

TEACHING HISTORY



VOLUME 54 | No. 4

ISSN 0040 602

TERM 4

2020



DEFINING MOMENTS

JOURNAL OF THE HISTORY TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION OF NSW Inc

First published in 1961

Registered by Australia Post as PRINT No. PP23121/00005

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DON'T STAND SO CLOSE TO ME: SCHOOLS IN THE PANDEMIC FRONT LINE OF 1919

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Image: Nowra Public School was one of many across the state that was converted into a temporary hospital during the pneumonic influenza epidemic in 1919. Image 41330. June Wallace Papers. Caroline Simpson Library & Research Collection, Sydney Living Museums.

Most school histories barely mention 1919. Perhaps they refer in passing to the disruption caused by the ‘influenza epidemic’, before picking up the renewed round of classes, sports and patriotic pursuits. In contrast with the horror tolls and honour rolls of World War I, 1919 stands out as an emptiness, a vacuum in both participation and commemoration.

Yet for staff and students alike, the pneumonic or ‘Spanish’ influenza pandemic represented an experience of unparalleled intensity. Across New South Wales, a series of reactive and sometimes contradictory public health pronouncements saw piecemeal closures of schools from February until August 1919.¹ Over those perilous months, William Carter – headmaster at Barker College in Hornsby – dictated a string of

letters to apprise parents of the changing regulations. 'Quarantine restrictions will be imposed upon all members of both teaching and domestic staffs', he asserted on 31 March, adding the reassurance that 'Maids waiting at meals are all masked'.² Such precautions proved inefficacious, however. Despite excluding day students from attending, 73 of the college's 85 boarders contracted the disease. So did nearly all of the staff.

Teachers were doubly in the front line throughout the pandemic year. Before their schools closed – and again after they cautiously reopened – educators faced the prospect of contaminated classrooms. Even in normal times, seasonal influenza led to a higher proportion of teacher absences than any other infection, accounting for 86% of sicknesses in 1914 and 56% in 1920.³ But in 1919, the pandemic or 'pneumonic' form of influenza posed a notably greater danger for staff than for pupils. Killing approximately 15,000 Australians, it was especially severe for adults in their prime of life. The average age of men who died from 'Spanish' flu was 36.4 years, while for women the peak risk occurred at 32.6 years.⁴ This was exactly the age of Natalie Bullen, a teacher at Nowra Superior Public School, when the pandemic claimed her on 26 June.⁵

Males, nevertheless, died at a higher rate than women. The difference was probably behavioural rather than biological. In 1919, men were more likely to venture out in public and tended to press on in the face of illness until they became moribund. Among the most poignant – and pointless – of such deaths was Charles Savill Willis, Principal Medical Officer of the New South Wales Department of Education. 'So keen was Dr. Willis' sense of duty at the commencement of his brief illness', noted his posthumously published book, that he collapsed and died soon after giving an address on hygiene.⁶ His loss was greatly mourned, both at personal and professional levels. Given the vast number of teachers and pupils overseen by his Willis, in 1919 his role was arguably 'the most influential public health and preventive medical position in Australia'.⁷

The Education Department mobilised

While Willis had helped spearhead the state's response to the escalating crisis, the entire Education Department was soon enrolled. Its grand building on Bridge Street was handed over to serve as the Sydney headquarters for the Metropolitan Influenza Administrative Committee. As requests for advice and assistance funnelled in, instructions and aid motorcycles issued forth. Both throughout the suburbs and across the state, over 1200 teachers volunteered to serve as community champions. With classes cancelled, female teachers were urged to take on nursing duties

while males were tasked with converting their schools into temporary care facilities.⁸

Not all complied. At South Wagga Public School, head teacher Edwin Byrnes resisted requests to transform his school into an emergency hospital, fearing the long-term impact on enrolments.⁹ While Byrnes was overruled by local council's Health Officer, the headmaster of Helensburgh Public School voluntarily stood down from his duties in order to coordinate the town's emergency response. Alfred Southwell and his wife Marion led the small community through the crisis, especially over June to August when their school was closed. It served instead to provide temporary kitchen facilities, nursing accommodation and beds for convalescent influenza patients.¹⁰ Cookery mistress Winifred Budden likewise catered for patients and volunteers when Lithgow Girls' School was converted into a hospital.¹¹

