

**From a Breadwinner to a Good and Useful Citizen: The Attitudinal Shift
Towards Child Labour in NSW, 1850–1916**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration of Originality

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or institute of higher learning.

I affirm that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work. I certify to the best of my knowledge that all sources of reference have been acknowledged.

Ulduz Salmanova

Authorship Attribution Statement

Chapter One of this thesis has been published as

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I designed this study, collected and analysed the data, and wrote the drafts of the manuscript.

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As supervisor for the candidature upon which this thesis is based, I confirm that the authorship attribution statements above are correct.

Associate Professor Frances M. Clarke

Covid Impact Statement

The Covid-19 pandemic significantly disrupted my studies in 2020 and 2021 and created lasting effects. During this period, I was compelled to leave Australia. I moved myself and my family first to Sweden and then, a year later, to Germany. These moves prevented me from conducting essential archival research in Australia and limited my interactions with fellow postgraduates and senior Australian researchers. These restrictions impacted my ability to access primary sources, delaying aspects of my research progress.

Ulduz Salmanova

Contents

Acknowledgements	ii
Abstract	iii
Introduction	1
Chapter One	16
Chapter Two	45
Chapter Three	86
Chapter Four	128
Chapter Five	161
Conclusion	191
Bibliography	199

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Abstract

In New South Wales, as in many other places, childhood shifted substantially in the modern era, as child labour—once a reality for the majority—came to be heavily restricted. Nowadays, children generally do not engage in paid work until their mid-teens, and most of their time is devoted to education, social activities, and play. This transformation stems from reforms initiated in the mid-nineteenth century, aimed at restricting child labour and expanding education. By the early twentieth century, working-class children were increasingly redefined from wage-earners to learners, with education replacing work as the focus of childhood.

The movement to restrict child labour in New South Wales was shaped by three key factors: health concerns, educational priorities, and moral considerations. Middle-class reformers, including legislators, became increasingly concerned about the physical harm of child labour, particularly in industrial settings. British discourse on the health impacts of child labour, which highlighted stunted growth and deformities in young workers, influenced thinking in New South Wales. This, combined with fears surrounding degeneration theory, reinforced the belief that industrial child labour could permanently damage the future health of the population. Additionally, concerns about the Australian climate and sanitation linked poor working conditions to disease, further fuelling calls for reform.

Education played a central role in the transformation of attitudes toward child labour, with schooling increasingly seen as essential not only for societal stability but also for economic growth. As the colony industrialised, the need for a skilled, educated workforce became more urgent. Reformers viewed education as a key tool for fostering a productive, self-sufficient population that would drive economic development. Furthermore, education was seen as a means of preventing crime and mendicancy.

Another major concern influencing changing attitudes toward child labour in New South Wales was the moral character of working children, particularly those in factories and street trading. Reformers were concerned that financial independence, coupled with unsupervised street

work and unregulated interactions in factories, could lead to inappropriate relationships, crime, or prostitution. They feared that such autonomy would undermine moral order and social stability, further driving their efforts to restrict child labour.

Thus, the immediate welfare of working-class children was considered important only insofar as it impacted their future outcomes. Reformers, largely from middle-class backgrounds, did not focus on improving the living conditions of working-class families, which would have reduced families' reliance on child labour. Instead, they concentrated on limiting child labour for children deemed too young, without addressing the underlying economic conditions that made child labour necessary for many families. Furthermore, many forms of child labour, particularly the exploitation of Aboriginal and state children, were not subject to the same scrutiny. Consequently, the movement to restrict child labour was driven by pragmatic considerations, focused more on securing a steady supply of compliant workers, preserving social order through a morally disciplined population, and minimising reliance on state support, rather than prioritising the welfare of the children themselves.

Introduction

By the early twentieth century, a profound historical shift had taken place in many western societies in which poor children, like their privileged peers, were expected to prioritise education over contributing to their family's livelihood. It is commonly believed that this transition came about because society collectively recognised childhood as a vulnerable and formative stage of life—one in which adults held responsibility for protecting the young, ensuring their well-being, and creating the conditions that would enable them to reach their full potential. In short, inexorable human progress supposedly led to improvements in children's lives. This perspective is so pervasive that even AI, like ChatGPT, highlights the historical development of child labour laws as an example of societal progress, reflecting shifts in values such as prioritising child welfare, health, and education over economic gains.¹ In reality, however, this perspective stems from ideas that developed during the first half of the twentieth century and were later formalized in the 1959 United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child, which emphasized children's entitlements to health, education, recreation, and protection from exploitation, rather than arising from the original motivations for removing children from the workforce.²

This thesis reveals that in colonial New South Wales (NSW), the transition of working-class children from productive workers to dependent students was motivated by economic, industrial, and social considerations rather than genuine child welfare concerns. Occurring during the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this transition was led chiefly by middle-class reformers. Their primary focus was not children's immediate welfare. Reformers, when implementing measures to gradually remove poor children from work in coal mines,

¹ Here is ChatGPT's response to the question: What does the emergence of child labour laws signify? "The evolution of child labour laws illustrates societal advancement, demonstrating a change in values that emphasises the importance of child welfare, health, and education over economic profit. Over time, societies began to recognise that childhood should be a protected period for development, rather than a time for exploitation through work. This shift highlights the growing emphasis on protecting vulnerable populations, promoting the well-being of children, and ensuring their access to education, all of which serve broader social and ethical goals."

² UN General Assembly, *Declaration of the Rights of the Child*, A/RES/1386(XIV), UN General Assembly, November 20, 1959.

factories, or street trades and place them in schools, aimed instead to cultivate a healthy and capable workforce to support industrial growth. Their goal was to equip these children with skills essential for advancing Australia's industrial ambitions and ensure they conformed to socially acceptable middle-class norms. These concerns led to a redefinition of childhood as a preparatory phase for working-class children, during which they were supposed to focus on education and skill development. Contrary to popular belief, reformers prioritised long-term societal benefits over immediate improvements in working-class children's lives.

This thesis contributes to a growing body of scholarship on the history of childhood established over seventy years ago by Philippe Ariès' pioneering work, *Centuries of Childhood* (1962), and supported by the founding of the *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* in 2001.³ The field is relatively new, particularly in Australia. Australian scholarship on the history of childhood emerged in the 1980s, likely influenced by the social history movement's focus on marginalised groups. Early contributions to the history of childhood in Australia focused on colonial children, providing foundational insights into their experiences.⁴ Sue Fabian and Morag Loh's *Children in Australia* (1980) expanded this scope by offering a comprehensive study of children's lives throughout history.⁵ Jan Kociumbas's *Australian Childhood: A History* (1997) stands out as the most comprehensive work, presenting a broad historical overview of childhood from the late eighteenth century.⁶ Understandably, the history of child welfare is the most extensively studied sub-discipline in the history of childhood, given the moral imperative to expose the exploitation of children by the systems intended to protect them. Historians such as Shurlee Swain, Nell Musgrove, John

³ Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York, NY: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1965).

⁴ Bob Bessant, "Children and Youth in Australia 1860s–1930s," in B. Bessant (ed.), *Mother State and Her Little Ones: Children and Youth 1860s–1930s* (Melbourne: Centre for Youth and Community Studies, 1987); 7–30; Ken Inglis, "Young Australia: The Idea and the Reality," in *The Colonial Child: Papers Presented at the 8th Biennial Conference of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria, Melbourne, 12–13 October 1979*, ed. Guy Featherstone (Melbourne: Royal Historical Society of Victoria, 1981):1–23; Shurlee Swain and Renate How, "Locating the Colonial Child," *Interlogue*, no. 5, (December 1994): 49–54;

⁵ Sue Fabian and Morag Loh, *Children in Australia: An Outline History* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1980).

⁶ Jan Kociumbas, *Australian Childhood: A History* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1997).

Ramsland, Margaret Barbalet and Robert Van Krieken have examined the intersections between children's lives and welfare institutions, often aligning historical inquiry with political investigations into child abuse and institutional failures.⁷ While child welfare history is a major focus in childhood studies, a distinct body of literature has developed examining convict children. This scholarship examines their unique position within the penal system, examining their experiences as both victims of exploitation and subjects of reform.⁸ Key themes such as the problematisation and restriction of child labour in Australia, however, remain underexplored, unlike the extensive research available for the US and Britain.⁹

That said, there is a modest body of literature addressing child labour in Australia, though most studies in this area focus on its extent and economic importance. Historian Maree Murray, for instance, has highlighted the importance of child labour to rural economies during the 1870s, where children from low socio-economic backgrounds served as an essential source of cheap

⁷ Shurlee Swain, 'Beyond Child Migration: Inquiries, Apologies and the Implications for the Writing of a Transnational Child Welfare History', *History Australia*, vol. 13, no. 1 (2016): 139-152; Shurlee Swain and Margot Hillel, *Child, Nation, Race and Empire: Child Rescue Discourse, England, Canada and Australia, 1850-1915* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010); Nell Musgrove, *The Scars Remain: A Long History of Forgotten Australians and Children's Institutions* (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2013); Margaret Barbalet, *Far From a Low Gutter Girl: The Forgotten World of State Wards* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1983); John Ramsland, *Children of the Backlanes: Destitute and Neglected Children in Colonial New South Wales* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1986); Robert Van Krieken, *Children and the State: Social Control and the Formation of Australian Child Welfare* (North Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992).

⁸ Lucy Frost, *Convict Orphans: The heartbreaking Stories of the Colony's Forgotten Children, and Those Who Succeeded Against All Odds* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2023); Catie Gilchrist, "The "Crime" of Precocious Sexuality: Young Male Convicts and the Politics of Separation," *Journal of Australian Colonial History*, vol. 8 (2006): 43-66.

⁹ Hugh D. Hindman, *Child Labor: An American History* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2002); Hugh Cunningham and Pier Paolo Viazzo, *Child Labour in Historical Perspective 1800-1985: Case Studies from Europe, Japan and Colombia* (Florence: UNICEF, 1996); Peter Kirby, *Child Labour in Britain, 1750-1870* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Jane Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Carolyn Tuttle, *Hard at Work in Factories and Mines: The Economics of Child Labor During the British Industrial Revolution* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000); Clark Nardinelli, *Child Labor and the Industrial Revolution* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990); Viviana Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1985); David Nasaw, *Children of the City: At Work and at Play* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1985); Walter I. Trattner, *Crusade for the Children: A History of the National Child Labor Committee and Child Labor Reform in America* (Chicago, IL: Quadrangle Books, 1970); Shelley Sallee, *The Whiteness of Child Labor Reform in the New South* (Athens, AL: University of Georgia Press, 2004); James Schmidt, *Industrial Violence and the Legal Origins of Child Labor* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

labour.¹⁰ Her research has also explored the boarding-out scheme in NSW (1880–1920), which aimed to provide care for children but often led to their exploitation due to inadequate oversight.¹¹ Murray notes that the work of boarded-out children was similar to that of other working-class children in that they served as an easily exploitable pool of workers within rural economies and institutional schemes. In a similar vein, Penelope Hetherington’s scholarship on Western Australia’s early Swan River Colony confirms that child labour was crucial for settlers’ survival, while historians David Macdonald and Kerry Wimshurst further highlight the importance of child labour in colonial NSW.¹² Viewing this labour in economic terms, Macdonald emphasises children’s role in supporting industrial growth, while Wimshurst, focusing more on the social necessity, concludes that the casual labour of the young helped sustain working-class families. Building on the broader discussions of child labour’s economic and social significance in colonial Australia, Kerin Gorton and John Ramsland similarly highlight the immediate contributions of convict children in NSW, arguing that they were essential to the colonial workforce by filling labour shortages in key industries.¹³ However, Cameron Nunn challenges this view, critiquing the application of “Human Capital” theory and suggesting that convict children were initially seen as a burden, with their transportation driven by long-term social and economic considerations rather than immediate profitability.¹⁴ Finally, historian Shirleene Robinson is one of a number of scholars

¹⁰ Maree Murray, “Children’s Work in Rural New South Wales in the 1870s,” *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, vol. 79, iss. 3-4 (December 1993): 226–244.

¹¹ Maree Murray, “The Child is Not a Servant!: Children, Work and the Boarding out Scheme in New South Wales, 1880-1920,” *Labour History*, no. 77 (November 1999): 190-206 and [Maree Murray](#), “Children and Schoolwork in New South Wales, 1860-1920”, Department of Economics, University of Wollongong, 1999.

¹² Penelope Hetherington, “Child Labour in Swan River colony, 1829-1850,” *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 25, no. 98 (1992): 34-52; Kerry Wimshurst, “Child labour and school attendance in South Australia 1890–1915,” *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 19, iss. 76, (1981): 388-411; David Macdonald, “Child and Female Labour in Sydney, 1876-1898,” *ANU Historical Journal*, vol. 10 and 11 (1973-74): 41-49.

¹³ Kerin Gorton and John Ramsland, “Prison Playground? Child Convict Labour and Vocational Training in New South Wales, 1788–1840,” *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, vol. 34, iss. 1 (2002): 51–62.

¹⁴ Cameron Nunn, “Juveniles as Human Capital: Re-evaluating the Economic Value of Juvenile Male Convict Labour,” *A Journal of Labour and Social History*, vol. 108 (May 2015): 53-69.

who have looked into the extent and nature of Aboriginal children's labour in Australia's past.¹⁵ Focusing on colonial era Queensland, Robinson pointed to the extensive use of indigenous children in domestic service, pastoral activities, and other sectors, while demonstrating both the crucial nature of this labour to the colonial economy and the way indigenous children remained profoundly vulnerable to economic and physical abuse due to systemic racism and powerlessness. Together, these studies underscore the centrality of child labour to Australia's economic and social development while highlighting the persistent exploitation and vulnerability of children, particularly those from marginalised groups.¹⁶

In addition to this work examining the prevalence of child labour in Australia's past, a small body of work looks at efforts to restrict child labour. Historians James Hagan and Madeleine Johnston, for instance, have delved into Victoria's 1885 *Factories and Shops Act*.¹⁷ Both highlight the role of media outlets like *The Age* and the influence of trade unions in advocating for reform. Hagan emphasises the Melbourne Typographical Society (MTS), while Johnston explores unions' broader efforts to protect male workers' wages. They also acknowledge the contributions of reform advocates, such as manufacturers like John Parry and liberal politicians, emphasising social and moral motivations for protecting vulnerable workers. Hogan adopts a practical perspective, focusing on improving conditions and addressing unfair competition, while Johnston examines child labour through socio-political ideologies and economic factors. Likewise, my honours thesis

¹⁵ Shirleene Robinson, "The Unregulated Employment of Aboriginal Children in Queensland, 1842-1902," *Labour History*, no. 82 (May 2002): 1-15; Shirleene Robinson, *Something Like Slavery? Queensland's Aboriginal Child Workers* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2008); Penelope Hetherington, "Aboriginal Children as a Potential Labour Force in Swan River Colony, 1829-1850," *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 16, iss. 33 (1992): 41-55; Inara Walden, "That Was Slavery Days': Aboriginal Domestic Servants in New South Wales in the Twentieth Century," *Labour History*, no. 6 (November 1, 1995): 1-22.

¹⁶ An exception to the prevailing scholarship is the work of Bradley Bowden and Peta Stevenson-Clarke, which challenges the prevalence of child labour in Australia, arguing that the economy's focus on skilled adult labour and industrialised pastoral agriculture left few suitable roles for children. Bradley Bowden and Peta Stevenson-Clarke, "Reconsidering Managerial Use of Child Labour: Lessons from the Experience of Nineteenth Century Australia," *Journal of Management History*, vol. 16, iss. 3 (2010): 380-395.

¹⁷ J. Hagan, "Employers, Trade Unions and the First Victorian Factory Acts," *Labour History*, no. 7 (November 1964): 3-9 and Madeleine Johnston, "The Role and Regulation of Child Factory Labour During the Industrial Revolution in Australia," *International Review of Social History*, vol. 65, iss. 3, (December 2020): 433 – 463.

investigated legislation restricting factory child labour—specifically the 1896 *Factory and Workshops Act* in NSW.¹⁸ In this work, I highlighted diverse advocates for child labour regulation, including workers seeking job protection, legislators fearing social decline, and doctors promoting public health. These studies highlight the complex social, economic, and political factors driving child labour regulation in factories in Victoria and NSW.

Building on these insights, this thesis traces the transformation of attitudes toward child labour in colonial NSW more broadly, extending beyond factory work to encompass other forms of youth employment. It does so by examining some of the earliest child labour laws in NSW, including the *Coal Fields Regulation Act* (1862) and the law regulating child street trade, the *Neglected Children and Juvenile Offenders Act* (1905). Through this legislative analysis, it explores what sparked concerns over youthful workers, the discourse that shaped these issues, and the measures enacted to address them. Furthermore, it identifies key advocates for child labour restrictions, their motivations, and the opposition they faced, while also examining the development and scope of the resulting legislation. To explore the evolving colonial attitudes toward working children, this thesis goes beyond examining laws, incorporating evidence from several government inquiries and analysing the unique phenomenon of juvenile industrial exhibitions, which gained significant popularity in late nineteenth-century Australia. Additionally, I examine why family farm labour, despite a brief period of scrutiny—primarily by teachers—ultimately remained an accepted form of child labour. This comprehensive analysis draws on a wide array of primary sources, including minutes from Miners’ Union meetings, government documents such as census data, parliamentary debate transcripts, evidence gathered by government inquiries, legislative records, speeches from influential reformers, contemporary literature, colonial newspapers, and medical journals.

No fixed definition of “child” or “child labour” occurs in the following chapters, as this approach allows for examination of how attitudes toward child labour evolved in NSW. These

¹⁸ Ulduz Salmanova, “Banishing Children of “Tender Years” from the Workplace: Examining Child Labour Legislation in Nineteenth-century New South Wales,” (Honours thesis, University of Sydney, 2017).

terms changed over time and differed among commentators. Some considered thirteen- or fourteen-year-olds as “children” in need of protection, while others placed the boundary of childhood earlier or later. Similarly, the definition of child labour has evolved over time. In the 1860s, opposition was limited to children’s work underground in coal mines. By the 1870s, concerns expanded to include child labour in factories, while street trading by children was tolerated until 1905. In the early twentieth century, unpaid family farm labour increasingly drew criticism, yet it remained unregulated. Analysing how people in the past understood “childhood”, “youth” and “child labour” is a critical component of this argument.

The fluid nature of these definitions becomes particularly apparent when examining the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century in NSW, when childhood roles underwent significant transformation. This involved bringing the experiences of poor and working-class children—except Aboriginal children—closer to those of wealthier peers. Children under fourteen in NSW, regardless of class or gender, increasingly spent their days being schooled, while boys over fourteen could pursue technical education before entering the workforce. The shift from child labour to schooling was initiated more by economic and industrial needs; middle-class reformers led this change not so much to improve children’s immediate welfare, as to develop a healthy, skilled workforce for industrial growth. By removing poor children from labour in mines, factories, and street trades, reformers also aimed to instil middle-class values in this vulnerable population. Education served as a means to both shape productive workers and transmit bourgeois ideals to children from labouring families rather than being viewed as a fundamental right, thus reflecting broader economic and social priorities rather than purely altruistic intentions.

This thesis highlights diverse factors unique to the NSW context that contributed to the curtailment of job opportunities for working-class children and the emergence of their new role as dependents. However, industrialisation emerges as a broader, pivotal influence that shaped these colonial developments. The nature of this influence was paradoxical— industrialisation initially drove the rise of child labour due to the demand for cheap, unskilled workers in factories, mines,

and other industries, but it ultimately became the catalyst for its decline. Child labour in NSW increasingly became a significant concern during the second half of the nineteenth century as the colony's industrialisation accelerated. The harsh realities of child labour in coal mines—where children endured dangerous conditions, long hours, and minimal protections—were well-documented and widely publicised. NSW legislators, informed by government inquiries from Britain, were aware of the severe health consequences of child labour in coal mines. The health risks associated with factory work were also extensively publicised and well-known to them. Consequently, they began to regulate child labour in mines and factories to ensure a healthy, capable workforce for the future. Thus, industrialisation not only brought children into industrial workplaces but also made their employment visible, leading to its scrutiny and eventual restriction.

Industrialisation also fuelled anti-child labour sentiments in other ways. As a latecomer to industrialisation, political and economic elites in NSW felt insecure about the state's industrial development. With many Western European countries and the United States far ahead in industrial development, and NSW lacking the resources to train its youth in essential industrial skills, a belief emerged that the colony would be better served by investing in general primary education and the technical education of its young. This focus aimed to prevent NSW from falling behind and to strengthen its ability to compete with more advanced nations. The ban on street trading by children as NSW entered the twentieth century was also indirectly linked to growing industrialisation. Street trading was perceived as a dead-end occupation that would lead either to future criminality or a life of professional begging. To prevent such outcomes for child street traders, middle-class reformers sought to regulate child street trading by banning it for those under ten and restricting those aged 10 to 16 from trading during school hours, compelling them to attend school and potentially transition into work that would supposedly be more honest and productive. In this way, industrialisation not only shaped the economic priorities of NSW but also influenced social policies, reinforcing the idea that education and skill development were essential for the colony's competitive advancement on the global stage.

Another significant influence on the transformation of experiences for NSW children from impoverished backgrounds lay in contemporary ideas about childhood, which were evolving throughout the Western world during this period. Historically, European societies had largely accepted a religious perspective on childhood, viewing children as inherently sinful due to the doctrine of Original Sin.¹⁹ However, Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau challenged this view, emphasising the malleability of children and the importance of education in shaping their future. Locke argued that children were blank slates shaped by experience, stressing the importance of disciplined education to instil virtue.²⁰ He believed education was essential not only for personal growth but also for the prosperity and well-being of society. Rousseau, in contrast, saw children as naturally good but susceptible to corruption, advocating for a protective and carefully structured upbringing.²¹ These ideas gradually shifted societal attitudes, leading to an increased emphasis on nurture over nature. By the nineteenth century, the Romantic movement, championed by figures such as William Wordsworth, Victor Hugo, and Jean Paul Richter, further reinforced the notion of childhood innocence, portraying children as pure beings in need of protection from the corrupting influences of society. By the 1860s, NSW reformers embraced the belief that nurture played a greater role than nature in shaping individuals, driving efforts to expand mass schooling. Though they explicitly used these terms by the early 1900s, their push to regulate child labour and emphasise education had already been guided by these ideas for decades. Reformers sought to remove working-class children from harsh labour conditions and place them in schools, believing structured education was essential for shaping them into responsible, productive citizens who would contribute positively to society's future development.

