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‘PITY THE POOR IMMIGRANT’: ASSISTED SINGLE FEMALE MIGRATION TO COLONIAL AUSTRALIA

In this examination of women as ‘poor’ immigrants a close focus is applied to a particular category of female immigrant, namely the single British women who received government or private assistance to migrate. Eric Richards has suggested that the availability of government assistance led to the emigration to Australia of some of the very poorest people in British society. In considering poverty amongst single female emigrants this paper examines two types of schemes which existed in the second half of the nineteenth century, specifically designed to introduce single women to the Australian colonies. The first type, which operated primarily in the 1850s, was initiated by British philanthropists and British government authorities expressly to relieve poverty in Britain. Some of these programmes in the 1860s and 1880s were also designed to relieve poverty amongst middle-class women; most however were directed at working-class poverty. Secondly this paper examines some aspects of government assistance schemes organised by the colonial governments, which introduced the largest number of assisted female immigrants. It is far more difficult to assess the level of poverty of this second group of women since much of the evidence is impressionistic and fragmentary, and serves rather to emphasise the heterogeneity of immigrant groups. However the evidence suggests that the chance to escape poverty was a factor influencing the decision to migrate at least for some women.

The extent of poverty amongst colonially-assisted female immigrants is the first consideration. Another is the proposition

that the administrators of colony immigration schemes regarded assisted female emigrants as objects of charity and, consequently, poor by definition. The language of migration is also relevant here. 'To emigrate' is commonly an intransitive verb: 'she emigrates'; 'they emigrate'. However, in the language of nineteenth century female emigration it was frequently transitive: e.g. 'they emigrated the women'. Thus 'emigrating' becomes something which is 'done' to someone else. The Oxford Dictionary attributes an early usage of the term in this manner to Maria Rye, well-known mid-nineteenth century British emigrationist. The term 'emigrate' used in this way denotes the taking away of agency from the people who were 'emigrated'; they became the objects of the action, rather than its subjects. This shift in usage of the verb indicates the manner in which those who assisted female migration constructed emigrant women: as people without agency, whose lives and actions were controlled by others.

Women assisted to emigrate in the 1850s, in schemes initiated in Britain, were poor. Their poverty was in fact a requirement for their entry to these earlier schemes, and as poor women—from workhouses, from prisons, or simply because of under-employment—they were routinely subjected to controls over their behaviour. After the 1850s, when colonial governments took greater responsibility for the migration process, their level of control continued and intensified, even over women for whom poverty was not necessarily a prerequisite for assistance. Assisted single migrant women in the second half of the nineteenth century were constructed and treated by colonists and colonial authorities as though they were poor. This outcome was a result both of the systems of control practised in the 1850s over poor women and also of an attempt to shape the immigrant women into the workers the colonists wanted: deferential, humble, grateful domestic servants.

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EMIGRATION programmes formulated in Britain in the 1850s specifically to reduce the pressure of poverty within the British working class were organised both by private individuals and by British government authorities. In the nineteenth century, the British government's Poor Law Commissioners were authorised to 'emigrate' to the colonies people who received parish relief, to reduce the charge on the parish. Women as well as men migrated to
Australia under these arrangements, but the number of single workhouse women amongst these migrants was small, for a variety of reasons.

The Poor Law Commissioners reported in 1861 that most pauperism amongst single women was due to their inability to find employment because of 'loss of character'. Many women classed as 'able-bodied female paupers' were single mothers. These were the women, especially when accompanied by their children, whom colonial opinion found most objectionable. Apart from colonial reluctance to accept the single women who were most likely to be receiving parish relief, the cost of passage was a major determinant of the destination of poor law emigrants. All Australian colonies offered schemes of assisted passages through the Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners (CLEC), particularly for single women; and, under a British Act passed in 1849, the Poor Law authorities were permitted to assist not only the destitute, but the poor in general who wished to emigrate, with the CLEC's approval. However by 1870 no colony was prepared to take 'any official cognizance of poor persons sent out by guardians at the expense of the rates' and none would allow colonial funds to be used to assist such immigrants. Officially at least, the guardians and Poor Law authorities were responsive to the demands of colonial and overseas governments on that issue. It is therefore likely that the poor law authorities did not customarily convey single female emigrants to the Australian colonies, both for financial reasons and because of the reluctance of colonial authorities to receive them.

