

Redefining the Beginnings of Social Work in Australia

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Introduction

History holds a peripheral position in Australian social work and social policy (Roe 1976; Graycar, Horsburgh and Wyndham 1987; Martin 1990). We are not alone in this. In the United States, for instance, Fisher (1999) writes that 'history holds a marginal place in social work' (p. 191) and that this has been the case since the mid-1950s. His position is supported by other United States social welfare historians (Trattner 1984; Chambers 1992) as well as by Walton (1975) in the United Kingdom. Why, then, attempt to redefine the beginnings of social work in Australia? The first reason is to understand ourselves and our profession within a sense of place. Often we only see social work as transplanted from overseas because we are not aware of those who have gone before us and so do not have a shared interpretation of the profession and its antecedents in this country. Thus, Woodroffe's (1962) history of social work focuses on England and the United States and, although written by an Australian, makes no mention of Australia (Martin 1990). The second reason is to understand our profession in Australia over time. We need to know our history as 'usable history' (Tosh 1999) to sharpen our awareness of the provision of social services in Australia over the last 200 years and thereby acknowledge, learn from and expand the innovative and indigenous ways of working of our predecessors. This paper attempts, through a re-reading and re-framing of secondary sources, to provide an alternative view of the beginnings of social work in Australia.

A Narrow, Imperial Focus

The modest amount of Australian social welfare history that has been written has been very narrowly focused. John Lawrence (1965) has written the only general history of social work as a professional occupation in 20th century Australia and Brian Dickey (1980) has written the only national history of social welfare provision covering both the 19th and 20th centuries. Both authors fall prey to a narrow imperial intent, common in Australian historiography until the late 1970s and characterised as 'English, Protestant, male, and imbued with racial superiority, powerfully linked to the idea of progress which

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undergirded the British Empire' (Stannage 1995, p. 99). Within this view, only imported and preferably British practice is legitimate. This imperial stance has even been accepted by such a trenchant critic of social work as Richard Kennedy (1985) who saw Australian social work as simply originating in the conservative Charity Organisation Society modelled on similar organisations in what he calls 'the Old Country'. Kennedy and others like him see the origins of Australian social work as mere franchises of British social work.

In fact, neither of the two best-known forerunners of social work in Britain and the US, the Charity Organisation Society and the Settlement Movement, were particularly successful in Australia. Commentators who focus on British social work history to explain Australian social work beginnings are, therefore, missing the history of what actually happened in Australia. This misfocus means that there has been little systematic claim made on Australian 19th century social activists as proto-social workers. By contrast, in England, Edward Denison, William Booth, Samuel Barnett, Octavia Hill, Robert Owen, Elizabeth Fry, Mary Carpenter, Josephine Butler and in the US, Dorothea Dix, Charles Loring Brace, Stanton Coit, Vida Scudder, Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr (to name a few) are all claimed as (early) social workers (Woodroffe 1962; Seed 1973; Walton 1975). While there have been a few claims that some of the early Australian women workers/activists were 'social workers' (Fleney 1944; Lawrence 1976; Gregory 1984), Australian social work historians such as Lawrence (1965) and Martin (1983; 1985; 1986; 1987; 1990) concentrate on professional associations in the 20th century, ignoring social activists, particularly women, who pre-date professional social work (Marchant 1985). This lack of awareness continues as contemporary writers substitute British and American history in the place of Australian social work history (Martin 2003).

Stannage's (1995) criticism of Australian historiography as being generally male-centred is also true of influential Australian writings on social work/welfare history. Lawrence (1965), who saw the numbers of female social workers as a liability for the profession, has already been criticised by Marchant (1985), Brown (1986) and Martin (1990). The same criticism has also been made of Dickey (1980) by Godden (1982) who noted that he excluded women's charities and denominational institutions from his history:

His limitation was that he almost totally excluded women's charities operating separately in the women's sphere and therefore not only underestimated the influence of women in philanthropy but also of denominational institutions (p. 97).

Horsburgh (1985), too, has noted that Australian social welfare writers 'fail to discuss religion of any kind in the context of social welfare' (p. 54). While there is a paucity of material about denominational providers of welfare services, even then, in the little that has been written, Dickey's (1985) and Horsburgh's (1985) writings on denominational social welfare provision have tended to have an exclusive focus on the agencies of Protestant denominations such as those of the Anglicans, Lutherans, and Methodists.

Hughes (1998) has noted the lack of writings on Catholic social welfare:

The general history of Catholic welfare endeavours has been neglected more than it should. Consequently, there has been a lack of analysis of the role of the Catholic Church in social welfare (p. 170).

