The Enquiry into the Te Oranga Girls Home, 1908

Beryl Hughes

The Appendix to the Journal of the House of Representatives(1908) includes an enthralling Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Te Oranga Girls Home.[1] The commissioner for this enquiry , H.W. Bishop, was appointed to investigate the management of Te Oranga over the two previous years. Specifically, he was to assess the system of classification of the girls;[2] the methods of punishment; the duties and working conditions of staff; and the relations of staff and matron. What set the enquiry going was a letter to the *Lyttelton Times* from an Anglican clergyman, Dr F.P. Fendall, written after a conversation with a girl out on service. He criticised the corporal punishment in the Home, saying it suggested the savagery of some American slave-owners. Other letters followed: it is clear that many people were interested in Te Oranga and its regularly absconding inmates. The Official Visitors to the Home (voluntary workers, two women and one man, who were recognised by the Department of Education, which was responsible for the Home) then wrote to the Department of Education asking for an enquiry.

Te Oranga, the only reformatory for girls in the country, was situated in Burwood, in the outskirts of Christchurch. It was established in 1900 as part of a reorganisation of the education and training of problem girls and boys. To begin with, Te Oranga held only about a dozen girls, but

it quickly expanded, becoming a catch-all for girls from all over New Zealand. Magistrates could commit girls to it, girls could be removed from prison and sent to it under special warrant, while Industrial Schools could ease their own burdens by dispatching particularly troublesome girls there.[3] Most of the girls at Te Oranga were transfers from other schools.

The girls at Te Oranga are several times referred to in the enquiry as 'culls'. Chambers' *Twentieth Century Dictionary* defines a 'cull' as an unsuitable animal eliminated from a flock or herd, a description which echoes in a milder form the words often applied to inmates of Industrial Schools and reformatories. It was said in a ministerial report in 1901 that the 'leading idea in both reformatories and Industrial Schools proper is predominantly educational'. The purpose behind these schools seems to me to have been to prevent what were considered undesirable elements from 'polluting' society. But once in the schools, the young people were undoubtedly subjected to an educational programme of sorts, one which mirrored the sex-stereotyping of society. Boys at Burnham Industrial School were taught tailoring, shoemaking and carpentry. Girls at Te Oranga worked at 'feminine' tasks: they cleaned the buildings, helped with cooking and laundry, and learned plain sewing and dressmaking. It should not be thought that the girls disliked this in principle, as distinct from disliking the unpleasant conditions in which they often had to work. Miss Harrison, the school teacher at Te Oranga, who appears to be a relatively detached witness with loyalties clearly outside the Home, said that 'the girls complain they do not like outside work. They would like to be taught cooking and dressmaking and housework generally. They would like to be trained domestic servants or housewives' (p.34). This suggests that the girls could appraise their prospects realistically. It casts doubt on the value of the tasks the girls had to perform; in theory they learned dressmaking and cooking, but in practice they presumably spent much of their time in doing the least skilled work of the institution.

Te Oranga cannot have been a pleasant place to run or to be in and its rapid expansion meant that for some years the accommodation was inadequate. The Report gives no description of the place; it was from the educationist, A.G. Butchers (who observed 'the Te Oranga Home had little of a home to commend it'), that I learned that each building was enclosed by a twelve foot high iron fence, so that the girls lived in a kind of prison.[4] There were extensive grounds, but not enough buildings to permit proper organisation. At the time of the enquiry, plans for new buildings had been approved by the Department of Education which was responsible for the Home.

The inmates were clearly a mixed bag. In age they ranged from 12 to 21, and they included a few who were retarded. (Ordinary schooling at the time was not compulsory beyond the age of 12.) A number - we are not told how many - suffered from venereal disease. To quote the commissioner, 'Many of the girls are brought direct from the brothels, from Chinese dens, from the open streets, from the company of dissolute parents' (p.vii). Because of the inadequate accommodation, the 54 girls in the Home at the time of the enquiry were divided into only two groups: 11 of the better-behaved were in the first class, enjoying special privileges, and 43 were in the second class. Poor accommodation, leading to poor classification, leading to special problems, was a constant theme in the evidence.

