PART THREE: STATE WARDS, THEIR NATURAL PARENTS AND THE NEGLECTED CHILDREN'S DEPARTMENT
INTRODUCTION TO PART THREE: THE RIGNEY FAMILY

On 16 December 1912 James and Irene Rigney's five youngest children were committed to the Neglected Children's Department. They were Myrtle, aged twelve, Lionel, ten, Clara, nine, Aubrey, six and Mary Ann, five. Rigney, was a labourer from the Tasman Peninsula and the family's circumstances were "poor", but since he was in full employment, he was instructed to pay 25s a week maintenance. Four children were boarded out to Mrs. Boyd in North Hobart. Mary Ann was placed nearby with Mrs. Mulcahy. In January, Clara and Myrtle were transferred to another foster mother and, in June, the two boys were sent to the Boys Industrial School. No reasons for these changes are given in their files.

The children had been committed when their mother was sentenced to one month's prison for abusing Clara. A teacher, noticing that she could not run, had discovered bruising from shoulder to waist. The police were notified and reported:

The doctor told me the child had been most brutally thrashed and if some action was not taken the mother would be doing the children some grievous bodily harm. On the 15th instant I endeavoured to interview the mother of the child but without success; she was hidden indoors. I observed the poor little child with its body bruised and its arm in a sling. When questioned, the child said 'Mother thrashed me because I told stories'. The child is poorly nourished and in a most disgraceful condition. James Rigney, father of the child, said he was obliged to stay at home and protect the children. That his wife handled them very roughly and on different occasions threatened to throw them in the bay. The woman referred to is a bad lot and makes periodical trips to Hobart and leaves the family to shift for themselves.

Rigney wanted to maintain contact with his children and his first letter to them after the committal, echoed the values of departmental officials. He may have suspected they would read it, and hoped to solicit their good will. Even so, his honesty, and empathy for his children was striking:

Dear Children I saw your Mother on Boxing day morning, and she says she is fairly well. and her head is much better than is was at home, and she would very much like to see you all. Do try and be good children. try and help Miss
Boyd and try and learn all good things. But above all speak the truth and be honest at all times then people will trust to what you say and do. Dear Children be kind to one another and help each other and if you want to know anything write and ask me and I will do all I can for you do not think because you are away. I do not love you, because I have always loved you and done all I could for you, but I cannot bring you home again to stop for a long time.

Packer told the foster mothers that the children could write to Rigney when they liked, but his letters must be read first so that their "minds are not upset". There were other family letters, although only one, written by an older brother, was kept: "Daddy told me to tell you that he got your letter daddy said to be sure and let him know how are getting on when you write".

Rigney had already asked for his children to be released, appealing to Packer:

you do not know what it is to me to lose all my family at once who has had to be both Father and Mother to them at times ever since my first little one was born plenty of times for whole weeks when their mother was too unwell to do anything and after 16 weary year of love and care I lose them all is very hard.

He initially applied for the three oldest, suggesting that he might find someone to look after Lionel. Although the two girls were too young for service, Myrtle could stay with a woman shopkeeper in town. She had lived there before, until the police "interfered", presumably because she was working. Rigney thought that "it might be better for her, as she is a strong girl and is used to rough work". The application was refused.

Later he applied for the younger children, planning to place them with his sister, on the Tasman Peninsula, so that he could see them. The police report said that she had seven children and that she looked after two others. Her circumstances were "comfortable". Even so the police opposed the children's release. Their mother was no longer in prison and, according to Rigney, diagnosed as being "of unsound mind that she was not responsible for her actions and should not have charge of the children". Again the children were not released. After that, both parents waited on the chief secretary but were told that no discharge was possible unless satisfactory arrangements were made for the children's care. Lionel told the inspecting nurse that his mother had two boyfriends and that he had seen her in bed with one of them. Packer became doubly resolved not to return the children.
Parental visits became increasingly contentious. *Rigney* had seen the children on Christmas Day without a visiting order which annoyed departmental officials. Then *Mrs. Rigney* made a disturbing visit. According to the inspecting nurse: “She threatened to kill the children if she got the chance and said they had been a curse to her all their lives, also that they spent all their time with men”. A week later she visited them without permission, and after that did so regularly. The Department retaliated by refusing her visiting orders, when sought. *Rigney* stopped paying maintenance in protest at his children’s continued detention, so Packer refused him visiting rights as well. Now *Rigney* made an effective analogy between the position of criminals and state children, also claiming that *Clara* had not been abused:

I will never pay while I have to crawl and beg to get a order to see my children. any one would think by the way you treat us, that we were drunken scum of the earth. If those children were the greatest criminals on the face of this earth I could visit them once a month without an order from anyone, but as it is your department objects to let me see them that often. They were taken from us because the Doctor swore deliberate lies. and at the Court I was told we could see them at any time.

The secretary did not reply.

*Myrtle* was sent to hospital where the dispute over visits intensified. Her foster mother was allowed to see her, while her family, apart from a sister, were not, because they came without orders. *Rigney* told the secretary that he:

Inquire [how] she was doing and as she was doing allright we did not crawl for an order, and after this you think I am going to maintain them, not but what I would be willing to do what I could, if I had controle over them. But not as things are, your Department took them and from what I can see you would not let them have anything to do with us, as Mr Seager considers it an offence to walk up the street with one of them. If we were Drunken Beastly bad Characters that were allways Drunk and Disorderly. I could understand not being allowed to see them. But I can truthfully say no man has ever seen me drunk or disorderly at anytime. and there is no man in this world has ever done more under the circumstances for the good of his family. they were not neglected children, only their Mother being so unwell she was not able at all times to take care of them, I again humbly ask for an order as before for *Mrs Rigney* & our son and Myself to see the Girls and if I do not get i t.
from you I will most certainly see if I cannot do so from someone else, as the
children are not prisoners, or are we criminals.

Daly told Rigney that he could visit the children with permission but must
pay maintenance. Mrs. Rigney was not allowed to see them and Rigney was
reminded of his admission that she was "not quite responsible for her
actions". He continued to ignore bills for maintenance, and to apply for
visiting orders for his wife. In December, departmental officials weakened,
perhaps because Packer, who disliked compromising state children's care,
had died. Daly went to see the committing justices who agreed that the
children could be returned if the Department supervised them. They were
not discharged but returned home under the same agreement that adoptive
parents made. This allowed departmental inspectors to visit the home and
remove them without another court case if necessary.

The children apparently fared badly. In December 1917, according to the
police commissioner, J. E. C. Lord, Myrtle was removed from domestic
service by her father and returned to her employer for protection because
she was roughly treated. Rigney forcibly removed her again, threatening
"severe punishment" for leaving home. Lord, thinking that the children
should be transferred to departmental foster homes, sent a constable to
investigate. The neighbours told him that the mother was "very cruel to the
children" but the children said they were well treated. The policeman
reported that "they appear to be very happy & certainly look anything but
badly treated and I see no reason for any of them being removed from their
parents' care". Even so, in 1919, Clara, placed in the Mercy Home, for an
unspecified reason, returned there voluntarily after being with her parents.
According to Rigney, her mother "javed her for her dittitary and slovenly
ways". Clara told the inspector, that she was "determined not to remain at
home because her mother uses bad language & is also very bad tempered.
She also refuses to allow Clara to attend Church, giving as her reason that
church people are hypocrites". Rigney tried to enlist the Department's help:

as I am her Lawful Guardian and responsible for her actions she will either have
to come home and do something near the mark or if she will not come home I will
not be responsible for her and I am not going to loose time running after her as I
have done before.

187
Clara was allowed to stay at the Mercy.\(^1\)

The *Rigney* story has been quoted at length because it indicates that family violence was a problem. Yet it was scarcely addressed by the Department, since few children became wards after physical abuse by a family member.\(^2\) Although poverty was the underlying reason, most children were ostensibly committed because their parents could not control them or had a moral weakness, as defined by the *Neglected Children and Youthful Offenders Act*. As the first two chapters in this section will show, much behaviour that social reformers believed to be a moral problem was a misconception, or failure to accept the coping mechanisms of the poor.\(^3\)

To many people, then and now, it would make sense to give financial assistance to poor families and commit those children that were abused. Yet, despite some strongly expressed doubts, departmental officials eventually agreed with *Rigney* that his children were not neglected, probably because he was a temperate, employed man, who tried to control them and enforce school attendance. In addition, their mistreatment did not constitute neglect, according to the *Neglected Children and Youthful Offenders Act*. Although physically abused children could be committed to the Department under the *Prevention of Cruelty to and Better Protection of Children Act*, no instances of this were found during my research. The Department’s failure to protect the *Rigney* children can be linked to a legal definition of neglect which placed more importance on an absence of control. Parents were expected to discipline their children, which sometimes meant beatings, so that the boundary between abuse and punishment was blurred. The Department was caught between two conflicting imperatives, that children be protected and that society be protected from them. As the *Rigney* girls became older and more independent, their view of home life became clearer, giving the impression that the state failed them as children. Their story suggests that, while the *Neglected Children and Youthful Offenders Act* created the potential for the state to intervene between abusive parents

---

\(^1\)SWD 1/19/1090-4.

\(^2\)In 1901, five children were committed to the Department when their parents were sentenced to twelve months imprisonment for the severe physical abuse of their niece. When the sentence was finished, the children were returned home without hesitation, apparently because, since they had not been the objects of the abuse, Departmental officials thought that they were not in danger. SWD 1/6/373-6, 1/6/349.

\(^3\)For a discussion of policy concerning children’s committals see “The Effect of Financial Constraints on Departmental Definitions of Neglect”, Chapter 4.
and their children, that often failed to happen. As the final chapter in this section shows, many state children wanted to return home but were forbidden to do so. It is ironic that children who might have preferred state care were released.

Although unusually persistent, Rigney behaved like many parents, displaying a similar resentment and using the same tactics. In addition, Rigney's troubles show the limits of men's control over their wives and families. While he spoke for them in public, his authority in private was weak: he could not control his wife's behaviour, although he claimed to have tried. Many other fathers had difficulties maintaining authority because of long absences while they were at work. This theme will be further explored in the chapter on fatherhood.

This section of the thesis is divided into three chapters. The first two discuss the social, economic and cultural environments which led to children's committals to the Department. For convenience, fathers and mothers are treated separately, but this is a difficult boundary to maintain. As a number of historians have commented, the construction of male or female gender can only be discussed within the context of their interactions. Even so, the experiences of motherhood and fatherhood are different enough to make them convenient categories. In order to assess the reactions of natural parents and state wards to child welfare policy more fully, the final chapter considers the relations between them and the Neglected Children's Department.

---

CHAPTER EIGHT

"WEARY YEAR OF LOVE": FATHERHOOD AND CHILDREN'S COMMITTALS

According to prevailing images of fatherhood, the father had authority over his family and was its representative in public. He provided the income, which underpinned that authority, spoke on the family's behalf, protected it and had legal control over it. Yet, given the itinerant nature of the casual labour force in Tasmania, this model was often nominal rather than substantial. The mother's authority was more effective because being at home, she understood the family's relationships. This placed men in the difficult position of being supposed to exercise power when they could not, probably leading to ineffectual, even violent attempts to control the family. However, amongst the files searched for this thesis, no examples were found of children committed to the Neglected Children's Department because of paternal violence. As has already been suggested, this was probably because children were expected to be controlled, especially by the father, and beatings were a common form of discipline. This is evidenced by departmental officials' reluctance to act sometimes, even when physical abuse to state wards occurred.2

As has been argued, while poverty was not a criterion for children's committals, it was usually the reason. Poverty was exacerbated by the structures of authority within families. Many men who went off looking for work felt little compulsion to support or return to families where they felt like intruders. This helps explain why wife desertion, and the failure to pay maintenance, was a common occurrence in Tasmania, as elsewhere. Similarly, ex-nuptial fathers, wary of social disgrace, stingy or poor, and with no expectation of control over the child, usually evaded maintenance. However, many widowers and deserted husbands took responsibility for their children, perhaps because there was no one else to do it, or because their authority was unchallenged by the mother. This factor undermines the

1 Rigney described his experience of fatherhood as "sixteen weary year of love". See the introduction to this section.

2 For a discussion about the Department's interventions on behalf of its physically abused wards see Chapter 6 and "Children and their Adoptive Parents" in Chapter 7.
stereotype of the feckless, deserting father, which, as Susan Tiffin suggests, was gaining currency at this time.³

These dichotomies, the deserter or the responsible, dutiful father, can be linked to the two images of manhood that dominated amongst the European population in Australia. One, suited to the itinerant needs of rural industries, celebrated a physical toughness and stamina which was tested by feats of strength or bouts of drinking. Such men were portrayed as independent characters, eschewing domesticity while valuing friendships with men, cemented by gambling, drinking and a misogynist attitude towards women. This image helped justify wife desertion. Although often associated with the working class, this representation of manhood had middle-class adherents, especially amongst writers and bohemians, because such men were the heroes of the bush ethos. The Sydney Bulletin, in particular, celebrated the strong, hard drinking and gambling male. Physical work was more likely to produce diseased, decrepit bodies than strong healthy ones, especially if there were also nutritional deficiencies and alcoholism, but this factor was ignored by proponents of the myth.

The alternative image of masculinity (described in the opening chapter of this thesis) was derived from nineteenth century English evangelicalism. It emphasised the role of men in providing the income for a comfortable home which their wives, who had no need of paid employment, could manage. The children were well-fed, contented, and at school. The family man was an individualist, who supported his wife and children without help, even in times of distress. This sense of independence was perhaps the only similarity between the two representations.⁴

Marilyn Lake argues that, at the turn of the century, there was a concerted effort by feminists, the church, business and trade unionists to enshrine the family man as the national type. Feminists disliked the other image because

³Susan Tiffin suggests that deserting fathers caused official anxiety because they threatened to undermine the nuclear family, a bulwark of the social order. Although there was a belief that single parent families should receive enough financial support to live like male headed households it was feared that would encourage desertion, a paradox which was resolved by making deserting fathers pay maintenance. They were punished by legislation which focused on penalties. Depicting them as "vicious" contributed to the disciplining process. Susan Tiffin, "In Pursuit of Reluctant Parents: Desertion and Non-Support Legislation in Australia and the United States, 1890-1920", in Sydney Labour History Group (Editors), What Rough Beast? The State and Social Order in Australian History, Sydney, 1982, pp.131-142.

⁴For a fuller discussion of representations of family men see Chapter 1.
alcoholism, gambling, irregular income, and disrespect for women, made domestic life intolerable. The church was concerned about the moral implications of this way of life and business wanted a reliable workforce. In Tasmania, this type of coalition, without trade union support, had produced the *Neglected Children and Youthful Offenders Act*. Many public servants, especially in departments that dealt with the poor, can be included amongst those who fostered and transmitted the family man’s values in both private and public life. As my chapter on the administration of the Neglected Children’s Department suggested, their employment, regular and adequately paid, could support a household comfortably, and public service culture was compatible with domesticity.

One way in which the Department supported working-class men who accepted their domestic responsibilities, was to commit their children who were uncontrollable, if it was requested. Nine-year-old *Carl* was surrendered because he was “uncontrollable” and a “truant player”. His father was a basket maker in “fair” circumstances with a good character and his mother did domestic duties. *Frank*, aged eleven, was surrendered for similar reasons in 1909. His father was a blacksmith, also in “fair” circumstances. He was married and both parents’ characters were “good”. The boys were placed in the industrial school for discipline. The children of fathers that officials considered feckless were accepted less willingly and, as will be shown, the men’s inability to provide a regular income was often equated with other failings.