The effect of this neglect has been to write social activists, especially women activists and religious women, out of the few social welfare histories written about Australia. Australian social work, therefore, lacks a reading of its history that places it within the social reforms and movements of the 20th century. This paper proposes to widen the parameters for a (re)reading of 19th and early 20th century Australian social welfare activism as proto-social work practice and attempts to challenge the generally conservative interpretation of the beginnings of social work in Australia.

Differing Traditions of Service

There is a long history of philanthropy in Australia which Windschuttle (1982) traces to the Protestant Evangelical revival in the Anglican and other Protestant churches with an emphasis on personal responsibility, social control of the poorer classes and child-saving. Between 1800 and 1850, colonial men and women were heavily involved in at least 18 separate philanthropic and moral reform causes in Australia, including the founding and management of women-only organisations such as The Female School of Industry and The Female Friendly Society in 1826 and the Sydney Dorcas Society in 1830 (Windschuttle 1982). This philanthropy pre-dates the founding of the Charity Organisation Societies in Sydney in 1878, in Adelaide in 1885 and in Melbourne in 1887. While social activism can be conservative and illiberal, as for example, when there was a strong reliance on the values of the British Poor Law amendments of 1834 where 'charity was consequently parsimonious and accompanied by attempts at spiritual and moral retraining' (Hughes 2002, p. 92), another reading of this activism can trace elements of what we would now call a social justice stance, particularly in regard to social questions such as the exploitation of women and children.

Associated with the history of religious sectarianism in Australia (Hogan 1987), which persisted until the 1960s (Dixon 1996), Catholics had different traditions and purposes in establishing philanthropic services. For Catholics in the early colonies, the social issues that mobilised action were issues of social justice that affected them as Catholics: religious freedom for Catholics, Irish immigration, the franchise, access to Catholic convicts and orphans (O'Farrell 1992). Much of this social welfare work was carried out by Catholic religious sisterhoods. Catholic religious sisters were able to be active in providing welfare services precisely because of their religious affiliation; other working

women were not able to enjoy such independence:

In the period up until the Second World War when very few Australian women lived professional lives, the veiling of Catholic nuns gave them a passport to the independent world of work and social welfare...that they were often overworked and exploited is undeniable, but this was the common lot of working women, most of whom did not share the prestige enjoyed by Catholic nuns within their own community (Carey, 1996, pp. 138-139).

The social welfare work of the sisters in the 19th century was varied. They established basic social services including free schools and hospitals, refuges and accommodation and services for working women long before the beginnings of the Australian welfare state. In 1838, the Irish Sisters of Charity became the first Catholic nuns to immigrate to New South Wales. The day after their arrival, they began their work with the 730 women and 180 children of the Female Factory at Parramatta. Subsequently, the Sisters established a free school for poor children, began visiting the sick and poor in their homes, established a female hospital and later St Vincent's Hospital in 1857, a hospital which was 'free and open to all irrespective of religious belief' (MacGinley 1996, p. 81). (Currently, there is a Catholic health system including 57 public and private hospitals, 83 Catholic nursing and convalescent homes and 201 homes for the elderly (Dixon 1996) as well as any number of small community-based agencies that offer support, healing and help in most cities and towns in Australia.)

Free immigration from the 1830s and the subsequent increase in the European population, the cessation of transportation to New South Wales in 1840 and the closure of the Female Factory at Parramatta in 1848 increased the needs of migrants, especially young women. One response was the establishment of refuges for women. A Mrs Blake and colleagues established a refuge for former prostitutes in Campbell Street in Sydney, about 1845. 'From 1846, the Sisters of Charity assisted with administration and finding employment for girls ready to leave' (MacGinley 1996, p. 80). A group of Protestant women opened a similar refuge about 1848 (Dickey 1985). The French Good Shepherd Sisters opened a refuge for women at Abbotsford in Melbourne in 1863 (MacGinley 1996). Six women's refuges for female ex-convicts, reformed prostitutes, the frail aged and unmarried mothers, were established by Mary MacKillop's Josephite Sisters, between 1867 and 1891 in Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne (Foale 1995). Another response was the Young Women's Association in Darlinghurst, Sydney, as a place of accommodation, training and employment agency for working women from 1860 to 1875 (O'Carrigan 1999).

In 1838, the same year as the Irish Sisters of Charity landed in Sydney, Caroline Chisholm, perhaps best known for assisting immigrant women in colonial New South

Wales, began work in Sydney. From 1838 to 1846:

confronted by the neglect of newly arrived immigrants generally, and particularly distressed by the spectacle of the single females drifting into prostitution, she determined that, as no others seemed willing to begin to help, she would (O'Farrell 1992, p. 84).

