

Kohimarama Naval Training School

Auckland, New Zealand, 1874-1882

criminality, discipline, Marine Department, redemption, reformatory, social control, vocational purpose

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In 1874 the Naval Training Schools Act was passed in New Zealand. When the Commissioner of Customs, [William Reynolds](#), introduced the Naval Training Schools Bill to parliament, he stated that the prime purpose of institutions established under the legislation was vocational—to provide boys with ‘a thorough training in seamanship’ (NZPD 1874: 428). He argued that such institutions promised much economically for New Zealand as a trading nation. It was considered inevitable that, because of its location, New Zealand would become a nation of maritime activity. The country was already developing its own shipping fleet and the lack of internal transport development meant that coastal shipping was crucial. Having a ready supply of seamen would support these activities and would avoid reliance on foreign shipping. Schools of this nature would be instrumental in these endeavours.

The schools were also to serve a social control function in the young colony. Because poverty, destitution, sickness and premature death were not uncommon, children were often left homeless, reliant on community based charitable aid, casual neighbourhood support, or on their own devices. This generated public anxiety as juvenile crime, larrikinism and delinquency became increasingly linked with conditions of hardship and with lack of parental support and control. One solution had been to remove from society children who were perceived to be problems, as well as those considered vulnerable to corruption. To this end state industrial schools had been established with the 1867 Neglected and Criminal Children Act. Reynolds suggested that the proposed schools would serve a similar function. The Naval Training Schools Bill, he explained, was ‘to establish industrial schools for neglected and in some cases criminal children’ so they could be trained for a future in the maritime service (NZPD 1874: 743).

Economic and social benefits

The potential economic benefit was not lost to advocates of the Bill. Without intervention, the neglected boy was seen as the potential pauper or criminal and a future economic burden on the state. Young people who would otherwise become ‘idle reprobates and a charge upon the colony through the gaols and police’ would be transformed into ‘useful members of society’ (NZPD 1874: 747). Accordingly, the Naval Training Schools Act (1874) identified potential students as ten to fourteen year-old sons of prison inmates, those found begging, homeless, destitute, orphaned or in the company of thieves, those in trouble with the law, and boys whose parents or guardians elected to have them placed in the school, either because they could not control them, or because they could not afford to support them. Such parental requests would not be considered favourably if the child had been convicted of a felony or had served a period of imprisonment.

Establishing the naval training school

The only school to be instituted under this Act was the Kohimarama Naval Training School and it had a short life. It was established in buildings that had been erected as the Melanesian Mission’s St

Andrew's College at what is now known as Mission Bay in Auckland. Seven years after the removal of the mission's headquarters to Norfolk Island in 1867 the buildings were leased by the New Zealand government for the school, along with the mission schooner, *Southern Cross*, which was to be used as a training vessel (Ross 1983). At this time education for settler children was provided through the Provincial Councils, and there was no central state education department. The school was therefore established under the superintendence of Captain T.C. Tilly of the Royal Navy and administered for most of its brief seven-year history under the Marine Department. It was managed by a former Royal Navy Lieutenant, G.R. Breton, and staffed largely by naval officers. As one Member of Parliament noted, the school was intended to create 'what might be called a sort of *esprit de corps*, or spirit of emulation, among the boys' (NZPD 1874: 746). The boys also received regular religious instruction and were required to attend prayers each morning and evening. The benefits of such training, according to the Bishop of Melanesia, would only be fully appreciated when the boys were able to take up good apprenticeships that would enable them to rise above their unfortunate backgrounds (AJHR 1877 H-29: 6).



Figure 1: The school buildings looking north west, c. 1895. Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland Libraries, 4-2880a.

