

A Living Library Project

History of Children's Services

Two Documents about Attitudes to Slums

"Slum Babies and Slum Mothers"

First Published about 1914

and

"Lifting Babies out of the Slums"

Slum Abolition Movement in the 1930's

Introduction

1.

Two Documents about Attitudes to "Slums"

"Slum Babies and Slum Mothers"

There are very few people, still alive, who would remember the days before there were Infant Welfare Centres and Kindergartens and other children's services which were established, in Victoria, in the years between 1910 and 1925. Here are some approximate dates :-

- 1910 The first Free kindergarten.
- 1914 The first Maternal and Infant Visitations
- 1919 The first Municipal Infant Welfare Service
- 1920 Baby Health Centres Association established
- 1920 The Tweddle Hospital opened
- 1925 The After-care Hospital opened.

To help students and community organisations to visualise the past the Crow Collection Association is publishing a set of booklets which provide some historical background.

For example, this booklet is a reprint of a typescript of an article by Ray Phillips, who also used the by-line Philip Ray. It seems from one of the typescripts that Ray Phillips was a woman although on one the by-line used is Philip Ray with Ray Philips in brackets.

There are three of her/his typescripts in the Crow Collection, dated between 1911 and 1925, so, he/she was a contributor to newspapers from about 1910 to 1925 - the period "just before living memory".

The other two articles are on the Neglected Children's Aid Society and the District Nursing Society. These have been republished in the Living Library booklet "Two Articles about Health".

To date, there is no information about the newspaper in which the series was published.

The articles present pen pictures of some of the living conditions of the period and of the social attitudes of the philanthropists who pioneered some of our children's services.

To supplement this article a few quotes from a tape by Os Barnett have been included as an appendix.

Although there is much to learn from the past, there can be no harking back. Families today face different problems and have to face some of the older problems in a different way.

"Slum Babies and Slum Mothers"

by Ray Phillips

No Date but About 1914

(Note :- Headings have been added but no other alterations have been made to the original text.)

That one cannot help being in accord with the teaching of Baby Week, goes without saying, though there may be some minor points on which one might disagree with them. It was asserted somewhere that in "any neighbourhood the parents err less from ignorance than from carelessness".

My experience, drawn from District Visiting leads me to doubt this. It is, I know, a feminine habit, to draw generalisations from individual cases; but that is the only way to prove or disprove such a contention.

"Astonishing Cases of Ignorance"

A nurse in charge of a baby clinic told me some astonishing cases of ignorance and she assured me that they were by no means isolated ones.

"A mother came to me with a very sick baby - not exactly ill, but absolutely undernourished.

'What do you feed him with Mother?' was of course my first question.

'Well nurse I can't feed him my self, so I give him condensed milk. (Mrs Jones brought up her four on condensed milk), and do you know I found a glass of stout do me so much good that I give the baby a spoonful out of the glass. If it does me good, it ought to do him good too, don't you think so?'

I think, "continued the nurse "that I was sufficiently horrified to be able to convince that mother that stout, as a diet for a child under twelve month, was most unsuitable."

"Another case that comes to my mind," she went on, "was that of a decent little mother, who is honestly anxious to do well by her children. She began as usual telling me that the baby always seemed hungry. Then she told me that she found that he liked best of all a taste of pickles, or a few drops of tomato sauce dropped onto his tongue. 'And he doesn't like it mild, nurse' she added with obvious pride at the baby's achievement 'he likes the real hot brand'".

"It is quite a common thing for Mothers to tell us 'I just give him bits from my plate to get his stomach used to it, nurse.' Cheese, onions, potatoes, oysters and a heap of unsuitable food is given in this way out of sheer ignorance.

"One mother brought a child on the verge of collapse and the mother told us she had fed him from birth on bread and boiled water.

"I have heard as milk is so indigestible for them.' What can you do with mothers like that !" she sighed - then she brightened as a lovely baby came into the clinic. This baby weighed only three and a half pounds when it was born. Mother was attended by a nurse from the District Nursing Society, who preached fresh air every day of her visit, (they visit Mother and baby for ten days you know) then she advised the Mother to bring the baby to the Clinic to be watched. Mother learnt splendidly, "she said "and now see the baby - such a credit to us all.

"Well you see nurse I know nothink about babies, I worked in a factory and never 'ad no time to see after babies. I never had no thought about them, either. But 'se ain't a bad little blokey is 'e ? He weighs eight ounces more than Mrs L...'s kid whats four months older.' she added importantly, almost truculently."

