

Displaying, Not Just Doing: Learning for Citizenship and Belonging in Australian Institutions for Incarcerated Boys, 1920–1939

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, both the Gosford Training School for Boys in New South Wales and the Westbrook Farm Home for Boys in Queensland were well-established institutions. Both were state-run facilities that ostensibly existed to incarcerate, educate and reform boys convicted of criminal offences. Gosford and Westbrook had total responsibility for the boys under their care during their periods of incarceration. They were responsible not just for the formal education of the boys within them, but also for ensuring that those boys learned how to become good citizens and valuable members of their future communities. This article focuses on how institutional and government authorities communicated and displayed techniques of reformatory learning. It examines how this learning was displayed to local communities, arguing that the work of demonstrating that the boys were learning to be good citizens was an important part of institutional governance.

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Since the late 1990s, there has been a transnational push to strengthen our understanding of the complex nature of historical residential “care” for children. While there have been distinctions in methods, scope and purpose, inquiries in nations including, but not limited to, Australia, Ireland, Sweden and Denmark have sought to understand the effects of residential care on its young subjects, including the extent and impact of abuse in these contexts.¹ This movement has been accompanied by a scholarly interest in the nature of historical institutionalisation, which has included studies of the internal workings of specific institutions alongside broader studies of child welfare systems and their impacts.² Less is known about the relationship between residential care institutions for children and the broader local, statewide and national communities of which they were a part. This issue is of particular interest in the case of residential care institutions housing children convicted or suspected of criminal offences. These youth detention institutions had the potential to act as both threat and boon to the communities in which they were situated: on the one hand, they housed young people who had been deemed to be, to some extent, a risk to society. At times they did so in settings that were relatively

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open, and which made escape possible and even likely.³ On the other hand, however, the institutions had the potential to offer benefits to local communities through employment, access to facilities and practical support. Equally importantly, the institutions were expected to reform young offenders rather than merely house or punish them. As such, they could position themselves as low-risk additions to local communities to the extent that their efforts at reformation were successful.

This article seeks to develop our understanding of how the youth detention institutions of the twentieth century sought to demonstrate the efficacy of their reformatory regimes to local and statewide communities. It examines the efforts made by two Australian institutions for young male offenders, the Gosford Training School for Boys, in New South Wales, and the Westbrook Farm Home for Boys, in Queensland, during the 1920s and 1930s. As has been noted elsewhere, “reforming” children was only one part of the complex and interwoven functions with which youth detention institutions have been tasked, which have also included functions related to education, welfare and punishment.⁴ Yet it was in displaying the techniques of “reformation,” and their outcomes, far more than in displaying their other functions, that institutions sought to manage public opinion.

The cases of Gosford and Westbrook provide two Australian examples of institutions faced with the challenge of operating at a distance from their relevant capital cities and in close proximity to potentially vulnerable rural and regional communities. Both were state-operated sites of juvenile detention founded in the early twentieth century as part of a broader transnational movement of children in need of welfare support into rural and more homelike environments.⁵ Both were designed to cater for children convicted of criminal offences, which were usually relatively minor. However, both, in reality, held more complex populations, including those who had been found guilty of no offence but who had been deemed unmanageable in other government institutions. Boys could be incarcerated at Gosford up to the age of 16 until 1923, and from then up to the age of 18.⁶ At Westbrook, boys could be incarcerated up to the age of 17.⁷

Both Gosford and Westbrook sought to train boys to be future agricultural workers, and the institutions were situated on working farms to allow for this training. Despite catering for young offenders, institutions differed from Borstals, which were stricter, focused on older and more recalcitrant children, often hired former soldiers as warders, and focused on more strenuous hard labour and drill.⁸ Gosford and Westbrook both had their origins in the nineteenth-century reformatory and industrial school movement and were intended to house juveniles only. They both incorporated aspects of physical labour and drill, but they also demonstrated a belief in the reformatory power of open space and their systems of privilege were far less strictly defined than in Borstal institutions. While there has been some debate as to whether Gosford, in particular, could be fairly described as a Borstal institution, similar to those in England, the evidence instead suggests that Gosford was viewed as a more reformatory institution, while decision-makers in New South Wales viewed Borstals as distinctly punitive.⁹

While Westbrook and Gosford were similar in purpose and setting, Gosford existed in a more varied youth justice system. Through this period Westbrook was the only institution to which offending boys could be sent in Queensland. In New South Wales, however, other institutions existed during this period, although Gosford remained central to the institutional network. Despite this difference, they were similar sites and received similar criticisms. In later years, both institutions would be the subject of

considerable public distrust and disapproval, centred among members of their local communities, after highly public absconding events.¹⁰ At Gosford, this would stem from overcrowding. At Westbrook, in 1961, the mass escape would be the outcome of significant and ongoing abuse.