However a number of workhouse women emigrated to the Australian colonies in the late 1840s and 1850s, before colonial attitudes to pauper migration hardened and before the colonists and colonial legislatures themselves took control of migrant selection from the CLEC. The earliest and largest of these schemes, the Irish orphan scheme, involved the despatch of young orphaned Irish girls and women, aged between 14 and 18, from Irish workhouses.

2 British Parliamentary Papers (hereafter BPP), 1861, xxxiii, 1, p.12.
4 BPP, 1865, xxii, 1, p.7.
5 BPP, 1870, xxxv, 1, p.57.
6 Eg. see ibid., p.58; and BPP, 1889, xxxv, 193, p.292.
In 1848 and 1849, over 2,000 were sent to New South Wales, 1,200 to Port Phillip and 600 to Adelaide, but the scheme was shortlived.\(^7\)

A second attempt at large-scale female workhouse migration was made in the following decade, when massive emigration from Cork by small farmers and tradespeople caused large numbers of domestic servants to be thrown out of employment and onto the Union. These were ‘respectable’ working women, not women forced to accept relief because of ‘loss of character’. Large numbers of these women migrated to British North America at the expense of the poor rates, and the CLEC also despatched a number to New South Wales and Western Australia.\(^8\) The Lady Kennaway, containing 150 Irish women from the Cork Union, arrived in Sydney in 1854. But these women were not well received by the colonists, probably as a result of dissatisfaction with the earlier orphan immigration scheme, and the New South Wales colonial authorities subsequently instructed the CLEC to terminate workhouse emigration to that colony.\(^9\)

In Western Australia, however, the Cork women were welcomed. Colonists there had less choice than those in New South Wales about the character and origins of the women they received. Western Australia was in a sense a ‘colony of last resort’ for prospective immigrants, since it was a late developer and could not offer immigrants the advantages of its more established and affluent eastern counterparts. Further, the Western Australian colonists, in an attempt to meet their pressing need for labour, had in 1848 accepted the British government’s offer of male convict labour which, from 1850 to 1868, comprised the bulk of the colony’s supply of male workers. As a reward for accepting British convicts, Western Australia received immigrants at imperial government expense equal to the number of convicts received, the large majority of whom were single women.\(^10\) Western Australia was unusual amongst the Australian colonies in

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\(^7\) Paula Hamilton, "‘Tipperarifying the moral atmosphere’. Irish Catholic immigration and the state 1840-1860", in Sydney Labour History Group, What Rough Beast? The State and Social Order in Australian History (Sydney, 1982), p.22.

\(^8\) Secretary of State to Merivale, 7 July 1855: Public Record Office, Kew, U.K. (thereafter PRO), CO386/76.

\(^9\) Hamilton, op. cit., p.23.

\(^10\) Memorandum, Merivale to Sir Frederick Rogers Bart., 19 February 1869: PRO, CO386/77.
programme from 1850 into the 1870s funded by the British Treasury. As a consequence it had little control over the composition of its assisted immigrants. Furthermore, because the colonists could not afford the anti-Irish sentiments expressed elsewhere, the British authorities considered Western Australia an ideal destination for women from the Cork Union in the 1850s. However, the passive Western Australian colonists rebelled when the CLEC turned to workhouse women from London. The CLEC had claimed that they were women

who though on that account disqualified for Emigration at the expense of any Colony were yet in truth respectable women who might properly be sent to Westn Australia at the expense not of the Colony but of the Imperial Govt.

The arrival of the Emma Eugenia in mid-1858 brought that practice to an end. The colonial immigrant agent judged the families and the Irish workhouse women on board to be very proper and respectable; the English workhouse women, however, ‘were of a most objectionable class, and behaved disgracefully during the voyage’. Twenty-four were said to be as bad as possible, with at least eighteen thought to be prostitutes. As a result of colonial outrage, the Secretary of State directed that the experiment of selecting women from English workhouses cease, though the CLEC were left

at liberty to procure as many as may be practicable from those sources in Ireland which have hitherto afforded young women of fair character, and of a description suited to the wants of Western Australia.

By the early 1860s, even the Western Australians had been infected with the anti-Irish sentiments expressed by the eastern colonists in the previous decade and, in 1862, Governor Hampton requested the CLEC to ensure that future parties of single women be selected ‘in such a manner as to counteract a previous irregularity in the parts of the United Kingdom from which such

11 Ibid. About 1600 free emigrants were sent out to Van Diemen’s Land at British government expense, mainly the wives and families of convicts, largely between 1850 and 1853.