And that brings me to the point where I am completely at one with "Medicus". "If a fashion can be set in the direction of mother care, those mothers will soon follow the fashion. And it is up to those who can to set the fashion. How true this statement is was shown by the Nurse's next words.

"Mrs L came along to us" she told me when the mother had gone. "She was most resentful about those extra ounces and considered it a slur on her personally. 'Its that funny, nurse" she said 'because he (referring to the rival child) was a peaky kid not arf the size of mine born.'"

Want of knowledge is the root of the evil. It is no use telling these things once or twice, they must be forced into the intelligence with constant reiteration, for conservative custom has laid its hold on one and all.

"Me mother says when she 'ad babies...."is a constant menace

The Little Mothers' League

From America comes an excellent example that might be followed with advantage to all concerned in the shape of the "Little Mother's League". It is well known the large part the little elder sister plays in the upbringing of the younger ones amongst the poorer classes. The "Little Mother's Leagues" are formed at the board schools, and girls from twelve years are encouraged to join the League.

The course of lectures includes simple hygiene, feeding of babies, clothing etc small entertainments given by the children themselves provide the means to buy material on which they are taught to make infants clothes.

The "Little Mothers" are given simple lectures on the care of children, by those qualified to speak. They are encouraged to watch their own young brothers and sisters and above all the baby of the family, and to tell the results of their observations in an informed manner at a meeting of the League. They are awarded certificates and medals for proficiency shown after a simple examination.

It would be difficult to place a value on such work as the Little Mothers' League. The lessons learnt at that age would not only have immediate results in the home, but would tend to remove the deplorable ignorance that attends so many girls who leave school to go onto factory work, and from there to a home of their own. The fact that the Leagues enrol only voluntary members, increases its value.

Open the Windows, Let the Fresh Air In !

"What is the most noticeable thing you find on your rounds ?" I asked a nurse from the District Nursing Society, whom I accompanied one day.

"Closed windows" she answered promptly. "You would not believe the difficulty we have in persuading mothers to leave the babies to sleep in the open air. A room hermetically sealed is the preference. She laughed, then she sighed. "Poor mites ! The other day I went to see one of my babies" (they are all 'my babies', these nurses have very large families) "Mother was out so I asked to see the baby and found she had been put to sleep in a bed, in which a man was seriously ill with pleurisy, in a darkened stuffy room."

A nurse from this same society, which nurses over three hundred midwifery cases a year, and can therefore speak in a general way, told me that babies are usually healthy at birth. "And when do they begin to go off ?"

"After about a month. Even when the mother nurses the child you get digestive troubles from over-feeding. The mother thinks that the baby must be hungry when it cries."

We entered one of a little row of cottages just then. Our knock brought a trail of dirty children to the door. The eldest, a girl of twelve, showed us in. The odour that met us at the door was intensified as we penetrated the bedroom. It was a tiny front room, the big double bed leaving a small margin of space to pass around it. The small window was tightly shut, and a bedraggled blind kept out the cleansing sun. The Mother was in a bed devoid of sheets - covered by a couple of old grey horse blankets.

In the corner of the room was a tiny sofa with two chairs tied in front of it on which was the penultimate baby, a child of something under two years. "To keep 'im out of mischief, nurse" was the explanation for the presence of baby number 2.

The whole family followed us into the room, and while mother shrilly upbraided the little housekeeper for not having done something towards cleaning the room, the baby cried vociferously, so that the mother seized him and instantly placed him at the breast. "The only way to keep him quiet, nurse".
"How often do you feed him mothers?"

"Well he needs it often nurse, he is that hungry - always crying- so I have to give it to him."

"That's what makes him cry mother - you over feed him."

The expression of frank doubt on the mother's face needed to be seen to be appreciated; and it would take something more than once telling to persuade her that regular feeding at stated intervals was necessary to keep the little machine in good working order.

Inherited Superstition

Deep set, inherited superstition is another evil to be fought. It is generally expressed in the words "Me mother says they used to" or "Granny always did....." In some ways the poor are curiously conservative.

If you speak to an Englishman, or even to a large class of Australians, on these subjects, the chances are that they will tell you that there are no slums here. There may not be the slums that abound in the old world - but they are quite bad enough.

Some places come at once to my mind. One is a tiny singled fronted place opening onto the street - a small right of way-runs down the side. The whole frontage is probably about 16 to 18 feet wide including the right of way. Here lives a mother, father and six children. At first the dirt disgusts one and you are inclined to exclaim. "Why don't they keep it clean?" Reflection soon proves to you that cleanliness is an absolute luxury. Cleanliness and money, time and industry.