Indeed, there was no doubt that the education system made a major contribution to managing the pandemic across New South Wales. 'In many instances ... the Education Department by the loan of its school buildings for emergency hospitals, met local demands which could not otherwise have been satisfied', noted Robert Paton, the state's Director-General of Public Health. 'The school teachers of the Education Department gave assistance freely whenever and wherever it was required, particularly in connection with the relief depôts'.¹² Managed by teachers and staffed by community volunteers, these depôts provided essentials such as blankets, meals and respite care for families affected by the disease. With adults bearing a disproportionate burden of sickness, relief depot workers oversaw the welfare of children whose parents were hospitalised – or worse. As historical geographers Kevin McCracken and Peter Curson have lamented, during 1919 several thousand children across New South Wales lost their father, their mother, or both.¹³

Students' diverse experiences and memories

The experiences of students in 1919 were typically diverse, as were their memories. Living in the Sydney suburb of Granville, teenager Kathleen Woodgate was not unduly alarmed when both of her parents came down with influenza. Yet in 1986 she vividly recalled the funeral cortege for the local parish priest, who had been infected while ministering to patients. As the procession passed, a messenger delivered a telegram informing Kathleen's family that her brother-in-law had died. She was then despatched south to Cooma, to aid her pregnant older sister whose four eldest children were also infected. Despite the intensity of the trauma, Kathleen's overriding recollection was of the generosity and courage of the local community.¹⁴ Interviewed in 1986, Dorothy McBride had been a



Image: Respected and effective, Dr Charles Savill Willis was the most senior member of the Department of Education to die on duty in 1919. State Archives & Records NSW, NRS-9873-1-[2/737]-R2187.

10-year-old in Coraki in 1919. She recalled suffering from influenza, being ‘too sick to eat ... you’d creep about the house, half sick and then lie down’.¹⁵

Happily, school-aged children experienced a much lower mortality than adults. Of the 22 influenza-related deaths in the Shoalhaven over 1919, for instance, only one victim was aged between 5 and 18 years.¹⁶ Not all sick pupils recovered, however. Keith Butler lived in the working-class Sydney suburb of Balmain. Just shy of his fifteenth birthday, Keith succumbed to pneumonic influenza on 11 July. His death came during the peak of the ‘second wave’ of the disease, likely a consequence of the flip-flopping relaxation of regulations in response to public pressure. Sadly, given the limited financial relief for families, parents desperate for income were amongst those who agitated for the schools to reopen. With Keith’s mother Lil and his older sister Gwennie also struck down by influenza, his father Sid had to juggle caring with working. Regrettably, it was a familiar challenge. ‘It has only been with your loving care that he has lived so long’, consoled a friend, ‘poor little chap was always

so delicate’.¹⁷ Lil and Sid received over 50 letters, cards and telegrams of condolence for the loss of their ‘laddie’, with many correspondents sharing their own disturbing experiences of the pandemic.

There were, however, unanticipated benefits to closing schools. Intended to minimise the transmission of influenza, it also reduced the spread of other infections that regularly killed schoolchildren, particularly diphtheria and scarlet fever. Under the *Public Health Act* 1896, local councils across New South Wales were required to maintain a register of notifiable infectious diseases. Many of these registers still survive in local studies collections, regional archives or at State Archives & Records NSW. Recording each patient’s name, address, illness and their treating doctor, entries also noted the name of the school when children became sick.¹⁸

In Albury, for instance, pneumonic influenza dominates the infectious diseases register over April to July 1919.¹⁹ Yet before schools were closed, the primary infection affecting pupils at Albury, Lavington and Gundowring Public Schools was diphtheria, which in that era resulted in death for 5.2% of children aged 10 years and under.²⁰ In Sydney, the Marrickville infectious diseases register was dominated by typhoid fever in adults, and both diphtheria and scarlet fever in children. However, as pneumonic influenza overtook the community from February to July 1919, other diseases effectively ceased to be notified.²¹ A similar pattern was observed in nearby St Peters, with the classic school infections only returning once influenza regulations were relaxed in August.²²

