne Orphan Asylum, as the institution was known between 1854 and 1926, so as to set the record straight according to my reading of the documents. I would welcome any further evidence or corrections.

The St. James’ Visiting Society was launched on 7 April 1845 after an attempt to form such a society the previous year had proved abortive. The Dorcas Society was founded a few weeks later in June 1845 to dispense outdoor relief to poor mothers at the time of their confinement. It did not assume its child care function until 1850. Its first orphan asylum was part of the St. James’ Visiting Society’s cottage at the back of the Royal Oak, Queen Street; the orphans were never housed in the Little Collins Street building mentioned by McMicking, Greig and Butler. After two more moves, to Flagstaff Hill and Bourke Street West, the children were transferred late in 1854 to some tenements on government land adjoining, not on, the Simpsons' property at Kew. In March 1856 the new Melbourne Orphan Asylum on Emerald Hill was ready to receive up to a hundred children; 89 were admitted in the first month. When the Asylum moved again, this time to Brighton in 1878, accommodation was provided there for less than half the average number of children on the institution’s books owing to an extensive boarding out programme resolved upon in 1876 and implemented early the next year. Payments for the maintenance of destitute orphan children were made to foster parents and, under certain conditions, to their own widowed mothers. The idea of direct aid to mothers, far from being too radical for acceptance as stated by Dr. Judge and Mrs Emmerson, was adopted by a Special General Meeting of Contributors on the 26 September 1876 and the byelaws were amended accordingly. It is true that there was some dissension at committee meetings and some battles over details. One defeated motion quoted in full by Butler may have misled your contributors: the proposal that children already in the Asylum should be returned to their mothers9. But the scheme of aiding mothers to keep their children instead of having them admitted to residential care was not only adopted but in time ousted foster placements altogether11. After the introduction of mothers’ benefits paid by the Children’s Welfare Department, then of widows’ pensions and child endowment, the number of boarded out children on the orphanage’s books diminished until the vanishing point was reached in 194812.

With respect, I must also object to the contention of Dr. Judge and Mrs Emmerson that “Protestants were less motivated to establish children’s homes than Roman Catholics”. The Protestant Melbourne Orphan Asylum antedated all others by several years; the first in Geelong was the Protestant Orphan Asylum, organized in 1854 and opened the following year and the Immigrants’ Aid Society, founded by Protestants in 1853, sheltered more destitute children between 1854 and 1864 than any other institution13.

This brings me to the question of the Princes Bridge Industrial School which was conducted for its first four years by the Immigrants’ Aid Society. According to Dr. Judge and Mrs Emmerson it began in 1857 on a site adjoining the Victoria Barracks and was conducted for the first 27 years by A.W. Greig’s...
Penal Hulk Deborah?

father. Greig, the son, is credited
with describing the buildings as
“totally unsuitable for maintaining
children” (p8). There are several
mistakes here: the date, the
location, the superintendent, the at-
tribution of the criticism about the
buildings and, in a way, the object
of the censure. It is true that the
forerunner of the Princes Bridge In-
dustrial School existed in 1857 on
land adjacent to the then non-
existent Victoria Barracks. There
had been a school there for the
young inmates of the I.A.S’s Im-
migrants’ Home since 1855 but in
1857 a new building was erected at
the Society’s expense and later in the
year it came under the auspices of
the Board of National Education14.

It catered from 1857 not only for
children in the institution with their
destitute parents but also for a new
intake of deserted children, ad-
mitted on the order of a
metropolitan police magistrate or
the Chief Secretary and maintained
at the Government’s expense15. But
this school on the west side of St.
Kilda Road was not an industrial
school in either of the senses then
current. The term was applied to
schools under both the National and
the Denominational Boards where
some vocational instruction was
given; the Free Church School at
Buninyong and the Warrnambool
National School were so designated,
for example.17 The Immigrants’
Home School was not one of these
nor was it an industrial school in the
second sense of an institution
designed to prevent crime by
training the children of the
“perishing and dangerous classes”
to habits of industry, except in so
far as all education was thought to
have a salutory effect on wayward
youth. Before 1860 it was an or-
dinary elementary school with
teachers drawn from amongst the
pauper inmates of the Home.18

In 1860 after strenuous
negotiations with the government the
former Institution for Houseless
Immigrants (called the Public
Houseless Immigrants’ Home by
Greig) on the opposite, or eastern,
side of St. Kilda Road was handed
over to the I.A.S. for the purpose of
conducting an industrial school un-
til the necessary legislation was
passed to enable the government to
establish one itself19. Juvenile
vagrants, prisoners’ children and
discharged youthful offenders were
now to be admitted in much larger
numbers. The buildings, which had
served as lodgings at a fixed charge
for new arrivals from late 1852 to
late 1854, had been used in the
meantime as temporary barracks for
the 40th Regiment until the first
portion of the new Victoria
Barracks across the road was ready
to receive them in 186020. The I.A.S.
immediately expended a large sum
on extensive alterations and im-
povements to the dilapidated
buildings. Then a new brick school-
house and other substantial
buildings were gradually added21.

