

Conclusion

Family Experiments concentrates upon the experience of five middle-class professional families, whose individual and collective experiences, in Melbourne and Christchurch, constitute a small strand in the fabric of Australasian family and social history. It is a strand, however, which for a brief period at the end of the nineteenth century exercised considerable influence upon the wider understandings of family that were beginning to emerge throughout Australasia.

The years between 1880 and 1914 were transitional ones in the history of the middle-class family in Britain and Australasia. Changes in the legal position of women within marriage, greater access to higher education and, in New Zealand and Australia, the extension of the franchise to women were achievements that owed much to middle-class advocacy. Within Britain's aspirant professional generation that came to maturity in the 1870s, support for these reforms came to be seen as touchstones of progressive thought. They could be pursued as ends in themselves or form the basis of a wider set of expectations. We see these expectations take their most idealised form in the writing of Julia Wilding in the years before her marriage and departure for New Zealand. Put simply, she regarded the individual family as the fulcrum of social progress. The domestic world thus became a potentially transformative one, in which children and the full realisation of their individual talents became the focus of a family life whose objective was the cultivated and socially useful citizen. This is not to imply that this high-minded idealisation of the family is indicative of the shared aspirations of the generation of middle-class professionals represented in the five families of this study. Rather, it is employed here as a fixed point against which we may attempt to characterise how a group of professional families sought to negotiate the circumstances of time and place to give effect to a range of aspirations within their colonial families.

The liberalism of the Wildings was that of England's provincial professional middle class. It was grounded in a strongly moral stand opposing what it believed to be a decadent and moribund aristocracy, against which it posited its own social usefulness and industry. For many, like Julia and Frederick Wilding, proclaiming liberal principles became a form of secular evangelism. In the mid-1870s, disenchantment with liberalism's immediate English prospects bred a gospel of hope, in which the British settler societies became potential sites for social betterment. Viewed in this way, migration came to be couched in optimistic and experimental terms; experimental in the sense that for the Wildings and families like them a return to the known world of family and friends, whatever its frustrations, remained a safety valve. The sense of family experiment varies in proportion to the security of middle-class status; some could afford the luxury of experiment more than others. For Orme and Mary Masson, the risk of failure was mitigated by the strength of their 'long' Scottish families and the relative security offered by the university framework in which migration occurred. Neither the resources of his Scottish family nor academic credentials that fell short of his best hopes provided John Macmillan Brown with much scope for experiment, and it was 10 years after his arrival in New Zealand and at the age of 38 that he married.

The migrations and motivations of Henry Higgins and Alexander Leeper are grounded in Irish circumstances. They invoke family in ways that speak to issues of individual and collective survival within a deeply religious framework. Nothing better exemplifies this context than Henry Higgins's sea voyage to Australia with his mother and his younger siblings. It marks off Henry's Irish childhood from his Australian adulthood and his emergence as the *de facto* male head of household in ways that defined his subsequent relationship with his mother and siblings and prefigured the role he later adopted within his extended Australian family. Whereas Higgins's understanding of family was already shedding the Methodism of his parents, religion remained a central dynamic for Alexander Leeper. He made his way to Australia as an envoy of his concerned parents, in the quest for his prodigal elder brother, who had departed hastily for Australia in 1866. Alexander's subsequent return to Ireland and the ultimately more considered decision to emigrate and marry in Australia were constructed within the terms of Anglican religiosity in which his family was steeped. The marriage he envisaged would be one which would

take its shape within a spiritual haven maintained by an idealised and saintly wife, in which reciprocal obligations and loyalties protected individuals from the vicissitudes of life.

By any assessment, the families observed here must be judged significant contributors to the colonial societies they joined. The broad features of their individual stories suggest rapid acceptance within an emerging middle-class elite and steadily improving financial circumstances. Residences within or adjacent to the University of Melbourne shielded the Leepers and the Massons from the economic pressures of the housing market and provided an impeccable middle-class address. For them, as for John Macmillan Brown, acceptance within the colonial middle-class elite was determined by their roles within the emergent colonial university. Unqualified respect for the intellectual was rarely a feature of colonial life, but as the first generation of a recognisable British institution, they found ready acceptance within a small educated elite of Melbourne and Christchurch. For John Macmillan Brown, this rapidly acquired status and acceptance was marked in the public acclamation of his marriage to Helen Connon, the Headmistress of Christchurch Girls' High School. If status came more readily than wealth for academic families, the two marched in unison in the lives of the legal families.