¹⁹ Colin Heywood, *Childhood in Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018): 81-96.

²⁰ Jamie Gianoutsos, "Locke and Rousseau: Early Childhood Education," *The Pulse*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2006): 1-23.

²¹ Colin Heywood, *Childhood in Modern Europe*, 81-96.

This brings us to yet another significant development in the nineteenth century that profoundly transformed children's lives in NSW—the broader application of the *parens patriae* doctrine. Originating in English common law, *parens patriae* (meaning “parent of the nation”) granted the sovereign authority to act as guardian for those unable to care for themselves, particularly minors and the mentally incapacitated. Initially used sparingly to protect vulnerable children's property rights, rather than oversee their upbringing, the doctrine expanded significantly in the second half of the nineteenth-century. As concerns grew over child labour, education, and welfare, the state adopted a more paternalistic role in family life. Economic and social pressures spurred state interventions aimed at moulding children into productive and morally upright citizens. The state's involvement now extended beyond property protection to regulating children's everyday lives. Authorities implemented compulsory education, imposed restrictions on child labour, and established welfare systems for vulnerable children. This shift reflected a growing belief that the state had a duty to ensure children's health, education, and readiness for future societal roles. Consequently, family dynamics were redefined and increasingly subordinated to public oversight in the name of children's best interests.

Thus, NSW was significantly influenced by broader Western developments, including industrialisation and emerging knowledge about its health consequences, evolving concepts of childhood, and increasing state intervention in family life. However, examining this transformation in NSW reveals distinctive regional characteristics that shaped how these global trends manifested locally. Several factors were unique to the NSW context. In the coal mining industry, miners' unions—motivated by self-interest in restricting child labour—brought the issue to legislative attention. Concerns about the Australian climate's impact on European settlers' health influenced legislators' decisions to remove children from both mining and factory work. The colony's convict heritage shaped policies toward street children, resulting in particularly strict regulations governing girl street sellers. While NSW had established educational provision from its early settlement, the underlying motivations evolved significantly over time, with education's importance growing in

response to changing political and economic conditions. Finally, NSW's slower pace of industrialisation compared to European nations and America fostered deliberate efforts to promote technical education as preparation for workforce entry. These region-specific influences demonstrate how global patterns of childhood transformation adapted to local conditions, creating distinctive pathways toward the modern conception of dependent childhood in colonial NSW.

The findings on changing attitudes toward child labour in NSW share some similarities with those of historians studying the US and Britain, but they also highlight key differences in motivations and mechanisms of change. One major similarity is the role of economic and industrial pressures in shaping child labour reform. Like Walter Trattner's emphasis on economic arguments against child labour—such as its inefficiency and harm to national stability—this NSW study suggests that reformers were motivated by long-term economic interests rather than immediate humanitarian concerns.²² However, a key difference lies in the cultural framing of childhood. In the US, Viviana Zelizer famously described a cultural transformation in which children came to be seen as “priceless,” leading to legal reforms that removed them from the workforce.²³ In contrast, the NSW study suggests that reformers redefined childhood not as a sentimental or sacred phase, but as a period of preparation for work. While both perspectives acknowledge a shift toward schooling, the US case emphasises emotional and cultural changes, whereas the NSW case frames it as a strategic decision to develop skilled labourers for industrial expansion.

Historian Hugh Cunningham challenges the myth that child labour reform in Britain was driven solely by humanitarian figures like Shaftesbury or Barnardo.²⁴ Instead, he argues that perceptions of poor children evolved over time due to industrialisation, romanticism, abolitionism, and evangelicalism. Initially seen as economic assets, poor children were later portrayed as slaves, then savages needing civilisation, and finally as sentimentalised waifs. This transformation parallels

²² Walter I. Trattner, *Crusade for the Children*.

²³ Viviana Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child*.

²⁴ Hugh Cunningham, *The Children of the Poor: Representations of Childhood since the Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

the NSW findings in that childhood was redefined, but whereas Cunningham highlights shifting cultural perceptions, the NSW case underscores pragmatic economic objectives. Public concern, legal reforms, and state intervention gradually redefined childhood in both cases, making education central and shifting responsibility to parents. Another contrast is the role of activism and social movements. Walter Trattner highlights the influence of the National Child Labour Committee and other reformers in the US who framed child labour as a national crisis. In NSW, however, the movement was led more by middle-class legislators rather than grassroots activism. Reform efforts in NSW were less about moral outrage and more about social engineering—ensuring that working-class children conformed to middle-class ideals of education and work discipline. Race also plays a slightly different role in the US context. As Shelley Sallee shows, racialised arguments especially influenced child labour reform in the American South, reinforcing white supremacy by prioritising white children’s removal from labour while neglecting Black children’s rights.²⁵ A racially-inflected language of “civilisation” also, of course, framed discussions around childhood in Australia—ultimately leading to the literal removal of Aboriginal children from their families.²⁶ Yet in NSW, where the indigenous population was less visible from the urban centres where discussions on this issue were centred, the emphasis on white supremacy tended to also be less overt than in the US. The NSW commentators in this study do not mention racial factors, instead focusing more on class and economic concerns. On the whole, both the NSW study and historians of the US and Britain recognise economic and industrial pressures as critical to child labour reform. However, while US scholars emphasise cultural shifts, activism, and race, the NSW case highlights a more pragmatic, workforce-driven rationale.

²⁵ Shelley Sallee, *The Whiteness of Child Labor Reform in the New South* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2024).

²⁶ See Penny Russell, *Savage or Civilised: Manners in Colonial Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2010) for a discussion of early ideas of the concept of “savagery” and “civilisation.” For a comparison of racist ideas that led to child removal of indigenous Americans and Australians, see Victoria Haskins and Margaret D. Jacobs, “Stolen Generations and Vanishing Indians: The Removal of Indigenous Children as a Weapon of War in the United States and Australia, 1870-1940” in James Marten, ed., *Children and War: A Historical Anthology* (New York: New York University Press, 2002).

This thesis comprises five chapters. Chapter One examines the enactment of the Coal Fields Regulation Act (1862) in NSW, the colony's first legislation restricting child labour by banning children under thirteen from underground mine work. Unlike in Britain, where public outrage over mining accidents spurred similar reforms, the NSW Act emerged primarily from miners' safety concerns, with the Miners' Union playing a pivotal role in advocating for regulations modelled on British laws. The inclusion of child labour restrictions appears incidental but went uncontested during parliamentary debates. The chapter finds that the Act's child labour clause was influenced by several factors: safety concerns, lawmakers' beliefs about the colony's harsh environment affecting children's health, and the perceived need for children to gain an education to become informed voters in the future. The decision to set the age limit at thirteen, higher than Britain's age limit of twelve, stemmed from concerns about colonial children being less physically developed than their British counterparts. Ultimately, the Act marked a significant step in NSW's labour reform, demonstrating an early recognition of child protection as intertwined with broader social and health considerations.

Chapter Two explores the evolving attitudes toward youth employment in NSW from the late 1850s to the mid-1870s through four select committees. Initially, legislators advocated for increased child employment in manufacturing to address concerns about rising youth vagrancy, fearing that unemployed boys would turn to crime and girls to prostitution. By the mid-1870s, this stance had reversed, with legislators seeking to limit child labour due to concerns about its negative impact on health and education. Several developments drove this shift. The decline of protectionist policies and the stabilisation of manufacturing reduced the perceived need for child labour to support local industries. Additionally, new measures addressing juvenile vagrancy alleviated earlier concerns about youth homelessness. The rise of public schooling further prioritised education over immediate workforce participation. The chapter concludes that between 1850-1875, attitudes toward child factory labour shifted from positive to negative due to changing economic and

political conditions, with classrooms becoming recognized as the proper environment for all working children by 1875.

Chapter Three examines juvenile industrial exhibitions in NSW at the turn of the nineteenth century, highlighting their uniqueness and significance in shifting societal attitudes toward youth education and training. These exhibitions marked a departure from earlier views that prioritised keeping children occupied with any form of work. Instead, they emphasised the importance of both basic education and practical skills to prepare children for future industrial roles. This shift was driven by concerns that Australia, lacking infrastructure for technical education, was falling behind other Western nations and relying on immigration to meet the demand for skilled labour. Juvenile industrial exhibitions emerged as a distinctive response to these challenges. Unlike other jurisdictions, NSW embraced these events to promote technical education, reduce class distinctions, and empower the working class, driven by an anti-elitist movement. They sought to instil a strong work ethic in children, counter youth disengagement, and highlight the value of labour. Additionally, the exhibitions reflected middle-class views on gender roles, promoting technical training for boys and domestic responsibilities for girls. Ultimately, these events represented a multifaceted response to the colony's social, economic, and cultural challenges, underscoring a growing middle-class commitment to developing a technically skilled workforce while reinforcing class-based societal values.

Chapter Four argues that the Neglected Children and Juvenile Offenders Act (1905) in NSW emerged from social concerns, advocacy by influential figures, and the efforts of youth organisations. Groups like the Boys' Brigade, founded by middle-class reformers, sought to protect working-class children from the negative influences of street trading, which they linked to truancy and juvenile crime. Sir Charles Kinnaird Mackellar and Attorney General B.R. Wise were key advocates for state intervention. Mackellar viewed child neglect as a primary cause of truancy, crime, and prostitution, emphasising the influence of environment on behaviour. Wise shared Mackellar's concerns but was also driven by liberal reformist ideals. Public fears toward beggars,

often equated with child street hawkers, further fuelled calls for reform. By positioning the state as a key protector of youth welfare, the legislation marked a transformative moment in early twentieth-century NSW, shaping notions of responsible citizenship and further defining childhood as a protected phase of life.

Chapter Five examines early twentieth-century debates surrounding child farm labour in NSW and its impact on children's education, health, and development. It explores how educators, inspectors, and public figures criticised farm work for causing absenteeism, hindering intellectual growth, and depriving children of play opportunities. The chapter highlights tensions between these criticisms and societal ideals that framed farm labour as character-building. It also investigates the uneven application of these concerns, particularly the differential treatment of Indigenous children. Finally, the chapter assesses the limited regulatory response, focusing on the indirect measures introduced by the 1916 Public Instruction (Amendment) Act, which sought to address absenteeism through stricter school attendance policies rather than directly targeting child farm labour.

Ultimately, this thesis reveals that the campaign against child labour was shaped more by the priorities of reformers than by a sincere concern for children's well-being. This is evident in the way middle-class advocates approached the issue—focusing on restricting child labour while neglecting the root economic causes that made it necessary. Rather than working to improve the financial stability of working-class families, they often placed blame on parents while restricting only particular forms of child labour, leaving others unaddressed. At the same time, widespread and systemic exploitation—especially of Aboriginal and state children—was largely ignored, revealing the movement's selective approach. Although reformers increasingly emphasised the ideals of childhood play and education, their efforts were driven less by humanitarian ideals and more by practical or ideological considerations.

Chapter One

The Coal Fields Regulation Act of 1862: The Beginnings of the Child

Labour Prohibition in Australia

The idea that the young should be removed from the paid workforce—an idea that began taking root in many privileged nations at some point in the nineteenth century—is among the most profound transformations in the history of childhood. Transnational trends, however, only partly explain this transformation, for each jurisdiction also followed its own unique path in adopting relevant legislation. In Australia, the colony of New South Wales (NSW) led the way in proscribing child labour by imposing the first age-related employment prohibition—a ban on the recruitment of children under thirteen for underground coal mining work. This development occurred within broader debates about factory child labour. However, as Chapter Two will demonstrate, prior to this coal mining legislation, public inquiries had addressed child labour not to restrict it, but paradoxically to expand it. The eventual ban on child labour in coal mines resulted from miners' union pressure for new regulatory legislation modelled on recent British coal mining law. Drawing directly from this British precedent, William Keene, author of the *Coal Fields Regulation Act of 1862*, adapted the British child labour clause by setting the minimum age at twelve.¹ Once introduced, the provision raised little concern on the legislative floor. On the contrary, the clause received strong support, with legislators raising the minimum age for coal mine work to thirteen, and the bill passed into law with remarkable ease.

Miners favoured limitations on child employment in coal mines due to multiple related factors. Safety considerations were paramount, as they regarded untrained young workers as hazardous to mine operations overall. From an economic standpoint, certain miners exploited the system by using their children to secure extra work allocations while performing the labour themselves, creating inequitable conditions among colleagues. Restricting juvenile employment

¹ NSW, *An Act for the Better Regulation of Coal Fields and Collieries*, No. 17 Vic. 26, December 20, 1862.

aimed to promote more equitable job distribution and wage parity. Furthermore, miners believed children should finish elementary schooling (literacy and numeracy skills) before entering hazardous mining environments. Although they did not explicitly campaign against child labour, miners tactically sought legislation based on British models that incorporated such prohibitions, indicating this restriction aligned with their underlying objectives to improve working conditions, uphold safety standards, and ensure fair access to employment for adult miners.

An analysis of the discourse surrounding juvenile employment in coal mines—both in legislative debates and government inquiries into proposed mining legislation—reveals that middle-class legislators’ willingness to act on the issue was shaped by a combination of growing transnational attention to childhood and locally grounded concerns related to health, education, and national development. Long before the question of an appropriate labouring age appeared on NSW legislators’ agenda, several European states already had relevant regulation in place. The role of the British experience in the formulation of the colony’s first child labour law cannot be overestimated. Members of both houses of the NSW parliament showed familiarity with recent debates in Britain, and they echoed British concerns that overwork would injure young workers and lead to a decline in the health of the broader population as labourers passed their over-taxed systems on to descendants. In Australia, such fears were exacerbated by a belief that the country’s youth were already behind their English counterparts in physical and mental development owing to an inauspicious environment. Drawing on racialised assumptions that linked particular climates with the health of different types of bodies, legislators fretted that the Australian environment was unsuited to white settlers. Moreover, they showed great concern with education, believing that removing the young from schools and placing them in the labour force risked undermining the country’s ability to raise law-abiding citizens and prudent voters. Thus, the convergence of local anxieties about national strength and civic development with international models of child protection ultimately paved the way for legislation that, while not explicitly framed as anti-child

labour, functioned to restrict it in ways that aligned with both working-class interests and middle-class reformist ideals.

Much like today, no single definition of a “child” existed in mid-nineteenth century NSW, the period when the issue of child labour was first raised. The word meant different things depending on the context. For matrimonial purposes, for instance, the law designated twenty one as the age of majority, with no one below this age able to wed without written consent from a parent or guardian.² In the political realm, the same age restriction applied, with the colony of NSW considering only men above age twenty one mature enough to be enfranchised, mirroring the voting age that pertained across much of the United States in this era.³ In contrast, cases that involved parental “desertion” defined a child as someone under age sixteen, with parents punishable by law only if they failed to support those below this age.⁴ And an even younger age defined childhood in cases involving sexual violence against females, with NSW legislation passed in 1847 providing specific penalties for convictions involving the rape or attempted rape of females under ten.⁵ In instances where offenders were children themselves, the law distinguished between youth under and above fourteen years of age, with those below age fourteen afforded a speedier trial so as to minimise their pre-trial incarceration.⁶ The 1859 select committee enquiries discussed in Chapter Two reveal that in factory settings, a child was defined as someone under fifteen or sixteen years of age. However, when legislators assessed what constituted a “child” in coal mining environments during the early 1860s, no clear distinction between childhood and adulthood had been established.

² NSW, *An Act to Amend and Consolidate the Laws Affecting Solemnization of Marriage*, No. 19 Vic. 30, November 30, 1855.

³ NSW, *An Act to Amend the Electoral Law*, No. 22 Vic. 20, November 24, 1858. On the voting age in the U.S., see Corinne T. Field and Nicholas L. Syrratt, *Age in America: The Colonial Era to the Present* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2015).

⁴ NSW, *An Act to Amend the Act for the Maintenance of Deserted Wives and Children*, No. 22 Vic. 6, August 25, 1858.

⁵ NSW, *An Act for the Better Punishment of Indecent Assaults upon Female Children*, No. 11 Vic. 30, October 2, 1847.

⁶ NSW, *An Act for the More Speedy Trial and Punishment of Juvenile Offenders*, No. 14 Vic. 2, July 19, 1850.

The concerns that led to the first age-based labour law in Australia present an interesting counterpoint to trends taking place in Britain and in settler societies such as the US, Canada, and New Zealand. Scholars have offered a number of explanations for how a ban against the use of child labour was rationalised in Britain. Discussing the role and motives of religious groups in the passage of the 1842 *Coal Mines Act*, which removed children under age ten from the pits, for instance, historian Alan Heesom argues that Christian supporters of the Act were motivated by a desire to fill young children's free time with religious education which could hopefully teach them to accept their lot in life and lead them away from the "delusory nature of radical political panaceas."⁷ Historian Peter Kirby identifies evangelical humanitarians and workers as major opponents of child labour in Britain. Spokespeople like Lord Shaftesbury, he explains, were concerned with the effects of industrial child employment upon established social relationships, fearing that reduced parental supervision of children would inevitably undermine family integrity.⁸ They also opposed child labour out of fear that a rapid increase in factory production would result in a class of rich and powerful industrialists who would threaten the traditional privileges of landed aristocrats. But workers also had their own agendas according to Kirby, mainly in using the issue of child employment to campaign for shorter hours and seeking to eliminate employers' ability to undercut their wages by employing children at half pay. Similarly, Colin Creighton sees middle-class reformers and workers as a force behind child labour laws. He explains that the Ten Hours Movement, which consisted of workers on the one hand and Church-and-King Tory philanthropists on the other, was a vocal advocate of child labour regulation in the textile industries. To justify their goal of a ten-hour day, the Movement claimed that factory youth should have the same rights as privileged children, namely, the rights to life, health, physical protection,

⁷ Alan Heesom, "The Coal Mines Act of 1842, Social Reform, and Social Control," *Historical Journal*, vol. 24, no. 1 (March 1981):69-88, here 70.

⁸ Peter Kirby, *Child Labour in Britain, 1750-1870* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 98-101.

education, play, and a caring family life. Launching a powerful moral critique of child labour, they argued that these rights were grounded in both the law of nature and the laws of God.⁹

In the US, trade unions were the first organised bodies to oppose child labour. Although they might have aimed at removing youth from an industrial workplace as the latter depressed adult wages, this was not their primary goal. Rather, according to historian Hugh Hindman, reformers hoped to make education available for all children, believing that an uneducated citizenry was corrosive in a democratic republic.¹⁰ On the other hand, sociologist Viviana Zelizer argues that other motives were at play, particularly changes in cultural understandings of childhood. She points out that reformers saw gainful employment as inappropriate for children since it represented the “commercialisation of child life”. As she puts it, a “new cultural equation” was introduced: a properly loved child was not supposed to work.¹¹ “[P]arental love could only exist if the child was defined exclusively as an object of sentiment and not as an agent of production”.¹²

Explanations for the laws restricting the employment of the young in Canada and New Zealand suggest that local conditions provided the impetus for curbing certain forms of employment by age. According to Lorna Hurl, it was skilled workers who first voiced opposition to child labour in Ontario, Canada. This took place in the 1830s-1840s, she notes, as a result of changes in the apprenticeship system which led to children being employed as workers at the expense of adults.¹³ In New Zealand, historian Jeanine Graham also suggests that the initial agitators for the abolition of child labour were workers; there, too, child workers were perceived to be competing with adults for scarce jobs.¹⁴

⁹ Colin Creighton, “The Ten Hours Movement and the Right of Childhood,” *International Journal of Children’s Rights*, vol. 20, iss.4 (2012): 457-485.

¹⁰ Hugh D. Hindman, *Child Labor: An American History* (New York, NY: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2002), 49-50.

¹¹ Viviana A. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (New York, NY: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1985), 72.

¹² Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child*, 72.

¹³ Lorna F. Hurl, “Restricting Child Factory Labour in Late Nineteenth Century Ontario,” *Labour*, vol. 21 (Spring, 1988): 87-121, here 92.

¹⁴ Jeanine Graham, “Child Employment in New Zealand”, *New Zealand Journal of History*, vol. 21, no. 1 (1987): 62-78, here 64.

According to existing scholarship, then, the major driving force for child labour laws in the above-mentioned societies was labour market protection, rights discourse, and the ruling class's desire to retain the established social structure. As this chapter shows, the circumstances in which NSW adopted the Coal Fields Regulation Act of 1862 were quite different: both transnational and local factors played a role in the passage of the legislation. The influence of the British child labour debates and laws only partly clarifies the willingness of colonial legislators to proscribe juvenile employment in pits. The relative ease with which the legislation was enacted needs instead to be seen in the context of colonial fears of the imminent degeneration of the population in the harsh Australian climate and of the perceived need to educate working class children due to the franchise being substantially extended. While middle-class support for child labour legislation in NSW was shaped by ideological and demographic concerns, miners backed the restrictions for practical reasons such as safety, fairness in work distribution, and the importance of education before entering the workforce. It is worth charting this history because this Act would eventually prove to be a critical piece of legislation in the history of NSW, providing the opening salvo in what turned out to be a broader movement that eventually led to banning the labour of anyone below fourteen throughout the colony's paid workforce. The "growing concern" over child labour in late nineteenth century Australia that Bradley Bowden talks about had a precedent in much earlier decades and was rooted in the problematisation of children's employment in the coal mining industry.¹⁵

* * * *

Coal mining was launched not long after the British began to colonise the Australian continent, beginning on the eastern coast in 1788. In NSW, this was one of the state's first industries, with coal initially discovered in 1796 near Newcastle, a settlement located one hundred

¹⁵ Bradley Bowden, "No Place for Children: The Peculiar Case of Australia, 1850-1919," in *Child Labour's Global Past, 1650-2000*, ed. Kristoffel Lieten and Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011), 613-630.

and sixty kilometres north of Sydney.¹⁶ Over time, coal was discovered in other parts of NSW too. In the nineteenth century, the three main areas for mining in NSW were the northern district, centered initially on Newcastle, shifting towards the Maitland-Cessnock area at the end of the nineteenth century; the southern district, also known as the Illawara district, near Wollongong; and the western district in and around Lithgow. Until 1830, coal mining was a government-run operation. After this year, it was passed into the hands of private businesses. NSW coal is of bituminous variety, suitable for boilers, domestic heating, and for the making of the coke and coal gas. Soon after being detected in Newcastle, coal began being exploited commercially, with the first cargo of coal shipped overseas in 1801.¹⁷

While all of NSW was set up as a penal colony, Newcastle originally held a special punitive status. It was the site of a secondary penal colony, meaning a place to which repeat offenders were sent.¹⁸ Consequently, the first miners labouring in the Newcastle coal fields were exclusively convicts. Since most in this class had no background in this work, the few who did, in fact, possess mining experience were worth their weight in gold: they were treated better and granted various privileges such as extra rest time and double food rations.¹⁹ According to one historian, this practice established a tradition of granting miners higher pay in relation to unskilled workmen.

