



# Applying for Child Migrants

Boys' Town, Glenorchy, was established by the Archbishop of Hobart, the Very Rev Tweedy in 1945 and was given to the Salesians of Don Bosco to administer in November 1946.

Fr John Brennan SDB, the first Rector of Boys' Town, had ambitious plans to build a school to help educate the less fortunate boys according to the teachings of St John Bosco.

Classes commenced in February 1947 for the more than 30 children who lived at Boys' Town. Fr Brennan set about advancing his plans to build a new school and have the State and Federal Governments help by paying two-thirds of the building costs in exchange for a commitment to receive child migrants from the UK.

Fr Brennan was in contact with the State Government Tourist and Immigration Department and was mailed a printed circular "Child and Youth Migration Schemes by Approved Voluntary

Organisations" and met with the Secretary of the Department, Monday 28 June 1948 for discussion and advice.

Following this meeting he wrote to the Tasmanian Government Immigration Officer in setting out the Salesian plans:

*It is proposed to extend the buildings at Boys' Town, Glenorchy, Tasmania, by building and equipping a block of dormitories, classrooms, and all conveniences to house fifty boys according to plans and specifications submitted to you, estimated to cost forty thousand pounds (£40,000). We wish to accept 40 British migrant boys, Catholics, between the ages of nine and twelve years. We guarantee them a thorough training, intellectual, physical and moral, and we will have them prepared for and placed in trades at the end of their training.*

In 1949 Fr Brennan lodged the official immigration nomination for 40 boys, stating eight could be accepted at once. This was because he calculated there was

room for eight more in the dormitory hut attached to Grantleigh, currently holding 32 Australian boys.

He had not expected at that stage that it would take nearly three years for the first boys to arrive.

Delays were caused by two issues. Firstly, Boys' Town, Glenorchy, as an institution, had not been approved by the UK authorities to receive child migrants. The Salesians and the Tasmanian Government had expected approval to be automatic, as they felt that children in obviously inferior institutions in Great Britain would be clearly better off in Tasmania.

However approval proved to be problematic as the British Government required answers and explanations as to the way children were raised, how much contact with the world outside institutions they enjoyed and how much freedom the children would have to play and mix with other children. Fr Brennan

and the Salesians resented being judged by secular authorities and were dismayed their methods would be questioned.

Secondly, there were many fewer children available for immigration than had been assumed.

Many Catholic dioceses in the United Kingdom, just as in Australia, did not approve of sending children away from their country of origin. The Australian Catholic representatives in the UK worked for months on trying to get institutions to allow them to ‘recruit’ child migrants.

Fr William Nicol was Director for the Federal Catholic Immigration Committee and in charge of recruiting. His London office organised the parties of Catholic children for Australian Catholic institutions. He had been in direct contact with Fr Brennan at Boys’ Town since 1948 and had kept him apprised of the supply of child migrants.

Nicol did not have enough for his nomination of 40 but thought he could manage a dozen to leave in March, but in February wrote to let Fr Brennan know he had postponed the despatch as

*...some of the institutions were trying to wish on to us some boys who were very much below par and who in addition were bed wetters. Under the circumstances I have cabled my office to hold the shipment.*

Brennan, disappointed, agreed:

*I am most anxious that the boys we receive are normal, at least, in intelligence and not bed wetters. I want them to fit in with our own children, a thing only normal children can do.*

Far from the image of thousands of poor war orphans awaiting Australian charity, the reality was that the Catholic Immigration effort was desperately difficult. Fr Brennan’s insistence that the boys be “normal” set the bar too high.

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