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Abstract

This chapter examines the racial anxieties at work in the Australian women's movement in the early 1900s, focussing on campaigns and organisations aimed at increasing and 'improving' the white population on the one hand and discussions of the 'Aboriginal problem' on the other. It particularly examines the activities of the National Council of Women, the largest women's group of this period, and the Australian Federation of Women Voters, a smaller but highly influential organisation, as well as local groups which emerged to further these causes. Specifically, it explores efforts to promote immigration from Britain, which went alongside eugenic measures to exclude 'unfit' white migrants as well, and various schemes aimed at producing 'well born' white children. As I hope to show, these seemingly disparate activities were informed by a single racial imperative. The racial interests of the movement coalesced around anxieties about the need for a large and healthy white population to secure the nation's future. Indeed, their racially based reforming campaigns revolved almost entirely around anxieties internal to whiteness. While the women's movement showed remarkably little interest in the 'Aboriginal problem', or the 'peril' of Asian immigration, their vigorous campaigns around improving the quality and quantity of the white population reveal how racialised thinking in fact permeated the movement and animated many of its endeavours. And women's work was presented as essential to implementing these vital racial programs.

Keywords

articulation, movement, women, making, australia, 1910s, 1930s, anxieties, white, race

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11

White anxieties and the articulation of race: the women's movement and the making of White Australia, 1910s–1930s

Jane Carey, Monash University

At the present time the most pressing question for Australia is Immigration. To keep to the 'White Australia' policy, the flow of people from the Old Country must be steady and suitable.

The Dawn, 15 December 1924, 4.

In this country the question of infant life is a most vital one, and should be of deep concern to the whole community, for we have need of all our children. Babies are the best immigrants.

School For Mothers Institute: Its Aims and Objects (Adelaide, 1909).

This chapter examines the racial anxieties at work in the Australian women's movement in the early 1900s, focussing on campaigns and organisations aimed at increasing and 'improving' the white population on the one hand and discussions of the 'Aboriginal problem' on the other. It particularly examines the activities of the National Council of Women, the largest women's group of this period, and the Australian Federation of Women Voters, a smaller but highly influential organisation, as well as local groups which emerged to further these causes. Specifically, it explores efforts to promote immigration from Britain, which went alongside eugenic measures to exclude 'unfit' white migrants as well, and various schemes aimed at producing 'well born' white children. As I hope to show, these seemingly disparate activities were informed by a single racial imperative. The racial interests of the movement coalesced around

anxieties about the need for a large and healthy white population to secure the nation's future. Indeed, their racially based reforming campaigns revolved almost entirely around anxieties internal to whiteness. While the women's movement showed remarkably little interest in the 'Aboriginal problem', or the 'peril' of Asian immigration, their vigorous campaigns around improving the quality and quantity of the white population reveal how racialised thinking in fact permeated the movement and animated many of its endeavours. And women's work was presented as essential to implementing these vital racial programs.

The 'racial' history of Australia has been extensively explored in terms of the treatment and experiences of Indigenous people and the fears of 'Asian invasion' which gave rise to the nation's founding doctrine of the White Australia Policy in 1901.¹ But these histories have rarely been linked, in Australia or elsewhere, to the concurrent obsessions with white racial fitness. Similarly, the significant body of scholarship on the racial dimensions of the western women's movement has largely focused on white women's constructions of themselves in relation to racial 'others'—how this could be used to bolster white women's status, and the 'civilising' impulse of the western women's movement in relation to those perceived as racially inferior.² Both of these tendencies were certainly

¹ See for example, Henry Reynolds, *The other side of the frontier: Aboriginal resistance to the European invasion of Australia* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1982); Bain Attwood, *Telling the truth about Aboriginal history* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005); Andrew Markus, *Australian race relations, 1788–1993* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1994); David Walker, *Anxious nation: Australia and the rise of Asia 1850–1939* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1999); Gwenda Tavan, *The long, slow death of White Australia* (Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 2005).

² Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of history: British feminists, Indian women, and Imperial culture, 1865–1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Clare Midgley, ed., *Gender and imperialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), and *Feminism and Empire: women activists in Imperial Britain, 1790–1865* (London: Routledge, 2007); Patricia Grimshaw, 'Settler anxieties, Indigenous peoples, and women's suffrage in the colonies of Australia, New Zealand and Hawaii, 1888 to 1902', *Pacific Historical Review* 69.4 (2000): 553–72.

evident in Australia. However, the voluminous discussions of white racial fitness, evident in the Australian women's movement from at least the early 1900s, have not, to date, received much attention.³

This chapter is drawn from a much larger project examining ideas about race and whiteness in the Australian women's movement from the 1880s to the 1930s. In this work, I have particularly argued that it is not sufficient to look only to 'others' to explain the operations of 'race'. Following Aileen Moreton-Robinson's proposition that whiteness is 'central to the racial formation of Australian society',⁴ I suggest that we need to pay far greater attention to the extensive discussions of whiteness that circulated from the late 19th to the mid-20th centuries as a major domain in which ideas about race were being articulated. Such an approach also reveals the direct connections between Australia's racially restrictive immigration regimes and the policies adopted towards Indigenous peoples—issues which have usually been treated separately

³ The majority of whiteness scholarship is based in the United States. For some of the key works see: David Roediger, *The wages of whiteness: race and the making of the American working class* (London: Verso, 1991); Toni Morrison, *Playing in the dark: whiteness and the literary imagination* (New York: Vintage: Random House, 1992); bell hooks, 'Representations of whiteness in the literary imagination', in *Black looks: race and representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992); Cheryl I. Harris, 'Whiteness as property', *Harvard Law Review* 106.8 (June 1993): 1707–91; Ruth Frankenburg, *White women, race matters: the social construction of whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). There is also a small but growing body of Australian historical work on whiteness: Warwick Anderson, *The cultivation of whiteness: science, health and racial destiny in Australia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002); Marilyn Lake, 'White man's country: the trans-national history of a national project', *Australian Historical Studies* 35.122 (2003): 346–63; Leigh Boucher, Jane Carey and Katherine Ellinghaus, eds., *Historicising whiteness: transnational perspectives on the construction of an identity* (Melbourne: RMIT Publishing, 2007); Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the global colour line: white men's countries and the question of racial equality* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2008); .

⁴ Aileen Moreton-Robinson 'Preface', in *Whitening race: essays in social and cultural criticism* ed. Aileen Moreton-Robinson (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2004), ix.

within surprisingly discrete historiographies.⁵ These twin pillars of Australia's racial past both had their foundations in protecting the privileges of whiteness and patrolling its boundaries.⁶

This chapter thus asks questions about the nature and location of racial discourses and their relationship to the national project of White Australia. The campaigns discussed below highlight how racial thinking inspired reforming agendas and supported white women's agency. Beyond this, these activities provide new insights into, in Patrick Wolfe's words, the 'organizing grammar of race', which Ann Stoler suggests was 'a central colonial sorting technique'.⁷

Good white immigrants

I have discussed elsewhere the women's movement's intense activism against the 'menace of mental deficiency' and its racially damaging effects as one key example of how the racial discourses at work in the movement could revolve entirely around whiteness.⁸ The campaigns around immigration reveal this racial focus even more starkly. From the 1910s to the 1930s the women's movement took a strong interest in immigration issues, but not, perhaps, in the way we might expect. Their activities did not focus on the need to exclude 'Asian' or 'other' migrants. They assumed

⁵ On this point see Ann Curthoys, 'An uneasy conversation: the multicultural and the Indigenous', in *Race, colour and identity in Australia and New Zealand*, eds. John Docker and Gerhard Fischer (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2000).

⁶ I am drawing here on Matt Wray, *Not quite white: white trash and the boundaries of whiteness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

⁷ Patrick Wolfe, 'Settler colonialism and the elimination of the Native', *Journal of Genocide Research* 8.4 (2006): 387; Ann Laura Stoler, 'Intimidations of Empire: predicaments of the tactile and unseen', in *Haunted by Empire: geographies of intimacy in North American history*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 4.

⁸ Jane Carey, "'Women's objective—a perfect race': whiteness, eugenics and the articulation of race', in *Re-Orienting whiteness: transnational perspectives on the history of an identity*, eds. Leigh Boucher, Jane Carey and Katherine Ellinghaus (New York: Palgrave, 2009); Jane Carey, "'Wanted—a real white Australia": the women's movement, whiteness and the settler-colonial project', in *Studies in settler colonialism*, eds. Fiona Bateman and Lionel Pilkington (New York: Palgrave, forthcoming).

the White Australia Policy was working effectively to prevent this (as indeed it was). Rather, their activism focused the need for increased migration from Britain, but also, and even more predominantly, on the need for rigorous screening and medical testing to ensure only high quality white migrants were admitted.