Until 1821, the year Newcastle stopped being a penal settlement, coal mining remained a small-scale operation. But the industry grew exponentially in the 1840s, largely as a result of the introduction and increasing use of steamships, the extension of railways (which relied on coal power), and the use of coal and gas as the means of lighting. Moreover, the reliance on coal around the world gave an enormous stimulus to the export trade and propelled the development of mining.²⁰ As the industry grew, so did the number of people it employed. From a mere 371 workers

¹⁶ Robin Gollan, *The Coalminers of New South Wales: A History of the Union, 1860-1960* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1963), 3-9.

¹⁷ J.W. Turner, *Coal Mining in New South Wales, 1801-1900* (Newcastle: Newcastle Region Public Library, 1982), 14.

¹⁸ Gollan, *The Coalminers of New South Wales*, 6-8.

¹⁹ Turner, *Coal Mining in New South Wales*, 16-35.

²⁰ Gollan, *The Coalminers of New South Wales*, 11.

in 1856 the number of miners in New South Wales rose to 979 in 1861.²¹ By the time the 1856 census was held, the use of convict labour in mines was a relic of the past. Starting in the 1830s, this old workforce was supplemented and eventually replaced with the labour of miners imported from the coal fields of Britain.²²

Workers immediately engaged in hewing coal were not the only adults employed below ground. They laboured alongside workers referred to as shiftmen.²³ Boys as young as eight were also employed in mines below ground.²⁴ It is impossible to establish the precise number of young miners, since census data in the early years of the colony only recorded employment by gender and not by age. According to miner Alan Wilde's estimate, however, in the early 1860s there were between eight and ten boys engaged in each coal mine of the northern district, the district with the largest output of coal.²⁵ Testimony from two select committees on the coal mines bill detailed the work performed by these boys. Children were mostly given the role of driving ponies (wheelers), opening and shutting doors to keep the ventilation in the workings regular (trappers), coupling the tubs of coal to form a set or train (couplers), attending the switches on the underground railways (switch-minders), and striking the hook or hooks at the bottom of the pit on to the corf bows (hookers).²⁶ As in the US, these forms of employment constituted the early stages of a mining career, with boys starting in these roles and eventually becoming directly engaged in hewing coal.²⁷

Most of the boys working in the industry were miners' sons according to testimonies given before the Select Committee on the Coal Fields Regulation Bill in 1862.²⁸ For adult miners,

²¹ Census for 1856 and 1861. The reason data for 1856 is used as a starting point is that earlier data on the total number of coal miners in NSW is not available.

²² Edgar Ross, *A History of the Miners' Federation of Australia* (Sydney: Halstead Press, 1970), 13.

²³ Gollan, *The Coalminers of New South Wales*, 21.

²⁴ NSW Legislative Council Journal 1872-1873, *Minutes of Evidence Taken Before the Select Committee on the Collieries Bill* (Sydney: Thomas Richards, Government Printer, 1873) 601. [Hereafter NSW LCJ 1872-1873]

²⁵ NSW Legislative Council Journal 1862, *Minutes of Evidence Taken Before the Select Committee on the Coal Fields Regulation Bill* (Sydney: Thomas Richards, Government Printer, 1862), 618. [Hereafter NSW LCJ 1862]

²⁶ NSW LCJ, 1862, 586; and NSW LCJ 1872-1873, 723.

²⁷ Hindman, *Child Labor*, 98.

²⁸ NSW LCJ 1862.

apprenticing their own children was a means of organising work and a practice they imported from their home countries. In early-nineteenth century Great Britain, miners contracted with coal companies independently and offered the labour of themselves and their families.²⁹ Such family-based labour organisation ensured that the industry remained closed to outsiders thus diminishing downward pressure on wages.³⁰ Undisturbed by competition, miners would teach their sons the craft and preserve that knowledge for subsequent generations. In addition, the practice of restricting access to the industry was also born of necessity as most coal mining communities in Britain tended to be geographically isolated.

Work in mines had many disadvantages. For a start, it was intermittent: as there was no way of efficiently storing coal, work was done only when there was an immediate demand. When boats were waiting to be loaded with coal, miners had to work long hours to win as much coal as possible.³¹ When no boats were waiting, employers kept pits idle. Furthermore, work in coal mines was unhealthy and dangerous, with a high incidence of fatal accidents.³² It was arduous too, not least because of the adverse working conditions. Summarising these conditions for readers of the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1861, one miner wrote:

after he has heaved those coals he has got to fill them into skips and wagons, in a place not four feet high; that is not all; he has to prop the top up with timber, and, nine cases out of ten, the miner has a vast amount of water to contend with; the miner has to lie down in a certain position to hew the coals; and in many instances to lie down in several inches depths of water . . . he has got to wheel them [coal]

²⁹ Alan Campbell and Fred Reid, "The Independent Collier in Scotland," in *The Independent Collier: The Coal Miner as Archetypal Proletarian Reconsidered*, ed. R. Harrison (Hassocks, Sussex: Harvester, 1978), 54-74, here 64.

³⁰ Robert McIntosh, *Boys in the Pits: Child Labour in Coal Mines* (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), 48.

³¹ Ross, *A History of the Miners' Federation of Australia*, 15.

³² Catherine Mills, *Regulating Health and Safety in the British Mining Industries, 1800-1914* (Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2010), 1.

about six hundred yards to the pit, seven or eight hundredweight at a time – that will take him six times to go back and forward...³³

Regulation and improvement of working conditions were thus miners' major concerns, along with ensuring the correct weighting of coal, the regular payment of wages, pay increases, and the restriction of working hours.³⁴

Trade union activity and legislation were the two avenues miners used to address their concerns.³⁵ Although miners combined to make demands as early as 1850, these alliances were temporary and were not, strictly speaking, unions.³⁶ The first real attempt miners took at unionisation occurred in May 1860, when the Coalminers' Association of Newcastle was established.³⁷ Miners were the first among semi-skilled workers in NSW to form a union, closely following the formation of the Typographical Association (1851), the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (1852), the Operative Stonemasons (1853), the Australian Society of Progressives Carpenters and Joiners (1854), and a number of others.³⁸ While a paucity of records make it impossible to know how many workers joined unions in their early days, it is clear that the coalminers' union was a force to be reckoned with from its inception.³⁹ Historian Robin Gollan notes, for instance, that the union's demand to return the original hewing rate at Minmi Colliery was satisfied by the proprietors after a two-months strike.⁴⁰

The Coal Fields Regulation Act of 1862 is another example of the success of coalminers' unions. The measure was enacted as a consequence of three hundred and seventy miners'

³³ "The Newcastle Mining Question," *Sydney Morning Herald* (Hereafter *SMH*), September 2, 1861, 5.

³⁴ Ross, *A History of the Miners' Federation of Australia*, 15.

³⁵ Ross, *A History of the Miners' Federation of Australia*, 19.

³⁶ Gollan, *The Coalminers of New South Wales*, 27.

³⁷ Turner, *Coal Mining in New South Wales*, 68 and Gollan, *The Coalminers of New South Wales*, 27-33.

³⁸ J.T. Sutcliffe, *A History of Trade Unionism in Australia* (Melbourne: The Macmillan Company of Australia, 1967), 36.

³⁹ On the impossibility of assessing union membership at this time, see Marjorie Tew, *Work and Welfare in Australia: Studies in Social Economics* (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 1951), 135. Turner, *Coal Mining in New South Wales*, discusses the strength of the coalminers' union.

⁴⁰ Gollan, *The Coalminers of New South Wales*, 35.

demands.⁴¹ Newspaper reports suggest that the decision to petition the government to this end was first voiced during a public meeting of colliers of the Hunter River District on May 24, 1858. During the meeting, there was also a suggestion to have a representative for miners' interests in the legislature, who would see to it that the bill was introduced and passed.⁴² Fellow miner Thomas Lewis became such a representative. He successfully contested the seat of Northumberland (an electoral district in the Newcastle area) in December 1860.⁴³ As soon as he took up his role, he started agitating for the introduction of a Bill for the Better Regulation and Ventilation of Coal Mines in the Colony of New South Wales.⁴⁴ This Bill was brought to the floor three times: twice in 1861 (in April and December) and the last time with a successful outcome in May 1862. Lewis was in charge of the Bill when it was introduced in December 1861; the other two times he actively promoted its support.⁴⁵

With the new law coming into effect, children under thirteen —boys as no females were ever employed in NSW coal mines underground—could no longer be employed in mines underground.⁴⁶ On the surface, it does not look like the union pursued the measure.⁴⁷ Newcastle coal miners spent the late 1850s to early 1860s agitating for a new law which would include increased powers for mine inspectors, since they found the existing legislation inadequate in terms of safety.⁴⁸ Miners argued that although an earlier legislation passed in 1854 provided for the appointment of an inspector, it did not endow him with authority to regulate the workings of the mines. What they needed was an appointment of someone who would have “power to enforce

⁴¹ “Thursday, April 25, 1861,” *SMH*, April 25, 1861, 5.

⁴² “Inspection of Coal Mines in New South Wales: Meeting at Newcastle,” *Empire*, May 28, 1858, 3.

⁴³ “Local and Provincial,” *Goulburn Herald*, December 12, 1860, 2.

⁴⁴ Legislative Assembly, Votes and Proceedings 1861. [hereafter NSW LA, V&P]

⁴⁵ LA, V&P 1861 and 1862.

⁴⁶ NSW, *An Act for the Better Regulation of Coal Fields and Collieries*, No. 17 Vic. 26, December 20, 1862. Clause 7: “After the thirty-first day of March next no person under the age of thirteen years shall work under ground in any Colliery and every owner or agent or other person who shall knowingly employ or permit any person under that age to work under ground in any Colliery shall for every such offence be liable to a penalty not exceeding twenty pounds.”

⁴⁷ NSW LCJ 1862, 586 and NSW LCJ 1872-1873, 723.

⁴⁸ “Inspection of Coal Mines in New South Wales: Meeting at Newcastle,” *Empire* May 28, 1858, 3.

proper ventilation and save the pale-faced collier from the consequences of inhaling the carboniferous atmosphere that endangered his health, and ultimately life itself.”⁴⁹ In their demands to the government, they insisted that the colony adopt legislation along the lines of laws recently enacted in Britain.⁵⁰ Nowhere in the minutes of the Newcastle miners’ meetings was there a suggestion recorded to seek restriction of child labour in mines.⁵¹

It is tempting to think that miners did not try to restrict the work of the young because the children involved were generally their own sons. Why would they want to lose additional income? One cannot help but get the impression, however, that although the Miners’ Union did not openly call for banning juvenile labour under twelve in mines, this measure could well have been their hidden agenda. One reason for such a surmise is that miners requested that the colonial legislation be modelled after the most recent English *Regulation and Inspection of Mines Act* (1860), which did contain a child labour restriction. The provisions on children’s employment in the English Act provided that no boys under twelve were to work in mines and that boys between ten and twelve years could be employed only on the condition that they attended school for a certain number of hours each week.⁵² Newcastle miners must have known that the child labour provision in the requested legislation was on the cards.

Another reason to believe that the union intended to have child labour in mines banned is that they did not protest it. In April 1861, the first time the Coal Fields Regulation Bill was brought to the floor, Lewis, the member of the Legislative Assembly elected by the miners, was keen to lend support to clause seven—a clause that banned youth employment under twelve in mines.⁵³

⁴⁹ “Inspection of Coal Mines in New South Wales: Meeting at Newcastle,” *Empire*, May 28, 1858, 3.

⁵⁰ “Miners Delegate Meeting,” *Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser*, August 28, 1860, 3.

⁵¹ A thorough reading of the minutes of Newcastle miners’ meetings held in the four years prior to the first introduction of the Collieries Bill in the Legislative Assembly reveals that miners’ major concerns were with mine ventilation and wages. *Newcastle Chronicle and Hunter River District News* (1858-1860) and *The Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser* (1856-1860). The first mention of a petition being necessary to wait upon Governor General regarding the bill to regulate coal fields was in 1858, and the Bill passed both Houses in 1862.

⁵² UK, *An Act for the Regulation and Inspection of Mines*, No. 23 and 24 Vic. c. 151, August 28, 1860.

⁵³ “Legislative Assembly,” *Empire*, April 26, 1861, 5.

When a fellow legislator suggested that the minimum age had better be set at ten years, Lewis responded that twelve years of age was as young as anyone should be allowed to work in mines.⁵⁴ In another newspaper reporting of this sitting of the Legislative Assembly, Lewis allegedly claimed that “no honest and industrious man would ever allow his son, under twelve years of age, to be employed below ground.”⁵⁵ The words of Alan Wilde, a miner who claimed to represent the collective opinion of his fellow workers, also attests to the fact that the Miners’ Union was content with the proposed prohibition of child labour under twelve. In 1862, Wilde told the select committee on the Coal Fields Regulation Bill: “I am perfectly satisfied with the Bill as a whole, only I was told by the men to direct attention more particularly to the ventilation of the mines. ... The rest is not of such vital importance to the miner.”⁵⁶

The evidence that the two miners authorised by the union gave before the select committee on the Coal Fields Regulation Bill suggests that the union took issue with the employment of young boys in mines because it was believed to pose a threat to mineworkers’ safety and because it contributed to rivalry among colliers. One miner asked to state his opinion regarding clause seven claimed that uneducated children were a liability in mines; therefore, it was best that they stayed at school until twelve years of age and after they were confident in their three Rs (reading, writing, arithmetic), they could join the mining workforce.⁵⁷ It could be that miners affiliated with the union already refrained from sending their sons into the mines at a young age and the proposed law promised to make it compulsory for everyone to follow the suit. The second miner who gave evidence sounded somewhat irritated when he informed the committee that some miners habitually brought their young sons with them to claim a share of work and then let the boys go while they completed the work themselves.⁵⁸ He explained that “there are occasions when a man cannot get as much work for his own turn as he can perform, and therefore, to get an advantage

⁵⁴ “Legislative Assembly,” *Empire*, April 26, 1861, 5.

⁵⁵ “Legislative Assembly,” *SMH*, April 26, 1861, 4.

⁵⁶ NSW LCJ 1862, 617.

⁵⁷ NSW LCJ 1862, 610.

⁵⁸ NSW LCJ 1862, 618.

over his neighbouring workmen, he will take his boy in to claim a portion of a turn, so that he may have the right to that much more work".⁵⁹ No doubt, rationing of work was done with a view of equalising wages. Golan confirms this suggestion as he states that the union tried its best to fairly distribute work among miners to avoid conflict.⁶⁰ The Miners' Union, therefore, had a vested interest in restricting child labour in coal mines, despite making no direct demands for limitations on youth employment underground.

However, the Miners' Union's request that the proposed Coal Fields Regulation Bill be modelled after British legislation inevitably meant that the colonial legislation would incorporate the British child labour restrictions. William Keene, one of the authors of the bill, copied from the 1860 English legislation the clause that the starting age of colliery workers in NSW would be twelve years, but erased the provision stipulating that children between ten and twelve could only be employed in mines if allocated time for education.⁶¹ He did not elaborate on why he did this, simply saying that such a condition was bound to complicate the Act. Most likely, Keene omitted the clause because children's schooling was not yet compulsory or standardised in NSW and would not become so until later in the century. The reason Keene included a clause banning employment of children under twelve reflected his concerns about the effects of labour on Australian children's health. In the evidence that Keene gave in 1862 before the select committee on the Coal Fields Regulation Bill, he argued that Australian children were not as strong as their English counterparts and that long hours in the dark had a damaging effect on their constitutions.⁶² He also mentioned that he would have preferred to follow the French legislation (in the past he used to work in France), which restricted employment in pits to those above the age of fourteen. Thus, thanks to the Miners' Union's insistence on following British legislative precedent and Keene's compliance,

⁵⁹ NSW LCJ 1862, 618.

⁶⁰ Golan, *The Coalminers of New South Wales*, 24-25.

⁶¹ UK, *An Act for the Regulation and Inspection of Mines*, No. 23 and 24 Vic. c.151, August 28, 1860; NSW LCJ 1862, 623.

⁶² NSW LCJ 1862, 623-624.

the child labour provision designating twelve as the minimum age made an appearance in the new Coal Fields Regulation Bill.

The discussion around clause seven on the floors of both houses in 1862 shows that in general members of the legislature shared Keene's concern for the welfare of child miners. Additionally, they had a concern of their own, namely the effect of gainful employment on child workers' schooling. When Keene's Bill came before the Legislative Assembly in July 1862, the chamber welcomed the age restriction. More than that, legislators raised the minimum age from twelve to thirteen. A hot debate preceded this amendment, which was concisely reported in the press and constitutes the only source available for assessing legislators' motives. While the provision was being discussed, one of the members of the House argued for an increase in the minimum age to fourteen. Merion Moriarty, Member for Braidwood (an electoral district south of Sydney mostly focused on agriculture until the 1850s, when gold was discovered in the town) and a former physician, who made this suggestion, explained that: "At an earlier age constitutional powers might not be sufficiently developed to enable them [boys] to resist the prejudicial effects of underground labour."⁶³ William Windeyer, Member for West Sydney and a lawyer, agreed, adding that "he could not imagine a boy growing up into a strong healthy man, if from the age of twelve he was employed in working in the tunnels of coal mines without light or a sufficient amount of wholesome air."⁶⁴ John Caldwell, Member for East Sydney and a merchant, also agreed but his reason was to give children "the fullest opportunities for the attainment of education".⁶⁵

⁶³ "Legislative Assembly," *SMH*, July 4, 1862, 2 and Alan Powell, "Moriarty, Merion Marshall (1794–1864)," Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/moriarty-merion-marshall-4248/text6863>, published first in hardcopy 1974, accessed online January 17, 2017.

⁶⁴ "Legislative Assembly," *SMH*, July 4, 1862, 2 and "Windeyer, Sir William Charles (1834–1897)," Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/windeyer-sir-william-charles-1062/text8145>, published first in hardcopy 1976, accessed online January 25, 2017.

⁶⁵ "Legislative Assembly," *SMH*, July 4, 1862, 2 and "Legislative Assembly," *The Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser*, July 8, 1862, 2.

The debate over clause seven highlighted legislators' shared concern for child miners' welfare, balancing health considerations with the importance of education.

Interestingly, whereas legislators *outside* the mining districts pushed for this amendment, miners' representatives strongly opposed setting fourteen as an age limit for employment in mines. Lewis and David Buchanan, the Member for Morpeth (an electoral district in the Newcastle area), both argued that the earnings of children were critically important for miners' families, especially if the father passed away.⁶⁶ And given that education was provided only up to the age of twelve, they argued, it was better for boys to have gainful employment than to be left idle for two years. This argument had an effect as shortly after it had been voiced, the minimum age was reduced to thirteen and with this amendment the Bill was sent to the Upper House.⁶⁷

The Legislative Council did not consider the proposed Bill straight away. It was instead referred to a select committee to determine its advisability.⁶⁸ The enquiry lasted slightly over two months, from October 2, 1862 to December 9, 1862, during which six witnesses were called and examined. Witnesses came from all ranks of the coal mining industry, from workers to mine owners and the government-appointed Examiner of Coal Fields. Judging by the questions put to witnesses in regard to the clause relating to child labour, the issue of boys' education was foremost in committee members' minds. Four witnesses called to testify before the Select Committee were asked to state their opinion as to whether working at an early age for long hours interfered with boys' schooling or whether it would be advisable to copy the provision in the English Act and allow children at ten to work in mines below the ground, provided that those aged between ten and twelve were given time off for schooling.⁶⁹ Another question frequently asked of witnesses in regard to the child labour provision was a variation of "Do you think it is injurious to a boy's health to be at work in the pit?"⁷⁰

⁶⁶ "Legislative Assembly," *SMH*, July 4, 1862, 2.

⁶⁷ "Legislative Assembly," *SMH*, July 4, 1862, 2.

⁶⁸ NSW LCJ 1862, 578.

⁶⁹ NSW LCJ 1862, 601, 610, 618 and 623.

⁷⁰ NSW LCJ 1862, 587, 618 and 624.

On the completion of the inquiry, the committee made some changes to the Coal Fields Regulation Bill received from the Lower House. It appears the committee members did not alter the clause that set the age of thirteen as a minimum for mine work.⁷¹ This prompted a question from Alexander Scott, a country entrepreneur, when the bill came before the Upper House on December 12, 1862. He enquired why the committee did not follow the English Act and designate the minimum age as twelve. James Mitchell, a former member of the select committee and a physician by profession, claimed on behalf of the whole committee that they had resolved to keep age thirteen as a minimum because the committee believed that colonial boys at twelve were not as strong as their English counterparts. It should be noted that the conclusion did not quite follow from the information gathered from witnesses. The majority of those asked to state their opinion on the development of colonial youth said that children in NSW were more “precocious” compared to their English counterparts.⁷² In all likelihood, a few members of the Upper House were highly concerned with mining youths’ wellbeing and managed to convince their fellow members to accept clause seven as written (probably Mitchell and Hargrave, since the latter posed leading questions designed to get witnesses to agree with the proposition that mine work was injurious to boys’ health).⁷³ Reportedly, the Legislative Council approved the clause on boys’ employment age without much further debate.⁷⁴

The remarks made by legislators while discussing the child labour provision of the proposed Coal Fields Regulation Bill suggest that three major concerns were driving the NSW legislators: first, an apprehension with the health of the young boys who worked in mining in general; second, a more specific concern with the alleged differences between the physical development of Australian children in comparison to their counterparts elsewhere; and, finally, a fear that mining youth were not receiving adequate education due to their long working hours. As

⁷¹ “Parliament of New South Wales,” *Empire*, December 13, 1862, 3.

