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PREFACE

In 1976 five research papers in Australian history, written by second year students in the ordinary History IIB course, were presented in this format. The favourable response that they received suggests that the project is a worthwhile one and it will therefore be continued annually. This year, however, publication of the papers has been undertaken by students under the auspices of the History Club and the S.R.C.

Each year students in this course are asked to investigate some aspect of Australian history, preferably through research in primary sources. They are encouraged to look whereever possible at questions through which light can be thrown on significant problems by the study of local history. Over a hundred such projects were undertaken this year, and the variety of topics as well as the quality of the papers presented was very encouraging.

The papers published here were chosen not only because they are good papers, but also to show the variety of issues that interest students. Many other papers could have been chosen.

Peter Stephens :	Morpeth in the era of the Steamship.
Mary Livingstone :	The First General Strike in the Coal Industry
Adelle Harding :	The Copeland Gold Rush
Mark Holmes :	The First Battle Honour – Australians in the Boer War
Baronya Croft :	Rothbury Dilemnas
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Peter Crotty :	Henry Dangar, Pioneer Explorer, Surveyor and Pastoralist
Gregory Gamage :	Attitudes of the People of Newcastle towards the Chinese 1978 - 1888
Lynda Allomes :	A Study of Bushranging in the Hunter Valley
Susan Murray :	The Robertson Land Acts
Lynn Rutherford :	The Bellbird Mine Disaster 1923
Peter Jeffrey :	The Paul Bunyans of Cedar Arm

C. Bacchi
P. Hempenstall
N. Rutherford

The works presented in this collection are not only a tribute to their authors, but also to Carol Bacchi, Peter Hempenstall and Noel Rutherford who provided the opportunity, the support, and the encouragement that made it all possible. The History Club is pleased to be associated with such a worthwhile project.

History Club Executive

WORKING–CLASS WOMEN AND THE SUFFRAGETTES : A STUDY OF URBAN NEW SOUTH WALES AND VICTORIA, 1890–1900

BY

NOELINE WILLIAMSON

SYNOPSIS:

By 1890, the greater proportion of the Australian population lived and worked in urban areas. At least half were women. (1) A large number of these urban women were working class. Their history is largely unwritten. What is overlooked, by feminists and traditional historians alike, is that women do not constitute a common united entity. Women, like men, have many places in history. They had, in the period 1890 to 1910, differing and often conflicting aims. This period, for the working-class woman, was socially disastrous. This effectively removed her from the mainstream of the motivations and aspirations of the middle-class suffragette.

Working-class women, if viewed from the level of the 'New Left' or traditional historians, are not found in Australian history. The former, by applying strict ideological criteria, eliminate a working-class altogether.(2) The latter, though less concerned with the validity of class identification, generally neglect to include women in their historical interpretations. Sociologists and social historians have less difficulty in locating social stratification (and women) in society and this criteria will be used. A working-class, for the purposes of this study, will be defined in terms of socio-economic status.(3) Working-class conditions have, to some extent, been subject to a similar analysis. Historians have tended to take literally Coghlan's assertion that Australia has been a 'working-man's paradise.'(4) Economic historians are questioning this assumption, especially for the period 1890 to 1900. The working-class of the south-eastern metropolis, more so than any other urban area, reached a nadir of misery during the 1890's with record unemployment alleviated only by sporadic inadequate relief. Working-class women were affected by these circumstances enough to initiate a move of their own. It had no relationship to the program followed by the middle-class suffragette.

> The nature of the battles fought in Australia over legal and political equality for women illustrates very clearly . . ., that far from being an homogeneous group, women were seriously divided according to class as well as marital status.(5)

Beverley Kingston recognizes the divisions of which the women's movement in 1890, and until recently, appeared largely unaware.(6) Anne Summers, on the other hand, rejects the premise that the movement was class based. She admits to its middle-class composition but as,

> 'The feminists represented their policies as being in the interests of women of all classes and certainly as long as they were the sole champions of female suffrage and a host of other issues affecting women it was not possible to assign a class label to any of these policies.'(7)

Summers concentrates on stressing the active force of the suffragettes. She is not concerned with the worsening economic conditions of the period in which their action took place. The economic depression of the 1890's depressed all classes, but none more so than the semi and unskilled worker. Economic historians have suggested that their plight, as a working-class, was worse than anywhere in the world at the time.(8) The middle-class suffragette, secure in her higher status and financial security, could have little identification with this group or any understanding of the plight of the woman who experienced such conditions daily.

