

FROM THE SHADOWS INC
ORPHAN SCHOOL CHILDREN'S STATUES UNVEILING
SPEECH BY
HER EXCELLENCY THE HONOURABLE BARBARA BAKER AC
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ST JOHN'S PARK PRECINCT, NEW TOWN,
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Good afternoon.

I pay my respects to the traditional and original owners of this land: the palawa people. I acknowledge the contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal community. I recognise a history of truth, which acknowledges the impacts of colonisation upon our First People. I stand for a future that respects and acknowledges Aboriginal stories, culture, language and history.

Many of us here were present this morning at the unveiling of the Rowan Gillespie statue at the Cascades Female Factory, World Heritage Historic Site.

The unveilings that are shortly to take place at this former Orphan Schools complex are the culmination of many years of effort by many people, in Tasmania and in Ireland. These efforts further recognise and commemorate our complex and often tragic convict past.

The total commemorations consist of eight aesthetically striking bronze statues. They were completed between 2015 and 2021, through, first, the Footsteps towards Freedom Project, and then the From the Shadows Project.

As I said this morning, Dianne Snowden, Secretary of the From the Shadows Project team has noted that Rowan Gillespie has been described as “one of the most eloquent contemporary masters of Irish sculpture”, and that “historical authenticity is fundamental to his work.”¹

I say again, Rowan, on behalf of all Tasmanians, we are all grateful; we thank you for all your hard work over these years to create these sublime, haunting and mysterious figures. They have an ethereal quality, individually and collectively, perhaps because they are modelled from living descendants of the convict women and the children.

Congratulations and thanks to John Kelly, who, inspired by Rowan's Dublin "Famine" sculptures, recruited a small project team and commissioned Rowan.

I believe there is a memorable story of Rowan's first accommodation in Tasmania being a tiny box-like room at the back end of the State Cinema with good sound effects from films being played! I am told on very good authority that Rowan has had a visit to his first accommodation, for old time's sake.

Rowan and John have worked together on the projects. The From the Shadows Team have been greatly effective and successful in managing the project at this end. I acknowledged them this morning and do so again: Bob Gordon, President, Dianne Snowden, Secretary; and Ros Escott, Lorraine Davidson, Darryl Massie, Jennifer Fitzpatrick, David Boon, and Sandra Lo.²

May I also acknowledge the enormous and assiduous research involved in gathering information about the children who lived here. We thank the Tasmanian Family History Society, and also Dianne for her 2018 book *Voices from the Orphan Schools*.

Sadly, while in care, more than 400 children died here, most from preventable diseases.³

But in her foreword to Dianne Snowden's book, Emeritus Professor Lucy Frost noted, "In spite of a childhood teaching [the children here] to shut down their emotions, many managed not only to create families, but to look after them through the vicissitudes of fortune."⁴

Remarkably, until now, nothing at this St John's Park precinct site tells the story of the Orphan School children. Although the Orphan School buildings survive, largely intact, there is neither acknowledgement of their original purpose nor of the children who lived there.⁵ These two statues poignantly rectify these omissions.

In my remarks this morning I concluded on a sombre note, to remind us of the tragedies of our convict past. I will do so again, with another account, this one from 1837:

"On Thursday last, the boys of the Queen's Orphan School were marched into Town, two and two, to witness the ceremony of proclaiming Queen Victoria. The lads looked healthy, but, certainly, anything but clean or respectable. About one third of the poor children were paraded about, without any covering on their heads; and, considering the heat of the sun, during some of our summer days,

and their close cropped hair, it occurred to us that the plan of so allowing the children to be uncovered, was very likely to reduce their numbers, and, consequently, the expense of maintaining them. We believe the children had shoes upon their feet, but of this we are not certain. However, we can say, that we never before saw them in so dirty a condition.”⁶

Again, as we prepare to unveil these two statues, let us reflect, and remember.

Thank you.

¹ Forty South magazine 29 July 2021, article by Dianne Snowden: [Shaping history: Rowan Gillespie’s statues \(fortysouth.com.au\)](https://fortysouth.com.au), accessed 24 February 2022.

² [The Project Team \(fromtheshadows.org.au\)](https://fromtheshadows.org.au), accessed 24 February 2022.

³ Forty South op. cit.

⁴ Frost, Lucy, Foreword to *Voices from the Orphan Schools: the Children’s Stories* by Dianne Snowden, Hobart, 2018 page 15.

⁵ Forty South op. cit.

⁶ The Cornwall Chronicle (Launceston), Saturday 4 November 1837 page 1.