Gosford and Westbrook are not representative of all sites of residential child welfare, or even all youth detention institutions. Their location on farming sites, their proximity to rural and regional communities, and the varied needs and criminal or welfare histories of the boys placed under their supervision all contributed to an environment in which reputational management was challenging. They are significant, though, because they offer insight into how twentieth-century residential institutions for children – which were particularly vulnerable to local criticism – engaged with their communities, and the extent to which those forms of engagement were the subject of positive attention. In the remainder of this article, I examine the methods through which these institutions sought to demonstrate their reformatory efforts and to mark those efforts as being effective. I argue that, while educating boys to become good citizens was at the core of their work, they also displayed that education, and its outcomes, in ways that aligned with public understandings of boyhood and citizenship. Through the 1920s and 1930s, both institutions were well-established, and largely accepted, parts of their local environments. As such, this article focuses not on the techniques through which these institutions sought to establish consent for their presence but, rather, those through which they sought to retain it.

Evidence and Approach

The key sources used in this article are newspaper articles referencing the two institutions during the 1920s and 1930s. Articles have been sourced from the National Library of Australia's *Trove*, a digital archive. A total of 2,074 articles published between 1920 and 1939 were examined for this study. Of these, 1,074 were published in New South Wales and referred to the Gosford Farm Home for Boys. The major local regional newspaper, *Gosford Times and Wyong District Advocate*, published 571 of those articles, while another, short-lived, local newspaper, *Man on the Land*, published 43 during its existence between 1936 and 1938. A total of 1,000 articles were published in Queensland newspapers referencing Westbrook, with 377 of those published in the *Toowoomba Chronicle and Darling Downs Gazette*, which existed between 1922 and 1933. Its predecessors, the *Toowoomba Chronicle* and the *Darling Downs Gazette*, published 33 and 32 articles respectively concerning the institution. After 1933, local news sources were not available, with major metropolitan newspapers providing the most coverage of the institution from that time.

The institutions at both Gosford and Westbrook were located in regional communities at a distance from the capital cities of Sydney, in New South Wales, and Brisbane, in Queensland. This distance from the capital cities was intentional and was seen by decision-makers to provide the boys with an opportunity to be trained without succumbing to the influences of their habitual acquaintances, including friends and family.¹¹ However, this created a situation in which institutions holding, at times, several hundred boys were located in smaller communities where their presence could be perceived as a threat. Newspaper records, and particularly articles published in local and regional

newspapers, provide a valuable means of understanding how institutions instead represented themselves as successful reformers and as part of a broader community.

The local newspapers for the regional communities nearest the institutions provide a sense of the types of communication and performance in which they engaged. Local regional newspapers, in Australia as well as elsewhere in the world, have been oriented towards the interests of their communities to a greater extent than major metropolitan newspapers. They have tended to focus on issues of community interest and to promote and advocate for the needs of their communities, even at the expense of journalistic objectivity.¹² While these newspapers cannot be taken as representative of community attitudes as a whole, they do have the potential to provide insight into the interests of the communities surrounding the two institutions. Far more content concerning the institutions was published in local regional newspapers than in the major metropolitan papers.

These newspapers are used primarily to understand the efforts at outreach that were attempted during this period. Articles published in newspapers reflect public interest in the institution. The type of interest differed significantly between newspaper types, with local regional newspapers more likely than any others to report on institutional involvement in community activities such as sports, exhibitions or celebrations. Major metropolitan newspapers and non-local regional papers were more likely to discuss the institutions in the context of court cases leading to admissions or major developments such as changes in leadership, increases in absconding, or, occasionally, visits by notable figures.

Displaying Strategies and Outcomes

Both Gosford and Westbrook were influenced by their proximity to broader, rural or regional, communities. For the Gosford institution, this meant the local community in and around Gosford itself. For Westbrook, it meant the nearby regional centre of Toowoomba. Their location was no accident. It was tied to broader assumptions regarding the nature of rurality and the presumed moral impacts of rurality on children and young people, particularly boys.¹³ However, the decision to locate the institutions rurally was made by parliamentary decision-makers, many of whom had little connection to the rural areas in which the institutions were located. In deciding where to locate the institutions, decision-makers focused on the needs of their state at large, not on the interests of the communities that would be expected to host the new carceral sites. Their decisions meant that the boys were removed from the urban areas which were presumed to be the source of most cases of delinquency, and away from friends and family who were believed to be poor influences.

Perhaps in response, the institutions made themselves available to their communities in a range of ways. These included serving as sites that could be visited and included in the programme of various community events. For example, in 1927, a distance-driving competition ended with a social drive to the institution at Westbrook, where, according to the local newspaper, “over 100 adults spent a very enjoyable afternoon at the Home, as the guest of the genial superintendent, Mr. T. Jones, who conducted the party over the institution.”¹⁴ Distinguished visitors to Gosford and Westbrook were also invited to inspect the institutions.¹⁵ Visits to the institution, like events whereby boys or their work were promoted in the community, offered an opportunity for institutional staff to

demonstrate the good work they were doing and their success in “reforming” the boys. So too did other events that were reported on in local newspapers. The techniques used by the institutions, and their representation in local and statewide newspapers, are described in this section.