Schooling, daily routine and apprenticeships

The Naval Training Schools Act established that formal schooling would be part of the educational experience for the boys, and in the year following the founding of the school Reynolds reported that their general education was not being neglected. However when the school routine was written into the institution's official rules and published in the *New Zealand Government Gazette* that year, it became clear that boys received minimal regular school instruction, and that vocational pursuits and regimentation were the order of their day. Their routine began at five in the morning when they were to make beds, clean the buildings and wash before the seven o'clock muster and prayers. After

breakfast the work day was divided between nautical instruction, school, garden and trades (NZGG 1875: 472).

There was always the possibility that some of the boys would be ill-suited to a life at sea, so broadening their range of experiences was considered, to provide further options for apprenticeships on leaving the institution. Such options would require trades and agriculturally-based skills, but there was little expectation that future careers would require advanced general education. At this early stage of the school's history, it was only in a Wellington-based journal, *The Monthly Review and Educational Gazette* (July 1875) that concerns were raised about the school being in the hands of naval personnel rather than a trained schoolmaster. From an educational perspective, having someone in charge who could understand boys' natures was crucial.

Discipline and punishment

Physical and psychological punishments enforced discipline in the institution. These were also identified in the gazetted regulations and were meted out for the various transgressions directly after morning prayers. Modes of punishment included black listing (involving an extra share of unpleasant 'dirty work' and denial of recreation time), time in the cells (with or without bread and water), the wearing of a placard on the boy's back stating the nature of his offence, and caning by the manager. Under the Act, boys could also be triced up to receive up to 20 strokes of the whip, as awarded by the magistrate, and a gaol could be established on the premises. The training ship, the poor condition of which limited its usefulness for nautical instruction, was also used for such purpose. Archival references cite instances of whipping, especially for absconding from the school, and also reports of boys being sent to Mt Eden prison for misdemeanors committed while absent without leave (National Archives Auckland; AJHR 1877 H-29: 5).

The misdemeanours of the boys were discussed by a variety of commentators either as a function of their 'tempers'; their 'unsettled and roving disposition'; their 'criminality', or of poor parenting. Even the educationalist who argued for the general education to be with a trained schoolmaster believed that the chief purpose of sending neglected children to the school was 'to weed out their evil propensities' so that they would have sufficient learning to give them a good start in life. The institution was seen to offer protection for the wider community and hope of redemption for the boys. In parliament its establishment was seen to be an act of benevolence on the part of the government, in that it promised to save many children from 'utter ruin' (NZPD 1874: 747).

Assessing the work of the Naval Training School

So how successful was the Naval Training School in fulfilling its objectives, and what brought about its early demise? The first signs of discontent related to the small number of admissions recorded in the first three months of the school's operation. With only 19 of the available 60 places filled, eleven of which were transferrals from industrial schools, concerns were raised about how well informed the relevant authorities were about what the institution had to offer. Under-utilisation was considered wasteful of such a valuable resource and costly in terms of future benefits that would be lost to the country and to the boys' lives (AJHR 1875 H12a: 3). While the manager's report on the school three months later indicated numbers were rising steadily, all did not seem well. Although Breton commented that the boys' behaviour had, 'on the whole, been very satisfactory', he reported that seven students had absconded and one had been expelled. He had anticipated worse, he said, given their 'previous mode of life' (AJHR 1875 H12a: 23).