Although in a semi-rural area, Te Oranga had good transport links with Christchurch. Some of the privileged girls were taken there occasionally, while some of the older girls had spells of domestic service in the area. Mrs Branting, the matron or manager of the Home, said in her evidence (p.133) that people constantly wrote to her for servants. It was in fact these links with the community which led to the enquiry.

The Minutes of Evidence, over 130 pages of small type, have to be carefully assessed.[5] A number of people had reasons for departing from the truth. The matron, whose management and humanity were on trial, said that she was not financially dependent on her job, but presumably she hoped to emerge with credit from the enquiry. Her staff may have believed their jobs depended on the support they gave to her version. Even the voluntary Official Visitors had an interest in presenting a rosy picture: a plain one might cast doubts on their own competence or kindness. I do not suggest that these people were necessarily lying, but that one must weigh their evidence.

The girls' evidence must also be weighed. Several of the adults said the girls were terrible liars and a few of the girls admitted they were in the habit of lying. Considering the power exercised by the staff, it would not be surprising if the girls lied as a strategy for survival. The girls were described as unstable and unreliable and some of the evidence supports this. It is hard not to sympathise with the girls, victims of poverty and neglect, but it is advisable to look critically at their testimony.

These people are faceless for me except for Bishop, the commissioner, whose photograph (firm, alert) appears in *The Cyclopedia of New Zealand*, Vol. 3, p.243. Born in England and educated at Winchester, oldest of English public schools (motto: *Manners Makyth Man*), he might not seem a good choice for chairman of an enquiry into the workings of a girls' reformatory in one of the bleaker parts of Christchurch. In fact he seems to have been not a bad choice. A man of many parts, he had worked in

hop-culture in Motueka, taught in Wellington, was a licensed interpreter in Maori and a magistrate for many years. In some respects no more enlightened than most of his contemporaries, his aversion to corporal punishment separates him from almost all the adults who spoke on the subject.

As a magistrate Bishop had committed some of the girls to Te Oranga, and the Home appears to have been a familiar place to him (and probably to all Christchurch magistrates). This might seem a disqualification, but his knowledge had advantages: he would be a hard man to hoodwink. He had presented a report on the Burnham Industrial School for boys in 1906, so he had experience of institutions for young people.[6]

All who gave evidence were examined on oath. The matron was represented by T.G. Russell, a Christchurch lawyer who was aggressive in defending her reputation, asking leading questions repeatedly. C.E. Salter appeared for a member of the public interested in Te Oranga; in effect Salter represented the girls' interests. R.H. Pope appeared on behalf of the Education Department.

The Report is too long to discuss in detail here. Instead I will focus on particular people and themes.

First Mrs Branting, the matron. It would be easy to cast her as a villain. All Russell's skirmishings cannot hide her defects. Her attitude to finance was highly flexible. She spent money given by friends of the Home for Christmas treats on a piano, tennis-court and gymnasium and was saving for a swimming pool. She took money for tips out of special funds in a way that was misleading - though hardly wicked There was something odd in her handling of pocket-money and money for church collections. But her interpretation of Christmas treats seems reasonable and was approved by the Visitors.

More serious than her rough financial management was her failure to keep the punishment book properly. As Bishop pointed out, the recording of punishments long after the event 'from scribbled data or from memory' prevented the Department from monitoring punishments adequately. He also criticised departmental officers who had ignored the obvious defects in the register.

The worst thing about Mrs Branting was her callousness. Take the case of E.S., who absconded while out on service and then allegedly led an immoral life. She claimed on returning that she had been ill, and Mrs Branting admitted that she looked thin. Two days later she was punished for absconding with 12 cuts of the strap and detention in the punishment cell on dry bread. Three days later, she was hospitalised with pains in the head (p.108). According to Dr Alice Moorhouse, the authoritarian and unsympathetic medical officer at Te Oranga, her

ailment (appendicitis) could not be attributed to the punishment.[7] E.S. absconded again during the course of the enquiry. Mrs Branting's medical expertise, much emphasised at times (a nurse, a *doctor's* widow) seems to have failed her here, let alone her humanity.

Mrs Branting gave signs of being power-hungry, as we shall see in the case of A.G. Moreover, like her staff, she was quick to suspect the girls of sexual misconduct. Her language was unrefined. Although she denied it, I believe, after considering the evidence, that she did call two of the girls 'great big hulking hulls' and did say to A.G.'s prospective employer, 'Before you could get her there would probably be a few bastards in the world'. I could quote other examples of her vigorous speech, which probably shocked the ladies who frequented the Home more than the girls.

