

# CARE FOR DEPENDENT CHILDREN IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA IN 1888

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Emily Miles, aged fourteen and a half, was admitted to the South Australian government Industrial School at Magill (on the eastern outskirts of Adelaide) on 3 January 1888. She came from Petersburg, the northern supply depot town soon to receive a boost as the base for the journey to and from Broken Hill. Her father Charles (?Charlie surely) had deserted her mother, whose only attribute in the records was not her Christian name, but her drunkard's state. Emily had previously been admitted to Magill under the terms of the State Children's Act (no. 387 of 1886) in 1887, and been licensed for service till she was sixteen. But she had been sent back because of her misconduct, and now by order of the Executive Council her period of wardship as a State Child was extended to her eighteenth birthday, presumably in the hope that her behaviour might be remedied and stabilised in the remaining three and a half years. She stayed three months in the large institutional barracks of the school, which nestled into the hills not far from the Penfold family vineyards: her new foster parents received her on 9 April 1888. They lived in Park Road, Kensington Park.

This paper is a companion piece to 'Dependence in South Australia 1888: The Destitute Board and Its Clients'.<sup>1</sup> Like it, this paper aims to present some examples of the reality of life in 1888 for a segment of the colonial Australian community which is sometimes ignored in the grand sweeps of historical narration. The lives of the dependent, the weakest and most vulnerable in the community of colonial capitalist Australia, are obscure, their voices weak. But they are worth listening to just as members of the society nonetheless. Moreover, since mostly they were so socially dependent the only records surviving are about what was done to them, the evidence casts light on the values of the people providing this support, gives some reality to the notions which informed the leadership they exercised in 1888.

The sources which provide the case histories in this paper are the Admission Registers and Boarding Out Registers of the State Children's Council, which are located in the South Australian Archives, GRG 27/9/3 and 27/5/4-5. Once again I must acknowledge the assistance of Mrs Elizabeth Bleby in gathering this data and the Flinders University Research Committee for the funds.

Emily was one of 221 children admitted to the Industrial School during 1888 under the various clauses of the State Children's Act. Not all were first admissions. Indeed, the State Children's Council report for 1887-8 reported that in the financial year to 30 June 1888, only 59 boys and 50 girls were newly admitted, along with 63

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boys and 65 girls who were re-admitted. In the following financial year the total numbers rose to 283.<sup>2</sup>

Carefully analytic in these early years of their responsibilities, the Council recorded the religious affiliations of their *new* charges as follows

**Table 1: Religious affiliations of State Children admitted in 1888 and 1889**

	1887-8	1888-9
Church of England	32	65
Roman Catholic	35	25
Wesleyan	11	10
Congregational	3	2
Presbyterian	2	9
Lutheran	5	2
Primitive Methodist	3	0
Baptist	4	5
Bible Christian	1	4
'Protestant'	13	7
Salvation Army	—	1

Source: SCC Admission Registers

These numbers were in proportions reflecting both the diversity of protestant affiliation in the colony and the nominal character of many of those affiliations, especially in the largest denomination, the Church of England.

The clauses of the Act governing admission as State Children gave the magistrate and the officials a wide range. They could be committed because they were:

**Table 2: Grounds for admission of State Children in SA, 1888 and 1889**

	1887-8	1888-9
Without sufficient means of subsistence	—	11
Neglected	27	15
Destitute	18	46
Having no home	34	34
Stealing	2	8
Residing in a brothel	3	4
Residing in a reputed brothel	2	—
Surrendered by parent	4	5
Uncontrollable	15	28
Admitted temporarily	3	2
Using indecent language	—	—
Not lawfully on premises	1	—
	—	—
	109	153

Source: SCC Admission Registers

While moral danger clearly had its place in the experience of the children and the perceptions of the Council, the two major causes of admission were first, poverty, and then, second, a deliberate decision by the parent to surrender the child, either temporarily or permanently, in order to increase the survival chances of both parent and child.

In terms of parental situation, the lists given by the Council are long middle-class reviews of the problems and failures of the lower orders of the colony. Some parents were 'respectable' or 'poor and honest', others were 'in a lunatic asylum'. The largest group of descriptions referred to the desertion by the father — to places known or unknown. In some cases the mothers were listed as "disreputable", 'a prostitute' (stepfather 'worthless drunkard'), or 'intemperate'. In only one case (in 1888-9) were both parents dead. Then there were illegitimate children — 15 per cent in 1887-8, 13 per cent in 1888-9 — where, in addition, the parents were disreputable, deserted, in hospital, or otherwise unable to care for the children.

