A HISTORY OF THE

Ugly Men's Voluntary Workers' Association of W.A.

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Murdoch University 1993.
I declare that this thesis is my own account of my own research.
ABSTRACT

In recounting the history of the Ugly Mens' Voluntary Workers' Association of Western Australia this thesis addresses several themes. It challenges the depiction of Western Australia in the inter-war period as a prosperous and consensual society. Until recently this has been the dominant construction in Western Australian historical writing. The existence of a welfare organisation of the size and scope of the Ugly Men's Association indicates that there was a greater degree of poverty and hardship experienced in Perth than had previously been acknowledged. An account of the activities of this body of voluntary workers helps bring to light the nature and the extent of that poverty.

The thesis illustrates changing community responses to poverty. The provision of charity to the poor was ceasing to be the province of the wealthy elite by the end of the nineteenth century. Comprehensive welfare programmes were not implemented by the Commonwealth government until the 1940s. The Ugly Men's Association, during that intervening period, represents an attempt by the lower middle and working classes to provide for their own welfare. The response of the upper middle class self-appointed 'moral guardians' to some of the Association's fund raising methods, however, resulted in the curtailment of those activities and ultimately the end of the Association.

The areas in which the Association sought to provide assistance incorporate some of the dominant social concerns of the inter-war period. The problems addressed by the Association - of soldiers and their dependants, newly arrived immigrants and the development of the state's rural industries - reflected the prevailing ideologies of Empire.
and the agrarian myth. The changing role of government in these areas is also elucidated through the study of the Ugly Men.

This thesis has retrieved from obscurity a band of voluntary workers who provided not only material relief from hardship but also a great deal of entertainment. The Ugly Men were a major force in the cultural life of Perth in the 1920s.
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Introduction.

The Ugly Men's Voluntary Workers Association of Western Australia (Inc) was formed in 1917 by a group of citizens who were, in the first instance, concerned about the hardship caused by the absence or loss of male breadwinners as a result of Australia's involvement in World War 1. The problem, they decided, could be directly addressed through voluntary labour and publicly donated funds. While the executive committee was dominated by businessmen, merchants and entrepreneurs who directed the Association's activities, its membership base included women, skilled tradesmen and labourers whose voluntary work was essential for the achievement of the Association's aims.

The Association is referred to in a number of texts dealing with the inter-war period of Western Australia's history, but the references are, on the whole, fleeting; often merely recording its existence as one of several charity organisations operating at that time. F.K. Crowley's *Australia's Western Third*¹ and G.C. Bolton's *A Fine Country to Starve In*², for example, both refer to the Association only to note briefly the nature of its operations. Some recent local histories and autobiographies provide examples of the organisation's activities, but within a very specific context.³ Such evanescent references belie the

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size of the organisation and the extent of its activities, masking the fact that, at its peak in the mid- to late-1920s, the Ugly Men's Association was annually raising and distributing around £12,000 to upwards of 7,000 applicants for relief; that there were over 2,000 names on the membership roll; that there were 21 suburban branches; and that it operated, albeit with changing objectives and *modus operandi*, for more than two decades.

A closer study of the Ugly Men's Association makes possible a number of things. The existence of, and need for, a voluntary welfare organisation of this size poses an implicit challenge to the portrayal (by Crowley and Bolton, for example) of inter-war Western Australia as a prosperous and contented society. It also affords the opportunity to examine the changing roles of government and community in providing for the poorer members of society during that era. The socialist model of income maintenance was not developed until the middle of the twentieth century, but by the end of the nineteenth century the concept of charity as the moral duty of the wealthier classes was becoming increasingly inappropriate for a society which saw itself offering opportunities for advancement within a more egalitarian structure. Within this transition period, the Ugly Men's Association was insistent that the help they gave was not *charity*, but rather *assistance* to those who, through temporary misfortune, were suffering hardship. With the right sort of help, these people could once again take their places as productive members of society.

A survey of the fund raising methods of the Association can add to the body of knowledge of inter-war popular culture, and the response of the middle class guardians of public morality further challenges Bolton's depiction of inter-war Western Australia as a consensual, homogeneous society. It provides another example of the control exercised by that small sector of society which imposed its views of appropriate behaviour on the rest of the community through persistent and self-righteous lobbying. The actions of the moral guardians in asserting their standards of propriety have been documented by other writers in addressing gambling, censorship and popular entertainment in the inter-war period.4

The Association's efforts in assisting soldier settlers and immigrant settlers and the establishment of a farm training school for boys reflect the contemporary concern with the development of the state's rural industries and the dominant ideology which asserted the superiority of agrarian life - the arcadian myth. Finally, the growth and decline of the Association itself provides a fascinating insight into the workings of an autonomous group - one which seemed very much the product of two men, Alex Clydesdale and Harry Mann, both of whom were members of the Legislative Assembly but tried to shape their society by extra-parliamentary means.

While the voluntary nature of the membership of the Association suggests a grassroots response to suffering which largely coincides

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with Bolton's characterisation of a close-knit community, the Association's raison d'être by implication contradicts the suggestion of civic self-satisfaction which flavours the first few chapters of *A Fine Country to Starve In*. Although unemployment in the early 1920s was by no means as extensive as it was during the years of the depression, neither was it insignificant. In the absence of either self-contributory or government funded income maintenance programmes, considerable hardship ensued if the period of unemployment was protracted.