Yet something must be said on her behalf. She had to cope with 54 resident girls, many of them unruly. They knocked each other down, hit and kicked each other (and occasionally the staff), and often ran away. There were another 22 girls employed outside the Home as servants who were also her responsibility. With the help of the sub-matron, she had to keep in touch with employers and prospective employers, take girls to meet them and correspond with girls when they were out on service. In addition, she was responsible for a mini-farm: cows, chickens and bees were kept on the nine acres of land, while all firewood and nearly all vegetables for the Home came from the property.

Although the number of staff for 54 girls may seem high - matron, sub-matron, four attendants and a living-out school teacher - some of them were responsible (with the help of the girls) for the cooking, cleaning, laundry and mending for 60 people. The girls needed close, constant supervision indoors and in the outdoor work which took up several hours each day. (A man was also employed for outside work.)

Mrs Branting's work was tough and she was a tough woman; no gentle person could have survived 12 years at Te Oranga as she did.[8] But people with no obvious axe to grind - neighbours and girls who had left for ever - attested to her concern, at least for most of the girls, most of the time. I think she did a reasonable job in appalling conditions and occasionally she behaved harshly. Although she strapped freely she was not the most fierce. A.G. said she could take 12 from the Matron but hardly 6 from Miss Hunt.

Bishop criticised some aspects of her management, her failure to keep the punishment register properly, her liberal strappings, her boxing of ears and other points but did not condemn her overall. In fact he wrote (p.7):

> Yes, in spite of many shortcomings, many drawbacks,

> many weaknesses, one cannot but feel grateful to the management for much excellent work that is being done.

The management was Mrs Branting. Perhaps the verdict is too kind. But Mr Pope of the Education Department considered her position the hardest of all those under the Industrial Schools Act (p.125).

The case of Elizabeth Howden, who was on the staff for a few months, gives a glimpse of working life for women. She had been engaged under unclear conditions. She claimed she was engaged as a clerk, with occasional duties as an attendant; Mrs Branting claimed that duties as an attendant were an important part of the work (pp.51-2). Miss Howden was indignant at having to do what she called cow-work (supervision of girls while they milked). There was another misunderstanding over her salary. Then two months after starting work she left to nurse a sick relative. Two weeks later Mrs Branting recalled her. Soon afterwards, Miss Howden had a bad attack of flu and was dealt with unsympathetically by the matron (p.52). Miss Howden's response was to try to stir rebellious feelings among the girls. On being informed, the department ordered her dismissal. Bishop (p.vii) agreed the dismissal was justified but recommended that conditions of employment should be clearly stated in writing. Miss Howden, a rather foolish woman, was a victim of lax arrangements and the assumption that a woman's job could be put on hold while she cared for relatives. (Her absence and her recall injured her relationship with Mrs Branting.)

I wish I knew more about the girls, who are not even names. Obviously they were from the poorest levels of society: difficult girls from other levels would not be committed to Te Oranga. We learn nothing of their ethnic background except that one girl was said to be half Chinese. A little information can be gathered about a few girls. A.G. was sent to Te Oranga for theft. C.A. claimed she was committed solely for one visit to a Chinese house in Wellington. 'I only took some flowers to a woman named Mrs G.' Russell's questions showed he had reason not to believe her. G.J. said she was arrested when on the point of going to Sydney with a man. She was 14 at the time (p.3).

The girl whose misfortunes led to the enquiry was AG, committed to the Home for theft three years earlier by Bishop, when she was nearly 18. She disliked Te Oranga, finding the food inadequate and the work hard. When she complained to Mrs Branting, 'I was thumped on the back and told I was always complaining'. On the certificate of a magistrate (Bishop again) and two doctors she was committed to a mental hospital because of her violent temper and (possibly) a suicide attempt. After a stay of six weeks she was sent to the local Samaritan Home, where the matron, Miss Early, found her excitable at first but 'very amenable to

discipline' and fit to be tried in domestic service. Mrs Branting announced she intended to 'keep the girl in bolts and bars' as long as she could.