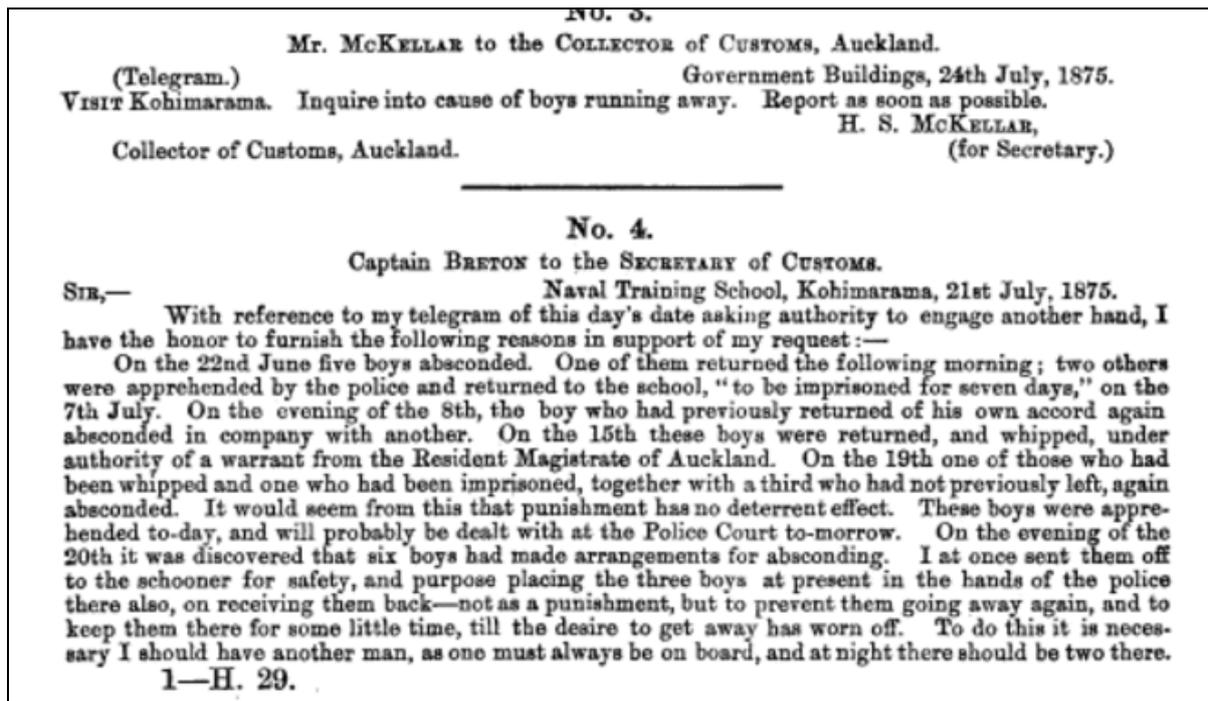


Figure 2: Correspondence concerning the Naval Training School at Kohimarama, 1875. National Library of New Zealand. . Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/20333971>

Within a month of this report, complacency over boys absconding was no longer possible. In an urgent telegram to the Secretary of Customs requesting 'an extra hand', Captain Breton cited cases of repeat absconding which demonstrated that extreme forms of punishment such as imprisonment and whipping were not having the required deterrent effect. Boys, in fact, were reoffending within days, and were not short of companions to join them in their escapades. The extra staff member was to ensure 'proper conduct and discipline of the school'. He was to be stationed on the training ship, which would act as a prison for the boys until their desire to run away had 'worn off' (AJHR 1875 H-29: 1-2).

The absconding increased, however, and was reported by the editors of the *New Zealand Herald*, who speculated that something was amiss. Having studied the rules for the school which had been published only nine days earlier, their purpose in bringing the matter to public attention was to have the rules reassessed. Because work and punishment monopolised the boys' lives, the editors suggested, the school would continue to be a failure and the boys would continue to abscond. They felt the approach adopted in the school was somewhat outdated, and probably framed 'by some tyrannical old martinet' who had witnessed such severe practices 'on the quarter-deck of a man-of-war' (*New Zealand Herald* 29th July 1875).