---

5 For a historiographical celebration of the bushman as the national type see Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, Melbourne, 1958. A minor article by Douglas Pike describes the alternative image of manhood nicely. He suggested that the pioneer, a family man, had an independence derived from “quiet pride in self, family and the property he hoped some day to pay off”. A sense of mateship was derived from loyalty to the church, school or community and from helping sick or needy neighbours. At heart he was a gambler who was “recklessly squandering his own and his family’s resources in the belief that you can’t lose every time”. Douglas Pike, “The Smallholder’s Place in the Australian Tradition”, Tasmanian Historical Research Association: *Papers and Proceedings*, Vol. 10, 1962-3. For a critique of assumptions of gender neutrality in national myths see Marilyn Lake,”The Politics of Respectability: Identifying the Masculinist Context” in Susan Magarey, Sue Rowley and Susan Sheridan (Editors), *Debutante Nation: Feminist Contests in the 1890’s*, Sydney, 1993 pp. 1-15.

6 SWD 1/13/828.

7 SWD 1/13/849.
Single Fathers

Many of the single fathers of state wards were employed as labourers, a term covering a myriad of physical tasks on farms, wharves, in brickyards, smelters, or mines and in the bush cutting wood. Such work was casual with periods of unemployment. With care, a comfortable home might be achieved on 30s a week in 1908 but most fathers of state wards had lower wages than that. A farm labourer had a house and earned 25s a week. His circumstances were described as “poor”. Others earned even less, one 17s a week, and another, 15s. Self-employment, usually carting or fishing could also lead to a tenuous existence. For instance, fishing earned one man 21s a week. A bargee earned 2s a ton transporting 20 tons of wood weekly. He paid wages of 15s a week leaving him with 25s.

Other employment included a tanner, printer’s machinist, and brick maker. The machinist’s income was low and the brick maker unemployed. If an artisan could not get work in his own trade, he took what was available. A carpenter worked as a labourer, and an iron moulder, out of work, hoed an orchard one spring for 24s a week. It was common for men to work at a series of jobs. One who was unemployed after the ore ran out at a west coast mine in 1909, was unable to find other mining work because of a strike. In December he got a contract to tar some buildings, then earned 10s by cutting wood. He planned to hawk fish after Christmas if steady work still eluded him. In March 1910, he put all his money into a fish shop in Queenstown but, by October, it was clear that the business was failing. His children, who had been privately boarded, were committed to the Department. Other men’s chances of earning a regular income were impaired by poor work safety. Accidents were common, sometimes resulting in death. More often, injuries or damaged

---

8 SWD 1/12/778; 1/2/12.
9 SWD 1/11/710-2; 1/7/456-7; 1/17/1017.
10 SWD 1/13/812-3.
11 SWD 1/15/954.
12 SWD 1/9/580-1; 1/7/468-9.
13 SWD 1/20/1140.
14 SWD 1/13/812-3.
15 SWD 1/9/601.
16 SWD 1/15/949.
17 SWD 1/11/708-9; 1/4/251-2.
20 SWD 1/10/644.
21 SWD 1/14/899-90; 1/15/944; 1/17/1009.
22 SWD 1/3/195; 1/17/1005.
23 SWD 1/15/925-7.
24 For example, one man died in a work accident at a timber mill in Recherche and another in a boiler explosion at Zeehan. SWD 1/3/183-6; 1/10/671.
health left the man incapable of earning a decent living, and there was no workers compensation.\textsuperscript{25} One father, aged 46, described by Seager as a "poor shattered frame of a man" had a spinal complaint said to be caused by work in the mines. He was unemployed for two years and then worked casually for 15s a week.\textsuperscript{26}

These employment patterns were not conducive to a regular domestic routine for the man or his family and the work was too poorly paid to support a comfortable home.\textsuperscript{27} The casually employed labourer often had to travel to find work, spending as much time with male companions as with his family, so that it was simpler if relationships with women were temporary. This was a physically active way of life conducive to the value system that celebrated bodily strength and toughness. Even so many men subscribed, wholly or partly, to domestic representations of manhood.

As has already been suggested, few children of parents who lived together were committed; most couples apparently managed, even if they were poor. However, if the wife died or went away, the family's finely poised economy might collapse. Men were not trained in the household management essential to eking out a small income and families missed the few shillings that most mothers earned. Many men needed to work away from home to make a decent living so that they could not supervise their pre-school children. Work and school hours did not match, which meant that ensuring attendance of older children was an additional problem.\textsuperscript{28} Many widowers were nearing old age and suffered from ill health.\textsuperscript{29} To avert poverty, numerous men left home to find work, eventually losing touch with their families. Yet although the incidence of wife desertion amongst this socio-economic group was high, comparatively few single fathers seem to have ignored responsibilities to their children. Those that did not board their children out, leave them with family, or find a housekeeper, probably

\textsuperscript{25}The first legislative provisions for workers' compensation were made in 1925. \textit{Workers Compensation Act} (1925) 18 George V No. 82.
\textsuperscript{26}SWD 1/9/580-1.
\textsuperscript{27}In Richmond, Victoria, casually employed workers were constantly on the move to avoid debts and rent arrears. Each time they settled in a new area, the children had to start again at a strange school, and the mother had to form new community networks for emotional and practical support, as well as establishing credit at the shop. This erratic way of life attracted a stigma, not least because the respectable working class were afraid of becoming trapped in it too. Janet McCalman, \textit{Struggletown: Portrait of an Australian Working-Class Community}, 1900-1965, Melbourne, 1984, pp.21-23.
\textsuperscript{28}SWD 1/6/366-7; 1/5/271-4.
\textsuperscript{29}SWD 1/8/518-9.
learned some of the interpersonal skills that normally underpinned the mother's control of the family.

Since men whose children were committed had usually failed to support them, departmental officials assumed they were lazy or alcoholic. Seager feared that they were trying to use of the Department. He often said, "it is not the duty of the Government to relieve parents of their responsibilities", lamenting the, "comparative ease with which men may throw off their responsibilities respecting their children and burden the state with their maintenance".30 In 1908, he refused to take a child whose father had gone to New Zealand, suggesting that the man "would laugh with glee to think how well he is managing things". Seager would have liked him to be deported and prosecuted for child desertion, as a deterrent to others, but there were no legal provisions for this.31 Men who could not support their families were, as these statements suggest, considered culpable until it was proved otherwise.

It is probable that many single fathers remarried so that their children never came to the attention of the Department. However, remarriage did not guarantee the children's care because the step-mother, an intruder in the children's lives, might lack the authority, or will, to manage them. Cecil was committed as "uncontrollable", because his step-mother could not make him attend school. The inspecting nurse thought it a "small offence to have him committed to the care of the Department".32 Poor management could escalate into conflict. Adelaide, who did not get on with her step-mother, was surrendered by her father because of her disobedience. She was, according to her committal form, "uncontrollable, steals money & tells lies".33 Similarly, May was surrendered because she "constantly runs away". She too had a step-mother and her father was frequently away from home.34 Such behaviour probably indicated a problem at home but the child was construed as 'uncontrollable' or disobedient. Even so, the Department might have helped these children by removing them from intolerable situations, as the following committal suggests.

30SWD 1/5/251-4; 1/6/366-7; 1/15/920-2.
31CSD 22/114/25/8/08.
32SWD 1/19/1120.
33SWD 1/15/944.
34SWD 1/19/1101.
Thirteen-year-old Hilda's father married a woman with five children. The father's work resulted in long periods away from home when, according to Hilda, her step-mother abused her. She was also forced to mind the other children which she disliked. In retaliation, Hilda fed paint oil to the baby, who nearly died. The police reported that:

she had given the baby the oil, because her stepmother was always ill treating her & knocking her about and makes her mind the children and they are very rude Mrs. Smith will not let her go away to service, and she said what she had done, she was drove to, & she would sooner go to God than stay there, and she did not care what became of her.  

A single father might employ a housekeeper although this was beyond the means of many. In addition, he had to have a fairly comfortable home or no one would accept the position. In 1900, a wood splitter, Charles Taylor, who had looked after his six young children for the five years since his wife died, applied to have his four eldest committed so that they could be placed in a training school. The two youngest would be cared for by a neighbour. He was willing to pay 10s a week for the care of his older children. This father was a typical 'deserving' widower, but Seager was wary of relieving those too readily in case a flood gate opened. He suggested that for 10s a week the man ought to be able to afford a housekeeper:

My opinion is that Taylor should display more energy and make an effort to secure a housekeeper no doubt there would be many glad of the place and thus keep his family together: if Taylor is relieved of his responsibilities what guarantee have I that he will not quietly slip away like several others have done and leave the whole charge of the children upon the Department?

The magistrate assured Seager that Taylor had a "strong parental affection" and that if he had wanted to leave his children he could have already done so. He had been forced to sell all his furniture after his wife's death to pay for the associated expenses and, because of the children, could not travel any distance to find work and so could not earn enough to refurnish his home. This made it difficult for him to find a "trustworthy person" as housekeeper. The children were committed as "uncontrollable" because the father had to leave for work so early that he could not ensure they attended school. Taylor had wanted them placed in industrial schools so that the girls

35SWD 1/16/962.
could learn domestic skills and the boys, a trade, but this request was refused. A few months later he remarried and the children were returned to him.\textsuperscript{36}

Employing a housekeeper could cause new problems. A mother died on the west coast leaving five children. The father, earning £2 a week, brought them to Hobart for admission to industrial schools. Pearce suggested that it was cheaper to employ a woman from the New Town Charitable Institution as a housekeeper and the man chose a young, unmarried mother. Soon he was accused of co-habitation. When he stole fourteen pine boards worth £1.5s from a building site, the magistrate suggested that it was a ploy to get a short prison sentence, so the children would be made state wards and the man could run off with his housekeeper. He was given the maximum sentence of six months, and the children were committed. There is no evidence that a de facto relationship was formed after the prison term expired.\textsuperscript{37} The readiness of some government officials to assume that a housekeeper co-habited with her employer probably made it more difficult to find one.

Widowers often turned to their families for assistance. When a Scottsdale mother died in 1915, leaving eight children, two of them went to live with their grandparents. Another two boys, aged eighteen and thirteen, were able to support themselves, and four children were left with private foster mothers. These children were surrendered because the father, who had gone to Wynyard to work on the railway, did not earn enough to pay for their care.\textsuperscript{38} In a family of twelve children, two married sisters took care of a younger sister and brother, while two teenage boys worked with the father clearing land. The family was too large for them all to be cared for by siblings and three children were surrendered to the Department. Seager was annoyed by these committals:

I have ascertained that this man was a widower, strong and able to work for the children, but rather than make an effort to provide for them, preferred to surrender them to the Department, and thus relieve himself of all responsibility.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{36}SWD 1/5/271-4; CSD 22/30/25/00.  
\textsuperscript{37}SWD 1/1/43-7.  
\textsuperscript{38}SWD 1/27/1442-4.  
\textsuperscript{39}SWD 1/15/920-2.
Children were also distributed amongst aunts and uncles. In one motherless family of eight, a girl was placed with an uncle and it was planned to send her brother to another in Melbourne. The two youngest children stayed with their father, who was unwell, and his three grown up sons helped him to support them. Even so, the family was too large for relatives to maintain them all. A ten-year-old girl had to be sent to the industrial school and the father’s ill health meant the boys were finally committed.\(^40\)

The poverty of relatives often limited their ability to help. A man, in his sixties, worked at the Penguin Iron Mine, earning 15s to 20s a week in 1902. He was a widower with three children whose sister cared for them. However, she had been too destitute to support her own children, and his income was not enough to compensate. An Anglican clergyman and the man's employer recommended the children’s committal. The employer said it was a financial loss to employ the man but, "I have a regard for him as he has been with me about three years, and is a very decent man". The children were surrendered when he went to hospital.\(^41\) When Ellen and Kate were deserted by their mother, their father left them with an aunt by marriage while he went to work on the west coast where he died suddenly. The aunt kept the girls for a few years but surrendered Ellen in 1909 because she could no longer afford to keep them both. Pearce explained that the uncle had only a small income and that since Kate was "delicate", she would be a "burden" for some time.\(^42\)

Some single fathers boarded their children. Problems often arose with the maintenance, usually because of ill health. In 1914, two boys, deserted by their mother, depended on their father for support. He had "miners consumption", and with only an invalid pension to live on, was unable to pay for the children’s care.\(^43\) Another deserted father had been in the New Norfolk Asylum and had only one leg. His daughter was boarded privately but the father stopped paying maintenance. The police magistrate, W. O. Wise, instructed that all the man’s savings be used to support his children, but that was not enough. A prison sentence was the only option left but, given the man's health, Wise did not want to proceed. The child was

\(^{40}\)SWD 1/9/580-1.
\(^{41}\)SWD 1/8/518-9.
\(^{42}\)SWD 1/13/837.
\(^{43}\)SWD 1/22/1242.
surrendered and left with her original foster mother.\textsuperscript{44} In 1901 a woman took care of three children, the youngest of seven, receiving only £1. 4s in ten weeks. The father was in hospital, so the Department agreed to pay their maintenance until he was better, but he never recovered enough to support the children. One boy was adopted, while two siblings were placed with their grandmother. The Department paid her half the boarding-out rate. When she could not manage, the children were transferred to other foster homes. The Department had tried not to commit these children, recommending first that the father board them with some elderly people in his area.\textsuperscript{45}

A few men attempted both to support and care for their children. A labourer on the Devonport wharf, said to be “hard working & sober”, looked after his three boys aged four, five and seven. His wife was in the New Norfolk Asylum; a baby and little girl were boarded at a cost of 6s 6d a week. No one minded the boys while the father worked and they were surrendered as “uncontrollable”.\textsuperscript{46} In a similar instance, four children lived in a hut on the Forcett road. Their mother was also in the New Norfolk Asylum, and the father, a fisherman, earned a meagre living. He was often away, leaving the children alone. They were committed for neglect.\textsuperscript{47} Six year old John’s mother had been dead for five months. He lived in the cabin of a barge with his father and two brothers. Two sisters were already in the care of St. Joseph’s Orphanage. The father told Pearce that the boys were on the barge because he could not get anyone to care for them. He was afraid that John would be drowned or killed in some other way. That day the child had fallen into the hold so that his nose was “all smashed in”. Pearce recommended the committal:

\begin{quote}
I think it would be a great blessing to this poor little child to be placed in a comfortable home it would be fearfully hard to think of the poor child on the boat through the coming winter with no mothers care or attention. If anything did happen to the child then the talk would be hard against the Department for not taking him away.\textsuperscript{48}
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[44] SWD 1/16/987.
\item[45] SWD 1/6/366-7.
\item[46] SWD 1/11/710-2.
\item[47] SWD 1/5/320-4.
\item[48] SWD 1/10/644.
\end{footnotes}
Fathers had no chance of sustaining a dual role if they became ill. A Longford man, hospitalised with pneumonia, usually earned only 17s a week because of his physical debility. He had five children; two daughters had a reputation for stone throwing and “dishonesty”. His children were surrendered.\(^{49}\) The daughter of a fireman in poor circumstances because of ill health was committed because he could not control her.\(^{50}\) A commission agent, suffered from “creeping paralysis”. He had a monthly income of £1 from Tattersall’s, his previous employer, and 32s 6d from his church. Consigned to home, he could not supervise his son who developed a “wandering habit” and was placed in the industrial school.\(^{51}\)

Some fathers were overwhelmed by poverty. A wife deserted her husband in Colebrook, taking three children and leaving another three, two of whom had health problems. The father’s earnings of 15s week were supplemented by the children picking up potatoes. The man refused to pay maintenance telling a magistrate that:

I am very poor and unable to pay anything as it takes all I can get to keep the other children and it is a hard matter to get work and those I work for has to be answerable for provisions at the store for me. But I need say no more as the public knows how I stand and the complainant should not have left me and took the children away with her.