A power struggle in which the Department and Miss Early were involved developed between Mrs Branting and a clergyman's wife who wanted to employ A.G. It ended with A.G. going into service, as she wanted, and Miss Early, who had defied the authority of her chairman on A.G.'s behalf, losing her job.

A.G. was clearly a problem: she had attempted suicide and attacked a girl with a knife. Yet she had responded well to Miss Early. Mrs Branting was strongly prejudiced against her and, as Bishop pointed out (p.v), seemed less interested in helping A.G. than in getting her own way.

Apart from individuals, there are themes that stand out, such as sexuality. Every girl committed to Te Oranga or returned there after absconding was subjected to 'a physical examination of a highly private nature' (p.v). Girls transferred from other institutions were exempt. If Mrs Branting, who examined them, suspected VD, she informed the medical officer. The worst cases were sent to hospital. Bishop approved the examinations in principle, but insisted that they should be done by a doctor. There had been criticism of Mrs Branting's role and the examinations must have harmed her relationship with the girls.

Mrs Branting was convinced that the girls absconded chiefly to meet men, although conditions behind the iron fence provided an incentive to escape. The girls thought they were misjudged. H.M. complained that Mrs Branting 'tells the girls they cannot contain themselves when there is a man on the premises.' Mrs Branting and some of the other adults who gave evidence seem to have believed that all contacts the girls had with men, when in domestic service or when absconding, led to sexual intercourse and probably prostitution. The girls' evidence shows they did have contact with men when outside, though it's not clear if they absconded in order to meet them.

Masturbation was another bogey. Dr Moorhouse said it was very common in the Home. 'That would necessitate very constant and strict and almost excessive supervision?' Bishop asked, and was told that it did, day and night. The staff were alert to catch masturbators. Several girls complained that when a girl turned over in bed, 'Miss Mills sings out to us'.

The only time the possibility of lesbianism was raised was when F.B. was asked if she had been found in bed with N.H. She answered that she had been sitting on N.H.'s bed, talking to her. Any physical demonstration of love would have been difficult in the crowded conditions, with

staff sleeping nearby, ears tuned to the sound of bedsprings. Girls were everywhere and were diligent and imaginative tale-bearers. A letter written by a girl (A.Z.M.) out on service to one inside, signed 'Mack' and addressed to 'My own dear Cherry Ripe', suggests lesbianism, although the letter - apart from the opening words - has nothing particularly affectionate in it and is mainly concerned with 'Mack's' dislike of Te Oranga and Mrs Branting; it was read out in court as an illustration of her attitude (p.31).

An inevitable theme was punishment. There were various forms, from strapping to reducing a girl's bread allowance, but it was physical correction which roused most public interest. We learn what it involved from Bishop's condemnation (p.3):

> To think that a young woman of twenty years of age, laid on a bed, face down, clothed in a nightdress and receiving twelve strokes of a strap on her body is to my mind most repellent, beside being quite opposed to all modern methods of discipline.

Girls could receive fewer than 12 strokes but Mrs Branting seems to have preferred this number, the maximum the Department permitted. She also thumped backs and boxed ears freely; she boxed the ears of F.B. one Boxing Day and then sent her to bed for asking if the punishment was a celebration of the day (p.22). Girls could be shut in the punishment cell (an ordinary small room) and in spite of denials from the staff I believe, after studying the evidence, that girls were occasionally forgotten and missed a meal. Bishop thought the cell was not properly supervised.

Two kinds of punishment, designed to humiliate, had aroused comment. The first was a special punishment dress, 'an extraordinary garment of many and various hues', as Bishop said in condemning it. The second was compulsory cutting of the girls' hair, which at that period was worn long. If a girl absconded, short hair would identify her. Several adults were in favour of this punishment. Dr Moorhouse said that her hair was cut off when she was a girl 'and I thought it was very nice'. 'Yours was not cut off as a punishment?' asked Bishop, on target as usual. 'No,it was not' (p.77).

Mrs Branting said that punishments were used only after persuasion had failed. We can't check this, but we can read the details of punishments in an appendix to the Report. This shows that in the two previous years, 153 punishments had been inflicted on 43 girls, about one every five days. Some were relatively light - confinement to the cell for a few hours, or losing a slice of bread. The number of punishments is perhaps not surprising. The girls were undoubtedly turbulent. One of them, according to Mrs Branting, kicked a staff member so badly that she was

- the words are Mrs Branting's - under the doctor for nearly six months. Insubordination, fighting, spitting, striking another girl with a piece of timber, stealing, lying are some of the offences listed.

