

COMA Tasmania Spring Newsletter 2018



Representatives of the successful museums for the Community Heritage Grants 2018, including COMA's Elizabeth Bondfield, at the National Library of Australia.

President's Report

COMA Seminar & AGM 29 September 2018

30 people attended an interesting morning at the Frances Parsons Building, Jane Franklin Hall. The election of the COMA committee confirmed new members Chris Tassell and Jack Dimsey. Reports were circulated prior to the AGM and three minor changes to the Constitution were ratified.

This was followed by three talks. Dr. Michael Hodgson gave new insights into the life of Dr. Victor Rattan, leaving the audience unsure about this enigmatic surgeon and hospital superintendent. Elizabeth Bondfield gave fascinating insight into a small homeopathic chest: her talk is reproduced at the end of this newsletter. Dr. Philip Thomson spoke about items including the Benjafield homeopathic chest and Sir John Franklin's chest, both on loan to COMA.

Cultural Heritage Grant Success

A grant from the National Library of Australia enables us to employ an experienced museum curator to conduct a significance assessment of COMA's collection, focusing on 10 key objects. This work will enable us to delve deeper into key stories in the collection, helping us to plan future exhibitions and programs.

Tax Deductible Gift Recipient Status

In November we received notification from the ATO that COMA has been recognised as a tax deductible gift recipient. This means that future financial donations and gifts will be tax deductible to the donor. We would like to warmly thank the Jane Franklin Foundation for their generous assistance in processing donations over the past year.

Save the date: COMA Seminar 2019

Our next COMA Seminar will be on Saturday **23 March 2019**. Our working title is 'Strange Alchemies: pharmacy and anaesthetics'. We will have more information for you on this soon.

Curator's Report

This just in! Arts Tasmania 'Caring for Collections' grant

We have just learned that we have been successful in receiving a Lynne Stacpoole Caring for Collections Grant, through Arts Tasmania by the Minister for the Arts. This grant will go towards the purchase of new, portable display cases as part of our plans to develop new exhibitions.

National Library of Australia Cultural Heritage Grant – Significance Assessment

This spring we received the exciting news that COMA has been successful in our first major grant application: a National Library of Australia Cultural Heritage Grant. As Philip has mentioned above, this grant is to assess the significance of our collection, which will help with our future exhibition and program development. I was invited to represent COMA to accept the certificate from Dr Marie-Louise Ayres, Director-General of the National Library of Australia, and meet with other museum professionals and volunteers from across Australia. It was an incredibly inspiring time as we swapped ideas and experiences, and were made wonderfully welcome by the staff at the National Library of Australia, the National Museum, the National Archives and others.

New displays for the collection

This past few months have passed in a flurry of grant-writing, partly aimed at preparing COMA for new displays to showcase our collection. We have learned from our tour groups over the past year, and would like to offer engaging stories from our collection for visitors and students alike. Our proposed display topics are:

1. *Misconceptions: contraception, censorship and the law in the early 20th century*
2. *Miasmas, humours and the evolution of germ theory in Tasmania*
3. *The gifts of Morpheus & Dr. Pugh: Anaesthesia*
4. *Dr. Thomson's cabinet of curiosities and obsolete treatments in healthcare* (a changing display - first topics: 'Cured by lightning!' (electrotherapies) and 'Sovereign remedies: Strychnine, arsenic and mercury in pharmacy')

If we are successful, these exhibits will be incorporated into our guided tours and education programs available to students, researchers and visitors to COMA.

The Dispensary of Sarah Crouch

At the recent COMA Tasmania AGM, I presented a short talk on Mrs Sarah Crouch's dispensary. Here is a short extract:

The Dispensary of Mrs Sarah Crouch



Sarah Crouch's dispensary [01.A.158], donated by her granddaughter Sarah Crouch jnr.

In our collection is this wooden box, once owned by Mrs Sarah Crouch, wife of the under-sheriff of Hobart. Inside the box are four glass tincture vials with heavy stoppers – and below many smaller vials of pillules, making it a box of homeopathic medicines. It's fair to say we don't have many objects in the collection provenanced to a 19th century woman. So who was Sarah Crouch?



Portrait of Sarah Crouch, aged 41, by J. Harrison [NS3487/1/2].
Reproduced courtesy of Tasmanian Archives & Heritage Office

Sarah Crouch emigrated to VDL as the governess of a Methodist minister's family in 1831. In 1832 she married law clerk Thomas Crouch, who became the under-sheriff of Hobart. They had eight children – four of whom survived to adulthood.

From the earliest days of their marriage, Sarah and Thomas Crouch welcomed the young Quakers James Backhouse and George Washington Walker into their home as lodgers. The first Quaker meeting in Tasmania (possibly Australia) was held in their house in 1833. Sarah Crouch became a Quaker.

The Quakers became the moral conscience of colony. They tried to help people others preferred to ignore or exploit: the weak, foolish and naïve, the poor, the alcoholics.

Sarah took this mission to heart. She visited the Female Factory and the Orphanage weekly, and testified publically against conditions in the Orphanage. She founded a society to help prostitutes and another to help impoverished new mothers through visits and donations of clothing. She began a benevolent society to assist free settlers, and perhaps because her experience as a governess taught her how precarious life as a servant could be, she set up a servant's home for female servants to stop them from being exploited or prostituted if they lost their jobs. This was a women's-only environment where girls and women in domestic service could live safely until they found their next job or a husband.

In 1867, when she was 60, the Gore Institute (the renamed Servants' Home) presented Sarah with a portrait and an illuminated address thanking her for her work, which is now at the Tasmanian Archives & Heritage Office. Well known colonial surgeon Dr Edward Swarbreck Hall's signature is there, but the majority of names are female, showing how Hobart Town women organised, lobbied and helped others behind the scenes.

About seven years before she died, Sarah Crouch suffered a stroke that left the right side of her body paralysed. According to her obituary She taught herself to write with her left hand so that she could keep writing to her children. She died aged 69 in 1876 of 'apoplexy' and 'cerebral softening', probably dementia associated with stroke. Her obituary tells of her life's work: 'She always kept a dispensary for the purpose of supplying the poor with simple drugs'¹.

In the early 19th century pharmaceutical companies began to make boxes with medicines intended for home use, and these were known as 'dispensaries'. These were not cheap, and it is unlikely that Sarah Crouch could have afforded one as a humble governess when she first came to Australia. However, the one she has left us can probably be dated to about 1850, by which time she was in her forties and a woman of means.

Who made the dispensary?

The case was made by James Epps & Co., a homeopathic pharmacy. James Epps was a homeopathic pharmacist, who became famous for his 'homeopathic cocoa', intended initially to provide a 'nourishing' drink that wouldn't be as stimulating as tea or coffee.

The four glass bottles contain herbal tinctures of arnica, rue, poison ivy and nettle. These were intended for external use, for bruising and bleeding, rheumatism and sprains, and burns. The tiny vials of pillules are too many to list here, but they include *colchicum* (extract of meadow saffron bulb) opium, and extract of cayenne.

¹ 'Obituary', *Tasmanian Tribune*, 24 January 1876 p. 2

Homeopathic and conventional medical dispensaries were commonly used by settler's families when doctors were too far away or as in this case when the patient couldn't afford a doctor's visit. Carers were guided by 'domestic physician' books giving symptoms and treatments.

Interestingly the Servant's Home had two doctors who regularly attended the residents as needed: Dr Agnew, and Dr Swarbreck Hall. So it is likely the dispensary was kept as a kind of 'first aid kit', or for those who were not attached to the Servant's Home.