Status was not simply a matter of occupation or wealth. The establishment of the Wilding family indeed suggests that there were other pathways to acceptance within colonial society that lay outside these crude determinants. Just as the universities conferred instant status upon their earliest generations of British professors, so did the fledgling sporting and cultural fraternities offer opportunities for talented enthusiasts such as Frederick and Julia Wilding to emerge as prominent figures within an urban middle-class circle with the time and money to pursue leisure activities. Within a decade of their arrival Frederick's talents as cricketer, tennis player, sports administrator and games advocate had made him arguably the city's best-known sporting figure and certainly its most enthusiastic supporter. Talent as a performance pianist allowed Julia Wilding to carve out a significant role within the city's musical community. Their range of activity drew them into a cluster of overlapping interest groups and secured their place within the city's social elite.

It is fashionable to describe the integration of migrant British families into settler societies in terms that invoke the idea of networking. Such a description implies a greater degree of deliberation and forethought than is perhaps justified. Clearly, however, as a fragment of the British professional class establishing itself throughout the Empire, the five families of this study encountered few impediments as they made their way in colonial society. Of the 18-year-old Henry Higgins alone could it be said that the ethnic and religious connections available to him on arrival proved of limited value. Such networks as aided his passage into the established middle class emerged within the framework of his academic study. It is there, for example, that he began to understand the nature of colonial liberalism alongside his fellow student Alfred Deakin. He later turned to Deakin for advice before entering politics, and it was Deakin who appointed him to the Commonwealth Arbitration Court in 1906. The Masson and Leeper families negotiated their linkages with middle-class society from the university environment they shared. Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the social relationships of the three Melbourne families was its interconnectedness. Nowhere is this better represented than by the 'Heronswood Push', a self-conscious imitation of working-class city gangs, in which the teenage Masson, Leeper and Higgins children entertained themselves in mildly bohemian ways. The 'Push' links between the three families flowed through to the old world university years at Oxford, where Mervyn Higgins and Allen Leeper were at Balliol College, and Rex Leeper in New College, and at the University of Edinburgh where Irvine Masson studied.

There is similarity and difference in the ways the two Christchurch families slotted into the small but expanding enclave of educated British professionals beginning to assert an influence in civic affairs. Their occupations alone gave them entry to the clubs and organisations that were defining the city's cultural and political life. Talent and enthusiasms provided the basis for communities of interests that brought together clusters of like-minded individuals and families. In this context the Wildings and the Macmillan Browns found common cause in the campaign for higher education for girls and the enfranchisement of women. Here, too, the city's brand of liberalism was taking root. Its chief definer was William Pember Reeves, a young lawyer and journalist, who as neighbour, friend and fellow cricketer inducted the Wildings into the more interventionist

aspects of colonial liberalism. When Reeves called the big landowners 'social pests', he spoke in terms that sat comfortably within the liberal lexicon of provincial liberalism that the Wildings brought with them from Hereford.¹

These public manifestations of private family lives indicate something of the nature of the marriage relationships that supported them. The understandings that underpinned the five marriages shared the fundamental premise that as members of an educated and professional elite which proclaimed its meritocratic nature they were morally obliged to give effect to its values within their families. Beyond this, the marriages demonstrate the changes and the continuities evident within the thinking of a generation of middle-class professional families exerting their influence within colonial society. The idealisation of the family as the fulcrum of social progress gave immense authority within the marriage relationship to Julia Wilding. Since the ideal family rested equally upon greater paternal involvement in elements of domestic life, most notably the upbringing of children, it also shaped a marriage that realised in large part the ideal union of partnership to which they aspired. The marriage of Adeline and Alexander Leeper derived its ethical dimension from deeply ingrained religious beliefs and an idealisation of women as veritable 'angels in the house' that both gave authority within the marriage and defined the limits of that authority.

