

HMS Mars: An industrial school in the late 19th century

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Abstract

This short reflection on the history of industrial schooling and residential care in Scotland focuses on the ship HMS Mars. Moored close to the city of Dundee, the ship was 'home' to thousands of poor, destitute and homeless boys in the late nineteenth century. Designed to fill a perceived need for white British sailors in the Merchant Marine, the ship was largely forgotten after it was scrapped in 1928. This article interrogates some of the ways that the boys on-board had been criminalised, and the imperial context of the training ship.

Keywords

Training ship, residential childcare, care experienced history, industrial school

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Introduction

Between 1869 and 1929, over six and a half thousand boys aged between ten and sixteen years old were sent to live on-board [the HMS Mars, a 'training ship' and 'industrial school'](#) moored near Dundee. Equipped to house up to 400 boys at a time, the ship was launched as part of a broader movement to establish industrial schools for poor, vagrant and destitute children in Britain.

The first boy to unofficially board the Mars when it was launched in October 1869 was inspired by the possibilities of imperial adventures. As noted above, the first boy was Murdoch McLeod, the adventurous bookbinder's apprentice, who had been inspired by the novel *Swiss Family Robinson* to 'run away to sea'. Two years later, though, Murdoch attempted to escape, by taking a life-buoy and swimming through the night to Tayport, where he was found and returned by a police officer. Much later in life, McLeod was interviewed about his time on the Mars, and recounted how he was 'slung across cannon' and 'lashed with a rope's end' as a boy (Douglas, 2008).

In contrast to the volunteer McLeod, the first boy officially registered was David Petrie, who had been charged under section 14 of the 1866 Industrial Schools Act with being Destitute and Homeless. His mother's address was listed as Dron's Close, while his father's whereabouts were unknown. In theory, industrial schools like the Mars were meant to house and educate the poor, as distinct from the reformatory school for children convicted of crimes. In practice, children were sentenced to time in an industrial school by magistrates for things like begging, to being in the company of reputed thieves. For the children, the experience would have been difficult to distinguish from a criminal proceeding.

On arrival on the ship, the similarity to a prison continued. Children were first stripped and examined by a medical officer. Their hair was cut close to the scalp. Then they were bathed and given a uniform to wear. Their names and details of their families and 'sentence' were noted in a log-book. In a practice very much drawn from prison camp life, each child was assigned a number which replaced their name. From that point on, even just amongst the children themselves, they were only referred to by their assigned number.

Efforts to strip away individual identity from the boys were part of their training for a life at sea, but also greatly reinforced the effects of removal from their homes. Boys were deliberately given little opportunity to maintain connections with family and friends. Parents could apply for discharge of their children but were almost always refused. The notes accompanying one of the very few successful applications for discharge in 1888 emphasised that the committee 'did not wish to encourage applications of this nature' (Quoted in Douglas, 2008, p. 74).

The ship filled its places rapidly. Originally fitted for 300 boys, that number was soon increased to 400. Despite its reputation as a punishment for Dundee's 'bad boys', children were sent from all over Scotland and most had never committed a crime, beyond being very poor and sometimes homeless. In its early years, many came from Edinburgh. The rapid recruitment in the capital was driven by the activities of the Royal Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (RSSPCC), as well as missionaries. RSSPCC inspectors sought out homeless or vagrant children, who they could take to magistrate's court for committal to industrial schools. Only a few years after the launch of the Mars, this broke out into a scandal with accusations of the agents 'snatching' children from the streets (Kelly, 2019).

The scandal around recruitment in 1874 was also about complaints of physical punishment of the children. In the official register of punishments for 1873, six boys were given between seven and eighteen 'stripes' but the former Baillie Lewis claimed that the official register did not reflect the true extent of violence on the ship, where punishments went unrecorded and far exceeded the permitted caning.

The children of the Mars also were at risk of accidents. Within two months of the launch of the ship, Patrick Foy nearly died in the freezing waters, rescued by Captain Wake. The next year, three children, William McIntosh, William Miln and John Hall, died after being sent to collect mail in a small boat with two other boys.

Fire as well as water was treacherous on-board a ship. At 3am on Saturday 28th of May, 1883, the fire bell rang on the Mars. Three boys, from as far afield as

Fife, Galashiels and Glasgow, were later found guilty of having set the fire which destroyed the Captain's quarters and a large part of the stern. This was only one of many arson or attempted arson incidents on board industrial school or reformatory training ships. Boys attempted to escape, stole food, and hollered and cat-called staff to express their dissatisfaction on-board training ships.

