

## Transient School Communities: Education of 'The Great Wandering Class'

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### Abstract

This paper makes a study of the education of children living at the Lock 7 and 9 construction camps between 1923 and 1935. While completing a Masters Project through the University of New England in 2010, I discovered the unusual situation whereby the children of men employed on a South Australian construction project were enrolled in Victorian schools for a period of time. The archival record of correspondence between the teachers and the Victorian Education Department at Lock 7 and 9 made fascinating reading as they tussled to obtain the necessary supplies and to administer a school with a finite life. School 4156, which began at Lock 9 near Kulnine Station in Victoria closed in 1926 and reopened six years later at a new location near the Rufus River in 1930. It finally closed at the completion of the works in 1934. Who were the teachers and what struggles did they have teaching the children of the great wandering class? This paper tells their story.

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In South Australia's 175th year, water is as topical an issue as it was in the early days of European settlement. Research for my Masters Degree focused on the harnessing of the waters of the Murray River. It was whilst undertaking this research that I uncovered school files relating to the lock construction scheme. In the first quarter of the twentieth century, South Australia was charged with the construction of the first nine of the series of planned River Murray locks and weirs even though locks seven, eight and nine were outside its borders. Significantly, the teachers were supplied to the schools at these lock sites based upon the state where each 'construction community' was situated, regardless of distance from a particular centre of administration. For example, the school at Lock 8 on the N.S.W. side of the river was staffed by the N.S.W. Education Department. Using as a case study the settlements based at Locks 9 and 7, both situated on the Victorian side of the River Murray, this

paper will provide glimpses of the unusual circumstance where the children of workers on an interstate scheme were educated by Victorian teachers.

In a post-Federation nation-building exercise of immense proportions involving the states of New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia, construction of the lock systems on the River Murray began with the building of Lock 1 at Blanchetown in South Australia during 1915. Argument as to which state should take responsibility for the costs of building, infrastructure and the quantity of captured waters to which each would be entitled continued for many years.<sup>1</sup> Under the River Murray Waters Act, storage provision for irrigation was to be made on the upper Murray River and at Lake Victoria, and twenty-six weirs and locks would be built in the course of the Murray River from its mouth to Echuca and along the Murrumbidgee River.<sup>2</sup> South Australia's responsibility would be the construction of all of the works between the Murray River mouth and Wentworth, New South Wales would manage the works on the Murrumbidgee above Wentworth and New South Wales and Victoria jointly would take responsibility for all the works on the Murray above its junction with the Darling River.<sup>3</sup> However, due to cost blowouts and rail and road transport improvements, not all of the proposed works proceeded.<sup>4</sup> The construction works involved large cohorts of workers transporting themselves and their families to remote locations where they established small, relatively self-sufficient communities for the duration of the works. Once building was completed the workers' community would relocate to the next site to begin the entire process again. Such lives led these workers and their families to be referred to as 'the great wandering class.'<sup>5</sup>

Only limited studies of the lives of the people involved in lock construction on the Murray River exist, and even less has been made of the schools at the sites. Rob Linn's *Murray Water is Thicker than Blood*, an oral history, is the pre-eminent work in this field.<sup>6</sup> However, his chapter 'Learning for the Future' does not refer to the different state systems involved at the various lock schools or the difficulties at the administrative level. Marianne Hammerton's *Water South Australia: a History of the E and W S*, attempts to cover the history of the enormous Engineering and Water Supply Department which, with its antecedents, oversaw the state's lock and weir construction along with other irrigation and construction projects.<sup>7</sup> The breadth of her study prevented any analysis at the micro-history level of any of the schools at the

lock sites. The three volume *Vision and Realisation, a centenary history of education in Victoria*, devotes nine lines to Lock 9 School and nothing to Lock 7 School.<sup>8</sup> The invitation was there for me to research the personnel at these two schools.

Although parallels exist with the broader history of rural education at the time, my study of these two lock schools is unlike other school histories which have often been written in response to the celebration of a milestone. A large number of such publications emerged in the 1980s to celebrate the centenary of education in Victoria, and often were a compilation of individual recollections written for a guaranteed audience.<sup>9</sup> Although only a total period of nine years contains the life and times of the staff at School 4156, Locks 7 and 9, the research is complicated by the fact that the archival record is split between two states. The records for the schools at Locks 7 and 9 are held at the Public Record Office of Victoria while the State Records of South Australia holds other documentation relating to lock matters. The lock teachers' struggles became apparent in the letters they wrote to the Victorian Education Department requesting additional staff, supplies or financial support. Yet it appears that in spite of the obstacles, the staff succeeded in passing on an education remembered fondly by the recipients.<sup>10</sup> Oral testimony of some of the former students has allowed small, otherwise hidden, insights into the personalities of a few of the teachers. I believe this little school faced additional challenges, situated as it was, literally on the edge of competing state systems.

On-going rivalry between the states forms a background for this study. Such rivalry was rife from when the lock and weir system was planned as previously mentioned. In the discussions leading up to Federation, education was one of the 'non-negotiables' for federal control and strong and jealous competition regarding education continued right up to the Hobart Declaration in the late 1990s.<sup>11</sup> There are many examples of this lack of cooperation, especially for schools close to the Victorian and South Australian border, including the exclusion of South Australian students from the Murrayville primary to year 12 College in the 1980's.<sup>12</sup> A similar issue existed at Mildura. McIntyre found that, 'as education is the responsibility of the individual states, children from New South Wales are not encouraged to attend Mildura High School,' even though only a river separated the areas.<sup>13</sup> In this context, the trials and tribulations of the teachers at Lock 7 and 9 schools may have been imbued with

something of the 'inconvenience' of Victoria ministering to South Australia's needs. An early reply from the Education Department to the South Australian Public Works Department about a request for supplies for Lock 9 School stated, '[t]he fact that no. 9 Lock is in Victoria was overlooked.'<sup>14</sup> The teachers and the children were at the mercy of these opposing interstate departments who often enough 'passed the buck' about responsibilities.<sup>15</sup>