Without maintenance, the mother could not support the other children and she surrendered a daughter.\(^{52}\) Another labourer, at Brown’s River, lived in a “tumbledown” hut with no furniture, the family slept on the floor with a “few old rags”. Working all day, he could not mind his two children who, according to a neighbour, were “running about wild and neglected”, their lives endangered by a nearby sixty to eighty foot precipice. They did not go to school or Sunday School. It is not clear whether the children were committed as neglected or surrendered by their father who, despite his poverty, was ordered to make substantial maintenance payments for them.\(^{53}\)

Some fathers tried to manage with the help of teenage daughters. Ivy kept house for her father and two little brothers, after her mother died. According to Pearce, the boys were “left to roam about the place alone as the

\(^{49}\)SWD 1/11/708-9.  
\(^{50}\)SWD 1/10/674.  
\(^{51}\)SWD 1/11/730.  
\(^{52}\)SWD 1/13/838.  
\(^{53}\)SWD 1/4/251-2.
girl is so much away from home”. He concluded that she had “too much liberty” and ought to be in service. The boys were surrendered by their father. Rose looked after her four younger brothers and sisters after their mother died. The children had a reputation for unruly behaviour amongst the neighbours. Their father was a farm labourer, described on the Department’s committal form as “poor” but with a “good & sober” character. An Anglican clergyman recommended the children’s committal, seeing their problems as caused, not by poverty, bereavement or the father’s long working hours, but by the mother’s negligence:

[She] unfortunately did not train up her children as she should have done. Consequently since her death they have had their own sweet will & have been entirely neglected. The father is a hard working & steady man, but has no control or management over his family

Rose was sent to the Magdalen Home and her younger sister was committed. The clergyman hoped, that, under a private arrangement, one of the boys could be placed on a farm with some “good firm but kind person”.

As has been suggested, the socio-economic circumstances of poor single fathers were more conducive to child desertion than nurture and economic support. For men who wanted their freedom, desertion was the best way of forcing the Department to commit their children and as will be shown, desertion was easily done. Yet the evidence suggests that single fathers did not desert their children in high numbers. However, the Department assumed that they would, so that their official documents are skewed in ways that suggest culpable desertion was a common practice. This makes it difficult to determine its extent.

Some of those accused of the offence had probably not disappeared for the long term. Instead, having become unemployed, they could not pay maintenance, which made it practicable to lose touch temporarily. Seven children were boarded out to a single woman and their father was supposed to send 25s a week for maintenance. He consistently looked for jobs but with so little result that the payments stopped. He was an affectionate father who, up until this time, had written regularly to his children. Yet the neighbour who alerted Welsh, thought the man feckless, “utterly careless in this matter, though he used to send money for his children’s keep”. This

54 SWD 1/13/812-3.
55 SWD 1/12/778.
character assessment was accepted and the father was described as someone who “fair drinks” with a “poor” character on the children’s committal form. The committal of three of them was an attempt to force him to pay maintenance.\textsuperscript{56}

In another instance, a man placed two of his children with his parents and another with his brother in 1897. He went to Melbourne to find work, without success and stopped sending money. Some Launceston philanthropists contacted Welsh. The father was found by the Victorian police which prompted him to send his parents a contrite letter:

I am sending you 30s which is very little I know but will send more next month. I have been doing very little work on the wharf not enough to keep me. I have hardly any clothes to wear and I know my dear children cannot have any—give them my best love and God bless them.\textsuperscript{57}

Other fathers did abandon their children deliberately. Three little girls were first deserted by their mother and placed with their grandmother in Sandy Bay. When she died, the father took them to his boarding house. He was in debt for board and disappeared without taking them.\textsuperscript{58} Another father deserted his children in St. Helens so that they were forced to sleep in outhouses. After two months the police found him and brought him back.\textsuperscript{59} A girl was left with her grandmother by her father who had gone to New Zealand and never paid maintenance, although, as a tailor, he should have had sufficient means.\textsuperscript{60}

Some carers were not concerned about the children’s well-being, so that the father’s desertion could have disastrous consequences.\textsuperscript{61} Guardianship might not be clear cut, which led to wrangling; even relatives might not have the children’s best interests at heart. If children were potentially useful, one part of the family might try to take them from another. The dispute could involve the whole neighbourhood so that the merits of both sides are

\textsuperscript{56} SWD 1/15/925-7.  
\textsuperscript{57} SWD 1/7/456-7.  
\textsuperscript{58} SWD 1/11/754-5.  
\textsuperscript{59} SWD 1/1/2-7.  
\textsuperscript{60} SWD 1/12/775. This child’s grandfather was George Judge, a former employee of the Neglected Children’s Department. For a fuller discussion of the committal see the footnotes in “The Inspection of State Children” in Chapter 4.  
\textsuperscript{61} SWD 1/10/636.
obscured. Such incidents illustrate the subjectivity of the term ‘neglect’. Two children, aged five and seven, were left with their seventy-one-year-old grandmother in Cygnet when their father went to the west coast in 1897. According to the police she was “very feeble” with rheumatism in her hands and legs. Another relative, who wanted the children, told the police that:

it was time the children were taken away from their grandmother for she did not think it right that two such young children should sleep with an old woman & the old woman drinks & has been known upon several occasions to lay out in the bush all night drunk & have the children out with her.

The relative had a four-roomed house and although her circumstances were poor the police thought that her children were “very neat & clean, & they first class in their manners”, and that she was “a very good kind hearted woman”. However, the grandmother refused to give the children up because they would be made into “slaves”. The police thought this was a drunken protest, but the proprietor of Cygnet’s general store, told the magistrate that the children had been well treated by their grandmother. The proposed foster mother was “an almost confirmed invalid”, in need of the children’s help. The magistrate concluded that the grandmother was “devotedly attached” to the children, keeping them and the house neat and clean. There was no evidence that she drank, and three neighbours spoke highly of her care. He recommended that a weekly 5s food voucher be sent to the local store for her. Cygnet’s Roman Catholic priest did not think either relative was suitable and recommended foster care. The children were boarded out by the Department.62

The Desertion of Mothers and Children by Fathers

Men seem to have deserted children more readily if the mother was with them. While misogyny, underpinned by the sorts of cultural values expressed in the Bulletin, was a factor in this, it does not entirely explain the phenomenon.63 As has been suggested, if work was not available locally, given men’s lack of actual power within some families and unimportance

---

62SWD 1/7/468-9.
63One misogynist left the state to evade maintenance payments to his wife even though he owned five acres worth £600. In 1915, he joined the Army but deserted and disappeared, allegedly because he discovered that an allotment of his military pay would be made to her. SWD 1/24/1374.
within their affective structures, it is not surprising that many gradually moved further afield losing interest in their wives and children.

Under the 1873 *Deserted Wives and Children Maintenance Act*, men were obliged to support nuptial or ex-nuptial children under sixteen, and wives, legal or de facto, with whom they had lived for a year or more. The income or goods of non-compliant husbands and fathers could be appropriated and placed in trust for their families. Wilful desertion was a misdemeanour so that those about to leave the colony could be apprehended. 64 Under the *Infant Life Protection Act*, provision for ex-nuptial fathers to pay maintenance was reinforced, although proof of paternity had to be provided (Mothers became liable too). Parents who did not comply could be fined and if they tried to leave the state, sent to prison. 65 After 1910, the *Interstate Destitute Persons Relief Act* provided for defaulting parents to be arrested elsewhere in Australia, if the relevant state had reciprocal powers. 66 Even so, while some men paid maintenance, many more seem to have evaded it. 67 One problem with the *Deserted Wives and Children Maintenance Act* was that it absolved husbands from supporting unfaithful wives. This underpinned the view that men’s financial support of their families was an unwritten contract in which the wife was faithful, and there were paternal rights over the children. Husbands behaved as if this was so. One who alleged, but did not prove, that his wife was unfaithful, went to gaol twice rather than pay maintenance. 68 Men whose wives left, taking the children, might also refuse to support them. 69

Unmarried paternity was often disputed by men who were niggardly, poor, feared social disgrace or were unwilling to support a child whose upbringing would be without reference to them. A putative father refused to pay the funeral expenses of his three-year-old daughter, a state ward, because she was buried before he was told of her death. Addison accused him of evasion but the police said that, if pressed, the man planned to sue the Department for failing to inform him of the death, arranging the burial without

---

65 *Infant Life Protection Act* (1907) 7 Edward VII.
66 *Interstate Destitute Persons Relief Act* (1910) 1 GeorgeV No. 55.
67 One man paid £1 a week in 1910 to support his family. SWD 1/15/93. However, there are many more examples of men evading maintenance. See Chapter 9.
68 SWD 1/4/269-70.
69 SWD 1/2/115-7.
permission and not allowing him to see the child.\textsuperscript{70} While this might have been a counter-claim, such disputes suggest that maintenance payments signified, not just a financial arrangement, but an agreement to assume all the duties and privileges of fatherhood.

Legislators, anxious to prevent false claims for maintenance, had made the provisions for determining paternity so strict that it was difficult to establish. The mother's oath was not proof unless additional evidence was supplied. It is not clear what would have sufficed since a witness to the relationship before the pregnancy occurred was not adequate.\textsuperscript{71} Many women were reluctant to sue because of the publicity.\textsuperscript{72} Sometimes they were trying to hide the birth from their own parents. Young women were especially afraid that their fathers would turn them out of home if the baby's existence was discovered.\textsuperscript{73} Under the \textit{Infant Life Protection Act}, if mothers had more than one sexual partner, paternity could be disputed which led to attempts to blacken plaintiffs' characters which discouraged applications for maintenance.\textsuperscript{74}

 Mothers often concealed the identity of the father. One young woman told the police the name of her nine-month-old daughter's father, but said she did not know his whereabouts and would not recognise him again. The inspecting nurse thought that another man, who visited when the baby was born and did not deny parentage, was the father. He filled in the child's registration form because the mother could not write and paid 10s a week maintenance for four months. When he wanted to reduce it to 8s, the foster mother decided to surrender the baby to the Department. The man told the police he was not the father but was "keeping company" with the mother, whom he planned to marry, although he would not support the child. The Department gave up trying to claim maintenance.\textsuperscript{75}

One father went to extraordinary lengths to evade supporting his child, in part, perhaps, because he was married and public recognition of the baby

\textsuperscript{70} SWD 1/19/1095.
\textsuperscript{71} SWD 1/23/1289.
\textsuperscript{72} SWD 1/5/304.
\textsuperscript{73} One woman would not apply for maintenance because she was supported by her own father who would turn her out of home if the baby's existence was discovered. Another was reluctant to press for maintenance because, although her mother knew about the child and contributed to the cost of its care, her father did not. SWD 1/12/772; 1/27/1431.
\textsuperscript{74} SWD 1/25/1349; 1/20/1148.
\textsuperscript{75} SWD 1/22/1249.
would have been a social disgrace. When the baby was born, he acknowledged paternity and gave the mother £5, promising to pay maintenance. Later he said he would not, and when pressed by the police produced a letter signed by the mother in which she admitted telling lies and asked forgiveness. When questioned, she said he had told her that he would not take care of the child unless she wrote the letter, virtually at his dictation. He was a travelling salesman and had been put up at the mother’s parental home. A few months later it was found that her sister was also pregnant and that he was allegedly the father. Once again he refused to pay maintenance. 76

Alcoholism

Even though alcoholism existed throughout Tasmanian society, low income and drink were inextricably linked in middle-class perceptions of poverty so that it was a criteria for identifying the alcoholic. 77 If alcoholism was more common amongst the poor, then stress caused by the other misfortunes associated with destitution, was probably the cause. Once established, alcoholism made earning a living and coping with a family impossible for both single and married fathers, even though affection was shown or attempts at effective fatherhood were made. The *Neglected Children and Youthful Offenders Act* provided for the committal of children if their parents drank, and since alcoholism disrupted family life, this was probably an advantage to some children. However, this emphasis on alcoholism also encouraged officials to look for it where it did not exist. Moreover, focusing on alcohol as the problem, instead of children’s mistreatment, meant that some might be committed unnecessarily, while others who were abused went unnoticed.

Alcoholic men who stayed with their wives and families often made their lives a misery. *Norman* was surrendered by his father, a wharf labourer in

---

76SWD 1/27/1431; 1/28/1486.
77There was a fundamental contradiction in these perceptions of working-class men’s drinking habits. The father on one committal form was described as “good workman. Very intemperate”, even though alcoholism would have precluded hard work. In another instance, the chief secretary saw a delegation from the Launceston Benevolent Society asking that some children be committed to the Department. The father was alleged to be “habitually drunk”, so that the mother was forced to live in the “lowest lodging house in the city”. Welsh’s inquiries showed that the father was in full employment and that, although the family only lived in two rooms, they were well furnished. He thought that the children looked well cared for and that the father could not be a habitual drunkard or no one would employ him. SWD 1/16/994; CSD 22/85/92/04.
poor circumstances, in 1911 for uncontrollability and truancy. Both parents were alcoholics and neither Norman or his sister had enough to eat.\textsuperscript{78} Frances was surrendered by her father because, according to the police she “Runs away from home & sleeps in any out-house or empty building, will foist herself on any good natured person”; a characteristic, perhaps, of mistreated children. Her father was described as a “drunkard” and her mother as a housewife with a “questionable” character.\textsuperscript{79}

In another instance, three children were denied “the common necessaries of life” because their father, an iron moulder was an alcoholic. His second wife was often away from home, perhaps because of his alcoholism, and so took little care of the children. A boy was found crying in the street and taken in by a neighbour. He had not been fed for some days. Two other children were also in the street, afraid to go into the hotel where their father was drinking. The man surrendered two of them and was ordered to pay 2s 6d a week for each.\textsuperscript{80}

If a single father was an alcoholic, the situation was impossible. An alcoholic tailor, with four children, whose wife had died, was able to earn 35s a week but he had debts of £255 4s 7d. He had a dirty, unfurnished home and the children had no proper care, despite the presence of a housekeeper. The health inspector reported that:

I had difficulty gaining admission, and when I entered I found Dookey in an intoxicated condition, crying and swearing over the housekeeper (Miss Phillips, aged 22 years). I spoke to her and got no answer. In the same room were three little girls. ages from 11 years to 13 months, only partly clothed and very dirty. The baby only had a very dirty singlet and dress on; the one older were dressed in much the same manner.