⁷² NSW LCJ, 1862, 601, 610, 618, 623.

⁷³ NSW LCJ, 1862, 624.

⁷⁴ “Parliament of New South Wales,” *Empire*, December 13, 1862, 3.

seen above, legislators from diverse backgrounds, medical and non-medical, were equally worried about child miners' state of health, suggesting that the health threats of mine work were well-known. An examination of major colonial newspapers published in the ten years before the Coal Mines Regulation Bill was first introduced, however, reveals that child labour in coal mines had not previously been problematised in the colony by physicians, the most likely pressure group, or anyone else.⁷⁵ That NSW physicians did not take up the issue probably had to do with their lack of organisation in the first three quarters of the nineteenth century. Prior to 1880s, there was no long-lived professional body or journal in NSW that acted as a forum for discussion of pertinent medical matters or a springboard for organised action. The Medico-Chirurgical Association of Australia, founded in Sydney, had survived only three years after its founding in 1844.⁷⁶ Another body, the Australian Medical Association, founded in 1859, led a faltering existence before collapsing a decade later. The life of the first professional journal, the *Australian Medical Journal*, was also short-lived (1846-1847).⁷⁷ On a more general level, public health in NSW in the first half of the nineteenth century was rudimentary, mainly comprising quarantine and vaccination activities.⁷⁸ The knowledge of the health complications caused by mine work that members of NSW Parliament were drawing on must, then, have been produced elsewhere.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, social commentators across the Anglo-European world were beginning to raise the alarm about the effects of industrialism on children's health. Drawing attention to the debilitating effects of early labour not just on children's own bodies but on the future of the entire colonial "stock," their concerns were echoed by NSW parliamentarians. As early as 1818, data were available in Britain on the state of health of the labouring classes. In

⁷⁵ I have made an extensive search of all extant colonial newspapers held on Trove for the years between 1851 and 1861, for any terms relating to the labour of colonial children and was unable to find any mention of this topic.

⁷⁶ Milton Lewis and Roy Macleod, "Medical Politics and the Professionalisation of Medicine in New South Wales, 1850-1901," *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 12, no. 22 (1988): 69-82, here 71.

⁷⁷ Lewis and Macleod, "Medical Politics and the Professionalisation of Medicine in New South Wales, 1850-1901," 71.

⁷⁸ Milton J. Lewis, *The People's Health: Public Health in Australia, 1788-1950* (Westport, CN: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 33-34.

that year, the House of Commons noted that Manchester was no longer the rich source of army recruits it had once been.⁷⁹ Physicians' contribution to the discourse around workers' degeneration was significant. They wrote books expounding on the afflictions suffered by workers, of which *The Manufacturing Population of England* (1833) by Peter Gaskell and *The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Class Employed in the Cotton Manufacture in Manchester* (1832) by James P. Kay are but a few examples. According to Gaskell, factory employees were distinguished by "sallow" and "pallid" complexion, bowed legs, short stature, raised chests and flat feet.⁸⁰ Additionally, medical men provided evidence before various government enquiries to the effect that the physical condition of the labouring classes was deteriorating. For instance, many of the ninety-three doctors interviewed by the Royal Commission on Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories (1842) claimed that children working down in pits suffered from stunted growth, crippled gait, irritation of the head and back, premature aging and death.⁸¹ Even statistics were put to use in the attempt to demonstrate the decline of health among the proletariat. On examining 1,933 children, Samuel Stanway, a medical commissioner on the employment of children in factories in England in the 1830s, concluded that those he studied were, on average, shorter than non-factory children of a comparable age.⁸² These discussions over the welfare of working-class children both in England and NSW indicate that what Mona Gleason has termed the rise of a discourse of the "public child"—one whose wellbeing is no longer solely of interest to his or her immediate family but also of concern to the community at large—made an appearance much earlier in these jurisdictions and extended beyond middle-class children.⁸³

⁷⁹ Thomas E. Jordan, *Victorian Childhood: Themes and Variations* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), 18.

⁸⁰ Thomas E. Jordan, *The Degeneracy Crisis and Victorian Youth* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993) 9.

⁸¹ UK Royal Commission on Children's Employment in Mines and Manufactories. First Report (Mines and Collieries), Appendix, 1842, 183-194.

⁸² J.M. Tanner, *A History of the Study of Human Growth* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 147-150.

⁸³ Mona Gleason, "From "Disgraceful Carelessness" to "Intelligent Precaution": Accidents and the Public Child in English Canada, 1900-1950," *Journal of Family History*, vol. 30, no. 2, (2016): 230-241.

Although statistical analysis of populations was not entirely novel in Britain or Europe more generally, the early nineteenth century witnessed a new belief in the unassailability of numerical proof.⁸⁴ This development originated in the theory of the normal frequency distribution curve devised by Belgian mathematician and astronomer Lambert-Adolphe Jacques Quetelet.⁸⁵ He was the first to apply routine methods of mathematical analysis used in astronomical observation to various demographic questions—crime, marriage, and suicide rates—that occupied the minds of French intellectuals at the time.⁸⁶ Quetelet showed, for example, that the occurrence of crimes were regular each year, and that each crime had its specific age, sex, and district prevalence.⁸⁷ His most influential contribution to modern statistics, however, was a book titled *Sur l'homme et le développement de ses facultés* (1835) which won immediate acclaim. Here, he revealed the findings of two surveys he carried out in 1831-32. In the first cross-sectional survey of children ever conducted, Quetelet measured children's height and weight.⁸⁸ He found that human stature in many populations was distributed according to the law of error. The observations Quetelet made throughout his life led him to believe that that statistical laws of society were akin to the mechanical laws of the heavens, and that the historical path of society could be predicted with the same success as that of planets.⁸⁹ His works played a crucial role in the British Association for the Advancement of Science establishing a Statistical Section in 1833 and the Statistical Society of London doing so nine months later.⁹⁰

Using methods pioneered by Quetelet, statisticians began to produce a raft of new studies alleging that certain populations were degenerating as a result of industrialism. The sense of imminent population corruption was accompanied by a belief that degeneracy was both hereditary

⁸⁴ See Dorothy Porter, *Health, Civilization and the State: A History of Public Health from Ancient to Modern Times* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 49-50 and Stuart Woolf, "Statistics and the Modern State," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 31, no. 3 (July 1989): 588-604, here 588-589.

⁸⁵ Porter, *Health, Civilization and the State*, 66.

⁸⁶ Porter, *Health, Civilization and the State*, 66 and Tanner, *A History of the Study of Human Growth*, 126.

⁸⁷ Tanner, *A History of the Study of Human Growth*, 125.

⁸⁸ Tanner, *A History of the Study of Human Growth*, 125-126.

⁸⁹ Porter, *Health, Civilization and the State*, 66.

⁹⁰ Tanner, *A History of the Study of Human Growth*, 122.

and progressive—that is, that acquired traits were transmitted from one generation to the next and that every successive generation would thereby be more sickly than the last.⁹¹ Understandings of degeneracy were influenced by the idea of the transmission of the acquired traits propounded since the 1700s by various theorists of reproduction and heredity, including Comte de Buffon, Carl Linnaeus, Erasmus Darwin and, more recently, Jean-Baptiste Lamarck.⁹² According to the latter, adaptations made by organisms in their own lifetime were transmitted to the next generation.⁹³ Two books published by French psychiatrist Benedict Morel around the middle of the nineteenth century were the likely sources shaping the ideas of degeneracy as progressive. Morel maintained that diseases in one generation induced higher proportions of the sick in the next and this continued until no more offsprings were produced.⁹⁴

The perception among the NSW legislators that Australian children were not as developed as their counterparts in England is indicative of the fact that degeneracy of the rising generation was anticipated and feared, not only on account of overwork in poor conditions but also on account of the Australian climate. This, in turn, shows that colonial legislators internalised some of the negative ideas on human acclimatisation that were in circulation in the first half of the nineteenth century. Initially, it was believed that Europeans' encounters with new climatic zones, including tropical ones, would not endanger their wellbeing.⁹⁵ Tropics with their abundance of nature and various resources tended to invoke images of paradise. Over time, however, particularly from the mid-eighteenth century onwards, medical texts spread the idea that tropical climates were the principal cause of the deadly diseases afflicting Europeans in places like the Caribbean and West Africa. The revival of Hippocratic theories of environment and disease—the idea that health

⁹¹ Jordan, *The Degeneracy Crisis and Victorian Youth*, 24.

⁹² Richard D. Walter, "What Became of the Degenerate? A Brief History of the Concept," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, vol.11, no.4 (October 1956): 422-429, here 424.

⁹³ Richard W. Burkhardt Jr., "Lamarck, Evolution and the Inheritance of the Acquired Characters," *Genetics*, vol. 194, no. 4 (August 2013):793-805.

⁹⁴ Walter, "What Became of the Degenerate? A Brief History of the Concept," 423.

⁹⁵ David Arnold, *The Problem of Nature: Environment, Culture, and European Expansion* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1996), 144-152.

was closely tied to geographical, climatic, and environmental factors—gave boost to this negative representation.⁹⁶ With the increasing European presence in the tropics and subtropics, medical men began to wonder about the ability of humans raised in one climate to prosper in an entirely different one.⁹⁷

By the mid-nineteenth century, a host of institutions had been founded in Britain to investigate the question of acclimatisation. Although their major concern was with plant and animal acclimatisation, human acclimatisation was also of interest.⁹⁸ In relation to humans, there existed several distinct ways of thinking on the subject. Universal anti-acclimatisation was one of the most popular stances throughout the nineteenth century. According to Edinburgh anatomist Robert Knox, humans utterly lacked the ability to acclimatise and, therefore, races of people should not live in alien localities. Degeneration and dying out were a certain outcome if people changed climates, he held. Another popular stance was tropical anti-acclimatisation. According to this theory, tropics were harmful to the well-being of the so-called white race. It is not immediately evident which of these theories struck root with colonial legislators; the one thing that is clear is that they did not think that the Australian climate was commensurate with European settlers' health.

The concern over the health effects of new environments was not restricted to NSW legislators; other colonials were also worried about how they would fare in the Australian climate. Historian Warwick Anderson has outlined the anxieties that newcomers to Australia felt in the early colonial period as they worried about the effects of air, water, or the environment on British bodies, fretted about whether their constitutions would be able to adjust to new circumstances,

⁹⁶ Arnold, *The Problem of Nature*, 152 and Michael A. Osborne “Resurrecting Hippocrates: Hygienic Sciences and the French Scientific Explorations to Egypt, Morea and Algeria” in *Warm Climates and Western Medicine: The Emergence of Tropical Medicine, 1500-1900*, ed. David Arnold (Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1996): 80-99, here 81.

⁹⁷ David Livingstone, “Human Acclimatisation: Perspectives on the Contested Field of Inquiry in Science, Medicine and Geography,” *History of Science*, vol. 25, iss. 4 (1987): 359-394, here 360.

⁹⁸ Livingstone, “Human Acclimatisation,” 363-373.

and expressed anxieties that hot winds could lead to loose morals.⁹⁹ Medical literature produced in southern Australia between 1850 and 1880 abounds in concerns over alleged loss of vital power and fatigue among white people. The sun was believed to cause major mental and physical derangement. Observations of several doctors show how they thought the local climate undermined their own and or other colonials' health. Dr. James Kilgour lamented the lack of muscular and physical power in the Australian man. Another doctor, Andrew Ross, agreed and added that it was unrealistic to expect Australian men to do as much work as those in Britain, where the weather was much cooler. Male labour efficiency was a good indicator of racial adaptation. Likewise, among the women, doctors observed, there was a distinct failure to reproduce. Australian women, they believed, reached puberty much earlier than their counterparts in Britain but supposedly deteriorated when they turned twenty.

Colonists worried that degeneration of the population would ensue not only because climate in Australia was alien, but also because it was inferior. Nineteenth-century Europeans firmly believed that the geographical conditions of the place people inhabited shaped their physical make-up, intelligence, and morals.¹⁰⁰ The alleged pitiful state of Aborigines was thought to be the future of the European race in Australia (only after social Darwinism developed did Aborigines start to be viewed as their past).¹⁰¹ Doctors noticed with horror that broad-shouldered and muscular immigrants were slowly acquiring the slender frames of the indigenous population. Native mammals with their odd features and habits were similarly viewed as examples of the disastrous effects of the Australian climate.¹⁰² This is not to say, of course, that everyone in colonial Australia subscribed to negative views on the local environment. Historian Tim Bonyhady convincingly argues that there was a sizeable proportion of colonials who delighted in Australian

⁹⁹ Warwick Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness: Science, Health and Racial Destiny in Australia* (Carlton, Vic: Melbourne University Press, 2005), 16-26.

¹⁰⁰ Mark Peel and Christina Twomey, *A History of Australia* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 89.

¹⁰¹ Anderson, *The Cultivation of Whiteness*, 27.

¹⁰² Peel and Twomey, *A History of Australia*, 90.

nature and sought to conserve it.¹⁰³ Nonetheless, the debates around the child labour provision in the Coal Fields Regulation Bill of 1862 show that NSW lawmakers were swayed by more pessimistic representation of the Australian climate.

If the environment was generally understood as detrimental to white settlers' health, education was understood as essential in improving their morals. Interestingly, education always ranked high on the colonial government's priority list, even in the early days of settlement. This had to do with the wish to prevent colonial children (particularly those of convict background) from following in their parents' footsteps.¹⁰⁴ As education was thought to be the obvious means to achieve this aim, the colonial government started providing financial support for education early on: it paid the salaries of clergymen who ran the original schools, supported schoolmasters with provisions from government stores, gave them land grants, and contributed to their salaries, as well as raising customs duties to sponsor the establishment and maintenance of schools. By the mid-1820s, roughly one-eighth of colonial revenue was used for educational purposes. In this, the colony of NSW differed substantially from England, where education was traditionally sponsored by private charity and where the state only became involved in funding public education from the 1830s onward.

If education was understood as an essential right from the beginning of British settlement in Australia, the rationale for educating poor children changed over time, shifting substantially in the two decades after the 1830s as large numbers of assisted immigrants arrived, leading to "the weakening of the convict strain".¹⁰⁵ If the main goal had once been to separate children from the damaging influence of their convict parents, now the ambition was to inculcate in them desirable social attitudes and to prepare them for their appropriate station in life. Fundamental to this goal for middle-class social commentators was the hope that an educated population would be less

¹⁰³ Tim Bonyhady, *The Colonial Earth* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2002).

¹⁰⁴ B.K. Hyams and B. Bessant, *Schools for the People? An Introduction to the History of State Education in Australia* (East Hawthorn, Vic.: Longman Australia Pty Limited, 1972), 5-23.

¹⁰⁵ Hyams and Bessant, *Schools for the People?* 23.

prone to labour militancy. According to education historian Albert Austin, this was a well-entrenched understanding of the goal of education in England and colonial politicians merely repeated long-held views about the benefits of schooling.¹⁰⁶ He notes that the more immediate influence on colonial government's educational thought was the speech delivered in the House of Commons on April 19, 1847 by Thomas Babington Macaulay, one of the most respected orators of his time and a long time contributor to the authoritative literary periodical *Edinburgh Review*.¹⁰⁷ Macaulay talked extensively about the need to enlighten the labourer in order to teach him to enjoy exercising his intellect, to respect his Maker and legitimate authority, and to seek redress of wrongs by peaceful and constitutional means.¹⁰⁸

For middle-class social commentators and elite colonists, the education of future and current labourers was especially crucial due to the extension of the colonial franchise in 1858. The credit for this historic event goes to the Constitutional Association, whose members were able to successfully petition the British government to alter one of the qualifying conditions—rental requirements. These requirements were reduced from £20 per annum to £10.¹⁰⁹ A £10 qualification in Sydney, where rents were high, essentially meant a universal manhood suffrage. The Constitutional Association was formed in 1848 by democrats following a Chartist program. The founders of the association came overwhelmingly from the ranks of small tradesmen and skilled working-class immigrants from Britain. Historian Chris Connelly names their exclusion from “wealth and power by selfish interests within the established elite” as their major reason for supporting the expansion of voting rights.¹¹⁰ John Hirst gives a more flattering explanation, suggesting that democrats acted in the interests of the working class as a whole. He states that

¹⁰⁶ A.G. Austin, *Australian Education 1788-1900: Church, State and Public Education in Colonial Australia* (Carlton, Vic. Sir Isaac Pitman (AUST.) Pty Ltd, 1972), 177-78.

¹⁰⁷ Austin, *Australian Education 1788-1900*, 178.

¹⁰⁸ *Speeches by Lord Macaulay* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1952), 304, quoted in Austin, *Australian Education 1788-1900*, 178.

¹⁰⁹ J.B. Hirst, *The Strange Birth of Colonial Democracy: New South Wales, 1848-1884* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1988), 3-17.

¹¹⁰ C. N. Connolly, “The Middling-class Victory in New South Wales, 1853–62: A Critique of the Bourgeois-pastoralist Dichotomy,” *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 19, iss. 76, (1981): 369-387, here 372.

democrats strove to stop further assisted migration as it was perceived to increase competition, and to restrict the influence of squatters.¹¹¹ Either way, to be able to be elected to the Lower House of the parliament, democrats needed more workers to qualify for the franchise.

Now that the *Electoral Reform Act of 1858* had been effective for several years and more working-class people were qualified to vote, commentators expressed some alarm that political power would be wielded by uneducated or “cunning” people. Therefore, there was a grave need to educate the labouring masses; future political prosperity supposedly depended on this.¹¹² As Hirst notes, this was not simply an elite concern; the democrats who had pressed for voting rights also believed that common people needed to be educated to be fit rulers, although their reasons were somewhat different: they thought that educated people would be better positioned to protect their rights and less ready to submit to the authority of lords and kings.¹¹³ In the US, support for the education of poor children ran along similar lines. The creation of a republic in the late eighteenth century and the extension of near universal white male suffrage several decades later led conservatives in the Northeast to argue that universal common school education was a key to instilling proper social values.¹¹⁴ Spokesmen for American workers, on the other hand, demanded that all children be schooled on the grounds that it would help them to recognise and protect their rights through the political process.¹¹⁵

In the early 1860s when the Coal Fields Regulation Bill was debated, education in NSW was not yet standardised or compulsory. There existed a dual system of education of church and state elementary schools, established in 1848. Church schools came under the Board of Denominational Education and state-controlled or “National” schools under the Board of

¹¹¹ Hirst, *The Strange Birth of Colonial Democracy*, 4.

¹¹² Austin, *Australian Education 1788-1900*, 179.

¹¹³ Hirst, *The Strange Birth of Colonial Democracy*, 7-8.

¹¹⁴ Carle F. Kaestle, “Between the Scylla of Brutal Ignorance and the Charybdis of a Literary Education: Elite Attitudes toward Mass Schooling in Early Industrial England and America in L. Stone ed. *Schooling and Society: Studies in the History of Education* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976): 177-191.

¹¹⁵ Maris A. Vinovskis, “Schooling and Poor Children in 19th-Century America,” *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 35, iss.3 (January 1992): 313-332, here 318.

National Education.¹¹⁶ In the early years, public schools experienced the same problems that affected denominational ones—lack of funds for adequate education, poorly trained teachers, and parental indifference.¹¹⁷ Education in primary schools was provided up to the sixth grade and consisted mainly of teaching the three “Rs,” but even this simple task often fell by the wayside. In the 1850s, it was often a case that a school child could not write or do basic arithmetic.¹¹⁸ Attendance was poor, such that approximately one-quarter of the total school-age population of the mid-century period had not been exposed to formal schooling. This is explained by the insufficient number of schools in remote areas as well as some parents’ inability to pay school fees of 6 pence per child per week. Those children who attended school oftentimes did so irregularly, mostly when not engaged in some form of vital labour. For most children, the total length of schooling was about two years. Given the low rates of literacy among working class people, the colonial legislature’s desire to have pit boys schooled becomes clear, although the cure they devised—banning them from employment in mines—seems naïve. It takes more than criminalising one type of employment to encourage families to send their children to school.

Thus, the child labour debate initiated in the 1860s led to major changes in the experience of childhood. The requirement for children to attend school full-time until Year 10 traces its origins to the Coal Fields Regulation Act of 1862. That the coal mine was the first workplace where juvenile labour was banned does not have so much to do with the number of children employed in this industry as with the ability of the Coalminers’ Union to force the issue of better regulation of mines onto legislators’ agenda. Miners may have not demanded the removal of children under twelve openly, but it was, most certainly, their hidden agenda. Requesting that the colonial Coal Fields Regulation Bill be framed in the same terms as the 1860 English act on the subject is but the most telling proof. Miners backed these restrictions for pragmatic reasons: they were

¹¹⁶ Alan Barcan, *A History of Australian Education* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1980), 53.

¹¹⁷ Hyams and Bessant, *Schools for the People?* 34.

¹¹⁸ Hyams and Bessant, *Schools for the People?* 35-39.

concerned about the dangers posed by inexperienced children in hazardous mining conditions, wanted to put an end to unfair practices where some workers used their children to gain additional job allocations, and believed that children should finish their basic schooling before joining the labour force. William Keene, the person entrusted with drafting the bill, took the bait skillfully set up by the Miners' Union and included a clause banning child labour under twelve in mines. Legislators readily agreed to the inclusion of the child labour provision into a proposed Coal Mines Regulation Bill as they shared the concern in Britain that the rising generation was under the threat of degeneration due to overwork at a tender age. The fear of degeneration had an extra, local dimension in Australia: for many, living and working in what was believed to be a hostile climate meant certain deterioration of the national stock—a reality that would only be cemented if children were sent to work too soon. Schooling of labouring children in the context of the extended vote was also a specifically Australian feature of the original child labour debate. Concerned predominantly with ensuring the supply of a healthy workforce and literate citizenry, NSW legislators unwittingly touched off what became a broader debate over the place of children in the Australian labour force.