Sports and Physical Education

Sport and physical education were a part of the reformative regime of both institutions and, in distinct ways, part of their programme of displaying their reformative efforts. The emphasis on athleticism and physicality reflected broader movements in the moral training of children. In England, for example, the development of physical education during the first part of the twentieth century was associated with a belief that physical development would lead to more moral and valuable citizens. The connection between citizenship and physical development was solidified and reiterated after the First World War when the need for a healthy and physically active citizenry took on a new meaning.¹⁶ Advocates for physical education sought to develop young people’s skills in both sports and military-style drill.¹⁷

In America, too, physical activity had been adopted by school boards across the country as part of the proper work of schools. This was a process supported by experts who “highlighted the consequences of modern society’s neglect of physical activity,” part of “contemporary anxieties about the ruinous effects of the city.”¹⁸ Elizabeth Gagen argues that practice related to playgrounds and physical culture programmes was part of a movement to train the bodies of young people in support of a healthier nation, in terms of both muscular training and character.¹⁹ She argues that children’s bodies, in early twentieth-century America, were thought of “as muscular tissue, capable of receiving training that would habituate consciousness and implant ideals for future behaviour.”²⁰

Similar connections between morality, future citizenship and physical activity are evident in the Australian context. Perhaps unsurprisingly, drill was an essential part of the training provided at both Gosford and Westbrook. In their participation in drill, boys were brought into line with their counterparts in Australian government schools, where children participated in physical training with a military flavour, alongside sports and games.²¹ Between 1911 and 1929, compulsory national military service existed, requiring that boys aged 12–13 enrol in junior cadets programmes and those 14–17 enrol in senior cadets, alongside provisions for adult men.²² Training boys to take part in military-style drill was therefore part of a broader national prioritisation of defence. While representations of the boys as drilling, therefore, had the potential to position them as becoming not only patriotic but also ordinary citizens, it was only at Gosford that participation in drill formed an effective part of the outreach work of the institution as reflected in its inclusion in newspaper coverage.

Displays of physical training were an important means through which the Gosford boys demonstrated the success of the institution’s programmes. These displays, which included performances of gymnastics alongside drill, required that the boys leave the institution and attend various community events. They were one of the primary means through which the boys of Gosford even participated in agricultural events. For example, in 1925, a report on the annual Gosford Citrus Show, published in the local newspaper, noted that “[a] contingent from the Gosford Training School gave an excellent display of

physical training.”²³ Similarly, their participation at the Gosford Show of 1930 included displays of gymnastics,²⁴ while a 1931 article concerning the show referred to the Training School’s “usual first-class display squads in marching, gymnastic tableaux and physical exercises.”²⁵

These displays did not always require the boys to leave the institution’s grounds. Similar performances occurred when visitors attended the institution. For example, on Mothers’ Day 1933, a visiting gymnastics and athletic team gave performances at the training school, in which “[s]everal of the lads belonging to the institution gymnastic team also took part and profited by being allowed to co-operate.”²⁶

The physical activity available to incarcerated boys, and broadcast to a broader community, went beyond physical training in gymnastics and drill. Like their counterparts in government-run schools, the boys of Gosford and Westbrook had opportunities to take part in a range of competitive sports, including team sports such as football. Both physical training activities, including drill, and competitive sports had an important role to play in the institutions’ interactions with, and communication with, their broader communities.

While both Gosford and Westbrook drew on their programmes of sport and athletic training in managing relationships with stakeholders outside the institutions, how they did so was distinct, highlighting the importance of local differences and individual management decisions in determining the shape of particular communication strategies. A key difference was in the location of interactions between the institutionalised boys and their broader communities. Both institutions mounted sporting teams, which took part in matches against teams of local young people who were not residents of institutional care. However, while the boys of Gosford left the institution’s grounds regularly to participate in sporting competitions, the evidence suggests that the boys from Westbrook were rarely permitted to leave the Farm Home. Instead, they welcomed external teams to visit them on their own sports fields.²⁷

The local newspapers for both institutions reported regularly on the sporting activities of the boys. At Westbrook, reports were generally brief and perfunctory.²⁸ Occasionally, there was some commentary, particularly when the institution’s team performed above expectations. For example, a 1921 article commented on the win, by a large margin, for the Westbrook boys in a game of football against the “much heavier and older” members of a visiting team.²⁹ Similarly, in 1929, the visiting Christian Brothers cricket team was described as “hopelessly outclassed” by the Farm Home boys.³⁰

At Gosford, reports of other sporting teams visiting the institution were common, but the reported level of engagement between the Training School boys and the broader community was far greater. The boys of the Gosford Training School were not only able to play against other teams, both on their own grounds and as visiting players, but were also considered acceptable teammates for other members of the Gosford community. For example, in 1927, the boys’ football team from the Gosford Intermediate High School were down a few members. They brought in substitutes from the Training School, who helped them defeat the Central Football Club of Newcastle.³¹