The medical officer of health alerted Seager who sent Pearce to investigate. A neighbour told him that the man was seldom sober and that he mistreated the younger children. The housekeeper had not been paid and planned to leave as soon as better childcare arrangements were made. Then the landlord evicted the family, who went to live with a neighbour. When the man found a new house, the housekeeper returned to him, placing her own respectability in jeopardy. Pearce now believed that she only “styles

\textsuperscript{78}SWD 1/17/1017. 
\textsuperscript{79}SWD 1/12/786. 
\textsuperscript{80}SWD 1/17/1004-5.
herself as Housekeeper”. The children were eventually surrendered by the father.81

Sexual Abuse
Sexual abuse of children was perhaps linked to male powerlessness because it was a way of asserting control over the family. Although children could be committed to the Department for their mother’s sex work, no provision covered sexual abuse by a male member of the household. However, under Offences Against the Person Act the offence was punishable by imprisonment, if a conviction could be obtained.82 One father served a gaol sentence in 1902 for “tampering with one of his daughters”. Four of his children were committed to the Department. His eldest child, a thirteen-year-old girl, went into service to keep the baby, who was boarded privately.83 Another family of seven children, was committed to the Department for neglect in 1908. Their mother was dead and the eldest daughter had a baby that was her father’s. The policeman’s wife burnt the children’s clothing because it was “seething mass of filth”. Such misery evoked Seager’s compassion. Although he grumbled at the potential cost of raising the children, he did not hesitate to accept them, thinking it a “fearful” case. Welsh agreed, adding that “one can hardly realise that a man could be guilty of such a crime on his own flesh and blood”. The father was imprisoned for the abuse.84 Another man, alcoholic and described by Daly as a “of very low type” and “absolutely unfit” to have the care of his children, especially the girls, had probably sexually abused them too.85

Like alcoholism, sexual abuse must have existed throughout society but it was more likely to be discovered amongst the poor working class because they were already targeted as suspect parents. This helped put other men beyond suspicion, and so punishment. Not many sexual offences caused by men in the home came to light, although some authorities thought that, in general, the sexual abuse of children was common. In 1896 a Waratah magistrate said that it was “prevalent” in his area, although it was not often discovered.86 This abuse of children then, as now, was hidden. Children did

---

81 SWD 1/17/1013.
82 Offences Against the Person Act (1863) 27 Victoria No. 5.
83 SWD 1/8/482-5.
84 CSD 22/114/25/11/08; SWD 1/12/798-802.
86 CSD 19/4/11/96.
not complain because if they had grown up with it they did not know that they should so. Moreover they might not be believed. Complaining to their mother might do little good since she was likely to be destitute and ran the risk of social ostracisation if she left the family home.

Most of the widowers or deserted husbands whose children were committed to the Neglected Children’s Department were casually employed labourers. According to the images that matched their socio-economic situation, such men made uninterested and unreliable fathers. This was the expectation of the officials at the Neglected Children’s Department. But as its files suggest, although child desertion, sexual abuse and alcoholism did occur, the number of single fathers who struggled to provide for their children to the best of their ability is striking. Some tried to fulfil the mother’s role also. If they failed, it was because illness, poverty or the structure of employment made it impossible. Such men challenge the assumptions held about them by contemporary society.

In other family types men’s significant role was confined to supporting the family. Although within a marriage, they had nominal control over them, the matriarchal nature of most households made many men’s emotional involvement redundant, even unwelcome. This accounts, in part, for the high incidence of family desertion. Unmarried fathers were also excluded from fatherhood which helps explain their reluctance to support their children. Men’s attitudes to maintenance payments had a profound effect on the capacity of single mothers to support their children and this, along with the situation of widows, is the topic of the next chapter.
CHAPTER NINE

"NO ONE NOW THE TROUBLE I HAVE HAD TO KEEP MY CHILD": SINGLE MOTHERHOOD AND CHILDREN'S COMMITTALS

Single mothers had to make decisions about work and childcare within a narrow set of parameters constructed by social values. Conventions regarding respectability constrained their choices, while definitions of gender roles made them economically vulnerable. Children often came into the care of the Neglected Children's Department because their mothers were not considered respectable, or because they could not cope financially. The Department made decisions about the children's futures that were intended to discipline their mothers into conformity with the prevailing social values. Yet while it did attempt to modify women's behaviour, it could not stop them from making choices according to their own perceptions of their situations. My approach is to consider which strategies women used when they had to both support and mother a family and then assess their willingness to have their child committed when they could not manage. Sometimes they were able to use the Department in ways that had not been intended by the framers of the Neglected Children and Youthful Offenders Act. When widowers' or deserted husbands' children were surrendered to the Department, it was usually as a last resort and this was true of most single mothers too. Even the desertion of children, prompted as it was by the stigma of unmarried motherhood, and an impossible economic situation, can be seen in this light.

Strategies for Survival

Representations of motherhood suggested that mothers were financially dependent on their husbands. As has already been suggested, men acted as the family's advocate in public life, while women supervised the domestic sphere. According to these images, mothers were inherently good, proving their virtue through selfless dedication to the family. Their knowledge of moral values enabled them to provide good training for their children.  

These representations of motherhood, while giving women some moral

---

1 In this chapter all women without a male partner are referred to as single and those who were never married, or were in a de facto relationship, as unmarried.
2 For a discussion of motherhood see Chapter 1.
authority (which groups like the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union used to further feminine public status) deprived many others of the knowledge and voice that was needed to cope with the public sphere. It left many women poorly equipped, in a personal sense, to negotiate their way in it.

Many sections of the working class shared this gendered value system. As has been suggested, the trade union movement aspired to separate spheres for the sexes, believing that when whole families worked for low wages the result was poverty. In response to their demands, the 1907 Harvester Judgement decreed that a man should be paid enough to provide the basic needs of a wife and three children. The Judgement, because it ignored the dependence of many households on a female breadwinner, did not deal adequately with child poverty.

Widows and deserted wives were perceived as a threat to the social order because they usually had to support the family, a male role. There was a widely held fear that this might lead to extra-marital relationships or sex work, a contradiction to good mothering. Women who remained respectable were encouraged by financial assistance from their churches and community fund-raising activities. Unmarried mothers were socially ostracised, even if they did attract some tentative sympathy, because sexual activity had taken place outside marriage, contradicting the myth of inherently virtuous motherhood. The stigma attached to unmarried motherhood, according to Shurlee Swain and Renate Howe, was used to reinforce the overall community’s sexual morality. Portraying the single mother as the other, helped to define the married mother as normal which underlined other norms governing reproduction, inheritance, identity, kinship, morality and religion. Class prejudice mixed with this gendered

3 See also Chapter 3.
4 SWD 1/6/368-70; SWD 1/1/20-1; SWD 1/6/412-8.
5 Similarly, Joy Damousi argues that convict women held a contradictory position within discourses of motherhood. This placed officials in a difficult position because, although they wanted a high birth rate, they were unwilling to reward ex-nuptial sexual activity. The solution was to take the baby away and so punish the mother. While this was the Tasmanian policy during the 1920’s and later, between 1896 and 1918, unmarried mothers were expected to raise their babies as best they could. Joy Damousi,”Beyond the ‘Origins Debate’": Theorising Sexuality and Gender Disorder in Convict Women’s History”, Australian Historical Studies, No. 106, April 1996, p. 68; Joy Damousi, Depraved and Disorderly: Female Convicts, Sexuality and Gender in Colonial Australia, Melbourne, 1997, pp. 119-20.
anxiety, since single mothers were thought to be a manifestation of aberrant working-class morality. In Tasmania, as elsewhere, the unmarried mother’s punishment was to organise childcare, find employment and face the social stigma alone. If she succeeded, she might rehabilitate her reputation and in this way the baby became her salvation. The fate of widows and deserted wives who did not maintain their respectability, resembled that of unmarried mothers.

Low wages made it difficult for women to support their children. Since it was widely believed that well paid employment was men’s prerogative, working-class women’s work was mostly limited to laundering, charring or domestic service, all poorly paid. According to Alison Alexander, laundresses earned 8s to 9s a week and a few chars up to 15s. Most women whose children were committed to the Department held these jobs. Waitressing was less usual and could be relatively well paid. One woman earned 13s a week, as well as board and lodging, at a coffee palace in Hobart. Employment at jam factories, hop or fruit picking, and hawking fish were other possibilities although, since they were seasonal, the incomes were erratic. One woman was a wet nurse, but this probably became less common because women increasingly breastfed their own babies. Some women earned a living through sex work.

A few widows and deserted wives boarded their children privately and went into domestic service. However, the majority worked from home, not only to keep their families together, but because they could not afford the cost of boarding them all. Alexander shows that thirty-five percent of laundresses were aged between forty-five and sixty-five between 1891 and 1901. More than half the charwomen were over forty-five. She postulates that this age range shows that they were widows, although the figures could also reflect the greater freedom of married women with teenage children to work. Laundering was convenient because it could be done at home so that children could be supervised. Young unmarried mothers often went into

---

8 SWD 1/11/741-2.  
9 SWD 1/13/838; 1/14/872-7.  
10 SWD 1/7/474.  
11 SWD 1/13/814-5; 1/9/562-5; 1/6/419; 1/6/408-10; 1/15/955.  
12 The Department sometimes committed children so that their mothers could go into domestic service. SWD 1/6/54-5; 1/10/675-8; 1/14/896.  
13 Alexander, pp. 105-8.
domestic service and boarded their children; they seldom had a home set up and, unlike widows, usually had only one child. They could not take their babies with them because few employers would allow it, in case they took up the mothers' time. Moreover, as Andrew Mather of the Hobart Benevolent Society said, "people do not like to have strange children about their places".14

To avoid debt, unmarried mothers had to budget carefully. As my chapter on apprenticeships said, wages for domestic servants were between 6s and 16s a week from 1890 to 1910, with young domestic servants at the lower end of this scale.15 For a sixteen-year-old girl, wages could be as low as 2s 6d a week in 1898.16 One employer told the Department that she never paid more than 5s a week.17 To keep a position the servant had to be neatly dressed, and some wages went on this.18 Babies' board cost between 4s and 6s a week, with clothing and medicine as extras. Thus the minimum cost of adequate care left the mother with a meagre balance at best. Moreover, the stigma of unmarried motherhood could be a barrier to employment and the baby's existence was often concealed for this reason.19 These difficulties led many unmarried mothers to desert their babies.

Children were often able to assist their mothers. Teenage daughters looked after younger siblings or helped with laundering and were sometimes kept away from school to do so.20 Children cut wood and collected sticks from the bush.21 They helped around the house, ran messages and went out to get food. The Department returned one boy to his mother so that he could help at home when she was released from hospital. She said she was "very weak I can scarcely hold a pen to write".22 Some children earned a small income. A boy, aged eleven, earned 4s a week working in a timber yard in 1908.23

14 A three-year-old boy was allowed to live with his mother who was in domestic service but when it became obvious that the mother was pregnant again, she lost her position. In another instance, a woman was allowed to take her baby into domestic service with her, but not the rest of her children. SWD 1/6/407; see also SWD 1/1/61-3; 1/1/25.
15 Alexander, p. 80.
16 SWD 1/1/78.
17 SWD 1/1/5/326.
18 SWD 1/7/474; 1/5/326.
19 SWD 1/5/332.
21 SWD 1/8/503.
23 SWD 1/8/560.
Another boy, aged twelve, whose mother was a widow, earned 7s while boarded-out to her. Although this was illegal, departmental officials ignored it because they sympathised with the woman’s situation. Occasionally children’s income made a substantial difference to the family economy. For instance, in 1919, three adolescent children had a combined income of 40s 6d a week, two thirds of the living wage. Other ways of finding an income included begging and sex work. Begging was common and sex work may have been also. If so, it was hidden. Stealing might make money, but could also be a bravado designed to challenge parental or official authority. Street children, despite their reputation for idling and mischief, often contributed to family incomes by street vending, paper selling and shoe shining.

Some women supplemented their income through sex work. Although this was often a strategy to support their children, it was widely thought that sex workers lacked motherly qualities. This was reflected in the Neglected Children and Youthful Offenders Act’s special provision to commit their daughters. Yet the Department’s files demonstrate that the family’s financial needs had to be balanced against moral considerations. Such findings support historiographical arguments that working-class women did sex work, not through innate sexual deviance, an ancient myth, but as part of a limited range of options available to them for making a living. Categorising women as good or bad, according to their sexual morality was irrelevant to their characters.

24SWD 1/6/412-8.
25SWD 1/24/1314.
27SWD 1/4/246. Only one example of a child sex worker was found in the Neglected Children’s Departmental files although, in 1895, the Tasmanian News claimed that the problem was widespread. Their claims may have been exaggerated in order to persuade parliamentarians to pass the Neglected Children and Youthful Offenders Act. See “The Introduction of Child Welfare Legislation, 1895-6” in Chapter 2.
29Tasmanian News, 30 August 1895; 31 August 1895; 2 September 1895; 4 September 1895; 13 September 1895.
30Neglected Children and Youthful Offenders Act (1896) 60 Victoria No. 24.
If impoverished unmarried mothers were pursued by authorities for maintenance, brothels could offer a hiding place, company and income. In 1887, a sixteen-year-old mother supported her daughter by wet nursing but was dismissed because her employer thought her "a beast, and not fit to be entrusted with the care of a child". She worked as a hospital laundress but was dismissed and took several positions as a domestic servant before disappearing. The police traced her to a Hobart boarding house where she told them that she was unemployed and that, even with a position, she could not pay maintenance. Judge, the inquiring officer, thought that she did sex work which persuaded the Central Boarding-Out committee to commit her baby. Judge described the girl's lodgings as:

nothing more than a brothel, there are several girls there whose conduct and intertemperate solicitations for me to treat them to drink, and come inside the room leaves no doubt on my mind that they are prostitutes, and I think the woman ... is just as bad as the others are.

Departmental officials' main concern was that sex workers would have a bad influence on their children. Olive, age thirteen, was committed to the Department for living with a sex worker, her mother. She was boarded-out to her grandfather who was warned that any contact with her mother would mean transferral to a departmental home. Much sex work was done while the children were around, which particularly worried social reformers. Frances Edwards condemned a woman because "she carries on her bad calling in the presence of these little girls" and Pearce said of four other children that they "had seen, and heard a great deal too much in their home before they came away". In reality, sexual morality had no bearing on women's ability to nurture children. According to Pearce, Nora, looked after by her two sisters, who were Queenstown sex workers, spoke "very sensibly not like a girl of eleven years". He thought that she might be older than she said, but this was not the case.

---

32 According to Daniels, brothels and disorderly houses offered shelter, a place to hide for absconding servants and a social life as well as some financial support through sex work to convict women. They were a meeting place, and a source of entertainment, an important part of working-class culture. Daniels, pp. 32-4.
33SWD 1/7/474.
34SWD 1/24/1356.
35SWD 1/13/814-5; 1/9/562-5.
36SWD 1/10/657.
The way that women moved between sex work and other forms of support, like charity or marriage, demonstrates that it was an economic strategy. *Mrs. Kearney*, a widow with seven children from Latrobe, supplemented her 10s per week from the Charitable Grants Department with sex work. She was discovered when she developed puerperal fever after the birth of another baby. Seager stopped the grant and her three daughters, were committed and sent to the industrial school. The investigating police constable was “quite satisfied this woman will still follow her former immoral course when over her present trouble”. Yet, by 1907, she was remarried and reasonably prosperous. Welsh recommended that the girls be discharged since she was “now in a respectable position and married and able to support them”.37 Married women were respectable because they did not threaten social norms. In addition, husbands were supposed to be a restraining influence. In 1919, a single mother, unable to support her child, got married. A police constable said that the husband had “a chance of ... making a good woman of the child’s mother, who from reports to hand has not been leading a good life”.38

As the *Whelan* story, which introduced this thesis showed, since the Act did not provide for children’s committal on grounds of poverty, officials looked for other reasons, usually alcoholism or sex work, if impoverished parents refused to surrender them. As a result, allegations of sex work by authorities cannot always be taken at face value. A policeman reported on the living conditions of two little girls aged three and one:

> I saw the two children in question, the miserable appearance of them show plainly the great need of food while I was there *Mrs. Reid* was peeling potatoes and the three year old child was trying to eat the raw peelings there is scarcely any clothes on the children and they seem so cold, the beds are only an old straw mattress, the bedding consist of pieces of old blanket and clothes and very little of them.

