



Stitched Up

In memory of the girls of The Newcastle Industrial School
1867 to 1871

(Image by Jane Theau; words by Anne Casey)

Historical background

Between 1867 and 1871, Newcastle Industrial School for Girls in New South Wales housed 193 girls aged between two and a half and eighteen years. This was a time when masses of immigrants were fleeing dire circumstances overseas (war, famine and poverty) to join the emerging colony in Australia.

The girls of Newcastle School came from backgrounds of poverty, cruelty and discrimination endemic in immigrant and marginalised communities during this, Australia's 'Gold Rush' era. Their stories are breathtakingly brutal.

Hard times led to desperate measures and there were plenty to prey on the innocent and unprotected. The girls were sentenced to a stay at Newcastle Industrial School after being arrested for vagrancy, prostitution and petty crime.

Ostensibly, their internment in Newcastle was intended to remove them from situations of immediate danger and to teach them basic literacy and sewing skills. In reality, the girls' internment locked them into a cycle of repeated incarceration and ill-treatment from which most were unable to break free.

The girls were given a minimum of 12 months in Newcastle, with most enduring periods of involuntary 'apprenticeships' as domestic help for lengthy periods afterwards. During their time at Newcastle, the girls became notorious in the locality for a series of daring escapes which led to repeated incarcerations in the Newcastle Gaol. Some went on to gain national infamy.

Those who survived changed their names over and over in an effort to overcome the stigma of their pasts.

The 'Stitched Up' project

'Stitched Up' is a collaboration between Newcastle Lock Up (old Newcastle Gaol) and Timeless Textiles Gallery. It is an art exhibition marking 150 years since the opening of Newcastle Industrial School.

The brainchild of Australian fibre artists, Anne Kemptom and Wilma Simmons, the project has been two years in the making. Drawing on research by local historian, Jane Ison; anthropologist, David Eastburn; and Bernadette Sheehan, Wilma and Anne have pulled together an art exhibition featuring 25 renowned international and national textile artists.

Australian artist, Jane Theau, whose work features in the exhibition, invited Irish-Australian poet, Anne Casey to write a voiceover. Jane and Anne have collaborated closely. Jane has created a series of thread artworks which will be backlit to form shadow figures representing the sinister and spectral lives of the girls. Anne has written 20 creative pieces which feature as a voiceover and visual poetry in the exhibition.

Artists from Canada, Hungary, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Denmark and nationally across Australia have contributed to this project. The exhibition runs from 23 June to 6 August in Newcastle with plans to exhibit in Ireland next year.

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Running stitches

A stitch in time saves nine
But what if you're the tenth?
Tenth in line
Ten in a line
Ten hungry mouths
And you're the last

The smallest lowest slowest
A stitch in time
For the rest
And you're the dirty
patched and hungry
Last in line

From a line
Stitched up
Slapped in irons
Stowed in a hold
Lashed with brine
'Lucky' to land alive

You and the saved nine
First of your kind
Born Strine
Dragged up
Snagged up
Smacked up
Slapped up

Ten in a line
Sewing straight lines
Seams in straight lace
Not for *this* place
Coarse serge
And rough serves
For *these* girls

Never mind
Never knew no better
A stitch in time
Saved nine
Tenth in line
Tow the line
Stitch and survive

A Rose by any other name

Ada, Alice Jane, Alice Mary, Alicia, Amelia, Ann, Ann Elizabeth, Anna Maria, Annie, Bridget, Caroline, Caroline Mary, Catherine, Charlotte, Eliza, Elizabeth, Elizabeth Ann, Elizabeth Esther, Elizabeth Jane, Elizabeth Mary, Ellen, Emily, Emily Alice, Emma, Esther, Esther Maria, Eva, Fanny Caroline, Fanny Jane, Frances Marion, Grace, Hannah, Harriett, Henrietta, Honora, Isabella, Jane, Jane Amelia, Jane Elizabeth, Jemima, Johanna Eleanor, Julia, Kate, Lima, Louisa, Lucy, Margaret, Margaret Jane, Margaret Janet, Margaret Louisa, Maria Jane, Martha, Martha Mary, Mary, Mary Ann, Mary Jane, Mary Maria, Pasculine, Phoebe, Rachael, Rebecca, Rosabel, Rose, Sarah, Sarah Ann, Sarah Jane, Sarah Maria, Sophia, Susan, Susannah, Theresa, Winifred

– *Mary... Mary?*

– ***Mary!***

– ***Mary!!***

Beggin' yer pardin Ma'am, that's not my name

– *I thought you were all called Mary*

Beggin' yer pardin Ma'am, no. My name is Eliza

– *Well, Mary, next time I call out 'Mary', you just come running, mark me?*

Yes Ma'am

Night whisperers

Mary?

