

# THE LOST BOYS OF MR DICKENS

How the British Empire turned artful dodgers into child killers

by STEVE HARRIS

*Pause you who read this, and think for a moment of the long chain of iron or gold, of thorns or flowers, that would never have bound you but for the formation of the first link on one memorable day.*

— Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*

This is the gripping real-life story of two young boys sent by the British Government as impoverished and unwanted juveniles to exile in the world's first prison built exclusively for children.

Some 3000 boys doing their best to survive on the streets of 19th century Great Britain were forcibly removed from their Oliver Twist lives, a stolen generation to be 'saved' from a life of crime by being transported to the other side of the world to endure seven or 14 year sentences in the extraordinary colony of Van Diemen's Land.

Prejudice, moral panic, harsh justice and expedience saw unwanted boys condemned to severe isolation, solitary confinement, hard labour in chains and thrashings in a juvenile version of notorious Port Arthur, a ground-breaking chapter in the history of juvenile crime and punishment.

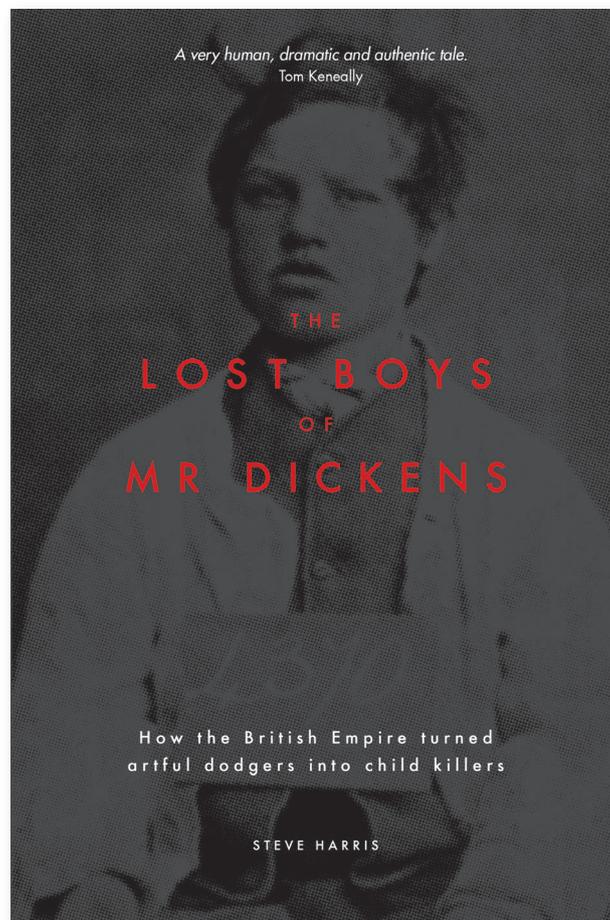
Some quietly endured in the hope of salvation through rudimentary trade and Biblical instruction, but others became relentlessly defiant and mutinous in a brotherhood of resistance and bullying, inexorably slipping from hope to hell.

It culminated on a winter's day in 1843 when the infant colony was shocked to hear that two young boys had bashed an overseer to death, facing a trial and a walk to the scaffold.

As engrossing as a novel, this story of the death of childhood in the cradle of the world's mightiest empire, and the atmospheric tale of crime and punishment leading to a sensational murder trial is from another time but implicitly raises questions which remain with us today.

## The Author

Steve Harris is a former editor, editor-in-chief and publisher at *The Age*, *Sunday Age* and *Herald Sun*. He is a fourth generation Tasmanian, life member of the Melbourne Press Club, and a John S. Knight Fellow at Stanford University. He is the author of *Solomon's Noose*, the true story of a young Van Diemen's Land convict who became Queen Victoria's longest serving hangman, published in 2015, and *The Prince and the Assassin*, the true story of Australia's first royal tour and the nation's first portent of world terror, published in 2017. (both published by Melbourne Books)



*Steve Harris' book brings to life a most bizarre social experiment and all its grotesqueness in engrossing form. It's a very human, dramatic and authentic tale, written so comprehensively that it is a service to Australian and British readers.*

— Tom Keneally, winner of the Booker Prize and Miles Franklin Award

*History as suspenseful, vividly portrayed, affecting and moving as the best films and fiction.*

— Robert Drewe, award-winning author

*Steve Harris skilfully portrays one of the most sobering and saddest stories in Australian history.*

— Professor Geoffrey Blainey, AC

*A moving story of two boys, embedded in a penetrating and thorough study of a grim part of Tasmania's history: the harsh treatment of boys transported for often minor crimes.*

— Alison Alexander, award-winning author