"Some of these little places are scrubbed out every day - right through," said the nurse. "More than some of our homes eh? And think of the confined space for eight pairs of feet to be trampling all day! Think how easy it is for the dirt to be trampled into these places almost flush with the street! Look at the pocket handkerchief, badly drained, muddy little yards they have! Think of the want of conveniences to keep the home tidy! Nowhere to put a thing! Probably a little wire safe is the only cupboard in the house. It isn't easy to keep these places clean. Yet some of them are beautifully neat. I will take you to one now."

The little pale mother was still in bed. The visit of the nurse was the event of the day. In a moment the nurse had undone her bag and taken therefrom a fresh white apron to put over her

equally fresh print dress. The practical lesson of carrying out this symbolic cleanliness right into the house is hardly ever lost.

"Take him away and wash 'is 'ands or he will dirty nurse's apron." I heard said frequently to the children who stood around to see "baby washed".

Flour Bag Sheets

The mother and child were bathed and freshened, the nurse attracting my attention to the bed that was poor but spotlessly clean. The sheets had been made from flour bags sewn together.

"My sister kept a fish shop," she explained "and had lots of flour to fry the fish, so she kept the bags for me. I washed them and sewed them together." The action was typical of the woman - she was of a thoughtful and thrifty type, that is rather rare, and was ready to assimilate all teaching that guided her towards right and clean living. By way of contrast, nurse told me of a case that she was called to suddenly, where the half drunk husband still occupied the room of his sick wife.

"There wasn't a clean thing available - not a saucepan or basin; and they would not have been any good if they had been, for there was nothing of which to build a fire. The penny-in-the-slot meter was valueless because there wasn't a penny in the house. We managed to rouse a neighbour and get some candles and some hot water just before the baby was born. Next day when I went around to see them, I found the mother writing an excuse for the little chap who had been kept home from school, with a burnt match, there being no pen, ink or pencil. Yet the father was in fairly constant work." Ignorance of how to spend money to its best advantage is generally at the root of poverty of that sort.

"Baby Week" is undoubtedly a step in the right direction. It will disseminate knowledge. But is it a certainty that it will reach the people who would most surely profit by its teachings? I think not quite. Mothers from Collingwood, Fitzroy or Port Melbourne have neither the time nor money to travel so far to learn something of which they have no suspicion that they are ignorant. The knowledge must be taken to their midst. Local Town Halls in the poorer suburbs, kindergartens and Church school rooms, could be used to bring the teaching nearer. With the newer curriculum in the primary schools, which includes hygiene, and certain sides of domestic economy - such teaching in the future should not be necessary, but, until that day arrives, we must try to do all that is possible.

The paradox that "Medicus" used attracts me. It is so true that "the real difficulty of the matter is the apparent simplicity." It is a simple matter to say that houses with tiny yards should not exist; but they do, and will exist in spite of saying. In one place I visited, I found three children playing in a yard

that could not have been more than 16 by 8 feet. The baby's go-cart was tucked away in the only corner, between an outhouse and the back gate, at which stood the dust bin. The flies were quite partial in their attentions. In addition the little yard was full of dripping clothes out to dry.

"He always seems to have a cold, Nurse," said Mother as she dexterously wiped his nose with one hand, while the other shook to go-cart to hush the baby. Nurse's eyes were eloquent as she glanced towards me, via the dripping clothes.

Seeking Brightness in the Picture Houses

One had only to look into some of these homes to realise the attraction that picture theatres, and such places, must hold for this class. Especially the growing boy or girl. The overcrowded house, where there is no space for leisure, cannot compete with the attractions of (so-called) beauty and wealth, shown on the screens, and I for one, would be loth to blame those who seek brightness where they may. The dignity of home life is not. But perhaps that is another story.

Surely we each have a right to a place in the sun and the sight of children playing in the gutters, and tiny backyards, brings to one the feeling of how much remains to be done, in the age of vaunted civilization.

It is a simple truth that, as "Medicus" says, "the saving of babies is a complex question and does not depend on single causes." We must go by degrees - and the first step must be dispersing ignorance. "Baby Week" is a step towards that end. But let us be careful not to lose the narrow path in the wilderness ahead.

Appendix to "Slum Babies and Slum Mothers"

Extract from

"The Slum Abolition Movement in Victoria"
1933 -37

By E.W. Russell

Published by Hornet Publications 1972

The book includes a chapter on the "Barnett group" in the slum abolition movement in Melbourne in the nineteen thirties.

