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The Dunwich Cemetery on North Stradbroke Island, off Brisbane, is mostly open grass fields, but beneath the surface lies at least 8,000 former inmates of a 19th century asylum for the destitute. Descendants of asylum inmates and local authorities are now trying to find out more about these fields of lost graves.

ALI MOORE, PRESENTER: In Queensland, efforts are underway to unlock the secrets of one of the state's oldest cemeteries. The Dunwich Cemetery on North Stradbroke Island is mostly open grass fields on the shores of Moreton Bay. But beneath the surface lies the remains of at least 8,000 former inmates of a 19th Century asylum for the destitute. The descendants of asylum inmates and local authorities are now trying to find out more about the fields of lost graves. Peter McCutcheon reports.

Whom nobody owns : the Dunwich Benevolent Asylum, an institutional biography 1866 - 1946

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Formatted abstract

The Dunwich benevolent asylum constituted a significant slice of Queensland's social background for eighty years from 1866 to 1946, yet it has been subject to little investigation and almost nothing is known of its function or history. This dissertation aims to fill the gap by using a research model and interdisciplinary approach for what may be termed an institutional biography.

By these means it can be seen that the benevolent asylum was isolated, but that the physical isolation was only a symptom of social abandonment. In housing the unwanted members of society who were embarrassments and liabilities, Dunwich served a social system driven by motives of economic progress. The asylum's function was not to help the weak and crippled but to hide them, the outcasts "whom nobody owned".

Unwanted by both the Brisbane hospital and the colonial government, the institution was sent to Dunwich because of the availability of vacant buildings. For the next eighty years, without regard for the inmates or the staff who worked there, almost every type of person who was unable to fit in with society was admitted. The blind, crippled, mentally deficient, terminally ill, cancerous, tuberculosis and leprosy patients, inebriates and others were shipped indiscriminately to the island. Most were old. All but a handful accepted their fate uncomplainingly, not because they were happy but because they became "institutionally dependent".

Debates on the purpose and effectiveness of the benevolent asylum appeared in the newspapers and parliament, but avoided the point that the benevolent asylum was a dumping ground for unwanted burdens on society. Even the reasons for closing were caught up in politics and societal prejudices rather than the question of what was best for the inmates.

The situation was almost as bad for the staff. The superintendents were given too many responsibilities with too little support to carry them out. They were even expected to be the government presence on Stradbroke Island without the authority to do so. This led the benevolent asylum into an unwinnable conflict with other users of the island. Other staff lived in sub-standard accommodation, suffered poor employment conditions and experienced limited contact with the outside world. It is little wonder that they developed a strong benevolent asylum culture.

Further to purely documentary and historical sources, the dissertation uses interdisciplinary methods to provide insights into Dunwich's operation.

The actions, beliefs and values of the institution's staff and the public service are interpreted in the light of Charles Handy's organic model of "organisational culture" to study component groups within an organisation.

Erving Goffman's work on "total institutions" is used to understand the position of the inmate. This is supported by the theories of Pauline Morris on the commonweal organisation and research by several psychologists on institutionalisation. The benevolent asylum fitted the pattern they described, of an institution set up for the benefit of the public rather than its residents, who were conditioned to obedience.

Statistics are used where appropriate, principally to make sense of the large amount of data on the thousands of inmates who were at the benevolent asylum.

Mark Billinge has argued that a community can be understood by studying its component institutions. Application of the basic elements of his theory shows that the undesirable aspects at Dunwich were a reflection of societal beliefs rather than an individual aberration.

As an institutional biography, the dissertation shows the development of the benevolent asylum, examining the forces which formed it and the interactions within the institution and with its environment. The historical and interdisciplinary sources are represented by a structural research model comprising three elements the sponsoring body (government), the institution (benevolent asylum) and the clients (inmates). The influences on the elements are grouped under two headings: environmental (social, political, economic and local) and cultural (the organisational cultures of the public service and benevolent asylum).

It is through tracing these interrelationships that the conclusion is reached: nobody was willing to take responsibility for the benevolent asylum, which was left to manage as best it could in physical and social exile.

