

MAX WILLIAMS' memories of Mittagong Boys' Home (now known as Renwick):

At the age of 10, Max Williams (born 7/2/1930) was taken to court and charged with being a neglected child, also one charge of breaking and entering a school, and a charge of truancy and being uncontrollable. He was sent to Mittagong Farm Homes for Boys for "discipline and proper supervision and regular schooling". He was taken from the Children's Shelter in Sydney (under the escort of Mr Frost and Old Pierce) via train to Mittagong to the home where he would live for the next four years of his life.

The Superintendent at the home was Mr Jones. "There were eleven homes, divided into Catholic and other religious denominations. Number 2 home was the hospital, number three was for 'working boys", Number 7 was for young Catholic boys, Number 9 for young Protestants. Max's was place in number 7 home, for younger Catholic boys. At age 12 he was transferred to number 8 home which was originally built as a staging hotel for Cobb and Co coaches.

It was 'a very old, Anglican-style home.' The boys all ate at a large table together. Later, when he was about 13 or 14, Max was transferred again, this time to number 12 home which had been recently built. There the boys had to eat at smaller tables in groups, and had to use serviettes, knives and forks, and to learn meal-time etiquette. This home was run by a Catholic matron who was assisted by a deputy matron and a cook.

The Farm Homes' complex had its own public school, located near the Christian Brothers building. (In the 1950s, the church recommended the building be closed down because of complaints about sexual assaults on inmates). It also had a huge penned piggery (not in use), a swimming pool, a scout hall (where Max was initiated as a scout, later becoming a patrol leader; they would sometimes go on camps.) There was also a theatre, a big orchard with a jam factory in it (where boys made jam for the war effort), and a boot shop, where boys learnt book-making skills. Max became a very skilled boot-maker, and later when he was incarcerated in adult prison, he worked in the prison boot shop, even making boots for warders.

Max recalled a "ghost" at Mittagong Farm Homes which was known as Peg-Leg Peter, who was supposed to have escaped from Kenmore Mental Institution. One night Max crept outside his cottage and thumped up and down along the cottage verandah with a quilt over his head, pretending to be Peg-Leg Peter, and terrifying the boys inside. Max said he mostly enjoyed his years at the Farm Home, though he ran away a number of times.

In 1944-46, Max was sent to Gosford Boys' Home (Penang), where, after escaping, he was sent to Gosford Prison for three months days for absconding. At Penang there were 12 cottages with 30 boys in each; there were two dormitories in each cottage. "There are more details and information in Dingo: My Life on The Run by Max Williams (published Fontana/Collins, 1980)

Here is a poem by Max from his days at Mittagong:

On the Pots

(To a friend on punishment)

I knew about the pots

and Matron filling them with soapy water

so you couldn't eat the scraps.

The giant enamel bowls

and milk buckets you leaned in

scouring the chips (or imagined barnacles

on sauce-pan like ships)

that only got you into more trouble for playing.

And days that didn't go right or hurry by

whether it was close to dark

near the drive where the frost

stopped you from running away.

And the black cast-iron boiler

stinking of corned beef water

that Miss Kells let soak all day.

(A smell of small parcels

Matron made you put in the fire

when she was sick.)

You learned all these things on the pots;

you were that sort of boy -

right to smack, or even joke with.

without feeling so silly

C Max Williams

And one more poem, which is my favourite of Max's:

THE EMPTY HOUSE

The old house felt unfriendly

offering no apologies for the undressed rooms

and the stained wallpaper

or for sharing this familiarity

with others who might come anytime.

This had never been my home.

"They moved." The neighbour said, "A month ago:"

And I repeated it to an overcoat

hanging behind the door.

That night I sheltered in the empty house

tucked into myself like an abandoned dog

not caring for the advances people made

wrapped in an overcoat smelling of tobacco and grown ups.

This was my fathers smell, blanket warm and coarse.

Next day I watched an old lady crying

and demolition workers putting back the sky.

C Max Williams

(Both poems are from The Poor Man's Bean by Max Williams, pub Prism, 1975).