Os Barnett andThe Slum Abolition Movement in the Thirties

Quotes from a taped talk published in a book by E. W. Russell

The Slums in the 1930s

"Well now I will tell you how it (the slum abolition campaign) started. I was asked by a chap to go down to a little mission at the corner of Little Lon. and Exhibition streets, and it was full of slum children. There wasn't a pair of shoes or socks in the whole gathering....

"And I went home, and my two youngest daughters had climbed into our big bed, they had gone to sleep with their arms around each other. And I could burst into tears when I thought of the comfort of their security, and the kids I had spoken to.....

"I said they ought to be taken out of that environment... We will have to build a home for them."

Mr Barnett then described how he campaigned for support for the Methodist Babies' Home and the support he rallied to this cause.

"It was a thrilling story to tell them, and they all agreed. I went out to find some land....."

The Methodist Babies Home was opened in South Yarra in the mid nineteen thirties). However, after all this effort to rescue children from the slums and put them into a clean institution Mr Barnett realised that this was not fully solving the slum problem.

Then I came to this conclusion. You can't lift every baby out of the slums. Unless the parents are derelict or criminal, or in some way impossible. It meant lifting the whole family out. That would mean slum abolition. It was a natural conclusion.

In an address to the Council of Churches Mr Barnett advocated slum abolition for the following reasons :-

The only solution to the problem was to take the people out of the slums, otherwise the revolutionary forces of Communism would urge them to do it for themselves. Two thousand unemployed gathered in Collingwood every week and listened to Communists, who offered them something while more fortunate people offered only the soul destroying dole.

E. W. Russell's book, published 1972, and a number of 1930/40s publications by Os. Barnett are in the Crow Collection at the Footscray Campus of the Victoria University of Technology.

Crow Collection Association
Victoria University of Technology

Living Library Project on History of Children's Services

Funded by the Lance Reichstein Charitable Foundation

Sept. 1991 to May 1992

Booklets Published as Background Material.

1. The History of the Carlton Refuge from 1850s to 1920
First published 1920
2. Two Articles about Health of Women and Children :-
"The Neglected Children's Aid Society"
First published 1911
and
"The After Care Home and the District Nurses".
First published 1925
3. Two Documents about Attitudes to Slums
"Slum Babies and Slum Mothers"
First published about 1914
and
"You can't lift every baby out of the slums
The Slum Abolition Movement in the 1930s
4. History of Children's Services in Melbourne Municipality
1910 to 1980
5. "Bread and Treacle Diet"
Extracts from documents of the 1930s.
6. "Mothers must Work To Win"
Photos and leaflets from the Brunswick Children's
Centre, 1943.
7. "The Deprived West/ The Determined West" an extract from a
report by Ruth and Maurie Crow, first published 1972.
8. Creating Community in the Neighbourhood - Neighbourhood
Houses in the Western Region", transcript of a tape by
Meredith Sussex, 1978.
9. History of the Tweddle Baby Hospital, by Kathleen
Codogonotto
First published 1992
10. The past, present and future - Community Development in
the Western Region, a report by Louise Glanville, 1992
11. "Magic in the Lives of Children, Participation in the
Lives of their Parents" report prepared by Christine
Carolan and Sheila Byard, 1992.
12. Kit on Federal Funding of Children's Services.

About the Project

The Lance Reichstein Charitable Foundation funded the Crow Collection for a Living Library Project on children's services in the Western Region.

A Project Steering Committee has assisted the project worker (Christine Carolan) who has worked with providers of children's services teachers and students in the Region.

The project resulted in the production of a video which includes information on the history of child care, a kit about the way children's services are funded, a series of booklets describing community movements which resulted in initiating some of the present children's services and a display of photos of some of the people who have helped to establish these services in Melbourne's Western Region

A seminar on May 22nd 1992 marked the end of this project but the video and publications can be used well into the future.

About the Collection

Ruth Crow and her late husband, Maurie were involved in movements on urban issues from the mid 1930s. Over the years they built up an extensive collection of documents :- books, pamphlets, posters, photos and working papers.

In 1990 the Victoria University of Technology (Footscray Campus) invited Ruth to donate the collection to the VUT Library.

The Crow Collection includes documents written and/or used by groups and individuals committed to social change. This store of information from the past is being used to generate ideas about the future.

A Crow Collection Association has been formed and incorporated. One of its aims is to enhance the comprehensiveness and accessibility of the Collection through Living library Projects.



The Crow Collection

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This kit has been funded by the Lance Reichstein Charitable Foundation