

1886.
NEW ZEALAND.

SEACLIFF LUNATIC ASYLUM.

(COPY OF ENTRY MADE IN INSPECTOR'S BOOK BY DR. MACGREGOR, INSPECTOR.)

Presented to both Houses of the General Assembly by Command of His Excellency.

EXTRACT FROM INSPECTOR'S BOOK.

I MADE my first inspection of Seacliff Asylum on the 20th, 24th, 26th, 27th, and 28th days of May. On the day of my last visit the number of patients in the asylum was 453—males, 297; females, 156: 1 male and 3 females were out on trial, and there was 1 dipsomaniac in the asylum.

I made a careful individual inspection of all the inmates, and made a special examination of any cases that seemed to require particular attention.

I found no one improperly detained. There was one old man of eighty, suffering from senile decay, placed here by the Judge merely because he could not be properly managed at home.

I found no one in actual seclusion, and only a few who, at intervals and for short periods, required to be confined to their rooms. One female patient was wearing locked gloves, for reasons that seemed to me sufficient. All the inmates of this asylum are well and kindly treated, being well fed, well clothed and well lodged, while their medical treatment is carefully attended to by Dr. Neill and his assistant Dr. Macandrew.

There are, however, great defects, which at present, and for some time to come, must greatly detract from the undoubted advantages of this asylum. These advantages, which in the present state of feeling about the asylum are apt to be overlooked, are nevertheless such as very few of the institutions of the kind possess. There is a magnificent estate of nine hundred acres of first-class bush-land, unsurpassed in fertility, beauty of situation, and accessibility when we consider the province as a whole.

There is a railway-station at the gate; and the only difficulty arises from the fact that the trains are run at hours very unsuitable for the wants of the asylum.

The drawbacks, with which the public mind is so occupied just now, arise from two sets of circumstances: First, the whole external aspect of the place is inexpressibly dreary and dispiriting, because it is dense-bush land just in process of being cleared, and the laying-out of the grounds about the building is at present in a state of chaos. Second, the building itself has become the subject of such an embittered controversy that there exists great doubt and anxiety regarding its actual condition.

Concerning the former point, I have no hesitation in saying that in a very few years, when this asylum is surrounded with beautiful grounds and fertile fields, the present feeling of disgust and indignation will give place to one of satisfaction; for in judging of this asylum it must not be forgotten that what was meant for a farm-asylum, the great majority of whose inmates should be all day occupied in out-door work, is for the present unavoidably transformed into a closed asylum, with dismal surroundings, and sunless, high-walled airing-courts, where none such were ever meant to be.

The drawbacks arising from the character of the building must be owing either to bad plans or bad workmanship. The plan, I believe, is on the model of the Norwich County Asylum, built, I think, in 1877. It is defective chiefly in these respects:—

1. The day-rooms are too much narrowed, under a desire to provide the great number of sleeping-rooms required by the dislike of associated dormitories among the well-to-do population of this colony, without greatly increasing the cost.

2. The dormitory window-sills are so high that no view is possible. There is no doubt that in this matter the architect blundered—at any rate, he sacrificed the usefulness to the appearance of the building. He is entitled, however, to the admission that the inmates are seldom or never in the rooms except when they are in bed, and that the loss of the view, therefore, is no great matter.

3. The most serious defect of all is one which, so far as I know, no one has called attention to. A considerable part of the ground-floor is utterly useless from being placed close up against a concrete wall facing a solid bank of clay, on which the kitchen-block and other back premises rest, at the level of the first floor. No doubt this also is due to anxiety to diminish the cost of excavation; but it has the effect of making a part of the ground-floor very damp, and, I fear, incurably so.

I am of opinion that in other respects the building is well adapted for its purpose, and, further, that some of the objections so strenuously urged against it are either inseparable from such large buildings, or are due to the temporarily wretched surroundings, and the merely provisional airing-courts, which had to be erected until the proper airing-courts could be laid out.

As regards the alleged defective workmanship, it is a matter for the experts of the Public Works Department, more especially as it is so covered up or so remedied by recent repairs that I, at any rate, cannot venture an opinion on the matter. There is, however, one point that calls for remark from me—the doors of the single rooms were not properly fastened to the wall, so that several of them were knocked out, and had to be subsequently fastened by iron bands. The responsibility for the great diversity of locks rests with the Lunacy Department. So far as I can judge, some of the minor matters which have been made so serious seem to me to indicate a disposition to magnify trifles and make the most of difficulties. The cracks in the north wing, which were at one time so alarming, appear to be due to settlement. I must state, however, that the cracks have been repaired and the fallen plaster restored, so that it is impossible for one who is not an expert to speak definitely in the matter. Whatever the defects of the building, no one can deny that the greatest care must be exercised in looking after its maintenance. I was very sorry, therefore, to observe the sloppy condition of the lavatories, specially those in No. 3 male ward (refractory), on the second floor. I found that here not one of the basins had a plug attached, and that the screws under the taps were gone, so that every time they were used the water spouted over the floor, which was swimming as a usual thing. The water, accordingly was actually dropping from the ceiling of the room below, and so on to the ground-floor, disfiguring and rotting everything in its course.

I was surprised to find that there was no plumber on the staff so that these expensive tradesmen have to be brought from Dunedin every time a tap or a pipe goes wrong in this extensive building, and often after much damage is done.

The leaky hot-water cistern at the top of the house should at once be replaced by a copper one.

The laundry-boiler is much too small, the furnace is ill adapted for burning wood, and the drying-closets must be made more effective.

I expect, when I next visit the asylum, to find a great deal more despatch in serving out the dinner, that much more rapid progress than hitherto has been made in laying out the grounds, and that a larger proportion of the patients are regularly employed out of doors.

After careful consideration I have come to the conclusion that the storekeeper is utterly unfit for his business. His store-book is absolutely bristling with errors. Not a single column of it can be taken on trust without previously adding it up; so that it is useless except to mislead. I am also of the opinion that one good man can easily perform all the duties of clerk and storekeeper, provided that the stores are methodically issued at a set hour each day.

The magnificent dining and amusement halls are entirely unused, to the great loss of the patients, and the confounding of the whole working of the asylum, owing to there being no provisions made for lighting. I earnestly urge that this matter may be taken in hand without any further delay. I regret to find that no steps have been taken to organize amusements for this large asylum, the reason given being that until the place is lighted nothing can be done. It seems to me, however, that a great deal more might have been attempted; and I would suggest that in choosing members of the staff a preference should be given to such persons as can take a part in getting up entertainments for the patients. I also think that the beautiful billiard-table, now standing unused in the dining-hall, might be brought into use with great advantage, especially on wet days.

I have made a careful investigation into the charge of neglect in the case of J— C— brought against Dr. Neill by ex-warders Dundas and Sutherland. I can find no evidence in support of their allegations, while they are directly contradicted by Chief Warder McDonald and Warder Fuller, as well as by Dr. Neill himself and the evidence of the "case-book." The fact that Dundas was under notice of dismissal before the charge was made, and that Sutherland has been dismissed since, taken together with the length of time—nearly three months from now—that has been allowed to elapse, leads me to conclude that there is nothing in it.

31st May, 1886.

D. MACGREGOR,
Inspector.

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