The participation of boys in team sports was often complicated. The reality of the institutions was such that the inmates would change frequently, sometimes with little warning. This was the result of sentencing rules that left young people with indefinite periods of incarceration. The situation was made more complex by the fact that boys

could be “hired out” if a suitable location was found. So it was that, in 1933, the local newspaper for Gosford noted that “[w]hile the Training School team is leading in the second grade cricket competition, the team has lately been chopped about to such an extent that it has been difficult to put a team in the field. It is only by reason of the fact that the boys practice regularly that they are doing as they are.”³²

The positioning of the Gosford institution and its sporting endeavours was generally positive. As was the case at Westbrook, reporting tended to focus on the institution and its players en masse rather than on individuals. However, occasionally, the local newspaper would celebrate the achievements of particular boys, such as A.A., who was Captain of the School, and who saw his achievements, particularly sporting achievements, celebrated in the local newspaper.³³ Successful sportsmen who left the institution after their period of incarceration also, at times, received special attention.³⁴

In emphasising physical activity and competition, the institutions engaged with a set of prevailing values concerning the merit of healthy bodies and physical activity, which existed beyond Australia.³⁵ The difference between the two institutions was not so much in their approaches to reforming boys through physical training, but rather in their willingness to allow boys to step outside their gates in demonstrating the effects of that training. Both, it seems, were successful in obtaining positive public attention and in gaining opportunities for incarcerated boys to interact directly with members of their broader communities.

Agricultural Training

Agricultural work was an important aspect of the institutions’ work and was associated with Australian conceptions of healthy masculinity.³⁶ Work “on the land” was considered a desirable occupation for older boys particularly, as opposed to “blind alley” occupations that had few opportunities to develop into socially recognised adult jobs.³⁷ This is despite the problem, which faced some proposed early twentieth-century schemes to find work for boys on farms, that advancing from farm worker to owner was not generally possible without pre-existing capital.³⁸

Successful contemporaneous approaches for non-incarcerated children, such as the rural school movement, sought to educate children who were already living rurally in agricultural skills to encourage them to remain rurally located.³⁹ However, in the case of the criminalised youth incarcerated at Gosford and Westbrook, farm labour was broadly conceptualised as preparation for a valuable future life despite the absence of the connections and, potentially, the property, which were available to non-incarcerated children who were born to rurally located families.⁴⁰ As such, the capacity of the boys to raise livestock and grow produce served as an important indication of the success of the institutions.

Participation in the agricultural events of the local communities was important at both institutions. At both sites, there was considerable potential for developing competitive gardens and herds of livestock. Both sat on large plots of more or less arable land, with Westbrook having undoubtedly the more fertile soil. Both were also established in a context in which the development of an agricultural labour force was significant and promised to offer a valuable contribution to statewide and local economies.⁴¹ They also existed in a context in which institutions for children based on farms were growing in

number in Australia, including not only youth justice institutions but also sites designated as existing for welfare or the training of British child migrants.⁴² Despite the similarities between Gosford and Westbrook, and the fact that both were operating in a child welfare culture which valorised rural labour, there was a marked degree of difference in the centrality of agriculture to their programmes and, particularly, to their efforts at public outreach. At Gosford, agricultural activities were important but demonstrated with equal prominence alongside other areas of skill such as sports and physical culture. At Westbrook in the 1920s and 1930s, agriculture was at the core of its communication strategy and central to its efforts at reformation. This communication tended to centre on agricultural outputs rather than the visible efforts of the children themselves.

Part of this was because of the leadership at Westbrook. Its second superintendent at that site, Thomas Jones, was carefully selected not for expertise in teaching or working with young people, but rather for his experience as a farmer, running a state experimental farm. Jones's appointment sent a clear signal that Westbrook would be an institution which took agriculture seriously. He made himself available to the local community to provide lectures and newspaper commentaries on matters relating to agriculture and worked to make the institution relatively self-sufficient. Under his guidance, Westbrook came to butcher the majority of the meat it used, as well as producing most of the fruits and vegetables it required.⁴³

Jones served as a valuable asset for reputation management in the institution, his very presence indicating that a high level of agricultural training would be available to boys. This was further demonstrated through the participation of Westbrook boys in the Toowoomba agricultural show. Under Jones, the institution regularly won prizes for its cattle, pigs and produce.⁴⁴ Notably, however, this was a form of outreach that had the effect of silencing the boys themselves. Their labour was evident in the materials that were sent to be displayed at agricultural shows. However, they themselves were physically absent, and prizes were often won, not in their names, but in Jones's or in the name of the institution's head gardener.⁴⁵ The result was a situation in which Westbrook had a good reputation for its farming, and boys who were incarcerated there were expected to have received a practical education that could equip them for a fruitful afterlife being hired out to local or other farmers. However, the boys did not benefit directly from participation in these activities by being permitted to exit the institution gates or spend time in communities.

