



**FROM THE SHADOWS INC
ORPHAN SCHOOL CHILDREN SCULPTURE UNVEILING
REMARKS BY
HER EXCELLENCY THE HONOURABLE CAROLINE WELLS
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
NEW TOWN, SUNDAY 4 OCTOBER 2026**

Good morning, everyone. It is a pleasure to join you today to unveil Rowan Gillespie's new sculpture of Orphan School Children here at St John's Park.

Before we begin, I would like to acknowledge the Palawa people as the First Peoples of Lutruwita/Tasmania and the Traditional Custodians of this land. For countless generations, they have cared for and nurtured this remarkable island, its landscapes, waterways and communities.

I pay my respects to Elders past and present and recognise the enduring contribution of Aboriginal Tasmanians to the cultural, social and spiritual life of our State.

Today, we are here to unveil a new sculpture, but more importantly, we are here to remember the stories of women and children who are too often forgotten by history.

During Transportation, 13,000 convict women came to Van Diemen's Land. On arrival, they were imprisoned at the Cascades Female Factory or similar institutions, while their children — who had committed no crime — were sent here.

The Orphan Schools housed in these buildings were bleak and miserable places. We know from contemporary reports that conditions here were severe: the buildings were sparsely furnished and cold, food was often scarce and many of those responsible for looking after the children treated them harshly.

Almost 6,000 children lived at the Orphan Schools during the period from 1828 to 1879. Many of them were not orphans in the true sense of the word — they were poor children, children of convicts and Tasmanian Aboriginal children who were taken from their families.

As they served their sentences, convict women were powerless to keep their children with them. Then, thanks to death, desertion and the colony's rigid rules and regulations, families were fragmented and lost contact, many never to be reunited.

In one of my first events as Governor earlier this year, I was honoured to accept a replica of the Rajah Quilt on behalf of the people of Tasmania. This remarkable textile was stitched by convict women on board the four-month voyage of the *Rajah* to Van Diemen's Land in 1841.

Though these women's lives had been marked by poverty, hardship and conviction, they joined together on their journey into the unknown to create something beautiful. The original survives today in the National Gallery of Australia as a testament to their resilience.

Heartbreakingly, the women of the *Rajah* collectively left 90 children behind when they sailed from England, never to see them again.¹ Ten children did arrive with their mothers on board the ship, but sadly they, too, were not to remain together.²

¹ Jo Andrews and Dianne Snowden, "Australia's Convict Quilt: Something to be proud of", [Haptic and Hue podcast](#) discussion, 2 May 2024.

² Dianne Snowden, "Voices from the Orphan Schools: The Children of the Rajah", [Tasmanian Ancestry: Volume 33 Number 4](#), March 2023, pp 209-212.

The older children were sent here to the Orphan Schools soon after arrival, as only those weaned from their mothers were admitted. The stories we know of these children reflect both the harshness of this place and the strength of those who endured it.

Dressmaker Maria Musgrove's two-year-old daughter Mary Ann was taken from her when the ship docked in July 1841, the youngest *Rajah* child sent to the Orphan Schools on arrival.³ Sadly, Mary Ann died of gangrene of the mouth — a condition commonly seen in malnourished children — just over six months later in February 1842.⁴ She was buried in the St John's Burial Ground.

Irish-born widow Mary Brown, transported on the *Rajah* for stealing a gown, was often before the courts in the colony before she died at the Cascades Female Factory in 1843.⁵ Her children Michael and Elizabeth remained at the Orphan Schools for some time after her death, before Michael was apprenticed to a Mr Lightfoot in 1847.⁶ He then sent for his sister to join him in Sydney in 1848 — both siblings managing to escape the institution.

History often celebrates soldiers, explorers and political leaders. Less often does it record the quiet labour of women whose hands built homes, mended clothes, cared for families and created beauty despite hardship. Even less does it acknowledge the stories of children, many of whose lives have gone unrecorded or were lost before they had the opportunity to live them.

This is why the *From the Shadows* project is so important. It seeks to illuminate the stories of convict women and their children, bringing their lives out of the darkness. The sculptures that make up the project are overdue recognition of those whose resilience and humanity have too often been overlooked.

³ Dianne Snowden, "Voices from the Orphan Schools: The Children of the Rajah", [Tasmanian Ancestry: Volume 33 Number 4](#), March 2023, pp 209-212.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

Today we reflect on the often-harrowing stories of our past. But there is also a much more positive story of the present that I think is worth celebrating here.

That is the story of a community coming together in the wake of an act of vandalism to ensure that our history is not forgotten.

One person's thoughtlessness was no match for the collective dedication of those from Hobart and beyond who supported *From the Shadows* to reinstate the Orphan School Children sculptures after last year's theft.

From the time the group announced that it would replace the statues, donations started flowing in. Some via a Go Fund Me campaign, others as direct donations, still more from a raffle and a fundraising afternoon tea at the Cascades Female Factory.

Many donors had already given generously to the original *From the Shadows* project. I particularly enjoyed learning that the first donation came from a supporter who simply emptied her purse and said, "take this".

Tasmanians stood together to say: this is our story. We will remember it and ensure it keeps being told.

I mentioned the replica Rajah Quilt earlier. When we shared that story on the Governor of Tasmania social media pages, we were overwhelmed by the response from around the world. Many people came together to marvel at the *Rajah* women's fortitude in the face of such hardship, praising their ability to create something beautiful that has stood the test of time, while also remembering the convict women in their own families.

To me, this response speaks to the powerful connection people continue to feel with the stories we are gathered here to remember. While for decades it may have been a silent shame, today Tasmanians are proud of the resilience of their convict ancestors and are dedicated to keeping their memory alive.

As we unveil this new sculpture today, there are many people who deserve our warmest thanks for their work in ensuring that *From the Shadows* continues to commemorate the experiences of convict women and children.

In particular, we thank sculptor Rowan Gillespie for his artistry and recreating his original design so beautifully, now with modifications to enhance security. How wonderful that Rowan was able to join us today all the way from Ireland.

I commend the *From the Shadows* committee, who have worked tirelessly since 2018 to bring these important stories into the light through funding two convict women sculptures at the Cascades Female Factory, along with the sculptures of children here. Their commitment to fundraising for the replacement statues has been outstanding.

I also acknowledge the Department of Health and The Friends of the Orphan Schools for their support of the project.

Finally, thank you to Brian Corr for his *Ballad of the Children of St John's*, written specially for this occasion. May we all keep the song's poignant final line close to our hearts, urging us to always remember 'the children history cast aside'.

It is now my great honour to officially unveil the Orphan School Children sculpture.

Thank you.