Most children were admitted aged from eight to eleven years, but there was also a noticeable bulge of very young children: nineteen under three in 1887-8, twenty one the following year. For example, Ellen Burgess was 20 months old when she was admitted on 7 January 1888 as a destitute child. Her unmarried mother Hannah was concurrently admitted to the Destitute Board's Lying-in Home on Kintore Avenue to give birth to another child. Little Ellen was promptly 'adopted on subsidy' on 9 January by Harriet Smith, a widow living in the city of Adelaide.

By contrast, and pointing to a much greater sense of cooperation between agency and client, Thomas Plint was 12½ when he was surrendered again on 16 January 1888 after a visit with his uncle at Smithfield. His grandmother was probably caring for him, while his mother now lived with another man at Oaklands. So he was sent to visit another aunt, at Woodside, who subsequently accepted foster care responsibility on the full subsidy of 5/- a week — but only for the rest of the year. When he was thirteen, young Thomas would have to fend for himself as an adult member of the working classes.

The network of services available for the care of these children was wider than just the Industrial School at Magill. Not only was foster care or boarding out now twenty years old in South Australia, but so was the work of the Roman Catholic Refuge for Women established by Mary McKillop. Alice McNally's (4½) unmarried mother had left Alice's 18 month-old sister at the Refuge. Alice was boarded out with subsidy to a Roman Catholic widow at Macclesfield.

Similarly, Bertha Martin, also four years old, was taken in care as a neglected child. She came from Tanunda. Her blacksmith father had disappeared, her mother was now dead. Since her religion was recorded as Evangelical Lutheran, it is not surprising to find the same day as she was 'admitted' she was 'adopted' by August C. F. Geyer of Tanunda. Adoption was not the serious twentieth century event supervised by the Supreme Court involving total legal transfer of identity: it meant simply that this State Child would be supported by the family without subsidy, and that regular inspection might be waived by mutual agreement. The child could still be reclaimed or returned, and was still under a court order — in this case till Bertha turned 18.

Henry Stephen's case seems a more promising experience for the child. He had been sentenced to the Boys Reformatory Hulk, the *Fitzjames*, for theft and then transferred to the Industrial School because of his good conduct on the hulk. Now

he was to be licensed out for the remainder of his period of supervision, till he was sixteen to the care of his widowed mother, who kept a store in Norman Street, City, a lane in the southwest quarter. Presumably the Council judged that Henry had been reformed, and could now be trusted, subject to the retention of the state's power to intervene if there was a relapse. The records do not suggest it.

Family groups were not necessarily broken up, though the larger the group admitted, the more difficult it became for the administrators to avoid this step. The Ferguson children, Myrtle (6½) Grace (4½) and James (1½) were admitted on 13 February, probably being delivered by their mother's father, John Schlate. Sadly, Mrs Grace Ferguson had been admitted to the lunatic asylum, and a year later news was received that their father James had been admitted to the Kew Lunatic Asylum in Victoria. But the Council succeeded in finding them a home as a group, with a widow of Childers Street, North Adelaide who was paid subsidy.

Charles Dunstan (born 30 July 1873) caused some trouble, as did many others. He was admitted from Koorunga, on the Burra copper mine field, probably being sent by his uncle and aunt, for his mother was dead and his father's whereabouts were unknown. He had been placed with W. H. Dunn of Orroroo in 1884. This placement was probably not the first. In October 1887 he was admitted to Adelaide Hospital, but in December he absconded. Now in February 1888, after his arrest at Burra, he was sentenced to supervision till he turned 16, and licensed for service with a farmer at Kadina.

Sometimes it was lack of supervision, not finances, which mattered. Edith Lawrence's mother was dead, and her father worked on the 'Perth line' — telegraph? — certainly not in Adelaide. The girl's grandmother at Bowden was caring for her, but she was found to be 'uncontrollable'. Both father (6/-) and grandmother (2/6) were ordered to pay towards her maintenance. In April she was sent to Adelaide Hospital, and then in May boarded out on subsidy till thirteen. Her 'pilfering habits' were recorded in 1891; she was retained as a servant under supervision in 1893; her wages were reduced in 1896; and she was returned for misconduct in 1897, six months before the final expiry of the Council's powers over her.