After World War One, the Soldier Settlement scheme with its push into far flung places led to demands for schools, often 'hidden in the trackless bush' and these schools became the 'crucial centre of the community.'<sup>16</sup> In 1922, a regional Victorian newspaper boasted that no country in the world had done more to provide efficient one-teacher schools in the outback population as Australia.<sup>17</sup> It continued, '[i]n Victoria, where there is a sufficient number of children of school age, and where a suitable room is offered, a teacher is provided and a school opened.' Fresh young teachers were sent to rural schools to earn promotion by their effective work in country districts, ensuring a steady flow of keen young teachers for these locations.<sup>18</sup> While life at the 'lock camps' was often devoid of the relative conveniences of more urban living, one absolute necessity was the provision of education for the children just as it had been in other rural locations.<sup>19</sup>

Although the locks are numbered numerically from Blanchetown, lock work did not proceed in a logical numerical order, but rather in relation to priorities in the overall plan. After Lock 1 was completed, construction of Locks 3, 5 and 9 commenced, with Lock 9 of critical importance with regard to its proximity to the storage facility at Lake Victoria, which was to ensure a reliable supply of water for South Australia.<sup>20</sup> Lock 9 was the 'farthest afield constructed by the South Australian Public Works Department'<sup>21</sup> adding to the complexity of administrative demands. It was about three hundred and fifty kilometres from Adelaide and six hundred kilometres from Melbourne.

The first teacher appointed to School 4156 was Arthur Burgess, aged twenty-four, who commenced on 30 January, 1923 in the same month that construction works at the site began in earnest. The first indication of the complexity of administrative issues surrounding the lock school and the circuitous route taken by communication between the various stakeholders was when on 5 February 1923, the South Australian

Public Works Department sent a letter to the Education Department, stating that enquiries had been received from parents at Lock 9 about when a teacher would be provided when in fact he had started by this time!<sup>22</sup> Arthur Burgess' official 'teacher file' states that he had 'a very good knowledge of rural school management' and was 'a young teacher of much promise, an ex-Duntroon cadet with excellent qualifications in literary subjects and physical training.' Fortuitously, the file then states that, 'he gets on well with children!'<sup>23</sup> All these traits would have been useful at Lock 9. Despite the fact that the Education Department had agreed to supply books and blackboards,<sup>24</sup> Mr Burgess began his classes ill equipped. This is alluded to in his strident plea just one week into the school term for books and other requisites.<sup>25</sup> The department, showing little insight into his difficulties, replied that the request should be made on the 'enclosed form' and through the district inspector.<sup>26</sup> It is easy to imagine the frustrations that such petty bureaucratic demands would have caused a teacher in the 'trackless bush.' Claims made in the press of the time refer to the Education Department as 'an autocratic institution.'<sup>27</sup> Sullivan and Spauld claim that teachers in remote areas of Queensland felt their employer had deserted them and that bureaucratic pettiness was a source of annoyance for teachers.<sup>28</sup> Mr. Burgess also faced this problem.

Since school staffing was based on enrolment,<sup>29</sup> an increase to forty-one students led Mr. Burgess in May 1923 to request the appointment of a junior teacher to assist with the demands of the growing school.<sup>30</sup> He was confident that the enrolment would continue to increase as twelve additional married quarters were due to be constructed in the near future as married men continued to arrive at the site. At this early stage of the school year, Mr. Burgess had already assessed the needs of his pupils, requesting 'a teacher with some experience' due to the 'backwardness of the majority of the pupils.'<sup>31</sup> There are no extant school records to support Burgess's description,<sup>32</sup> but when coupled with comments made by the district inspectors (mentioned later in this paper), it seems reasonable to conclude that these students did present 'special' issues. Obviously no-one was appointed by the department and by 1 June 1923, Burgess had appointed a junior teacher, Miss Joan Reed, the daughter of Cliff Reed, one of the lock men.<sup>33</sup> Miss Reed lacked the 'experience' that Burgess had hoped for with his 'backward students' but her appointment was in line with existing teacher training. Andrew Spauld referred critically to the 'cheap sweated labour' of junior teachers.<sup>34</sup>

This pupil-teacher apprentice system co-existed with a college course which bonded teachers for a period of years.<sup>35</sup>

The inspector whose role it was to visit each school twice a year, once to examine pupils' results and once without notice to inspect the premises, furniture, discipline and the teacher's ability to instruct, gave marks which affected their salary and promotion opportunities.<sup>36</sup> In October 1923, the inspector's report praised Burgess stating that he had adapted himself to his surroundings and had a good influence on his pupils.<sup>37</sup> He was also described as being especially fitted for this 'type of school'<sup>38</sup> suggesting something unique about the school. Possibly, Burgess' Duntroon background was an advantage in assisting him to take charge and forge a way forward. In any case, all stakeholders were keen for him to continue. When he announced his intended marriage for Christmas 1923, married quarters were arranged for him since he 'has done excellent work in his school and as a live member of the community.'<sup>39</sup> His positive involvement in the community was in line with other remote teachers who organised social activities.<sup>40</sup> By May of his first year, Mr. Burgess had already organised a concert raising £7 in funds for a school library and had planned a fence and the laying out of a school garden.<sup>41</sup> It would have therefore been a surprise when on 18 February 1924, with only eight days notice, Burgess telegraphed his intention to resign, giving no indication of the reasons, in order to resume his former position on the Australian Army Staff Corps. Burgess specifically instructed that his reliever would need to leave Melbourne by 23 February as 'the motor coach from Mildura to the lock runs on Fridays and Mondays only.' However, no reliever arrived and, personally inconvenienced, Burgess stayed on till 29 February, beyond his resignation date and then he closed the school.<sup>42</sup>