From 1838 to 1846, she personally settled 11,000 people on the land. From 1846 to 1854, she returned to England and lobbied successfully for the formation of the Family Colonisation Land Society to assist the poor to emigrate as families (O'Farrell 1992). Not content with assisting families, she supported land reform and in the early 1860s delivered a series of public lectures in Sydney on the topic of opening squatters' lands to free selection for smallholdings:

In a lecture entitled 'Free Selection Before Survey', delivered to several hundred people at the Pitt Street Temperance Hall in 1860, Caroline Chisholm aligned herself firmly with the land reformers of the colonies... Colonial men had to stand up to men of property and wealth, she asserted, and take advantage of the recent democratic changes (which were working splendidly, overall) to wrench privilege from them. The squatter opposed smallholding in a fashion that was ruthless and unprincipled, as Caroline once discovered herself when she promoted cooperative agricultural communities for unemployed men and their families. The rich were to be feared, not respected; the true future of the colonies lay with ordinary working men and women.

Caroline Chisholm was highly unusual in this era for her capacity, as a woman, to command public attention for her forthright views, but her representation of the best course for colonial society was scarcely idiosyncratic. The issue of 'unlocking the lands' held by squatters was one of the colonial radicals' key policies and was rapidly gaining political momentum. But, more pertinently, Chisholm spoke from a woman's particular perspective. Dominant voices have portrayed the economic development of the colonies, both in Chisholm's lifetime and since, as the concerns of white men in their exploitation of natural resources, their utilisation of new technology and of imported finances. Caroline Chisholm, as a white colonial woman, understood that economic choices were also choices about the character of colonial people and the fundamental gendered structures of society. She knew that the distinctive development of the colonies would revolve not only around geographical mobility and production, wealth and poverty, but also around sexuality and marriage, families, kinship and communities; she also saw that the areas of production and reproduction were interrelated (Grimshaw, Lake, McGrath and Quartly 1994, p. 108).

Despite criticism of Chisholm for seeing young immigrant women as vulnerable and needing 'a husband's protection from poverty and from the sexual aggression of other men' (Grimshaw et al. 1994, p. 89), she appeared to have the ability to link immigrants' personal troubles with politics, land reform, and the politics of production and

reproduction. Some commentators see these welfare services as mere means of 'organising consent to ruling class dominance' (Windschuttle 1982, p. 26) but another way of looking at these responses is to see native Australian attempts to create organised responses to glaring social needs. Those who accomplished this did the work themselves, running what amounted to a number of small businesses with the skills we now require of community development workers and social entrepreneurs.

Education, especially education for the poor, was an important social issue in the 19th century. Of the thirteen Catholic congregations of nuns established in Australia before 1880, and four of these congregations were founded in Australia, all but one were involved in education (MacGinley 1996). The education provided was a mix of free schools for the poor, government subsidised denominational schools and elite, fee-paying schools. Generally, those founded by sisters from Ireland tended to provide free or subsidised education although often this was in conjunction with more elite schools, the fees from which subsidised the poor schools and charitable works (MacGinley 1996, p. 124). Catholics were not the only ones to support education for the poor. Even after the Education Acts of the 1870s and 1880s and their promise of free, secular and compulsory education, there were still children who could not attend school because of poverty or lack of home care. In the first issue of *The Dawn* in 1888, Louisa Lawson wrote of the Ragged School in Kent Street in Sydney and railed against the injustice that these children were not allowed into the public schools:

(She) established fundraising schemes and collected books, clothing, haberdashery and toys for the ragged schools, as well as sometimes helping to organise picnics for the children. Mrs Kate Gent, the Mistress of the ragged school in Kent Street, was a regular correspondent and contributor to *The Dawn* (Lawson 1990, p. 164).

The Ragged Schools encompassed academic, social and moral education and are credited, in England, with the development of informal education and youth work (Smith 2002).

The Social Question and the Woman Question

In the 1880s and in the following decade of the 1890s four remarkable men and women, William Guthrie Spence, William Lane, Louisa Lawson and Bessie Harrington Lee, were among many notable colonists who took public stances on issues of social justice in colonial society (Grimshaw et al. 1994, p. 151).