Many questions were asked about food, always important to captive eaters. Given that the girls must have varied in size and metabolism, it is not remarkable that they disagreed over the adequacy of meals. Most girls questioned said the amount was satisfactory, some said it wasn't, and a few claimed there was enough in summer but not in winter. Dr Moorhouse considered it 'very good plain food', while Bishop pronounced it 'good, wholesome and ample in quantity'. He based this partly on the 'healthy and robust appearance' of the girls, which seems a reasonable test.

But Bishop had two criticisms of the food. He had heard that Mrs Branting watered the syrup. The amount of jam and dripping put on the girls' bread by the staff was also earnestly debated and two slices of bread, one spread with dripping, one with jam, seem to have lain around for some time. Bishop was particularly interest in the syrup-watering and hardly rested until Mrs Branting promised the practice would cease.

His other complaint was the use of chamber-pots as containers for jam, sugar, rice and milk. When the girls complained of this, according to A.Z.M., Mrs Branting told them 'they never had better in their own homes'. Mrs Branting said that chamber-pots were used to store food in many institutions. She had bought more than were needed and used the spares as containers. She added rather snidely to Bishop, who was active in the questioning, 'Evil to him who evil thinks'. Bishop strongly condemned the practice (p.vi):

> The endeavour should be to refine and elevate these girls, and not to cause them to believe that we appraise them so low in the domestic scale as to store their food in a vessel that is not even mentioned in ordinary polite society.

Refining and elevating the girls - or even coping with them properly - was hardly feasible in existing conditions. Immediate reorganisation was urged by several witnesses. Bishop in the Report strongly supported the plan of the City Missioner who visited the Home regularly. This plan proposed that on arrival, girls should be held in a reception class for three months. There would be three other classes: the third class for particularly difficult girls, the second class into which most girls would be placed after the reception class, and the first class which would be reached by good behaviour. This plan was praised by several witnesses and Mr Pope of the Education Department said that it would be put into operation once the new building was completed.

Undoubtedly more space would improve life at Te Oranga; it would

also permit better control of the girls. Control was obviously the key issue. The instruction received by the girls in cookery, bee-keeping, poultry-rearing, gardening, dressmaking, plain and fancy sewing, designed, it was said, to fit them for work as servants or wives, their leisure activities of gymnastics, tennis and croquet, were not of primary importance to the authorities. The girls were at Te Oranga to be controlled and reformed and restored eventually to the world, clean, orderly and respectable and no longer a perceived threat to society.

But supposing girls were still unregenerate at 21, the age at which, under the Industrial Schools Act, they passed beyond the control of the authorities? Several witnesses, as well as the commissioner, believed the authorities should have power to detain young people beyond that age. Bishop pointed out (p.vii):

> Society protects itself today from the habitual criminal, it has an equal right to protect itself against the young sexual degenerate without waiting for him to first commit some horrible crime.

Hy hypothesised that a girl might be 'hopelessly bad. She is a sexual degenerate, and will be a source of contamination wherever she goes'. Such a girl ought not to be turned loose on society on reaching 21. Mr Pope believed that magistrates should have power to extend the period of detention to the age of 25 for inmates of Te Oranga who, in the opinion of the matron, were 'unfit to be at large' at the age of 21. He said that he and Mrs Branting had in fact kept the information from a girl that she had reached her majority. She was a 'half-caste Chinese and there was a grave danger of her going back to the Chinese life'.

These attitudes came directly or indirectly from the influential social hygiene movement, which was based on the hereditarian ideas of the nineteenth century. Many of the supporters of this movement wanted to sterilise those they considered unfit, or at least to limit their opportunities for breeding. They must have been delighted with the passing in 1909 of the Industrial Schools Act, soon after the Te Oranga enquiry and probably influenced by some of the evidence. This act gave magistrates power to detain beyond the age of 21 any inmate of an Industrial School who was found 'to be morally degenerate or otherwise not (in the public interest) a fit person to be free of control'. This detention could, with some safeguards for the person involved, be extended indefinitely. The act applied to both sexes, but the reports of the Minister of Education show that it was used against women more than men. The 1914 report shows 12 women detained under the act and 1 man. In 1915, the numbers of women and men respectively were 19 and 3; in 1916, 27 and 5. This is not surprising, since women seem to have been held solely

responsible for the spread of venereal disease and for the birth of illegitimate children.