Yes Eliza.

Tell it to me again... What did 'e promise yer?

He said he'll come one moonlit night and carry me away in his omnibus Eliza.

And d'yer think 'e'll do it... E's not spinnin' yer no yarns Mary..? Will 'e really come for yer Mary?

Oh yes, Eliza, he'll do it alright!

Oh Mary, yer know 'e's only after one thing from yer

Well, Eliza, better him that gives first, than him that just *takes* what he wants

And *takes* Mary **shivering**

And *takes* Eliza

'Tis cold in 'ere Mary. Them girls smashin' windows. Runnin' wild. Now we all have to suffer. Bitter wind for window dressin's we 'ave. What possessed them for goodness sakes?

Not *goodness* Eliza. *Badness*. Bad men put the devil inside them. That's him trying to break out.

Shivers Mary. **shivering**

Cuddle up close to me Eliza. I'll look after you. I'll *always* look after you.

I loves yer Mary.

I love you too Eliza.

Mary, Mary life's contrary

Where did your young years go?

In tangled threads

And patched up shreds

Narrow beds all in a row

Dear Eliza

There's a hole in my belly
Dear Henry, dear Henry
There's a hole in my belly
Dear Henry, a hole

So fill it, dear Eliza
Dear Eliza, dear Eliza
So fill it, dear Eliza
Dear Eliza, fill it!

With what shall I fill it
Dear Henry, dear Henry
With a cake, dear Eliza
Dear Eliza, a cake

But where shall I get it
Dear Henry, dear Henry
At the bakers, dear Eliza
Dear Eliza, the bakers

With what shall I pay him
Dear Henry, dear Henry
With a penny, dear Eliza
Dear Eliza, a penny

But where shall I get one
Dear Henry, dear Henry
From a rich gent, dear Eliza
Dear Eliza, a gent

There's a babe in my belly
Dear Henry, dear Henry
Well what were you thinking, dear Eliza
Dear Eliza, just what?

There's a hole in my belly
Dear Henry, dear Henry
There's a hole in my belly, dear Henry
That's what...

Mary, Mary once was prayerly
How did things get so low?
These scraps of lives
Hemmed and stitched with lies
Holed up and bound to sew

Three little kittens

Mother dear Mother
Why don't you come?
Your three girls are waiting
Two years is too long

Sarah is eight now
Eliza near twelve
They tell me I'm foolish
To hope for your help

Oh mother dear mother
They called you *depraved*
They said you misused us
Be grateful we're saved

Then why do they call us
The *sweepings of streets*
Cast-offs of convicts
With *loathsome disease*?

Pinch us and beat us
And lock us in cells
Starve us on crumbs
While stuffing themselves?

But Mother dear Mother
Our wounds have all healed
We're ready and waiting
We'll do what you need

Just take us, sweet Mother
Come bring us away
Else we'll be held here
Forever... and a day

Running scared

I was running, running, running from the day I was born
Running with thieves
Running into trouble
Running out of time
Running from my father
Running from rough fists
Running from coppers' grips
Until my luck ran out

And I was running from a clip
Or a cut of Matron's tongue
Running from girls rounding up for a riot
Running from trouble
Running away with trouble
As trouble ran away with me
Till I was running after three young ones
And then there were two

And I was running away from my lovely Mary Ann's
Sweet dead face
Running, running, running with two little ones
Out of the hold of swollen knuckles
Into the arms of another
And we were running, running, running
On the steamship *Gambier*
Sailing into Hobson's Bay

Soon we'd be far enough away
From all the running
Till the collier *Easby* was coming
It was ramming and we were screaming
Now *everyone* was running
As the funnel was coming
Down, down cleaving the deck
And the water was running

Still it's running
But we're still...
Little Arthur and Harold and me
We are drifting away...
To sleep
Lulling with the currents
No more running for us three
No more running at last...