To understand the basis of this activism, it is useful to review the provisions of the *Immigration Restriction Act* (1901), the central plank of the White Australia policy. We are all familiar with the first and most notorious provision of the Act, which was designed as a bar to 'non-white' immigration. This prohibited the immigration of: 'Any person who when asked to do so by an officer fails to write out at dictation and sign in the presence of the officer a passage of fifty words in length in an European language directed by the officer'. What is less well known, is that five of the Act's other six provisions were actually directed at excluding categories of white migrants who were deemed racially undesirable. Specifically, section 3 denied entry to:

- (a) any person likely in the opinion of the Minister or of an officer to become a charge upon the public or upon any public or charitable institution;
- (b) any idiot or insane person;
- (c) any person suffering from an infectious or contagious disease of a loathsome or dangerous character;
- (d) any person who has within three years been convicted of an offence, not being a mere political offence, and has been sentenced to imprisonment for one year or longer therefore, and has not received a pardon;
- (e) any prostitute or person living on the prostitution of others;

The Act was clearly designed to allow for a careful screening of potential white immigrants. The campaigns of Australia's largest women's organisation, the National Council of Women, around the issue of immigration reveal they were keenly aware of this, and their activism revolved almost entirely around these issues.

From the early 1900s its various state branches established special committees on immigration which reflected the desires for both quantity and quality. Naturally, they had a strong interest in encouraging and providing support, 'protection', and opportunities for women migrants. They also insisted that the selection and supervision of women migrants needed to be carried by Australian women themselves. Thus the Emigration and Immigration Committee established by the Queensland National Council of Women in 1910 concerned itself particularly with the welfare of British immigrant girls coming out as domestic servants. They were keen to encourage such migrants, since the shortage of 'good help' was a constant source of irritation for middle-class women at this time, but they were equally concerned that such immigrants should be properly selected and supervised. What was wanted, they argued, was 'well trained domestics rather than the haphazard ones who were constantly arriving'.⁹ The committee aimed to get in touch with bodies which would 'recommend girls of good character and capacity', and to ensure 'proper protection' on the journey and suitable positions when they arrived.¹⁰ The following year they considered sending 'a band of women to England to choose suitable girls as emigrants'.¹¹ At around the same time the New South Wales Council formed a similar committee which also expressed the view that 'the women selected to be sent out here were not wisely chosen'. And they thus passed resolutions that a committee including women members be formed in London to select immigrants, that 'all women emigrants be passed by a woman doctor',

⁹ Minutes, 30 May 1910, National Council of Women of Queensland Records (hereafter NCW of Queensland Minutes), Fryer Library, University of Queensland, Brisbane. This committee was formed in response to the fact that the International Council of Women had established a standing Committee on Immigration, and it was expected that national member organisations would follow suit: NCW of Queensland Minutes, 7 March 1910.

¹⁰ NCW of Queensland Minutes, 10 June 1910.

¹¹ NCW of Queensland Minutes, 7 August 1911.

and that a matron be appointed to supervise women migrants during their journey to Australia.¹²

Both committees pursued these agendas even more vigorously in the years after the First World War, and both became closely involved with the New Settlers League, formed in the early 1920s, which sought to assist new migrants after their arrival in Australia. Other groups also emerged to support the cause. In South Australia, it was concerns over immigration which led to the reformulation of the National Council of Women in 1921, when Lady Hackett, the lady mayoress, convened a meeting 'to discuss Australian conditions as affecting the immigration of British war service women'.¹³ The immigration of girls and women from Britain remained a major focus for the South Australian Council. The Women's Service Guilds of Western Australia, the state branch of the Australian Federation of Women Voters, also took a keen interest in immigration. In the early 1920s, some of its members formed the Women's Immigration Auxiliary Council, which sought to assist new migrants, both in practical terms and by providing entertainment and social events at the hostel provided for them.¹⁴

These committees dealt almost exclusively with British immigration. The question of non-white migration arose only rarely, and was treated separately. In 1924 one of the topics proposed for discussion at the Australian national conference was 'That there should be a full, unbiased and scientific international investigation of the problems arising from contact between Eastern and Western peoples with special reference to migration'.¹⁵ And in 1925 the South Australian Council passed a resolution protesting 'against the number of undesirable immigrants

¹² Minutes, 2 March 1911, National Council of Women of New South Wales Records, MLMSS 3739 (hereafter NCW of NSW Minutes), box MLK 3009, Mitchell Library, Sydney.