The pauper teachers were replaced
by well qualified respondents to an
advertisement, the B.N.E. inspector
being present when the applicants
were interviewed. Industrial training
was introduced. In August 1864
the whole establishment was taken
over lock, stock and barrel, or
rather buildings, children and
superintendent, by the Government
as its first Industrial School gazetted
under the Neglected and Criminal
Children Act22. J.T. Harcourt who
had been the superintendent of the
Immigrants’ Home since March
1859 thus became the first Inspector
of Government Industrial Schools
and Reformatory. He was replaced
as secretary and superintendent of
the Immigrants’ Home by James
Saunders Greig who held the post
for 27 years after the Industrial
School had been removed from the
I.A.S’s jurisdiction. The remark
about unsuitable buildings, cited by
A.W. Greig, was made by a govern-
ment inspector in the 1870’s with
reference to all the various premises
used by the government over the
years for reformatories and in-
dustrial schools24.

One last word, your contributors
fail to mention the first reformatory
in Victoria under the 1864 Act. It
was the penal hulk Deborah, which
was proclaimed as such on 27 July.
The transfer of boys from Pentridge
had begun a month or so earlier25.

Sheila Bignell,
Vice President,
Melbourne Family Care
Organization

References:

1. MS. Minutes of the St. James’
Visiting Society in the
possession of the Melbourne
Family Care Organization; Port
Phillip Herald, 10 April, 1846;
1st Annual Report of St. James’
Visiting Society.
For all those who deal with baby battering. This comprehensive book critically reviews the extensive literature and traces in detail society’s attempts to manage the problem. Based on a research study conducted by the author and his research team of the psychiatric, psychological and social aspects of baby battering, it provides greater depth in its special study than has previously been described. The author’s recommendations are the result of a fresh and pragmatic approach to the problem based in his special experience of its scope, its socio-economic and radical implications. Guidelines are presented for the prevention of ill-treatment, the after-care of the child and the treatment of offenders.

Contents:

2. P.P.H., 20 August-12 October 1844 passim; P.P.H., 21 November 1848: Donations and Subscriptions to the St. J.V.S. for its first year, viz. April 1845-April 1846. Australian Dictionary of Biography Vol. 1, p521, James Grant, Adam Compton Thomson where the formation of the Society in 1844 is recorded but not its demise.

3. St. J.V.S. Minutes, 16 June 1845; P.P.H., 26 June 1845; Port Phillip Patriot, 27 June 1845.

4. 7th Annual Report of St. James’ Dorcas Society, July 1852. (This report may be the source of the dating error as it carries the printed date 1850. Internal evidence clearly supports the inked correction, 1852); St. J.V.S. Minutes July-December 1850 passim; Melbourne Orphan Asylum Register of Inmates.


6. 7th Annual Report of St. J.D.S. op.cit; Reports of Melbourne Orphan Asylum for year ending July 1854, for the last 6 months of 1854 and for the year ending December 1855.

7. M.O.A. 5th Annual Report for 1856; Church of England Record 1856 p79.


14. Denominational Schools Board Correspondence, 55/750 & 55/893, 23 August and 1 October 1855; Argus, 25 October 1855.

15. B.N.E. Correspondence, 57/1718 & 57/2022, 31 July and 17 September 1857.

16. B.N.E. 57/1718 op.cit; Chief Secretary’s Office Correspondence 57/4476, 24 June 1857 — 60/3439, April 1860, passim.


19. Chief Secretary’s Office Correspondence, 60/2566-60/3467, 19 March & 18 April 1860; Argus, 25 Feb 1860; Geelong Advertiser, 9 June 1860.

20. Ibid.


22. I.A.S. Minutes 1861-64 passim; Annual Reports 1860-64; B.N.E. 60/1975-63/7744, 16 November 1860-23 Sept. 1863 passim.


24. V.H.M. Vol. XLVI, No.1, p9; see also V.P.P. 1872 Vol.3 op.cit.

25. C.S.O. 64/2784, 64/5536, 64/8083, Reports of Visiting Justice to Penal Establishments for February, June and July 1864; Statistics of the Colony of Victoria 1864, p.251.