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History Club

Department of History

STUDENT RESEARCH PAPERS
IN
AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

No. 5

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PREFACE

In the Australian History course offered in Second Year at the University of Newcastle, as part of their progressive assessment, students have the opportunity of either presenting a conventional essay or of researching a topic of their own choice from primary sources. Many students choose the second alternative, and since this programme began in 1976 a considerable corpus of material on the local history of this area has been built up. The papers are all available for public use in the local history collection of the Newcastle Public Library. The best of the papers, however, are made available to a wider readership by publishing them each year.

This, unfortunately, may be the last issue of the publication, as a reorganisation of the courses offered in this department has meant that Australian History will be taught in First Year only, where unstructured private research by students would be less appropriate. However, the editors hope you will find the papers in this volume as interesting and useful as we did.

Peter Hempenstall, Margaret Henry, Noel Rutherford.

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THE NEWCASTLE AND NORTHUMBERLAND BENEVOLENT SOCIETY

BY

SUSAN ARMSTRONG

SYNOPSIS:

While the Australian colonies sustained many of the social and political ideals of Britain, one area in which Australia differed was in its dealings with the poor. Although our charitable institutions reflected the current nineteenth century Victorian attitudes towards the poor, they adopted different ways and means of dispensing charitable relief.

This paper looks at one such institution, the Newcastle and Northumberland Benevolent Society* from its inception in 1885 through to 1900. It attempts to examine the aims and the role of the society in dispensing charity in the colony of Newcastle, to see how its growth reflected the changing economic conditions within the colony and to estimate how the Benevolent Society reflected nineteenth century attitudes towards charitable relief and the poor, and maintained these attitudes into the twentieth century.

Australian social institutions were fashioned in a climate of opinion "where not only did early colonists have a horror of the English Poor Law, but the very nature of the Australian economy and the lack of a system of local governments made its introduction impossible".¹ However the question soon arose over who should accept responsibility for the destitute of the colonies, and the pattern of organization that relief work should follow. Governments were reluctant to assume responsibility for such relief, as the widely held belief was that government intervention in relief work "not only undermined initiative and self reliance, but encouraged a pauper class".² The solution was found in government subsidized voluntary organizations which came to assume the central role in charitable relief work in most colonies of Australia.³

In the colony of N.S.W. the Benevolent Society became the Government Almoner dispensing charity and poor relief "within a community where self improvement was the dominating ethos and Christian duty frequently underlined".⁴ The Victorian attitude towards poverty combined fatalism "the poor ye always have with you" and a moralizing and patronizing form of dispensing charity which saw "destitution as the result of individual weakness of character, and philanthropy [as] the bridge between business dealings and Christian consciousness".⁵ Such was the climate of thought, that set the tone of the Newcastle Benevolent Society at its inception in January 1885 and which accompanied all its charitable works for the next fifteen years.

This attitude of moral rectitude was present from the very start of the Newcastle Benevolent Society. The minutes of the first meeting opened with the statement, "the Benevolent Society in Newcastle owes its origins under Divine Providence to the united efforts of many members of the Newcastle Relief Society and Women's Crusade".⁶ These ladies seeing the distress amongst them called on the Mayor to convene a public meeting to form a Benevolent Society whose chief aims would be "to procure an asylum for helpless people and to relieve the destitute poor around them".⁷ The ladies hired premises near the St. John's Church in Parry Street and the ladies' committee proceeded to take over the entire management and responsibility of the asylum.

The objects of the Newcastle Benevolent Society were
 "1) to relieve the wants of the poor - supplying them with clothes, food and necessities both inside and outside of the asylum in Newcastle and surrounding districts
 2) primary consideration to be paid to the sick and poor women in their confinements".⁸

Underlying these aims was the assumption that poverty was self-inflicted, and that assistance should be individual temporary and reformatory".⁹ The Newcastle Benevolent Society set out to establish restrictions and prohibitions so that only the desperate would apply. Widely held assumptions in regard to relief were "that assistance should be below the lowest prevailing community standards, that recipients should be institutionalized where possible in benevolent homes and that recipients be required to undertake arduous and unpleasant tasks".¹⁰ Rigorous character investigations were carried out by lady visitors and almost inevitably "the general morals of the