¹³ 'Report of the National Council of Women of South Australia, September 1921', (Adelaide: The Council, 1921), np.

¹⁴ *Dawn*, 14 June 1924, 5.

¹⁵ National Council of Women of New South Wales, Biennial Reports for 1925–26 (Sydney: Fred W. White Printer, 1926), 11.

coming to Aust. from S. Europe.¹⁶ But the main concern was with increasing the numbers of British migrants coming to the country. In Western Australia, the formation of the Women's Immigration Auxiliary Council was motivated by the understanding that, 'To the Commonwealth, the greatest problem is that of population, and the danger to her empty areas is a menace which makes it imperative that she should make an effort to people them with migrants from the Motherland.'¹⁷ In 1924, the NSW Committee reported its opinion that: 'immigration, so far as New South Wales is concerned, is at a low ebb and we hope that the dribble will grow into a rushing stream in the coming year.'¹⁸ The following year, they noted that about 12,000 migrants had come to the state over the past two years, 80 per cent of whom were British. And that, while few Scandinavians were coming to the state, 'a number of Northern Italians come, who have been subjected to medical inspection previous to embarking.'¹⁹

Naturally, these groups remained particularly concerned with increasing the number of women migrants. In 1926 the New South Wales Committee advocated 'a united effort on the part of women of Australia, to attract women of the United Kingdom here.'²⁰ By 1927 the South Australian Immigration Committee was most pleased to report that girls who were willing to do domestic work were now being given free passages (these had previously only been available to male migrants). Thus the committee hoped that these reforms would mean 'the stream of suitable women migrants to our shores may be greatly increased.'²¹ They also continued to argue that women themselves needed to be involved in

¹⁶ NCW of Queensland Minutes, 18 May 1925.

¹⁷ *Dawn*, 16 February 1927, 11.

¹⁸ National Council of Women of New South Wales, Biennial Reports for 1923–24 (Sydney: 1924), 23.

¹⁹ National Council of Women of New South Wales, Biennial Reports for 1925–26, 20.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 6.

²¹ The National Council of Women of South Australia: Report for 1927 (Adelaide: The Council, 1927), 18.

the selection process. In 1923 the New South Wales Council again urged that the selection of women migration should be undertaken 'by Australian women paid for the purpose.'²² The Queensland Council also resolved in 1923 that 'there should be proper selection by competent persons in Great Britain of the girls to be sent to Australia such persons to be preferably Australian women appointed for the purpose.'²³ This was an issue pursued by all of the councils across the country into the 1930s. A resolution passed at the 1938 national conference urged that the Commonwealth government should 'employ a responsible woman officer overseas to encourage and recommend women immigrants of a good type for Australia.'²⁴

But it was child migrants who were seen as particularly desirable. In 1924 the New South Wales Council's Immigration Committee reported its opinion that 'boy and girl migrants are the best for Australia. The Dreadnought scheme holds pride of place so far, having brought out over 4000 boys of a very fine type.'²⁵ In 1926 they repeated their opinion that 'boy and girl migrants were the best for Australia, for they are adaptable and absorb the conditions of the new country, and become useful members of the community', and reported with satisfaction again on the schemes in place.²⁶ In Western Australia The Women's Immigration Auxiliary Council also strongly promoted child migration schemes, praising the work done in this area at the Fairbridge Farm cottages. An

²² National Council of Women of New South Wales, Biennial Reports for 1923–24, 23.

²³ NCW of Queensland Minutes, 20 August 1923. In the same year, the South Australian Immigration Committee presented virtually identical resolutions at a meeting with the Minister for Immigration: *The National Council of Women of South Australia: Report for 1923* (Adelaide: The Council, 1923), np.