Things did not evolve smoothly in the transition to a new teacher. On 10 March 1924, after an interrupted start to the school year, twenty-one year old Lindsay Patience, found himself facing the fray and reopening the school, armed with a freshly undertaken 'training program for rural schools.'<sup>43</sup> Having been in his new school only one month, Mr. Patience requested the necessary texts not applied for by his predecessor: Pendlebury's Arithmetic, Hall and Stevens School Geometry, Wright's Physics part 1 and 2, Wallis' Junior Geography, Herbert's Senior Geography, Atlas, leaflet maps of Australia, Palgrave's Golden Treasury, Shakespeare's Macbeth, Henry

V, Merchant of Venice and Scott's Ivanhoe.<sup>44</sup> It would appear that Mr. Patience was a competent teacher as the inspector's comments include descriptions such as 'earnest, thoughtful and industrious.'<sup>45</sup> He left the school on 19 April 1924 for Tallarook after only forty-one days at School 4156. His appointment on 'temporary relieving duty' may explain his short tenure at the school. With bureaucratic obstinacy, the Education Department, delayed the reimbursement of Mr. Patience's return travel costs from Mildura to Lock 9 by mail-car until well after he had left the school, requesting receipts which simply were not supplied by the mail car driver. Correspondence dated 8<sup>th</sup> May 1924 shows Mr. Patience still claiming total costs of £2/10/- for the trip.<sup>46</sup> Mr Patience was placed at four different schools up until his resignation on 7 March 1925.<sup>47</sup>

Charles Costelloe, an experienced teacher aged 28, was appointed as Head Teacher on 20 April 1924. His official record before his commencement at Lock 9 stated that he was an 'earnest, energetic teacher, employs good methods, good management, very good discipline and tone.'<sup>48</sup> He certainly maintained this rigour as his report two months into his time at Lock 9 School noted that he was a well-planned and effective teacher with 'a brisk and encouraging style. He employs modern methods of instruction and develops the expressive powers of his pupils.'<sup>49</sup> 1924 however, presented new difficulties for the lock as floods interrupted the progress of the work. Although half the men were discharged, the married men were kept as much as possible.<sup>50</sup> As a result, the school appeared to suffer very little change. The social life surrounding the school continued and the concert in aid of the children's Christmas tree and sports was held before a crowded house, involving musical items by the children, an overture by Miss Connie Reed, one of the senior students and songs by her mother Mrs. J. C. Reed.<sup>51</sup> Pat Reed recalled that his 'mother was the main instigator of the school concerts.'<sup>52</sup> A continued growth in enrolments to forty-nine led Mr. Costelloe to request an additional teacher on 25 April 1925.<sup>53</sup>

I have the honour to apply to appoint a sewing mistress to the staff at Lock 9 School in addition to the present staff....This is a particularly hard school to work as the children belong to the great wandering class and have never had any (sic) continued schooling in any place or state.<sup>54</sup>

The position of Sewing Mistress was often part-time and involved sewing as well as the infants' general curriculum.<sup>55</sup> With permission granted, Mr. Costelloe appointed or 'promoted' Joan Reed to this role and employed her sister Constance Reed as Junior Teacher.<sup>56</sup> The Reed family seemed to play a significant part in the school at Lock 9.

School committees had been an important part of Victorian Education since an Amending Education Act of 1910 had established their role in assisting school development.<sup>57</sup> Mr. Costelloe's apparent struggle to form a school committee led the Education Department to suggest that he persist by tactfully making an 'approach (to) parents and others interested and impress upon them the importance of forming a committee to promote the welfare of the children.'<sup>58</sup> To his credit, further correspondence suggests he had been successful in this goal at the end of June 1925.<sup>59</sup> The record depicts Costelloe as a hard-working teacher actively promoting the welfare of his students and of the broader school community. In addition to these roles, he was secretary of the Lock 9 Football Club.<sup>60</sup>

On 10 August the South Australian Commissioner of Public Works advised the Education Department that construction at Lock 9 was drawing to a close and that the teacher would not be required beyond the end of the month.

The Honourable Commissioner wishes me to convey to the education authorities in your state the sincere thanks of the South Australian Government for the way in which they have met the requirements of the employees at No. 9 Lock.<sup>61</sup>

Mr. Costelloe was transferred to Kialla near Shepparton and he remained teaching until retirement at age 65.<sup>62</sup>

The workers and their families from Lock 9 moved to Lock 4 near Loxton. Not only was all the plant and equipment transferred to the next site, but all accommodation was pulled down and transported by paddle steamer to be reassembled at the next location.<sup>63</sup> The school too suffered this fate, not unusual for rural schools. As Daniels stated, 'many school buildings led a nomadic existence, being moved from one site to another, serving a different generation in a different area.'<sup>64</sup> The children from Lock 9 School had their education interrupted by changing between state systems, this time back to South Australia. From June to December of 1926, a number of the children



from Lock 4 were enrolled at Bookpurnong School as their families arrived to commence at the new work site.<sup>65</sup> The school at Lock 4 was established in January 1927 in the Lock 9 building after parents lobbied the South Australian Education Department for a school to be staffed on site at the works.<sup>66</sup> The completion of Lock 4 towards the end of 1929 meant that the Lock 4 School was closed and the lock families moved to the Lock 7 site.<sup>67</sup>

The following request was sent from the South Australian Public Works Department in 1930 to the Education Department requesting a schoolteacher for an estimated initial enrolment of twenty-six children at Lock 7.