From the 1880s to 1910, Australian social debate and activism revolved around two issues, 'the social question' of workers' rights to fair wages and 'the woman question' of women's access to social and political power, including suffrage rights. These questions were fought out within the context of Federation, nationhood and political and economic reorganisation. The 'new unionism' inspired by Spence and Lane led the discussion of the social question in the late 1880s. The rise of the Australian Labor party, debates about

tariff protection for domestic industry, arbitration as a means of wage regulation, social policy reforms to provide redistributive Old Age and Invalid Pensions and the maternity allowance of 1912 created a National Settlement that brought (white) workers, farmers and manufacturers together (Markey 1982). At the same time, women organised to secure economic, social and political independence:

The woman question was thrust into prominence by more disparate groups of organised women in suffrage leagues, including Louisa Lawson, and in the Women's Christian Temperance Union, including Bessie Harrison Lee, where the goal was the twin one of fighting the use and abuse of alcohol and improving women's status...those colonists who discerned structural disadvantages underlying individual's troubles, be it as workers or as members of a particular sex, and who promoted paths to change, became increasingly influential and persuasive as the 1880s and early years of the 1890s proceeded (Grimshaw et al. 1994, pp. 157-158)

The Womanhood Suffrage League was established in Sydney in 1891 by Louisa Lawson, Dora Montefiore, Rose Scott and Maybanke Wolstenholme (Lake 1999). Its purpose was to gain the vote for women on the same conditions as men. These women were typical of a large number of women in the Australian colonies at the end of the 19th century who were agitating for equal voting rights for (white) women and women's rights to be free of sexual and work exploitation. Women's organisations encompassed suffrage groups, women's trade unions, temperance groups and women in the emerging Labor Party. Women such as Henrietta Dugdale, Vida Goldstein, Mary Lee, Jessie Ackerman, Elizabeth Nicholls, Ada Throssell, Suzanne Manley, Leontine Cooper, Emma Miller, Ethel Searle, Ida McAulay and many others were prominent in these struggles in all the colonies (Lake 1999). Their purpose was not just to gain the vote but also to create a better and more just society.

The Beginnings of Professional Social Work

The women's suffrage movement at the end of the 19th century 'shared many of the aims of philanthropy, particularly that of alleviating the results of the exploitation of women and children, and the majority of its leading members were also members of women's philanthropic organisations' (Godden 1982, p. 95).

Marchant (1985) has noted how social activists in national women's associations and industry were instrumental in the establishment of social work in New South Wales. The National Council of Women (NCW), founded in Sydney in 1915 and in Melbourne in 1917, 'epitomised the political activism of women post-suffrage' (Grimshaw et al. 1994, p. 197). The NCW was open to all women's organisations including charities. 'The NCW had a number of standing committees that promoted action and involvement in areas such as Public Health, Trades and Professions, Education, and Child Welfare' (Marchant 1985, p. 37). For example, one of the organisations initially affiliated to the NCW was

the Catholic Women's Social Guild (CWSG), founded in Melbourne in 1916:

The CWSG immediately advocated a vigorous role for lay Catholic women in social and political reform in the community. Further, it adopted a feminist ethos which was early and consistently manifested in calls for equal rights for women in political, civil and industrial matters (Kennedy, S. 1985, p. 10).

Essentially the leaders of the CWSG aimed to mobilise lay Catholic women to monitor social and economic conditions, particularly as they affected women, and to act on these either alone or in concert with other women's organisations. Education of members in the issues and means of action was a high priority. The CWSG journal, *Women's Social Work*, had a central part to play in this (Kennedy, S. 1985, p. 23).

Norma Parker, a later pioneer of university training for social workers and president of the Australian Association of Social Workers from 1946 to 1953 (Lawrence 1965), had been elected to the Central Committee of the CWSG in 1932. Parker was also a member of the Victorian branch of the St Joan's Social and Political Alliance, an organisation of Catholic lay women. The Alliance was founded in Australia from England in the 1930s on:

the need for Catholic women to take up the cause of equal rights for women everywhere and the necessity for women to organise to influence political processes in the interests of this cause and of Catholic principles of social justice generally (Kennedy, S. 1985, p. 99).

The St Joan's Alliance mounted many campaigns for women's rights in relation to employment, housing, factory conditions, the position of women in unemployed families, a greater role for women in public life and social policy. Parker was later a foundation member of the NSW branch of the St Joan's Alliance in 1946. In 1933, Norma Parker and Constance Moffit, approached Archbishop Mannix to establish a Catholic Social Service Bureau (CSSB) in Melbourne. Both were graduates of the University of Western Australia and had gained Master's degrees in social work at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC (Gleeson, 2000). The CSSB, founded in 1935, was the first of what are now 32 Centacare agencies which provide individual and family welfare services around Australia (Dixon 1996).

