

# **Smallpox in Sydney**

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## **Certificate of Authorship/Originality**

I certify that the work in this thesis has not been previously for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and in the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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## Smallpox in Sydney

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## Abstract

In May 1881 a case of smallpox was discovered in Sydney. In the ensuing months the deadly infection spread throughout the city. By the end of the epidemic eight months later, several hundred cases had been notified to the authorities, with about forty deaths. Compared with other epidemics such as Spanish Influenza or HIV, this one was hardly more than a blip, yet its impact on Sydney was tremendous. With no infectious diseases hospital, no board of health to manage the response, no proper ambulance service, and no known treatment of the disease, there was widespread panic.

Within weeks of the first case being confirmed, three more cases were discovered and the decision was made to isolate the victims and their families at the quarantine station, seven nautical miles from Sydney. It was the only place with facilities large enough to isolate those affected.

A horse-drawn omnibus was purchased to take these people from their homes to Cowper's Wharf where they were transferred onto a steamboat that would take them across to the quarantine station. By the end of the first day, twenty-seven people (more than half of them children) had already been transferred across the harbour. In the early hours of the following morning two doctors who detected those early cases, as well as several other victims, were taken across to the quarantine station along with the corpse of another victim. What happened to these people and many others who were isolated at the quarantine station over the next few months is the subject matter of *Smallpox in Sydney*.

While the story is essentially true and the names are those of actual people who were caught up in the epidemic, this is nevertheless a work of fiction. For reader who would prefer to know exactly where to draw the line, unfortunately there is no line. Like Margaret Atwood in *Alias Grace*, where there was fact I've endeavoured to use it and where there were gaps I was free to invent.

Not surprisingly there were many gaps. There were no diaries or letters I could find that would provide a glimpse into the minds and hearts of characters such as Michael Clune. The best sources of information were the transcript of the Royal Commission and the reports in the newspapers at the time. From analysis of these two sources the characters began to take shape, but the task of bringing them to life is the point where fact and fiction merge.



*There is nothing in our history that will make us appear so utterly contemptible in the eyes of the world as our conduct under this affliction.*

***The Freeman's Journal, Sydney, August 27, 1881***