As the main camp will be on the Victorian side of the river, the Honourable Commissioner wishes me to approach your department and ask whether you would provide a teacher for Lock no. 7 in a similar manner to the one previously supplied for Lock no. 9. Please send male teacher as female difficult to accommodate.<sup>68</sup>

The Education Department agreed to provide a teacher on 28 January 1930 but added 'the Department would be glad however to be advised of the location of No. 7 Lock.'<sup>69</sup> Although excuses could be made for not being aware of the site of the new lock, I believe the statement may mirror a 'distance' in the department's relationship with the school that translated into further difficulties for the teachers and the children over the next four and a half years. The school number used by Lock 9 was 'recycled' and Lock 7 School became School 4156 No 7.<sup>70</sup>

Conditions for schools had changed drastically in the late 1920s which contributed to an even tougher time for the teachers at Lock 7. As economic conditions worsened in the country, all government allocations were cut by 20%. This included grants to schools as well as teachers' salaries and allowances.<sup>71</sup> The education department removed the travelling day previously available for teachers in remote schools.<sup>72</sup> By August 1931, teachers were bemoaning the fact that their meagre salaries had been reduced to less than pre-war rates, and that two hundred teachers had been deprived of their hard-won promotions in the previous few years. In addition, remote allowances had been withdrawn from teachers in schools 'fifty miles from nowhere' and staffing had been interfered with such that junior teachers, paid little more than one pound a

week, were forced to do the work of assistants earning four times that amount.<sup>73</sup> It is in this framework that we now consider the life of School 4156 at Lock 7.

Thirty-year-old Roy Foran was Lock 7's first teacher transferring from Wickliffe in Victoria with his wife and two children, taking up residence in 'married quarters' near the school.<sup>74</sup> Mr. Foran found himself inadequately resourced to start his new school being required to apply on the appropriate forms for requisites including readers.<sup>75</sup> An active school committee was in place from the beginning, probably having moved with the people from Lock 4. The 'wandering class' was taking on some sustained structures and the committee was engaged in attempts to obtain equipment for the school.<sup>76</sup> In the first few months, Roy Foran experienced a less than satisfactory outcome when he complained about the desks which were 'quite unsuitable' and particularly uncomfortable for the smaller children.<sup>77</sup> Since the education department was not responsible for furniture in a building it had not supplied, his correspondence was transferred to the South Australian Public Works Office. The economic slump of the Depression possibly led to the negative reply: no new desks were to be provided and the desks used at Lock 9 would be repaired.<sup>78</sup> In June 1930 Mr. Foran asked the Education Department to share the cost with the school committee of some maintenance and also to contribute toward the cost of fencing the school grounds, but both requests met with a similar negative response.<sup>79</sup> Many rural schools in buildings which were leased or which had been erected by parents on donated land experienced similar treatment.<sup>80</sup>

As works progressed at Lock 7 and employee numbers increased, the ever-increasing enrolment of students required additional teaching staff. Mr. Foran was granted permission to appoint Florence McPhee, wife of a lock employee, as Sewing Mistress. Her appointment however proved to need a special dispensation from the Governor in Council as the employment of married women in the public service was prohibited.<sup>81</sup> The dispensation was allowed on receipt of information to the effect that no accommodation was available for a single woman and that Mrs. McPhee had successfully carried out the role already at Lock 4.<sup>82</sup> By June 1930 the school's enrolment had risen to fifty-two and Foran was granted permission to appoint Lorna Summers, a relative of one of the lock families, who lived nearby. Her employment as a junior teacher commenced on the day that the inspector visited and he noted in

his report that she was 'energetic and should do effective work.'<sup>83</sup> On 18 October 1930 student numbers were escalating having reached seventy-two. Mr. Foran again requested more staff.<sup>84</sup> Unlike other rural locations where the employment of a female teacher was easier since they could often be 'boarded out' with a local family,<sup>85</sup> letters to the Education Department from the lock schools always insisted on male staff as the single men's quarters were available but no suitable accommodation was available for single women. The Education Department continually failed to understand the living circumstances at the site and asked once more if a female teacher could be accommodated. Mr. Foran stated that a female assistant could not be accommodated as the 'residents have small homes which are temporary structures.'<sup>86</sup> Three weeks later numbers had increased to seventy-nine and further increases were expected around Christmas as work increased at the site.<sup>87</sup> From 4 January 1931, John Joseph Moloney took over as Head Teacher with Mr. Foran as assistant teacher.<sup>88</sup> Foran continued at the school till the start of the 1932 school year. The record is silent as to the reason for his departure from the school except for a letter from a parent asking that Mr. Foran's services be retained.<sup>89</sup> Max Pearson, a former student at Lock 7 School clearly remembers Mr. Foran as 'a popular teacher, a gentlemanly type, very approachable with never a bad word spoken of him.'<sup>90</sup> The inspector's opinions at the time support this memory: 'A very diligent and conscientious worker who has done sound work under unusual conditions.'<sup>91</sup>

Unlike his predecessors, Mr. Moloney, an experienced teacher of thirty-seven years of age had already taught in the region at Werrimull.<sup>92</sup> His many years of corresponding with the education department showed as his regular requests for supplies were liberally sprinkled with the word 'urgent'. He requested large sheets of hyloplate for blackboards, which he claimed, were 'absolutely necessary in this school owing to the big attendance, cramped conditions and to allow for the highly efficient working of the school.'<sup>93</sup> However this request was denied 'due to the present condition of the finances.'<sup>94</sup> Simpler requests such as an extra copy of the Education Gazette and the earlier mailing of salary cheques to 'catch' the mail car to Lock 7 were also refused, a more difficult decision to understand.<sup>95</sup> By 12 February 1931 the enrolment was ninety students. Mr. Moloney's request for two dozen ink wells was allowed (as long as they were submitted on the correct form), but the Physical Education text was 'not available.'<sup>96</sup> Undaunted, Mr. Moloney maintained a confident approach. His March