* The ladies had to form a Benevolent Society in order to obtain £ for £ subsidy from the government.

applicant came under review; as attempts were made to distinguish between the deserving and the undeserving poor".¹¹

These attitudes towards the poor were reflected in the rules of the asylum. "In the men's ward there was to be no gambling, no entering other wards, spitting, rude or improper behaviour. Men were to rise at 6 a.m. in summer, half an hour later in winter. They were fed three times a day, with lights out at 9 p.m. In the women's ward similar rules applied. But there were children to wash at 6 a.m. or half an hour later in the winter, evening prayers had to be attended and a lock up at 9 p.m. Both sexes had to be bathed completely once a week and to change their clothing. In return for their keep, they were expected to contribute to the maintenance of the asylum".¹²

Mrs. Ellis, the President of the Society speaking at the official opening of the asylum, encouraged her band of workers to "try by God's grace, to carry out his great command, to love thy neighbour and to follow in the steps of the Good Samaritan".¹³

The first annual report of the Benevolent Society commenced with the words, "Blessed is he that Considereth the Poor" and stated that "in porportion to the outward prosperity around us, there is an increasing undercurrent of poverty, and wretchedness permeating our midst, which can only be stemmed by the efforts of the Committee."¹⁴

Relief was taking on a two fold character, administration of outdoor relief and the running of the asylum. In administering outdoor relief, the Society divided the district which it served (including Stockton, Bullock Island, Wickham, Minmi, Charlestown, Catherine Hill Bay) into areas, in each of which the relief was administered by two lady visitors. Once a case of destitution was brought to their notice, they made a full investigation and forwarded their report to the General Committee. This committee decided on the amount of relief to be given, either in the form of clothing, blankets, tools to help obtain employment or food tickets which could be redeemed at the local general shop in each area. There was no fixed allowance, the society being governed by the circumstances of the applicant, "in practice it is usual to give 2/6 a week to a single applicant, 4/6 a week to a married couple".¹⁵ However, in keeping with the underlying ethos of the society the Honorary Treasurer stated, "we do not profess to give relief that will fully support, as we do not believe in doing that which will do away with their self reliance".¹⁶

A total of 1231 individuals were helped in the first year of the society's existence and the Committee expended £245/19/8 in cash for outdoor relief. "Within the first twelve months the original asylum was insufficient to meet the needs of the Society so a new building had been erected which provided extra accommodation and allowed for the separation of the sexes. Nearly one hundred people passed through the asylum in the first year with many aged and infirm becoming permanent inmates".¹⁷

The second Annual Report presented in March 1887, showed the beginnings of the depression which was pervading the colony, with a corresponding increase in the numbers applying for relief. Nearly one hundred people found temporary relief and shelter in the asylum, and some 1,900 people were afforded outdoor relief. Mrs Ellis in presenting the report implored the ladies "to be true women, and show their sympathy to young and old, sick and poor, as well as the merely poor and needy. We know upon higher authority that it is more blessed to give than to receive".¹⁸

The attitude of the Newcastle people towards the distress in the district was summed up in an editorial in the Newcastle Morning Herald, 12th March 1887. While the editor agreed "there were genuine cases of poverty, ... that are deservous of charity, [he observed] that charity does not apply to able-bodied single men who can shoulder their blanket and make for districts where labour is not at a premium".¹⁹

An historical sketch on the Newcastle Benevolent Society published in the Newcastle Morning Herald 15th March 1889 characterized the prevailing attitudes towards the poor and the charities that dispensed charity than any number of individuals. The Benevolent Society is such a society, and one important feature of this society is the carefulness with which its funds are distributed and expended".²⁰

Also in the Newcastle Morning Herald 18th May 1889 was an editorial which suggested "that a great stimulus could be given to public benevolence in Newcastle if the two main relief agencies, the Benevolent Society and the Relief Society, whose objects are identical, whose manner of working is similar, were united into one single body, irrespective of class, opinion, or belief. The union of these two bodies would be a holy alliance that could only result in good".²¹ However the ladies of both societies ignored this plea, and continued to assist the poor in their own separate ways. In fact the records of the Benevolent Society show little cooperation with any other society, church or hospital in the district.