12 Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners (hereafter CLEC) to Merivale, 6 October 1858: PRO, CO386/77.

13 Ibid.

14 Secretary of State to CLEC, 13 October 1858: PRO, CO385/29.
Emigrants were drawn. 15 The recruitment by government of workhouse women to Western Australian appears to have ceased in the 1850s.

Parallel with state-funded workhouse migration were schemes operated by private organisations to encourage emigration amongst the poor and destitute. One such scheme, the progeny of the Bishop of Perth and British philanthropist Louisa Twining, attempted to introduce a number of English workhouse women to Western Australia in 1859. Twining proposed that pauper girls old enough to graduate to the adult wards of the workhouse should be placed instead in a home where they could be trained in domestic service prior to emigration. 16 Keeping young women out of the adult wards was crucial to the scheme’s success (particularly given the earlier failed attempt to introduce women from London workhouses to Western Australia) since the ‘loss of character’ which led to able-bodied female pauperism was thought to be contagious. But the scheme was a failure because the ‘good work’ done in England was badly undone on the passage out. Writing in 1898 of this scheme, Twining underlined the need for firm matrons who could continue the good work of training and supervising the girls and women on the emigrant vessels. 17 In fact the professional middle-class shipboard matrons used by all the colonial governments from the 1860s filled precisely this role.

Reformation was the motive behind another contemporary scheme, Urania Cottage, a collaboration between the wealthy Angela Burdett Coutts and Charles Dickens. Most of the Cottage’s inmates were women from Coldbath Fields Prison, where London's prostitutes were punished, and the Westminster Bridewell Prison. 18 Urania Cottage was a place of training and probation prior to emigration. Over five and a half years, 57 women passed through the Cottage, of whom 33 emigrated with three ‘relapsing’ on the passage out. 19 The Cottage was a concrete manifestation of Dickens’ vision of Australia as a land where ‘fallen’ women could find redemption.

15 Secretary of State to CLEC, 6 April 1863: PRO, CO385/30.
17 op. cit., p.48.
19 ‘Home for Homeless Women’, in Household Words, 23 April 1853.
'The Irish emigrant', *Melbourne Punch*, (18 July 1872), reproduced by permission of the National Library of Australia.
In the 1850s, however, British philanthropists increasingly looked to emigration as a means of relieving poverty before women were forced into the workhouse or onto the streets. In 1858, middle-class feminist Isa Craig argued that as the condition of the working class was the greatest determinant of the crime level and, since the availability of employment the most important factor influencing that condition, one of the best preventives of crime was 'the ship ready to carry the workman to where his work awaits him.'

She pointed out that for Britain's 'humbler' women in particular, lack of employment and fierce competition for wages meant that fifty thousand women worked for less than sixpence a day and a hundred thousand for less than a shilling. Armies of women passed through the workhouse each year, or became criminal.

One scheme motivated directly by these considerations sought to assist emigration to Australia of some of the most impoverished of all British workers, the needlewomen. In December 1849, the philanthropist Sidney Herbert pointed out that competition amongst labourers had reached levels which were no longer compatible with earning a living wage and that no trade offered worse conditions than apparel-making, 'and for this reason—the labour is principally done by women.' According to Herbert, the wages paid to needlewomen ranged between just 2½d and 4½d a day.

Needlework was the last resort of the desperate and the unskilled, the market precarious and repeatedly upset. Being 'thrown back into the rank of needlewomen' was common to servants 'out of place' and implied a situation of destitution and the possibility of exposure to 'very great temptation.' Herbert's solution was emigration on a scale large enough to affect significantly the numbers of needlewomen competing for wages in Britain.

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21 Ibid., p.289-97.
23 In 1869, the Poor Law Guardians instructed that no needlework beyond that required to fill a workhouse's immediate demand for linen and clothing should be produced, since to do so would upset the sensitive balance of the market place. 'Appendices to Report on Relief in the Metropolitan District', 1869, p.52: PRO, MH32/103.
Herbert's Society did not confine itself to needlewomen but adopted criteria of selection which covered 'young women in great distress, by reason either of the low rate of wages in the various occupations or in consequence of having been entirely without employment.' The 409 destitute young women who had emigrated by December 1850 included three governesses, two charwomen, a nurse, two schoolmistresses and 169 servants, with the large proportion of servants being attributed to the fact that many needleworkers—servants out of place—continued to describe themselves as servants in an attempt to assume some air of respectability. Some candidates for emigration were completely destitute, unable even to produce the meagre outfit of clothing required for the voyage, and in the majority of cases Herbert's subscription fund was required to cover the cost of fares and outfits.