Te Oranga's short history came to a rather abrupt end in 1918. In the two previous years there had been an average of 70-85 girls in residence, so it may have looked to be necessary and flourishing. But in fact, departmental policy was changing. A system of boarding-out children from Industrial Schools with relatives, friends or people not related to them was now adopted. The Minister of Education, in his report for 1918, claimed that according to departmental officials and the staff of Industrial Schools, the boarding-out system was superior to what he called, significantly, 'the barracks or institution system'. The preference for the boarding-out system in dealing with neglected and dependent children was 'practically world-wide' (*AJHR*, 1918, vol.2, E1, p.66). It was also cheaper to run - a point which probably carried weight with authorities everywhere - since the number of institutions could be reduced, with only the most intractable young people being kept inside. At Te Oranga, the majority of girls had always arrived as transfers from other schools, but 'with more careful scrutiny of each case and different methods of treatment' the number of transfers was reduced to a minimum. Moreover, 'young delinquent and uncontrollable children' were now to be supervised in their own homes, provided the conditions were favourable. (Previous reports gave the impression that the girls' home conditions were invariably appalling.) The better behaved girls were placed in domestic service, while a small number, who could not be dealt with in any other way, were sent to Caversham Industrial School (*AJHR*, 1919, vol.1, E1, pp.48-9).

Te Oranga was gone and not much lamented, I assume. Yet after eighty years the Report of the Commission of Enquiry can still enfold and enthral one with its details of ordinary life in all its obstreperous, bursting energy, barely contained behind the iron fence Some of the worst aspects of that life have, I hope, gone for ever, but many of the attitudes expressed by adult witnesses are alive and rampant to this day.

Notes

1. *AJHR*, 1908, vol.5, H21.
2. I welcome the comments of Sandra Coney on the use of the word 'girl'. See *Every Girl: A Social History of Women and the YWCA in Auckland 1885-1985*, Auckland YWCA, 1986:1.
3. Industrial Schools were intended for girls and boys who were 'destitute, or whose only faults are due to want of proper discipline and control...' Reformatories were for those who had 'shown criminal or vicious tendencies'. *AJHR*, 1901, vol.3, E3,p.2.
4. Butchers, A.G., *The Centennial History of Education in Canterbury*, published

by the Centennial Committee of the Canterbury Education Board (1950?):232-3.

5. I give page references to the evidence only where the person named gives evidence on more than one occasion or gives evidence which runs to more than a couple of pages. In other cases, the evidence can be traced through the Index to the Evidence of the Report. Girls are referred to throughout the Report by their initials. In the Index, the initial of the surname is given first, but in the evidence itself, the initial of the first name is given first. I have used the latter form throughout the article.
6. The terms of the enquiry into Burnham School had required Bishop to consider the same issues as he was to consider in the Te Oranga enquiry, with the additional matter of the treatment of sickness. The Burnham Report is less than a twelfth of the size of the Te Oranga Report and contains no evidence given by witnesses. Much the same problems are revealed as at Te Oranga, e.g. poor building and unsatisfactory classification of inmates. Relations between manager and staff appear to have been worse than at Te Oranga. As at Te Oranga, it was an outcry in the press which led to the enquiry. Bishop's Report can be found in *AJHR,* 1906, vol.2, E3B. The secretary of the commission was Ettie Rout the safe-sex campaigner, who worked as a shorthand-typist in Christchurch at that time.
7. Moorhouse was educated at Christchurch Girls' High School, when Helen Connon was principal. She gained her MB ChB at the University of Glasgow in 1901 and practised in Christchurch for a number of years. She was at one time medical officer at St Helen's, Christchurch.
8. She retired in 1912.

Beryl Hughes is retired from lecturing in the History Department at Victoria University of Wellington. She is convenor of the Wellington Regional Working Party of the Dictionary of Biography and is researching women's history in early twentieth century New Zealand.