[Dunwich Benevolent Asylum -- History.](#)

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THE DUNWICH CASE - 1906

The Dunwich case, as it was reported over many days in the Brisbane Courier, involved an action by Dr James Stockwell, the Medical Superintendent of the Dunwich Benevolent Asylum, against WH Ryder, as the nominal defendant for the Government, for wrongful dismissal. The hearing was initiated 17 August 1906, and was continued over several days in August 22,23,24,25 and on August 28th the Chief Justice declared

His Honour said, in the first place, there would be some questions on the disputed matters which raised the question of law as to whether the inquiry was a proper one. Then he proposed to tell the jury that in his opinion, for the purposes of this trial, the inquiry was not a proper inquiry, and therefore the plaintiff was improperly dismissed. Upon that he would point out the right guide for them in assessing damages that would be the difference between the emoluments which he derived from the position from which he was dismissed and what he was earning, or ordinarily could earn now.

On Wednesday 29th August 1906, The Chief Justice gave judgment for the plaintiff for £2212 10s, and costs

But on Sept 12th 1906, the Government appealed to the Full Court and on Sept 14th 1906, the decision was reversed

The reason why this case is so interesting is that during the hearing of evidence, it was revealed that Ellen Jackson was mistakenly declared dead on 6th Oct 1905 and a death certificate was issued. In fact, it was later revealed that the deceased was in fact Margaret Jackson. A letter was sent to Ellen Jackson's Family (possibly John Morgan who was the only surviving son) to state that she was alive. Then in August 1906, when she did die, a further death certificate was issued. To this day, both death certificates remain

THE DUNWICH CASE – The Brisbane Courier Friday 17 August 1906

THE STOCKWELL CASE - ACTION AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT. HEARING FIXED FOR MONDAY.

The action instituted by Dr James Stockwell formerly Medical Superintendent of Dunwich, against W H Ryder, as nominal defendant for the Government, came before His Honour the Chief Justice (Sir Pope A Cooper) in the Supreme Court yesterday. The statement of claim set out that the plaintiff on May 4. 1901 was appointed to the position of Medical Superintendent of the Dunwich Benevolent Asylum, medical officer for the care inspection, and supervision of the lepers detained in the lazaret on Stradbroke Island and superintendent of the Institution for Inebriates, at a salary of £500. On April 9 1906 he alleged that the Deputy Governor acting for and on behalf of his Excellency the Governor, and with the advice of the Executive

Council, wrongfully and Illegally approved of his (the plaintiffs) enforced resignation as from February 15 last. He had not resigned, but had been wrongfully and illegally prevented from performing and discharging his duties although he was ready and willing so to do. He therefore claimed £125 as arrears of salary to April 30, and £10,000 damages. The statement of defence set out that the resignation of the plaintiff was enforced after inquiry by a board appointed in accordance with the provisions of the Public Service Acts 1890 to 1901, and in pursuance of the recommendations of the board. By reason of this the defendant alleged that the plaintiff ceased to be an officer of the Public Service, and he (defendant) did not admit his pecuniary claims: but, with respect to the arrears of salary

brought into court £97 4s 5d as sufficient

to satisfy any claim that he might have. In reply, the plaintiff accepted the sum of £97 is. 5d. in satisfaction of his claim for arrears of salary, but with respect to the charges made against him he said he was not charged in the manner prescribed by the Public Service Acts, and particularly that he was not, prior to the inquiry, nor at any time, notified or informed of any specific act or acts of either neglect of duty or of maladministration, and was not at any time notified or informed of any specific matter or matters with which he was to be charged. He also said that the inquiry was not a full, fair, or proper inquiry, and was not held in accordance with, nor in the manner provided by, the Public Service Acts, in that in particular the alleged charge or charges were not specified; that he (the plaintiff) was not fully heard and was improperly prevented from being heard; that the place was improperly and wrongfully restricted to Dunwich; that he was improperly and wrongfully prevented from defending himself and from fully and properly instructing his legal representatives; and that witnesses who were summoned for the purpose of the inquiry and who neglected or refused to attend and give evidence were not compelled to do so.