Summers and others demonstrate the sympathy of the women's movement toward the working-class woman by the attention paid to pressing for better conditions in factory employment for women. Rose Scott, a prominent suffragette, is cited as having exerted much influence in the framing and passing of the New South Wales Factories and Shops Act and Early Closing Act of 1889.(9) Kingston contends that these reforms were more the result of pressures from '. . . benevolent liberal patriarchal sources.'(10)Rose Scott may have had influence or she may not; what is more important is the proportion of women in the workforce who received this support from the suffragettes. Males were, in the 1890's, proportinately larger as breadwinners and females still predominately dependent. According to Coghlan's estimates, see Table I, 82.64 per cent of females were dependent in New South Wales in 1891. Victoria's figure was comparable at 78.85 per cent. Women were not in the workforce in large proportions and were therefore largely

Table I: Proportion of Male and Female Breadwinners in New South Wales and Victoria, 1891

State	Proportion of Breadwinners		Proportion of Dependents	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
	%	%	%	%
New South Wales	63 13	17.36	36.87	82.64
Victoria	65.42	21.15	34.58	78.85
Australia	64.01	18.12	35.99	81.88

Source: T. A. Coghlan, A Statistical Account of the Seven Colonies of Australasia, 1899-1900, Government Printer, Sydney, 1900, p. 596.

dependent on the increasingly uncertain incomes of the male population. Though exploited and in need of better pay and work conditions, working women were only a small proportion of all women. The majority of working-class women were dependent; their needs, as will be demonstrated, were of a different kind. They received scant recognition of this from the suffragettes.

Prostitution was abhorred by the suffragettes and Temperance Unions alike. The suffragettes saw the prostitutes as victims and sought to advance schemes of rehabilitation and homes for working girls. For example, Louisa Lawson, the radical feminist and outspoken champion of women in the workforce, founded the Darlinghurst Hostel for working girls as a bulwark against prostitution.(11) In their zeal to eradicate this socially unacceptable profession they sought to enforce middle-class morality onto those women, who through choice or circumstance, chose this avenue to survive the depression. Cannon suggests that in the 1890's there were, in Melbourne, 10,000 prostitutes.(12) A high percentage of women were intent on solving their economic problems in the only way they saw as possible. As Kingston states,

> . . .the only choice she (the working-class woman) had to make was whether she would try to hold body and soul together by 'respectable' means or whether she would take the easier path of easy virtue Either way she would age quickly and still be socially unacceptable.(13)

Summers describes the double standard of morality which prevailed between men and women. She approaches seeing the double standard of morality prevailing between middle-class and working-class women when she notes that women from the working-class were 'Damned Whores' until they proved otherwise.(14) Prostitution was a profession of the lower socio-economic groups. There was no pressure from them to have it abolished.

Maybanke Anderson, active in a wide range of issues that assumes her views were widely known and supported,(15) illustrates a further division in the aims and needs of women in the 1890's. Girls of a 'better sort' did not attend government schools. These 'of necessity' were suitable only for the children of working-class origin.(16) The pressure, by the suffragettes, for better quality and higher education was an aspiration of middle and upper-class values. They were aware of the need for scholastic training to gain professional employment and recognition in traditionally male dominated areas. It was a necessary paradigm of the 19th century women's movement to acquire educational equality with men. It was not considered a necessary goal for working-class women. Elementary education was reasonably equal for both boys and girls in that decade. The daughters of working-class families achieved an adequate preparation for the strata of society in which they were to be placed. It is probably unlikely that they aspired for anything more. Higher education was not an integral issue in feminist propaganda and University graduates were not prominent in the suffrage movement.(17) Nevertheless, education reform was supported, in the hope of achieving a larger representation of women in tertiary education. This was an interest of the middle-class and had no common bond or wider implication to include the woman in lower socio-economic groups.

