Reviews

Not only a servant

Reviewed by Paula Hamilton

This book has attracted much wider interest than a focus on South Australia would suggest. Its main strength is a concern with a section of the unorganised working class previously denied a voice in our history — female state wards. It gives the reader insight into their daily lives of work as domestic servants, their relationships, experiences and feelings. This is unusual. Most of the existing histories of women and work tend to concentrate on the labour market since it is notoriously difficult to uncover the nature of social relations in the home. As far as possible, Margaret Barbalet allows the women to speak for themselves so that the text is interwoven with extensive quotes from her main source, the South Australian State Children's Department correspondence. This was the letters written to the department by women boarded out or fostered in "respectable" middle or working class homes. Barbalet has covered the period from 1887, when the State Children's Council was set up to supervise the operation, to 1940 when there were extensive changes made to the system. Throughout this time there were several hundred girls from the age 13 or 14 who were apprenticed out as servants every year. These letters provide a window into lives usually unavailable for scrutiny, lives filled with drudgery and often with violence or loneliness. This was particularly so in the country where it was sometimes a fine line between the work of a servant or a farm hand.

Over the fifty year period of the study, Barbalet emphasises continuities in experiences; departmental policy and attitudes to the state wards. Even in the 1930s the majority became domestic servants, although the women themselves were increasingly resentful of this occupation. By then working class women generally were able to work in a narrow range of jobs which at least gave them more independence. Another aspect of their experience which altered little, according to Barbalet, was the stigma of "being not only a servant but also a ward of the state". She rightly points out the dual nature of this social prejudice. Certainly, Barbalet reveals the life of a state ward to be more restricted, since the women were unable to change their situation without application to the department. This was an important infringement on their independence, and one which of course attracted applicants for their employment. However, other restrictions described, such as the lack of personal privacy, the control by mistresses over dress, clothes, choice of male suitor, etc., were also features of the general domestic servant's life.

The department believed that to apprentice women as domestic servants in the home was a "safe" occupation, preventing them from exposure to the "evil influences" accompanying factory work or other independent city employment. The chapter on "Sex and Marriage" is therefore valuable in revealing the sham of this assumption. In practice, there were many instances of sexual abuse, with less recourse to police help. Many cases of rape and assault by men of the household or co-workers indicate how little control these women were able to exert over their own lives. It could be an equally destructive experience inside the family as out of it. Another section on violence is also included in the chapter "Country Life and Other Trials". This section deals mainly with mistreatment by mistresses — women against other women — and the book might have gained more force by discussion and comparison of these together.

Barbalet's women do not emerge simply as "victims", but one might wish that she had explored more fully the concept of their resistance to such extensive state control of their lives and the oppressive social and economic situation in which they were placed. The instances of insolence, refusal to do certain tasks (such as feeding horses, pigs, chopping firewood and cleaning shoes), refusal to get up in the morning, theft or absconding, all indicate something of the spirit of resentment and rebellion which runs as a thread in their correspondence to the department. Many of the letters expressed grievances or complaints, since this was largely their purpose, but they also should be seen as attempts to change or control their own circumstances.

This book makes fascinating reading about a little known world, but it is also a study of increasing state intervention over working class family life, with the dual aim of ridding the world of poverty and doing it cheaply. As Barbalet says, to the late nineteenth century reformer boarding out seemed the ideal solution. The evidence from her study of these women's lives would seem to indicate otherwise.

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