Mr. Stumm, with him Messrs. Wassell and Hobbs (instructed by Messrs Foxton and Hobbs), appeared for the plaintiff; and Mr. Feez, with him Mr. McLeod (instructed by the Crown Solicitor, Mr. G. V. Hellicar), for the defendant.

Mr. Feez said it would be a convenience to both sides if the trial could be allowed to stand over until Monday. Owing to the amount of matter they had had to go through, it had really been hard to get quite ready.

Mr. Stumm said it would be a matter of convenience to the plaintiff if the case were adjourned.

The Chief Justice said he was always willing, of course, to consult the convenience of counsel, but how long was the case likely to last?

Mr. Feez said that was a difficult question to answer, but the Crown had no desire to protract the case.

The Chief Justice pointed out that the Full Court sat on September 4, and it would be exceedingly inconvenient to have the case interrupted.

Mr. Feez said he did not think the case would last as long as that. .

Mr. Stumm said if the view he had of the case was correct the case would not be a very protracted one, but if it should be necessary to go into evidence at large as to what took place at Dunwich, it would take some time, and the loss of two days would not make any difference.

His Honour said that perhaps the best thing would be to strike a jury and then adjourn the case until Monday.

The following jurors were then impanelled :- Messrs. E. A. Macpherson, Alex Clark, W. R. Southwick, and A. McKenzie. The hearing was accordingly adjourned

until 10 o'clock on Monday.

The Brisbane Courier 24th August 1906

THE DUNWICH CASE ACTION AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT.

EVIDENCE FOR PLAINTIFF

The trial of the action brought by Dr. Jas. Stockwell, formerly medical Superintendent at the Dunwich Benevolent Asylum, against W. H. Ryder, as nominal defendant for the Government, was continued in the Supreme Court yesterday, before his Honour the Chief Justice (Sir Pope A. Cooper) and a jury of four.

Mr. Stumm, with him Mr. Wassell and Mr. Hobbs (instructed by Messrs. Foxton and Hobbs), for the plaintiff; Mr. Feez, with him Mr. McLeod (instructed by the Crown Solicitor, Mr. G. V. Hellicar), for the defendant.

The Foreman of the Jury applied for increased fees, on the ground that this was the fourth day of the hearing.

"His Honour pointed out that the case was adjourned on Monday, so on that day the jurors were able to attend to their own business. That could hardly be called a day.

The jury did not press the application.

Dr. Stockwell, under further cross-examination by Mr. Feez, said that his duties included the supervision of the lazaret, where there were from thirteen to fifteen inmates. He visited there regularly once a week and sometimes oftener. The man in charge, Lister, complained to him of the conduct of some of the inmates and he endeavoured to remedy it. He did not tell the assistant to take no notice of it. He drew the attention of the Government to the state of the lazaret, and endeavoured to have what was wrong remedied. Frequent complaints of misconduct and insolence to the officer in charge were made to him, and he reported the matter to the department. He represented to the Government that conduct went on which he could not prevent unless they (the Government) did something to assist him. He certainly never instructed Lister to be blind to a great many things that some of the inmates did. If Lister had entered that in his diary it was an invention, for he would never have said such a thing. The annual deaths at the institutions ranged from 150 to 170. Not many of them occurred suddenly. He never made any post-mortem examination in cases of that sort, because the patients were under his care before, and it was not usual to make a post-mortem under those circumstances. As a matter of fact he made no post-mortem examination all the time he was there. If complaints were made to him by inmates about the food they got, he redressed their grievances. A lot of tobacco was issued to the inmates. It was the custom before he was appointed to give tobacco to all the males, whether they smoked or not, and he continued the practice until he discovered that tobacco was being sold. He then stopped the issue to non smokers, and substituted for it something extra in the way of rations. Tobacco was given to inmates in hospital as well, and he always looked upon it as a sign that they were getting better when they began to smoke. A mistake was made in certifying to the

death of a woman. The matron notified him that Ellen Jackson had died, and he took it for granted that that was so, and gave the death certificate. It had since been discovered that Ellen Jackson was

still alive. The whole matter was a clerical error, and it was brought up now as a piece of spleen to bring further trouble upon his hand. The woman who died was Margaret Jackson and if witness had known that a mistake had been made he would have written to the Registrar