The passage of the Coal Fields Regulation Bill in 1862 unintentionally started a child labour debate in NSW. It gave rise to a decades-long discussion of and negotiation over the type of work considered appropriate for children to perform, and over how the childhood years should be spent. As the next chapter shows, in the mid-1870, legislators increasingly turned their attention to factory child labour, establishing a select committee to examine its effects on children's health, morality, and education. Their concerns closely resembled those of the legislators who had earlier restricted underground child labour in coal mines. While no definitive resolution emerged in the mid-1870s, the debate gained momentum, ensuring that child labour remained on the political agenda. The initial resistance to regulation had been weakened, making future reforms more feasible.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Over time, the combined efforts of physicians, factory workers, and legislators played a crucial role in shaping policy. As my honours thesis has shown, these efforts eventually culminated in the passage of

the 1896 Factory and Workshops Act which set stricter limits on child employment. Ulduz Salmanova, “Banishing Children of “Tender Years” from the Workplace: Examining Child Labour Legislation in Nineteenth-century New South Wales” (Honours thesis, University of Sydney 2017).

Chapter Two

Debating Children's Industrial Labour: From a Scarce Resource to a Moral Conundrum

As the previous chapter showed, in the late 1850s to early 1860s, colonial elites opposed child labour in coal mines due to its negative impact on education, health, and national development. However, factory child labour in this period faced criticism for the opposite reason—the lack of suitable job opportunities for young people, highlighting contrasting concerns over youth employment. Indeed, legislators were so concerned about the lack of factory employment among the colony's youth that this issue was included among the subjects investigated by three select committees appointed in the late 1850s and mid-1860s: a *Select Committee on the Condition of the Working Classes of the Metropolis* in 1859, a *Select Committee on the State of Manufactures and Agriculture in the Colony* in 1862, and a *Select Committee on the Unemployed* in 1866. Legislators justified the 1859 select committee as a means of assessing the extent of deprivation in the colony and assisting the underprivileged, with juvenile vagrancy forming one line of inquiry.¹ The second select committee was tasked with investigating the progress and state of manufacturing and agriculture in the colony and inquiring into employment opportunities for the young.² Establishing the amount of distress among the labouring classes—including young workers—formed the avowed purpose of the third select committee, as well as proposing solutions to alleviate the problem.³ The three select committees evidenced a concern among colonial elites with *increasing* the number of young males in industrial employment.

¹ NSW LA V&P 1859-1860 (v.4), *Report from the Select Committee on the Condition of the Working Classes of the Metropolis together with the Proceedings, Minutes of Evidence and Appendix* (Sydney: Government Printer, 1860): 1263-1465. [Hereafter, NSW LA V&P 1859-1860]

² NSW LA V&P 1862 (v.5), *Progress Report from Select Committee on the State of Manufactures and Agriculture in the Colony together with the Proceedings of the Committee and Minutes of Evidence* (Sydney: Government Printer, 1862): 1041-1120. [Hereafter NSW LA V&P 1862].

³ NSW LA V&P 1866 (v.5), *Report from the Select Committee on the Unemployed together with the Proceedings of the Committee and Minutes of Evidence* (Sydney: Government Printer, 1866): 619-680. [Hereafter NSW LA V&P 1866].

By the mid-1870s, legislators' concerns had shifted, aligning with earlier debates on regulating child labour in coal mines. Factory employment, too, was now seen as a threat to children's wellbeing and as a major hurdle preventing their education. However, one new concern that had not been prominent in the coal mine child labour debate emerged in discussions of factory child labour: the concern with children's morals. This growing anxiety about the moral implications of factory work, alongside concerns about health and education, prompted legislators to take action. A *Select Committee on the Employment of Children* was appointed in 1875 to investigate these issues and propose solutions. Unlike the aforementioned committees where children's working status formed only one line of inquiry, this investigation was entirely devoted to children's industrial pursuits. Its stated goal was to limit, rather than expand, the employment of "persons of tender years in trades, professions, or callings unsuited to their years and calculated to be injurious to their physical and moral development."⁴ This marked a second legislative turning point, following the ban on child labour in mines, as children's health, morals and education took priority over integrating them into the industrial workforce.

Focusing on these four committees, this chapter reveals that the central question debated by commentators between 1850-1880 concerned which institutions should be responsible for disciplining and shaping children and youth. During the late 1850s to mid-1860s, factories were viewed as the most suitable places for shaping the moral and practical character of youth. With child vagrancy perceived to be on the rise, factories were seen as a way to remove children from the streets and out of harm's way. Additionally, legislators viewed factory work as a means of instilling discipline and basic technical skills—tools they believed would deter future criminality and uphold social order. Despite the scarcity of formal apprenticeships and meaningful skill development opportunities, legislators largely ignored this reality, choosing instead to prioritize

⁴ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876 (v.6), *Progress Report from the Select Committee on the Employment of Children together with the Proceedings of the Committee, Minutes of Evidence and Appendix* (Sydney: Government Printer, 1876): 871-931. [Hereafter NSW LA V&P 1875-1876].

the theoretical benefits of industrial labour over its practical limitations in preparing youth for successful transition to adult life. Youth employment in factories was also favoured as a political tool by protectionist legislators, who used it to justify the imposition of duties on imported goods. The depressed state of local manufacturing—particularly in industries struggling to compete with cheaper British imports—made such arguments more compelling.

However, by the mid-1870s, legislators had abandoned the view that factories provided appropriate environments for disciplining and training children and youth. The earlier concerns were no longer as pressing; various institutions had been founded to deal with vagrant children, marking a shift toward viewing these specialized facilities as the appropriate places for shaping wayward youth. With manufacturing starting to see better days and free traders having prevailed, the political utility of youth employment in factories diminished, protectionist legislators could no longer credibly use factory work programs to justify duties on imported goods. As these alternative solutions emerged and local industry adjusted to free trade, a new political will developed to restrict factory employment for children under fourteen. This shift was driven by concerns over health and education, mirroring those behind the coal mines bill, with health arguments once again drawing from British debates and developments. However, an additional factor was the growing concern over morality in the industrial workplace, reinforcing the belief that premature employment could negatively impact children's well-being and development, further strengthening the push for stricter labour regulations. This transformation represents a significant ideological shift from viewing factories as the optimal institutions for shaping children to regarding them as fundamentally inappropriate environments for youth development. Changed circumstances allowed known factory concerns to override local economic pressures. With factories now viewed as harmful, the classroom was increasingly seen as the most suitable space for nurturing children, reflecting an important change in societal views on child-rearing.

It is important to stress that at this time concerns about the harmful effects of industrial employment on children's health, education, and morality were not dominant in society at large.

The 1875 select committee suggests a new political concern with the presence of children's factory labour in NSW, but nothing came out of the inquiry and there was no legislation banning child labour in factories until the mid-1890s. Nonetheless, the select committee was a pivotal moment in emerging opposition to children's factory employment. Although it did not lead to legal or material changes in children's working lives in the 1870s, it paved the way for legislation restricting the use of child labour in factory settings two decades later.

* * * *

Before exploring changing views on industrial child labour in NSW in the third quarter of the nineteenth century, it is essential to understand the industries where children were employed and the conditions in which they worked. Young people laboured in a variety of industrial settings, including jam factories, bakeries, leather and boot factories, textile mills, brickworks, tobacco factories, printing shops, and ironworks.⁵ While some children entered factory work as early as seven, most started around the ages of nine or ten. Child workers were often the offspring of adult labourers, and their wages were typically collected by their parents. If they were not related to an adult worker, they were still expected to hand over their earnings at home. Although children worked the same long hours as adults, they performed tasks specifically designated as children's work, meaning no adults carried out the same duties. However, this did not make their labour any less strenuous; children's work tended to be physically demanding, much like the work performed by adults.

Brickmaking was one such industry, where labour was backbreaking for children and adults alike. A lot of manual labour was involved in making bricks. Initially, workers dug raw clay and tossed it into piles.⁶ In order to temper the clay, the piles were left to weather and occasionally

⁵ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876; "The Sydney Jam Company," *Australian Town and Country Journal*, March 15, 1879.

⁶ I.B. Holley Junior, "The Mechanization of Brickmaking," *Technology and Culture*, vol. 50, iss. 1 (January 2009): 82-102.

turned with a spade to break down clumps and ensure that the weathering reached all the material. After a while, the clay was shovelled into a pit where it could be watered and kneaded by the trampling of men or oxen. Next it would be hauled to tables, where moulders scooped up an amount of clay and pressed it firmly into a sand-sprinkled wooden box divided into brick-sized sections, striking off the surplus clay as they went. The sand on the inner surfaces of the box allowed the hand-pressed clay to be easily shaken from its mould. The green bricks would then be carried to the drying shed and stacked loosely to permit air to reach their surfaces. When suitably dry, these green bricks were fired for three days and nights. Wood, and then increasingly coal, was used to fuel the fires of the kiln. As a last stage, the vent holes in the kiln were sealed to hold in the heat, and bricks were left for another four or five days to become properly fired. This is what brickmaking looked like in Philadelphia in 1810.⁷ It was much the same in NSW in 1875, based on descriptions of work in NSW brickyards found in the minutes of evidence taken before the *Select Committee on the Employment of Children* (1875).

In 1875, NSW had several brickmakers, with an estimated sixty to eighty operating in Sydney alone.⁸ Most were concentrated in Marrickville, Waterloo, St. Peters, and Ashfield. Brickyards during this period were generally small and owned by individual entrepreneurs or small partnerships. Their locations were largely determined by the availability of suitable clay, as poor road conditions made transporting raw materials over long distances impractical.⁹ Additionally, brickmakers needed to be near sizable communities to ensure a steady market for their products. The suburbs mentioned likely met both of these key requirements, making them ideal locations for brick production.

Children, both boys and girls, played a role in the brickmaking process in NSW brickyards. They were primarily employed as “pugger-ups,” responsible for carrying clay and sand to

⁷ Holley Junior, “The Mechanization of Brickmaking,” 82-83.

⁸ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 881.

⁹ Holley Junior, “The Mechanization of Brickmaking,” 82.

brickmakers and shaping rough bricks before they were moulded.¹⁰ Clay was transported from pits to workstations using bare arms, with individual loads weighing up to fifty pounds.¹¹ Over a day, young workers could move three to four tons of clay over short distances of ten to fourteen yards.¹² On rainy days, children were reassigned to assist in clay digging or greasing brick moulds.¹³ Some, if skilled, participated in brickmaking itself. In brickyards that adopted machinery in the 1870s, the need for pugger-ups diminished, reducing the number of child workers. Those who remained were mainly tasked with cleaning brick moulds.¹⁴ Brickyards were hazardous places for children, with risks of accidents from collapsing earth or machinery, making them tough and often dangerous environments for young workers.¹⁵ These harsh conditions highlight the physical demands and dangers faced by child workers in brickyards.

Work indoors posed its own set of challenges for the young. In tobacco factories, the process of making tobacco was divided into repetitive, monotonous tasks that required workers to move quickly and efficiently. Both boys and girls under fourteen were employed, each performing specific duties. Boys were responsible for sorting tobacco, tying it into bundles, and removing the stems, while girls sorted tobacco from large containers or wrapped tobacco leaves around figs.¹⁶ Some factories provided training in the full tobacco-making process, but only boys were employed in these settings due to perceived moral concerns.¹⁷ Over time, boys progressed from stripping tobacco leaves to more complex tasks like strand-making, twisting, or plug-making. The indoor working conditions were harsh. Tobacco factories were unbearably hot, as tobacco

¹⁰ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 881.

¹¹ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 884.

¹² NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 882.

¹³ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 883.

¹⁴ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 887.

¹⁵ "Killed in a Brickyard," *Telegraph*, September 19, 1888, 3; "A Painful Accident: Crushed between Rollers," *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, August 18, 1889, 5; "Shocking Accidents," *North Melbourne Advertiser*, December 11, 1874, 2.

¹⁶ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 889; Figs were pre-treated tobacco leaves that had been dried, dipped in syrup and liquorice, dried again and sprinkled with rum or various essential oils and then moulded into shape. See: "Manufacture of Tobacco," *Australian Town and Country Journal*, February 26, 1876, 16.

¹⁷ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 892.

leaves underwent repeated processing and drying.¹⁸ Although rooms were ventilated before work began to lower the temperature, they remained uncomfortable. The air was thick with the smell of tobacco and added flavouring agents, making it suffocating at times. While factory workers were protected from outdoor weather, the work environment inside was far from pleasant, highlighting the difficult conditions faced by children in these industries.

The issue of children's industrial employment was first addressed at the colonial level in the mid-nineteenth century, sparking significant interest and leading to investigations by three select committees. The first in the series of investigations, *Select Committee on the Condition of the Working Classes of the Metropolis* (1859-60), was appointed on September 30, 1859, by Henry Parkes, who acted as the committee's chair. At this point, Parkes represented East Sydney in the Legislative Assembly. He joined a select committee of ten assemblymen to investigate unemployment, declining wages, poor working-class housing, and the causes and extent of juvenile vagrancy in the colony.¹⁹ Over a period of five months, the committee interviewed forty-one witnesses, among whom were city and country employers, government employees, labourers, medical practitioners, pawnbrokers, clergymen and labour agents.²⁰ The report the committee released revealed that 789 people were unemployed and that 250 had been out of work for longer than three months. It also found that the local manufacture of clothing, textiles, leather, footwear, furniture and tobacco had significantly declined as a result of the rising production costs and increased imports. Although several industrialists who testified before the committee opined that the situation could be helped by the imposition of modest import duties, the committee only suggested that taxation be reviewed. To redeem vagrant children, the report suggested setting up a Nautical School and assisting in the completion of the Asylum for Destitute Children at Randwick.²¹ Although the committee stopped short of recommending major structural changes,

¹⁸ "Manufacture of Tobacco," *Australian Town and Country Journal*, February 26, 1876, 16.

¹⁹ NSW LA V&P 1859-1860, 1265.

²⁰ NSW LA V&P 1859-1860, 1268.

²¹ NSW LA V&P 1859-1860, 1275.

its detailed investigation demonstrated government recognition of juvenile delinquency, among other things, as a matter requiring official attention.

Not long after this effort concluded, legislators approved a *Select Committee on the State of Manufactures and Agriculture in the Colony*, following a motion by John Lucas on September 2, 1862. A member of the Legislative Assembly for Canterbury, Lucas was a builder, and later a contractor, well known for his protectionist views. He had publicised his opinion on this topic a few years earlier in a pamphlet titled *Protection v. Free Trade*, where he advocated raising taxes on imported goods in order to promote the products of workers and farmers in a young country.²² The broad goal of his committee was to inquire into the state and progress of manufactures and agriculture in NSW.²³ Like its predecessor, this body was comprised of ten legislators, none of whom had served on the earlier committee. It was forced to cut its proceedings short as the end of the session was drawing close. The committee called only eleven witnesses—almost all factory owners, some of whom gave evidence before the previous select committee—before wrapping up in mid-December. The general burden of the evidence paraded before this committee yet again designated the free importation of inferior goods as the culprit of the contraction of some industries. As a result, the chair issued a report recommending the revision of a tariff.

William Macleay, a member of the Legislative Assembly representing the Murrumbidgee, initiated the third select committee examined here on November 1, 1866. He was a protectionist who advanced his views by leading select committees that he initiated and chaired.²⁴ There were two tasks set before the *Select Committee on the Unemployed*: to establish the amount of distress existing among the labouring classes, and to offer solutions to alleviate the problem.²⁵ The committee

²² R. W. Rathbone, “Lucas, John (1818–1902),” Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/lucas-john-4045/text6435>, published first in hardcopy 1974, accessed online February 10, 2021.

²³ NSW LA V&P 1862, 1043.

²⁴ Martha Rutledge and Michael Hoare, “Macleay, Sir William John (1820–1891),” Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/macleay-sir-william-john-4125/text6599>, published first in hardcopy 1974, accessed online February 17, 2025.

²⁵ NSW LA V&P 1866, 621.

consisted of ten members, some of whom fervently professed protectionist views— John Lucas mentioned before, John Sutherland, and Robert Stewart.²⁶ In total, thirteen witnesses were interviewed, six of whom were factory owners who advocated protective duties.²⁷ The committee was so fast-moving that a final report was produced in under a month. It estimated that there were no less than 3000 unemployed men in the colony, among whom were not only unskilled labourers, but also mechanics and artisans.²⁸ To aid the unemployed men, the committee suggested boosting local manufacture through imposing a duty of twenty percent on several imported goods.²⁹ The major bonus of this effort would be to engage currently idle youth in industry, offering job prospects that would increase parents' willingness to apprentice their boys. Juvenile prostitution would be checked as well, providing jobs for girls in textile factories rather than forcing them to walk the streets.³⁰ Ultimately, the committee's swift actions and protectionist recommendations aimed to strengthen local industry and create economic opportunities for both men and youth in the colony.

The colonial government established these three select committees—in 1859, 1862, and 1866—amid widespread fears of industrial decline and economic uncertainty. In the late 1850s-mid-1860s, there was a pervasive opinion among certain colonials that manufacturing in NSW was in a state of decline. This likely felt even more devastating given the colony's already weak industrial growth. NSW's earliest factories were limited to smiths' shops, windmills, breweries, tanneries, woollen mills, ropewalks, foundries.³¹ Although some factories employed between twenty to forty

²⁶ K. J. Cable, "Sutherland, John (1816–1889)," Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/sutherland-john-4673/text7725>, published first in hardcopy 1976, accessed online May 11, 2021; "Mr. Robert Stewart," *Parliament of New South Wales*, <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/members/formermembers/Pages/former-member-details.aspx?pk=444>, Accessed February 17, 2025.

²⁷ NSW LA V&P 1866, 638, 659.

²⁸ NSW LA V&P 1866, 621-2.

²⁹ NSW LA V&P 1866, 624.

³⁰ NSW LA V&P 1866, 623.

³¹ G.P. Walsh, "Factories and Factory Workers in New South Wales, 1788-1900," *Labour History*, no. 21 (November 1971): 1-16, here 1.

hands, a more common arrangement was for a factory workforce to consist of a master tradesman and a few labourers or apprentices.³² Similarly, although some of the early factories were impressive buildings, most were no more than backyard sheds. The number of factories grew year by year; around the 1830s, manufacturing moved from the production of everyday foodstuffs, clothing, and building materials to relatively capital-intensive ventures like sugar-refining, gas making, meat canning, woollen-milling, and the smelting of iron and copper, as well as facilities like shipbuilding and repair yards.³³ Yet growth was not straightforward; it fluctuated in line with demand.³⁴ Thus, given that manufacturing industry was not exactly flourishing before the 1850s, the thought that it was now regressing was, doubtless, very unsettling.

The concern with the state of manufacturing and the economy more generally emerged in connection with the gold discoveries of the 1850s. The rushes had a mixed effect on manufacturing industries in NSW: on the one hand, the influx of immigrants boosted industries related to the production of food and drink, mining machinery, and transport; on the other, the mass exodus of unskilled labour and factory workers to eastern Australia meant that many smaller factories were forced to shut down.³⁵ The labour shortage led to rising wages and increased costs for raw materials like wool, tallow, skins, and meat.³⁶ These high production expenses made it difficult for local manufacturers to compete with cheaper British imports, which were often end-of-season stock, sold below prime manufacturing costs. Even after 1854, when the labour situation improved, wages and raw material prices remained higher than before the gold rush. As a result, local industries continued to struggle against the influx of low-cost British goods, highlighting the lasting economic impact of labour scarcity and inflated production costs on the colony's manufacturing sector.

³² Walsh, "Factories and Factory Workers in New South Wales, 1788-1900," 2-3.

³³ J. R. Linge, *Industrial Awakening: A Geography of Australian Manufacturing 1788 to 1890* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1979), 407.

³⁴ Walsh, "Factories and Factory Workers in New South Wales, 1788-1900," 3.

³⁵ Walsh, "Factories and Factory Workers in New South Wales, 1788-1900," 7.

³⁶ Linge, *Industrial Awakening*, 407-410.

Faced with the threat from cheap British imports, there emerged agitation for protective policies, levied duties or tariffs on imported goods, though this was challenged by competing agitation for free trade. Local producers, unable to compete with overseas manufacturers, supported protective policies.³⁷ The unemployed also favoured them, hoping for job opportunities in a growing colonial industry. Meanwhile, ministries saw them as a financial tool to generate necessary revenue, making the policies appealing to multiple groups with economic and employment concerns. A whole cohort of colonials, however, supported free trade, which by this time had been the accepted fiscal policy in Britain—the country that bought most of Australia’s exports and sold most of its imports. Proponents of free trade included export producers who sought to keep their costs down, commercial enterprises that were engaged in international trade, and the workers who were employed in these sectors. Consumers in general were also not in favour of a tariff that might increase their cost of living. The colonial government’s decision to appoint the select committees in question was therefore prompted, among other things, by the need to gather evidence that could inform policy decisions in this contentious debate between free traders and protectionists, particularly regarding how trade policy might affect local manufacturing and overall employment opportunities, with youth unemployment forming part of these broader concerns.

Committee records highlight legislators’ heightened anxiety over joblessness among colonial youth. The intensity of these concerns becomes evident in the questioning style of committee members like Dr. John Dunmore Lang who in 1859 pressed William Bell Allen, soap and candle manufacturer, with pointed inquiries: “are there no other employments than those at present prevalent in the country that would give employment to a large proportion of the Colonial youth?”³⁸ Youth unemployment was a minor concern in the 1859 inquiry but became a more

³⁷ Stuart Macintyre and Sean Scalmer, “Colonial States and Civil Society, 1860–90,” in *The Cambridge History of Australia*, ed. Alison Bashford and Stuart Macintyre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 189–217, here 201.

³⁸ NSW LA V&P 1859-1860, 1336.

systematic focus in the 1862 and 1866 committees, where most witnesses were asked about the lack of job opportunities for young people in the colony.³⁹ The ultimate proof that legislators in the 1850s and 1860s expected working-class children to be wage earners lay in an additional question that investigators frequently raised, namely, whether the colonial youth under fourteen or fifteen contributed as much to the family economy as their British counterparts did?⁴⁰ These inquiries thus demonstrate that legislators were particularly concerned with the issue of unemployment among youth.

While legislators worried about juvenile unemployment, they did not assign the same degree of importance to every employment opportunity. On several occasions, there were mentions of children earning money through casual street occupations. Malcolm Campbell, for example, mentioned that there were children “selling fruit in the fruit season or doing any odd jobs they can get to work at.”⁴¹ Another witness mentioned in passing that boys worked as bus boys, or ran errands, or sold newspapers.⁴² Yet no inquirer showed any interest in expanding children’s participation in these street jobs; no one attempted to explore how many children were doing such work, how old they were, or, indeed, how to get more children to work in these occupations, though they consistently posed such questions regarding children in industrial employment. Legislators’ disregard for street-based employment opportunities demonstrates that they were not simply concerned with keeping youth busy but were specifically invested in channelling them into industrial employment.