²⁴ Minutes of Annual Meeting, 15 September 1938, National Council of Women of Australia Records (hereafter NCW of Australia Minutes), MS 7583, box 12, Australian Manuscripts Collection, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

²⁵ National Council of Women of New South Wales, Biennial Reports for 1923–24, 23.

²⁶ National Council of Women of New South Wales, Biennial Reports for 1925–26, 20.

article in the *Dawn*, the journal of the Australian Federation of Women Voters, in 1924 reported their opinion that:

no scheme has been so successful, or promises to be such a triumphant success ... [who] could not fail to be inspired by the movement which has enabled these little citizens to be transplanted from the crowded areas of the Motherland to the vast open spaces of Western Australia.²⁷

At the time Fairbridge housed some two hundred children.

Alongside the desire to increase the white population through immigration, however, was the fear that, as in the convict era, Australia might become a dumping ground for the lowest elements of British society. Calls for the appointment of women doctors and immigration officers went hand-in-hand with arguments for more stringent medical and other examinations to weed out undesirable migrants. Thus the New South Wales Council in 1921 proposed the need for 'a stricter examination of women immigrants, this examination to be conducted by women doctors, and a special stress be laid upon the necessity for excluding tubercular and venereal cases'.²⁸ As the president of the National Council of Women of South Australia expressed it in her annual address in 1926:

People of weak physique and mentality are not likely to be able to adapt themselves readily in a strange land ... for this reason it is a responsibility we owe to ourselves as well as to those who desire to settle successfully in Australia that a definite standard of health and mentality should be required.²⁹

In line with the women's movement's broader engagement with eugenics, and reflecting the explicit provisions of the *Immigration Restriction Act*, there was an increasing emphasis on the need to guard against the racial menace of 'mentally deficient' migrants. In 1921 the South Australian

²⁷ *Dawn*, 15 December 1924, 4.

²⁸ NCW of NSW Minutes, 22 August 1921.

²⁹ The National Council of Women of South Australia: Report for 1926 (Adelaide: The Council, 1926), 7.

Council's Immigration Committee urged that the medical examination of prospective immigrants 'should include mental and moral fitness'.³⁰ In 1929 the New South Wales Council wrote to the government to ascertain the number of immigrants who were currently housed in the state's mental asylums, and the type of insanity they suffered from.³¹ They were most pleased to discover that these statistics were already contained in the department's annual reports. In 1932 they passed a resolution requesting that 'more stringent examinations on mental, physical and general suitability to Aust[ralian] conditions to be made'.³² The Western Australian Women's Service Guilds had earlier argued in 1925 that there was a need for 'more supervision over mental defectives',³³ and strongly advocated in 1927 that 'to prevent mentally unfit girls being sent out stricter medical attention was necessary'.³⁴

Healthy white babies

Although there was strong support for immigration, it was white babies who were viewed as the best new additions to the Australian population. This was a recurrent theme in discussions both of migration and of the broad arena of maternity and child rearing. The Adelaide School for Mothers, founded in 1909 with the motto 'Babies are the best immigrants', provides a striking example of this major arena of racial work. The school provided medical care and classes for new and prospective mothers, and also health checks for their babies. Its third annual report in 1912 reflected on the hope that the School would be 'of real value to our city by helping the mothers to rear healthier citizens'.³⁵ And it concluded with an appeal for funds which outlined that 'the work of the School is a national one, having for its object the saving of the

³⁰ 'Report of the National Council of Women of South Australia, September 1921'.

³¹ NCW of NSW Minutes, 5 September 1929.

³² NCW of NSW Minutes, 1 September 1932.

³³ *Dawn*, 15 January 1926, 9.

³⁴ *Dawn*, 15 March 1927, 9.