We are free

Two frightened mice

The wind was high and wild that night
A drunken sailor wailing
A mother held her starving child
Herself was slowly failing
In sodden sod of Donegal
Their bodies soon were laid in
When Jim was glommed, their hope set sail
In the prison ship that held him

The wind was high, the night was wild
And Jim was sunk and ailing
His wife had died, their son beside
The birthing bed they failed in
At Ellalong this winter dark
His mind was surely fading
A savage heart was born that night
Between the pulses waning

The wind had fled, the night was still
When Jim came drunk and railing
Young Annie took against her will
Half strangled, and aquailing
Yet darker, darker fell the night
The moon was slowly paling
As little Maggie, barely ten
Was taken rough and flailing

And sorry, sad and shook the heads
And shocked the justice hearing
These wee girls taken from their beds
And shattered, shaken, teary
Marched together through the courts
Paraded with their story
Then locked up for their sorry part
A fate so twisted cruelly

The wind is light, the evening mild
And Annie's resting easy
A picture of her darling son
Held to her heart so dearly
His mother's strength ran through his veins
He fought for God and victory
A hero born from tragedy
Rewrote their place in history

The summer rain is warm and soft
And glistening on the daisies
As Maggie holds her husband's hand

Their memories are hazy
Whiling with her children here
Where birds are arcing lazily
Maggie's found her peace at last
Laid to rest in Waverley

Mary, Mary cooped in an eyrie
Hear the magistrates crow
Who'll lead the scarper?
Show who's sharper
Hear those whistles blow!

Lullaby to Sarah Jane

Rock-a-bye baby
Born in a slum
Mother a convict
Father had run
With no-one to watch
Her story was spun
In between bars
From far too young

Locked up by law
She pilfered a knife
Crossing her heart
She'd take Matron's life
Raging and riled
Wildly she cried
*I'm out for blood –
I'll slice her tonight!*

Alas Sarah-Jane
Went down with a fight
Yet wouldn't be conquered
And fled in the night
Taken again
She kicked and she spat
Ever the rebel
Till broken at last...

Rock-a-by baby
Born in a gaol
When the wind blew
Her baby did ail
When the sun broke
Her baby had died
And Sarah Jane's heart
Lay shattered beside

Rock-a-bye, baby

Sleeping in peace
Far from the plight
At her young mother's feet
No one to watch or
Hold her a spell
Sarah Jane's rocking
Alone in her cell

Ah Mary, Mary things went quarely
Born with a yoke to tow
All chances shot
To slip the knot
Your narrow neck swinging low

Any old iron

Four foot nothing
With an ironwood stare
The ninth of ten
She had fight to spare

Living in tatters
Down by the Bark Huts
With charcoal workers
Near the Great Southern Road

She was Black Sal's sister
That notorious lass
Brought up for killing
Two of her lads

Her mother read palms
But failed to give warning
Of Jane's sorry fate
Writ plain as morning

While still a child
Small, ragged and thin
A man from the steamers
Had her living in sin

Swept from the streets
She was packed off to 'school'
But swore black and blue
That she wouldn't be ruled

Joe-the-Tinker, her Pa
Fought hard and fought mean
Till Jane was released
At barely sixteen

In Liberty Plains

Young Jane made her bed
With a Singapore sailor
To whom she was wed

Beneath a bark roof
She bore him three boys
The mud-walls were wailing
When her youngest one died

But her husband jumped ship
And in deep Waterloo
Jane plied the night trade
To feed her small brood

Tribulations and trials
Saw her clapped up in gaol
While her two cherished children
Were taken away

Though she railed at their jailing
Jane strained in vain
For her Joseph and Davey
She would ne'er see again

Testing her mettle to
Rise from the worst
She found herself bound
By her poor tinker's curse

In Maclean she had forged
Some scrap of a life
With a humble *kanaka*
Serving him and his wife

But her history's shadow
Soon darkened their door
When a fellow was poisoned
Jane was branded once more

Though time would have told
That she wasn't at fault
It was leprosy took him
The culprit not caught

Jane never could cast
The tarnish she'd worn
That condemned her to death
From the day she was born

