

## History Lesson: Teaching in the early days

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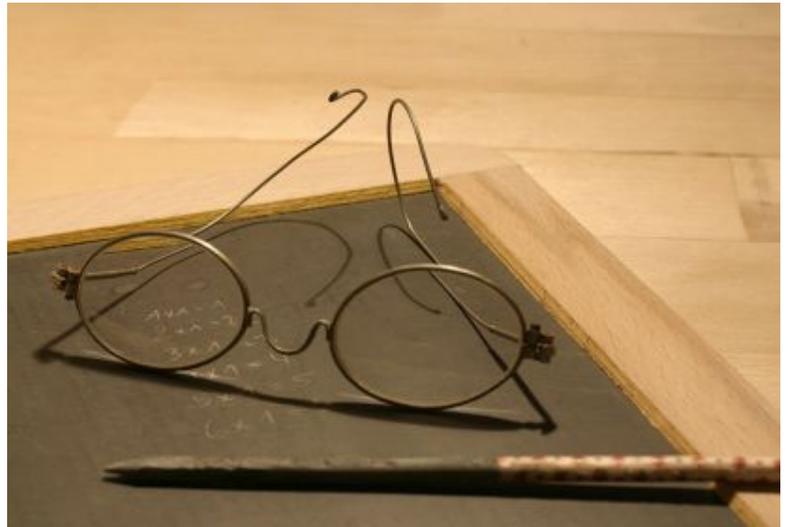
The earliest teachers in what is now the state of NSW were Aboriginal men and women. They taught life skills and tribal awareness via ceremony, dance, lore, oral storytelling and art.

The provision of education for children of convicts, soldiers and government officials in the penal colony of NSW was not a high priority of the British Empire. The controllers of the unhappy, incongruous community of conscripted migrants and their resentful gaolers no doubt felt they had more pressing cares than the planning of schools for the unwanted children of the lower classes. Classes were conducted in wattle and daub huts.

### TEACHER QUALIFICATIONS (OR LACK THEREOF)

Teachers in the early days of settlement were usually former convicts.

History records Isabella Rawson as the first European to teach in Sydney. A laundress in London, she stole and pawned drapery to the value of 12 shillings; when caught she confessed and handed over the pawn tickets. In the Old Bailey, she pleaded on her knees a story of distress and begged forgiveness. She was transported to the colony of NSW for seven years.



Mary Johnson is acknowledged as the first European to teach in Parramatta. She had been sentenced to seven years transportation for stealing and pawning a few articles, with a total value of three shillings and 10 pence.

Charged with pawning articles from a furnished room in London, Thomas McQueen pleaded necessity, promised to repay and replace everything, but was transported to the colony for seven years. He taught at Norfolk Island, in Sydney and Tasmania.

Even as late as the early 20th century the considerable majority of teachers were untrained or very inadequately trained. Some were "pupil-teachers", others were sent to a larger staffed school for a fortnight to three weeks for observation before being sent to a small remote one-teacher school. Graduates from a teachers college were still a minority, even after the introduction of a six-month course.

### TEACHING AND LEARNING CONDITIONS

Reports on the conditions of schools in 1854 show modern governments have learnt nothing. The findings of commissioners William Wilkins, Samuel Turton and Henry Levings were shocking.

- Schools could accommodate only half of the colony's children — 200-plus additional schools were needed.

- More than 75 per cent of schools were badly placed; either on account of distance from the population, difficulty of access or the unhealthiness of their location. The commission records children were often exposed to the rain and wind and teachers' accommodation was scarcely good enough for a dog kennel!
- Schools were also very unequally distributed.
- A large number of schools did not possess a blackboard and less than one-sixth had a sufficient supply of apparatus (books, slates or even a desk).
- "The condition of the schools is deplorable in the extreme ... the teachers seem to be industrious and in many cases zealous!" When teachers are untrained and otherwise unprepared for an efficient discharge of their duties it must be expected that the results of their labours will not be very gratifying.

The working conditions of teachers of the day would not be tolerated by teachers now. "Buildings were antiquated, accommodation unsuitable and restricted, classes conducted in weather sheds or on verandas and thus exposed to the extremes of heat and cold, equipment inadequate and dependent in large measure on the money-raising efforts of Parents and Citizens associations." (*The Teachers Challenge*, Max Kennett, 1968)

### **SUBSERVIENT SERVANTS**

Teachers were bureaucratically bound and disciplined servants of the state. Their individual status precisely defined by statute and numerous strata determined by the restrictive classification and efficiency award. This is best summed up with the formulaic response to end all official correspondence: "Had the honour to be, Sir, your obedient servant."

Teachers had to be careful about engaging in public controversies or expressing their views on educational conditions including their own working conditions: "They could be called on to explain, and be reprimanded if officialdom or the Minister considered that their actions had overstepped the restricted bounds of official rectitude. (*The Teachers Challenge*, Max Kennett, 1968)

Conditions remained largely the same due to teacher subservience and disunity.

**Next edition:** Teachers among the last sections of employees in NSW to avail themselves of the advantages of unionism.

— John Dixon, General Secretary