This was quite different from the type of participation in agricultural shows in which the Gosford boys engaged. The Gosford Training School occasionally sent produce to the local agricultural show, but its offerings tended to be non-competitive. They took the form of instructive items, such as the display of manured and unmanured plantings of maize, or displays of the vegetables grown by the boys.⁴⁶

Their efforts did not cement the type of institutional reputation enjoyed by Westbrook – Gosford was never perceived as a site of rigorous agricultural training. Rather, it served to present the Gosford boys as well-rounded, hearty young people, and to offer opportunities for some of the boys to experience being presented in this light. As such, their engagement in the show allowed them, to some extent, to take part in the life of the community. Of course, as with sporting participation, this was not an opportunity that was equally distributed to all the boys at the institution. Rather, it was those young

people who were well behaved, and who displayed sufficient prowess in the often physical skills that were prioritised by the institution's community engagement, who could be recognised.

The experiences of the Gosford boys, who had the opportunity to attend and participate directly in agricultural shows, were more aligned with those of other Australian schoolchildren at the time. In a study of the Brisbane Exhibition and education in colonial Queensland, Joanne Scott writes that studying the "schoolwork and juvenile entries" – in her case in the first 25 years of the Exhibition's existence – "can enrich historians' understanding of education in . . . Queensland and draws attention to the role of an institution that stood outside of but interacted with the education system."⁴⁷ Scott identifies that the earliest iterations of the Exhibition focused on and prioritised agricultural displays, with schoolwork nonetheless present and reported on in newspapers. Scott's account demonstrates that the expansion of the Exhibition over time included some children and schools but not others. She notes, for example, that "examples of schoolwork by Indigenous children would not appear at the Exhibition until 1909."⁴⁸ In a sense, inclusion in the Exhibition reflected inclusion in the community of Queensland – but, while actual attendance at the Exhibition was an important aspect of its educational purpose and value for schoolchildren, this was something that was not available to the boys of Westbrook.

Other forms of education for future work were present. While they received less attention, the success of programmes like the carpentry lessons at Gosford was occasionally reported on in local papers.⁴⁹ From the mid-1930s, the plumbing class, motor mechanics class and training in the kitchen were also part of the work of the institution, commented on occasionally.⁵⁰ However, the relatively limited presence of these other programmes in reportage suggests that, while they may have been an essential aspect of the education which occurred *within* institutions, they were not necessarily promoted to the general public in the same way as agricultural education.

Cultural Education

While participation in sports and agriculture served to demonstrate the boys' physical prowess, it had the additional benefit of demonstrating a type of moral education that was deeply embedded in physical health and fitness. This was not, however, the only form of morally loaded education that occurred outside of the classrooms in these institutions. Cultural education included participation in activities as diverse as playing in bands, singing in concerts, participating in literary and debating societies and, at Gosford, taking part in the activities of a Young Men's Institute, formed along American lines.

These activities all mirrored the type of instruction that occurred in more middle-class environments. In particular, they mirrored the expected extra-curricular activities that would be offered in ordinary secondary schools. Each institution had a key society that served to demonstrate the intellectual capacities of the incarcerated boys. At Westbrook, this was the "Westbrook Boys' Farm Home Literary and Debating Society." The Society received lectures from visitors to the institution, wrote essays and participated in one-off events such as a "mock election," as well as engaging in debates. While members of the staff supported the society and its operation it was, so far as was possible, run by the boys themselves. However, the boys were not responsible for advocating for their strengths

and value as members of the society. This role was fulfilled by the local newspaper, which dutifully printed the annual reports of the society. From these reports, we can see not only the types of activities that boys engaged in, but also the type of debate topics they considered.

The Westbrook Farm Home Literary and Debating Society discussed economic subjects such as “[w]hich is the more beneficial to the State of Queensland, the Mining industry or the Dairying” as well as practical agricultural questions such as “[w]hich is the greater curse to mankind, the prickly pear plant or the cattle tick pest” and moral issues like “[a]re motion pictures harmful to a growing lad or not?” They also engaged with questions of military import, such as the 1921 debate topic of “[w]hich was used more effectively in the last war, the Aeroplane or the Submarine?”⁵¹ Reports of these debates served to position these boys as politically engaged, aware of their civic responsibilities and prepared for the intellectual, rather than merely physical, aspects of life on the land.

At Gosford, the Young Men’s institute was opened in 1936. As the local paper noted,

The Institute, which is the first of its kind in the Commonwealth, is patterned on the lines of similar organisations in America. The main motive is to fit the young men to take their places in the civic or other sections of the community when they leave the training school. At present they are taught trades, but given the opportunity of fitting themselves into the routine of outside life, it is claimed that they would make better citizens.

The Young Men’s Institute was associated with a Mock Parliament, which debated issues relevant to the boys, such as a theoretical proposed change to the Child Welfare Act.⁵² The actions of the Parliament received some attention, albeit a small amount delivered in a mocking tone, from the statewide press.⁵³

As with Westbrook’s Literary and Debating Society, Gosford’s Young Men’s Institute also hosted invited visitors who gave talks, as well as attending the events of the Institute. As the above passage on the Gosford Institute makes clear, the justification, in both instances, was that the boys could become better citizens if they were allowed to engage with cultural and social issues in a sustained, reasoned way. Yet there is good reason to believe that participation in these programmes was only open to a relatively small number of the young people who entered the institutions. Membership was voluntary, and the activities which have been reported suggest that a high level of literacy, beyond that attained by some of the young people incarcerated in these sites, was required to participate fully. It is also not entirely clear how many boys wished to participate in these activities.