The only income in this household was the 10s a week earned by a younger sister and the occasional domestic work done by the mother. The Department was anxious to commit the girls but their mother would not surrender them, which led to futile attempts to prove that the mother and grandmother were either alcoholic or sex workers. Finally the mother

37SWD 1/6/419; SWD 1/6/408-10.
38SWD 1/28/1500.
surrendered the children, ostensibly because she could not support them, but official interference probably played its part.39

In 1899, Pearce described the situation of Mrs. Watts, a widow, as “one of the worst cases” he had ever seen. The children were “barefooted and in rags, and covered with vermin; they look white & ill & apparently starving, they are certainly very much neglected”, spending their days on the wharves begging for food. There was a man in the bedroom, described by Mrs. Watts as a friend. Pearce apparently wanted to prove that she was a sex worker so that the children could be committed. Eventually the whole family was arrested and Pearce took the children away although only one went into care.40 It is not clear whether the mother’s suspected sex work was grounds for the committal.41

Infanticide was another strategy for mother’s social and economic survival, and, as Chapter Three suggested, was probably quite common, although well hidden. While occasional dead babies were found, many others probably were not, so that infanticide was often undetected. Where it could have occurred, sympathetic police might avoid an inquest and even if one was held, the cause of death was often given as accidental. Occasionally women were tried in court for concealment of birth but were given a small fine rather than imprisonment.42

Like other government authorities, departmental officials’ attitude towards infanticide was fairly inert. In 1900, Jane allegedly tried, with the help of her mother and landlady, to starve her baby girl to death in Hobart. At the last minute they lost their nerve, Jane went into service at Kelly Basin and the grandmother took the baby to Pearce, telling him that she had been deserted. She wanted to surrender her, but Pearce sent them home because he thought there had been “wilful neglect”. Shortly after that a doctor admitted the starving child to the New Town Charitable Institution and again, Seager returned her to the grandmother. The child was committed only after the intervention of the ex-premier, W. B. Propsting. Even then, the mother was

39SWD 1/12/796-7.
40SWD 1/3/209.
41Prevention of Cruelty to, and Better Protection of, Children Act (1895) 59 Victoria No.10.
42For a full discussion of official policy towards infanticide see “The Causes of Ex-Nuptial Infant Deaths” in Chapter 3.
pressured to take the baby back. A letter to her former landlady explains her behaviour:

Dear friend will you kindly find someone to take my baby if so will you kindly let me know by return of mail. I will give anyone 5s a week that will take it as the policeman has been to me about it if you can't, I will have to come to Hobart and see myself. They might only send it to me and I would not wish that for anything, as I am only strange down here...I do not mind who takes the baby but will you make things right and I will send the money by return mail.

The child was returned to the mother and finally adopted by the departmental foster mother. Seager’s position was odd since he was an advocate for infant life protection. His belief that if possible, parents, not the Department, must take financial responsibility for their children perhaps outweighed his concern for the baby.

Sometimes family support was available. A destitute mother might return home to live. For instance, in 1900, newly widowed Mrs. Linnell, her three children aged six years to ten months, moved in with her father. He owned a small orchard and some grazing land at Castle Forbes Bay but, according to the police, was too old and infirm to work it. His four-roomed house was poorly furnished. This family was a worthy case, according to the Department’s criteria, because neighbours had raised money to pay for the husband’s funeral. Even so, Seager, always keen to save money, was reluctant to assist. He told the magistrate that:

In the case of Mrs. Linnell she is but 41 years of age her father has taken her and her family in and no doubt if Mrs. Linnell will make an effort to assist him to work his orchard and land they will be able to maintain themselves as many others have to do throughout the Island.

He was finally persuaded to help Mrs. Linnell by assurances that the father was too weak to work and that she was “delicate”.

Rural grandparents often looked after a child while the mother went to work in town, sending a portion of her wages home. These arrangements failed if the parents were impoverished or infirm. According to the police, two brothers, “very much neglected”, lived with their grandmother "a

---

43SWD 1/5/332.
44SWD 1/6/368-70.
45SWD 1/7/477-9.
widow in poor circumstances” whose home was “too rough for children of such tender years”. The mother worked at a coffee palace in Hobart. Seager thought that she was making a “convenience” of the Department. However, since she was pregnant the committal was allowed to stand.46 Two-year-old Minnie was left with her grandmother in Sorell while her mother worked in Hobart. The warden thought that Minnie would die of “actual neglect” and the police said that she was “half starved and but poorly clad (nearly naked)”. She was committed for neglect although it is not clear whether her mother complied.47 In 1902, three girls were brought to town and left with the police by their grandparents, who alleged that their mother had deserted them. Seager suspected they were taking advantage of the Department: “If this statement is correct it has the appearance of collusion on the part of the children’s parents and grandparents to impose upon the Government for the maintenance of these children”. However, the children had to be committed.48

Sometimes mothers left their children with their parents and went interstate. One woman agreed to care for her two-year-old grandson for 5s a week. Four weeks later, her daughter went to Sydney and stopped paying maintenance. The grandmother still had four school-age children and since her husband was in the New Norfolk Asylum had to work to support them. She received no reply to her first application for his committal and wrote:

Please let me know if there is anything being done for me as the worry of work & the worry of the child is sending me silly. I cannot rest when I am at work thinking about them. When they are at school all day I know where they are.49

Eileen and Gertrude were left with their grandmother who, according to a Roman Catholic sister, was unable to cope. It was “a very sad case, as the poor grandmother is much attached to them, & would willingly continue to keep them with her, had she the means to do so”. Packer wondered if she could manage with 5s a week’s assistance, but she could not, having “bad” legs. In addition, the girls made it difficult for her to find work because she had to take them with her and so was often refused it.50

46SWD 1/11/741-2.
47SWD 1/2/111.
48SWD 1/7/477-9.
49SWD 1/13/822.
50SWD 1/13/822; See also SWD 1/16/965-6.
Some young unmarried mothers were afraid to tell their families about the baby's birth and other families refused to help. Such mothers could resort to a rescue home temporarily, although these had moral retraining programmes that were usually disliked. Moreover, the homes did not keep children over three-years-old in case the conversation and example of the women there hampered moral training. Rescue homes did not like helping with second pregnancies. As the matron of the Salvation Army Home said, “we do not want to encourage this sin”. Yet occasionally rescue homes assisted departmental officials’ attempts to prevent further pregnancies. One child was committed so that his mother, who was expecting her fourth baby, could go to the House of Mercy for two years, which Pearce thought, would prevent her from “burdening the State with any more children”.

Unmarried mothers’ problems were further compounded because the Department would not commit their babies unless the mother was “half witted” or “weak minded”. One child was committed and placed in a foster home near to her mother as, according to Seager, this “would be a very great help to make her continue in the paths of virtue”. It left her free to earn something for the baby’s maintenance although her employer did not think that she would ever earn much. On rare occasions children were made wards because departmental officials thought that, with assistance, the mother could become financially independent. However, the mother’s plans might be different. In 1903, a woman promised to go into domestic service to support her son in exchange for his committal. It seems unlikely that she intended to do so because she did not stay in one place for long. Welsh reminded her that “she must be careful, & lead a regular existence or she will bring a deal of misery and wretchedness on herself”. Soon after that she disappeared.

---

51 For instance, nine-month-old David’s mother was in the New Norfolk Asylum and although her parents looked after two children from her marriage they would have “nothing to do” with David. In another instance, a step-father was willing to support his step-daughter but would not provide a home for her ex-nuptial son, although he was eventually persuaded to pay the Department 2s 6d a week for his maintenance. SWD 1/14/914; See also 1/28/1482.
52 SWD 1/8/486.
53 SWD 1/8/535.
54 SWD 1/6/407.
55 SWD 1/8/544; 1/3/157; SWD 1/14/862.
56 SWD 1/9/597.
57 SWD 1/8/517.
Getting Help from the Department

Most mothers, given enough income and social support, would probably have wanted to raise their children themselves. However, this was seldom an option and instead, through their dealings with the Department, women tried to achieve the compromise most nearly meeting their wishes. Widows, considered to be deserving, sometimes had their children boarded-out to them, and received a sympathetic hearing if their children became 'uncontrollable'. Conversely, the Department believed that young single mothers should be able to support their babies and did not offer assistance readily. This probably persuaded many women to abandon their children because, once they had disappeared, there was no option but committals.

Between 1897 and 1899, a policy of boarding-out their own children to a few respectable widows and deserted wives at half the foster mother's allowance of 2s 6d a week was begun. The policy benefited the women because it gave them cash, which they could spend as they liked, instead of the rations and rent subsidy which the Charitable Grants Department would have provided. The arrangement saved the Department a substantial sum but for the mothers, the amount was woefully inadequate. In 1914 Edith Waterworth described the policy to the chief secretary, C. S. Ogden, as “not only unjust” but “positively cruel”. Ogden told her that it had been discontinued. Although this was not so, it seems to have diminished, women now being more likely to receive the allowance from the Charitable Grants Department. In 1912, Packer had decided that recipients of relief should receive a cash payment, instead of rations and a rent subsidy, so that there was no longer any advantage to women from boarding-out their children to them. Despite its limitations, boarding children with their mothers was a comparatively sympathetic policy. As a result, these women were more satisfied with the Department's aims and methods than other groups.

58 In 1899, the children of a widow in Recherche were boarded-out to her; the first example of this policy found in the departmental files. Another respectable widow's children were sent to the Launceston Girls Industrial School in 1897 instead of being boarded-out to her which suggests that it was not yet official policy. SWD 1/3/183-6; 1/20-1.
59 The Benevolent Society did not pay cash, presumably because it was assumed the money would be wasted, or spent on drink, and the Charitable Grants Department followed their example. Charitable Grants Department Annual Report, (1908) No. 37.
60 CSD 22/181/59/11.
61 SWD 1/21/1165.
62 Charitable Grants Department Annual Reports, (1896) No. 6; (1907) No. 35; (1908) No. 37; (1911) No. 41; (1912) No. 50.
To qualify, women had to be hard working, train their children carefully and have irreproachable morals. Few met the criteria. The best way to obtain the Department’s help was to avoid asking for it. Passivity was considered more appealing in women than forthright statements of requirements. Moreover, anyone who asked for welfare was likely to be considered lazy and so undeserving. One woman whose children were eventually boarded-out to her had refused help when her husband was killed in an industrial accident. In 1899 she was in hospital with heart disease and general debility, which, according to Seager’s information, was “consequent upon her exertions to maintain herself and family”. In putting her children first, even to the extent of damaging her health, the woman proved herself to be a good mother. By initially refusing help, she showed herself a worthy recipient of charity. Such women were probably motivated by a desire to maintain their dignity in the face of calamity. As Janet McCalman says, respectability offered the poor “some sort of psychological defence against the humiliations of insignificance and the frustrations of helplessness”.

In 1901, another widow, Mrs. Kingston, who had seven children, was a typical deserving mother. Her situation was brought to Seager’s attention by M.W. Gilleran, a Roman Catholic priest. Both he and Seager, in their recommendation to the under-secretary, made liberal use of the word “exceptional” to describe the situation, probably meaning that it was unusual for such families to seek aid. The father, formerly a tailor at a reputable Hobart clothing firm, had been “a careful & steady man & his family were much respected”. According to Seager, his widow trained her children carefully, providing the “special care required to bring up a large family in a respectable way, to make them good citizens for the future”. The widow guarded her children’s respectability carefully. When Pearce asked her if she had applied to the Benevolent Society for assistance, she said no, because “I would not like to send my children there for rations, to mix up with all sorts of children”.

---

63SWD 1/3/183-6.
65SWD 1/6/412-8.
66SWD 1/6/412-8.
Women who did not train their children according to the Department’s norms, were not eligible for the boarding-out allowance and a committal might occur without the mother’s permission. In South Burnie, Mrs. Metcalf’s three children were found to be “neglected and destitute”. They were “continually begging bread & in rags” and she was living in “a miserable, dirty, two room hut, contents valueless” with her six children. She had wanted to keep her family together and applied for assistance while her husband was in gaol. Instead of giving it to her, the children were committed. In another instance, the four children of a widow at Mathinna were committed so that she could go into domestic service. She was probably under pressure to do so since the Anglican curate had found her the position. Her house had burned down twice in one year, allegedly because she left the children alone while she talked to neighbours. The curate condemned her for carelessness: “I am not saying for a moment she is not quite respectable otherwise I would not have got her a place.-but utterly thriftless and incapable of doing for herself”. The woman was supposed to appear in court to surrender her children, but did not, so they were committed as neglected without her permission.

It was difficult for deserted wives to prove respectability. If they had initiated the desertion, or it was their fault in any way, they showed an unfeminine independence which put their morality in doubt. If the woman was deserted because of an alleged affair, the Bench could refuse to grant her maintenance and charitable relief might be refused too. A deserted wife in Queenstown claimed that her husband threatened to murder her but since there was an inference from the police that she had an affair, the children were committed. In another instance, two boys were committed to the Department because their father was in gaol for cruelty to a daughter. Their mother was living in Launceston, having deserted the father. Packer construed this as child desertion, although it is likely that the woman had good reasons for leaving. It was usually better for women to portray themselves as weak and submissive if they wanted sympathy. A deserted

---

67 SWD 1/13/803-4.  
68 (Words underlined as in the original text). SWD 1/10/675-8. Her daughter, Maude Kelly, was later adopted by an affluent family, again without the mother’s permission. See “Adopting Parents”, Chapter Seven. One of the sons was so badly beaten by his employer that the man was fined. See “Boys’ Responses to Management” in Chapter 6.  
70 SWD 1/8/530-1.  
71 SWD 1/16/994-7.
wife whose children were boarded-out to her, continually emphasised that she had been “cruelly deserted”, apparently to ensure that the secretary believed that she was the victim, not the author, of her situation.  

Departmental officials condemned child desertion because it seemed to be an abrogation of motherly love and meant that the child had to be committed and supported unless the mother could be found. Although it was usually unmarried mothers who deserted their babies, wives occasionally did so too. In 1909 Mrs. Robertson deserted her two-year-old daughter, whom she had placed with a carer. The Department suspected that she might do so because it had received an anonymous note: “Mrs. Robertson is runnin away from her baby on Tuesday morning in the expres or by the Poliena” (a boat). Police enquiries showed that she had left her position at a Hobart coffee palace. The police were asked to watch both trains and the boat. Even so Mrs. Robertson got away because shortly afterwards the Department received another anonymous note saying that she had gone to Sydney on the boat: “She was very friendly with ... the steward on bord I was a pasinger and I new her although She did not no me”. Police inquiries established that Mrs. Robertson had used an assumed name.

Some unmarried mothers never planned to raise their children. In 1904, a woman asked a Miss Heinrich to adopt baby Horace. She refused but kept him for the night. The woman never returned and Miss Heinrich took the baby to Pearce. Seager thought that the mother had hired the woman to abandon the baby. She was found and charged but the case was dismissed. The natural mother could not be traced. In 1914, before going to New Zealand, a mother paid a woman £5 to find a home for her baby.

Other babies were abandoned haphazardly. A woman gave birth to a baby on Hobart’s Domain and took him to the police, pretending that she had found him. They soon realised that she was the mother. She already had a child which she was supporting, and could not manage another one. A two-month-old girl was committed as “found wandering” after abandonment on a doorstep in Invermay, Launceston. Her mother could not earn a living.
because of a physical deformity and her own mother refused to help. The child was born at the Salvation Army Home and after she left, the mother wandered about Launceston for some hours looking for her aunt's house. A tram ride made her more lost. She told the police that:

I did not know what to do with myself or my baby. After walking some time I laid the baby on a door-mat on the verandah of a house. I knocked at the door of the house and came away leaving the baby there.