A.J. Hammerton has suggested that the Herbert fund's contribution to female emigration was small. However, although the Society was active in working-class emigration for only three years, the 1,300 women who emigrated makes its significance greater than the Female Middle Class Emigration Society, to which far greater attention has been paid. The fund was significant also for pioneering many of the procedures later used by colonial governments in the business of introducing single women. The influence of the Ladies Committee was greatest in this area, and one member, Mrs James Stuart Wortley, later became the first president of the United British Women's Emigration Association; Mrs Arthur Kinnaird, later a founder of the YWCA, was a co-founder in 1849 of the British Ladies Female Emigrants' Society, an organisation which provided shipboard matrons for women on government emigrant ships for the next forty years.

The committee considered the careful selection of its emigrants as vital to the success of its scheme. The selection process was combined with some pre-departure training and consequently the Emigrants' Home became an important element in this screening process. The Home, at 76 Hatton Gardens in London, was

24 Herbert, op. cit., p.4.
25 Ibid., p.5.
originally conceived as a temporary lodging house for intending emigrants, many of whom reportedly lived on the charity of friends scarcely less poor than themselves, or by selling articles from their diminishing supply of clothing. In the Home, intending emigrants practised domestic skills, prepared their kit and adapted themselves to their imminent departure. It was an opportunity for the middle-class women of the Committee to inculcate in the potential emigrants 'the habits of regularity and method' which were required for shipboard discipline, habits which were also, of course, useful to intended domestics. 28

The Home's other function was probationary. In some cases, a few weeks' residence demonstrated to the Ladies' Committee the 'unfitness' of individuals for emigration, and this period of trial also served to deter 'improper' characters from applying. 29 The one complaint about the Home noted in the Committee's report came from colonial representatives who felt that the treatment emigrants received there was so good that colonial reception homes suffered by comparison. The committee denied this, arguing that the standard of comfort was high only by contrast with the conditions in which emigrants had previously lived, but agreed in its 1850 report to 'making several arrangements at the Home, whereby the standard of comfort (if it may be so called) has been as far as possible reduced. 30

Another 1850s organisation which advocated emigration as a panacea for British poverty was the Highland and Island Emigration Society. As the founder, Sir Charles Trevelyan, wrote in urging people to subscribe to his emigration fund:

The surplus population of the Highlands has long been a source of anxiety...especially since the Famine of 1846/7 and now an absolute necessity of removing them has coincided with such an opportunity of providing for them elsewhere as never has and perhaps never will occur again. 31

This opportunity had arisen in the CLEC's readiness to relax their rules by allowing entire families to emigrate through the offer

28 Herbert, op. cit., Third Report, p.28.
29 Ibid., p.5.
30 Ibid., p.8.
31 Trevelyan to J. Colvin of Calcutta, 6 May 1852; Trevelyan to I.G. Lumsden of Bombay, 6 May 1852; in Letterbook no. 1, papers of the Highland and Island Emigration Society: West Register House, Scottish Record Office, Edinburgh (hereafter SRO).
of free and assisted passages, creating an unparalleled opportunity for the emigration of destitute people which, as Trevelyan rightly predicted, would not recur.32

The Highland and Island Society was not a female emigration society, but it has not been generally acknowledged that its emigration of single women was the critical factor in earning CLEC approval and financial assistance for the venture.33 In the 1850s, the colonies did not want more apprentice diggers for the goldfields. Thus the CLEC stated that ‘the Candidates who will receive a preference are respectable young women trained as domestics or for farm service, and families in which there is a preponderance of females.’34 Families in which the sons outnumbered the daughters were ineligible for CLEC assistance. Single men were also ineligible unless they were sons in families containing at least a corresponding number of daughters. The Highland and Island Emigration Society also arranged a concession with the CLEC whereby a family of adult brother and sisters could emigrate but only if the females predominated.35

Between January 1852 and July 1857, the Society despatched 29 shiploads of emigrants, about 4,900 people in total, of whom nearly one-quarter were young single working women. These women were destined for domestic and farm service but, like the Irish workhouse girls who preceded them, their backgrounds did not equip them to serve satisfactorily in middle-class colonial homes. Though some did well, a rupture between the colonists and the CLEC about the quality of CLEC immigrants hastened the decline in the Highland and Island Society’s activities. In the mid-

