
Section Two: Arrival and Establishment

This section outlines the process by which five middle-class professional families established themselves within the colonial environments of Melbourne and Christchurch. Individual case studies are grouped together by occupation of the male breadwinners: Wilding and Higgins as representatives of the legal families; Macmillan Brown, Leeper and Masson as academic families. To a degree, this is a categorisation of convenience, yet it rests upon day-to-day realities that helped shape the pattern of family life. The differences between the two categories were ones of emphasis rather than kind, and all five families shared a broad conception that they had a capacity to contribute significantly to the community-building processes in which their settler societies were engaged. They also shared a sense of duty which was grounded in notions of citizenship that owed much to their understanding of the civic democracies of the ancient world. Theirs, however, was an expanded notion of citizenship that included women to a greater or lesser extent.

It was an expanded understanding, as Frank Turner argues, that rested upon an 'abstract and idealised "ancient world"', leavened by 'a set of more or less traditional English humanist values long employed to oppose commercialism ... and social individualism'.¹ These ideas lay at the heart of British philosophical liberalism, which, influenced by John Stuart Mill, had developed a significant communitarian

1 Dale, *The English Men*, p. 24 (citing Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain*).

dimension. Its central concept—that of ‘active citizenship’—derived from Mill’s study of Athenian democracy, and undoubtedly shaped the five colonial families at the centre of this study.² Each may be shown to have been influenced by what Eugenio Biagini has described as Mill’s ‘zeal for the cultivation of civic virtue’.³ As relatively new communities, colonial Melbourne and Christchurch provided contexts in which the values of nineteenth-century liberalism might flourish. Moreover, Mill also provided a way of linking the public and private spheres of family: to each individual there was attached, in his view, a duty to pursue ‘eudaimonia’—‘human flourishing’ or personal development—as the surest way of achieving the fullest expression of humanity.⁴ Viewed in this light, the family could be thought of as a microcosm of the wider community, in which ideal citizens and civic virtue could be cultivated and social relations harmonised.

That is not to say that this group of mid-nineteenth-century professionals laid out these philosophies in coherent form (although the Wildings were broadly aware of where they stood within English liberal thought). Rather, their liberalism acted as a prism through which they interpreted the world and offered a guide as to how they might live their lives.⁵ Within the embryonic professional communities of the colonial societies they entered, their world view and the language in which it was advanced were instantly recognised.⁶ Among the networks of like-minded families taking shape in the colonies, they were welcomed as potential recruits in the task of achieving the idealised society they envisaged. Within these colonial family networks we can glimpse ways in which a generation of professional migrants move beyond the classical liberal position that involved a negative conceptualisation of individual freedom to confront the apparently conflicting concepts of liberty and community. In this they might be seen as acting as a bridging generation, linking older conceptions of liberalism and newer ones that accepted that a more ethical and fairer society might require a degree of social experimentation.

2 Biagini, ‘Citizenship, Liberty and Community’, p. 6, and more generally, pp. 1–9.

3 Biagini, ‘Liberalism and Direct Democracy: John Stuart Mill and the model of ancient Athens’, in Biagini (ed.), *Citizenship and Community*, pp. 23–24, and more generally, pp. 21–44.

4 Biagini, ‘Liberalism and Direct Democracy’, p. 23.

5 This interpretation owes much to Stuart Macintyre’s definition of colonial liberalism in *A Colonial Liberalism*, pp. 10–13.

6 Dale, *The English Men: Professing Literature*, pp. 15–19.

The pursuit of a social ideal was sustained by material and professional success. None of the families in this study was to retreat from the community they entered. The lawyers Henry Higgins and Frederick Wilding left estates of £69,000 and £30,000 respectively—sufficient to place them amongst the very comfortably off colonial upper middle class.⁷ John Macmillan Brown, whose wealth derived in large part from shrewd investments that produced an estate of some £80,000, stands closer to the rich of his day than was normal for academic families.⁸ The Leepers and Massons are more representative of their profession: comfortably housed within the cloisters of Melbourne University, they neither benefited from the rising property values that home ownership provided, nor shared Brown's capacity for shrewd investment.