She was given a one month prison sentence, suspended on a surety of £10 and good behaviour for twelve months. 77

Under the Infant Life Protection Act, mothers were obliged to pay maintenance to their babies' foster mothers. However, most only did so for a short while, after which they disappeared.78 Children in rescue homes or industrial schools were also abandoned, but the effects were more devastating in private homes because foster mothers could not afford to support the child. As a result, they often made economies that threatened the child's life.79 Although desertion was common, mothers probably would not have done it if they could have found an alternative. Swain and Howe suggest that unmarried mothers seldom wanted to give up their children, but that unless they did, the stigma overwhelmed their lives. For unmarried mothers who wanted respectability, the only question was whether to retain some control over a child they could not raise personally.80

Private boarding-out offered the most control, but for many unmarried mothers it was financially impossible. Joseph, boarded-out in a Police Department foster home, was supported by his mother who earned 8s a week. Unable to continue the payments, she left Hobart but was found by the police when Joseph became ill and was removed from the nursing home for neglect. She was told that if she could not find another home for him, he would be committed and she would have to pay maintenance. Ill health forced her to leave her position and she had no money to pay a

77 SWD 1/23/1289.
78 SWD 1/16/972; 1/17/1033; 1/17/1025; 1/12/772; 1/14/912; 1/16/978; 1/16/961; 1/16/960; 1/17/1039; 1/21/1188.
79 SWD 1/6/394; 1/4/260; 1/9/618. When the Children's Protection Society's Home for ex-nuptial babies, Glen Dhu, closed, six children who had been abandoned by their mothers were committed to the Department. SWD 1/15/958; 1/16/959.
80 Swain and Howe, p. 123-4.
doctor. The mother begged Seager to commit the baby: "no one now the troule I have had to keep my child this last ten month hoping you will do what you can for me if you dont have petty on me have it for my child". 81 Leslie's mother had gone to Melbourne to look for work, leaving him in a foster home but had to give up her position through ill health. She suggested to the foster mother that she have him adopted, obtain maintenance from the father or appeal to the government. It would be a relief to be absolved of responsibility for the child: "I thought Things would be much different when I came over here but perhaps it all happened for the best if I do not have to pay it will give me a chance to get on my feet again". 82 Similarly, a mother boarded her baby in a Police Department home but got behind in her payments when she was unemployed for a month. She was also in debt for her own board. The foster mother went to see her and, "spoke to me very harsh on the subject". The mother told the police commissioner, J. E. C. Lord, that "if you could try and get some one to take her my baby for good I would let her go as I find it very hard to keep her and myself and pay for board". The child was committed. 83

After the Infant Life Protection Act was passed in 1907, many of the babies boarded in Police Department foster homes were deserted. 84 It seems likely that by bringing the babies within the ambit of government concern, the legislation offered unmarried mothers a new alternative for their care. Since Police Department foster mothers received no maintenance from the government, babies that were abandoned had to be transferred to the Neglected Children’s Department where the foster mothers were paid. Thus a mother could be reasonably sure that if she abandoned her baby, it would receive adequate care. If the Department did not find her, she could not be sued for maintenance. Packer believed that this was what deserting mothers thought. As a result, he resisted government moves to make the transferral of such babies automatic:

81 SWD1/14/889.
82 SWD 1/5/304.
83 SWD 1/18/1055.
84 The parentage of new committals is not always recorded in annual reports. Even so, the figures suggest that many more deserted, ex-nuptial babies were committed after the Infant Life Protection Act. The files of these children show that they were often from Police Department homes. The numbers of ex-nuptial babies committed are as follows: 1897, 1; 1902, 3; 1903, 4; 1905, 6; 1907, 6; 1908, 17; 1909, 17; 1911, 15. The Infant Life Protection Act was passed in 1907 with the first surge in committals occurring in 1908. Neglected Children's Department Annual Reports, PP (1898) No. 33; (1903) No. 36; (1904) No. 40; (1906) No. 2; (1908) No. 46; (1909) No. 51; (1910) No. 48; (1912) No. 30.
a number of unscrupulous parents...when they ascertain how easy it is to have
their children provided for, will neglect to pay the foster-mother their fees and
thus considerably add to the number of children already being maintained at the
expense of the State.85

However, the committals were unavoidable if there was no other way to
support the child.86

Some widows, deserted wives and unmarried mothers managed without
state assistance for some time. When they did surrender their children it
was usually due to difficulties with discipline, a symptom of the problems of
playing a double role. For many, repeated pregnancies, a poor diet and
poverty, along with overwork, led to exhaustion. There was little time or
energy to foster discipline by building a close and co-operative relationship
with the children. If the family was large, the mother could not supervise
them all and they might be surrendered as uncontrollable.87 It is difficult to
know how many mothers really felt that their children were uncontrollable.
Applications were often made by philanthropic organisations such as the
Benevolent Society or the City Mission. They may not have expressed the
mother’s views because they saw a disciplinary problem, while mothers
probably wanted their children placed where they could be better fed. Since
there were no provisions for children to be committed for poverty, many
justices or magistrates knowingly committed them as uncontrollable.88

The departmental records suggest that mothers’ concern about daughters
focused on their sexual morality and vulnerability. In 1897, six-year-old
Harriet was surrendered by her mother, a washerwoman, who, because she
worked from 8 am to 9 pm, could not supervise the child. According to
Pearce, she was “afraid that some harm might befall her little girl, as she is
running about the streets day after day while she...is away working”. Harriet’s
two brothers remained with their mother.89 Similarly, Emma was
committed because her mother, a domestic servant, could not supervise her.
Welsh said that the child tended to “wander about the streets aimlessly and

85SWD 1/16/978.
86For a discussion about the introduction of infant life protection legislation see Chapter 3.
87For instance, two sisters and a brother, ages nine to five were surrendered as uncontrollable
by their mother, a “poor” washerwoman in Devonport who had been deserted five or six years
ago. SWD 1/14/857-9.
88For a discussion about the committal of children as uncontrollable see “The Effect of
Financial Constraints on Departmental Definitions of Neglect” in Chapter 4.
89SWD 1/1/25.
causing her mother a deal of anxiety”. Emma was sent to St. Joseph’s Orphanage but the mother agonised over the decision, changing her mind once. In 1905, the council clerk at Westbury asked C. W. Allen, MHA, to help a widow surrender her daughter. He said:

[She was] anxious to get her daughter Anna, placed in an industrial school; you know the child, and how utterly incorrigible she is, her mother cannot do anything with her, and she is associating with the ... family and will certainly get into trouble; her behaviour to her mother is deplorably bad.

If they had sons, loutish behaviour - stealing, missing school and pilfering - became the issue. In 1908 Henry was surrendered by his mother as “uncontrollable” because he was a school truant and had two convictions for throwing stones, once at an old man. Mrs. Clark, a charwoman who had been hospitalised, wanted her sons committed because she could not control them while she was at work. Pearce said: “I know [Mrs. Clark] to be a hardworking woman. She has looked well after her children as long as her strength would allow her”.

Authorities might want a boy committed for his behaviour, while his mother was more concerned about her inability to cope financially. Three children were surrendered by their mother, a deserted wife of eight years. The father had paid 15s a week for a few months and then disappeared. Launceston’s City Missioner, T. E. Long, recommended that the twelve-year-old boy be placed in the Boys Industrial School and a manager, G. W. Shoobridge, passed the recommendation on to the Department. The mother worked in a hotel and was home only at night. She earned £1 a week and, according to Nurse Heathorn, had “very little time for her children and home, and apparently does not appear to take any care or have any control over them”. Long said that the:

little fellow runs the streets in a very dirty & ragged state, no one to care for him.
I am anxious to save him from bad companions which he is getting amongst. It is an undoubted case of neglect, & the police have spoken to me about it. I wish to save the boy from conviction of any wrongdoing.

---

90SWD 1/1/1.
91SWD /9/608.
92SWD 1/8/560.
93SWD 1/2/106.
The girls were sent to the industrial school and the boy was boarded-out. Their mother evidently saw the problem as poverty because she asked that the children be returned to her as soon as her financial situation improved.\textsuperscript{94} Tasman's mother surrendered him because she was homeless and had no income. She lived with a friend and the Benevolent Society gave her rations. The authorities feared that Tasman would be like his older brother who was serving a gaol sentence for using abusive language. Shoobridge said that:

> it is in the highest degree probable that this boy will become a burden upon the community as a criminal if he is not taken away from his present mode of life and surroundings. I am told that he has remained away from his home at night & roams the streets without proper control.\textsuperscript{95}

Undisciplined children might also be made wards of state against their mother's wishes, if proved neglected. Eric, committed from Launceston, was described as neglected because he was "found wandering and not having proper guardianship". Welsh blamed the mother for this boy's truancy:

> I consider the mother ... is to blame for her neglect of this boy-I purchased boots for the boy, and he went to school for a time regularly, but the mother exercised no control over him, and latterly, he wandered about the streets aimlessly during school hours, and could do nothing with him.\textsuperscript{96}

Vernie, who had a previous conviction for throwing stones and stealing cherries, was also committed for neglect against his mother's wishes. She was a widow and Pearce thought she set her children a bad example.\textsuperscript{97}

This chapter and the previous one show that, while widowers, widows, deserted spouses and unmarried mothers faced many constraints on their actions, they still tried to make use of a socially, culturally and economically inappropriate child welfare policy, often in ways that frustrated government officials and philanthropists. Once the children were committed to the Neglected Children's Department, parents continued to try and make the policies of the Department suit their needs and that is the topic of the next chapter. Paradoxically, even though the subject of negotiations between

---

\textsuperscript{94}SWD 1/24/1314.
\textsuperscript{95}SWD 1/1/41-2.
\textsuperscript{96}SWD 1/10/641.
\textsuperscript{97}SWD 1/1/10.
parents and the Department were the children, their views were not usually recorded at the time of their committal. A feature of children's powerlessness was the lack of adult consultation with them about decisions that affected their lives fundamentally. However, as they grew older, their opinions of their parents and the results of having been removed from them were expressed more clearly and that, too, is a topic of the next chapter.
CHAPTER TEN

"I WILL SEE THEM SOON": CHILDREN AND THEIR PARENTS AFTER COMMITTAL

To facilitate retraining and encourage assimilation with the respectable working class, officials in the Neglected Children's Department deliberately distanced parents from their children. Maintaining the filial bond was thought risky since it might allow undesirable values to be transmitted; the modern belief that knowledge of family and culture are essential to the construction of identity had little currency at the turn of the century. This policy was given legislative force by the *[Neglected Children and Youthful Offenders Act]* which provided for a penalty of up to £20 for attempting to communicate with a state ward without permission. In addition, anyone, including the parents, who removed a child without permission, or facilitated absconding, could be fined up to £10 or imprisoned for fourteen days.¹ In departmental opinion, the only significant role left to fathers, and sometimes mothers, of state children was that of paying maintenance.

Parental Contact with Children

Many parents accepted that they should maintain their children, even when unable to do so. They also wanted them to be well-behaved, attending school or apprenticed to a trade, in a safe environment, and kept away from bad company.² There were requests that children be raised in a particular religion.³ Although parents were often disparaged, such aspirations and concerns struck a chord, and the requests were usually granted. Sometimes this translated into limited access to children, and their eventual release. Robert van Krieken argues that the coincidence of values and attitudes between parents and the state was not unusual, indicating an acceptance of its policies.⁴ However, the files from the Department suggest that, while

---

¹*[Neglected Children and Youthful Offenders Act]* (1896) 60 Victoria No. 24.
²SWD 1/2/106; 1/19/1120; 1/1/1; 1/9/608; 1/15/944; 1/654-5; 1/10/644; 1/6/373-6; 1/5/271-4.
³In one instance, a single mother requested that her daughter be raised as a Catholic. The Department was about to transfer the child to a Catholic foster mother when the request was retracted. The mother claimed that she had been pressured to make it by a nun SWD 1/10/670; see also 1/5/271-4.
some parents agreed with its values, the issue was loss of authority, so that even they might not be wholeheartedly supportive. Legislation allowing the state to come between parents and children was new, and many resisted it.

Many parents had disappeared by the time the child was committed and others made little effort to stay in touch. However, some were anxious to retain parental rights and emotional bonds. One way of doing so was to ask that siblings be kept together. This coincided with departmental policy. Siblings would often be placed in the same neighbourhood, if there were no foster homes available for large families. Parents tried to keep in touch with their children by writing, visiting and eventually asking for their release.

Letter writing could sustain relations even if for many it was unfamiliar, resulting in awkward, self-conscious expression that perhaps did not convey the parent’s meaning adequately. The immediacy of communications normally conveyed through touch, body language or facial expressions were lost. A correspondence, especially a sporadic one, could not compensate for the range of emotions, memories and traditions that parents and children developed in uninterrupted relationships. Many of the letters received by the Department from one parent were written in different hands, suggesting that they could not write. At times, perhaps, the literate intermediary altered the substance of letters, further distancing parent from child. Letters might be read by a foster mother or a departmental official so that parents were guarded about the content or shaped it to gain approval. Many children found writing an onerous task, unpleasantly associated with school, and the letters they received were difficult to link with real parents. The difficulties of maintaining contact through letter writing partially explains the apparent loss of interest in their children frequently shown by parents.

Forming a good relationship with the foster mother was the best way of maintaining contact. Victor Crooks, who lived in Melbourne, had a flourishing correspondence with Mrs. Moore, his son’s foster mother and when the child was hospitalised, she let him know before telling the Department. When the boy recovered, Crooks applied successfully to have

---

5SWD 1/10/675-8.
6SWD 1/18/1058-9.
him released and asked Mrs. Moore to bring him to Melbourne, sending her fare. He thought it a pity she could not come during the Show.\(^7\)

However, natural parents, especially mothers, might resent foster mothers for usurping their role. Three children were committed in 1916 because their deserted mother could not support them. When their father joined the army, an allotment of his pay was made to them, and she applied for their return because: “if the state can pay one woman to look after them why could they not pay there mother whoes heart and sole is in them and probably can look after them better....if she only had the same mean”. The mother claimed to be worried about her children’s care, perhaps justifiably, because soon afterwards, six-year-old Irene showed her distress by destroying the other foster children’s clothing, and articles belonging to the family. The Department had to pay £5 compensation and Irene was sent to the industrial school. Her mother said that the damage was done by another child and that Irene had been mistreated. Moreover, gifts sent to her from her mother had been shared amongst the rest of the foster children. Irene’s mother told the foster mother:

```
thank God, they are out of your hand’s, you have got five pounds and my child has got seven years in the school but thank heaven she will get justice there any how and it was just as well i didnt see you, thrashing my children with a strap or they would have had my protection....may you never forget till the day you go to the grave if such is the case you were pay to mind my children\(^8\)
```

Already dissatisfied with the home, the Department deregistered it in 1919, so the complaint probably had substance.\(^9\)

Sometimes contact between parents and children was encouraged. When Clarence was committed, his mother, a destitute and hard working widow, wrote to Pearce to find out if the boy was “in good health or is he fretting”, and was reassured. A few months later, she told Seager that: “I am pleased to hear of my little Boys good conduct I hope he will always be a good Boy as he always was at home please let me know the regular time for writing”. Seager replied that: “You may have no fear respecting him for if ill or anything out of the usual should take place with him I would at once write to you”. Parents who stressed their children’s good behaviour perhaps believed that

\(^7\) SWD 1/15/949.  
\(^8\) SWD 1/24/1375.  
\(^9\) SWD 1/24/1329.
this was the best way of gaining the Department's sympathy, increasing their chances of maintaining contact, and perhaps obtaining a release. However, Clarence proved a poor correspondent, and a few months later, his mother told Seager that:

I have never had a letter since before Christmas I have written twice since then but received no answer and I am nearly crazy thinking over him as he is just as fresh today as the day he left me I no Sir he is better off but still I like to get a letter sometimes.