An additional means of demonstrating cultural education, and one used to great effect for outreach purposes at Gosford, was musical training. At Gosford, the choir was an important means of displaying cultural education during the 1930s. In 1931, Major Cookson, then superintendent of the institution, wrote to the local newspaper to state that:

It might interest friends of the institution to know that we have now established a very fine choir amongst the boys, after much effort and, indeed, much disappointment. It helps to brighten the wards at night and the choir is on visiting terms with all wards. We are fortunate in having a musician in the new hospital officer, and the Superintendent’s knowledge of music and choir handling has been supplemented by keenness on the part of Instructor Fletcher.⁵⁴

Under Major Cookson, the boys' choir became part of the programme of outreach to the community. This new aspect of institutional life created a new means of performing and thus interacting positively with the local community. The choir performed at community concerts to general praise.⁵⁵ Other forms of musical performance also allowed for community service and connection, such as in 1933, when two boys from the Gosford Training School played "The Last Post" at the town's Anzac Day celebration.⁵⁶ These events did not reflect the entirety of the music programme in the institution, which also included events such as sing-along nights for members of the institution only.⁵⁷

Musical training, in the British context, has been shown to have served as a meaningful route for some children in welfare homes between the 1870s and 1918 to advance, particularly into roles in the armed forces.⁵⁸ Musical training could therefore be understood not only as a means of imparting taste and allowing for visible forms of performance but also as something valuable for the young people involved. It also spoke to the focus on producing good citizens, members of a strong nation, which also appears to be present in the type of physical and agricultural training offered at these sites.

Community Service and Engagement

It was at Gosford that the fourth technique of reformatory education and public engagement was most obvious. While both institutions engaged in a form of community service by serving as a readily available venue for events, Gosford was distinct in the level of physical interaction between the boys and the community. The boys at the Gosford institution provided meaningful support to the local community across a range of contexts. This often included providing physical support through acts of service, which ran the gamut from supporting local groups in setting up for community events to serving as a volunteer firefighting force, which, along with the staff of the institution and members of the broader community, could be relied upon to battle the bushfires that the area not infrequently faced.

In 1939, for example, a newspaper in the city of Newcastle reported on bushfires in Gosford whereby flames leapt "as high as 100 feet from tree to tree." It noted that volunteers "managed to burn breaks, and saved the homesteads." It further identified that "[i]nmates of Gosford Training School for delinquent boys, in charge of officers, did good work."⁵⁹ A short-lived Sydney newspaper wrote that:

Boys of the Gosford Training School who have been incarcerated because of their previous misdeeds early to-night fought raging bush fires with a spirit worthy of the best citizens in the land.⁶⁰

The presence of the Gosford boys in the Sydney newspapers highlights the extent to which firefighting, as a dangerous activity tied to an inherently newsworthy occurrence, allowed the boys of Gosford to demonstrate their good moral status to the state as a whole. This was far less possible than the everyday acts of community support, which nonetheless served as training for, and evidence of, good citizenship and community-mindedness.

At times, acts of community engagement and service accompanied physical displays. For example, in 1930, the Gosford boys not only performed a gymnastic display at the Gosford Show but also, alongside Training School officers, helped to prepare and serve

lunches.⁶¹ Boys also provided entertainment and submissions to other events, some of which allowed them to reach a statewide audience as well as their local communities.

The boys from Gosford took part in the 1924 Boys' Week procession in Sydney, during which they marched in a parade with their school banner alongside other, more conventional schools.⁶² The *Daily Telegraph*, after praising the marching of the boys from Darlinghurst school, noted that [t]he deportment of its boys was only exceeded in excellence by that of the Gosford Training School-lads, who, being older, and having the eagle-eye of an instructor relentlessly upon them, bore themselves with a truly military air and grace. Their exposition of the goose-step in front of the Town Hall was quite a show in itself.⁶³

The Sydney Town Hall held a two-day exhibition of "boys' work" as part of the event, which was organised by the Rotary Club. Alongside the procession, the Gosford Training School boys were involved in the exhibition, performing "physical displays."⁶⁴ The participation of the boys in these events allowed them to physically visit the city of Sydney, where many of them would have been sentenced before being sent to Gosford, and demonstrated that they were trusted to leave the confines of the institution and the rural region of Gosford without any risk of harm. It is important to note, however, that it was always a contingent of boys, not the entirety of the institution, who attended these events.

Displaying the Results of Reformatory Education: For Which Audience, and to Whose Benefit?