The quarterly meeting of the Society conducted in November 1889 showed the increasing use of the asylum as a lying-in hospital for the poor women of the district. The report stresses however "that in cases where the young women 'have loved not wisely but too well' they have subsequently been led back to respectable lives through the efforts of the ladies of the Society."²²

By 1892 "great and terrible distress abounded in the district".²³ Mrs Ellis lamented the lack of support from the Colonial Government to the Newcastle Benevolent Society. "The Sydney Benevolent Society received a grant of £7,500 compared to £1,500 to Newcastle".²⁴ In giving her report Mrs Ellis acknowledged the gratitude of the Committee "to the almighty for his abundant blessing on the Society, in making them the honoured instruments of conveying help and support to the poor and needy."²⁵

The Annual Report of March 1893 continued to "show the effects of the great depression on the Society".²⁶ "The past year has been a momentous one in the annals of outdoor relief by this society with upwards of one hundred families receiving a weekly allowance; as well as receiving blankets, food and clothing".²⁷ By 1893 the society had ceased to issue annual totals of people helped by outdoor relief and issued the figures by the month, with an average of 120 families being helped each month.

August 1893 saw Mr. Creer visiting Newcastle urging all able bodied men to go to the country to mine for gold". He offered the men railway passes, miners' rights, and a fortnight's rations (to be repaid when they made good) as well as the incentive that under their miners' rights they could fence in a fair sized portion of land to grow vegetables as well as fossicking for minerals. He had no doubts the men could make a living in this way, rather than to be relieved by charity, and pauperized by the government".²⁸

TABLE I

Figures for the first seven years of the Benevolent Society show the large increase in outdoor and casual relief given by the Society. They show how the Benevolent Society "acted as a barometer upon the social conditions of the colony".^{26a}

Year	Outdoor Relief			Casual Relief				
	Families	Male	Female	Total	Meals	Bed	Passes	
							Steamer	Rail
1886	266	472	759	1231	x	x	29	x
1887	405	-	-	1863	600	x	105	35
1888	571	848	1293	2141	1269	456	210	23
1889	857	1610	2268	3878	1047	359	268	57
1890	1766	2372	3634	6006	1136	381	217	45
1891	2136	2820	4248	7068	735	248	58	-
1892	2523	3276	5572	9848	725	308	143	26

* No explanation was given why in the years 1891 and 1892 when demands for outdoor relief increased dramatically, there was a corresponding decrease in the demand for casual relief. One explanation is that able bodied men had left in search of work in the country leaving their wives and children dependent on the Benevolent Society.

This move by the government "of offering the traditional Australian panacea of putting men on the land"²⁹ is ironic in view of the Benevolent Society's quarterly meeting in November 1893 which "stressed the continuing depression and the disastrous effect it was having on the working classes and the friends of the Society".²⁹ Not only was the society helping 207 families, "many of whom were deserted wives with children, whose husbands were away scouring the country for work";³⁰ but as well it had to cope with the fact that "scores of hardworking men driven out from the interior through want of work, have forced their way into Newcastle in the hope of obtaining employment, and when it is not forthcoming they are falling back on the helping hand of the Society".³¹

Even as the depression increased in severity in 1894, Mr. Arnott could eulogize, "what would the poor of this city have done without a society such as this in their midst? It was a matter of thankfulness that God had put into the hearts of the ladies present to engage in such noble work, and all the good done could be traced to the hand of God himself".³³

This moralizing and patronizing attitude toward the poor still prevailed even in times of massive shutdowns in industry and the mines causing wide-spread unemployment. The Newcastle Benevolent Society still saw its role "as stimulating community concern for the poor, and to organize the necessary care for them".³⁴ Charity, to the Society, was still regarded "as a minor adjustment to the machinery of society, rather than a radical reformation of it".³⁵ Poverty was still believed to be in most cases self inflicted and the subject of condescending charity designed to discourage pauperism.