Unlike most industrial schools, *HMS Mars* accepted both Catholic and Protestant boys and so many children were sent from the west coast, with Glasgow becoming the most common hometown of boys on-board. Officers on the ship paid commission to an agent in Glasgow, five shillings per child, to 'do his best to keep up a steady supply of new boys' (Quoted in Douglas, 2008, p. 116-117). One graduate from the ship wrote to Captain Scott in January 1899 and described how he had applied as an orphan to the Glasgow agent, Mr West. The letter emphasises his vivid memories of playing with the other boys, 'The scene just now passes before me. No thought for the morrow. We were happy' (Quoted in Douglas, 2008, p. 118-119). He returned to Glasgow after he left to become a cobbler, using skills he learnt on the ship.

The *Mars* came under increased scrutiny in 1896, when a committee was established to examine both reformatory and industrial schools throughout the UK. The training ship system had been attacked in 1895 by Admiral Field, who pointed out that the ships were extravagant and wasteful, because so few of the boys went to sea. The ships were defended by Admiral Day Hort Bosanquet, who wrote in 1898 that 'Great Britain is the maritime nation of the world... the calling of seamen is therefore one of the most important, if not the most important, of all careers open to her rescued boys' (1898, p.179). This national pride was tempered with nationalist anxiety. He quoted statistics that 27,765 foreigners were serving on British vessels, alongside 27,911 Lascars, sailors of Asian, Arab, or North African origin, mostly British subjects who served on British ships. He noted an 'alarming' drop in the numbers of 'British sailor lads' joining the Mercantile Marine. This, he argued, showed that there was a strong 'demand for the services of boys in the Mercantile Marine' to replace both foreigners and British subjects of colour in their ranks (Bosanquet, 1898, p.180).

The 1894 report from the Mars revealed that, of 386 children on-board, the ship housed 45 boys under the age of twelve, and 82 between twelve and fourteen years old. They are described as 'orphans, — children of criminal or drunken parents, children deserted by their parents, illegitimate offsprings of unfortunate women, in fact children who only want to be taken from bad surroundings and given a fair chance to become decent members of society' (Quoted in Report to the Secretary of State for the Home Department of the Departmental Committee on Reformatory and Industrial Schools, 1896). The admissions report for 1894 shows that around half the new boys had 'been found wandering', that is seemingly homeless, and a third in 'the company of Thieves, etc' (Ibid.).

The committee's assessment of the advantages of the training ship revolved around its location and isolation, making note of the life in the open air, the surrounding river scenery, and the 'more thorough separation of the boys from the outer world' (Report to the Secretary of State, 1896). Under questioning about the distinction between an industrial school and a reformatory, the committee drew attention to the Mars' own report that stated that 'industrial school children are much the same as other school children' and asked the ship's agent Mr Campbell, 'If the boys are no different from other boys why should they be sent to the 'Mars' to be shut up compulsorily?', his response was 'To take them away from their parents' (Ibid). Boys were only permitted four days at home a year if they had a 'decent home' to return to and requests from the family were almost always refused (Ibid).

The Mars was closed and the ship towed to Inverkeithing in June 1929 to be broken up, after sixty years as a home to boys and staff. The advent of the steam ship, and then the proliferation of destroyers, ended the demand for young boys to work aboard sailing ships. A reporter for the Dundee Courier and Advertiser collected some fond memories from local folk and staff on that day, but nothing from the boys themselves.

[Modern retellings of life on the ship](#) focus on the 'opportunity' offered by training at sea, but very little is known about the boys' experiences. The fact that the ship was broken up after decommissioning left no focal point for former residents to remember (Musgrove, 2015). The only written account by a former

'Mars boy' appears to be a manuscript held in the St Andrew's University Archives, by an H. A. Martin. He was active in memorialising the Mars as an adult, described himself as 'sadly disappointed' at the lack of interest shown by official bodies.

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Christine Whyte is a Lecturer in Global History at the University of Glasgow. Her research focuses the history of slavery and its abolition in West Africa. She is currently a British Academy / Wolfson Foundation Research Fellow, working on a project about state and institutional care for children liberated from the slave trade through the 19th century.