Progress Report stated that enrolment was ninety-five, with a possible increase and a second class soon. He had asked for an extra building, and had been promised an extension of the school public hall, extra out-offices and another tank. 'An accessible' flagpole had been supplied and school boundary fences were to be extended. He was happy that a good beginning to the year had been made at this 'remote school.'<sup>97</sup>

By May however, things had taken a radical change for the worse with tragedy at the burgeoning school. A telegram sent to Melbourne stated:

Eight grades, one hundred children all in one room, seventy feet by twenty feet. Curtain division. Many sore throats, two deaths. No swabs taken. Health Officer Mildura phoned; several grades affected.<sup>98</sup>

The school was closed for the eleven days leading up to the May school holidays and was re-opened after the term break.<sup>99</sup> Max Pearson remembers the fear throughout the community as anxious parents used various home remedies to safeguard their children. Dr Harris from Renmark set up a temporary hospital in the house previously occupied by the engineer and provided immunizations.<sup>100</sup>

After seven months, on 4 August 1931, Mr. Moloney requested a transfer but was not replaced until Thomas Hogan arrived on 1 October 1931. A series of letters to the Education Department depicted Mr. Hogan's initiation as quite 'harrowing.' Keen to start the new term on time, he arrived in Mildura by overnight train on Tuesday 29<sup>th</sup> September 1931 at 7.15 am. However, as the twice-weekly mail coach to the lock did not depart until Thursday, he 'hired' a friend's car and left Mildura at 10 am that same day. His experience of the trip is described graphically as follows.

Owing to floods, bridges etc being washed away, we had to travel over one hundred miles to reach here and were compelled to spend Tuesday night in the car in the wilds of NSW. During the night we had an inch of rain. This made many roads impassable and we eventually reached the lock at 4.30 pm.<sup>101</sup>

This trip took a total of about thirty hours. Flood waters meant that the shortest route to Lock 7 was via NSW, a distance of seventy four miles which Hogan's driver had quoted him at sixpence per mile. The actual trip covered over one hundred miles. The

department refused to pay the invoice for the section Mildura to Lock 7 of £3/14/- as he had failed to use the 'government contractor,' the mail car.<sup>102</sup>

In spite of this 'traumatic' start, Mr. Hogan went on to establish himself as a valued teacher at the school. The inspector wrote that he was 'brisk and business-like in manner and possessing a good grip of the essentials. He is accepting the responsibility of the school as a whole and should do well.' His next report said: 'A vigorous and energetic teacher who is doing very good work in managing a large and heavy school.' In 1933, the inspector said, 'A forceful teacher who has stimulated his staff and pupils by his attitude towards work. Has secured very good results indeed in a difficult school.'<sup>103</sup>

Vic Fitcher, aged twenty, commenced work as assistant teacher with Mr. Hogan as Head Teacher. Fitcher's story is particularly interesting. He had begun as a junior teacher, and then went on to Teacher's College graduating under bond, aged nineteen. He had good 'academic results' and a teaching ability that would 'improve in his own school.'<sup>104</sup> Twelve months at the tiny one-teacher school Tarrango in the far north-west of Victoria however, resulted in several scathing reports from the inspectors. Although his teaching ability was good, his organization and record-keeping were poor and he was fined a total of £4 over the first year. As a consequence he was removed from the school and sent to Lock 7. The head teacher at Lock 7 was advised to let Mr. Fitcher know that he 'was being removed from Tarrango on account of his unsatisfactory work there.'<sup>105</sup> Whitehead's research showed that this practice of transferring teachers as a disciplinary measure was also used in South Australia.<sup>106</sup> Despite the troubled beginning to his teaching career, Fitcher went on to have a most distinguished career with the Victorian Education Department including as Vice Principal of Melbourne Teachers' College.<sup>107</sup> On beginning at the new school, Fitcher had to write to the department informing them that he had at the end of February, not received any pay cheques!<sup>108</sup> This was rectified and on attaining his twenty-first birthday in July, he received a pleasing increase in his salary to the basic wage of £200 per annum.<sup>109</sup>

By February 1933, the attendance at Lock 7 School had reached one hundred and eleven necessitating the employment of an extra staff member. By the middle of the year, Mr. Hogan advised the Education Department that although the works at the site

were expected to be completed by Easter 1934, the current enrolment was still one hundred and twelve, a fairly constant number since February.<sup>110</sup> After the middle of the year however, enrolments began to decline and by December, they had dropped to ninety-four. It was anticipated that by February 1934, numbers would be fifty and by March, they would have fallen to twenty-five.<sup>111</sup> Mr. Hogan left in January 1934, leaving Vic Fitcher in charge of the decreased enrolment. Fitcher had acquitted himself well at his new school. Max Pearson recalled his genial manner, approachability and commitment to the life at the camp, taking some of the boys rabbiting in his spare time.<sup>112</sup> Vic Fitcher was actually at the school the longest of all the staff, a total of two years and four months.

Thomas Tuohey, an older man, took School 4156 to its closure. His correspondence continued the pattern of his predecessors.