The inquiry into the training school

Breton's response was immediate, to request an inquiry which, regardless of the findings, would ensure that the truth of the allegations about the school should be generally known (AJHR 1875 H-29: 2). This was not the issue for the *Herald* editors. The rules were clear, and from other evidence, it was equally clear that they were being followed to the letter. It was the nature of the rules that was at issue. The editors felt that they were too stringent and they were calling for an amendment that recognized the value of an element of kindness and praise in the training of boys. In the inquiry that followed, however, the rules were never challenged—the reason for absconding was the only point of focus. To investigate, Breton had called on the services of Thomas Hill, Collector of Customs, to

interview the boys. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given their knowledge of Hill's close relationship with Breton, most of the boys stated they were happy and contented. The few who expressed otherwise were referred to as having 'insubordinate spirits', who could easily have their bad example followed because of 'the weakness of others of their class' (AJHR 1875 H-29: 6). Matters of discipline and the problem of boys absconding from the institution were thus put down to the boys' social origins. This assumed a predisposition to rebelliousness and corruption.

Measuring success

In his report to the Marine Department in 1877, the manager of the school had suggested that, given 'the antecedents' of many of the boys, the ultimate degree of success of the institution could never be certain (AJHR 1877 H-29: 5). Two years into the school's history, the ultimate degree of success began to be measured by the number of students graduating to sea service. Once they had turned twelve, and provided they were considered up to the task, the boys could be apprenticed to the owner or master of any of the British ships registered at or trading in New Zealand. However, only twelve of the boys trained at the school had been successfully placed. As departmental records began to show, masters and owners of ships were reluctant to take them on. Meeting the vocational purpose of the institution was proving to be elusive. Possible solutions were put forward—acquiring properly-trained instructors and a small useable schooner to replace the deteriorating *Southern Cross*, removal of the expulsion clause in the Act which, the manager felt, provided an incentive for dissatisfied boys to offend, but above all, the establishment of a penal school or reformatory to which the 'criminal element amongst the boys' could be removed (AJHR 1878 H-12: 2). Forcing destitute children to associate on a residential basis with criminal children was believed to be the most logical explanation for any problems the school was experiencing.

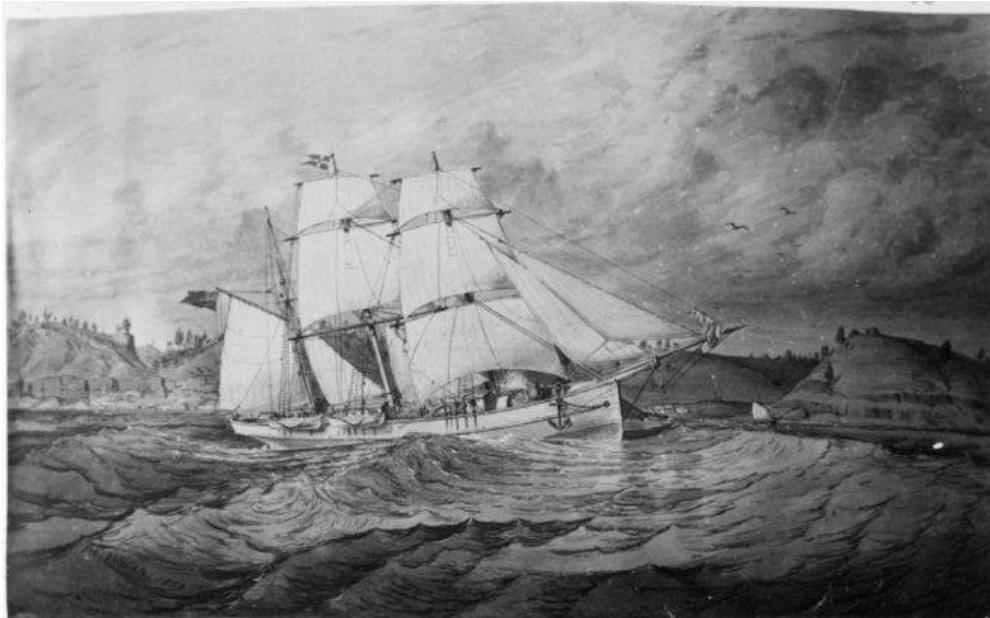


Figure 3: The barque, *Southern Cross*, used for training, and disciplinary purposes, 1881. Walsh, Philip, 1843-1914 :Photograph albums. Ref: PA1-q-255-24-1. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22717523>