The State Children's Council was also responsible for the Boy's and Girl's Reformatories. The *Fitzjames* hulk housed the boys off Semaphore, the girls lived in a portion of the buildings at Magill. They were all sent there under court order, though transfers for good conduct to the Industrial School was at the discretion of the Executive Council. The statistics were

Table 3: Numbers in the Reformatories in South Australia, 1888 and 1889

	1887-8		1888-9	
	boys	girls	boys	girls
at 1-7-1887	61	22	49	20
new admissions	23	14	30	14
readmissions	7	13	12	22
from Industrial School	6	5	6	6
exits	48	34	40	35
at 30-6-1888	49	20	57	27

Source: SCC Admission Registers

The Children's Council had more trouble with these cases than with those admitted to the Industrial School. Some, especially those transferred from the Industrial School, were being disciplined before boarding out, that their habits might be more conformed to acceptable standards. Others however were clearly placed in the reformatories as the only place 'in which they can be subjected to the necessary discipline'. The Council recognised that this meant a serious mixing of depraved (especially sexually), and innocent, children, but lacked the means for further classification. They wanted a truants' school to deal with the uncontrollable ones and they urged the courts, wherever possible, to order supervision for the maximum time — to sixteen or eighteen. As Dr Stirling put it in his report for 1887-8: 'The State has to act towards the children *in loco parentis*, and to do this thoroughly, benefit to the child and the colony, it is absolutely necessary that the State have complete control of all children, if not during minority, at least until eighteen years of age.' (p. 5) This obsession with truant children in particular, and with the need to intervene in the lives of working class children generally persisted at least until World War II.<sup>3</sup>

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Boarding out was by 1888 the principal long-term form of care for State Children in South Australia. Promoted by Emily Clark in 1866 in response to a paper by Frances Power Cobbe, experimented informally with by the Destitute Board in 1867-8, taken up legally after 1872 but largely as a cost saving measure, boarding-out had been formally institutionalised after the enquiries of the Royal Commission into the Destitute Persons Act (chaired by Sir Samuel Way CJ in 1883-5),<sup>4</sup> under the supervision of the State Children's Council. The Council could place out any State Child, that is any child brought under its supervision by a court order for those reasons mentioned earlier — destitution, neglect, crime, uncontrollability and so on.

The children could be boarded-out with subsidy (up to five shillings a week) to foster parents; they could be adopted, they could be placed without subsidy; they could be licensed for service if over twelve years of age; placed with relatives, including parents, or apprenticed to a trade.

The figures were:

Table 4: Children Boarded Out in South Australia  
in 1888 and 1889

	1887-8	1888-9
Placed out on subsidy	133	177
without subsidy	12	5
Licensed for service	107	94
Adopted	3	6
Situations, sentence expired	2	5
Apprenticed	2	—
To parents	35	23
To institutions	28	30
Absconded	2	5
	—	—
	326	345

Source: SCC Admission Registers

Again the registers give personal details to those bare categories. James Doran, sentenced at the age of eleven as uncontrollable, was an orphan who was adopted with subsidy by a farmer at Sevenhill in the Clare-Auburn region. He attended the Roman Catholic Sisters' School there. He was visited fourteen times between August 1888 and January 1891, while the sisters sent seven reports on his progress. When the subsidy expired on his thirteenth birthday he was licensed for service for three years with Mr O'Connor of Gum Creek. He absconded a year later, and after his apprehension a month later was sent to a farmer at Mt Gambier. He remained there for a year, being visited six times, but was returned in March 1893 because of 'mutual dissatisfaction'. Again he was sent out to service, this time to a farmer at Lower Broughton, where he worked until near his sixteenth birthday. He left without permission, not to be heard of again by the State Children's Council.

Another boy, Thomas Millington, did have a concluding note on his ledger: 'in good situation in NS Wales.' That came six years after his first experience of boarding out — at Langhorne's Creek. That was followed by a period of probation in his mother's care. It ended with Tom absconding, to be followed by another foster family, then misconduct, then back to his mother, now remarried. It was three years later, in January 1894, that his time expired and his transformation was complete.

Annie Thomas was even more troublesome. Daughter of a widowed smelter of Wallaroo who later was drowned accidentally, she was first placed out at the age of ten. In the next eight years she had, in all, eight separate foster parents and a stint with her father. The first return was caused by her foster mother going into hospital. The second was so she could live with her father, but that was found to be unsuitable. Then absconding, misconduct and just 'unsuitability' took over at roughly annual intervals, as she was moved from Golden Grove (near Adelaide) to Saddleworth in the mid-North, to Coomooroo, Willochra, and back to Hyde Park in the suburbs of Adelaide.

Little Billy Bourke was first placed out when he was  $3\frac{1}{2}$ . Five years later he was returned as uncontrollable. Then, at Langhorne's Creek first a widow and then, when she died, her daughter-in-law, cared for him with subsidy, until in 1896 at 13 he was returned because she could not afford to support him. It happened again in 1899, but this time he was sent to the Boys' Reformatory at Magill until his period of supervision expired.