The right to vote was the main vehicle for the suffragette's claims. In this they included all the injustices which were to them, in the 1890's, so clearly evident. Once gained they would have equality, with men, in the pursuits of personal and national life. It became, '. . .symbolic of the self-determination which women sought in all areas of life.'(18) The fervence of their belief iniated such action as petitions to Parliament, Committees and Leagues, suffrage oriented journals and newspapers, and attempts to enter Parliament, (for example, Vida Goldstein.) Why didn't working-class women respond to such wide publicity? They were literate and communications were adequate. The Government Statistician, T.A. Coghlan, records that by 1889, education had improved the reading ability of the population to the extent that few were now illiterate.(19) Only Britain, he claimed, had a larger correspondence and newspaper distribution per head of population.(20) The Labor Party eventually came to include female suffrage in its platform, but working-class women despite their apparent awareness, remained outside the pressures for the 'right to vote.'

In 1891, Vida Goldstein reported that in a petition containing over 30,000 signatures that,

> "Very rarely were refusals made by wives of working men, . . . These women came face to face with a adverse conditions of human existence . . . ." (21)

This supposed enthusiasm from the working-class woman did not last, for the adverse conditions became too great. As the depression pushed the working-class deeper into hopeless circumstances the realities of class division became too apparent. Each group, working-class and middle-class, became deeply imbued with their own particular grievance. The suffragette pressing for justice and equality for all women but in reality for a conservative and virtuous middle-class elite. The working-class responding to the adverse social conditions with a desperation born of personal suffering and lack of public concern.

An indication of the social dislocation suffered by the working-class can be gained from a study of the serious poverty of the 1890's and on whom this fell most harshly. This was the unemployed. In Victoria, where the rate of unemployment was the highest, there were 28 per cent of the male workforce out of work by 1893. As Table 2 demonstrates, high levels of unemployment persisted until 1900. Real incomes were not regained until two decades later.

Table 2: Victorian Unemployment, 1891–1900

Year	Unemployed per cent
1891	8.3
1892	17.6
1893	28.3
1894	24.9
1895	21.7
1896	10.8
1897	11.5
1898	10.2
1899	9.1
1900	5.3

Source: P. G. Macarthy, "Labor and the Living Wage, 1890-1910", Australian Journal of Politics and History, 13, April, 1967, p.83.

Macarthy claims that the working-class did not achieve any improvement in their depressed standard of living until 1914.(22) The conditions of the unskilled worker, in particular, were considered so deplorable and hopeless that a Royal Commission was demanded in 1897 in New South Wales. Two reports by the Unemployed Advisory Board, 1899 and 1900, stressed that it was the unskilled worker who was adversely affected by the depression and the attendant lack of Government expenditure on Public Works.(23)

It was inevitable that women should increase their participation in the workforce in an attempt to alleviate their financial distress. Victorian women were able, with that State's earlier industrial expansion, to enter manufacturing employment more readily. There was an increase in female participation in Victorian manufacturing of 14 per cent by 1900, and in New South Wales of 7 per cent. (24) Such a small increase in New South Wales does not illustrate a large-scale marshalling of women into the workforce. Victorian women were underpaid, sweated and worked long hours. (25) The reward for employment was small and accompanied, during the 1890's, by the hostility of the unemployed male population. It remains clear that there was a general dependence on the male breadwinner. The members of the working-class remained, for the most part, poverty stricken or, if in work, on uncertain depressed wages. In 1892, at least two thousand people in Melbourne were reported to be starving. The same year, in Sydney, starvation was reported for a large number of men, women and children. (26)

A description of the squalor of working-class life becomes more telling when it is remembered that many Australians were massed into the urban cities of the Eastern seaboard. Sydney contained some of the worst slum areas imaginable and these produced shocking social effects for the working-class woman. Of the individual woman, one observer wrote that,

> ". . . the women of the poorer classes look prematurely old:
> many of them are absolutely frightful." 27

For Melbourne's poor, the 'Age' wrote revealingly of the depressed state of industrial suburbs,

> ". . . the forlorn and destitute workers are hiding in alleys
> and lanes . . . can be found the emaciated and wasted faces
> of the women and their little ones." (28)

Cannon asserts that contemporary observers claimed that every second man, in Melbourne, was unemployed. This, he says, may be guess work, but there can be cited shocking individual cases of deprivation and horror.