32 Trevelyan to Murdoch, CLEC, 11 May 1852, in Letterbook no. 1, papers of the Highland and Island Emigration Society: SRO.
33 See Donna Hellier, "‘The Humbles”: Scottish Highland emigration to nineteenth-century Victoria’, in Patricia Grimshaw, Chris McConville and Ellen McEwen, Families in Colonial Australia (Sydney, George Allen & Unwin, 1985); and Jane Beer, ‘Highland Scots in Victoria’s Western District’, in Jane Beer, Charles Fahey, Patricia Grimshaw and Melanie Raymond, Colonial Frontiers and Family Fortunes. Two Studies of Rural and Urban Victoria (Melbourne, History Department, University of Melbourne, 1989), for two recent accounts of the Highland and Island Society’s activities. Beer, p.36, points out that ‘the greater proportion of females amongst the Highlanders is a reflection of colonial policy at the time’.
34 Excerpt from Regulations Issued by Her Majesty’s Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners (Edinburgh, 1853).
35 Ibid.
1850s colonists in New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia all objected to the type of female immigrants the CLEC selected at their expense. While anti-Irish sentiment played a substantial part in the colonists' anger, a major source of complaint was the immigrants' unsuitability by occupation for colonial domestic service. Of approximately 4,000 young women sent out to Australia in 1855, for example, the Adelaide Observer commented,

'(t)heir occupations are most unsatisfactorily classed, being adopted, in fact, from the representations of the girls themselves, each girl describing herself as belonging to that class in which she wished to obtain employment...With respect to the 3,481 domestic servants and the 390 farm servants, we now know well enough that it would have been much nearer the mark had these numbers been exchanged. 36 Female emigrationist Maria Rye's acerbic tongue captured the essence of the problem, as the colonists saw it:

The signal failure of Government emigration...long felt in the colonies, is beginning to make itself felt at home, by the refusal of the colonists any longer to send funds, in return for which they are burdened with the half-savage and wholly untaught and unskilled population of the wilds of Ireland and Scotland. Women born and bred in peat huts, who know nothing of the requirements or even decencies of civilized life, whose whole art of cooking consists in knowing how to boil a potato or mix porridge, whose skill as laundresses is confined to the washing of their own garments in the running brook, stronger in the domestic duty of peat-cutting than house-cleaning; women such as these, with Government certificates as cooks, laundresses, and housemaids, have been shipped by hundreds to Melbourne, Adelaide and Sydney, obtaining readily, on the faith of these certificates, wages from £20 to £30 a year; to be found, as a matter of course, utterly wanting in the first principles of their duties; instead of helps, hindrances in the family; so insupportable, that speedy dismissal has been the only alternative. Of such women our colonies have had more than enough. 37

By the late 1850s the CLEC could no longer overlook the resistance of the colonists in the major importing colonies, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia, towards the importation of impoverished and unskilled workers, especially single women. The CLEC accused the colonists of prejudice against the Irish,

36 Adelaide Observer, 3 May 1856.
pointing out that in Western Australia Irish women were particularly welcome in country districts because of their rural skills. The three largest colonies all took control of their own immigration funds, and of selection, from this period, bringing to an end the introduction of Britain's poverty-stricken women by the British government. Private philanthropic organisations had also largely ceased their operations by this stage, because of the poor reception received by some of the women sent to the colonies. As much as objecting to the Irish, the colonists refused to fund the immigration of poverty-stricken women lacking the domestic skills in demand in the homes of the colonies' town-dwelling middle-class.

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FROM the 1850s, all the Australian colonies at some stage offered government assistance to single female immigrants. This assistance usually took the form of free or very cheap passages and was available almost exclusively to domestic servants. To what extent can the women who accepted colonial government assistance be classified as 'poor'? As we have seen, poverty was virtually a prerequisite for assistance for the earliest groups of working class women emigrating to Australia. The later female emigrations were much larger and consequently more difficult to categorise. Fragments of information suggest that, for some women at least, poverty influenced their decision to migrate and their choice of destination. However the evidence here is derived largely from government archives and parliamentary papers and reveal more about government perceptions of female poverty and attitudes to female immigrants than they do about the reality of poverty in the lives of these women. The reconstruction of individual lives undertaken by historians such as Richard Reid in Australia and Charlotte Macdonald in New Zealand provides some important answers to this question. Nevertheless government and colonists' perceptions remain a useful element in the study of migration since they also shaped migrant experiences.