The public relations efforts of carceral institutions are rarely in the interests of inmates. "Prison tourism" – whereby visitors enter current or former prisons for tours – is a popular example that effectively serves the interests of all stakeholders bar current or former prisoners themselves.⁶⁵ Arguably, this pattern was replicated at Gosford and Westbrook. In displaying the techniques of reformatory education employed in these institutions, staff and government stakeholders could encourage public assent for the continuation of the institution and of the broader practice of incarcerating and "reforming" children.

The purpose and benefits of incarcerating children are not self-evident. The existence of the institutions at Gosford and Westbrook was justified, not just on the principle of removing young offenders from communities, but through an argument that institutionalisation could change the attitudes and behaviours of boys in some meaningful way, and encourage them to become good, productive citizens of their respective states and their nation. The use of techniques that could be displayed served to justify the continuation of the institutions and facilitate ongoing good relationships with community members who, under different circumstances, might be incentivised to advocate against the presence of the institutions. This, indeed, happened at later periods, during escape crises in both institutions.

Successful display of reformatory education could mitigate the reputational impact of otherwise scandalous incidents in the institutions. For example, a serious assault was reported at Gosford in July 1924 whereby an attendant was knocked down by an inmate with a shovel.⁶⁶ The local newspaper, while it reported on the incident, prefaced its report

by referring to “[d]istrict residents who have warmly admired the good results achieved by the present management at the Gosford Farm Home” and lamenting that “[t]he affair has been given a prominence which does no good to the work of the Home.”⁶⁷

The extent to which these programmes were beneficial for individual boys is difficult to determine. Sometimes, the type of work and training in the institutions was linked to the projected future careers of the boys. For example, when the Governor of Queensland, Sir Matthew Nathan, visited Toowoomba in 1921, his programme of visits included the Westbrook Farm Home alongside other significant local sites such as the schools, the convalescent home, the bacon factory and the condensed milk factory.⁶⁸ A Brisbane newspaper noted that, at the institution, “in the course of a short speech, the Governor expressed a hope that each of the boys would ultimately acquire a good-saved farm.”⁶⁹ This may have been a positive aspiration, and indeed likely would have appealed to some of the incarcerated boys. However, the government provided no practical support to enable boys to obtain their own farms, rendering it unlikely that boys would have been able to do so unless they obtained financial capital of their own at a later date.⁷⁰

There was also an idea that the success of the institutions in reforming the boys, and in demonstrating that reform, would allow them to re-enter the world free of the stigma of their incarceration. An example is found in a 1938 report on the second annual dinner of the Gosford Young Men’s Institute, in which a journalist wrote that the event

was not only an outstanding and brilliant achievement, but emphasises that forethought, understanding, and comradeship replacing the hard, irksome, and rigid rules of yesteryear, have won out in the mental and physical training of lads who “fell once” but are redeeming themselves in the eyes of the community. Officers of the Child Welfare Department, Superintendent W.B. Simms, and every officer connected with the Institution may feel justly proud of their work. And as for the boys themselves, suffice it to say that they will return to the outside world with the past cast into oblivion.⁷¹

Yet, again, there is little to demonstrate that this desirable outcome was accomplished. Any benefits to the incarcerated boys of these efforts at public relations, then, appear to have been nominal or theoretical rather than actualised. The work of keeping the public apprised of the actions and goings-on in the institutions appears to have served the purposes of adults in positions of some authority rather than those of the vulnerable boys who were acted upon, incarcerated and put on display.

Conclusion

Gosford and Westbrook engaged in public relations efforts to demonstrate that the type of reformatory education they provided was effective and in line with community expectations. The efforts of each institution were closely connected to their reformatory regimes and to the specific circumstances in which they operated. However, the outreach techniques that were successful, in the sense of being picked up and reported on in primarily local media, spoke to broader, often transnational, ideas about what it meant to be a good man and a good citizen.

The precise nature of the techniques employed at Gosford and Westbrook during this period were shaped by the geographical and temporal context in which they were operating. Drill, for example, was part of Gosford’s performance repertoire during

a period in which it was a skill valued by the Australian government and imposed upon Australian boys across social classes and backgrounds. It is likely that a study of different institutions, at different times, would reveal both similarities and differences in terms of the specific techniques of outreach that were applied.

In both institutions, the extent to which incarcerated boys benefited from efforts at outreach on their behalf is unclear. There is clear evidence that at least some of the inmates of both institutions had opportunities to interact directly with members of their community, including young people within similar age ranges who were not incarcerated. But the language that suggested more material or social benefits after their incarceration had ended was not supported either by the collection of evidence or by meaningful support. The outreach efforts of Gosford and Westbrook may have reduced the stigma experienced by former inmates upon their release. Given the lack of evidence produced by the institutions, however, it is just as likely that outreach supported the validity and continued operation of those institutions without producing improved outcomes for the boys they ostensibly served.