The social conditions facing the working-classes in the 1890's imply needs of a basic kind. Economic security was necessary and this led to the seeking, by the male population, of assurances that real wages would be maintained. They feared, with the prevailing economic conditions, that a drop in wages would not be regained in such a competitive labour market. Employment for those out of work was a further necessary aim. Some kind of Government intervention into the plight of those affected so harshly was also of prime importance. None of these needs were seen as being readily or quickly obtained. In Sydney, as an answer to the starving conditions, rations only were made available to keep families, that is, wives and children of the unemployed, at '. . . just above the pressure of actual hunger' (29) Apart from this measure and the efforts of the Labour Bureau, (which sent men to be employed in the country with little success (30) there was no real attempt to introduce relief of a substantial nature until much later in the 20th century. The 19th century philosopy of leaving the poor to manage as best they could was not easily dismantled. In the meantime, work-class women turned to other avenues to achieve recognition of their unique position in society.

> "The melancholy line filed down the street – Some hundreds, seedy, pale,
> their wistful eyes Stared strangely at the well-dressed crowds who saw
> Them pass along, for it was evening: . . . (31)

The words of the above poem express succintly the abject position of the unemployed and the apparent unconcern of those who were not so affected. The standard bearers of the unemployed processions were often female whose, '. . . genteel scruples have been silenced by the sobs of their hungry children.' (32) Working-class women began to agitate for relief from their distress. In Melbourne they supported the mass of demonstrations aimed at gaining employment for the thousands out of work. In June 1892, carrying small children, they joined the men in the attempts to convince the Government of the seriousness of their plight. They marched among the 500 unemployed on Scots Church much to the amusement of the congregation consisting of members from a better class suburb. (33) In Sydney there were public meetings which were '. . . even dangerous to the social order', in the same year. (34) Peyser does not mention the attendance of women at these highly volatile gatherings. Newspaper reports are vague as to the composition of Sydney demonstrations. Most refer to mass meetings of citizens. (35) Women may have been included in this description. If not there, it might be assumed that they, as members of the working-class so affected, shared the same sentiments as those who did attend.

The radical nature of the working-class woman was not part of a wider political gesture. It was a response to a specific need. In these terms, it was a selfish narrow aim to gain relief for a section of people who were in great distress. This can be further illustrated by the highly spontaneous outbursts of 'radicalism' displayed by the even narrower class category, the miner's wife. Newcastle and Wollongong, both coalfields, and characterized by small dense settlements clustered around the workings, were notorious for these angry uprisings. From the 1860's, their skill and vehemence at 'tin-kettling' was variously reported until the 1890's and early 20th century when the miner's strikes reached their peak and ultimate failure. The women were invariably more successful in putting the 'blacklegs' to flight than the men were in obtaining success for their claims and complaints about their uncertain work conditions. It is easy to judge the motives of such women as either narrow or unimaginative, but it is more difficult to imagine what other response they could have given. (36) Their position in the society precluded them from any link to the suffrage movement to attain their aims through that avenue. The right to vote may have been just as central to achieving their goals. They could not know it when just the need to survive was so important in their lives.

The move by working-class women lacked the organization which grew among the suffragettes. Apart from the attempts by Labor women such as Lilian Locke to gain votes from working-class women for Labor candidates there were no direct moves to create a consciousness of unity in working-class women. (37) Their 'radicalism' remained fragmented and ephemeral. This does not however detract from their importance in Australian history. During the 1890's, work-class women became overtly active in support of better wages, work for the unemployed and relief for those in distress. They demonstrated convincingly, in the suburbs of Melbourne and Sydney and on the coalfields, that they were capable of stepping outside conventional moulds to achieve desired social ends. Many risked injury and arrest and were abused (as were the suffragettes) for overstepping the accepted bounds of their sex. (38) The failure of the women's movement to recognize the basic social and economic needs of poorer women lost them a potential ally in their fight for political equality. The depression heightened the differences existing between middle-class and working-class women. Without social dislocation and economic disarray, working-class women might have remained as responsive to middle-class aims as they had been in 1891. The suffragettes, on the other hand, could not comprehend a lifestyle that was so dissimilar to their own. They were immune to the hopeless circumstances of working-class depressed conditions. Their political aims, in the end, bore no relationship to the socio-economic hardships imposed on the working-class woman during the 1890's in colonial New South Wales and Victoria.