38 BPP, 1856, xxiv, 325, p.29.
When the colonial authorities took control of their own immigration programmes in the 1850s, they benefited from their experience of the earlier private and British government-controlled schemes which had imposed strict occupational criteria in the selection of single female emigrants to fill the colonists' pressing need for domestic labour. The women they most wished to attract were women already employed as domestic servants; they had no intention of providing a philanthropic outlet for Britain's unemployable, at colonial expense. In formulating assistance for single female immigrants, however, the colonial authorities recognised they were dealing with one of the least affluent sectors of the British working class. Consequently the extent of assistance for single women was generally set higher than that offered to male immigrants and to their families, and this was indicative of the great demand for female domestics in the colonies, and it also reflected the sexual division of labour in Britain and the fact that women workers received lower wages than men. The degree of poverty among the female immigrants is, however, difficult to judge.

The level of assistance was critical not simply in directing the flow of female emigrants to one colony rather than another, but also in permitting women to contemplate migration in the first place. In making the decision to migrate the prospective emigrant had to consider the cost of passage and ship kit as well as the wages lost during perhaps three months in transit. Keeping the cost of passage low was therefore seen as fundamental to attracting the supply of labour the colonists wanted. In 1864, the New South Wales immigration agent reported that only by lowering the cost of passage could the colony hope to encourage more single female immigrants. Victoria, South Australia and Queensland all offered free passages to single women, although they were still required to pay ten shillings towards the cost of bedding and ship kit.\footnote{New South Wales, \textit{Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly} (hereafter NSW V\&PLA), 1865-1866, vol. 2, p.218.} In 1870, a Select Committee of the New South Wales Legislative Assembly reiterated the immigration agent's earlier suggestion that the cost of an assisted passage should be substantially reduced if the colony wanted to attract suitable immigrants and divert the flow from North America.\footnote{NSW V\&PLA, 1870, vol. 1, p.745.} As labour agent Mary Ann Pawsey pointed out to the Select Committee, despite the high wages then offered to domestic servants in New South Wales, women did not find their
way to the colony unassisted. Clearly the cost of an unassisted passage—about £15—was prohibitive.43

Colonial authorities were sometimes slow to recognise the critical difference even a pound or two made in attracting female immigrants, but selection agents were more sensitive to the circumstances of the British working class. In 1874 and 1875, the British government’s despatching officer, James Chant, recommended that New South Wales reduce the cost of passage for single women to £1.44 As agent general Sir Charles Cowper wrote, in supporting Chant’s argument,

high rates render efforts to attract emigrants all but futile. Everything has been done here to diffuse information; but unfortunately we cannot at the same time diffuse money, which is now all that is required.45

Similarly in 1881, New South Wales agent general Sir Saul Samuels complained that the £2 rate then requested of the single women the colonists most wanted was a serious disincentive, particularly when the colony was competing with other colonies. Samuels wrote to the authorities in New South Wales that ‘(o)ur charge in the case of single women is almost prohibitory; as few of this class of people who are disposed to emigrate can pay the sum in question’.46 It was therefore not surprising that most assisted women immigrants to New South Wales in that period proceeded directly to friends or relatives in the colony. This is clear from the relatively small number of women who offered themselves for hire at the emigrant hiring depot. Faced with the choice of paying £2 to emigrate to New South Wales, or accepting a free passage to South Australia or Queensland, women with no contacts in the colony chose to avoid the more expensive destination.

All the colonies offered domestic servants significant concessions not available to other immigrant groups. In the 1850s, the CLEC met the cost of travel to the port of embarkation for female emigrants; in addition they maintained single women at the emigrants’ depot prior to departure if the women had given up their situations and were destitute awaiting embarkation, as was often the

43 Ibid., p.790.
44 James Chant to Sir Charles Cowper, 16 February 1874, 2 June 1875: New South Wales Archives Office (hereafter NSWAO), 4/8024.
45 Sir Charles Cowper to Chief Secretary, 11 June 1875: NSWAO, 4/8024.
46 Sir Saul Samuels to Chief Secretary, 24 February 1881: NSWAO, 9/6175 (part).
case with single women in the process of emigration. In the 1860s, the South Australian government offered domestics a free passage and free transport to the port of embarkation, the only category of immigrant so favoured. In the late 1870s the shipping firm which selected female immigrants for Western Australia successfully convinced the colonial authorities of the need to defray the cost of ship's kit and transit to the port of embarkation in cases of real need, particularly among single women. If this were done they were convinced they could attract

a more desirable class of Emigrants, especially females, none of whom would be in a position to leave the Colony, at all events, till they had remained a sufficient length of time to earn the means to move elsewhere.