Reorganisation in 1880

A shift in administration of the school in 1880 raised questions about whether the problems rested solely with the students. It also brought to attention the matter of the boys' general education. The changes at Kohimarama were part of major educational developments that came with the

dissolution of the provinces in 1876 and the introduction of a national state education system the following year. The establishment of the Department of Education under the auspices of the 1877 Education Act and the appointment of Rev. [William Habens](#) as the first Inspector General of Schools provided a central education bureaucracy to which specialist institutions like the Kohimarama Naval Training School could be transferred. The shift from Marine to Education Department in 1880 coupled with apparent unrest amongst staff prompted a governmental inquiry into the management and working of the school.

This was conducted by the Inspector General who was particularly concerned about the unstable staffing situation. That there had been 66 resignations or dismissals in 68 months was variably attributed to the authoritarian nature of Captain Breton's management, unsuitable living quarters for staff (especially those with families), and uncertainty of tenure (as dismissals could be made with just a week's notice). Habens hoped that formalising appointments under the new Department of Education might improve matters somewhat, as the Education Act had stipulated that, unless there was gross misconduct, dismissals required a three month notice period. He felt also that limiting staffing to naval personnel was inappropriate, for educational and personal reasons. This not only narrowed selection that obliged them to make unsuitable appointments, he believed, but the 'roving disposition of seafaring men' did not bode well for consistency of provision. Constant change provided little opportunity for rapport to develop between the boys and the staff members as each instructor became 'part of a machine', with 'the mechanical and routine element in the school' taking precedence over the personal (AJHR 1880 H-01g: 3-4).

Habens was dissatisfied also that a naval officer had the role of schoolmaster, and that there had been 14 appointments to the position. He was concerned that many boys were having to 'go out into the world unable to read with comfort or to write a decent letter' (AJHR 1880 H-01g: 5), and argued that a trained or certificated teacher, appointed under the Education Act, would have the required technical skills to make better use of the limited time available for this aspect of the boys' education. He also advocated teaching the boys in two ability groups (classified as the most 'forward' and 'backward'), and that inspection for this aspect of the school's work be taken over by the senior inspector from the Auckland Education Board. On a return visit in May 1881, Habens was able to report that these recommendations had been implemented. By this time a new training ship *Kohimarama* was in place, farm equipment had been purchased, and the Secretary for Education, John Hislop, had advanced the idea that the school might, without altering its status under the Naval Training Schools Act, be proclaimed an industrial school under the Neglected and Criminal Children Act.

The end of the school

Perhaps the most damning evidence against the school was its failure to fulfil its vocational purpose. In his 1880 report Habens cited statistics relating to the outcomes of the boys' schooling. Of the 150 who had passed through the school, only 65 had gone to sea, 22 of whom had subsequently deserted. While Habens saw this as evidence of the 'vagrant habits of the boys, and the presence of a criminal element among them', Hislop had a different view, that it was possibly a result of the 'harsh and improper treatment of the boys by the masters of vessels' (AJHR 1881 E-6a: 27). A further 29 students had been apprenticed on land and at the time of the report, only 19 remained in service. This signalled a trend that had been anticipated in the setting up of the school, that some pupils would be ill-suited to sea service, but would benefit from opportunities to pursue other occupations of an industrial nature. Throughout the debates, naval training schools had been linked to industrial

schools. While some parliamentarians believed a separate institution was unnecessary given that the existing industrial schools were able to have their boys apprenticed to ships if they desired, for others it was believed that 'there was an advantage in having other schools of that character training children of the same class ... to different pursuits' (NZPD 1874: 745). The country had many needs and the school did not seem to be meeting those for which it was established. By the end of March 1882, the majority of the boys had been sent to service or to their families. The remaining 12 were committed by the Resident Magistrate to form the core of a new Kohimarama Industrial School.

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