Notes

1. Mitchell, "The Discursive Production of Public Inquiries"; Sköld, "Historical Abuse – A Contemporary Issue"; Swain, *History of Australian Inquiries Reviewing Institutions Providing Care for Children*; Sköld, "The Truth about Abuse?"
2. Ferguson, "Abused and Looked After Children as 'Moral Dirt'"; Driver, "Discipline Without Frontiers?"; Ramsland, "Mettray, Delinquent Youth and the Cult of Religious Honour"; Hendrick, *Child Welfare*; Godfrey et al., *Young Criminal Lives*.
3. Carden, "The Uses of Rurality in Twentieth-Century Youth Justice."
4. Shore, "Punishment, Reformation, or Welfare"; Carden, "Managing Moral Reformation."
5. Carden, "From Reformatory to Farm Home."
6. New South Wales, "Child Welfare Act," sec. 19.
7. Queensland Government, State Children Act, sec. 4.
8. Quinn, "The 'Penal Reformatory' That Never Was," 188.
9. *Ibid.*, 119–20.
10. Quinn, "The 'Penal Reformatory' That Never Was," 124; Carden, "A Breakdown of Reformatory Education," 70.
11. Carden, "The Uses of Rurality in Twentieth-Century Youth Justice."
12. Bowd, "A Voice for the Community."
13. Carden, "Reformatory Schools and Whiteness in Danger"; Carden, "Managing Moral Reformation"; Carden, "From Reformatory to Farm Home."
14. "Motoring. Distance Judging. Run to Westbrook Farm Home," 7.
15. "Vice-Regal Visit. Toowoomba Programme," 6; "Vice-Regal Visit. Toowoomba Arrangements," 4.
16. Welshman, "Physical Culture and Sport in Schools in England and Wales, 1900–40," 60–1.
17. *Ibid.*, 61.
18. Gagen, "Making America Flesh," 429.
19. *Ibid.*, 431.
20. *Ibid.*, 444.
21. Kirk and Twigg, "The Militarization of School Physical Training in Australia," 391.
22. Pyvis, "Setting the Precedent for Commonwealth Intervention in Schooling," 63.
23. "Splendid Citrus Show. Second Exhibition Confirms Gosford's Pre-Eminence," 7.
24. "Gosford Show. Bigger and Better Than Ever," 8.
25. "Leading Men of the Gosford District Say Help Your Show!" 6.

26. "Gosford Training School. Mothers' Day Celebration," 9.
27. For example, "Match at Westbrook," 6.
28. For example, "Westbrook," 3.
29. "Match at Westbrook," 6.
30. "Westbrook. Saturday," 12.
31. "School Football," 8.
32. "Gosford Training School. Some Cricket Notes," 4.
33. "Training School Notes," 6.
34. "Tommy Brown," 8.
35. Welshman, "Physical Culture and Sport in Schools in England and Wales, 1900–40"; Martschukat, "The Necessity for Better Bodies to Perpetuate Our Institutions."
36. Carden, "Reformatory Schools and Whiteness in Danger."
37. Abbott, "Producing Men?"
38. *Ibid.*, 48.
39. Brady, "Nambour"; Brady, "The Rural School Experiment."
40. Carden, "From Reformatory to Farm Home."
41. Carden, "The Uses of Rurality in Twentieth-Century Youth Justice."
42. For example, Daniel, "Solving an Empire Problem," 45.
43. "Self-Supporting Institution," 4.
44. "Westbrook Reformatory. RA Society Members' Visit. An Educative Garden," 5.
45. For example, "Toowoomba Show. Dairy Cattle to the Fore"; "Horticulture."
46. For example, "Pavilion Notes," 3; "Rural Interests. Settlement and Production. Gosford Show," 9.
47. Scott, "Mechanical Contrivances and Fancy Needlework," 18.
48. *Ibid.*, 30.
49. For example, "Gosford Training School. Good Progress Being Made," 8.
50. "Training School Notes. Activities Deserve Visit," 6.
51. "Westbrook Farm Home Literary and Debating Society," 4.
52. "Mock Parliament. Instructive YMI Debate," 4.
53. "Training School Boys' Parliament," 7.
54. "Gosford Training School," 14.
55. "Items of Interest," 1; "Training School Notes," 4 (1931).
56. "Anzac Day Celebration," 11.
57. Rubie, *Sent to the Mountain*, 47.
58. Sheldon, "The Musical Careers of the Poor."
59. "Fire Danger Over Near Gosford. Volunteers Kept Flames from Homes," 14.
60. "Gosford Boys Fight Fires," 1.
61. "Gosford Show. Official Opening," 3.
62. "March through City," 9.
63. "Making Good Australians. Boys' Week Effort," 8.
64. "Inspiring Week," 17.
65. Piché et al., "A 'Win-Win for Everyone' Except Prisoners."
66. "Attendant Assaulted. At Gosford Farm Home," 2.
67. "Assault at Farm Home," 12.
68. "Governor at Toowoomba," 5.
69. "Governor on the Downs," 3.
70. Abbott, "Producing Men?"
71. "'Stepping Stones to Understanding.' Child Welfare Secretary Eulogises Boys. Unique Function At Gosford Training School," 8.

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