

Treatment of our Lunatics: The Lunatics Act of 1868

“Everything is done which can be done, with the means at command, to make their lives and occupations resemble that of their more fortunate fellow-beings, and to remove, as much as possible, the feeling of restraint and confinement.”

- Reports on the Lunatic Asylums in New Zealand, 1870

When the Auckland Provincial Lunatic Asylum was opened in 1867, it had been 21 years since the passing of the Lunatics Ordinance, the first piece of legislature in New Zealand regarding the treatment of the mentally ill. A lot had changed during this period of time – in 1846, when the Ordinance was passed, it referred to asylums that did not yet exist anywhere in the country. When the Auckland Asylum opened, it was one of four independent lunatic asylums in New Zealand – existing alongside Karori Lunatic Asylum in Wellington, Sunnyside Lunatic Asylum in Christchurch, and the Littlebourne Lunatic Asylum in Dunedin. The asylum boom would continue in New Zealand for the next few decades, with another four large asylums opening before the end of the 19th century. Even by 1868 it was noted that the provinces “now vie with each other in erecting costly buildings for the sole purpose of promoting... comfort and welfare [for the insane]”.¹

It quickly became clear that with the rise of these new institutions the Lunatics Ordinance was no longer extensive enough to stand alone as the only piece of legislature regulating treatment of the insane. While the Ordinance had preceded the establishment of asylums in New Zealand, it pre-dated even any plans for the formation of any such institution; it had consequently become rapidly outdated with the rise of the asylum as the primary facility for confining the insane. It was for this reason that, in 1868, the Lunatics Act

¹ Fisher, “Annual Report of the Provincial Lunatic Asylum to the Provincial Surgeon”, *Daily Southern Cross*, 18 March 1868.

was passed – a piece of legislation that dictated not only proper treatment of lunatics but the management of the asylums built to keep them.

The Lunatics Act required, amongst other things, that a Governor-appointed inspector from each district regularly conduct inspections of the asylum within their district – there was no upper limit of visits specified, but only that they must occur at a minimum of once every three months. The inspections were to be carried out with no prior notice, and were to take as long as the inspector deemed necessary. Observations of the state and conditions of the asylums visited were to be recorded in detail in an annual report, which was then presented before Parliament. Similar reports were already in use – annual reports of patients treated and deceased in the hospital asylum and gaol were standard, and a relatively extensive report was produced on the state and condition of the Auckland asylum in the first year it was opened.² But the reports required by the Lunatics Act were a definite improvement, with accountability prioritised through the appointment of an independent inspector (the initial report had been made by the superintendent of the asylum – not exactly an objective bystander) and the no-prior-notice clause. This focus on accountability was maybe not the direct product of but was certainly influenced by a couple of alarming occurrences in the early 1860s. Reports of serious abuse at the colonial Lunatic Asylum in Jamaica had been well-publicised in England and its colonies, scandalising the general public and sparking discussion in New Zealand of the management of its own asylums.³ And in 1863 the death of Leonard Stilwell, a “person of unsound mind” imprisoned in Nelson Gaol, sparked not only an inquest but also public concern about neglect and ill treatment of the insane occurring behind closed doors.⁴

² Fisher, “Annual Report of the Provincial Lunatic Asylum to the Provincial Surgeon”, *Daily Southern Cross*, 18 March 1868.

³ “Management of Hospitals and Lunatic Asylums”, *Otago Daily Times*, 23 July 1863.

⁴ “Inquest on the body of Leonard Stilwell”, *Colonist*, 27 March 1863; “Treatment of our Lunatics”, *Colonist*, 31 March 1863.

INQUEST ON THE BODY OF LEONARD STILWELL.

An inquest was held in the Nelson Gaol, on the body of Leonard Stilwell, who died in the Gaol on Saturday, March 21, and was buried the same evening. The deceased had been a long time of unsound mind, and had been committed to gaol several times as a vagrant. The following evidence was adduced on Saturday:

Figure 1: The death of Leonard Stilwell and the subsequent inquest was widely reported on throughout New Zealand. *Colonist*, 27 March 1863. Accessed via *Papers Past*.

The objectivity and detail provided in the reports not only provided necessary accountability but also gave valuable insight into the day-to-day running of the asylum, as well as what life was like within them. Reading the reports, it becomes evident very quickly that the patients of the asylums lived a highly regimented lifestyle – a lifestyle dictated by the built spaces surrounding them. The padded cell may have been the built space which most literally expressed the confinement and separation forced upon patients, but confinement and separation was enacted in ways other than simply locking patients up.

When the first inspections began in 1869, the Auckland Asylum had been open for just under two years and was home to 92 patients – 65 male and 27 female.⁵ An imposing and modern structure of brick, its stature was undermined only a little by its asymmetry consisting of only a central block and east wing (the west wing, left off in the initial build due to budget constraints, was already noted as an impending necessity to prevent overcrowding but would still not be started upon until 1878).⁶ The asylum grounds comprised of twenty two acres with two each reserved for planting potatoes and vegetable crops respectively. The

⁵ “Reports on Lunatic Asylums in New Zealand”, Appendix to the Journals of the House of Representatives, 1870, pg 4.