There are seventy-seven children on the roll and they are all the children of working class people who would appreciate the supply of cheap books.<sup>113</sup>

His enthusiasm showed in the organisation of a First Aid course for twenty-two students with examination by the local doctor from Werrimull. Instead of the wholesome praise Mr. Tuohey probably deserved on the success of the course, the department, although pleased that some first aid had been done, hoped that it would not interfere with the teaching of hygiene.<sup>114</sup> Three of my interviewees were part of that course and two of them happily recall being awarded a medal and certificate for successful completion.<sup>115</sup> During this period, the school had a few different junior teachers including Alf Bottrill, Lorna Summers and Gwen Pearson, the daughter of another lock employee. On 17 December 1934, School 4156 finally closed, finishing a chapter in the lives of the close-knit lock community. Some families moved on to further works at the Goolwa Barrages while others moved elsewhere including a number who moved to Mildura.<sup>116</sup>

This study of school 4156 in its two incarnations, has accentuated difficulties faced by many remote rural schools at the time. However, I suggest that the schools at the Lock 9 and Lock 7 construction sites had more complex needs with their unique hallmark of being 'sandwiched' between two state government systems in a kind of 'no-man's land'. The bureaucratic insensitivity of the Victorian Education Department to the

unique set of circumstances of their staff at the lock sites led to an insistence on rules and regulations that complicated an already difficult task. Reflecting on the staff at School 4156, I like to think that, 'Sometimes teachers endure all that bureaucratic systems throw at them and still emerge as positive individuals.'<sup>117</sup> The various teachers and assistants who worked at School 4156, with their relentless pursuit of a better deal, appear to have played a positive and significant part in the lives of the 'great wandering class.' In this way, these Victorian teachers contributed some threads to the tapestry of South Australian history.

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### About the Author

Helen completed a Masters in History from the University of New England in 2010. Her main interests are Oral History, Public History and Genealogy. She has a strong interest in South Australian History in general, and has undertaken extensive research on the role SA played in the construction of the locks and weirs on the Murray. Helen is particularly keen to allow previously hidden voices to be heard. She is member of the AHA and the SA branch of the OHAA and attends the SA History Conference each year.

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<sup>1</sup> Linn, Rob, *Murray Water is Thicker than Blood: the stories of the families who made the River Murray's locks and barrages*, Adelaide, Openbook, 2001, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Broughton, G. W. *Men of the Murray: A Surveyor's Story*, Adelaide, Rigby, 1966. pp. 54-55.

<sup>3</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 July, 1921, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 February, 1928, pp.15-16. The envisaged scope of the works was initially far more extensive than what was eventually undertaken. According to this newspaper report, the original scheme was significantly reduced when the Murray River Waters Conference decided to give 'Notice of curtailment of the proposed weirs and lock program due to cost blow-outs.' A saving of £7,000,000 would be made. Works would cease with the construction of weirs 1-11 and 15 at Euston. Improvements in road and rail transport made further developments for navigation unnecessary.

<sup>5</sup> VPRS 640 Unit 1753, Inward primary schools correspondence, 1924-1926, C. Costelloe, letter to the Director, Victorian Education Department, 25 April, 1925.

<sup>6</sup> Linn, Rob, *Murray Water is Thicker than Blood, the stories of the families who made the River Murray's locks and barrages*, Openbook, Adelaide, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Hammerton, Marianne, *Water South Australia; A History of the Engineering and Water Supply Department*, Adelaide, Wakefield Press, 1986.

<sup>8</sup> Blake, L.J. (Ed.) *Vision and Realization: A centenary history of state education in Victoria*, vol. 2, Melbourne, Education Department of Victoria, 1973, p. 380.

<sup>9</sup> Garaty, Janice Royaline, *Holy Cross College Woollahra 1908-2001: A micro-study of Catholic Education in the Archdiocese of Sydney in the twentieth century*, PhD Thesis, ACU, 2008, p. 2. <http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/digitaltheses/public/adt-acuvp223.15102009/index.html> Accessed 31 Oct. 2011.

