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Working Boarders: the Boarding Out Scheme in New South Wales, 1880-1920

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This paper considers the work of children placed under the boarding out scheme in New South Wales in the period 1880-1920. It argues that work for, and by, boarded children was an intrinsic part of both ideology and functioning of the scheme. The paper suggests that, by boarding children in 'respectable' working class households (often in rural areas), the State Children's Relief Board placed children in situations where their exploitation, or overwork, was a significant possibility. It argues that the Board's mechanisms for ensuring the children's welfare under the scheme were not fail-proof and that exploitation, in variance from the scheme's ideals, did occur. However, the paper also suggests that the workload and intensity of the work undertaken by boarded children was commensurate with that performed by contemporaneous working class children who lived with their 'natural' families.

> It is, above all, essential to imbue the children with a *love* of work[1] *(Evidence of Miss Rosamund Hill to the NSW Public Charities Commission 1873-74)*
> I am getting on nicely at school, and I go very regular, I go everyday except on washing-day, and then I stop at home to help my guardian[2] *(Letter from boarded child 'S.H.', 1883)*
> The child is not a servant any more than the children of the home are servants.[3] *(Arthur Renwick, President of the State Children's Relief Board, 1882)*

Background

The work of children was an important and intrinsic feature of the boarding out scheme as the above quotations illustrate. In its broader sense the term 'boarding out' referred to the placement of children who were under large-scale institutional care into smaller, 'family style' situations. The scheme in New South Wales developed three styles of boarding out. Initially the bulk of children were boarded out, or fostered, with families who had applied for them. Other children, seen by authorities as in need of a special, supposedly differentiated, style of care, were placed in smaller 'cottage style' institutions. A later development in the scheme was the payment of a small allowance to 'deserving' widowed mothers in difficult circumstances to support the keeping of children at home.[4] This paper considers the labour of children who were boarded with foster families. Although this labour was unpaid it was valuable, and often even more valuable because it was in effect subsidised by the state.

Sources

Boarding out involved only a small percentage of children in New South Wales. Yet the documentation it bequeathed illuminates aspects of children's work in later nineteenth and early twentieth century New South Wales. This material provides insight into the work required in working class households and farms; it evidences the children's performance of this work and gender patterns in the allocation of work. Examination of the scheme also demonstrates the prevalent ideology concerning work for children;

indeed it is possible to view the attitudes and practices of several different groups to the place of work in children's lives. The annual reports of the State Children's Relief Board included opinions of bureaucrats, boarded children, foster parents, the children's teachers, and of honorary visitors to foster homes. This material usually, but not invariably, displayed a positive attitude towards the scheme. Yet the reports are revealing, particularly in their apparently verbatim records of working-class, fostered children. These reports contain the bulk of the extant evidence on boarding out. Other sources, including a secondary literature, are available; useful too, are oral history records. These balance and provide perspective to the dominant Board reports.

The discussion below refers to the boarding out scheme in the first four decades of its functioning. It is more heavily weighted, particularly in terms of evidence cited, towards the first twenty years of the scheme, the 1880s and 1890s. These years encompassed both practices and ideological underpinnings that constituted, and remained, intrinsic elements of the scheme. The voice and force of Renwick, who was the first state-appointed president of the board, as well virtual controller and chief ideologue, emerges strongly. Renwick's legacy was felt well after his withdrawal from the program at the turn of the century. Another reason for this balancing is the availability of significant children's and working class voices from the workings of the scheme in the 1880s. These records 'from below' were abruptly terminated in 1887, leaving the subsequent extant evidence top heavy with official and middle class voices. An exception is the very few reminiscences of older people who had been boarded out as children. These memories recall the period after the turn of the century.

There is no extensive historical analysis of the boarding out scheme in New South Wales to date. Those who seek Australian experiences of those subject to the practice must turn to Margaret Barbalet's work on South Australian state wards.[5] The detailed recovery of the experiences of boarded girls is the outstanding strength of this study. Barbalet uses the correspondence of the girls, and those involved with them, to characterise their experiences as boarded children and workers. She places this against a background of the introduction and development of boarding out in South Australia, the first Australian colony to use the scheme. Barbalet notes the close links between the English advocates, including the Hill sisters, and the South Australian women who oversaw the development of the program in that colony. She also recognises class issues relevant to the working of the scheme. A 'respectable' and willing working class for the reception of boarded children was a necessary element of the boarding scheme. Another constituent group was the middle class ideologues and officials who organised and oversaw the scheme. These participants from different classes are also stressed in Van Krieken's sociologically styled account of the system.[6] Van Krieken is critical of most Australian historical accounts of the development of boarding out schemes.[7] He argues that they stress the roles of community and philanthropic elite at the expense of the perceived respectable working class. Ramsland and Ritter both emphasise the importance of concerned higher class women in their brief accounts of the scheme's development, while Dickey notes the change in community attitudes.[8] Van Krieken argues that the implementation of boarding out prior to the 1870s would not have been possible. He sees the availability of a desired working class group as the timing switch in the scheme's introduction. Yet it would appear, for New South Wales at least, that the influence of higher class ladies, in close communication with their South Australian and English counterparts, was the crucial timing impetus. Boarding out commenced in New South Wales in 1879.

Kociumbas places the introduction of boarding out along a continuum of changing ideologies concerning children. She notes the confluence of emerging

'professionals', the activities of middle class women and the rise of a particular bourgeois doctrine concerning family life.[9] These factors changed the perception, and in time the reality, of the place of the child in later colonial society. Boarding out was a manifestation and consolidation of this confluence and change. The 1870s were also, in New South Wales, the decade where the proportion of children in the total population was the highest.[10] It was at the end of this decade that boarding out arrived in the colony.