Part of this activist network of women were industrial activists such as Eleanor Hinder, the first social welfare worker at Farmers department store in Sydney and one of a number of industrial welfare officers who assisted in training the first social work students at Sydney University:

Not only was this a new type of work for Eleanor Hinder, but the position was a new concept in the field of employment. Looking back on those times, she said, "I became somewhat of a controversial figure — or rather the 'welfare' idea was new in Australia and was controversial, both inside the store and among my trade union friends" (Wheelhouse 1978, p. 7).

Hinder initiated five elected staff committees to discuss working conditions, established training classes for junior and senior staff including attending Sydney University, and set up a first-aid service and recreational, cultural and sporting associations for staff. In 1923, Hinder was funded by Farmers to travel to Europe and the US to study the training of welfare workers and trade union activities. She was also asked by the Young Womens' Christian Association (YWCA) to visit China and report on factory conditions, especially for women and children. In 1926 she returned to China, under YWCA auspices, and worked in Shanghai for factory and labour reform until 1942. She joined the International Labour Organisation in Canada in 1943 and was seconded to the United Nations (UN) Relief and Rehabilitation Association in 1944 with special responsibility for Welfare for the Far East. She worked for various UN agencies until her death in 1963 (Wheelhouse 1978). Other industrial welfare officers such as Margaret Thorp and Margaret Cunningham at Anthony Horderns, Miss Taylor at Farmers and Miss Fraser at WD & HO Wills were also closely involved with social activists in the NCW and the YWCA in the 1920s and 1930s and in the training of social work students (Marchant 1985).

Besides individual activist work, some activists set up organisations to address social justice issues. These organisations are the very ones in which social workers now seek work. The Brotherhood of St Laurence and Community Aid Abroad were founded by an Anglican priest, Gerard Kennedy Tucker, in 1930 and 1954 respectively. Tucker was interested in social reform and had been inspired by the Oxford Movement in the East End of London. 'Waging war on social evils was his practical method of expressing his Christian beliefs' (Benn, 1981, p. 14). In Fitzroy in Melbourne, the Brotherhood worked with the poor and the unemployed, and an anti-slum campaign that 'was threaded with a strange mixture of political simplicity, righteous anger about social injustice, and above all, religious faith that by Christian practicality "right must triumph in the end"' (Benn 1981, p. 11).

Tucker and his colleagues established a range of social services for low income families, the unemployed and the elderly, and a research and policy section (Handfield 1980). Most of the time, Tucker's organisations sought alleviation of social ills and social reform, but on occasion Tucker instigated and participated in direct action to publicise injustices. In 1944, Tucker and two colleagues:

camped on the veranda of a house in Melbourne for six weeks to protest against a war-time landlord/tenancy regulation that prevented an elderly woman from returning home to die in her own home. The house was occupied by a single tenant who had alternative accommodation available. At another time Brotherhood members barricaded themselves in a house to prevent an eviction (Scott 1981, p. 136).

Conclusion

This paper has set out the parameters for a re-reading of 19th and early 20th century Australian social welfare activism as proto-social work practice. This paper challenges

the commonly accepted wisdom that Australian social work began in the 1920s with the employment of hospital almoners and that its antecedents are generally traced to the conservative Charity Organisation Society in the late 19th century and its 'Friendly Visitors'. The paper has attempted to give a reading of the beginnings of Australian social work that places it within the social reforms and movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The stories of the workers mentioned here, from the Sisters of Charity to Eleanor Hinder, provide an alternative view of social welfare history to the conservative and constrained histories of Lawrence and Dickey. These stories are the stories of workers who did the job themselves, not the stories of committees of petty capitalists, 'Ladies Bountiful', or 'ruling class Social Work' (Kennedy, R. 1985, p. vii). These workers responded to local issues whether it was poverty, lack of health or education, workers' rights or the rights of women and children. Their attitudes to the poor were different to those derived from the English Poor Law (Hughes 2002) and so were their attitudes to the franchise, suffrage and workers' rights.

This re-defining of the antecedents of Australian social work is not exhaustive (and it merely sketches out a number of themes) but it has posed a more activist and social justice foundation for the beginnings of Australian social work. It places social activists, particularly women from the first wave of feminism and religious women, centre stage in Australian social welfare history. Social activism and advocacy are central to the histories of professional and charitable organisations in Australia and undermine and challenge current Federal Government threats to deprive charitable organisations of their registration for maintaining that history of advocacy.

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