This attitude was not confined to the Benevolent Society. The Newcastle Morning Herald 20/9/1894, called attention to the increase in the numbers applying for relief, which had doubled since 1888. "Poverty is either increasing at an alarming rate, or the springs of private benevolence are drying up, or there is a greater disposition than formerly on the part of the people to throw the burden of their sickness and poverty upon the State".³⁶ The editor called for "effective legislation before the increase of distress is out of all proportion to the growth in population".³⁷

By November 1895 the Society was £1100 in debt, with increasing demands being placed on the Society's funds. One bright spot in the year 1895 was the erection of two cottages for aged married couples on the asylum site at Waratah. In 1896 the Society's first meeting reiterated its first main aim, "to discourage pauperism, and to induce and foster industry and self reliance".³⁸ The Society's records for 1896 show "that poverty and distress had in no way decreased, if possible it had assumed a sterner aspect. Innumerable cases of total destitution and distress had been brought to the attention of the Committee".³⁹ An application was made to the Government for further funds as £2606 was spent on relief, £500 more than in 1895. The request was refused even though the Sydney Benevolent Society was given £2000 "to deal better with the additional distress existing in the city".⁴⁰

Arrangements were proceeding for the erection of the new asylum at Waratah, with Mr. Arnott offering to sign a cash credit for the £2000 still needed to complete the building. The Reverend Seth Jones at the Annual Meeting in March 1896 felt compelled to move a vote of thanks to the Committee, whom he saw as being "engaged in the most honourable and Godlike work, guided by the noblest, purest motives. It was a labour of love and their reward was from God who had ordained that the poor should be helped by the rich, and the weak by the strong."⁴¹ A special vote of thanks was also given to Mrs Ellis "whose wisdom and love had enabled her to lead the Committee in accomplishing so much self denying and self sacrificing work".⁴²

Mr. and Mrs. Ellis and Mr. and Mrs. Arnott were the leading members of the Newcastle Benevolent Society. Mr. Ellis M.L.A. for Newcastle represented the Society's interests in Parliament and in deputations to the Premier for increased funds. Mrs. Ellis was President of the Society for twelve years, with Mrs. Arnott as senior Vice President and head of the Dorcas Committee; both were leading spirits in the Society, and provided the much valued leadership and incentive to the ladies of the Committee. These two couples were wealthy well-respected leaders in the colony of N.S.W., being prominent at all kinds of religious and philanthropic meetings. Public support for Christian activities was important for social standing in the nineteenth century, and membership of the Benevolent Society meant social success in N.S.W.⁴³ Status could be gained from doing good works, especially with pillars of society, the presence of the Arnotts and the Ellis' to a certain extent guaranteed the continued support of the Benevolent Society, and gave status and prestige to the Society's social events and activities.

By November 1896, changes were slowly occurring within the colony of N.S.W. in attitudes towards the poor, in particular to the aged. The Newcastle Morning Herald 8th December 1896 acknowledged that "many conditions of society which a few years ago were considered to be admirable in their workings are now considered antiquated and barbarous".⁴⁴ It called for a system of state pensions for the aged, it acknowledged that the system in operation was but "an elaboration of the poorhouse method in England of dealing with the aged poor".⁴⁵ Private benevolence was no longer seen as sufficient to meet the enormous demands being placed on it as the colony battled the continuing depression. However, the Herald stressed that whatever system was adopted it would have to "inculcate principles of thrift and self reliance among the people".⁴⁶ Changes in ideas on social welfare were certainly occurring, but they still perpetuated the ideas of self help and independence that the Victorian Era had nurtured.

The Annual Meeting of 1897 saw the Society change its name to the Newcastle and Northumberland Benevolent Society. The Annual report showed that "while the depression might have been abating in other parts of the continent, the Newcastle Society had seen no decrease in the demands for casual relief".⁴⁷ However Mr. Arnott felt that "the members of the Society had good reason to thank God for the progress of this grand and noble work of benevolence. The ladies had indeed worked nobly in the cause of charity".⁴⁸

In May 1897 Lord Hampden opened the new asylum at Waratah. He made comparisons between the way in which poverty was dealt with in this colony, and the way it was done in the old country. Lord Hampden felt there was a growing need for a central agency, "to deal with the question of the unemployed, to cope with the problem of relieving poverty, with the accompanying question of the selection of deserving cases and the rejection of the undeserving, as well as to suppress mendicity".⁴⁹