³⁵ *Annual report: Adelaide School for Mothers* (Adelaide: The School, 1912), 3.

babies, and the improvement of the physique of the nation.³⁶ This need was heightened during the First World War, as a pamphlet describing the school's work observed:

The war is depleting our country of her finest and most vigorous manhood. This will weaken her not only in the present, but in future generations. The soundest and healthiest men are needed for the battlefield while the less fit are spared to be fathers of the coming race.³⁷

The 1917 report appealed urgently for funds to support them in this cause, which again linked the issues of immigration and reproduction: 'the waste of War must be repaired, which gives an enhanced value to every child born. Therefore we make an urgent appeal for more support from all who have Australia's future welfare at heart. It is cheaper to save the babies than to bring out immigrants.'³⁸

By 1923 the School had expanded its work considerably, reflecting the degree of support they had garnered. By this stage, they were operating 30 Baby Health Centres and employed 11 nurses and seven honorary medical staff. It was claimed that the total attendance at these centres was 22,372, and in addition their nurses had made 19,700 home visits.³⁹ In 1930 this increased to an attendance of 70,706 and 38,471 home visits.⁴⁰ And by 1935 it was claimed that the association had made contact with almost every baby born in the state that year.⁴¹ Its primary stated aim in 1924 was 'to bring about a reduction in the Infant Mortality and to build up a healthier and stronger race.'⁴² This aim was expanded on the following year when the association's report observed:

³⁶ *Annual report of the School for Mothers' Institute* (Adelaide: The School, 1924), 5.

³⁷ *School for Mothers Institute: Its aims and objects* (Adelaide: The School, [1916]).

³⁸ *Annual report of the School for Mothers' Institute* (Adelaide: The School, 1917), 7.

³⁹ *Annual report of the School for Mothers' Institute and Baby Health Centre* (Adelaide: The School, 1923), 2-3.

⁴⁰ *Annual report: Mothers and Babies' Health Association* (Adelaide: The School, 1930), 3.

⁴¹ *Annual report: Mothers and Babies' Health Association* (Adelaide: The School, 1935), 3.

⁴² *Annual report of the School for Mothers' Institute and Baby Health Centre* (Adelaide: The School, 1924), 5.

The work of helping mothers to keep themselves and their babies well is of the greatest importance to the State. It reduces the infant mortality, the number of inmates in Hospitals, Home for the Blind, Deaf and Dumb, etc., and helps to build up a stronger and healthier race.⁴³

Fulfilling this ambition would require enormous work, as the medical officer Dr Helen Mayo explained in 1935, 'The aim of this Association is to reach as many mothers and babies as possible; to advise the mothers in matters of infant care and management and to keep the babies under constant observation, so that a healthier generation may grow up.'⁴⁴

This group was clearly highly concerned about the 'quality' of the new Australians being produced. The *Parents' book* it published went into at least 16 editions, and indicates the continuing centrality of eugenic ideals to its agenda, and the degree of surveillance and medical intervention which was required to realise this critical national mission.⁴⁵ As the opening paragraph of the 1940 edition read:

The proper care of the infant should begin long before it is born, since to produce healthy children the parents must themselves be healthy. It is said that every infant has the right to be 'well born.' Up to the present, however, that only means that an infant has the moral right to be born in a reasonable environment, and of parents free from certain diseases or defects, which may be communicated to it before or immediately after birth ... It is the object of this little book to give parents information in a simple form which will help them in the task of bringing up young Australians to be healthy men and women and good citizens of our Commonwealth.

⁴³ *Annual report of the School for Mothers' Institute and Baby Health Centre* (Adelaide: The School, 1925), 2.

⁴⁴ *Annual report: Mothers and Babies' Health Association* (Adelaide: The School, 1935), 19.

⁴⁵ On this issue see also Kereen Reiger, *The disenchantment of the home: modernizing the Australian family, 1880-1940* (Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1985); Lisa Featherstone, "'The value of the Victorian infant': whiteness and the emergence of paediatrics in Late Colonial Australia", in *Historicising whiteness: transnational perspectives on the construction of an identity*, eds. Leigh Boucher, Jane Carey and Katherine Ellinghaus (Melbourne: RMIT Publishing 2007).

Good citizenship was linked to good health. Its author, Dr Margaret Harper, a physician at the royal Alexandra Hospital for Children and Honorary Medical Director of the Tresillian Mothercraft Training School, went on to advise that 'there is nothing to be dreaded in the fulfilment of the natural destiny of the human race'. But a mother's ability to cope with pregnancy 'cannot be adequate or normal unless she herself is an efficient normal human being'.⁴⁶