Boarded children in foster homes worked in patterns similar to those of their working class contemporaries. The work patterns of both these groups ranged along a spectrum of varied intensity. In the period under discussion many children worked in the paid and unpaid sectors of the labour market; much of their unpaid work being performed in their households, or on family farms and selections. The use of children's labour fitted the character of production in New South Wales with children moving in and out of labour on a demand basis. Such demand could be diurnal, spasmodic or even seasonal. However, as mass schooling spread throughout New South Wales the accepted place of children increasingly became the schoolroom or the home.[11] Theoretically, boarded out children were subject to a series of controls which attempted to ensure their welfare, including schooling. A suitable amount of unpaid work was viewed as contributory to this welfare. However, reflecting the increasing emphasis placed on children's education by the state, boarded children's work was not meant to impinge upon schooling. In practice, as will be evidenced below, the system's controls did not always prevent the exploitation of 'state' children.

Beginnings

A boarding out scheme for children began privately in New South Wales in 1879. By 1881 the colonial state had taken full control of this scheme. Arthur Renwick was the first president of the State Children's Relief Board, the body constituted to oversee the program. He provided an explanation of boarding out in one of his early reports:

> Children of any age under twelve years are selected from all institutions wholly or in part subsidized by the State, and placed - or "boarded-out" as the process is termed - with respectable families, who are paid a certain sum quarterly for their maintenance.[12]

The New South Wales introduction of boarding out followed similar implementations in other colonies and nations. Boarding out systems had been introduced in South Australia, Victoria and Tasmania in the first half of the 1870s. Van Krieken has argued that the availability of a sufficient number of 'respectable' working class families was of critical importance for the scheme.[13] Such families were able and willing to foster children. More significantly, they were seen to be above penury. This was considered important. It was hoped that fostering families would be motivated by more than the receipt of money and the children's labour and that children would not be sent to homes where they were wanted only for their labour potential. Boarding out was another example of increasing state action concerning children in the later part of the nineteenth century. As with the contemporaneous compulsory schooling legislation and its implementation, the boarding out scheme showed a strong concern for the training of future citizens and workers. Both were accompanied by embryonic bureaucratic professionalism and a conviction that these interventions were for a utilitarian-style 'greater good'. Both the education system and the boarding out scheme removed children from the authority of their families. The education system did this on a daily basis,

boarding out over a much greater, and continuous period. The financial savings gained through the replacement of barracks-style institutions by fostering were also stressed as a most desirable by-product for the state.

The work ethic was a major part of the ideology that informed the boarding out scheme. Children's work was a major part of its practice. Work had also been a predominant element of a child's life in a nineteenth century barracks-style institution. However, boarding out was seen by its advocates as offering a superior, and more appropriate training because it took place in the wider world as opposed to a closed institution. Philosophies and habits acquired whilst boarded out were to serve the state and the children. Miss Hill's support for the scheme showed a belief that the children, the state's future citizens, should ideally become more than self-supportive, or dutiful, in their attitudes to work. Work was to become their love, to be something greater than just labour for exchange, it was to be imbued with feelings almost akin to a religious passion. The scheme attempted to allow boarded children opportunities similar to those available to 'natural' children in working class families. It did not envisage an idealised middle class childhood, rather, as Barbalet has observed concerning the South Australian scheme, it was a middle class ideal of the preferred working class childhood. Structuring this ideal was the child's place with a suitable, that is industrious, family.[14] Children were not to be servants, but they were to become very good and enthusiastic workers, or so it was hoped.

Initially state-controlled boarding out affected destitute or orphan children who had been supported by the state. State children, as they were referred to, were taken from institutions and allocated to applicant families. These children were not considered delinquent children. But they were seen as children in need of help. This was usually because their families had 'failed' them, often through extreme poverty.

The Boarded Children

The Board's Reports consistently labelled and sorted the social circumstances of its charges. The 1883 Report showed particulars of all children placed under the boarding out system in New South Wales. The largest category numbering 62 was labelled 'Father dead, mother destitute'. It was followed by 'Both parents dead' numbered 33, and 30 under 'Father deserted, mother destitute'.[15] By 1900, 1,266 children placed by the scheme were listed under 'Father dead, mother destitute'. In the same year the group 'Father deserted, mother destitute' had reached 1,034.[16]

The categories mentioned above were consistently the largest. The absence of a major breadwinner was the most common factor in the backgrounds of boarded children. This demonstrates the crucial importance of caregivers to the child's socio-economic situation and welfare. These patterns continued for the course of the scheme. The majority of children boarded had previously lost a caregiver, usually via death or desertion. This 'missing' caregiver was most often a father.[17]

Eric Mitchell's circumstances are an example of the 'Father deserted, mother destitute' category. Mitchell was placed in care by his mother after his parents separated when he was five years old. He lived in the privately supported Randwick Asylum for Destitute Children for five years. When Eric was ten the Asylum buildings were needed to accommodate wounded from the Great War, so Eric was boarded out.[18] Eric, in common with other boarded children, was failed by the informal social net of relatives and friends. Thus he came to be captured, or rescued, by the state's more structured support system. James Hallinan and Vic Burgess, two other boarded boys, lost their

fathers through death, Aida McCloskey and her brothers fell into state care when their mother was ill, and continued in this care after her death.[19]

Foster Families and Boarded Children

From the scheme's inception there was no shortage of applicants to foster children. In 1883 Renwick wrote ‘there has hitherto been a difficulty in complying with applications, in consequence of the want of suitable children’.[20] Four years later he again noted that the applications could not be met by the supply of children.[21] This was particularly so with girls. Renwick attributed the shortage of girls for boarding out to the strong predominance of boys in 'all our Asylums' which meant a smaller pool of available girls. He believed these patterns were due to demand for girls' labour, particularly in the domestic sphere. Girls could be placed by their own mothers to do domestic work, or to care for even younger children, thus they were less likely to come into state care.[22] Prevailing patterns of labour allocation meant that girls were seen as most suitable for ‘indoors work’, this facilitated their ease of placement as indoors work, ie the work usually allocated to domestic servants, was required in most households regardless of class status or location. Boys were viewed as more suitable for ‘outdoors work’, thus they were less easily placed privately, particularly in urban locales and, once in state care, deemed as most appropriate for rural placement.[23]