The marriage of Helen Connon and John Macmillan Brown embodies a form of idealisation that had both a public and private dimension. Celebrated in public by contemporaries as a marriage of an independent career-woman and feminist, its private manifestation confronted a dilemma that lay at the heart of late nineteenth-century familial feminism: how did the independent woman fulfil the 'double duty', as Benjamin Jowett had put it, inherent in the dual roles of motherhood and profession? The tragic resolution that ensued, with its tale of failing health, disillusion and early death, prompted speculation by Connon's biographer, Edith Searle Grossmann, that the Australasian societies that had granted women the vote and facilitated their pursuit of higher education lacked the servant class that, she believed, smoothed the path of their British sisters.

1 Sinclair, *William Pember Reeves*, pp. 136–37.

The marriages of Henry and Mary Alice Higgins, and Orme and Mary Masson were secure in their material foundations. A chair in chemistry at the University of Melbourne was judged sufficient testimony of Orme Masson's capacity to reproduce the middle-class domestic circumstances that Mary's Scottish family deemed essential. An established legal career and a house in Malvern met Henry Higgins's self-imposed preconditions for marriage. In meeting middle-class norms, both couples were accepting the broad conventions in which they had been nurtured and which were widely shared within their professional communities. The evolution of each marriage exhibited patterns that now seem familiar, but which derived their individual character in the negotiation of the circumstances of time and place. For Henry and Mary Higgins marriage derived much of its character from a mutual and intense absorption in the needs of an only child, an enduring and intimate relationship with Henry's extended Irish-Australian family and in the creation of a domestic and private shelter from a public life that was often controversial. The institutional setting of the Masson household provided a buffer between the public and the private spheres, created an essentially inward-looking domestic environment and, for Mary Masson, exacerbated the unsettling effects of migration. Within this environment the Masson marriage exhibits the conventional outward forms that prevailed amongst a professional society structured around a mistress of the household supporting a professionally occupied husband.

Middle-class families were at the heart of the campaign to open up higher education to women. A central concern of this study has been to examine the attention the professional classes gave to the education of their daughters and to explore what, if any, adjustments in the nature of family life this entailed. Put simply, if there is any strand of thinking in which the group of families observed in *Family Experiments* were united, it was in the pursuit of an education for their daughters that reached beyond that commonly available to them. In the Wilding family, it was a pursuit that gained its direction from an intense identification of a mother in her daughter's education, and its roots in a commitment to realising social progress through the usefulness of the individual. For the Macmillan Browns, the intensity of parental involvement in the education of their two daughters can be traced directly to the middle-class feminist aspirations with which their marriage had been associated and owes as much to the father as

it does to the mother. Parental roles in the education of the Leeper girls exhibit an even stronger fatherly involvement and one which, while concerned to shape a more academic program of learning for his daughters, was pursued without quite the moral intensity that marked his interaction with his sons. Only in the Masson family did the pursuit of an academic education for daughters stop short of university degrees. The decision was a maternal one grounded in the belief that the middle-class woman possessed a duty of service, which led not to the professional possibilities that lurked in the shadows of university study, but to committees of philanthropic or charitable activity.

Thus a belief in improving the education of daughters did not indicate a shared vision of the ends to which such education might be put. Julia Wilding understood that the 'new woman' she worked so diligently to bring to fruition was to be educated in ways which enabled her to become a socially useful individual. Beyond this ethical injunction there lay an ambiguity, if not of purpose, then about possibilities. Education would, she believed, open up the prospect of a career. Equally, it would enlarge the circle of cultivated and educated women who might contribute to general social progress from within marriage and the family. This pluralisation of the civilised individual, as Raymond Williams has termed it, stopped short of engaging with what became the common dilemma of the small group of young educated middle-class women of her daughters' generation: what to do with an advanced education in the humanities?² The dilemma is perhaps most acutely registered by Marnie Masson in verses she wrote at the Dromana country home of Henry and Mary Higgins in the summer of 1906, as the 'Heronswood Push' left their schooldays behind them: 'Boys to Varsities to work / And the girls to play.'³ If a university degree offered greater prospects, it may well be that the very middle-class families that were able to obtain such a qualification might also have aroused expectations that were not readily realised.

In the education of their daughters, the middle-class families of this study pursued idealistic objectives whose consequences they could scarcely have foreseen. In the education of their sons, there is more

2 Raymond Williams, 'The Bloomsbury Fraction', in Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays*, Verso and NLB, London, 1980, pp. 165–68.