An earlier publication, *The Australian mothercraft book*, produced in 1938, included chapters from leading health professionals from both Australia and Britain. Its foreword noted that 'The care and welfare of the mother and her children is of supreme importance for the happiness of her home and the future of the State'.⁴⁷ The introduction, written by Helen Mayo, one of the key founding figures of the association and chairman of the editorial committee, opened thus: 'This book is intended for the instruction of women in the art of mothercraft, so that by a popular extension of the knowledge gained by scientific research a healthier generation may arise'. She outlined recent decreases in maternal and infant mortality rates, but said there was still 'room for improvement':

This improvement will be brought about when mothers learn how to prepare for their children and how to manage them during the difficult years of infancy ... To help parents bring healthy babies into the world and keep them sound in body and mind is a work of national importance, and if this little book furthers that end it will have attained its object.⁴⁸

Its chapters contained covered topics from 'supervision during pregnancy' to 'Kidney and bladder conditions' to 'varicose veins', breastfeeding to the importance of sunlight, cleanliness to care of the eyes

⁴⁶ Margaret Harper, *The parents' book*, published under the auspices of the Royal Society for the Welfare of Mothers and Babies (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1940), 2 & 9.

⁴⁷ *The Australian mothercraft book*, published for the Mothers and Babies Health Association of South Australia (Adelaide: Rigby, 1938), 3.

⁴⁸ Helen Mayo, 'Introduction' in *The Australian mothercraft book*, 5. Mayo was a leading figure of the women's movement in South Australia, and one of the state's first woman doctors.

and skin. There was a considerable emphasis on the psychology of child rearing, and how to deal with ‘problems’ such as thumb sucking and masturbation. The first chapter, on ‘The expectant mother’, advised that only three things were needed to ‘ensure the birth of a healthy child. *Healthy parents, suitable and healthy surroundings and proper medical care and attention* during pregnancy and at the time of birth.’⁴⁹

The interest in increasing the quality of Australian babies was widely shared, as reports in the *Dawn* reveal. In 1928 the journal reported on a lecture by a visiting British doctor, Haden Guest, at the Feminist Club in Sydney:

You are interested in the question of migration. I would suggest the improvement of the general standard of ‘migrants by birth’ in this country. Real politics in the future will deal with two fundamental questions—the improvement of the health of the children and education. In these two matters, women will have first call.

His audience were presumably most gratified by his concluding remark that ‘There yet remains a very great field of work to be done, which must and can be done only by women.’⁵⁰ Later the same year, the *Dawn* reported the remarkably similar opinions expressed by Dr P.K. Roest of Holland in a lecture to the Theosophical Society in Sydney on ‘Modern motherhood’. Dr Roest argued that women needed to take a greater role in public life and in politics to complement their influence in the raising of children. He argued that:

The whole field of positive eugenics is waiting exploration ... Nothing less than radiant, exuberant health for the nation’s children can content women who bring the hearts of mothers to the task of nation building ... women legislators, backed by the intelligent opinion of Australian women, [will] give precedence to those things which mean the re-creation of humanity in the likeness of a nobler and more beautiful type.

⁴⁹ *The Australian mothercraft book*, 9. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁰ *Dawn*, 15 February 1928, 6–7.

And he concluded that: '[this] field awaits the labourer and the sooner Australian women realise their destiny the better for the nation.'⁵¹

A major plank of the women's movement's activities in this area revolved around campaigns for child endowment. This was seen as having far-reaching significance. As the New South Wales branch of the Australian Federation of Women Voters framed the issue at their annual meeting in 1928, child endowment would result in 'increased production; decrease in maternal mortality ... greater efficiency', and more broadly 'the promotion of a healthier race'.⁵² In 1929, an article in the *Dawn* linked the women's movement's campaigns on motherhood, child endowment, maternal and infant mortality, world peace, widows pensions, and the nationality of married women as vital issues for the forthcoming elections, and urged readers to 'return candidates who are with the women of Australia in the great fight for the preservation and betterment of the race'.⁵³

Locating race

Amidst all this racial fervour, however, there was remarkably little discussion of the 'Aboriginal problem' of the day. The question was not entirely ignored. Both the Australian Federation of Women Voters and, to a lesser extent, the National Council of Women, supported various initiatives relating to Aboriginal welfare, particularly the appointment of white women 'protectors'. These discussions have attracted considerable scholarly attention.⁵⁴ While some scholarship has thus characterised the

⁵¹ *Dawn*, 19 June 1928, 10–1.