Mother of Mary

Ding, dong, dell
The baby's in the well
Who threw her in?
Her grandma, Mary Williams
Who'll pull her out?
The coppers running round

What possessed this mother mild
To go and drown her daughter's child?
A tiny mite but newly born
Amidst the hay
In Grandad's barn

Ragged remnants

Scraps of things
With scraps of lives
Scraping a living
Living on scraps

Scraps of things
Scrapping together
Scrimping and scraping
Scraps to survive

A father's voyage

Across the world
In eighty-eight days
A transportee
A white-man slave

Into the crosswinds
Howled and wailed
This Roscrea son
His sorry tale

By tattered sail
Through gust and gale
Shoulder to shoulder
Chained to a rail

Pitch and trough
Sick and pale
Crest and fall
Lick of the flail

The chart of his voyage
A map he wore
Crisscrossed on his back
Forevermore

A letter from the Colonies

*c/o Joseph Booth
Randwick Road
Sydney*

18th March 1876

My dearest cousin Maggie,

I hope this finds you and your young family in good stead. It is a long while since I wrote. I fear that I have no good news for you from here.

I have no word of Father these past three years. He did his best after Mam died, but seven of us too young was too much for any man. The streets of Sydney reared us – until I ended up in that hellhole in Newcastle. I have never told you, but Matron used to threaten to send all manner of men in to sleep with us at night. And they wonder why we revolted? I would rather be torn limb from limb than ever go back there!

I know I am opening up old wounds, Maggie. You are my only link now with the family I have lost. Though we have never met, I still have your mother's letter to my Mam before she left Shanagolden. It's but a ragged scrap now. How many times I have dreamed of going back one day to see the green fields and the little cottage by the stream. I don't remember that day my mother carried me away in her arms so full of hope.

We are scattered to the four winds now dear Maggie, my brothers and sisters and me. Gone like the last leaves of autumn – Michael, Thomas, Cornelius, John, Mary and Johanna. Though I know their names, their faces are waning.

Hobson's choice my parents had – to leave the starving fields of Ireland and weigh anchor into the unknown. It was a black omen when Mam fell ill on the passage here. To be born Irish in these times is to be cast between the devil and the deep blue sea. In my 24 years on this earth, I have seen my fill. But a girl once said to me that people get used to anything from constant suffering and misery.

I would love to have met you Maggie, but I think it will not now come to pass. I have the galloping consumption these past few months. My greatest sadness has been that I have no memory of my mother. But Maggie, I think I will see her soon.

My love to you and all our family in County Limerick. May God keep you always.

Your loving cousin,

Eliza O'Brien

Tread softly

I remember it was cold
Cold as the hearts of men
I couldn't name
And the hurting, hurting
And the wracking, hacking, wrecking later
That never left

A bag of bones, she said
Matron, Mrs Clarke
Leave her away, she said
Cold as she was
They thought I couldn't hear
But what did I care?

A frightful state of disease, he said
The judge, he said
Young as this child is, he said
If only he knew, I thought
As he packed me off
For her own good, they said

Cold as they were
Cold as it was
Always living in fear
Cold as I am
Cold as this Christ Church clod
I'm better off here

What's in a name?

This poem was first published by The Irish Times in May 2017.

Another hand-me-down bestowed
Already tattered and torn
This title to which I was born
Already stained with the same
Indelible shadow of shame
As the smoke-blackened room
That swallowed me
Out of the womb

This cast-off of cast-outs
A caste apart
Enshrouded in doubt
This first 'gift' granted
First marker, moniker, brand
Last link to a lost land
First claim, first link in the chain
First tie to a life pre-ordained

What's in a name
That should hallmark me
Anchored to a counter-weighted history
What if... I could file it away
Claw, scratch and scrape
Unknot this monogrammed cape
Cast it back into the street
Would I be at once released

Uncuffed, unbranded, reprieved
Unchristened, unborn preconceived?

Cross-stitched

Intertwining threads
Mirror images repeated over and over
Weaving in and out of each other
Twisted tales of
Cast-off shreds
Crisscrossing
Stitched together
And ripped apart
Slowly unravelling
Into so many missing parts

Disappeared
Like stitches dissolved
From long-forgotten wounds
Their memories marked
By the palest
Of gossamer scars