The Board tried to prevent the exploitation of boarded children, especially their being overworked, through an initial vetting of applicants. Another tactic was to place children with families who were believed less likely to abuse the spirit of the system. Foster families selected were supposedly ‘above the pressure of poverty’, thus there would be no material need to excessively overwork the children.[24] The Board classified guardians according to occupation and noted the districts where foster families lived. Such criteria were viewed as evidence of the families' suitability. Placement in country areas with those of ‘social status’ was construed as insuring the positive physical and moral health of the children.[25] Certain homes were considered particularly suitable, such as those of ‘well-to-do working farmers’ or ‘respectable mechanics’. While the sobriety praised by the authorities may have enhanced the children’s situations, it is questionable whether the similarly praised frugality would have.[26] Barbalet’s work on state children in South Australia notes the practice of boarding children with single women, such as widows, spinsters or married women without children. The New South Wales Reports give some indication of this practice, mentioning placements with widows. Possibly the abundance of families wanting to foster children combined with the strengthening ideology of the family meant that single females were less often considered as carers.[27]

The placement of children functioned along broad class lines. Working class children, the bulk of those under the scheme, were assigned to working households, albeit those of a 'better kind'. Placement of these children with an upper class household was believed unsatisfactory. One teacher described a problem when children were placed above their station:

> I observe that children placed with working families turn out better than those placed with families considering themselves to be somewhat higher in the social scale, and consequently treat their wards more in the light of servants, consigning them to the men's huts for sleeping and food, and exacting as much work as possible.[28]

However, occasionally, when higher class children were boarded, they were seen as best placed with families of similar background.[29]The underlying reasoning was that they would not be treated as of lesser import despite their circumstances.

Similar caution was also required in placing children for adoption and apprenticeship. Adoption, contributed significant savings to the scheme as boarding payments to foster parents ceased. Indeed it was seen as the ideal style of placement. But, Renwick explained, 'it has to be carefully applied to prevent abuses'.[30] It was believed that some applicants for adoptive children had the child's potential labour in mind. Recognising one area of demand for child labour, the Board treated applications for older girls from households with several young children and no servants with particular caution.[31] The boarding out program was initially aimed at children under twelve. It was later extended to those under fourteen. When children reached the age limit, they were apprenticed. The significant difference between boarding and apprenticeship, apart from age, was financial. While a small allowance was paid to those who boarded children, those who accepted apprentices had then to pay for their services. Mrs Proctor, a lady visitor from Bungonia, expressed the following thoughts on the boarding scheme. It is unclear to whom she is referring, boarders or apprentices, when she mentions 'older children' and their 'employers':

> I wish I could say that the older children were improved in proportion to the younger; I am sorry to say that they often give so much trouble and anxiety to their employers as to discourage their efforts to do them good.[32]

One Strathfield visitor wrote of the state children that 'the mothers seem well pleased with their work'.[33] Mrs Stewart's report from Parramatta indicated a degree of affection in the guardian-child relationship. It showed, too, that the children she oversaw engaged in the common blend of school and work, with minimal leisure time:

> The foster parents have no children of their own, are now quite attached to those committed to their care, have a little land of their own, the work of which supplies all with occupation, and on every visit I have found them so employed (unless during school-hours, when of course the children are absent).[34]

Working Boarders

Work *per se* was an intrinsic part of the boarding out system. It was viewed as training for the children's roles in their adult lives, useful to the colony and empire. Renwick elaborated:

> It is always impressed upon the guardians that the object of the system is not to "coddle" the children…they must also be qualified as far as they may be in their youth to go out into the world and fight the battle of life with credit to themselves and advantage to the commonwealth.[35]

This view was shared by others who commented on the program. Mrs Taylor, a lady visitor, believed that the children, 'taught to be self-reliant and industrious' would 'make useful colonists'.[36] The program strongly encouraged school attendance and teachers were requested to comment on the scheme. Renwick was also, for a short period in the later 1880s, the Minister for Public Instruction and an advocate of schooling for all

children. One teacher believed that the children's work prevented future criminality; children learnt how to earn their living and thus avoided ‘becoming inmates of goals’ instead becoming ‘useful members of society’.[37] A guardian who had fostered seven children under the scheme firmly asserted that boarding out was necessary for Australia's future. He expostulated:

> Let the state look ahead and improve our race by sending out the sound children that are likely to become useful members of society. Four of the children that were sent to me plainly show what a degraded state their parents were in. If something is not done to stop this state of things Australia will not find room to store all her prisoners, lunatics and mendicants. There was a great fuss about the small-pox, but there is a much worse epidemic staring us in the face; and to help to ward off this let the State do all in its power to see that sound right-minded children are sent to proper foster-parents, who shall care for them and fit them to fight the battle of life, which they can never be taught in an Asylum.[38]

Even children repeated the ideology that viewed the practice as being for the greater good. Two children wrote, ‘we try to make ourselves useful as we can to our foster-parents … If we behave ourselves our foster-parents have promised to make us good and useful members of society’.[39]

The scheme's officials evinced concern only when the correct balance of work was upset and overwork, or the possibility of overwork, arose. Boarded children, it was reiterated, were to be treated in the same fashion as a family's natural children. Renwick made this clear in his First Annual Report:

> The child is not a servant any more than the children of the house are servants … their life, rough or smooth, is the same life as those children live who are not at all the care of the State.[40]

One school teacher observed this practice in his district, commenting, ‘the children are treated by their guardians precisely the same as their own offspring’.[41] In contrast to this observation occasionally the Board's reports contained a hint that the state children were not always treated quite the same as natural children. Another teacher wrote of boarded children who were ‘brought up almost equal to children of the family’.[42]

Work was a fact of life for boarded children. In this respect their experiences paralleled those of many other working class children. One of the duties of lady visitors was to see that foster children were not overworked, or made to work in ways that natural children would not be made to.[43] Yet the Board’s expectations themselves exposed children to the possibility of overwork. The scheme encouraged a practice, that of working children, through the selection of foster families and location of children, at the households of ‘respectable’, ie hard-working, families and households. Approval of this work was evident in the Board Reports. However the Board wanted this work not to merge, or cross, into the realms of overwork.