Beyond revealing legislators’ concerns about the lack of industrial employment for children, questions and answers voiced during the proceedings of the 1859 and 1862 select committees also reveal how childhood was defined within industrial contexts and establish the upper age limit for who was considered a child in factory work. Sixteen was the cut-off, with

³⁹ NSW LA V&P 1862, 1048, 1056, 1066; NSW LA V&P 1866, 641.

⁴⁰ NSW LA V&P 1862, 1057-1058.

⁴¹ NSW LA V&P 1862, 1057.

⁴² NSW LA V&P 1862, 1093.

everyone above that age generally understood to be an adult. This is evident from the customary question asked of all manufacturers in 1862—“how many males and females over and under sixteen do you employ in your factory?”— which demonstrates that the age of sixteen was perceived as a dividing line between childhood and adulthood when it came to factory work.⁴³ Whilst these excerpts from the minutes of evidence show us that the legislators assumed that it was natural for youth under sixteen to work, they do not tell us how early children were expected to join the workforce.

The select committee minutes indicate that legislators at the time showed little interest in establishing a minimum age for youth employment in factories. Committee members—notably chairman Henry Parkes—made clear that children of “a very tender age” should surely be exempt from industrial employment.⁴⁴ But neither Parkes, nor any other committeeman defined what constituted such an age. No legislator expressed an objection to nine-year-old children working in factories. For example, William Bell Allen, a soap and candle manufacturer, complained about the lack of employment opportunities for the youth and reminisced that there used to be tweed factories that provided plentiful employment for youthful workers; “children as young as nine and up to fifteen years of age” could be found among these factories’ personnel.⁴⁵ This information apparently caused no concern. Neither were protests voiced when another witness admitted to having children as young as eight working in his establishment.⁴⁶ The committee’s focus remained not on children’s capacity to labour at different ages, or on the meaning or significance of chronological age but, rather, on the need to increase industrial employment of all kinds for the young.

The evidence suggests that legislators’ concerns about the lack of engagement in industrial employment among youth largely excluded young women. On the rare occasions when

⁴³ NSW LA V&P 1862, 1047.

⁴⁴ NSW LA V&P 1862, 288.

⁴⁵ NSW LA V&P 1859-1860, 1335.

⁴⁶ NSW LA V&P 1862, 1335.

employment opportunities for young females were discussed, conversations focused solely on industries requiring sewing skills. During the 1862 select committee sittings, for example, only one factory owner, James Vickery (an owner of a boot and leather factory) was asked about employment prospects for girls. The committee inquired if the demand for domestic production was to increase, would he be able to employ more girls.⁴⁷ The 1859 select committee asked no such questions. The members of the 1866 select committee sought information regarding job opportunities for girls only on two occasions. William Alderson, a leather manufacturer, was asked if he thought that boosting local leather manufacture would provide jobs for girls among other colonials.⁴⁸ Robert Douglas, a tailor, was asked a similar question in the context of the slop manufacture (cheap ready-made clothing).⁴⁹ A much more frequent inquiry in regard to girls was made with a view of establishing whether prostitution among street girls was on the rise and at what age it presumably started.⁵⁰ This contrast between the minimal attention given to female employment and the extensive focus on juvenile prostitution reveals that legislators viewed young women primarily through the lens of moral vulnerability rather than economic productivity.⁵¹

This focus on female street prostitution reflected committee members' broader concerns about growing juvenile vagrancy, which they addressed as a related issue alongside their investigation into youth unemployment. They characterized these juvenile vagrants as children under the age of fifteen or sixteen, "who are allowed to ramble about the streets without employment, without direction, without instructions..."⁵² Time and time again, legislators on all three committees pressed witnesses on whether they had noticed that Sydney streets were overrun with aimless children, querying: "Have you not noticed the number of youths, of both sexes, in

⁴⁷ NSW LA V&P 1862, 1101.

⁴⁸ NSW LA V&P 1866, 672.

⁴⁹ NSW LA V&P 1866, 675.

⁵⁰ NSW LA V&P 1859-1860, 1306, 1319.

⁵¹ This preoccupation with female sexual propriety in colonial and early federation Australia will be examined in detail in Chapter 4. The ideology of domesticity that explains the lack of interest in female industrial employment will be discussed in Chapter 3.

⁵² NSW LA V&P 1859-1860, 1312.

the streets, in apparent vagrancy?”⁵³ Witnesses reported that they had, indeed, noticed a spike in the number of destitute children in public.⁵⁴ These consistent observations validated the committees’ concerns that juvenile vagrancy had emerged as a significant social issue demanding legislative attention.

Anxiety over homeless youth was not entirely new in NSW, but it reached unprecedented levels in the 1850s due to several factors that dramatically increased the number of destitute children living on the streets. This concern had arisen soon after colonisation and led to the first female orphan school being opened in Sydney in 1801 and the first male one in 1819.⁵⁵ Although concern with child poverty continued throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, it remained more or less in the background. In the 1850s, however, interest with homeless children surged. An increase in the number of neglected children in NSW, starting in the 1840s, helps to explain legislators’ unease with homeless or delinquent children in the 1850s. Depression in Sydney in the 1840s and ensuing urban poverty led to a rise in the number of neglected and destitute youngsters. Children wandering the slums of Inner Sydney became a regular sight, distressing for middle class residents whose sense of public respectability they offended.⁵⁶ Demographic changes brought about by the gold rushes only exacerbated the problem of street children, as masses of men went in search of gold and left wives and children behind. Around the same time, increased immigration put further pressure on housing and sanitation in working class neighbourhoods like the Rocks and Woolloomooloo. Crime thrived as well, as the rates of unemployment rose and waves of new migrants desperately sought work.⁵⁷ City streets thus became the place where children congregated and socialised, escaping from crowded, grimy buildings, and sometimes

⁵³ NSW LA V&P 1862, 1048, 1099, 1109,1114; NSW LA V&P 1859-1860, 1290, 1296, 1301; NSW LA V&P 1866, 664.

⁵⁴ NSW LA V&P 1862, 1080, 1114.

⁵⁵ Beryl M. Bubacz, “The Female and Male Orphan Schools in New South Wales, 1801–1850” (PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 2007): 122-124.

⁵⁶ John Ramsland, “Henry Parkes and the Development of Industrial and Reformatory Schools in Colonial New South Wales,” *Australian Social Work*, vol. 35, no.4 (1982): 3-10.

⁵⁷ Chris Murray, “The Ragged School Movement in New South Wales, 1860-1924” (PhD thesis, Macquarie University, 1979), 32-34.

pilfering, scavenging or stealing to get by, and the visible presence of these impoverished street youth heightened public anxiety about homelessness among minors.

Legislators found high unemployment among juveniles—coupled with the rise in juvenile vagrancy—particularly startling as it was at odds with the substantial demographic changes that had occurred by this time. One 1862 select committee member, for example, maintained that there had been a five hundred percent increase in the colonial population, yet the number of employed juveniles had not grown.⁵⁸ What was worse, it was felt, was that fewer youths were entering wage work in the colony than had been the case twenty to thirty years before.⁵⁹ The same inquirer estimated that four fifths of colonial youth were now out of employment.⁶⁰ Another inquirer claimed that when the population of the colony was only twenty thousand, there had been more working children than was currently the case.⁶¹ This perceived decline in youth employment amid rapid population growth heightened legislators' concerns, as it suggested that the colony's expanding population was unable to secure adequate employment opportunities, leaving an entire generation vulnerable to idleness.

The population growth that committee members discussed had, indeed, been substantial. Both as a result of the immigration induced by the gold rush and natural increase, the number of colonists in NSW rose from 118,918 in 1841 to 350,860 in 1861.⁶² Nor were they wrong in pointing to a substantial upsurge in young people on the city streets, for the ratio of children to adults also rose in this period and stayed high through most of the nineteenth century. In 1841, children under fourteen constituted twenty-six percent of the total population; by 1861, the percentage had risen to thirty-seven.⁶³ In 1871, the proportion of children in the NSW population rose to forty-two

⁵⁸ NSW LA V&P 1862, 1053.

⁵⁹ NSW LA V&P 1862, 1053; NSW LA V&P 1866, 664.

⁶⁰ NSW LA V&P 1862, 1053.

⁶¹ NSW LA V&P 1862, 1115-6.

⁶² J.C Caldwell, "Population," in *Australians: Historical Statistics*, edited by Wray Vamplew (Broadway, N.S.W., Australia: Fairfax, Syme & Weldon Associates, 1987), 23-41, here 26.

⁶³ New South Wales Census for 1841 and 1861.

percent; the highest it would reach throughout the nineteenth century.⁶⁴ These figures confirm that legislators' concerns were grounded in demographic reality: NSW had become a remarkably young society, making the question of youth employment all the more pressing.

Select committee inquiries in 1855 and 1862 sought to identify the underlying causes of juvenile unemployment, particularly investigating whether it stemmed from unwillingness to work. Committee members questioned witnesses repeatedly on this point, inquiring if there was “a desire among young people to learn the trades of skill...”⁶⁵ A great many witnesses shared a view that many juveniles were keen to work. To shed light on the roots of juvenile joblessness, legislators also considered the capacities of colonial youth to learn a trade, querying whether “The youth of the Colony are quite as capable of learning as those of England?”⁶⁶ This may have been a rhetorical question, asked to establish that the reasons for the widespread youth unemployment lay not in a lack of capacity but in a lack of jobs. Yet it echoes the same fears that led to the passage of the Coal Fields Regulation Act of 1862—that colonial youth might be somehow deficient.

The principal cause for the concern with juvenile unemployment was the apprehension that the absence of available industrial opportunities had a demoralising effect on youth and, thus, constituted a serious threat to law and order in the colony. Witnesses were asked if they thought that idleness among youth had any bearing upon the demoralisation of the colony.⁶⁷ One committee member went as far as to imply that the contemporary rise in bushranging in the colony had something to do with a lot of youths being out of work.⁶⁸ The rise of crime in the decades to come was also anticipated and feared. At the prompt of select committee members, witnesses regularly engaged in speculations over whether a big number of the unemployed juveniles would lead to the increase of criminality in future.⁶⁹ By common consent, it was resolved that that yes, it

⁶⁴ Caldwell, “Population,” 24, 40.

⁶⁵ NSW LA V&P 1862, 1057, 1066, 1069, 1081, 1099.

⁶⁶ NSW LA V&P 1862, 1109; NSW LA V&P 1866, 648, 649.

⁶⁷ NSW LA V&P 1862, 1052; NSW LA V&P 1866, 661.

⁶⁸ NSW LA V&P 1862, 1052.

⁶⁹ NSW LA V&P 1862, 1120.

would.⁷⁰ Concerns over juvenile unemployment and vagrancy were thus deeply tied to fears of social instability, with lawmakers and witnesses alike viewing idleness as a pathway to crime.

Colonial lawmakers viewed industrial employment as the solution to an anticipated rise in criminality, believing that training in a trade would pave the way toward a law-abiding society. To find support for this conviction, legislators sought evidence that trained youth turned out to be good citizens. To this end, witnesses were regularly asked to share an opinion on whether a person who had been through apprenticeship tended to become “a permanently good member of society”.⁷¹ Legislators sitting on the 1866 select committee also wondered if regular employment would turn the idle boys into good members of society in future.⁷² Legislators prioritised industrial jobs for unemployed youth, believing that trade training were key to transforming them into responsible citizens.

This strong emphasis on trade training and its perceived societal benefits also shaped how legislators spoke about young factory workers; legislators commonly referred to factory youth as “apprentices.” Shortly after learning the number of youths under sixteen working in a given establishment, the legislators tended to ask witnesses to make a judgment on whether the number of “apprentices” had declined in the last twenty years or whether the opportunities for apprenticeships had diminished.⁷³ Alternatively they solicited opinions on how much a colony would be better off if “the youth who are now unoccupied were trained to a trade...”⁷⁴ The inquirers also referred to youth subcontracted by factory employees (who were sometimes these employees’ own children), querying whether they performed piece work off-site as apprentices.⁷⁵ The latter raised one witness’s eyebrows; he expressed a doubt that factory workers’ children, who

⁷⁰ NSW LA V&P 1862, 1120.

⁷¹ NSW LA V&P 1862, 1120; NSW LA V&P 1866, 666.

⁷² NSW LA V&P 1866, 680.

⁷³ NSW LA V&P 1862, 1048; NSW LA V&P 1866, 641.

⁷⁴ NSW LA V&P 1862, 1079.

⁷⁵ NSW LA V&P 1862, 1069, 1080.

worked from home, could be called “apprentices”.⁷⁶ As this witness observed, committee members were defining “apprenticeship” in remarkably liberal terms.

At this point in Australian history, several different forms of apprenticeship existed. The rarest form was a traditional apprenticeship, whereby a child was indentured for a fixed term and provided with training in all aspects of a trade. Such opportunities were unusual in the second half of the nineteenth century because the colony was open to a large and steady flow of immigrants, who readily met the need for skilled workers.⁷⁷ Restricting the entry of young persons through a regulated apprenticeship system that controlled the supply of skilled workers was thus impossible to achieve. In view of this fact, the arrangements for the training of youth had to change. Three new kinds of youth training in NSW became prevalent instead. In one case, the traditional form—apprenticeship by indenture—was retained, but the content was altered so boys were trained only in a limited number of industrial processes. The second case is where the traditional form was abandoned in favour of simple written or even verbal agreement, but the training followed the traditional format: the training had some kind of structure and apprentices were trained in all, or at least most, branches of a trade. Finally, there was a third case, where both form and content changed, in which young male workers—simply called “boys”—were employed as unskilled labourers in jobs set aside specifically for them. A witness of the 1862 select committee, a leather manufacturer, confessed that in his factory he employed boys as the introduction of machinery opened up a niche for them. They took on work that adult workers refused to perform as it paid too little.⁷⁸ A witness in the 1866 inquiry also disclosed information about the boys employed in these kinds of jobs.⁷⁹ These adaptations meant that while proper apprenticeships still existed, they

⁷⁶ NSW LA V&P 1862, 1080.

⁷⁷ Thorsten Stromback, “By Chance or Choice: The Regulation of the Apprenticeship System in Australia, 1900-1930,” *Centre for Economic Policy Research, Research School of Economics, Australian National University, CEPR Discussion Papers* (2006); 2-3.

⁷⁸ NSW LA V&P 1862, 1066.

⁷⁹ NSW LA V&P 1866, 663-4.

were limited in number, leaving most boys to perform unskilled labour in factories rather than receive genuine trade training.

Despite this reality, legislators used the term “apprentice” to refer to every young person engaged in factory employment. Unlike other potential terms—such as child labourers or child workers—the term apprentice had venerable connotations. It spoke to an older world of labour, in which children worked under the guidance of master craftsmen to develop skills that would one day translate into an independent trade or shop. By the mid-nineteenth century when committeemen co-opted this term, that world had long been in retreat. The mass of children working in industrial settings were no longer learning skills that would allow them to make entire products, or to run their own shops or businesses. The alternative terms they might have chosen had also come into disrepute. By this time, discussions of children labouring in factories had already evoked starvation wages, airless, dark rooms filled with noisy machinery, and grim, pallid faces. Legislators had clearly decided that it was far better to evoke a bygone age when it came to discussing employment options for the young than to reference the industrial world in which children now worked.

To address mounting fears of youth unemployment, the 1862 committee headed by John Lucas, a fervent protectionist, actively sought suggestions for encouraging juvenile industrial employment: for one, they wondered whether the legislature was to assume responsibility for enabling youth to find employment. “Do you think that in legislature we should keep in view the desirability of finding employment...?” asked one legislator.⁸⁰ Other legislators wondered if promoting industrialisation would create more workplaces for youth and address the issue of juvenile vagrancy, posing questions such as: “Do you think it is possible to find employment for the youth of the Colony unless manufactures are carried on here?” and “Do you think if the whole of the boots and shoes now consumed in the Colony were manufactured here, it would tend to

⁸⁰ NSW LA V&P 1862, 1048.

give employment to a large number of these [vagrant] children?”⁸¹ On a practical level, legislators wondered, too, whether there was anything they could do to boost colonial manufacture. Should the legislature impose protective duties to raise competitiveness of locally produced goods and, therefore, contribute to the growth of local manufacture?⁸² If yes, what should the amount of duty be? Witnesses firmly maintained that unless manufacturing was encouraged, there would not be many opportunities for juvenile employment: “there is no employment for them [children] unless something turns up in the shape of manufactures. They are now thieves and vagrants,” declared one witness.⁸³ Witnesses also portrayed the importation of the British goods as a threat to the future of local production, explaining that there was no use in engaging apprentices as there was no future for them in local industries that might fold without protective legislation.⁸⁴ They overwhelmingly testified before the select committees that protective tariffs and government intervention were essential to foster local manufacturing and thus create the industrial employment opportunities needed to transform idle youth into productive workers. Thus, the problem of youth unemployment became a powerful weapon in the protectionist arsenal, allowing advocates to frame tariff protection as essential economic policy to create industrial jobs.

Despite the consensus among witnesses regarding the need for protective duties, the broader political battle over trade policy would ultimately take a different course, with free traders eventually triumphing over protectionists in NSW after a continual tug of war. In February 1865, protectionists had some small wins, including a successful bill to impose a duty of one shilling on every package imported (except livestock, goods in transit, flour, wheat, sugar, and tea) and an additional impost of twenty percent on all goods (with several exceptions) currently liable to import duty to reduce accumulated deficits.⁸⁵ A few months later the government introduced a general five percent ad valorem impost except on items like hides and skins, tallow, wool, wheat, flour,

⁸¹ NSW LA V&P 1862, 1048, 1099.

⁸² NSW LA V&P 1862, 1114.

⁸³ NSW LA V&P 1862, 1052.

⁸⁴ NSW LA V&P 1862, 1086.

⁸⁵ Linge, *Industrial Awakening*, 412.

and unsmelted ores. This measure reconciled the conflicting parties, generating much-needed additional revenue while keeping a lid on protectionists' more extensive demands. Ultimately, these modest compromises represented the high-water mark of protectionist influence in NSW, as subsequent decades would see the colony firmly embrace free trade principles, leaving the ambitious vision of tariff-protected industrial development—and its promised solution to youth unemployment—unrealized.

Though legislators made little progress on juvenile unemployment, they pursued several initiatives to address juvenile vagrancy. These initiatives emerged throughout the 1850s and 1860s, some preceding and others coinciding with the three committees. In 1851, the colonial legislature passed an *Act to Make Further Provision for the Apprenticing of the Children in the Male and Female Orphan School and Other Poor Children*. Soon afterwards, in 1852, the Society for Relief of Destitute Children was formed and in 1858—Destitute Children's Asylum in Randwick. In 1866, two acts were passed dealing with delinquent children—the Industrial Schools Act and the Reformatory School Act.⁸⁶ The former gave the state authority to provide schools for neglected and destitute children under the age of sixteen while the latter provided for children under that age who had been convicted in court. In 1867, the government opened an Industrial School for Girls at Newcastle and a Nautical School Ship for boys, the *Vernon*, stationed in Sydney Harbour. These institutions were considered appropriate vehicles for moulding childhood, offering structured environments that legislators deemed essential for transforming wayward youth into productive citizens.

These institutional approaches to juvenile welfare were shaped by evolving philosophies of juvenile reclamation and transnational influences. Reformist ideas travelled from Britain to the Australian colonies through multiple channels, including the circulation of literature via newspapers and pamphlets, the emigration of individuals with direct experience in ragged schools, and formal connections established between British institutions and colonial authorities.⁸⁷ Scottish

⁸⁶ Alan Barcan, *A History of Australian Education* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 112

⁸⁷ Murray, "The Ragged School Movement in New South Wales, 1860-1924," 17-29.

and English ragged school organizations actively sought to expand their mission by sending select children to the colonies as farm apprentices. Parkes, who chaired the 1859 select committee, exemplified the impact of these international influences. His resulting report, which recommended establishing a reformatory in the colony and cited the success of reformatories in France and Germany as models for redeeming wayward children, demonstrated how transnational reform movements shaped colonial policy discussions.⁸⁸ This international perspective was further reinforced by Parkes's engagement with contemporary reformist thought, particularly the influential work of Mary Carpenter, one of the most prominent advocates for the rehabilitation of so-called criminal children.⁸⁹

British social reformer Mary Carpenter's pioneering work with disadvantaged children established the intellectual foundation for juvenile justice reform that would later influence NSW policy. The eldest daughter of a prominent Unitarian minister, Carpenter distinguished between three types of children—the depraved and destitute, the neglected, who often turned to vagrancy, and those with criminal history—and offered a different school for each type.⁹⁰ According to her proposition, the first group of children were to attend a free day school; the second would spend their days in industrial schools, where they receive meals during the daytime, but return home at night; and the third category would be confined in boarding reformatories that aimed to reform their characters. Carpenter's conviction that reformatories were necessary emerged from her direct experience establishing a ragged school—a free day school for impoverished children—in the slum district of Lewin's Mead, Bristol in 1846.⁹¹ Here, she often dealt with children who had spent some time in prison. This experience convinced her that the ragged school needed to be complemented by reformatories. She strongly opposed the imprisonment of youthful offenders and expressed her

⁸⁸ NSW LA V&P 1859-1860, 1275.

⁸⁹ Ramsland, "Henry Parkes and the Development of Industrial and Reformatory Schools in Colonial New South Wales," 3.

⁹⁰ Murray, "The Ragged School Movement in New South Wales, 1860-1924," 17-29.

⁹¹ Murray, "The Ragged School Movement in New South Wales, 1860-1924," 17-29.

sentiment in her first book *Reformatory Schools for the Children of the Perishing and Dangerous Classes and for Juvenile Offenders* (1851), which became immensely popular.