Thumbnail sketches of the professional careers of the male breadwinner in each family underline the successful trajectory of the group within their respective legal and academic professional communities. After completing a classical and legal education at Melbourne University, Higgins established himself in equity law, was appointed to the judicial bench, and presided over the Federal Court of Arbitration. Wilding, likewise, established himself as a prominent barrister and in 1913 was appointed King's Counsel. Masson's services to the advancement of science within the university and in the forging of links with industry were recognised in 1918 by the award of CBE and by a knighthood in 1923. Macmillan Brown gained a reputation as teacher and scholar of English literature that transcended the cloistered environment of a colonial university and established himself as arguably the most influential New Zealand academic of his age. After leaving academia in 1895, he was to become something of a public intellectual on the international academic circuits as a frequently controversial and idiosyncratic student of anthropology and as a utopian novelist. Alexander Leeper's career developed within the academic world of Melbourne University, where he is credited with pioneering the Australasian university college system, consolidating the place of the

7 Rickard, *H.B. Higgins*, p. 310; Probate records of Frederick Wilding, Probate Register, Christchurch 24606/1945, Christchurch branch of National Archives, New Zealand.

8 Angus Ross, 'The Macmillan Brown Lectures 1977: The Slow Progress of the Favourite Child', (typescript), Macmillan Brown Library (MBL), University of Canterbury, Christchurch, pp. 2–3.

classics, and playing a crucial role in the establishment of Anglican education for girls, which he saw as a first step towards increasing their number within the university.

Such a summary speaks of successful male careers within an expanding professional community. Establishing the family households that both sustained and were sustained by these careers needs to be set within the context of migration. For young married couples the most obvious consequence was the loss of the support structure of immediate and extended families. The average British family had since the 1850s been producing fewer children. As Leonore Davidoff has demonstrated, 'the number of children born to a couple had declined from, on average, over six for those married mid-century to around three' by the end of the century.⁹ One consequence of this was the demise of the big family and the subsequent decline in the extensive cousinage that produced 'clan-like groupings' and made it possible for individuals to live out their lives almost entirely within the confines of the family.¹⁰ The frontrunners in embracing the new, smaller British family were the professional classes. It was from them that the families of this study are drawn. As members of a mid-century generation of professionals, they effectively traded whatever comfort was to be had from their extended families at Home for the prospects of the family they were about to create in the new world.

In practical terms, the absence of the extended family placed a premium upon engagement with the new communities they entered. In the cities of New Zealand and Australia, as in Britain, the big family that had characterised the early pioneering communities was becoming less common.¹¹ The new migrant professionals of the 1870s and 1880s were to be as instrumental in its demise as their British counterparts. Their idealised conception of the family demanded much of them as individuals and, as the following case studies attempt to show, migration intensified these demands. Their responses to the immediate

9 Leonore Davidoff, *Thicker than Water: Siblings and their Relations, 1780–1920*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012, p. 103.

10 Davidoff, *Thicker than Water*, p. 84.

11 Ian Pool, Arunachalam Dharmalingam and Janet Sceats, *The New Zealand Family From 1840: A Demographic History*, Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2007, *passim*, and especially pp. 18–19, 55–56, 59–66, 72–79, 81–84, 93–99, 106–8, 123–43, 156–57, 160; Ann Larson, *Growing Up in Melbourne: Family Life in the Late Nineteenth Century*, Demography Program, The Australian National University, Canberra, 1994, pp. 27–30, 37–63.

challenges of translating ideal into reality provide a way of exploring the roles played by men and women in both the public and private spheres of colonial life. They do so in a way that suggests that, in the establishment phase of their colonial lives, they both realised and, at times, transcended the Victorian ideal of the family built around 'domesticated husbands' and 'supportive wives'.¹²

12 Tosh, *A Man's Place*, p. 54; Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes* [2002 edn], pp. 149–92.

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