Bolton's citation of Opposition leader James Mitchell's 1930 election campaign speech (which Bolton refers to as 'a message of hope' for the electors compared with the 'platitudes' offered by the Labor government) paints an idyllic picture of Western Australia which should be treated with not a little scepticism:

> During the five years I led the coalition government from 1919 to 1924 we had no unemployed trouble, no starving people. Everyone was at work, prosperous and happy.\(^5\)

Although this statement bears all the hallmarks of election rhetoric, the vision created seems to have influenced Crowley's earlier assertion that it was 'evident that the State had gone far towards providing for ... the economic needs of its citizens'\(^6\), and his conclusion that the 1920s was a decade of considerable and widespread prosperity in the state.\(^7\)

Even a cursory examination of the kind of assistance provided by the Ugly Men's Association reveals clearly that the economic needs of some citizens were far from being met, at least a decade before widespread unemployment was acknowledged as a political and

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economic reality. The role of government in providing welfare services within this period can be elucidated by studying the activities of the Ugly Men's Association, particularly since the organisation often sought government endorsement and material support for its projects. The New Settlers' League branch of the Ugly Men's Association, for example, which found rural employment for immigrants planning to take up land under the Empire Settlement scheme, received a subsidy from both the Commonwealth and state governments; and returned soldiers who attended the Ugly Men's Instructional School for Returned Soldiers were, through the intercession of the President of the Ugly Men's Association, able to continue receiving sustenance payments while in training and free rail travel.

The changing nature of the Ugly Men's Association's objectives was in part a response to changes in government welfare policy and practices, which in some instances can be seen as partly due to the activities of the Association itself. Government dissatisfaction with the activities of the New Settlers' League, for instance, ultimately saw this role absorbed into the Immigration Department. Implicit within this process, however, was the government's acknowledgement that the resolution of the types of problems which had faced immigrants and prompted the formation of the League ought to be one of its responsibilities.

A study of the Ugly Men's Association fund-raising techniques adds a good deal to our understanding of popular culture in inter-war Western Australia. The Association was imaginative and entertaining in its fund raising efforts, aiming to involve as large a part of the community as possible. Torchlight processions, dances, popularity contests, talent quests, mock courts which extracted donations by way of 'fines' imposed for 'misconduct', and the production of a four reel feature film
directed by local film-maker Fred Murphy all engendered a great deal of public enthusiasm and provided entertainment for adults and children alike. Gambling, in a variety of forms such as bingo, art unions, and simple guessing competitions, formed a significant part of the Association's money-making repertoire. The annual Uglieland carnivals at Perth and Fremantle provided an even greater variety of games of chance, and public enjoyment of them is evident in the amount of revenue they generated for the Association.

Despite the fact that this revenue was used for public good and not private profit, the persistent efforts of several women's groups and church councils in protesting that the moral dangers outweighed any positive effects of the charitable works eventually resulted in the closure of the amusement parks. The drastic loss of revenue resulting from this marked a turning point in the history of the organisation. The Association's income in the early 1930s dropped to a quarter of what it had been in the previous decade, at a time when, somewhat ironically, the calls on its services were even more numerous and urgent. Despite this, the work of the Association continued, relying on regular donations from individuals and sympathetic business houses. A new venture in 1932 was begun with the establishment of an agricultural training school for boys at Wokalup, continuing to project an ideal of a Western Australia depending on the growth of its rural industries.

In 1939, with the outbreak of war, the Association went into recess. Alex Clydesdale by this time had been president of the Association for 21 years and Harry Mann, after a year as president, had also been vice president for 21 years. Both men were well into their sixties by then, but there was no suggestion of passing control to a younger person. It is tempting to speculate whether the Association would have maintained
its vitality longer had there been an infusion of energy at the executive level, or whether an end was inevitable with the introduction of a wider range of government welfare services in the 1940s, reducing the need for an organisation such as this. As it was, no further meetings of the executive were held and when, after Clydesdale's death in 1947, an investigation into the affairs of the Ugly Men's Association was conducted by the Chief Secretary's Department, it was found that there was sufficient evidence of maladministration for the remaining assets of the Association to be vested in the Minister responsible for the administration of the recently implemented Charities Act. After two decades of enthusiastic and generous service to the people of Western Australia, the Ugly Men's Association had come to a rather inglorious ending.

Despite this rather untidy dénouement, or perhaps even because of it, the history of the Ugly Men's Association deserves to be recorded. Its telling fills a gap in Western Australian historical writing which has only acknowledged the existence of poverty relatively recently⁸ and provides an insight into the way one community responded to the hardship in its midst. Western Australian welfare initiatives in the inter-war period which were neither church nor government sponsored have hitherto been largely unaddressed.

The origins of the Association and its philosophy are explained in Chapter One with an overview of the Association's activities. Chapter Two discusses in more detail the work of the Association in relation to soldiers and their dependants, while the activities of the New Settlers'.

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⁸C.T. Stannage 'Uncovering Poverty in Australian History', Early Days: Journal of the Historical Society of Western Australia, Volume 7 (8) 1976,
League are discussed in Chapter Three. The Association's fund-raising techniques and the unfavourable response to them from some quarters are the subject of Chapter Four, while the recipients of those funds and the scope of contemporaneous government welfare services are detailed in Chapter Five. An Epilogue summarises the fortunes of the Association from its decline in 1930 to its official demise in 1947.