

## BOOK REVIEW

### **The Tooting Tragedy: Cholera, Cruelty and Children of the Victorian Poor by William Ellis-Rees**

Hardback, 240 pages

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Ellis-Rees tells the story of a scandal at Surrey Hall, a residential school for workhouse children, in Lower Tooting, London. In January 1849, there was an outbreak of cholera at the school and many children died. This was associated with overcrowding at the school as well as insanitary and unhygienic living conditions. The story is told with reference to specific individuals including children, parents and medical officers.

Several London parishes farmed out workhouse children to the school which was run by Bartholomew Peter Drouet. Drouet was an entrepreneur driven by greed. He negotiated the fees for his services which were acceptable to the workhouse guardians. However, he spent as little as possible on caring for the children to maximise his financial gain.

Drouet provided a poor standard of care for the children despite concerns raised by Poor Law inspectors, medical officers and parents. The children were subjected to physical, emotional and sexual abuse and neglect. They suffered from malnutrition and several medical problems including 'the itch'. He successfully concealed the cruelty and brutality meted out to the children by himself and his staff.

Thomas Wakley, editor of the *Lancet* and Coroner for Middlesex, was involved with the inquests on the deaths of several children who died from cholera. Drouet was charged with manslaughter and tried at the Old Bailey. The defence successfully argued that there were flaws in the case presented by the prosecution and Drouet was acquitted. Charles Dickens, who was working as a newspaper reporter, anonymously chronicled the events of the case and drew attention to the suffering of the children.

This book is well researched and there are 30 illustrations which complement the text. However, a map showing the location of Surrey Hall in relation to the roads mentioned and the route of the Streatham drain which was the suspected cause of the cholera outbreak would have been helpful. The book will be of interest to those wishing to learn more about how children were cared for under the New Poor Law and how institutions like Surrey Hall were allowed to operate and failed to provide adequate care for the children of the poor.

**Martyn Thomas**  
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