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- <sup>10</sup> Linn, *Murray Water* and Helen Stagg, various interviews with former students at Lock 9 and Lock 7 conducted between 2009-2011, in her possession.
- <sup>11</sup> Walton, Robert, Lecturer in Education, Latrobe University, Mildura Campus, personal email, 2 Nov. 2011.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>13</sup> Mc Intyre, A. J. *Sunraysia: a Social Survey of a Dried Fruit Area*, MUP, 1948.
- <sup>14</sup> VPRS 796 P 000 Unit 873, Education Department Victoria to S.A. Public Works Department, 8 January, 1923.
- <sup>15</sup> See later discussion in this paper regarding the desks at Lock 7.
- <sup>16</sup> Daniels, John, *Early Schooling in Victoria, 1900-1920*, Swan Hill, Pioneer Settlement Press, 1989, p. 2.
- <sup>17</sup> *Gippsland Times*, 26 October, 1922, p. 3.
- <sup>18</sup> *Argus*, 16 Oct. 1934, Mr Frank Tate, former Minister of Education writing about how Victoria led the Empire in compulsory education.
- <sup>19</sup> The Victorian Education Act of 1872 provided for compulsory education and so it was that schools had to be provided at these far-flung places.
- <sup>20</sup> *Advertiser*, 24 August, 1915, pp. 6, 10.
- <sup>21</sup> *Advertiser*, 19 January 1924, p. 18.
- <sup>22</sup> VPRS 640 Unit 1672, Inward Correspondence, Commissioner of Public Works, South Australia, 5 February 1923 to the Secretary, Education Department, Melbourne,
- <sup>23</sup> VPRS 13579 Unit 66, Teacher Record Books.
- <sup>24</sup> VPRS 796, Unit 873, Outwards letter books, primary schools 1922-35, Education Department Victoria to South Australia Public Works Office, 8 January, 1923.
- <sup>25</sup> VPRS 796 Unit 873, Inwards correspondence, Mr. Burgess to Education Department Melbourne, 7 February, 1923.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, Note regarding suitable reply.
- <sup>27</sup> *Argus*, 28 Aug., 1920, p. 7.
- <sup>28</sup> Sullivan, Martin and Spaul, Andrew, 'The teacher's lot in Queensland, 1882 1930,' pp. 156, 169 in Theobald, Marjorie R. and Selleck, R. J. W. (eds.) *Family, School and State in Australian History*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1990.
- <sup>29</sup> Blake, *Vision and Realization*, vol. 1, p. 322.
- <sup>30</sup> VPRS 796 Unit 1672, Mr. Burgess to District Inspector, Educ. Dept. Melbourne. 1 May, 1923. Although junior teachers were an important part of school life at Lock 9 and also at Lock 7, I have not accessed their records for this paper as most of the correspondence was from the head teacher.
- <sup>31</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>32</sup> VPRS 640 Unit 2105, Central Inwards Primary School Correspondence, 1933 -1935, Gertrude Reed to Education Department Victoria, 3 June 1935. When Gertrude Reed wrote to the Education Department requesting her school records from Lock 9, she was advised on June 11, 1935: 'It is regretted that there is no record at the office of work done by you at school no 4156, No 9 lock.'
- <sup>33</sup> VPRS 640 Unit 1672.
- <sup>34</sup> Spaul, Andrew 'Invoking ghosts from the past: the formation of the Victorian Teachers' Union, Victoria, Australia, 1916-1926,' *Historical studies in Education*, Spring, 1993, Vol. 5 no. 1, pp 87-116.
- <sup>35</sup> Vicary, A. 'Their proper place in society': state education and the politics of status in South Australia, 1951-1979, *History of Education Review*, vol. 22, no. 2 1993, pp. 57-74.
- <sup>36</sup> Daniels, *Early Schooling*, p. 19.
- <sup>37</sup> VPRS 13579, unit 66, File no. 19764, Teacher Record Books.
- <sup>38</sup> VPRS 796 Unit 873, Outwards letter Books, primary schools, Education Department Melbourne to S.A. Public Works, 29 October, 1923.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>40</sup> Whitehead, Kay, 'A small share of pioneering work: the relationship between provisional school teachers and rural communities in South Australia, 1875 to 1915,' *Essays in the History of Rural Education in Australia and New Zealand*, eds. R. C. Petersen and G. W. Rodwell, William Michael Press, Casuarina, Northern Territory, 1993.
- <sup>41</sup> VPRS 796 Unit 1672, Mr. Burgess to District Inspector, 1 May, 1923.
- <sup>42</sup> VPRS 640 Unit 1753, Central inward primary schools correspondence, Burgess to Education Department Victoria, 4 March, 1924.
- <sup>43</sup> VPRS 640 Unit 1753, File no. 22315, 10 March, 1924.
- <sup>44</sup> VPRS 640 Unit 1753, Lindsay Patience to Education Department, 3 April 1924



- <sup>45</sup> VPRS 13579 Unit 74, File no. 22315, Teacher Records.
- <sup>46</sup> VPRS 640 Unit 175, Mr. Patience to Education Department, 8 May 1924.
- <sup>47</sup> VPRS 13579 unit 74, File no. 22315, Teacher Records.
- <sup>48</sup> VPRS 13579 Unit 63, File no. 18849, Teacher records.
- <sup>49</sup> VPRS 13579 Unit 63, File no. 18849, Teacher Records.
- <sup>50</sup> *Advertiser*, 11 November, 1924.
- <sup>51</sup> *Murray Pioneer*, 19 December, 1924.
- <sup>52</sup> Linn, *Murray Water* p. 54, Interview with Pat Reed, February 2001.
- <sup>53</sup> VPRS 640 Unit 1753, Costello to Education Department, 25 April, 1925.
- <sup>54</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>55</sup> Daniels, *Early Schooling*, p. 13.
- <sup>56</sup> VPRS 640 Unit 1753. The inspector in October 1925 reported favourably on Joan Reed stating she is 'a very earnest and effective young teacher. Her work with Grade 1 has been very creditable and the pupils have been given a splendid start in their school careers.'
- <sup>57</sup> Blake, *Vision and Realization*, vol. 1, p. 1217; *Mildura Cultivator*, editorial, 2 Nov., 1910.
- <sup>58</sup> VPRS 796 Unit 873 1922-1935, Education Department Victoria, to Costelloe, 16 May, 1925.
- <sup>59</sup> VPRS 796, Unit 873 1922-1935, Memo to Mr. Costelloe, 20 July, 1925.
- <sup>60</sup> *Murray Pioneer*, 3 May, 1926.
- <sup>61</sup> VPRS 640 Unit 1753, Commissioner of Public Works, Adelaide, to the Secretary, Education Department, Melbourne, 10 August 1926.
- <sup>62</sup> VPRS 13579 Unit 63, File no. 18849, Teacher Record Books.
- <sup>63</sup> Helen Stagg, Interview with Max Pearson, 3 May, 2009, in author's possession.
- <sup>64</sup> Daniels, *Early Schooling*, p. 28.
- <sup>65</sup> GRS 12704/1/P 1913-1943, Admission Register Bookpurnong School, State Records of South Australia.
- <sup>66</sup> GRG 53 16 1926 Box 1039, item 946, Superintendent of Primary Education S.A. to Director of Education S.A. 6 January 1927.
- <sup>67</sup> GRG 53 16 1926 Box 1039 Item 946, Mr. Angwin, Constructing Engineer to the Director of Education, South Australia, 17 Sept. 1929.
- <sup>68</sup> VPRS 795 Unit 2980, Building Files: Primary Schools 1929-1934, Secretary for Commissioner of Public Works, South Australia to Education Department Victoria, 3 Jan. 1930.
- <sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>70</sup> VPRS 795 Unit 2980, Victorian Education Department to S.A. Public Works, 18 January 1930.
- <sup>71</sup> Mannes, F., Petschel, Helen, Walton, Bob, *When the Swallows Come back: - A History of Irymple Primary School, Red Cliffs*, Sunnlyland Press, 1993, p. 32.
- <sup>72</sup> *Argus*, 29 August, 1929.
- <sup>73</sup> *Argus*, 8 August, 1931, p. 19.
- <sup>74</sup> Max Pearson, telephone conversation, 18 July, 2011.
- <sup>75</sup> VPRS 640 Unit 1958, 1930-1932, Roy Foran to Education Department Victoria, 5 February 1930.
- <sup>76</sup> VPRS 795 Unit 2980, A. Eddy to Education Department Victoria, 2 Feb. 1930.
- <sup>77</sup> VPRS 796 Unit 873, Letter to Public Works Department, Adelaide quoting Mr. Foran, 6 May 1930.
- <sup>78</sup> VPRS 796, Unit 873, 1922-1935, Memo to Head Teacher, Lock 7, 8 July, 1930.
- <sup>79</sup> VPRS 796 Unit 873, Memo to Head Teacher, Lock 7 from Education Department Victoria, 16 June, 1930,
- <sup>80</sup> Daniels, *Early Schooling*, p. 5.
- <sup>81</sup> VPRS 640, Unit 1958, Public Service Commission to the Minister of Public Instruction, 26 July, 1930.
- <sup>82</sup> VPRS 640 Unit 1958, Inspector Le Couteur to Secretary Education Department, Melbourne, 22 July 1930.
- <sup>83</sup> VPRS 640 Unit 1958, Mr. Foran to Education Department, 15 July 1930.
- <sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 18 October, 1930.
- <sup>85</sup> Whitehead, Kay 'A small share of pioneering work': p. 151.
- <sup>86</sup> VPRS 640 Unit 1958, Mr. Foran to Education Department, 1 November, 1930.
- <sup>87</sup> *Ibid* 7 November 1930.
- <sup>88</sup> VPRS 640 Unit 1958, Education Department Victoria to J. Joseph Moloney 17 Dec. 1930.
- <sup>89</sup> VPRS 796 unit 873, Education Department Victoria to Mr. McPhee, 12 January, 1932.
- <sup>90</sup> Max Pearson, telephone conversation, 26 July, 2011.
- <sup>91</sup> VPRS 640 Unit 1958, Inspector le Couteur's report July 1930.