Pearce asked the foster mother to "insist" on a monthly letter and she was given four penny stamps. Even so the boy lost touch with his mother.\textsuperscript{10}

On the other hand, Mrs. Boswood received no encouragement to contact her children. She was refused maintenance from her husband in 1907 because of an affair and two of the children were committed to remove them from her influence.\textsuperscript{11} She asked Seager when she could send letters and her photo:

\begin{quote}
i am just writing these few lines asking your kindness if you would let me no how my two little children are getting on as it is so long since i heard of them or see them the little Dears will think I have quite forgotten them.
\end{quote}

Women accused of sexual indiscretions were considered unsuitable correspondents. Mrs. Boswood was told that the children were in good health and happy, but was not encouraged to write.\textsuperscript{12}

Women who deserted their families, even if the husband was violent, were also discouraged. Mrs. Paling, who had left such a marriage, probably knew this and hoped that she could evoke the foster mother's sympathy and support:

\begin{quote}
Just a few lines just to see reazen why you havant ancere tow letter witch i sent i cant make it out as promish so faitfull to right and let me knowe how children are getten on as i nealy weared me self to death i can sleep of night thinking and i do hope trust you will ancer this as soon as you get this...how are my to Darling little boys getten on as it is Bertie birthday to day and i have bean thinking of him all day kiss him for me and wish him meaney happy returns of Day.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{10}SWD 1/9/602. When she requested his release a few years later, he had been adopted by his foster mother. See "Adoption by Foster Mothers" in Chapter 7.

\textsuperscript{11}For a discussion of maintenance see "The Desertion of Mothers and Children by Fathers" in Chapter 8.

\textsuperscript{12}SWD 1/11/717-8.
The letter was given to Packer, who asked the Launceston police to tell Mrs. Paling that the foster mother had been told not to answer, and that if she wanted information she must contact him.13

Many parents attempted to visit their children and the Department issued orders for this as long as there was no “trouble”.14 Sometimes visits encouraged friendships between natural and foster parents. Mrs. King corresponded with the father of her three foster sons while he was away working and sometimes invited him for curry and rice when he was in Launceston.15 There may have been many similar instances which never came to the Department’s attention. However, because foster mothers could be in competition with natural parents for parental rights, the relationship had the potential for conflict. In addition, some foster mothers found the visits time consuming or the visitors unappealing. One mother visited her baby girl so often that the foster mother requested her transferral because, according to Pearce, the inquiring officer, she “could not stand being worried with the mother coming about so much”. Seager told her to obtain a letter of permission which Pearce approved because potential foster mothers might be deterred if they had to “throw their houses open to so many callers”.16 Mrs. Mooney asked Pearce to transfer Eva and Albert because their father worked at a nearby hotel and visited his children when drunk.17 Problems were caused by a father who visited his son, aged two, without an order. According to Pearce he “carried a very high hand”, refusing to leave, or acknowledge the Department’s authority, when the foster mother told him the visit was illegal. Pearce suggested that the man should be warned of the penalties for abducting a state ward. Instead Seager told him that if he could support the child he could have custody. The man, who had not paid his wife maintenance, disappeared.18

Children’s visits to relatives were forbidden. In December 1908, a widow asked if her son could come home for Christmas because his grandmother was seriously ill. She offered to pay his fare. Visits home were usually thought too risky because of the danger of bad influences and absconding. In this instance the police agreed being:

13SWD 1/16/994-7.
14SWD 1/14/884.
15SWD 1/11/710-2.
16SWD 1/14/883.
17SWD 1/4/253-4.
18SWD 1/14/898.
of the opinion that the lad would be better off in the home than with the mother, because she being in poor circumstances, the boy would naturally not be under proper control, and would almost assuredly drift into bad habits.

Seager told the widow that a visit would "very much unsettle the lad". He added: "If you have money to spare for trips I will be glad if you will make donations towards the cost of your children's maintenance which costs the taxpayers 10s per week". By 1916 this policy had been relaxed. A widower, who had surrendered his three girls because he could not support them, asked if they could go home to Scottsdale for a week's holiday. The inspecting nurse agreed because "they are rather delicate looking children, & a trip to the country may do them good".

Occasionally parents helped the Department by returning children who had absconded home. In contrast, others made illegal attempts to see them. Unsupervised walks to and from school provided one opportunity. Mrs. Whelan, the widow whose story was told in the introduction to this thesis, regularly stopped her children between school and home and was warned that there was a prison sentence of up to fourteen days for interference with a ward. In June 1908, Mrs. Boswood, earlier discouraged from sending her photo and letters, abducted her daughter on the way home from school in West Hobart. She lived nearby and was, according to Pearce, "well known to the police", associating with "bad characters and Prostitutes". Pearce thought that if the mother interfered again the child should be placed in the outer suburbs. In 1912, Mrs. Boswood began picking up her son from school without permission. Like Mrs. Whelan, she was threatened with proceedings because Packer thought it was "a great pity for the boy to be upset, as he is, I believe the makings of a good boy".

Such interceptions threatened the Department's effectiveness because they unsettled children, making them less amenable to training. There was also a risk that the relative or parent would make deliberate trouble. Annie and Vernie's godmother stopped them on their way to school, later telling Seager that although they looked well clad and fed, Annie had some.

---

18SWD 1/11/968.
19SWD 1/27/1442-4; for a discussion of these children's committal see "Single Fathers" in Chapter 8.
20SWD 1/15/955; For the full Whelan story see the introduction to this thesis.
21SWD 1/11/717-8.
bruising. Vernie said his back was “very sore” but would not take off his coat. Pearce examined the children but found no injuries. He said that the foster mother “appeared to be very much annoyed that such a false statement should be made. I had a lot of trouble to stop her and the four children from crying. When they saw Mrs. Blakey cry they all started”.24

Parents and Maintenance

The government’s persistent budgetary difficulties, with the resulting political pressure, made maintenance collection crucial.25 In addition, departmental officials wanted to teach parents their social responsibilities. The Neglected Children and Youthful Offenders Act made parents, step-parents and putative fathers liable to pay maintenance of up to 10s a week. If two or more people had responsibility for the child, payments could be 12s a week. The amount was fixed by the committing justices who had to take into account the family’s financial situation, although proof of inability to pay lay with the parent. The very poor could apply for a dispensation from, suspension of, or reduction in payments. Payment defaults could result in a prison sentence of one to three months, depending on the size of the debt, which still had to be paid when the sentence was finished.26

The Department had difficulty collecting maintenance for various reasons. Some parents were too poor to pay it and, as has been suggested, others were unwilling because they associated the financial support of their family with parental or familial rights which were lost.27 Until 1910, and the passage Interstate Destitute Persons Act, there was little the Department could do if the parents went interstate.28 Seager believed that fathers deliberately deserted their children so that they would be committed and that they only “ostensibly” left the state to find work.29

25 For instance, in October 1908 when the parliamentary vote of £3155 for the Neglected Children’s Department was debated, Herbert Payne, MHA (Burnie) asked if intemperate, but fully employed men on the North-West coast, were expected to pay maintenance. Payne believed that men who spent their earnings on drink instead of their families should be “brought to book”. The premier said that the police pursued this matter adequately. The Mercury reported the question on 15 October 1908 and a clipping was attached to the files of a family from Burnie whose father was considered lazy and alcoholic. SWD 1/13/803-4
26 Neglected Children and Youthful Offenders Act.
27 SWD 1/19/1090-4.
28 Interstate Destitute Persons Act (1910) 1 George V No. 55.
29 For a discussion of fathers and desertion see “Single Fathers” in Chapter 8.
Maintenance was also difficult to obtain from fathers who remained in Tasmania. If wages were garnisheed, a man might be dismissed, causing further loss of payments.\textsuperscript{30} The law provided for a prison sentence for non-compliance, but that led to a period without wages. Moreover, the stigma of going to gaol, combined with the interruption in work, reduced employment prospects after release. At best, finding work took time and much travelling. Once it was found, new clothes might be needed and bedding purchased. Bills for rent, board, laundering and mending had to be paid.\textsuperscript{31} Other accumulated debts had to be met. As one man who had been in prison said, with high maintenance payments he might "be driven to do that which is not right".\textsuperscript{32} Leniency was sometimes the only way the Department had of obtaining its money. In 1915, a "hard working", "temperate" and "honest" father was allowed to work off his debt after an appeal from his employer to the premier, John Earle.\textsuperscript{33}

Amongst single fathers, poor health, resulting in low income, was often the reason for committals. It remained an impediment to the children’s support. One father, described as a "feeble old man", could only earn 3s 9d a day.\textsuperscript{34} Another, supposed to pay 2s 6d a week for his daughter, only worked four hours a day because of poor health. In August 1907, perhaps to evade a persistent Department, he sold all his furniture and went to New Zealand, owing £4 15s 6d.\textsuperscript{35} Foiled by inadequate legislation and the poverty of its clients, officials become increasingly intrusive in their attempts to collect maintenance. Robert Marsh, whose four children were committed for neglect, could not keep up his 15s a week payments because of ill health. According to a police report, he was "as weak as a cat", and earned 10s to 12s weekly. A neighbour, provided him with free lodging which led to rumours of marriage. Pearce urged its prevention as "he is only likely to bring further trouble upon himself. And possibly a further charge upon the state". At Seager’s request, he threatened Marsh with the children’s return if he remarried. Marsh wrote:

Sir I beg to inform you that at present I have no intention of getting married to Miss Mazey or anyone else until such time as I can keep my children in a proper

\begin{footnotes}
\item [30] SWD 1/12/794.
\item [31] SWD 1/1/2-7.
\item [32] SWD 1/1/43-7.
\item [33] CSD 22/203/139/18/15.
\item [34] SWD 1/12/798-801.
\item [35] SWD 1/10/674.
\end{footnotes}
manner it grieved me very much to have the government to keep my children as i am very fond of them and will do all i can to support them.

The letter resulted in better relations and the payments were remitted.36

Other commitments could also preclude payments. A husband who supported a wife in the New Norfolk Asylum and two young children in private care, had erratic employment. His three sons were committed and he was ordered to pay 2s 6d a week for them. He travelled all over northwest Tasmania looking for work, finding little. In the new year, he went to Williamstown, Victoria, for the wheat loading season but did not earn much because “a new chum like me dont get much work”. By now his arrears were £13 15s 7d, but £2 a month was all he could pay off them. A visit by two policemen to his boarding house upset him: “i did not think it would come to that i dont want them comeing to my Boarding house it dont look well....i dont want to do time in jaol it would never do it would breake me up”. In March, the wheat loading was finished and he went up country to find work. Seager said that he had paid “to the best of his ability”, while in Tasmania. Since the Department had no jurisdiction in Victoria the order was cancelled.37

The difficulties of paying maintenance, and the necessity of avoiding the Department, may have caused the rift between this man and his children. At first he had a good relationship with them. He was the father who used to visit Mrs. Large for curry and rice. In February 1910, he asked Welsh, the inquiring officer, to tell her to get the boys to write a letter: “i will shout for the one that writes the best...i hope to see them soon and be good boys how is nugget Michael getting on with his songs also William with the Black Crow Daniel with his books.” However, the children’s letters dwindled and when the father left Williamstown he wrote, “tell Daniel i will send him some man ferns some day tell them i will see them soon”. He probably never saw them; there are no more letters and by 1913 he could not be found.38

Alcoholism was reputed to cause fecklessness but its extent, as a cause of non-payment, is difficult to gauge since the Department discovered it on meagre evidence. Robert Marsh, mentioned earlier, had been accused of

36SWD 1/4/251-2.
37SWD 1/11/710-2.
38SWD 1/11/710-2.
drinking during his dispute with the Department over maintenance. His protest that “i am not of intemperate habits as stated in your report and i am very sorry that people should belie me to you”, was ignored, until the police reported that they had never seen him drunk and that he only visited pubs to keep people company. If a man was unemployed it was often assumed that alcoholism was the cause. If he found work, his character was reassessed. Frank Farnell, a widower, was arrested in 1897 for deserting his six children. He was described as a “drunkard”, although the desertion was probably caused by unemployment, and was ordered to pay 3s 4d a week for each child. In 1898 he found work at a bakery and his wages were soon increased because he was a “steady” and “attentive” worker. Even so he could not pay the £58 1s 10d he now owed the Department, partly because he was paying off a daughter’s funeral. His character was reassessed and the debt was remitted.

Although mothers were also expected to pay maintenance for their children, there are few examples in the Department’s files. Unmarried mothers came under the Police Department’s auspices and their children only became state wards if the mother did not support them. Thus there was little point in the Neglected Children’s Department pursuing them. Beyond that, since it was not conventional for women to support their children, there was more tolerance of failures to do so.

Local authorities were reluctant to press women for maintenance. A court refused to make an order against a mother, although the police thought that she could afford it. Another woman, already in debt and earning a meagre wage as a housekeeper, was pressed for maintenance. The police took the money but told Seager that:

I beg to explain that I did not wish to take this money from Mrs. Kelly as I was given to understand that she had to get an advance of wages from her mistress to pay it but it was at her express desire that I took charge of it.

---

40 SWD 1/1/2-7.
41 SWD 1/6/419-10.
42 SWD 1/10/615-8.
Children’s Release from the Department

Many parents were keen to have their children released because they missed them, wanted their parental rights restituted and the erasure of the stigma of having a child in state care. Children could be released by an order of the governor-in-council after a recommendation from the secretary. If there was uncertainty about the parents’ suitability, children could live with them but remain a state ward, theoretically as a safeguard. The Neglected Children and Youthful Offenders Act was precise about the reasons for committing children but did not set out rules for their release, increasing the potential for prejudiced decisions. Although children were ostensibly committed for moral, not economic reasons, their release usually depended on the parents’ material circumstances, as well as moral criteria. In towns, the advice of the inspecting officer or nurse was sought and in rural areas, that of the police or magistrate. Local opinion about particular families probably coloured the official view and affected the outcomes of applications.

Since single parenthood was the most common underlying cause of children’s committals, remarriage or reconciliation was the usual reason for their return. One widow considered marriage solely on the grounds that her offspring would be returned. The Department often did release children, sometimes with the provision that the new couple sign an undertaking to care for them. In 1914, a washerwoman, earlier described as living in “poor circumstances”, remarried. Her husband was earning £2 10s a week which enabled her to secure her daughter’s release. A widow, who had struggled to support her family by selling fish, also remarried, and her five children, who had been boarded-out to her, were discharged. She thanked Packer and his staff for “the way you have always treated us”.