The 1898 annual report of the Benevolent Society recorded "no decline in poverty or distress in the district, with the expenditure of the Society exceeding income".⁵⁰ The Newcastle Morning Herald 17th March 1898, reported the lack of remunerative employment and the closing of many of the large collieries. "Something bordering on a state of chaos has been reached, and if the present system of distributing outdoor relief is to be continued, it will be necessary for the general public or the government to be more liberal in their aid".⁵¹

By 1899 the Society recorded a slight decline in the demands for relief; however a new reform had been instigated in the distribution of casual outdoor relief. "The Committee acting on the conviction that freely given relief gives premium to the idle and thriftless, devised a scheme which is operating with excellent results. All applicants for relief who are physically able must earn their meal, bed or pass working on a wood heap at the rear of the Secretary's office".⁵² It is not known whether the calls on the society were really less, or whether each new case was being investigated more thoroughly to "protect the Society's funds against the impostures of the unworthy, to the detriment of the worthy".⁵³ The Society appeared more concerned with keeping down the calls on their funds than with the effectiveness of the relief.

However The Newcastle Morning Herald 21st May 1899 still felt that "the Society and its voluntary workers are doing a noble work of the purest philanthropy that is greatly needed in our midst".⁵⁴ The Royal

Commission on Public Charities published in 1899 also found "the system of management commendable and the methods adopted in administering relief more than efficient".⁵⁵

The year 1900 saw the Newcastle Benevolent Society placed on the same footing as that of the Benevolent Society of N.S.W. Demands on outdoor relief funds were considerably less than in previous years. Table II shows the amount of relief given by the society in the years 1893-1900.

TABLE II

As well as distributing outdoor relief, the society distributed loaves of bread and bags of biscuits to the needy poor at the doors of the asylum.

Year	Outdoor Relief		Meals	Beds	Passes	
	Families Relieved Weekly	Total (Individual)			Rail	Steamer
1893	1397	4608	645	251	43	273
1894	2149	*	1525	392	53	462
1895	3025	*	2377	281	65	539
1896	3295	*	1431	411	44	618
1897	3605	*	1688	308	37	353
1898	3286	*	1304	311	40	447
1899	2811	8966	1816	316	29	647
1900	2759	8203	1310	275	28	484

* While figures are not available for the total numbers of individuals helped in the years 1894-1898, the minutes of the monthly meeting of the Society dated 26th April 1895 indicate the extent of poverty and distress in the district.

"The ladies' out-door relief reports showed that 235 families comprising 1261 persons had been relieved in the month. They comprised 124 widows with families, 14 deserted wives, 32 families where heads of the house were incapacitated by sickness, 23 aged couples and 78 families where the breadwinner had been out of work for long periods". (from Minutes of the Monthly Meeting of the Society 26th April 1895 - published in the Newcastle Morning Herald.)

However whether the decrease corresponded with improved economic conditions is not known as the ladies were employing more careful supervision in dispensing relief, "each case being dealt with on its merits and relief being given only after an exhaustive enquiry and report by the lady visitor".⁵⁶

The new century saw The Newcastle Morning Herald 1st December 1900 urging the public to support the Benevolent Society. "Although the expenditure of £400,000 by the State upon old Age Pensions may be a large contribution towards meeting the needs of the poor, it will leave a large circle of poverty untouched and unrelieved. The passing of the Old Age Pension Act may be regarded as a first step towards State

recognition of the obligation of the many to the few, but it cannot be a reason for withdrawing individual and from societies which aim at meeting larger needs".⁵⁷

Many writers see the 1890's in Australia as a time when politics became the vehicle of coherent social and economic policies and social reform very much the concern of governments. Economic changes were supposedly causing a revision of the basic assumptions upon which charity was conducted. However the Newcastle and Northumberland Benevolent Society entered the twentieth century upholding the same Victorian attitudes towards the poor it had at its inception. The forty-sixth Annual Report published in The Newcastle Morning Herald 10th March 1931 contained "eulogistic references to the work of the Society".⁵⁸ The report stated that "the unfortunate should not be beggars, rather they should be sought out and aided. Every philanthropic worker knew how deserving people became under misfortune. The committee renewed the appeal to ladies who had the energy to make real contributions to the work of the ministering".⁵⁹

Whatever the role of government in the provision of social services in this country, even in 1931 the ladies of the Newcastle Benevolent Society still felt they had a role to play in dispensing their own particular form of charitable relief.

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