FOOTNOTES:

(1) S. Glynn, Urbanization in Australian History, 1788-1900. Nelson Australia, 1970, p. 3.
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M. Cannon, Life In The Cities, Thomas Nelson (Australia) Ltd., 1975. p. 10.
Official Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1901-1907, pp. 164-165.

(2) T. Irving and B. Berzins, "History and the New Left : Beyond Radicalism." in R. Gordon, The Australian New Left, Heinemann, Melbourne, 1970. p. 79.

(3) R. Lawson, Brisbane In the 1890's, University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1973, pp. 42-43.

(4) T. A. Coghlan, A Statistical Account of the Seven Colonies of Australasia, 1895-1896, Government Printer, Sydney, p. 82

(5) B. Kingston, My Wife, My Daughter and Poor Mary Ann. Nelson. Melbourne. 1975. p. 12.

(6) Editorial, Refractory Girl, No's 13-14, March, 1977, p. 2.

(7) A. Summers, Damned Whores and God's Police, Penguin Books Ltd.. Australia. 1975. p. 353.

(8) P. F. McDonald, Marriage in Australia, Australian Family Formation Project. Monograph No. 2. Australian National University, 1974, p. 146.

(9) D. Scott, "Woman Suffrage: The Movement in Australia." Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society, 53. Part 4. December, 1967, p. 304.
A. Summers, op cit, p. 354.

(10) B. Kingston, op cit, p. 63.

(11) A. Summers, op cit, p. 364.

(12) M. Cannon, The Land Boomers, Melbourne University Press, 1967. p. 24.

(13) B. Kingston, op cit, p. 120.

(14) A. Summers, op cit, p. 370.

(15) A. Summers, ibid, p. 334.

(16) M. Anderson, "Women in Australia," in M. Atkinson, (Ed.) Australia Economic and Political Studies. MacMillan and Co Ltd.. Melbourne, 1920, p. 267.

(17) A. Summers, op cit, p. 351.

(18) A. Summers, ibid, p. 359.

(19) T. A Coghlan, A Statistical Account of the Seven Colonies of Australasia, 1891. Acting Government Printer. Sydney. 1891. pp. 261-262.

(20) T. A. Coghlan, A Statistical Account of the Seven Colonies of Australasia, 1895-1896, Government Printer. Sydney. 1896. pp. 82-83.

(21) D. Scott, op cit, p. 315.

(22) P. G. Macarthy, "Wages in Australia, 1891 to 1914", Australian Economic History Review, 10, No. 1. March. 1970. p. 73.

(23) P. G. Macarthy, ibid, p. 75.

(24) P. G. Macarthy, ibid, p. 72.

(25) E. Ryan and A. Conlon, Gentle Invaders, Thomas Nelson (Australia) Ltd., Melbourne, 1975, pp. 34-35.

(26) D. Peyser, "A Study of the History of Welfare Work in Sydney from 1788 till about 1900, Part 1," Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society, 25, Part 3, 1939, p. 210.
M. Cannon, Life In The Cities, op cit, p. 264.
Sydney Morning Herald, 20th June, 1892.

(27) M. Cannon, Life In The Cities, ibid, p. 264.

(28) M. Cannon, The Land Boomers, op cit, p. 22.

(29) D. Peyser, op cit, p. 210.

(30) T. H. Kewley, Social Security In Australia, Sydney at the University Press, 1965, p. 24.

(31) The Bulletin, 9th July, 1892.

(32) The Bulletin, 9th July, 1892.

(33) M. Cannon, The Land Boomers, op cit, p. 27.

(34) D. Peyser, op cit, p. 210.

(35) Sydney Morning Herald, 2nd May, 1892.

(36) W. Mitchell, "Wives of the Radical Labour Movement," in A. Curthoys, S. Eade and P. Spearritt, (Ed's), Women at Work, Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, Canberra, 1975, p. 7.

(37) N. MacKenzie, "Vida Goldstein : The Australian Suffragette." Australian Journal of Politics and History, 6, No. 2., 1960, p. 196.

(38) Newcastle Morning Herald, 14th February, 1894, (Elizabeth Wilson, carrying a child, was 'accidently' struck severely across her shoulders and knocked to the ground. It was estimated, that out of 2,000 persons demonstrating, that half were women.)

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