Emigration for women, especially to Western Australia in the 1860s and 1870s, was sometimes a last financial resort. The shippers despatched eighteen single women on the Daylight in May 1877, of whom seven required advances to obtain their ship's kit. Only two advances were made to emigrants other than single women. The shipping firm considered itself lucky to obtain even eighteen single women for that vessel; eight others had accepted the offer of passage, conditional on receiving an advance for their kit, but all defaulted. Presumably a better option had turned up.

Other evidence underlines the difficulty of measuring the degree of poverty of female immigrants because of the heterogeneous composition of the immigrant population. One incident in Western Australian immigration in the 1890s serves as an example. In 1896, the S.S. Port Phillip, bound for Western Australia with a party of female domestics on board, caught fire in St Helena. Almost all the women on board lost everything they possessed. Most of the immigrants estimated their loss at well over £5. Elizabeth Louisa Johnson claimed £22-4-0 for her goods, which included the works

47 Victoria, Parliamentary Papers, 1856-7, vol. 4, no. 62, p.3.
S. Walcott to G.S. Walters, 15 February 1865.
49 Felgate & Co. to Colonial Secretary, 1 September 1876: Battye Library, Accession 36, 741/46.
50 Felgate & Co. to Colonial Secretary, 30 May 1877: Battye Library, Accession 36, 866/291.
51 Acting Governor, St Helena, Jersey to Sir Malcolm Fraser, 22 April 1896; M.P. Monk to Sir Malcolm Fraser, 11 April 1896: Battye Library, Accession 553, Box 2.
of Tennyson and Goldsmith, brushes and combs, a silver brooch and a feather boa. Annie Jeames, however, claimed only a jacket, worth £1-10-0, and a felt hat. Clearly the differences between immigrants in terms of possessions and background were substantial. As compensation, the colonial government initially offered the women between £1-10-0 and £2; but after some adverse publicity those with bigger claims were given £5, and the rest received at least £2, which the shipboard matron Mary Monk felt more than compensated most of them. Thus the worldly possessions of an immigrant domestic, despite the evidence the women themselves supplied, were assessed by the government as worth the equivalent of a domestic servant’s wages for a month.

This incident provides the historian with an opportunity to examine the assets of one particular group of domestic immigrants who, it appears from other evidence from that period, were typical of the single women despatched to Western Australia in the 1890s. However it is the colonial government and the shipboard matron’s perception of these women as ‘poor’—that is, as having very few possessions of any value—which is significant in this episode. Whether or not the female immigrants discussed in this paper were poor (and this remains an open question with regard to the government immigrants at least) all received assistance, either from the colonial government or private agencies. As recipients of assistance, immigrants were regarded by both the colonists and the colonial authorities as objects of charity and by, definition, as poor. This had different implications for male and female immigrants.

In both Britain and the colonies, accepting assistance was seen by those responsible for administering the migration process as equivalent to accepting charity, for both men and women. Making a substantial contribution towards one’s own passage—helping oneself—was regarded as evidence of an applicant’s thrift, independence and providence. These, however, were qualities valued more highly in male immigrants, and perhaps not at all in single working class women. Those who opposed immigration, such as sectors of the colonial working class or those opposed to the introduction of the Irish, sometimes tied the notion of men accepting assistance to ideas about ‘pauper immigration’ and the

52 List of goods lost by emigrants off the S.S. Port Phillip: Battye Library, Accession 553, Box 2.
53 Superintendent of Relief to Undersecretary, 9 June 1896: Battye Library, Accession 553, Box 2.
undeserving poor. For women, the implications of accepting assistance were different and were related to the role they would fill as domestics in middle-class colonial homes. Accepting charity created an obligation on the part of the recipient towards the donor. Thus the qualities required of servants—deference, obedience and discipline—became the price exacted from single female immigrants in return for an assisted passage.