Boarding out authorities thought the country was a desirable site for foster children. Rural locations removed children from the perceived unsavoury and unhealthy influences of large towns and cities, effectively keeping children off the streets. Country homes also distanced children from relatives, who were also often considered an

unsavoury influence. Boarding out was often, like the contemporaneous practice of selection, largely a rural answer to an urban concern.

Rural life for boarded children meant rural work. Indeed, officials and others enthused over country life and work for children. In 1884 Renwick noted that the scheme had been extended as far as Ulladulla on the south coast and to other distant inland localities, the increased cost of reaching the distant areas offset by their advantages. He wrote of the children fostered on dairy farms, 'this occupation will, it is believed … tend to create a most desirable class of colonists.[44]

Primary schooling was an important element of the boarding out program. Children were expected to fulfil minimum attendance requirements of seventy days per half year. The daily dairying routine could be made to fit this requirement, dairying before and after school keeping both boarded boys from 'idleness' and 'evil courses'.[45] Dairy farmers also perceived the benefits of the boarding out scheme, the extension of the scheme into diary areas resulting in even more applications for children from those districts.[46] The Board endeavoured to place children in these locales, noting the benefits of this 'healthy mode of life'.[47]

Between 1882 and 1887 the Board displayed a selection of children's letters offering children's' accounts of life in their households. [48] In this, the letters illuminated working class ways of life and the functioning of the boarding out scheme. The ever-present milking featured in many of these letters. One showed the layering of tasks that was the lot of many children in the period. R.K. wrote:

> I would have written sooner, but I have exercises to do at night for to take to school in the morning … I can drive bullocks now, and milk cows, and I can ride on horseback.[49]

Another letter writer was anxious to guarantee future behaviour, writing, 'I go to Sunday school, and I can milk a few cows now, and I soon will be able to milk a good few, and I will be good'.[50] Another also mentioned behaviour: 'I will try to be good dutiful. I deed right. (sic) I milk nine cows. I can ride a horse.[51] Another was rewarded with a heifer for being a good milker.[52] In keeping with 'natural' children in many working class households, the children's' letters evidenced that work was a significant part of their daily routine; they also showed an awareness by children of the importance of their behaviour. The letters often revealed the plural nature of the workload required from children in working class households, a plurality expanded by requirements of school attendance and homework, a circumstance also common to school children living with their own households.

Overwork?

Vic Burgess has recalled the work of his boarding out days. Twice a day Vic would get the cows in, on horseback. Then he would do the milking and the separating. In between these two shifts was another spent at school. Young Vic had little leisure time, starting work as soon as he got up and collecting cows in the afternoon on his way home from school for the evening milking. Contemporaneous opinion on whether children worked too hard appeared divided. Excerpts of letters from Lady Visitors and others published in annual Reports were often positive.[53] Mrs. Hill's letter from Jamberoo, was ambiguous on the question of the intensity of the children's work. Although she thought that the life was beneficial for the children she also mentioned that 'some onlookers' thought that

children had to work ‘too hard’ for long hours.[54] Henry Fletcher, from Windsor, warned the Board of possible pitfalls for children involved in dairy work:

> This is not a dairy district, but even here I have known parents make little slaves of their own children in the milking yard. There is a great temptation in this direction for many dairymen. Doubtless you recognize this, and take precautions so that State children boarded-out with cow owners are not overworked.[55]

When Vic Burgess remembered his experiences on the farm, which included the daily milking grind, he described it as 'work, work, work' and 'all the time working'. Vic showed his agency when, to quote his recollections, 'he cleared out one night'. The issue of the overwork always accompanied the scheme, even during its conception.[56] Henry Fletcher's point, that some parents overworked their natural children, was an apt one. As shown elsewhere, some working class parents worked their children hard, long and consistently, often from necessity.[57] Attendance at school did not lessen the demanding rural workload. Indeed because children were more often at school after the introduction of mass schooling other workloads had to be adjusted and varied in intensity, with an eye to school attendances. Authorities intended boarded children to be treated in the same fashion as their host's family. Believing in the virtues of the rural environment and work the Board deliberately sent both boys and girls to the country, placing them in families with often demanding rural workloads which were often juggled with children’s school attendance.

The work required from these children, as with other working class children, ranged over a wide spectrum. This spectrum was partially affected at least, by the families' economic circumstances. Although the Board attempted to place children in situations that were, to use its terminology, 'well to do', this was not always the case in practice.[58] Eric Mitchell recalled at least one of his foster families as 'poor people'.[59] Nor were significantly higher-class homes seen as suitable, because, as noted previously, there was a tendency for some to lump boarded children with their other workers and treat them accordingly.

Source material reveals a range of attitudes to boarded children and work, but references to children’s work were frequent. One child expressed concern at being unable to help a guardian sufficiently, because of school attendance, ‘the only thing I am sorrow for is [sic] I have to go to school in the afternoon; it is Mrs R__ busiest time’.[60] Another fretted at having to attend school when he could be out earning, as other children were:

> I am tired of school, but I am able and willing to work, as I see boys in bathurst [sic] not bigger than me earning from six to eight shillings a week. When I see them I feel as if I want to work myself.[61]

James Hallinan, unlike Eric Mitchell and Vic Burgess, was most positive in his recollections of life as a boarded child. Asked about how he was treated, Hallinan replied, ‘oh very well, one of the family. You couldn't wish for anything better. One of the family’.[62]

Foster parents' attitudes were diverse. They ranged from indulgent to vicious. The guardian E.T. appeared fond of the child A.W., E.T. confided: ‘I would not wish for any better boy than A.W., during my late illness he behaved like a little man, doing all that he possibly could to assist me’.[63]

