

Like a wicked Noah's ark: the nautical school ships *Vernon* and *Sobraon*

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Charles Dickens penned the simile, “Like a wicked Noah’s ark”, in his vivid description of the prison hulk observed by young Pip in *Great Expectations*. Sarah Luke begins her history of the 19th-century industrial school ship, the *Vernon* (later replaced by the *Sobraon*), moored in Sydney Harbour with changing cohorts of young boys on board, by asking if it was “a floating hell”.

Using an extensive range of sources, Luke takes the reader into daily life on board the ships, introducing a large cast of characters including the captains, crew, teachers and boys. She examines the aims of politicians and social reformers in setting up industrial schools, along with other institutions to deal with child poverty, homelessness and crime. The *Vernon* was never a gaol and boys were not sent there to serve sentences. A boy might have already served time in an adult gaol for petty crime such as thieving, and upon release had no responsible family to care for him. Or he might have been found homeless on the streets and charged with having no means of support.

The book is presented in three parts, one for each captain in charge of the institution: Captain James Seton Veitch Mein (1867–1878); Captain Frederick William Neitenstein (1878–1896); and Captain William Henry Mason (1896–1911). Of the three, Neitenstein stands out. Drawing on Neitenstein’s papers held in the State Library of New South Wales, Luke contributes to an understanding of this influential reformer who would subsequently take up the role of Comptroller of Prisons.

In the first part Luke delves into the school established on the *Vernon* after the passing of an Act for the Relief of Destitute Children in 1866. Captain Mein began to accept boys on the *Vernon* in 1867. By 1869 there were 135 boys on board. Mein became their legal guardian, while the ship was under the control of the Colonial Secretary until 1880, when control passed to the Department of Public Instruction. Mein, Luke argues, had weaknesses as a leader and the first few years were marked by problems between senior staff which Mein failed to control. Discipline on the ship, while not cruel, concentrated on deterrence by punishment rather than inspiration through reward.

After some time on the ship, and when old enough, boys were placed in apprenticeships, many going to rural New South Wales. Mein instituted the requirement that both boys and masters wrote regular reports to him. From these reports, no longer existing in their original form but reproduced in Annual Reports, Luke draws valuable source material.

Case studies of individual boys constitute a strength throughout the book. Occasionally Luke is able to trace a boy from the circumstances which led to him being sent to the *Vernon*, through his apprenticeship, and into life as an adult. To do this she calls upon many sources including the Annual Reports of the captains, newspaper articles and criminal records. In the opening pages we meet James McEvoy, aged 13, and James Plowright, 14, two of the first boys



admitted. Later we learn that James McEvoy thrived in later life; James Plowright, after initial promise, was not so fortunate.

Captain Neitenstein was everything that social reformers desired for the venture. He instituted a motivational scheme of discipline that really worked. Boys were ranked into classes, and could move up the ladder through good behaviour, earning rewards associated with the higher classes such as pudding with dinner, inclusion on excursions, playing and participating in sports on Cockatoo Island and even keeping pets. Demotion served as a deterrent, and corporal punishment appeared rarely necessary. Neitenstein visited every apprenticed boy at least once a year, and diligently attempted to deal with problems that arose in apprenticeships.

Luke, subtly but surely, presents ship-board life on the *Vernon* in a favourable light and the outcome, for the vast majority of boys, as positive. The biggest change that Neitenstein contributed was “regular recreation and fun”. William Henry Mason was Neitenstein’s mate and clerk, and later his successor. These two, says Luke, formed a “fabulous partnership”. The boys attended lessons provided by a teacher supplied by the Department of Public Instruction and also learnt nautical and trade skills, put to constant use in maintaining the ship. They worked hard and their days were tightly structured, but recreation was an important component. This was no “floating hell”. As adults, many ex-inmates would visit the ship, or they would write to tell their captain how they were getting on. Their letters often expressed appreciation of a time that turned their lives around. Some ex-inmates, however, became criminals, and a few notorious.

Luke makes brief references to ship-board institutions for boys in other Australian colonies and the United Kingdom, although transnational influences in their founding and later dismantling do not feature. In 1889, Neitenstein travelled to England to tour similar institutions and to arrange for a replacement of the ship which was then old and overcrowded. In 1892, the *Vernon* was replaced by the *Sobraon*, newer, bigger and completely refurbished. Three hundred and twelve boys lived on board in 1894 and this number later reached 400.

Captain Mason sustained Neitenstein’s policies and practices. In this period, many boys worked in the carpentry workshop on Cockatoo Island making desks and other furniture for public schools. They were paid as apprentices, the money being banked for their futures, but Mason worried that they were being exploited in that the value of the work far outweighed the pay. Mason had to deal with the problem of the ship being considered a reformatory, rather than an industrial school, with boys who had committed serious crimes and those who had absconded from other institutions being sent.

In 1911, the *Sobraon* closed, with staff and boys gradually transferred to other institutions. Luke’s final chapter is disappointingly brief with little analysis of the decision to close the ship. At times, Luke contrasts the Victorian idea, explicitly embraced by Neitenstein and Mason, that removal of a child from their family and culture was desirable and necessary for the child’s welfare and reform, with more recent ideas rejecting removal from family and culture wherever possible. Unfortunately, she does not return to this complex yet pertinent issue in the closing chapter.

This accessible book will interest both a general and specialist audience. It is supported by endnotes, bibliography, an index and, not least, photographs and portraits. The work is of relevance for social historians, historians of childhood and historians of education.

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