General correcting the death certificate. Mistakes of that kind happened before at Dunwich. It was customary to inform the relatives on the death of an inmate and a letter was written to Ellen Jackson's relatives notifying them that she had died. Though errors had been made in names before he did not think it had ever happened before that a similar mistake was made with relatives. A good deal of morphia was used at the asylum. It was administered to the inmates who had to take it by the warden McDonough. There was nothing to prevent patients getting morphia sent to them by post. He did not believe there was any truth in what had been said about the condition of an old Chinaman who died at the institution. If the man had bed sores on which there were maggots witness would have been unaware of the fact. Warder Heicke did not tell him that the Chinaman was in this condition. Heicke was the man witness dismissed for unkindness to a patient. The Chinaman could not have been in the shocking state described or he would have heard of it. After Mrs McKenny re-

signed Mrs Cardew was appointed Matron

Mrs Cardew reported that matters were rather disorganised in the female wards

and that parts were dirty. He had a high opinion of Mrs Cardew. If there were necessary things that were not there she had only to apply for them. He considered it was the duty of the matron to draw his attention to any matters which required to be looked into. It was not for him personally to inspect the women's beds to see whether they were clean. He was present at the second inquiry and was represented by counsel. Mr Morris, who conducted it, was on the whole scrupulously fair, and witness had on opportunity of meeting all the matters that were brought up.

By the Chief Justice; Several hundreds fowls were bred at Dunwich. Occasionally patients required chicken broth. Dozens and dozens of times he had sent it to them from his own house. If there were chickens to spare it was an understood thing that they were to be made into soup for the patients in the hospitals. There were five wardsmen employed by the Government in connection with the assylum, and one inmate warder in each yard. Paid inmates also were used to do work under the superintendence of the warders, but there was great difficulty in inducing them to keep at the work because they stopped as soon as they got a little money and other inmates had then to be trained.

Re-examined by Mr Stumm: He did not know what he had to meet at the second inquiry until the witnesses gave their evidence. He recommended to the Government that trained nurses and an assistant matron should be employed and that up-to-date equipments should be provided for the hospital wards, but his suggestions were not carried out. These and other recommendations were made in annual reports.

Mr Stumm tendered a copy of the re-

port of the medical superintendent as presented to Parliament.

Mr. Feez objected to the admission of the document on the ground that it was irrelevant.

Mr. Stumm pressed for the admission on the ground that the printed report differed from the written document, showing that the complete report was not laid before Parliament, but portions were deleted or altered.

His Honour admitted the report.

Witness, in reply to other questions, said the department did not follow his recommendations with regard to an extra tank. No effort was made to relieve the institution of undesirable cases. He particularly recommended that young and middle-aged persons should not be sent to Dunwich, but that part of his report was omitted from the report presented to Parliament. His representations with regard to the disgraceful state of the bathing accommodation and his suggestion that new wards should, be built were ignored. His statement in his report for 1903 that it was miraculous how the work was carried on under the existing conditions was cut out, and his reference to the buildings as disgraceful was altered to discreditable. In 1904 he attended on 8829 patients at the institution. Year after year he recommended that female trained nurses should be employed, and pointed out that the work in the hospital could not be satisfactorily carried on without them, but nothing was done. In his statement, "attention is drawn to the disgraceful condition of the buildings and offices of the administrative department," the word disgraceful was omitted from the Parliamentary report. He had not heard of any report to the head of his department adverse to himself.

Mr. Stumm read a report by the visiting justice commending the management and condition of things at Dunwich at the time of his inspection.

Witness, continuing, said the visiting justices, clergymen. Government officials, the Board of Health, auditors, visitors from abroad, and Ministers came down to Dunwich from time to time. Most of those he had to entertain at his house. The Commonwealth Old-age Pension Commission visited the institution last year, and both Mr. Chapman and Mr. King O'Malley expressed opinions with regard to it.

Mr. Feez objected to the witness stating what those opinions were. He knew what they were, and they were sought to be twisted.

Mr. Stumm : Do you press the objection?

Mr. Feez : Yes.

Mr. Stumm : Of course, then, I cannot get them in.

