'An Asylum for the Safe Custody and Proper Treatment of the Insane'

On 5 October 1848, John Burns and Eliza Richardson left Melbourne Gaol under police escort. Readers of the *Argus* newspaper were perhaps surprised to learn that the two ‘shed tears’ at their departure, for they journeyed to more ‘comfortable quarters’ in the colony’s new Lunatic Asylum, situated on a ‘romantic bend of the [Yarra] river’ some two and a half miles north-east of Melbourne. Prior to the opening of the Gaol in 1845, individuals thought to be insane by their fellow colonists found themselves confined in ‘a small wooden apartment attached’ to the prison in West Collins Street. Here, in the words of Garryowen, the chronicler of early Melbourne, they were ‘stowed away to live or die, or recover, according to chance, for anything like proper nursing or attendance was out of the question.’ By early-1847, there were fifteen men and women remanded as lunatics ‘on the gaoler’s hands, without any special means for ensuring their safe custody, or keeping them apart from the other prisoners of both sexes.’

As the transfer of Burns and Richardson reveals, prior to the opening of the Yarra Bend Asylum, no separate institution for the confinement of the insane existed in the colony of Victoria. Nor were they often segregated from other ‘deviants’ in Melbourne’s prisons. In the absence of any specialised institution for their care, there was no separate work of attending. The existence of asylum work as a separate occupational category relied, first, on the conceptual differentiation of the ‘lunatic’ from other categories of ‘deviants’, and secondly, on their separate confinement to an institution established specifically for that purpose. This, however, was insufficient to differentiate either the occupation or the work. The meaning of asylum work and the figure of the attendant further relied on perceptions of the lunatic, the object of asylum work, and on the meanings and purposes invested in the new institution.

In the 1840s, colonists in Victoria – or Port Phillip as it was known until it separated from the neighbouring colony of New South Wales in 1851 – began to discuss the need to confine the insane within their midst and to imagine a new institution for their incarceration: the asylum. In February 1848, reporting on the building of the Yarra Bend Asylum, the *Argus* warned of the necessity to ‘be on the lookout as to the disposal of its management’. The paper was anxious that under the administration of the colony’s
Superintendent, Charles LaTrobe, ‘the grand objects of such an institution’ had ‘little intention of being attended to’. It feared the new establishment would ‘prove merely another edition of the gaol, instead of an asylum for the safe custody and proper treatment of the insane.’

While there had been no apparent need of attendants when the insane were ‘immured in some part of the wretched gaols of Melbourne’, the desire for an asylum to be something more than these institutions made their presence a necessity. Consequently, the colonists of Port Phillip began to define the nature of asylum work and to visualise the attendant within the new institutional space. The idea of the asylum as an institution ‘for the safe custody and proper treatment of the insane’ was central to both the character of the work and the figure of the attendant as colonists began to imagine them.

A new institution
While contemporaneous with the colonisation of Australia, lunacy reform had little influence on the treatment of the insane during the first decades of settlement, when the population consisted, in the main, of convicts. The governing authorities provided no separate institutions for the confinement of the insane among the convict population, instead incarcerating them with other convict offenders. However, the increase in the non-convict population in the early-nineteenth century created pressure for the establishment of a ‘separate system for the treatment of lunatics’. The law subsequently defined ‘the criteria and procedure for the detention of lunatics’ and addressed control of their estates. Magistrates were empowered to order the detention of those brought before them on suspicion of insanity; the ‘criteria for apprehension generally involved disturbed behaviour, and the main concern was the detention of the lunatic to prevent further public disturbances.’ Those declared insane and ordered detained had to be confined with criminals until the opening of the first New South Wales asylum at Castle Hill in 1811, and institutions for the confinement of the insane in other colonies were similarly ‘makeshift and custodial’ until ‘purpose-built spaces became the dominant response of colonists to the problem of insanity’. The meaning of early lunatic confinement was thus ‘negative’ and exclusionary, its intention to detain in custody those considered disturbing.

The public disturbance lunatics created was one reason why the colonists of Port Phillip began to discuss confining the mad in their midst. Garryowen records that before the erection of Melbourne Gaol in 1845, ‘a watch-house built in the Eastern Market, occasionally served as a temporary asylum’. In September 1841, the Port Phillip Gazette reported the three-week imprisonment there of one Owen Callow, described as ‘deranged in his