Contemporary scholarship has revealed that out-of-home Care institutions like those Carpenter championed—reformatories and industrial schools—operated as quasi-carceral environments that inflicted significant trauma on children.⁹² These institutions, while ostensibly designed to rehabilitate rather than punish, employed rigid disciplinary regimes, corporal punishment, and intensive surveillance that differed little from prison conditions. Children were subjected to harsh labour, strict regimentation, and often brutal treatment by staff. The reformatory system’s emphasis on moral reformation through discipline created environments where physical, sexual and psychological abuse flourished, with children experiencing long-term separation from families and suppression of personal identity. The very architectural design of many reformatories—with their high walls, locked gates, and dormitory-style accommodation—reinforced their essentially custodial rather than educational function, demonstrating how philanthropic rhetoric masked fundamentally punitive practices.

By the mid-1870s, with the institutional responses to the rise of vagrant and neglected children seemingly in place, and the political debate between free traders and protectionists subsiding—eliminating the need to use youth unemployment as justification for protective tariffs—a new commitment emerged to regulate child labour in factories. On December 14, 1875, William Suttor Jr., an independent member for East Macquarie (no political parties existed at this time in NSW), proposed forming a select committee to investigate children’s industrial labour. The

⁹² David McGinniss, Keir Reeves, and Frank Golding, “Whose Pain? Whose Shame? Integrating Heritage and Histories in Ballarat, Australia,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, vol. 30, iss. 11 (2024): 1365-1378; Jacqueline Z. Wilson, “The Australian Orphanage Museum: Heritage and Activism,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, vol. 30, no. 11 (2024): 1291-1303; Jacqueline Z. Wilson, “Beyond the Walls: Sites of Trauma and Suffering, Forgotten Australians and Institutionalisation via Punitive ‘Welfare’,” *Public History Review*, vol. 20 (2013): 80-93; Jacqueline Z. Wilson and Bree Carlton, “Delinquent Girls as Activists: Insider Activism and Carceral Welfare,” *Space and Culture*, vol. 25, no. 2 (2022): 245-254; Travonne Edwards, Andre Laylor, Bryn King, and Henry Parada, “When Home Reminds Me of Jail: The Carceral Nature of Out-of-home Care for Black Youth in Ontario’s Child Welfare System,” *Children and Youth Services Review*, vol. 155 (Dec., 2023): 1-9.

lengthy title of the select committee—*A Select Committee on the Employment of Persons of Tender Age in Trades, Professions, and Callings Unsuitable to their Years, and Calculated to be Injurious Alike to their Physical as well as their Moral Development*—immediately indicates the two major rationales for setting up the inquiry.⁹³ The committeemen were most anxious to learn how working at a young age affected children's health and morals.

Acting on these concerns, the committee, consisting of eleven members including the mover himself, proceeded to interview its first witness on January 20, 1876.⁹⁴ Overall, the select committee interviewed eighteen witnesses, including owners of small and large factories, school personnel, and superintendents of industrial schools, along with a coal mines inspector and a doctor. As well as interviewing adult witnesses, the committee visited a number of workplaces that employed child labourers in order to speak to young workers directly.⁹⁵ While the testimony of adult witnesses was taken down verbatim, however, children's accounts were only briefly summarised. The committee also sought evidence by inviting responses to a standard questionnaire, sent to those deemed liable to shed light on the matter of child labour.⁹⁶ The committee's investigation provided a broad perspective on child labour, though children's voices were largely condensed, reflecting the era's focus on adult testimony.

Understanding Suttor's rationale for investigating child labour requires looking beyond the committee itself to his wider parliamentary agenda, as direct evidence of his motivations remains elusive. He left behind no personal papers and not much exists to document the committee's work beyond the parliamentary debates themselves. A few newspapers briefly mentioned the committee's appointment and reprinted its final report, but no one involved appears to have spoken publicly about their work. An examination of colonial newspapers in the months around the committee's formation similarly yields no evidence of tragic events concerning child labourers

⁹³ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876.

⁹⁴ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 881

⁹⁵ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 878.

⁹⁶ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 930.

that might have prompted investigation. Nonetheless, a few guesses can be made to account for Suttor's interest in this issue, based on his parliamentary motions. These show that, in the same year his select committee was appointed, he also called for the collection of statistics on children's mortality over the past five years, and on the number of children attending school.⁹⁷ His inquiry into the working youth, in other words, was not an aberration but instead the sign of a broader interest in children's circumstances.

Suttor's personal concerns about working youth had, in all likelihood, to do with developments occurring in Britain. Here, the twenty-five-year period before the NSW select committee abounded with government inquiries looking into child labour and with multiple laws designed to curb the practice.⁹⁸ The commissioners on bleach and dye works (1854-55) and the *Select Committee of the House of Commons on Bleach and Dye Works* (1857-58) played an important role in the extension of the existing factory legislation to non-textile industries. The extension was carried still further by the *Commission on the State of Children Employed in Lace Manufacture* (1861) and by the six successive reports of the *Commission on the Employment of Children and Young Persons in Trades and Manufactures not already regulated by law* (1862-1867). Further extensions were due to several minor committees, and, finally, as a result of the labours of the *Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the Working of the Factory and Workshop Acts*, with a view to their consolidation and amendment (1876), the consolidating act of 1878 was passed.

The findings of these inquiries were, as a rule, reported in the Australian press. In 1871, for example, the NSW public learnt about the gruelling work performed by children and young persons in the manufacture of bricks. According to several newspapers: "children were employed from fourteen to sixteen hours a day in horrible labour—working up to their waists in wet mud, carrying lamps of clay on their heads heavy enough for hodmen—a girl of thirteen, for instance,

⁹⁷ "N.S.W Parliament: Legislative Assembly," *Newcastle Chronicle*, March 9, 1876, 3 and "N.S.W Parliament: Legislative Assembly," *Newcastle Chronicle*, April 27, 1876, 3.

⁹⁸ Amy Harrison and B. Leigh Hutchins, *A History of Factory Legislation* (London: Routledge, 1966).

carries 50 lbs. and frequently walking fourteen miles a day to and from work.”⁹⁹ Similarly, NSW newspapers reported the findings of the 1875 royal commission inquiring into the working of the factories and workshops acts with an eye to consolidating the measures. An account of one witness, Dr. Fergusson of Bolton in Lancashire (a certifying surgeon under the Factory Act), received particularly wide publicity.¹⁰⁰ He told the commissioners that he had kept an accurate record of all the children who were officially brought to his notice. When certifying children who were unfit for work but who had reached the required age threshold, Fergusson was in the habit of noting down a child’s exact weight and physical condition. On watching such children, he found that the lapse of time brought little or no improvement to their physical health; at the end of six months, many of his subjects had not increased in weight and some had decreased, in his opinion, because they were overtaxed. He concluded that fulltime work stunted children’s growth, impaired their strength, and probably shortened their lives. Equally alarmingly, he suggested that the number of those who were physically unfit for full-time work was steadily increasing: of all the children he examined between 1868 and 1873, only one half were now fit to work full-time. Sending children to work too early, he implied, could have devastating economic impact on tomorrow’s workforce, as the young either died early or were permanently enfeebled before reaching their full capacity. Given this intensive period of British legislative activity on child labour—regularly reported in the Australian press—Suttor’s initiative can be understood as part of a broader imperial conversation about industrial working conditions, with colonial legislators addressing similar concerns in their own jurisdictions.

Further evidence of British influence on Suttor lies in his committee’s focus on children’s health and morals, directly paralleling the concerns raised in the aforementioned British government inquiries. The practice of recording the committee’s proceedings in Britain at this

⁹⁹ “Children in English Brickyards,” *Goulburn Herald and Chronicle*, November 18, 1871, 8; “The Brickfields of England,” *Freeman’s Journal*, October 21, 1871, 4.

¹⁰⁰ “Degeneracy of the Artisan,” *SMH*, September 4, 1875, 10; “Degeneration of Children in England,” *Clarence and Richmond Examiner and New England Advertiser*, September 28, 1875, 7; “Food of the Young,” *Burrangong Argus*, September 29, 1875, 4; “Factory Workers,” *SMH*, November 9, 1875, 5.

time, however, was different from the practice followed in NSW. In Britain, committees prepared lengthy, detailed reports that ran to thirty or forty pages, followed by minutes of evidence taken during interviews with witnesses of another hundred or more pages. These minutes, however, contained only the witnesses' responses, not the questions they were asked. In NSW, by contrast, select committee reports tended to be short—two-three pages long—and followed by a transcript of both the questions asked and the responses received. Due to this difference, it is not possible to see the language British investigators used to probe their concerns. But given that the British committees devoted considerable space in their reports to issues of children's health and morals, it is clear that similar concerns motivated their investigations. The *Commission on Bleach and Dye Works* (1854-55), for example, was keen to know how long hours of work affected the health of youths and if the employees of these factories were morally sound.¹⁰¹ The *Commission on the State of Children Employed in Lace Manufacture* (1861) was similarly worried about work being physically injurious to the young.¹⁰² Additionally, they felt unease about child labourers missing out on school, or escaping parental oversight in ways that could enable immoral behaviour. Similarly, reports issued by the *Commission on the Employment of Children and Young Persons in Trades and Manufactures not Already Regulated by Law* (1862-1867) demonstrate that the inquirers assigned great importance to child employees' health, morals, and education.¹⁰³ The end result of all these investigations was restrictions of various degrees imposed on child labour in Britain, the same goal Suttor pursued in launching his investigation into the harmful effects of child labour in factories.

Developments within Australia might also have influenced Suttor's attempt to legislate against child labour in NSW. The passage of the *Supervision of Workrooms and Factories Statute* (1873)

¹⁰¹ *Report of the Commissioner Appointed to Inquire How Far it May be Advisable to Extend the Provisions of the Acts for the Better Regulation of Mills and Factories to Bleaching Works Established in Certain Parts of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland* (London: George Edward Eyre and William Spottiswoode, 1855), vi.

¹⁰² *Report Addressed to her Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for the Home Department, upon the Expediency of Subjecting the Lace Manufacture to the Regulations of the Factory Acts* (London: George Edward Eyre and William Spottiswoode, 1861), 466.

¹⁰³ Children's Employment Commission, *Children's Employment Commission, First Report of the Commissioners with Appendix* (London: George Edward Eyre and William Spottiswoode, 1863), xvi-xxix.

in Victoria—Australia’s first factory act—could have been one of them. Historian Jim Hagan identified three forces that helped produce this legislation: regular articles in the *Ballarat Courier* informing its readers about the working conditions of youths in that town’s clothing factories; the work of the Early Closing Association, whose primary goal was to have all sewing women’s working hours reduced; and the support of John Parry, who owned a large clothing manufactory but apparently helped co-author the bill in league with a number of other factory owners.¹⁰⁴ The bill banned the labour of all youth under thirteen and limited the working hours for everyone under sixteen to eight and a half hours a day. In addition, a letter written to the *Sydney Morning Herald* in early December 1875 by a writer who claimed to be a thirteen-year-old boy employed in a brickyard might have offered Suttor additional impetus to inquire into children’s employment. The letter was published on December 6, almost a week before Suttor made his motion. In this letter, the anonymous writer referred to the clause in the Coal Fields Regulation Act (1862) forbidding child labour under age thirteen and pleaded with the government to intervene on behalf of boys and girls employed in brickyards as well. He argued that he and other pugger-ups (carriers of clay) worked twelve hours a day and had to walk long distances half of the time carrying heavy bricks. This, he maintained, led to their constitutions being “completely ruined.”¹⁰⁵ Suttor’s push for child labour reform in NSW was thus likely shaped by both British and local developments, as seen in media coverage and advocacy efforts.

Finally, as industrialization grew in NSW, bringing more families into factory work out of economic necessity and making child labour increasingly common, Suttor likely became more alert to concerns that factory work was damaging to the health and morals of children. It is known that in the period from 1860 to 1890 manufacturing’s share of the colony’s total productive output increased, although the size of that increase remains a point of contention. Historian N.G. Butlin

¹⁰⁴ J. Hagan, “Employers, Trade Unions and the First Victorian Factory Acts,” *Labour History*, no. 7 (November 1964):3-9

¹⁰⁵ “Boys in Coal Mines and Boys in Brickyards,” *SMH*, December 6, 1875, 3.

states that manufacturing grew from 4-5 percent in 1861 to 10-11 percent in 1891, whereas Allan Thompson suggests that manufacturing's share rose to as high as to 15% in 1891.¹⁰⁶ Either way, the rise in manufacturing likely made Suttor more receptive to alarming reports about workers' conditions in industrialized Britain.

Influenced by British parliamentary inquiries, developments in neighbouring Victoria, and NSW's growing industrialization, Suttor and his committee were most anxious to learn how working at a young age affected children's health. Before inquiring directly into this concern, the committee sought to learn about the working lives of young factory employees. They probed the age at which children entered industrial employment, the number of hours they worked, the nature of that work, and whether it was laborious.¹⁰⁷ This usually prompted a brief summary of what children did and a statement that children worked between ten and twelve hours, on a par with adults.¹⁰⁸ Whether children had a break during their working day and the length of such breaks was also a matter of interest.¹⁰⁹ Soon afterwards, committee members invariably queried whether witnesses had noticed any distressing effect of work upon children, posing such questions as: "From your experience, what effect has this kind of work upon the children—I mean physically?"¹¹⁰ Working on a sewing machine was considered a particular danger to girls, indicated by queries like: "Do you think working the machine has an injurious effect upon the health?"¹¹¹ or "Did you ever hear of the machines affecting the girls' spines or injuring their health in any way?"¹¹² Most witnesses maintained that factory labour had no ill effects on the young, but there were a few dissenting voices. Teacher Richard William Guille, for example, saw no significant

¹⁰⁶ N.G. Butlin, *Investment in Australian Economic Development, 1861-1900* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1972), 196 and Allan Thompson, "The Enigma of Australian Manufacturing, 1851-1901," *Australian Economic Papers*, vol. 9. iss. 14 (June 1970): 76-92, here 83.

¹⁰⁷ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 881, 884, 888-889, 909-910.

¹⁰⁸ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 881, 910.

¹⁰⁹ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 881, 904.

¹¹⁰ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 882-883, 885-886, 888-889, 892, 894-895.

¹¹¹ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 901.

¹¹² NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 903.

changes in students returning from factory work.¹¹³ In contrast, brickmaker James Cook observed that carrying heavy clay caused weakness in young children's knees.¹¹⁴

The 1875 select committee did not entirely rely on the opinions of laymen in the matter of children's health, but also sought professional insight by inviting Arthur Renwick, a medical practitioner, to testify. In this, the select committee of 1875 was different from the one appointed in the early 1860s to investigate the prospect of restricting child labour in coal pits, among other issues; back then, legislators did not seek medical expertise. The 1875 committee wanted to know Renwick's general opinion on how hard labour affected labourers younger than fourteen.¹¹⁵ The answer was far from reassuring; Renwick testified that such labour "stunts the growth of these children very much that they attain manhood and maturity much sooner than they should; that they live too fast and die long before they should or would under ordinarily healthy conditions."¹¹⁶ Legislators sought Renwick's medical opinion on the same sewing machine concerns they had raised with lay witnesses: the health effects of pedal sewing machines on young female workers, particularly given reports linking them to uterine diseases.¹¹⁷ When Renwick affirmed these fears, Suttor followed up by asking whether prolonged machine use could harm women's health, impact future generations, and contribute to infertility.¹¹⁸ Committeemen also inquired whether standing for long hours, operating sewing machines, or working up to twelve hours a day was detrimental to children's constitutions and whether air circulation was especially important in Australia's climate.¹¹⁹ Through this comprehensive medical testimony, the committee established a local

¹¹³ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 885.

¹¹⁴ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 882.

¹¹⁵ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 916.

¹¹⁶ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 917.

¹¹⁷ Karen Offen, "Powered by a Woman's Foot: A Documentary Introduction to the Sexual Politics of the Sewing Machine in Nineteenth Century France," *Women's Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2 (1988): 93-101, here 94; "Scientific and Useful," *Leader*, November 3, 1866, 20; "On Sewing Machines," *Illustrated Sydney News and New South Wales Agriculturalist and Grazier*, June 23, 1874, 15.

¹¹⁸ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 916, 918.

¹¹⁹ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 916, 918.

scientific foundation for their concerns about child labour, providing homegrown evidence for issues first highlighted in British inquiries.

As the previous chapter noted, by the 1860s, legislators had already been concerned about the perceived harm to children's physical health and the resulting degeneracy caused by industrial work. The 1875 committee not only reinforced these health concerns but also expanded their scope to include work safety, sanitation and hygiene, worried that inadequate facilities could exacerbate the health problems already affecting children in industrial work. Accordingly, legislators' questions focused on air quality and the provision of handwashing facilities and restrooms.¹²⁰ They also conducted firsthand investigations, making detailed notes during factory visits of the size and space of each workplace and how many workers it encompassed, as well as the amount of light.¹²¹ This focus on sanitary conditions reflected broader contemporary developments, as significant advancements in public health and hygiene were occurring in Britain during the same period, influencing the questions raised and opinions shared during investigations in both locales.

Growing alarm among British elites about the relationship between urban poverty, disease, and social instability led to the creation of the first systematic state intervention in public health. Specifically, in the first half of the nineteenth century in Britain, social elites began to fear that increasing levels of poverty were a burden that could demoralise the population, and, most alarmingly, generate political and social instability.¹²² In searching for ways to relieve poverty, the British state found that the problem of destitution among the urban working class was related to disease. Industrialisation endangered health primarily through the massive growth of towns. Demographic explosion in urban areas led to mass overcrowding, inadequate housing, an unprecedented accumulation of human, animal, and industrial waste products, together with rising

¹²⁰ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 891, 898-899, 905, 909.

¹²¹ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 910.

¹²² Dorothy Porter, *Health, Civilization and the State: A History of Public Health from Ancient to Modern Times* (London: Routledge, 1999), 110-116.

levels of industrial and domestic atmospheric pollution, and deadly pollution of an already limited water supply. These conditions, in turn, produced dramatic rises in infant mortality, epidemics of diseases like typhoid and typhus, and increased numbers of impoverished orphans, widows, and other dependents. To address the problem of destitution and disease, the British state introduced an interventionist bureaucratic system of health administration. Given the prevailing economic ideology of laissez-faire, the architects of state intervention had to justify their move. They did so by arguing that a large proportion of poverty—and its costs upon individuals, industry and society in general—could be reduced by preventing premature mortality of breadwinners caused by epidemic disease.

The adopted public health policies reflected the thinking of the men who pushed for them. For example, Edwin Chadwick, Sanitation Commissioner of the first General Board of Health, adhered to the dominant miasmatic theory of disease aetiology. The theory held that dirt in air, perhaps, coming from the exhalations and miasmas of dunghills, latrines, and sewers, was harmful to the constitution, as was dirty water or the food produced from animals living in dirty conditions.¹²³ Chadwick's solution focused around the construction of civil engineering works to provide efficient sewage, drainage, and clean water.¹²⁴ His 'sanitary idea' did not go beyond these initiatives. After Chadwick resigned, John Simon came to occupy the post of Britain's chief health administrator. His policy making was influenced by the new concept of 'state medicine.' The concept consisted of preventive and palliative medicine, going beyond dealing with filth in the external urban environment to include unsanitary or unhygienic practices within dwellings, factories, and public buildings. He focused on the spread of infectious disease by contact as well as atmospheric pollution, recommending the isolation of sufferers and their contacts, and

¹²³ Mervyn Susser and Zena Stein, *Eras in Epidemiology: The Evolution of Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 19-20.

¹²⁴ Porter, *Health, Civilization and the State*, 120-121.

systematic disinfection. Simon's promotion of state medicine was based on an acceptance of contagion as a source of disease.

At this time, the theory of contagion was beginning to replace miasma theory as a key to understanding disease transmission. Starting from the 1830s several important discoveries were made in various countries dealing with the origin of epidemic diseases, including the work of Louis Pasteur.¹²⁵ They all pointed to there being a living matter responsible for diseases such as measles, puerperal fever, and cholera. The works gave weight to the idea that infection was transmissible from person to person whether by direct contact, inhalation, or ingestion. Simon was familiar with one of the important works. In 1863, he read the treatise on childbed fever by Ignac Semmelweis, a doctor of Hungarian origin working in a hospital in Vienna. In this work, Semmelweis demonstrated that the disease was contagious and that its incidence could be drastically reduced by enforcing appropriate hand washing by medical caregivers. According to Simon, Semmelweis's treatise led him to abandon miasmatic theory and focus instead on contagion theory.

Historian Andrew Drew contends that the emphasis on personal hygiene in this period had roots not only in the major advances in medical science, but also in the great cultural changes taking place at the time.¹²⁶ In the second half of the eighteenth century, the nobility began to focus on standards of cleanliness in order to differentiate themselves from the rising middle classes. The requirement for cleanliness extended from outerwear to the layers of clothing closest to the skin, as an 'interiorisation of cleanliness' became a sign of good manners.¹²⁷ In the nineteenth century, middle-class people began to adopt similar standards. Cleanliness, or the lack of it, came to be associated with moral worth or immorality. Having appropriated the manners of the upper classes, the middle classes proceeded to inculcate cleanliness amongst the working classes. Hence, they

¹²⁵ Mervyn Susser and Zena Stein, *Eras in Epidemiology*, 77-88, 108-112.

¹²⁶ Andrew Wear, "The History of Personal Hygiene," in *The Companion Encyclopedia of the History of Medicine* edited by William F. Bynum and Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1993), 1283-1308.

¹²⁷ Wear, "The History of Personal Hygiene," 1300.

built a large number of public bathhouses. Housing, sewerage, and water regulations, too, had the goal of providing the conditions that would enable a personal hygiene. These developments in Britain—both medical advances and the broader cultural transformation that increasingly associated cleanliness with moral respectability—help to explain why the 1875 select committee in NSW showed such a pronounced interest in sanitary conditions in the colony’s factories.