- <sup>92</sup> VPRS 13579 Unit 56, file no. 16829, Teacher Record Books.
- <sup>93</sup> VPRS 795 Unit 2980, 1929-1934, Mr. Moloney to Education Department Victoria, 27 January 1931.
- <sup>94</sup> VPRS 796 Unit 873, 3 March, 1931.
- <sup>95</sup> VPRS 796 Unit 873, 19 February 1931, 3 March 1931, 20 April 1931.
- <sup>96</sup> VPRS 640, Unit 1958, Memo written by staff at Education Department Victoria, 16 February 1931 on teacher's letter.
- <sup>97</sup> VPRS 640 Unit 1958, Progress report as requested by Education Department Victoria, 7 March 1931.
- <sup>98</sup> VPRS 640 Unit 1958, Telegram from Mr. Moloney to Education Department Victoria, 11 May, 1931.
- <sup>99</sup> VPRS 640 P 0001 Unit 1958, 12 May, 1931. Mr. Moloney to act as temporary assistant in Mildura; Mr. Foran to take leave of absence. School reopened on 1 June 1931.
- <sup>100</sup> Helen Stagg interview with Max Pearson, 3 May 2009, in interviewer's possession.
- <sup>101</sup> VPRS 640 Unit 1958, Thomas Hogan to Education Department Victoria, 1 October 1931.
- <sup>102</sup> VPRS 640 Unit 1958. Rail Greensborough to Melbourne: 1/6; Melbourne to Mildura £3/1/7. Car Mildura to lock 7, £3/14/-. The total claim was £6/17/1.
- <sup>103</sup> VPRS 13579 Unit 72, File no. 21504.
- <sup>104</sup> VPRS 13579 Unit 89, File no. 27855.
- <sup>105</sup> VPRS 640 Unit 1958, 9 Jan. 1932.
- <sup>106</sup> Whitehead, Kay 'Career paths for provisional school teachers in South Australia, 1875- 1915,' *History of Education Review*, vol. 23, no. 1, 1994, pp. 53-67.
- <sup>107</sup> VPRS 13579 Unit 89, File no. 27855.
- <sup>108</sup> VPRS 640 Unit 1958, Vic Fitcher to Education Department Victoria, 2 March 1932, stating no pay received 30 January till 27 February 1932.
- <sup>109</sup> VPRS 796 Unit 873, Memo to head teacher from Education Department Victoria, 19 July 1932.
- <sup>110</sup> VPRS 640 Unit 2105, Report on attendance figures at Lock 7 School supplied by Mr. Hogan to Education Department, 12 July 1933.
- <sup>111</sup> VPRS 795 Unit 2980, Mr. Hogan to Education Department Victoria, 20 December, 1933.
- <sup>112</sup> Helen Stagg interview with Max Pearson 3 May 2009, in interviewer's possession.
- <sup>113</sup> VPRS 640 Unit 2105, Mr. Tuohey to Education Department, 31 July 1934.
- <sup>114</sup> VPRS 640 Unit 2105.
- <sup>115</sup> Helen Stagg interviews with Max Pearson, 3 May, 2009, Thelma Eddy, 21 February, 2010, Phyllis Pickering, 13 September, 2011. All in interviewer's possession.
- <sup>116</sup> Author's own family history plus several oral histories conducted by and in possession of author.
- <sup>117</sup> McKenzie, David, review of Marjorie R. Theobald and R.J.W. Selleck (eds), *Family, School and State in Australian History*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1990, published in *History of Education Review*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1991, pp 94-95.