⁶ “Mr Herapath, architect...”, *Auckland Star*, 29 November 1878.

asylum also sported a kitchen, dairy, bakehouse, cellars, and its own well.⁷ Like many asylums at the time, the Auckland Asylum aimed to be as self-sufficient as possible with the goal of employing patients in labour to produce much of their own food, and although this potential had not yet been fully realised by 1869 the inspector John King notes that two acres of potatoes had been planted by the patients. Self-sufficiency, of course, fed into the ‘separation and confinement’ idea that was characteristic of cultural attitudes towards the insane at the time. But it was also thought to be an important method of treatment – employing patients in manual labour was a way to get them physically active and mentally engaged in meaningful work. It was also a way to make the patients feel less separated and confined, giving them the freedom to move about the grounds and engage in the kind of productive labour that they would otherwise lack.

The patients led lives of rigid routine within the walls of the asylum. The enforcement of strict schedules was a method of separating and confining patients day-to-day in a less forceful but more insidious way than locking them away in a padded room, but still utilised specific elements of the built environment of the asylum. Patients were taken out and walked twice a day when weather permitted in the ‘airing courts’, small courtyards which were contained behind the building’s wings and hidden from public view – for want of a proper enclosure, and to keep them from public view, patients were not often taken out into the grounds proper to walk. The dining hall saw meals served three times a day, carefully timetabled and distributed – for example, in the summer months patients had breakfast at eight in the morning, eating dinner at one in the afternoon and supper at six o’clock. The standard menu is detailed in exact measurements in the 1870 report. Each patient was

⁷ “Reports on Lunatic Asylums in New Zealand”, Appendix to the Journals of the House of Representatives, 1870, pg 3.

allowed half a pound of bread and one pint of tea, while dinner was a pint of meat and vegetable soup with meat and potatoes, and another half-pound of bread.⁸

Of course, like self-sufficiency, these measures— outdoor walks in enclosed areas, regularly scheduled and portioned meals – were taken with the aim of promoting health and preventing harm to the patients of the asylum in the interest of moral treatment. Life at the asylum was not entirely bleak – while definitely a product of its time in the focus on separation and confinement, efforts were made to provide care and treatment to patients. This extended to efforts aiming to alleviate overwhelming feelings of imprisonment. Entertainment was well provided, and the asylum sported a library made up of books donated by the community as well as a day room stocked with indoor games like cards, dominoes, and draughts.⁹ Patients participated in singing and music lessons, if they were able, and a monthly entertainment night was held which included plays, recitation, music, and dancing, and was open to members of the public as well as patients. These nights were well publicised, and often reported upon in the papers – they were frequently attended by influential members of the community.

⁸ “Reports on Lunatic Asylums in New Zealand”, Appendix to the Journals of the House of Representatives, 1870, pg 4.

⁹ “Reports on Lunatic Asylums in New Zealand”, Appendix to the Journals of the House of Representatives, 1870, pg 4.

ENTERTAINMENT AT THE LUNATIC ASYLUM.

LAST evening the usual monthly entertainment given at the Lunatic Asylum for the benefit of the patients passed off with unqualified success. There was an unusually large attendance—the dining-room being, in fact, crowded by lady and gentleman visitors from Auckland, and the gentry of the neighbourhood. Amongst those present were—Mr. R. J. O'Sullivan, Messrs. J. and H. Williamson, Miss Williamson, Quartermaster Gallagher, Captain Cooper, Mrs. R. Kidd, Mr. Philson; Mr. Ward, Paymaster General Government; Mr. J. King, Mr. Waymouth, Mr. and Miss Naughton, Misses Donovan (2), Mrs. Williamson, Messrs. Rattray, Belfrage, Brophy, and the Nathan Troupe. The entertainment was commenced about seven o'clock, when the following programme was gone through :—

Figure 2: A newspaper excerpt reporting on one of the monthly entertainment nights held at the asylum. Note the list of attendants. Daily Southern Cross, 25 June 1869. Accessed via Papers Past.

It is an overly simplistic narrative to think that, with the transition from gaol to asylum, the treatment and quality of life of those confined to these institutions improved significantly and linearly – that the progression of mental health treatment at the time can be encapsulated in the contrast between the inmate languishing miserably in their cell and the patient receiving care and medical treatment in the asylum. It is just as overly simplistic to say that almost no change had occurred at all, and that the patient at the asylum was in fact just as much a miserable prisoner as the inmate at the gaol. The most accurate narrative is somewhere between the two extremes. The asylum building was, at the time it was

constructed, a necessary structure. An improvement upon both the gaol and the hospital asylum, it represented an important progression in attitudes at the time towards a moral treatment of the mentally ill. But it would take many years to even begin to eradicate those same attitudes that led to the initial imprisonment of lunatics in the city gaol – and the asylum represents this, too. It endures as an uneasy historical legacy of our national approach to mental illness and its treatment.

In the decades that extend beyond the chronological scope of this project, the Auckland Lunatic Asylum would weather its fair share of controversies, beginning with the damning Skae Report of 1877 and escalating to allegations of abuse of patients that would continue on into the 21st century.¹⁰ When it closed in 1992, it was as a relic of its time, a building built to serve a purpose that was no longer relevant in the modern world. Treatment of the mentally ill had moved beyond the needs which were prioritised when the asylum was first constructed, and the building had well outlived its necessity. Today the ‘Asylum at the Whau’ stands empty and vacant, with windows shattered and grounds unkempt – an enduring physical reminder of the attitudes and treatments best left in the past.

¹⁰ Skae, “Lunatic Asylums in New Zealand (Report on the)”, Appendix to the Journals of the House of Representatives, 1877; McManus, “‘Sheol’ Otherwise ‘Hell,’ only four miles from Auckland: how patients are treated at the Auckland Asylum”, 1892.



Figure 3: The front and centre of the original Auckland Asylum building as it stands today. Photographed by the author, February 2023.

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