All colonial government female assistance schemes from the 1850s attempted to impose rigid controls over the behaviour of single female immigrants. These controls originated in part in the work of philanthropic middle-class women in Britain who sought to protect immigrant women. But they were also a legacy from earlier schemes to 'train' refractory or unfortunate women in domestic service prior to departure. Controlling the female immigrant began with selection, where the morality of single female immigrants was subjected to a rigid scrutiny not given male applicants. This was both a continuation of the practices and a reaction against the practices of earlier societies. Urania Cottage for example, had incorporated a process of screening applicants into its programme; but that programme was also designed to reform 'disreputable' women. The colonial selection process was intended to eliminate the disreputable at the outset. As well as morality, government selection authorities in Britain screened employment qualifications through the examination of employer references and 'characters'. This was a logical response to the debacle of the 1850s, when the rural women of Ireland and Scotland introduced into the eastern colonies were found to be unemployable even in colonies hungry for female labour.

Differential treatment continued on the passage out, with the single women segregated from the rest of the emigrants and crew and placed under the constant supervision of the matron. Again the experiences of some of Twining's immigrants, and those from Urania Cottage who 'relapsed' on the passage out, alerted colonial authorities to the dangers of shipboard life. From the 1850s British middle-class women, including Mrs Stuart Wortley who served on Herbert's committee, pressed the colonial governments to employ professional matrons on board ships, women of middle-class origin.

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55 See my forthcoming doctoral thesis, 'Assisted working-class female migration from Britain to Australia, 1860-1900', Murdoch University, chapters 8-10, 'The process of control'.

who could both supervise the government immigrants and train them in domestic duties. By the 1860s, all the colonies except Western Australia and Tasmania made use of these professional matrons.

Finally, after arrival in the colony immigrant women were kept confined to the immigrants' barracks or the government hiring depot—unlike the men who arrived on the same vessel—still under the surveillance of a government matron, until they were passed into the hands of their first colonial employer. No similar controls were exercised over any other category of assisted immigrant. In Maria Rye's telling phrase, colonial governments ordered batches of single women 'like Manchester cotton or Bermondsey boots' and although they were perhaps better protected than those items, single female immigrants had no more autonomy. They were 'emigrated'.

How did the women themselves react to this proprietorial and paternalistic treatment? Two brief examples suggest that, predictably, there was a degree of resistance. One middle-class woman who took passage to Brisbane as a domestic in 1862, wrote back to the London feminist group who had helped her, describing the prison-like conditions of the immigrant barracks where the single women were incarcerated after arrival.

I suppose the Government considers that in giving us a free passage it buys and pays for us and has a right to do as it pleases with us. Certainly a free passage to a fine and prosperous country is no small privilege, and we should not feel the less grateful for it, if we could have the benefit increased by a rather better reception. 56

Thirty years later a domestic given free passage to Western Australia expressed similar sentiments:

we came out here as brave English women & as such we may...not be set down as worthless creatures who have been glad to leave their own country & avail ourselves of free passages which we are told should be given to none, we do not reckon ourselves with none but came here with the determination to repay...those who were so kind as to place free passages at our disposal. 57

Both these women rejected the colonial construction of the assisted female immigrant as submissive, worthless and poor. Both testified to their gratitude for the assistance given them but denied that accepting such a passage made them the objects of charity.

56 English Woman's Journal, vol. 9, August 1862, p.408.
57 Mary Corbett to Colonial Secretary's Office, 13 June 1892: Battye Library, Accession 553, Box 4.
Both recognised that the obligation between them and the colonial societies which introduced them was a mutual one.

For single women, then, one of the corollaries of ‘being emigrated’ and being constructed as poor was subjection to a great deal of control, both during the passage out and after arrival in the colony. Although this was true to a degree for all categories of assisted single female immigrants, the process of control reached its zenith under the colonial government assistance schemes. Such control went by the name of ‘protection’, but protection had many faces—protection of immigrant women from danger, protection of the colonial investment in domestic labour, protection of colonial homes from ‘contamination’ through contact with ‘immoral’ women. It is not possible to indicate here all the factors which induced colonial governments to implement their complex programmes designed to ‘protect’ the immigrant women assisted with colonial funds. However the earlier philanthropic British schemes were certainly a substantial influence, both in terms of some of the controls those schemes exercised over the poor women they introduced and in the colonial perception that the women who emigrated even late in the nineteenth century remained poor, refractory and reprobate.