Witness, continuing, said that when he walked through the wards it took him from 1.30-until nearly 6 o'clock. He began work at 6.30 in the morning, when he went to the office to see if there were any messages, any letters to answer, or any sick to visit. That done, he started in his buggy to visit the hospital wards (particularly the new cases that had arisen), the lazaret, or some other part of the institution. The lazaret was about a mile from his house. He usually got back for breakfast about 9 o'clock. After that he went to the office to see outside patients, hear complaints, prescribe for the sick, attend to his official correspondence, and correspondence with patients' friends, and receive reports from the warders as to the state of the patients. Then he went to the mess-room and the kitchen, and that brought him to 1 o'clock. He had lunch, and at 3 o'clock visited hospital wards, or the stores, and discussed matters with the assistant superintendent. After dinner he frequently went round the hospital wards. That was a fair account of his day's work. Of course he attended to serious cases at any time, day or night. He never heard it said that he was unkind or neglectful.

Mr. Feez : There is no suggestion that he was ever intentionally unkind or neglectful.

Witness, continuing, said : He represented to the Government that the clerical work encroached upon his medical duties, but he was not allowed additional assistance. He received reports by telephone from the lazaret, from the matron in charge of the female wards, and from Peel Island every morning. The auditors who examined the books would necessarily see what rations he received. He asked one of them whether he was entitled to eggs, and the reply was, "Certainly, why should not you be ?" He was not censured after the inquiry into Mary Kelly's death. Either Mr. Ryder or

Mr. Macdonald, P.M., who held the inquiry, told him there was nothing in it. On August, 12, 1901, an inmate who had been suffering from delirium tremens confessed that liquor was manufactured on the island, and that was how he got it ; and witness, reported the incident by wire, re- commending that a detective should be sent down to investigate the matter. On 21st of that month he wrote suggesting that in order to check ithe illicit supplv of liquor to Dunwich inmates a police- man should he sent down with each steamer to search passengers' luggage and to see that no liquor was smuggled ashore. As a result of that a constable was sent down. It was impossible for any man to carry out the regulations strictly ; that was with the present staff.

The Chief Justice : It always has been impossible ? -Yes it was while I was there.

By Mr. Stumm : He tried to get rid of the bugs in the wards first by fumigating with sulphur, then with carbolic acid and sulphur, and finally with corrosive subli- mate, which was the best thing that he tried. He was not acquainted with the details of the meat contract.

By Mr. Feez : Liquor was given out twice a day to the patients for whom it was ordered - an ounce in the morning and two ounces in the evening. His recom- mendation that a detective should ho sent down to investigate liquor getting ito Dun- wich was given effect to. The detective carne dawn and reported that he could not find where the liquor came from, but there was no check on visitors. There was a regulation that no parcels should be delivered to the inmates direct, but should he handed to the superintendent and examined before delivery to the in- mates. It was impossible to carry that out, because sometimes between 200 and 300 people came down, and the one man who was available for the work could not

search all their parcels and baskets. . He asked the auditor whether he was entitled to eggs because Mr. Hill, the assistant superintendent, raised the question whether he was.

Mr. Feez : Was the auditor the person to ask if you could have eggs - was he a person in authority ?

The Chief Justice : I should think he ought to have asked the Governor-in Council ! (Laughter.)

Mr. Feez : I do not suggest he should have asked the Govenor-in-Couneil, but I should think he ought to have asked the head of his department.

Witness, in answer to other questions, said that Mrs. McKenny's and Powell's conduct was brought up in the House.

At this stage the court rose until 10 o'clock the following morning.

The Dunwich Case - The Brisbane Courier 28 Aug 1906

His Honour said, in the first place, there would be some questions on the disputed matters which raised the question of law as to whether the inquiry was a proper one. Then he proposed to tell the jury that in his opinion, for the purposes of this trial, the inquiry was not a proper in- quiry, and therefore the plaintiff was im- properly dismissed. Upon that he would point out the right guide for them in assessing damages that would be the difference between the emoluments which he derived from the position from which he was dismissed and what he was earning, or ordinarily could earn now.

Mr. Feez then addressed the jury, and he had not concluded his remarks when the court adjourned until 10 o'clock this morning.