L.J.C.'s criticism of her ward suggested a tone of complaint about a servant: the child was ignorant of household duties and required a good deal of reproving.[64] Similarly, J.M. was critical of a nine-year-old female ward who did not know the names for domestic utensils.[65] Criticism by the guardian W.M.H. demonstrated the expectation that most children would be capable of domestic duties: ‘Regarding A.M'C., when she first came she was almost ignorant of the little household duties that other children of her age have generally acquired’.[66]

The Board and others did, albeit infrequently, mention unsatisfactory treatment. In 1885 Renwick mentioned that only one case of ill treatment warranted legal intervention, yet implicit in his statement was an inference that there were other, less serious cases.[67] Further in his report, where he stressed the need for caution in determining the character of potential foster parents, Renwick cited the case of two girls aged 12 and ten, who had been deserted by their foster parents. The older one was recovered by missionaries from a brothel, while the younger one had not been found.[68]

In 1884 Renwick noted that it was difficult to identify those who wanted to adopt children for largely mercenary motives. This prompted the board to allow only the adoption of children under eight. Such children, it was believed, were less easily able to be put out to work. Renwick explained:

> It is a common practice for people to ask for children for adoption who are nearly old enough for service, in order to avoid the payments provided under the apprenticing indentures, or to evade the essential conditions of family life. Such applications are not easily detected.[69]

Similar difficulties also applied to the selection of foster parents for the scheme. Kociumbas has shown that eight was the most common age for the initial boarding of children. This was the age at which the Board prevented adoption. It suggests that an older child's increased working potential made it more attractive to fosterers. An eight year old could be boarded for four years before the Board's payments ceased.

Work Intensity

Despite the Board's safety mechanisms of lady visitors, character testimonials, teachers and inspectors, ill treatment, sometimes in the form of excessive or demanding work, did occur. Eric Mitchell, as a ten-year-old state child was, in his own words, 'sent out to work'. Mitchell recalled:

> I used to have to do a big paper run on foot bare feet in winter very cold meet the train at six o'clock bring up the papers and do odd jobs round the place and try and get a little schooling which was, which was very rare.[70]

Mitchell's situation, with only 'a little schooling', apparently eluded the scrutiny of the Board's visitors and the ideology of required formal schooling for boarded children was not adhered to. His recollection contrasts with some, but certainly not all, material published in the Board’s Annual Reports. This suggests that the experience of ‘state children’ regarding the balance of school attendance and other work fits along a spectrum, ranging from frequent, even assiduous, school attendance to intermittent, or rare, attendance.[71]

Some children seemed well content with their boarded life on the farm, particularly in comparison to their institutional experience. One exclaimed, ‘I would a great deal sooner live where I am than in the Asylum. I am learning to drive the horses and milk the cows’.[72] Another enthused:

> My foster mother is kind to me, and Mr M say (sic) he thinks that I will make a good farmer when I grow up. I can milk a few cows, and sometimes help to do other work on the farm. I like living at Little Forest, and I go to school pretty regular, and I like the school because there are six more State boys besides myself.[73]

Another child spent spare afternoon time in the garden, not being allowed out. In this 'spare time' the child fitted in a few chores, including feeding fowls, planting flowers and minding the kids [young goats].[74] This child appeared to be at the end of the spectrum where the workload was not particularly onerous. Rather, work consisted of only a few tasks which were easily fitted, along with school, into a daily routine. Another state child, A.J., was particularly positive about the life experienced as a boarded child. The child wrote, ‘I get plenty to eat, and there is not much work to do here’.[75]

The Value of Work

Work performed by boarded children reflected contemporaneous gender delineations. This was in keeping with the Board's policy on the assignment of children. The training of girls in domestic and immediate household chores was seen as appropriate, while for boys farm training, and farm life was particularly favoured. The Board hoped that the placing of children in these situations would lead to their apprenticeships in these areas. The value of cheap, trained and valuable labour is indicated by the fact that this was often the case. Even in the early stages of the scheme, the majority of boarders stayed on as apprentices.[76] Renwick saw the training function of the scheme as benefiting both children and colony. Training, it was thought, gave boarded children an avenue to a more respectable class sector. Children, to use Renwick's verb from the excerpt below, could be 'restored' and relocated to a better station. This, it was inferred, would also benefit the colony, especially with respect to labour and tone. In his second report Renwick expounded:

> Trained in habits of diligence, taught useful trades, and so furnished with means to earn an honest livelihood, these depraved and degraded children will practically be restored to the society into which they were born; they will be, as it were, immigrants into the respectable ranks of labour from regions of sin and darkness; they will be reclaimed natures; they will increase the sum of the valuable population of New South Wales.[77]

The annual listings of guardians' occupations indicates these backgrounds favoured for the reception of children. In 1898 for example, when the scheme was well established, the largest group by far was farmers, at 936. Next in line were 328 domestics, followed by 96 labourers, 76 miners and 38 dairy farmers. These breakdowns were typical, as Renwick explained: ‘most of the elder male children are under the care of farmers, orchardists, storekeepers, and artisans in healthy country districts’.[78] He continued, mentioning girls as servants, in a rather revealing fashion:

> The servant girls are generally placed with farmers and in the comfortable homes of the middle classes. A large proportion of the young children placed out as boarders are under license with the wives of labourers, miners, mechanics and others, and with widows having small income.[79]

‘Child-Saving’ and Boarding Out

The later years of the 1910s saw the State Children Relief Board and its activities, including the boarding out division, come under attack. It was management, or perceived mismanagement, including alleged cases of ill treatment of boarded children, that led to the investigation of the Board and its workings by both the Public Service Board and a Parliamentary Select Committee. Although cases of ill treatment were explored by the Select Committee, they were judged mild and not widespread.[80] The concept of boarding out was accepted and not subject to criticism; this was reserved for the State Children Relief Board itself. Boarding out, or fostering, as it would become more commonly known, continued to be a policy of the Child Welfare Department which virtually replaced the Relief Board in the early 1920s.