Unhealthy consequences for schools

At the same time, the pandemic had unhealthy consequences for many non-government schools. With tuition and boarding fees plummeting, private colleges and denominational schools suffered significant losses. Enforced closure, for instance, appears to have delivered the *coup de grâce* to the already-struggling All Saints’ College in Bathurst.²³ In Parramatta, The King’s School experienced financial hardship but no outbreak of influenza among the diminished student population, while Sydney’s Newington College reported 40 mild cases.²⁴ Its principal, Reverend Charles Prescott, had played a leading role in campaigning the Minister for Health, Jack Fitzgerald, to allow boarding schools to remain open.²⁵ If this concession helped keep larger schools afloat, pneumonic influenza had a disastrous impact on boutique establishments such as the Clifton House School in Redfern, run by ‘Misses Flora and Fannie Brodie’. Economic distress highlighted the precarious finances of the many ‘smaller schools in the various suburbs conducted generally by widows and other



Image: Throughout much of 1919, the Education Department building in Sydney served as the headquarters for the Metropolitan Influenza Administrative Committee. State Library of New South Wales, Government Printing Office 1-13493.

ladies who were compelled to relinquish the major portion of their livelihood during a period of great stress'.²⁶

These empathetic words were penned in 1920 by William Kessell, a former scholarship student and dux of All Saints in Bathurst. A rising star in the New South Wales Department of Justice, Kessell was appointed to head a Royal Commission in to claims made under the State's *Influenza Epidemic Relief Act*. Passed just before Christmas in 1919, the Act was intended to offer some compensation to enterprises that had suffered financially by following the government's emergency proclamations. Sadly for historians, the 1,797 submissions tendered over 1920 no longer survive. However, Kessell's tabulated figures offer an extraordinary insight into pubs, music halls, picture theatres, rifle ranges, billiard saloons and amusement palaces across the New South Wales. They also detail the impact on the many non-government schools who claimed recompense for paying salaries, bills and rent while their income plummeted.

In total, 106 private schools claimed £14,321, but they received only £3,153. At 22.0%, it was nevertheless a more generous pay-out than the 16.2% average across all business claimants. Yet the State's 155 Catholic schools were granted just £414 of the £21,850 they requested – a paltry 1.9%. This was not, Kessell claimed, anti-Catholic bias. Having seen his own alma mater fail, he acknowledged that 'the position is one

savouring of hardship'. However, under the terms of the Act, loss of fees could not be claimed. Moreover, Kessell noted, 'none of the religious teachers are paid salaries, but, in return for their services, are fed, clothed, housed, and supported generally from the school fees received', adding that 'as the Roman Catholic Church is the owner, no allowance could be made for personal living expenses'.²⁷ It seemed a poor acknowledgement of the brave, generous ministrations volunteered by hundreds of teaching Brothers and Sisters while their schools were arbitrarily shut.

Schools – and especially teachers – served in the pandemic front line throughout 1919. Ironically, their courage and dedication has largely been forgotten precisely because so many schools were closed or repurposed as emergency facilities. But the resultant gap in institutional records does not mean an absence of history. In recovering their experiences – so eerily akin to the demands on educators in 2020 – we find the teachers of 1919 in the places where they worked hardest: their local communities.

*The State Library of New South Wales has recently released a five-part podcast, *The Gatherings Order*, which considers the 1919 pandemic in the context of Covid-19 (<https://audio.sl.nsw.gov.au/podcast/gatherings-order>). A matching exhibition, *Pandemic!*, includes the letters sent to the parents of Keith Butler. It is on display in the Library until 24 January 2021*

Endnotes

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- ¹⁶ Marianne Faull, *Just a Touch of the ‘Flu: Influenza & Related Deaths in the Shoalhaven, 1860–1960* (Nowra: Shoalhaven Family History Society, 2019).
- ¹⁷ Ernestine Slatter to Lil and Sid Butler, 10 July 1919, State Library of New South Wales, MLMSS 10131.
- ¹⁸ Peter Hobbins, Georgia McWhinney and Alison Wishart. *An Intimate Pandemic: Creating Community Histories of the 1918–19 Influenza Pandemic* (Sydney: Royal Australian Historical Society, 2019), pp.9,13–14. Viewed by author, Albury LibraryMuseum, 30 October 2018.
- ¹⁹ Frank V.G. Scholes, *Diphtheria, Measles, Scarletina*, Second ed. (Melbourne: William Ramsay, 1927), p.148.
- ²⁰ Register of Notifications of Infectious Disease Received by the Local Authority for the Municipal District of Marrickville, 1898–1930, Inner West Council Archives, A95/23.
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