⁵² *Dawn*, 22 May 1928.

⁵³ *Dawn*, 25 September 1929, 2.

⁵⁴ Fiona Paisley, *Loving protection? Australian feminism and Aboriginal women's rights, 1919–1939* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2000), and 'No back streets in the bush: 1920s and 1930s pro-Aboriginal white women's activism and the trans-Australia railway', *Australian Feminist Studies* 12.25 (1997): 119–37; Marilyn Lake, 'Childbearers as rights-bearers: feminist discourse on the rights of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal mothers in Australia, 1920–1950', *Women's History Review* 8.2 (1999): 347–63.

women's movement of this period as 'pro-Aboriginal', the highly racialised frames within which such issues were discussed mean they must be read with caution. Moreover, as Alison Holland has suggested 'one of the primary reasons for women protectors was to act as guardians of the white race: to stop miscegenation and prevent the growth of a 'half-caste' community'.⁵⁵ Certainly this was evident in the National Council of Women's discussions of such issues, which largely reflected the desire to prevent 'miscegenation' by banning contact between white men and Aboriginal women. The 1926 national conference passed four motions urging restrictions on the marriages and movements of Aboriginal peoples towards this end.⁵⁶

The Australian Federation of Women Voters was certainly radical in its demands for more funding for welfare and education, and that land be reserved to 'preserve' and 'protect' the remaining Indigenous population. Nevertheless, they envisaged a large degree of surveillance and control, and certainly did not view the majority of Aboriginal people as ready for the 'privilege' of full citizenship rights. They also generally supported the policy of removing 'half-caste' children from their families. As a long article in the *Dawn* in 1936 argued:

The suggestion of the Australian Aborigines' Amelioration Association and other bodies, that those people should be drafted into settlements where they might be trained to be self-supporting, and later to be raised to a standard which would permit of their absorption into the white community, has been repeatedly ignored ... These children should be given a training equal to that of white children and taught from the beginning that their destiny is absorption in the white community. There is certainly a need for them to be removed from native camps and their degenerating

⁵⁵ Alison Holland, 'The campaign for women protectors: gender, race and frontier between the wars', *Australian Feminist Studies* 16.34 (2001): 31. See also Alison Holland, 'Wives and mothers like ourselves: exploring white women's intervention in the politics of race, 1920s–1940s', *Australian Historical Studies* 32.117 (2001): 292–310.

⁵⁶ NCW of Australia Minutes, 26 July 1926, box 12.

influence and to be cared for in clean, health-giving, uplifting surroundings.⁵⁷

Indeed, most white women 'pro-Aboriginal' activists largely shared the racial beliefs of those they were opposing, even if they disagreed about what this should mean in terms of racial policy. Even Constance Cooke, one of the most radical of these campaigners, subscribed to prevailing beliefs about Aboriginal primitivism. In an address to the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society in London in July 1927 she began by observing that:

Australian aborigines [were] living representatives of the Stone Age, and also our distant forebears, their blood grouping being the same as that of the Caucasian races, quite distant from that of the negro.

She repeated the opinion of some anthropologists that: 'the gap between their civilisation and ours was too wide to be bridged, and that segregation was their only chance'. In a Model Aboriginal State, overseen by a small number of white government officials, 'they could evolve slowly from the hunting to the pastoral stage of culture'. They could be taught agricultural and other skills and eventually 'they would be competent to govern themselves'.⁵⁸

Nevertheless, discussions of Aboriginal issues were extremely limited. This neglect might be considered surprising given this is widely understood as the most pressing racial concern of the period. In reality this activism was sustained by a very small number of women who developed an intense interest in this area. Far more time and energy was devoted to securing the future of white Australia. There was a wide field of important work for women to do here, not only in the vital production of healthy white babies but also in public health, education, and other forms of 'expert' and professional employment. If we are to appreciate the extent to which racial consciousness pervaded the women's movement,

⁵⁷ *Dawn*, 16 December 1936, 8.

⁵⁸ *Dawn*, 15 February 1928, 12.

and indeed white Australian society at large, we must turn to their extensive anxieties about whiteness. These discussions formed a major domain in which the 'grammars of race' were being articulated and sustained. They thus provide significant new insights into white imaginings of the ideal national population, which were at the foundation of Australia's repressive racial structures.