To characterise nineteenth century child saving as 'progress' and a straightforward manifestation of middle class humanitarian concern is simplistic.[81] Such a simple Whiggish view is unable to capture the complexity and nuances of the child saving movement.[82] Nor is the social control approach, such as that favoured by Platt in *The Child Savers*, sufficient to encompass the development of child saving and its twentieth century successor, child welfare.[83] The social control approach emphasises state intervention into working class lives, the rise of the professionals, and the efforts of middle class women to exert and extend their sphere of influence, as in Kociumbas's treatment of boarding out in New South Wales and Victoria. Kociumbas also notes the importance of child labour in fostering, showing that boarding out effectively allocated and used the labour power of state children. This recognition of child labour is fitted to her wider concerns of increasing state and middle class intervention into the lives of the working class.

As Van Krieken has noted in *The Policing of Families*, Donzelot moves beyond social control theory in his account of the genealogy of modern family form.[84] Donzelot's emphasis on the rise of 'the social' accompanied his treatment of the varied, and more intensive relationships between the state and families. The development of the boarding out program corresponds with Donzelot's account of the growth of 'the social'. Boarding out in New South Wales, (and in South Australia) had been initiated by middle class ladies, before the state professionals assumed control. The scheme, as assayed in this paper, used a combination of unpaid lady visitors and professional administrators. In this, the scheme may be viewed as an early, and transitory, phase maturing toward the fully-fledged 'social' and professional state.

The withdrawal of children from barracks-style institutions and other conditions considered unsuitable for their welfare was viewed as useful by the state and other middle class representatives. The state considered that the families of these children had failed. However, the children could be 'rescued' or 'saved' by *tutelage*, to employ Donzelot’s terminology. They would be placed with acceptable families, trained, and made subject to scrutiny and analysis. The removal of these children was also willingly accepted and utilised by the mainly (‘respectable’) working class families who fostered children. By doing so these working class families accepted a form of *contract*. These 'respectable' families positioned themselves, not at the *tutelage* pole of Donzelot's

spectrum of state interventions, but closer to the *contract* pole. Because of their demonstrated respectability they gained the benefits of foster children. Foster families placed themselves, along with their wards, under the supervised freedom, and gaze of the state. To view boarding out as an example of blunt, unwelcome and resisted state intervention into the lives of an undifferentiated working class is simplistic and inaccurate.

State-sponsored boarding out from the very 1880s parallels the introduction of compulsory education. Both these actions were concerned with the consolidation and spread of dependent childhood, with particular emphasis on training the child. Both actions may be viewed as indications of the state's increasing concern with children, conceptualised as future citizens, parents and workers, and their childhood experience. The stipulation that boarded children must attend school indicated that the State Children’s Relief Board considered formal education to be as important, if not more important, than training in their foster household. In the period under discussion children's education increasingly held sway over their other labours.

This paper has argued that the situations and workloads of boarded children were similar to those of working class contemporaries who lived with their natural families. However, the State Children Relief Board attempted to check poor treatment, including overwork and inadequate school attendance. Such checks were not available for ordinary children, excepting the occasional monitoring of their school attendance and the even more spasmodic efforts to improve it. So it is possible, at least in some cases, that the Board may have prevented or even mitigated the harsher use of its children. Yet, as Eric Mitchell's recollections and the State Children Relief Board Reports showed, the supervisory system could fail. Such failure meant, as Mitchell's case demonstrates, that children could be treated harshly and worked excessively. The supervisory system, based as it was on a variety of agents, was not omnipresent. Neither did the process of boarding out guarantee the outcomes envisaged by the state.

At least two elements of the Board's policy worked to effectively place many state children as unpaid, and relatively unsupervised, workers. The Board adopted a 'devil makes work for idle hands’ approach, viewing a certain amount of work as beneficial for children. Work, it was believed, fulfilled the dual function of keeping children out of trouble, and, of training them for their roles as future citizens. Secondly, the tactic of sending children to rural areas, particularly to farms, placed children in a sector where daily workloads were frequently long and demanding. The Board's Reports reveal that rural placements were desirable as they removed children from the unsavoury environment of the city. Underlying the choice of rural placement was an emphasis, common to urban child saving movements, on improved physical and moral hygiene. Rural placements also meant that children were often isolated, and distant from interested friends and relatives. The difficulties of state children's lives had to be faced largely without their natural kin.

The work patterns of boarded children did not substantially alter over the period 1881 to 1920. Their school attendances, in keeping with that of their contemporaries, may have gradually increased, especially after the 1916 Public Instruction (Amendment) Act came into practice. The age at which children ceased to be boarders and became apprentices also rose in an incremental fashion, from 12 to 16 years. This mirrored changes in apprenticeship laws, another sign of the extension of the formal childhood period that took place in the period, and demonstrated the state's formal support for this extension.

Conclusion

The first four decades of the boarding out scheme saw children placed in situations where work was a common and central part of their daily life. In this, the scheme effectively mimicked conditions of other working class children. Indeed the scheme aimed at such a replication. It removed children from the most destitute or 'disreputable' section of the working class and placed them with the 'respectable' working class. As Renwick noted, boarded children were not meant to be servants any more than ordinary children were. His statement was unwittingly accurate. Some natural children were subject to workloads that were demanding, or even servant or slave like in their dimensions. This paper suggests that this was also the case for some boarded children, whose valuable labour was enhanced by the allowance which accompanied them. Boarding out was established and consolidated in the late 1870s and early 1880s. This was a time when the availability of children's labour power was decreasing because of the spread of mass schooling and the accompanying beginnings of fertility transition.[85] Thus, the labour power of boarded children in the 1880s and subsequent decades probably increased in relative value. Certainly expectations of work in schools, on farms, and in households for 'state' and other children remained.