Eagerly the Council let on laudatory comments from schools and visitors: 'is remarkable punctual', 'he is the cleanest and neatest boy in my school', and so on. They listed the reports as 'good' (over 3000 in 1887-8), fair (108), indifferent (33), bad (13) and praised the system they conscientiously administered.

There is no doubt these middle-class children savers believed their arrangements for the care of these children were preferable to the neglect, destitution and moral danger from which they had come. Recent enquiry<sup>5</sup> has challenged that comfortable view: emphasising the disturbances, the breakup of biological family ties, the significance of absconding, the coercion involved. There is also the whole question of when 'neglect', 'destitution' and the rest really justified intervention. At times there could be real conflict between working-class expectations for the children and those held by the Children's Council. But it must be said that in the large majority of cases, the steady progress of the children through school and

service culminated in their secure entry into adulthood, supported by regular inspections, reports, state subsidy and above all genuine family care.

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There were two Church of England homes for children in 1888, the Orphan Home, Incorporated, and the Children's Home, Walkerville. The former had been established by Mrs Julia Farr (wife of the Head Master of St Peter's College and later Archdeacon) and others in 1861 in the disused German and British Hospital in Carrington Street. Preference in this completely Anglican voluntary agency was given to children actually without both parents. The girls were trained up to be domestic servants, placed with and through the ladies of the organising committee: its small size — about 20 — meant it ignored boys.

A similar small number of boys (ca. 20) were catered for by the home opened in 1886 by Archdeacon Dove, rector of Walkerville. Again, the admission and placements were purely on a voluntary basis, with a high degree of ostensible religiosity and middle class concern for the children of the perishing classes being apparent.<sup>6</sup>

Then there was the Catholic Orphanage conducted by the locally founded Josephites. It too had no direct links with the state, because of the ban on aid to religiously controlled institutions. So, like the Anglican homes, the care provided by the Orphanage was voluntary and selective.

Female Refuges, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, principally serving unmarried, pregnant girls, clearly provided short-term protection to infants too. Not should it be forgotten that the Destitute Board's outdoor relief system contributed usefully to the maintenance of family groups in their own homes.<sup>7</sup> The Adelaide Benevolent and Strangers Friend Society probably also exercised a similar, though much smaller ministry in 1888 through its distribution of rations and firewood.

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To sum up, some three or four hundred children were socially dependent in South Australia in 1888, about 0.25 per cent of the population under fifteen years of age. About 80 per cent of these were state children, under court orders, and admitted to the institutions of the State Children's Council before being found foster home care, preferably in the country. Whether state supported, or in the care of one of the three small voluntary agencies, the children were assumed to be in physical and moral danger, the victims of poverty and dissipation, from which they were to be rescued. They would be trained up in habits of industry and virtue for a future life of serving in the working classes, far better than one of permanent poverty and degradation. Their care was coercive, reformatory, implicitly judgemental, yet probably in most cases producing life chances largely better than the alternative from which they had been taken. Both their former condition and their future prospects were shaped by the dominant concerns and values of a middle class busily engaged in the development of a capitalist oriented economy.

**Footnotes**

1. *Australia 1888: A Bicentennial History Bulletin*, no. 8, Sept. 1981.
2. *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, 1888, III, 39; 1889, III, 39.
3. Kerry Wimshurst, 'Child Labour and School Attendance in South Australia, 1890-1915', *Historical Studies*, vol. 19, April 1981; Kerry Wimshurst, 'Street Children and School Attendance in South Australia, 1886-1915' (M.Ed. thesis, Flinders University, 1979); Margaret Barbalet, 'State Children: Theory and Practice in South Australia, 1918-28' (M.A. thesis, University of Adelaide, 1974); Philip Cashen, 'Without Sufficient Cause: A Study of Truancy in South Australian Schools, 1927-1939' (M.Ed. thesis, University of Adelaide, 1980). Discussion of child care elsewhere in Australia in the late nineteenth century may be found in Brian Dickey, *No Charity There* (Melbourne, 1980), pp. 80-7, 127-32.
4. *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, 1885, IV, 228.
5. These critical assessments are made by Barbalet and Wimshurst in the theses cited in footnote 3.
6. Elizabeth Bleby, 'Church of England Welfare Services in South Australia' (research essay, Flinders University, 1980), pp. 16-31. Copy held by author.
7. This has been discussed in my paper cited in footnote 1.