3 Marnie Bassett, 'Heronswood Log Book', Marnie Bassett Papers, UMA, 7/26/13.

that conforms to norms prevalent within the antipodean professional middle class. The ambiguity and uncertainty that surrounded the quest for higher education for daughters gives way to persistent and clear-sighted objectives to maintain the newly created colonial family. Most obviously present within the legal families where meritocracy could be overridden more readily by a desire for dynastic continuity, the tendency towards occupational reproduction is evident in all families. The uniformity of objective is matched by a common form: a colonial education that mimicked the traditional education of the British public school, but was experienced as day-boys from suburban households and moderated by the influence of family. Within this framework there was space for parents with philosophical or educational axes to grind to exert considerably more influence than any headmaster or school. In the Wilding household this space was filled by a mother who sought to realise in her first-born son her understandings of a cultured gentleman, and by a father who believed the British love of sport held the key to a balanced life. Alexander Leeper's piety and scholarly enthusiasm for the world of classical antiquity impressed itself deeply upon his sons. A domestic environment in which test tubes were close at hand did more to stimulate Irvine Masson's interest in scientific enquiry than Melbourne Grammar's narrow science curriculum. For Mervyn Higgins, the status of an only child created an extremely close identification with his parents that brought with it a sense of obligation and, to some degree, a desire to emulate.

Recent British historical writing on masculinities sees a 'contradiction between the greater priority attached to manliness for boys and the greater role of mothers in teaching it'.⁴ This cluster of professional families would not have recognised any contradiction. The new *concept* of manliness that began to be registered within boys' schools throughout Australasia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in the 1890s made little impact within families whose educational ideals had been formulated in mid-Victorian Britain before their departure for the new world. The realisation of the civilised individual, in which a balance was struck between the cultivation of body and mind, best captures this thinking, and is given clearest expression within the Wilding family. The problem of what to do with

4 John Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Essays on Gender, Family and Empire*, Person Longman, London, 2005, p. 137.

sons was not to be found in the definition of the roles of mothers and fathers within the family but in finding a place for them in a colonial society that provided a narrow range of employment opportunities. This was a dilemma that had also shaped the fathers' own careers.

James Belich places the migrant professional classes of the late nineteenth century at the centre of what he calls 'the recolonisation process', in which New Zealand's colonial status was reaffirmed culturally.⁵ Within his interpretation, sending sons 'Home' for their university education becomes a touchstone of colonialism. This study suggests another interpretation. The education of sons also reveals the degree to which these first-generation members of the Australasian professional middle class summoned the resources of the extended British family and its networks to confront the very real problem of what to do with their sons. The question was as troubling as that posed by their educated daughters. A legal practice might become a family enterprise without recourse to an old world university, but the avenues for professional advancement were more restricted. Thus, university study at 'Home' made sense at a number of levels: with the assistance of family it was realisable; a British degree undoubtedly carried weight throughout the settler societies; reliance upon British relatives might encourage a greater sense of familial identification; it would provide an incentive, if one was needed, to make a family trip 'Home'. Among the least remarked features of the phenomenon, immersion in the life of the extended British parent family produced, as we have seen, marriage within the cousinage.

Historians have had more difficulty reconciling themselves to the ambiguities they detect in the lives of the middle-class professional households than is evident in the lived lives of the families observed in this study. Their generation has been described as a transitional one that redefined the family and women's role within it, but stopped short of confronting the structural and social changes needed to endow full citizenship. Theirs was also a generation that possessed an enduring faith in education to create the basis of a more civilised society. Whatever individual emphases they brought to this idealistic and optimistic philosophy, faith in the transformative possibilities of education and a belief in the family as the handmaiden of a progressive

5 Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, pp.29-30, 53-86.

society were its fundamental tenets. Together, these two strands in their thinking were in tune with the liberalism of their age. Nowhere is this given clearer expression than in the concept of the family wage enunciated in 1907 by Henry Higgins, the most politically radical of their number. If the Harvester Judgement can be seen as constituting a high point of familial liberalism, the outbreak of war in August 1914 marked, for this generation of middle-class professionals, the end of their optimistic expectation of social progress. Dream had become disillusion: replenishing the constructive impulses that had shaped their family experiments was a task for the future.

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