One feature of boarding out was the transfer and allocation of the children's labour power. In this the boarding out system served as a prototype for the Aboriginal apprenticeship scheme which began early in the twentieth century. These transfers were accompanied by a belief that a certain type of familial upbringing would enhance children's future contribution to society. They were also accompanied by the virtual daily labour of children. The conviction that child training and moulding was for the good of the larger society, featured in the ideology of boarding out and underlay the uptake of boarded children's labour. Child labour fitted easily into working class households, including those where the home site was also the site of production such as farms. So too, did the availability, malleability, and economy, or cheapness, of this labour.

Endnotes

1. Public Charities Commission, New South Wales Legislative Assembly Votes and Proceedings 1873-74, vol 6, Appendix V, To Evidence of Miss Rosamund Hill. Rosamund Hill was the activist daughter of the English social reformer Matthew Davenport Hill, visiting Australia at the time of the Charities Commission, she was a strong advocate of boarding out, along with her sister Florence and her cousin Caroline Emily Clark.

2. New South Wales State Children Relief Board Annual Report for the year ended 5 April 1883 (hereafter shown as SCRBAR 18__) Appendix H, Letters from Children, letter from S.H.

3. SCRBAR 1882, Report of the President Arthur Renwick, p. 175.

4. This development is contextualised in Ann O'Brien, *Poverty's Prison: The Poor in New South Wales, 1880-1918*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1988.

5. Margaret Barbalet, *Far From a Low Gutter Girl*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1983.

[6]. Robert Van Krieken, *Children and the State: Social control and the formation of Australian child welfare*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1992.

[7]. See particularly Van Krieken, *Children and the State* p. 6, p. 62 and pp. 73-75.

[8]. John Ramsland, 'The development of boarding-out systems in Australia: a series of welfare experiments in child care 1860-1910', *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society [JRAHS]*, vol. 60, pt 3, September 1974, pp. 186-98, Leonora Ritter, 'Boarding-Out in New South Wales and South Australia: Adoption, adaptation or innovation?' *JRAHS*, vol. 64, pt 2, September 1978, pp. 120-26, Brian Dickey 'The evolution of care for destitute children in New South Wales', *Journal of Australian Studies*, no. 4, 1979, pp. 38-57.

[9]. Jan Kociumbas, '"As the twig is bent": Children and Society in New South Wales and Victoria, 1860-1914', PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 1983. See especially ch. 3 Rescue: State and Charitable Care of the Destitute Child pp. 65-100. Van Krieken does not address this study, which contains similarities to his. Such an address may have tempered his critique of historians' work on boarding out and its parent field, the child and the state. A briefer version of Kociumbas's work is included in Jan Kociumbas, *Australian Childhood: A History*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1997, see particularly ch. 6 'Angels in the house: middle-class domestic ideology and practice'.

[10]. J.C. Caldwell 'Population' in Wray Vamplew (ed.), *Australians: Historical Statistics*, Fairfax, Syme and Weldon, Sydney, 1987, p. 24.

[11]. See Maree Murray, 'Children's Work in Rural New South Wales in the 1870s', *JRAHS*, vol. 79, pts 3 and 4, December 1993 and Maree Murray, 'Working Children: A social history of children's work in New South Wales, 1860-1916', PhD thesis, Macquarie University, 1996 for detail on children's work throughout this period. Autobiographical accounts are also a valuable source on children's work in the rural sector see, for example, Henry Lawson, 'A Fragment of Autobiography' in Henry Lawson, *A Camp-Fire Yarn: Complete Works 1885-1900*, compiled and edited by Leonard Cronin, Lansdowne Press, Sydney, 1988, pp.1-38 and A.B. 'Banjo' Paterson, *Singer of the Bush: Complete Works*, collected and introduced by Rosamund Campbell and Philippa Harvie, Ure Smith Press, Sydney, 1991, pp.1-116.

[12]. SCRBAR 1883, 'Report of the President', p.86.

[13]. Van Krieken, *Children and the State*, pp.74-75.

[14]. Barbalet, *Far From a Low Gutter Girl*, pp.195-99.

[15]. SCRBAR 1883, p.110. The 1885 Report again showed 'father dead, mother destitute' as the most numerous, at 213, of the children's backgrounds. It was again followed by 'Both parents dead' and 'Father deserted, mother destitute'. SCRBAR 1885, p 647. These figures were cumulative, those from previous years counted in every year. For like figures for 1889 see SCRBAR 1889, Appendix H.

[16]. SCRBAR 1900, p.231.

[17]. Van Krieken argues, somewhat simply, that the difficult circumstances of the colonial labour place 'made men less willing husbands and fathers'. This argument is both unsustainable and inaccurate. Men clearly were willing husbands and fathers as they did marry and beget children. The desertion rates indicate that men were less willing to continue on in these marital and parental roles. Van Krieken's argument also assigns male abrogation of responsibility directly to socio-economic conditions with little consideration of gender factors. Were socio-economic factors the main cause of parental and marital desertion then they could be expected to apply equally to males and females. A more sophisticated analysis would be that the interweave of socio-economic and gender factors resulted in greater desertion rates by men who, literally, left women 'holding the baby'.

[18]. Eric Mitchell, Mitchell Library Manuscript [ML MSS], 4485 , Mitchell Library Oral History [MLOH], 22/1-3.

[19]. Richard Raxsworthy, Oral History, Sydneysiders Collection, vol, 1, tapes 14A-14B, Vic Burgess. I would particularly like to acknowledge the work of Richard Raxsworthy and the contribution of Vic Burgess. New South Wales Bicentennial Oral History Collection [NSWBOHC], ML MSS 5163 James Hallinan - transcript 22, Ada Salmon, nee McClosky, - transcript 97.

[20]. SCRBAR 1883, p.107.

[21]. SCRBAR 1887, p.800.

[22]. SCRBAR 1887, p.800.

[23]. Barbalet notes that factory work was considered unsuitable for female state wards in South Australia, see Barbalet, *Far From A Low Gutter Girl*, p.199. A similar belief appeared to underpin placement in the New South Wales scheme; there is no mention of either girls or boys being allocated to families involved in factory work.