Children could also be released to previously separated parents, if they signed an agreement to live together and support the family. Vernie Webster’s children were committed to the Department when he separated from his wife in February 1913. By June they were reconciled and he applied

---

43 Neglected Children and Youthful Offenders Act.
44 SWD 1/10/615-8.
45 For instance, when one woman remarried, her daughter was placed with her although she was not discharged. The couple signed an undertaking to care for the child. SWD 1/1/33.
46 SWD 1/14/857-9; for an account of this child and her siblings’ committals see “Getting Help from the Department” in Chapter 9.
47 SWD 1/14/872-7.
48 CSD 22/155/25/1/12.
for the children: “I am goning to tell you that I am a changed man I nither
drink or do any bad things I have gave all bad haburts up”. The police
reported that Webster lived in a “good” five-roomed furnished cottage and
had twelve months employment, at 7s a day. He signed an agreement to
support his children and ensure day and Sunday school attendance, to “in
every way to look after them as a parent should do”. They were sent home.
Within a few months, the parents quarrelled and wanted to return them,
but the secretary refused.49

Divorce was only available to women who had been deserted for two years
and was expensive; difficulties which led many women to form de facto
marriages.50 In the Department’s early days officials disapproved strongly. A
woman in Queenstown, deserted by her husband while the baby was young,
formed a de facto relationship with another man who supported them. An
older child had been privately adopted when the woman’s first husband
died and was committed when she was abandoned by her adoptive mother.
The woman applied for her release but the police thought that the de facto
relationship indicated her unsuitability, so the secretary refused.51 Over
time the obstacles to legal remarriage were acknowledged and official
condemnation of de facto marriages diminished. In 1908 the police
recommended the return of some children to a Zeehan woman whose de
facto husband worked as a miner for £2 10s a week. He had supported her
and five children since their desertion seven years before. The police said
the woman’s reputation was good and that the de facto relationship was
mitigated by her circumstances. In 1906, another policeman had described
her character as “not what it should be” because of the de facto relationship,
thus illustrating the subjectivity of police judgments. The children were not
discharged. However, by 1922 attitudes had altered sufficiently for some girls
to be released to their mother even though she was not legally married. She
too was deserted with a large family and supported by her new partner ever
since. The police described the couple as “hard working, industrious people”.52

---

49 SWD 1/19/1104; for another example of a widower who remarried and whose children were returned to him see “Single Fathers” in Chapter 8.
50 The grounds for divorce were not extended until 1919. Matrimonial Causes Act (1860) 24 Victoria No. 13; Matrimonial Causes Act (1874) 28 Victoria No. 4; Matrimonial Causes Act (1919) 10 George V No. 65.
51 SWD 1/9/582.
52 SWD 1/36/1873-4.
Such releases might go badly. Sometimes separation had damaged children’s relationships with their natural parents or they did not get on with their step-parents. In 1915, nine-year-old Eva’s single mother married. She told Eva’s foster mother that, “with God’s help having won a good husband in spite of all the past I mean to live so that no one need be ashamed of knowing me”. She asked for the child but was refused. In 1916 the secretary decided, without recording his reasons, to release Eva. However, the step-father would not support her. In 1917 the mother asked the Department to take her back because he refused to have her in the house. The step-father was “as changeable as the wind he agreed to have her as I told you But now he says if she stops he goes out & I can do the best I can with her”. The man told the Department that his wife was unable to work, and that because of unemployment he was dependent on his father. There were four other young children and he was “not in a position to keep myself let alone a child that has no claim on me”. Eva was sent to the industrial school.

At times the Department was obstinate and unreasonable. The three Metcalf children were committed for begging while their father served a month’s gaol sentence for larceny in 1908. Two weeks later, the father, released from prison and employed, with a four-roomed cottage, applied for their return. A few “respectable” residents agreed to make sure that he kept his promise to support them. The application was refused. In August 1909, the father made another, claiming that he was in constant work as a wood cutter. However, the police constable said that the hut was not fully furnished and the three children at home were “not well cared for, being barefooted ragged and dirty”. The application was refused again. There were further ones in September, October and November, all unsuccessful. In September the children’s grandfather requested their release, which was also refused. In a subsequent letter he said that the police superintendent had encouraged him to write because he thought that the children should be with their parents. The schoolmaster did not think them neglected; some children in the district were better dressed, many more were worse, and the Metcalf ones looked well fed. The police said the children had been committed because their house had only two rooms but, “I pointed out to Mr Weston [the police superintendent] this morning that I could find a dozen famelys living in two rooms in Burnie with 6 & 7 children he said he well knew it”.

---

53 SWD 1/18/1062.
Still his grandchildren were not released. Yet Seager knew that poverty was too widespread to be tackled by committing children.

Occasionally children were discharged because a departmental official thought that a mother would be the better influence. In 1905 Welsh wanted to return two brothers, one of whom was “painfully addicted to masturbation & exposing his person”. The mother agreed to take them but only if she was allowed 2s 6d a week. Seager was afraid that charitable assistance had “stultified her efforts to hit out for herself and children”, offering to return them without assistance. She agreed: “It was a terrible shock to me, to hear of the dreadful habit-he has contracted. I cannot understand it - before I parted with them he was the more easily managed child of the two and more affectionate”. She tried to get financial help from her brother but was only able to take the boy causing the concern.

Children's Perspectives

Many parents particularly wanted their children back when they reached school leaving age, because they needed their wages or help at home. However, departmental officials tended to see the parents as mercenary and feared that the work of moral training would be undone, so were reluctant to return the children. Seager complained about the:

trouble of parents who have neglected their children so as to compel the state to take up their duties and when the children become of an age to be useful suddenly developing great interest in their unfortunate children which frequently leads to interference with the boys' employers and the return of the boy to his former surroundings is one of the great evils that neglected children's departments all over the world have to encounter.

Departmental officials might think that the children were better off without their parents but the children seldom agreed. They did not usually make judgements according to the Department’s moral code or see their parents' interest in them as mercenary, sometimes expressing a desire to help. If the

---

54 For a discussion of these children's committal see “Getting Help from the Department” in Chapter 9.
55 SWD 1/9/570-1.
56 CSD 22/89/133/05.
opportunity arose, most state children apparently wanted to go home. Some initiated the move and maintained a steady campaign.

Disruptive behaviour could occasionally result in a release. One girl, described as "disagreeable and dishonest" was returned to her parents, who were thought "respectable people and not very poor", to see if they could make better progress. More usually, such protests had a counter-productive effect. Frances, committed in 1908, when she was nine, maintained contact with her mother and, in 1917, asked Addison for her release saying, "I do so want to go home I havn been home for 9 or 10 years. A long time". A police report from Queenstown, where the mother lived, described her as poor and living in a de facto relationship, "the surroundings would not tend to improve her morally, or socially". Addison resolved against the release. He wanted to explain why in person, but Frances would not come into town:

I dont see why I should be refused whilst others have been allowed to go home to their parents besides I am quite capable of looking after myself & what is more I am not going to stay here I am going to leave as soon as I am able to please myself & wish I had gone home without asking if I might & then I would have been sure of it.

Addison warned that absconding would lead to arrest. Moreover, "in all probability you would regret having returned home if you saw the condition of things there". In response, Frances absconded twice, spending the night with a soldier the second time, possibly the most rebellious act she could imagine. She was sent to the New Town Charitable Institution. When the soldier wrote to her, the police warned him that, as a state ward, she "was not allowed to communicate with young men". Frances was eventually sent to the Magdalen Home, where she became a Catholic, which seems to have softened the secretary's heart. He wrote to Queenstown, planning to send her home, but her mother had moved to Broken Hill.

Martin was boarded-out when his unmarried mother was hospitalised and when she recovered the older brother was sent home to help her. Although Martin's committal had also been temporary, Seager decided to retain him to "save him from a downward career". In 1903 Martin absconded from his apprenticeship on Bruny Island, because he wanted to go home, and when

---

57SWD 1/16/994-7.  
58SWD 1/12/786.
he was found, Seager used his mother's concern for his safety to apply moral pressure:

> Your conduct has been a source of grief to your mother also and she has been out several times to see as to where you had gone to. I was pleased therefore to be able to tell her that you had returned to your service and intended to be a good boy for the future.

Martin absconded again in 1904, and several times in 1905. The last time, his employer thought he was "sure to make for his mother" but he did not.\(^{59}\)

It was usually employers who told the Department that their apprentices did not want any contact with their parents. It was said that Grace did not want to return to her father because he had "taken no interest in her welfare during the last nine years". He was told not to "interfere" with his daughter.\(^{60}\) Such statements by employers must be doubted because they often did not want to give up the child. John's mother surrendered him in 1907 because she could not support him and in 1920, when he was apprenticed, she wrote, inviting him to come home. His employer said that he did not want to go, asking: "What kind of a person is she? She must be rather a queer sort, she deserted him in his infancy & now when he is grown up she would like to get him to work for her". Yet she did not allow John to write to his mother, presumably in case he changed his mind. The mother was warned that legal action would be taken if she contacted him again.\(^{61}\)

In 1909, Ruby ran away after Mrs Connor intercepted a letter to Pearce asking permission to visit her sister. According to Ruby, her ears were boxed and she was sent to her bedroom, kept there and not given any food the next day. She was told that she had to be chastised over the letter because Pearce did not want her to go about the streets. Mrs. Connor said that Ruby had locked herself in the bathroom, then slid down a drainpipe and escaped. Both stories are probably true, with each preferring to highlight the other's faults. Ruby was sent to the Magdalen Home and her sister applied for her return. Her version of Ruby's childhood suggested that state children's fates were a lottery:

\(^{60}\)SWD 1/12/778.
\(^{61}\)SWD 1/11/741-2.
I suppose you know we are orphans with no mother to look after us, we where all parked I am glad to say, I got a good home and I am now married, but my Dear sister as had nothing but trouble, & now I am in a position to be able to keep her.

Since Ruby was a protestant, she could not stay in the Magdalen Home and was released to her sister.\textsuperscript{62}

Some children were confused by their parents' overtures to them, possibly because of conflicting advice. In 1909, a widow surrendered her three children because she was poor and by 1914 she was married, living in Victoria and wanted them home. Addison set police inquiries in motion but they were slow and in 1915 the mother visited the eldest child, Myrtle, who was apprenticed. Myrtle's employer protested that there had been:

some underhand work going on as regards Myrtle leaving here. I have had information given me from outside sources that should the Government not give permission to the Mother to take charge of the girl, that she, Myrtle intends running away.

Since the visit Myrtle had “been most unsettled & unsatisfactory in her behaviour”. She was reminded by the police that, as a state ward, she could not leave her employer and her mother was told that the release was being investigated but while the children were wards, “anyone inducing them to abscond, or otherwise misconduct themselves, is liable to prosecution“. The Victorian police found the marriage to be de facto and that the couple was too poor to support any more children. The release was refused, as was the following application. Myrtle changed her mind about going home, attacking her mother for being unmarried and wanting her home “to keep another man's kids”. Her mother replied that her husband was “quite able to keep them himself” and that “as for me not being married to Mr Mansfield I am as much married to him as I was to your father“. She continued, “I intend to come over & make you come home & you may be glad to come to Mr B. house yet & you may be glad of your mother before you are 18”. Myrtle was not returned although by the age of twenty, she was living in Victoria and planning to get married.\textsuperscript{63}

**Children's Identity**

The legislators of the *Neglected Children and Youthful Offenders Act* intended some loss of original identity to eradicate what they believed to be

\textsuperscript{62}SWD 1/2/140.
\textsuperscript{63}SWD 1/14/857-9.
a pauper morality. The Department, by refusing to board children with relatives, other than grandparents or mothers, placed a low priority on children's family connections. Some state wards who did not know their parents, became preoccupied with their origins. For them, as for everyone, family stories, culture, a sense of belonging, and hereditary characteristics were an essential part of identity formation so that the loss was of both relatives and self-knowledge. The children's grief was perhaps more profound because they could only imagine life with their natural families and idealise it. A great fear was that parents had disappeared because they did not want their children. When children inquired about their origins, the Department often had little to tell them. It was not until the 1950s that sustained efforts were made to find out more. Departmental officials were sometimes unwilling to say much in case the information was unsettling.

Curiosity about their families usually became apparent when state wards reached young adulthood. Lena, committed at eleven months, after she was abandoned with an aunt by her parents, thought for many years that her foster mother was her natural mother. By the time she was twenty-three, she had been told the truth, and wanted to know the names of her real parents. She also planned to leave her foster mother's home and use her own name, thus establishing her identity in other ways. She was not given much information and two years later asked for more, but was not told anything new.64

Ignorance of origins could cause real anxiety. According to her husband, Bessie had been told by her employer that "she picked her up in the gutter which is not a very nice thing to have said about one's wife". Addison was reassuring to a point. Both Bessie's parents were dead and she was living with a poor aunt when taken over by the Department. If she had not gone to that place she would have gone to another. In short, she was rescued, but by the Department, not her employer.65

Self-identity could be helped by the discovery of a sibling. When she was eighteen, Eleanor asked if she had a sister named Jane, because she had a slight memory of her. Seager knew of the sister but could not tell her anything else. Eleanor requested information about her mother but was

---

64 SWD 1/10/662.
65 SWD 1/13/806.
wary about being told too much: "I would like you to give me advice about my mother as I would not like to bother about her only for my sister".66

Finding the natural family did not necessarily mean rejecting the foster home. At eighteen, Ray, an ex-nuptial boy committed from Detention because an Anglican clergyman thought he was getting insufficient training, asked for information. His mother had remarried and he had a sister. At the end of his apprenticeship he went to stay with his foster mother before going on to work for his uncle.67

Since the Department often had little information or was unwilling to impart it, preoccupation with origins could become a life long matter. David, an ex-nuptial child, was committed when he was fourteen-months-old. In 1934, when he was twenty-one, he asked the inspector, the names and addresses of his relatives and why he was committed to the Department. Charles Seager said that the birth had not been registered and the mother’s whereabouts were unknown. David was surrendered by his Police Department foster mother because his own mother was expecting another baby. The inspector was told to use his discretion in what he told David. Since “he had turned out a good lad”, might have been afraid of unsettling or hurting him, because he said very little. David did not ask again until 1954 when Patterson, now the secretary, made an “exhaustive” search. The birth of a half-brother was registered but he was never committed to the Department, so there was no other record of him. The mother apparently never married.68

James, committed in 1910, when he was two-years-old, perhaps articulates the feelings of state wards who did not know their origins. He had affectionate, competent care and eventually completed an apprenticeship as a bricklayer but always wondered about his parents, considering himself “a bit of a mystery man”. As a young adult he asked for information about them because:

its pretty hard on a chap when he can’t find his mother nor father, not even seen them, ive often wondered for hours why they have never troubled to look for me, then again I think that they are looking for me & can’t find me, as I’d give the

---

66SWD 1/7/474. For an account of Bessie’s mother see “Strategies for Survival” in Chapter 9.
67SWD 1/14/888.
68SWD 1/20/1148.

249
world to find them or even to see them if they didn’t want me...No one thinks much of a man when he says he’s 25 years old & never saw his mother nor father in his life. 69

Poor children were committed to the state in an attempt to eradicate pauper culture, which many, mostly middle-class, people thought was caused, not by an inegalitarian economy but by childhood experiences. Yet as the chapters in this final section show, although many parents differed with the Department over the best way to raise children, others agreed, at least partly, although they lacked the economic resources to implement their views. For them, the issue was not differences over values and attitudes, but frustration at the loss of parental rights. Those parents who did not disappear, went to considerable lengths to maintain contact, potential control, and so the original identity, of their offspring. While some children learned to criticise their parents, the number who wished to go home, or at least find out more about their origins, is striking. Thus although separation from families and the retraining of children undermined their original identity, a few sought it, with some success.

69 SWD 1/14/898. James’ father “carried a very high hand” with the boy’s foster mother soon after his committal. See “Parental Contact with Children” in this chapter.