[24]. SCRBAR 1884, p.1425.

[25]. SCRBAR 1885, p.635.

[26]. SCRBAR 1885, p.636.

[27]. The strengthening ideology and valorisation of the family is well covered by Kociumbas in ‘“As the twig is bent”’. Even in late twentieth century society the nuclear family appears the preferred ideal and location for fostered children placed by the state, despite initiatives by other kinds of families.

[28]. SCRBAR 1889, p.309.

[29]. SCRBAR 1885, p.636. Although NSW Reports listed children’s religions they did not indicate matching of children and foster family according to religion.

This raises the question of whether religion was not considered in the placement of children or, alternatively, whether it was considered as a matter of course and thus not mentioned. Barbalet suggested that the significantly greater proportion of Catholic children boarded in South Australia, and the shortage of Catholic families willing to foster children may have indicated the larger numbers of poor working class Catholic families, see Barbalet, *Far From A Low Gutter Girl*, pp. xiv-vv.

[30]. SCRBAR 1884, p.1424.

[31]. SCRBAR 1885, p.681.

[32]. SCRBAR 1884, p.1438.

[33]. SCRBAR 1888, p.474.

[34]. SCRBAR 1885, p.649.

[35]. SCRBAR 1882, pp.184-85.

[36]. SCRBAR 1882, p.194.

[37]. SCRBAR 1889, p.632.

[38]. SCRBAR 1884, p.1445.

[39]. SCRBAR 1884, Letter from 'S. and F.P.' p.1441.

[40]. SCRBAR 1882, p.175.

[41]. SCRBAR 1889, p.631, for similar comment see SCRBAR 1911, p.33.

[42]. SCRBAR 1893, p.310.

[43]. SCRBAR 1883, p.87.

[44]. SCRBAR 1884, p.1431.

[45]. SCRBAR 1885, p.629, see also SCRBAR 1893, p. 310.

[46]. SCRBAR 1885, p.644.

[47]. SCRBAR 1887, p.819.

[48]. These letters were responses to a circular despatched by a Boarding Out officer. The Board's Annual Reports must also be read as an exercise in self-promotion. Thus the selection and publication of letters from children, foster parents, honorary visitors and school teachers may be seen as part of an annual public relations exercise. The published letters usually echo the sentiments of the Board. Despite this limitation the letters are revealing. They offer scarce glimpses of children's lives in working class households from children themselves. And, as the quoted extracts demonstrate, the published letters were not carbon copies.

The letters do offer a range of opinion and experience, albeit within the constraints of accordance to the Board's interests. After 1887, indicating the lesser place of children's opinions in the Board's reckoning of importance, no more such letters were published on the grounds of economy.

[49]. SCRBAR 1884, p.1442, see SCRBAR 1885, p.652, letter from W.A. for a similar piece.

[50]. SCRBAR 1884, p.1442, no initials noted.

[51]. SCRBAR 1884, p.1442, letter from C.R..

[52]. SCRBAR 1884, p.1442, letter from F.H.

[53]. See for example, letter from Miss Fraser, SCRBAR 1888, p.474 and another from Lady Visitor at Collector, SCRBAR 1891, p.1103.

[54]. SCRBAR 1908, p.53.

[55]. SCRBAR 1911 p.68.

[56]. See, for example, New South Wales Parliamentary Debates 1880-81 first session, vol. 5, p.976.

[57]. See Murray, ‘Children’s work’ and ‘Working children’.

[58]. See for example, letter from Mrs Smith, SCRBAR 1890, p.1298.

[59]. Eric Mitchell, ML MSS, 4485, MLOH 22/1-3.

[60]. Eric Mitchell, ML MSS, 4485, MLOH 22/1-3.

[61]. SCRBAR 1885, p.652.

[62]. James Hallinan, NSWBOHC transcript 22.

[63]. SCRBAR 1884, p.1449.

[64]. SCRBAR 1884, p.1446.

[65]. SCRBAR 1883, p.118.

[66]. SCRBAR 1883, p.118.

[67]. SCRBAR 1885, p.637.

[68]. SCRBAR 1885, p.642.

[69]. SCRBAR 1884, pp.1424-25.

[70]. Eric Mitchell, ML MSS 4485, MLOH 22/1-3, this passage has been transcribed from a tape, hence the punctuation. As an older man Mitchell’s memory was

recalled many years after his experience as a boarded child and at a time when universal and extended schooling had become accepted. Nonetheless his recollection is not inconsistent with other material on patterns of school and labour of that time.

71. See Murray, ‘Working Children’ for further material on the shifting balances between school work and other work for children in the period under discussion.

72. SCRBAR 1887, p.835, letter from W.H.G.

73. SCRBAR 1887, p.835, letter from J.W.G.

74. SCRBAR 1887, p.835, letter from J.A.

75. SCRBAR 1887, p.834.

76. SCRBAR 1884, p.1429.

77. SCRBAR 1883, p.94.

78. SCRBAR 1898, p.274, it should be remembered that these figures were cumulative.

79. SCRBAR 1898, p.274.

80. Select Committee on the Whole Administration of the State Children Relief Act (Further Progress), New South Wales Parliamentary Papers 1917, vol. 2, p. 449.

81. Van Krieken, *Children and the State* argues this point most strongly, see particularly ch. 1, 'Social theory and child welfare', pp. 3-30.

82. J. Manton, *Mary Carpenter and the Children of the Streets*, Heinemann, London 1976, is one example in this vein. Manton applies Whiggish historical narrative to Carpenter's child saving efforts in nineteenth century England.

83. Van Krieken, *Children and the State*, pp. 15-29, see also A.M. Platt, *The Child Savers*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1977.

84. Jacques Donzelot, *The Policing of Families*, Hutchinson, London, 1979.

85. See L.T. Ruzicka and J.C. Caldwell, *The End of Demographic Transition in Australia*, Australian Family Formation Project, Monograph no. 5, Department of Demography, Institute of Advanced Studies, ANU, Canberra, 1977.