The knowledge of the need to improve sanitation for factory workers could not have come from within. As noted in Chapter One, doctors in NSW were slow to organise in comparison to their British counterparts, and the status as experts was far from secure in the period. It is instructive that the 1861 select committee that looked into the necessity of banning boys’ labour in coal mines did not seek medical advice. That the 1875 select committee invited a doctor—Arthur Renwick—to testify indicates the growing appreciation of medical professionals. Still, the local medical community was not in the position to exercise much influence yet. The first institution in NSW concerned with public health—the Sewerage and Health Board—was created only in 1875.¹²⁸ The earliest pieces of legislation dealing with sanitation were similarly enacted only in the last quarter of the nineteenth century: *The Infectious Diseases Supervision Act* (1881), *The Dairies Supervision Act* (1886) and the first *Public Health Act* (1896).¹²⁹ The interest in the conditions in which the working class people lived, however, long predated these developments in the colony. The appointment of the *Select Committee on the Condition of the Working Classes of the Metropolis* of 1859-60 attests to this. To probe into the subject matter of the inquiry, the committee inspected 1,446 city houses, only 356 of which had water-closets; the committee deplored Sydney’s poor hygiene and the lack of fresh water for domestic use. Thus, just as the appointment of the 1875 select committee into child labour was influenced by relevant developments in Britain, so, too, was the understanding of the need to improve sanitary conditions for factory workers.

¹²⁸ Milton Lewis and Roy Macleod, “A Working Man’s Paradise? Reflections in Urban Mortality in Colonial Australia, 1860-1900,” *Medical History*, (October 1987), vol. 31, no. 4, 387-402, here 393.

¹²⁹ Milton J. Lewis, “Public health in Australia from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century” in *Public Health in Asia and the Pacific: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Milton J. Lewis and Kerrie L. MacPherson (London: Routledge, 2007), 222-249, here 224.

The 1875 committee's investigation into child labour in colonial NSW extended beyond physical well-being to include concerns about education. The committeemen sought to determine whether children engaged in factory labour could read and write and whether they had the energy to attend night school after long working hours.¹³⁰ Additionally, they questioned whether work schedules could be adjusted to allow children to continue their education.¹³¹ One key proposal involved mandating that children under fourteen attend school for at least half the day, raising concerns about whether employers could replace them during their absence.¹³² Legislators worried that without structured education, young workers would cease to learn, leading to intellectual stagnation. To explore this issue, they consulted Richard Guille, a teacher, about the long-term impact of factory work on his former students. They asked whether his former pupils, now adult brickmakers, had shown any intellectual advancement since leaving school as children.¹³³ They further inquired whether there were full-grown workers whose intellectual abilities had remained unchanged over eight to ten years in the trade. This questioning reflected concerns that industrial labour hindered intellectual development, reinforcing fears of working-class degeneration—an issue that, as we have seen, previously led to strict laws limiting child labour in coal mines.

Another factor driving colonial authorities to prioritise youth education in the 1870s was the poor state of schooling and the growing need for an educated workforce and citizenry. Despite the 1866 Public Education Act, which replaced two education boards with a single Council of Education to oversee and regulate schools, education in the colony remained an unresolved issue.¹³⁴ Many children still attended denominational schools, where quality was inconsistent, and public schools also faced challenges, primarily due to irregular attendance.¹³⁵ Erratic school attendance hindered both individual and collective learning, making it difficult to raise an educated

¹³⁰ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 881-882, 888-892, 894, 927.

¹³¹ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 883, 885, 888-889.

¹³² NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 888, 894.

¹³³ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 886.

¹³⁴ Barcan, *A History of Australian Education*, 112 and Craig Campbell and Helen Proctor, *A History of Australian Schooling* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2014), 80.

¹³⁵ Barcan, *A History of Australian Education*, 130.

population. The urgency of addressing this educational challenge was reinforced by political changes, including the establishment of responsible government and manhood suffrage in 1856, as the previous chapter showed. Educating working-class children became a priority, not only to improve literacy but also to prepare future voters for participation in democracy.¹³⁶ Authorities believed that poorly educated individuals were ill-suited for democratic society. Additionally, during this period, education began to be viewed as crucial for enhancing productivity and economic growth.¹³⁷ The growing awareness of these issues prompted members of the 1875 select committee to investigate the education of child labourers in factories.

The impact of factory employment on children's morals was also a key concern for the committee. Factory owners and adult employees were questioned about young workers' behaviour and whether they were a 'steady set of people.'¹³⁸ Particular concern surrounded tobacco factories, with inquiries into whether child workers smoked or chewed tobacco.¹³⁹ Legislators also worried about the effects of earning wages, fearing that financial independence could lead to reckless spending.¹⁴⁰ They frequently asked whether children or their parents controlled their wages and whether boys spent money in pubs or showed signs of intoxication.¹⁴¹ Additionally, legislators were concerned that unemployed child labourers returning to school might negatively influence their peers who had never been exposed to wage labour or the adult working environment.¹⁴²

Beyond financial and behavioural concerns, the committee was especially troubled by child workers' sexual morality, particularly that of girls. They questioned whether boys and girls worked in the same rooms, socialised, or left factories together.¹⁴³ Concerns extended to the availability of separate restrooms and the potential for workplace relationships leading to immorality.¹⁴⁴ Factory

¹³⁶ Barcan, *A History of Australian Education*, 98; Campbell and Proctor, *A History of Australian Schooling*, 82.

¹³⁷ Campbell and Proctor, *A History of Australian Schooling*, 82.

¹³⁸ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 884, 890, 892, 902.

¹³⁹ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 890, 892, 898.

¹⁴⁰ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 892-894.

¹⁴¹ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 911.

¹⁴² NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 928-929.

¹⁴³ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 890, 897-898, 902, 909.

¹⁴⁴ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 899, 902.

owners, such as William Alderson, were directly asked if boys and girls in their factories formed inappropriate relationships.¹⁴⁵ Legislators' primary focus was on girls, repeatedly inquiring whether factory work led them to 'go astray.'¹⁴⁶ They also explored why girls preferred factory work over domestic service, suspecting that higher wages and free evenings might negatively impact their morality.¹⁴⁷ Additionally, legislators worried that factory work hindered girls' ability to become good housewives, reflecting broader anxieties about how industrial labour affected traditional gender roles.¹⁴⁸ Through these detailed investigations, the committee, it seems, sought to ascertain that factory employment was fundamentally incompatible with the moral development expected of children in colonial NSW.

Parents of young workers, not their circumstances, were held responsible for the latter's early entrance into the industrial workforce. The committee questioned whether children's labour was truly necessary for the family's welfare, leading to inquiries like: "Could the parents of these children employed in the brickyards, out of the wages they themselves earn, afford to keep these children at school by day?" or "Do you know whether many of the parents are dependent on the earnings of their children?"¹⁴⁹ At times, legislators shifted their assumptions from believing that parents could manage without their children's earnings to viewing them as outright greedy and insatiable. The question asked of John Vicar, a proprietor of a tweed factory, proves the point: "Have you any persons employed by you whose parents could afford to send them to school, but who prefer to send them to your factory in order that they may obtain their wages?"¹⁵⁰ Thomas Lewis, Inspector of Collieries, was asked a similar question: "Do you think they are forced to work by their parents against their own wishes?"¹⁵¹ A significant shift is evident here. In the late 1850s to

¹⁴⁵ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 892, 895.

¹⁴⁶ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 897.

¹⁴⁷ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 898, 902.

¹⁴⁸ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 903; Further discussion on traditional gender roles and the significant emphasis on domestic service can be found in Chapter 3.

¹⁴⁹ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 883, 895.

¹⁵⁰ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 904.

¹⁵¹ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 911.

mid-1860s, there was a clear expectation that children from working-class families would work in factories and contribute to the family economy. By the mid-1870s, however, this had evolved into a belief that parents should be able to support their families independently, without sending their children to factories.

Alongside this evolving view of family responsibility, the 1875 inquiry revealed that the assumption that all child workers in factories were apprentices had weakened considerably. Investigators sought to clarify the employment terms of young workers. For instance, brickmaker James Cook was asked if the children on brickfields were indentured apprentices, and tobacco factory owner Douglas Dixon was questioned about whether young workers learned the entire tobacco manufacturing process; both answered negatively.¹⁵² However, some workplaces did employ apprentices, such as Messrs. Wright, Davenport & Co., where male apprentices in the riveting department and female apprentices in the machine room were bound for five and three years, respectively.¹⁵³ By the mid-1870s, legislators ceased to liberally classify children in factories as apprentices, recognising that factory work did not result in skilled or respectable employment—reflecting their diminishing enthusiasm for youth factory employment.

An examination of the questions posed by members of the four select committees reveals a significant shift in attitudes towards youth participation in the factory workforce. In the late 1850s-mid-1860s, the consensus was that more children should work in manufacture and that legislators should devise ways to provide such an opportunity. These sentiments were prompted by the observation that the streets were inundated with homeless children. This situation, it was feared, would have serious consequences for the colony: vagrant boys would become a menace in future while vagrant girls would turn to prostitution. Factory employment was, therefore, seen as a preventive measure, with political leaders championing industrial work for young people as a pathway to character formation and basic technical competency—qualities they believed would

¹⁵² NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 883, 890.

¹⁵³ NSW LA V&P 1875-1876, 900.

reduce criminal behaviour and preserve social harmony. Authentic training programs and meaningful skill development were scarce, yet lawmakers generally dismissed these deficiencies, focusing instead on the perceived benefits of factory labour rather than confronting its real failures to prepare adolescents for adult life. Beyond these social considerations, protectionist politicians also exploited the issue of youth factory employment to justify import duties on foreign goods. In the mid-1870s, the drive to secure manufacturing jobs for as many children as possible gave way to efforts to bar them from factory workplaces entirely. This shift was justified by claims that factory work was damaging to children's health in more ways than one, that it robbed them of education opportunities, and that it was injurious to children's morals. Ironically, while legislators' understandings of the problem shifted considerably— from concern that there were not enough children in factory employment to the concern that children were present among factory employees in any capacity—their interpretation of the tragic outcomes of either proposition remained entirely consistent. Initially, middle-class spokesmen predicted that a lack of factory employment for the young would lead them into lives of crime and immorality; by the 1870s, they held that facilitating such employment would produce the same results.

What can account for such a shift in attitudes towards employing youth in factories in a seemingly short span of time? While only a few years separated the 1859, 1862, and 1866 select committees that promoted child factory employment from the 1875 select committee that opposed it, this brief period witnessed substantial changes. For one, the confrontation between protectionists and free traders substantially eased off. At the same time, the state of manufacturing stabilised and improved. Additionally, several measures—institutions and laws—had been brought into effect to check vagrancy among youth, and the question of schooling continued to loom large on the horizon. What all this meant was that in the mid-1870s it was less pressing to deal with juvenile vagrancy; a lot of steps had been taken to alleviate the problem. Similarly, with free traders securing a decisive victory and manufacturing adapting to free trade terms—even showing first signs of flourishing—the argument that youth employment depended on protecting local

manufacturing lost traction. With fewer local pressures necessitating increased juvenile employment in manufacturing, and with the issue of juvenile factory work no longer being used as justification for tariffs on imported British goods, NSW was able to turn its attention to the harmful effects of factory conditions on children. These detrimental effects had long been documented in British debates on child labour but could now be fully explored and addressed without the competing economic pressures that had previously made child factory work seem necessary. Thus, this chapter demonstrates that the shift in attitudes toward child factory employment between 1850 and 1875—from viewing manufacturing as a desirable institution for shaping colonial youth to seeing it as harmful to children’s welfare—was the result of changing economic and political circumstances that finally allowed known concerns about factory conditions to take precedence over competing local pressures. The classroom, which had already been gaining recognition as the ideal environment for child development, was by 1875 definitively established as the proper place for all working youth, whether employed in factories or coal mines.

The next chapter will explore the rise and eventual decline of a distinctive Australian phenomenon—juvenile industrial exhibitions—at the turn of the nineteenth century. These exhibitions brought together the efforts of numerous middle-class reformers, who, perhaps unintentionally, conveyed a significant shift in societal expectations regarding childhood and work. By emphasising skill development and structured training, they reinforced the notion that children should prioritise education—first through primary schooling and then through technical instruction—before entering the workforce. Although these exhibitions were relatively short-lived, they played a crucial role in shaping public attitudes toward child labour. Notably, they represented an early manifestation of the redefinition of childhood roles outside the legislature. The exhibitions helped solidify the idea that children did not belong in workplaces at a young age but should instead be given the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for future employment, thereby advancing broader educational and labour reforms in NSW.

Chapter Three

Work, Education, and Social Roles: Insights from NSW Juvenile Industrial Exhibitions

In the early stages of child labour reform, lawmakers in NSW had begun taking tentative steps toward regulating child labour, as the previous two chapters reveal. They had already prohibited children under thirteen from working underground in mines and were beginning to question the suitability of factory work for those under fourteen. However, these legal measures were still in their infancy, and it remains unclear whether they significantly influenced broader societal attitudes toward children's place in the workforce. Against this backdrop of developing legal reforms, juvenile industrial exhibitions emerged as a powerful influence, reaching vast audiences and reinforcing the idea that childhood should prioritise education and training over workforce participation.

Juvenile industrial exhibitions arose as part of a broader global trend of industrial and technological showcases. This phenomenon mirrored a growing popularity of such displays in the second half of the nineteenth century, where nations and regions competed to display their industrial innovations, agricultural products, and scientific skills. Taking their lead from London's celebrated Great Exhibition in 1851, countries around the world sought to outdo each other in the lavishness and diversity of their displays. Only in Australia, however, did fair organisers create and sustain a tradition of hosting industrial exhibitions focusing specifically on the work of children.¹ Juvenile industrial exhibitions in Australia emerged primarily to promote technical education, distinguishing themselves from similar movements in other Western nations due to

¹ There were exhibitions by the same or similar name held in Britain and America in the second half of the nineteenth century, but they tended to be either one-off or short-lived events, or regular displays of institutionalised children, for example, inmates of reformatories. "Industrial Exhibition," *Ragged School Union Magazine*, London, vol. 13, iss. 149, May 1861, 110-112; "Industrial Exhibition, Albert Street Ragged School," *Ragged School Union Magazine*, London, March 1869, 60-61; "Wakefield Exhibition of Industrial and Fine Art," *Art Journal*, London, iss. 46, October 1865, 311-312; "Clerkenwell Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *Standard*, London, November 2, 1865, 2; "Praise for the Young People: Satisfactory Result of the Children's Industrial Exhibition," *New York Times*, April 7, 1886, 2.

specific local factors. In NSW, a strong anti-elitist sentiment and commitment to reducing class distinctions drove interest in equipping the working class with skills necessary for survival in a competitive economy. Additionally, Australia's less developed industrial sector, focused on consumer goods like textiles and food, relied on cheap, unskilled labour, offering limited technical training opportunities. This gap led to the need for alternative vocational education, making juvenile industrial exhibitions a unique and popular way to promote technical education.

Juvenile industrial exhibitions spanned around three decades from the late 1870s to the early 1900s, during which various middle-class organisers across multiple colonies dedicated significant effort to showcasing the work of Australian youth, including Aboriginal children and those with disabilities. Besides promoting education and technical training, these exhibitions were organised for a variety of other purposes. Organisers were seeking to solve a wide range of perceived or real problems facing Australia at this point. Some organisers thought that the exhibitions would lend support to the movement for technical education, thereby ameliorating the larrikinism allegedly widespread among Australian youth. Others wanted to demonstrate that Australian children were as capable as those of other nations; and, especially, to raise a generation happy with their lot and thus unlikely to engage in militant labour activities. While addressing all these and many other issues, the organisers were unwittingly negotiating the perimeter of permissible children's work at a time when child labour was increasingly frowned upon, and, in some industries, becoming legally banned.

During the rise of juvenile industrial exhibitions in NSW, primary education and technical learning became priorities, while unskilled wage work for children was increasingly discouraged, reflecting a shift in societal expectations for youth development. These exhibitions, from their inception, emphasised academic activities such as spelling bees, dictations, recitations, and map-making, positioning schooling as an integral part of children's work. Middle-class organisers also emphasised the importance of pursuing technical education after completing school, rather than immediately joining the workforce. As a result, these exhibitions highlighted that children under

the age of twenty-one were no longer expected to be gainfully employed but were instead encouraged to focus on academic or industrial learning. An article from the 1883 juvenile exhibition in Parramatta underscored this, stating that for youth “to be fitted for the contest in his manhood, he must forge the armour in his childhood.”² This shift signalled the ongoing redefinition of non-elite youth’s roles, with juvenile industrial exhibitions reinforcing the idea that education should take precedence over early workforce participation.

* * * *

During the colonial and early federation periods, Australia witnessed the rise of events known as Juvenile Industrial Exhibitions that showcased the talents, skills, and ingenuity of children. The earliest juvenile industrial exhibition in NSW was held in Grenfell in 1877. The neighbouring colony of Victoria followed suit, hosting an exhibition under the same name in Ballarat in 1878. As the exhibitions took place in close succession, a disagreement arose over which town first conceived the idea for a children’s exhibition.³ Chronologically, Grenfell was undoubtedly first. However, the Ballarat exhibition could also be considered the first of its kind because it was an entirely unprecedented type of juvenile exhibition. The reason these two events differed, despite having the same name, lies in how their organisers interpreted the word “industrial”. Reverend F.S. Wilson, who organised the Grenfell exhibition, used “industrial” to mean “industrious” or “hardworking”. In contrast, Richard Bannister, the organiser of the Ballarat exhibition, used the term in its more conventional sense, referring to manufacturing industry, activities, and results.

The timing of these exhibitions in Australian colonies was not coincidental. The second half of the nineteenth century was after all considered to be the golden age of industrial exhibitions. These did not begin with the 1851 Great Exhibition in London (also known as the Crystal Palace

² “The Parramatta Intercolonial Juvenile Exhibition,” *Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*, November 10, 1883, 894.

³ “Grenfell Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *Grenfell Record and Lachlan District Advertiser*, August 4, 1877, 2.

Exhibition), although this event significantly boosted their popularity. Industrial exhibitions had already been held in countries like France, Austria, Germany, and Britain since the eighteenth century, and by the early nineteenth century, they were common in Britain, typically organised by Mechanics' Institutes.⁴ After the Crystal Palace Exhibition, industrial exhibitions became larger and more frequent. Between 1851 and 1893, there were about thirty-nine major international industrial expositions globally.⁵ London hosted several international exhibitions in the nineteenth century, including specialised and Empire-focused events.⁶ Paris held four *expositions universelles*, and the United States hosted two major exhibitions in Philadelphia in 1876 and Chicago in 1893. Australia entered the scene with the Sydney International Exhibition in 1879, although it had been contributing exhibits to international events since 1851.⁷ Prior to shipping exhibits abroad, Australia sometimes held intercolonial exhibitions to select the best specimens, as seen with Melbourne's 1854 exhibition for the 1855 Paris Exposition Universelles.

Industrial exhibitions drew heavily from markets, fairs, and other traditional commercial activities but differed in their educational focus and the awarding of prizes. According to historian Elsbeth Heaman, fairs and markets were primarily commercial, whereas exhibitions aimed to educate and reward excellence.⁸ The practice of prize-giving originated from both turf societies, which awarded prizes for the best racehorses, cattle, and sheep, and learned societies of the Enlightenment, which awarded prizes for the best essays or practical innovations.⁹ This emphasis on education and recognition set industrial exhibitions apart from traditional commercial fairs.

⁴ Richard Daniel Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 456; Toshio Kusamitsu, "Great Exhibitions Before 1851," *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 9, iss. 1 (Spring 1980):70-89, here 70 and A.C. Davies, "The First Irish Industrial Exhibition: Cork, 1852," *Journal of the Economic and Social History Society of Ireland*, vol. 2 (June 1975): 46-59, here 48.

⁵ John E. Findling and Kimberley D. Pelle, *Historical Dictionary of World's Fairs and Expositions, 1851-1988* (New York, NY: Greenwood Press, 1990): 382-402.

⁶ Findling and Pelle, *Historical Dictionary of World's Fairs and Expositions, 1851-1988*, 45.

⁷ Louise Douglas, "Representing Colonial Australia at British, American and European International Exhibitions," *reCollections: Journal of the National Museum of Australia*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2008): 13-32, here 14.

⁸ Elsbeth Heaman, *The Inglorious Arts of Peace: Exhibitions in Canadian Society during the Nineteenth Century* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press Inc., 1999), 12.

⁹ Heaman, *The Inglorious Arts of Peace*, 12.

Exhibitions in the nineteenth century embodied Enlightenment theories of human nature and progress, emphasising self-interested economic development, empiricism, and public opinion. Philosophers like Hobbes, Hume, and Montesquieu argued that human competitiveness could be harnessed for public good and national prosperity. This led to the idea of exhibitions, which aimed to cultivate new aspirations by promising participants both monetary rewards and public recognition, appealing to their desire for distinction. Exhibitions also aimed to shape public opinion. The era saw a new notion of “the public” driven by a belief in human reason, the spread of print culture, and mass literacy. Revolutions in Haiti, France, and America had made it clear that elites could no longer ignore the masses. Instead, social elites sought to influence public opinion and culture by awarding prizes for exhibits, encouraging behaviour that aligned with their values. This was a shift from earlier times when elites tried to prevent imitation. In this new age, the rising middle classes instead promoted the idea that anyone could succeed with effort, furthering social mobility. Knowledge and vision were central to exhibitions, reflecting Enlightenment ideas that knowledge was acquired through reason and observation. John Locke’s notion that understanding required comparison was embodied in exhibitions, where similar objects were displayed side by side for better understanding. This method provided accessible knowledge to visitors, who absorbed information primarily through sight. Influential thinkers of the time praised the benefits of visual knowledge transmission.¹⁰ In short, by the time Australia began showcasing children’s work, exhibitions had already been associated with economic and industrial progress, the shaping of social behaviour through visual inspection, and promoting skilful industriousness and competition to mitigate social discord.

The juvenile industrial exhibition held in Grenfell in 1877 had a lengthy title—the Colonial Juvenile Loan and Competitive Exhibition—but was more commonly referred to as the Juvenile

¹⁰ Heaman, *The Inglorious Arts of Peace*, 10-22.

Industrial Exhibition.¹¹ Rev. Wilson of Holy Trinity Anglican Church, in a letter published in various colonial newspapers, claimed that he had conceived the idea of organising an event to showcase the talents of colonial youths as early as 1875. Since then, he diligently pursued this ambition until its realisation.¹² The exhibition he envisioned went for three days, starting on November 6, 1877, and was held at the Old Fellow's Hall located at the heart of the town.¹³ Four hundred and fifty exhibits were placed on display, with two hundred and fifty of them being competitive.¹⁴ Both boys and girls contributed material; the youngest participant was seven years old, while the oldest was aged fifteen. According to contemporary commentators, at least one thousand and four hundred people visited the exhibition, which was proclaimed an immediate success.¹⁵

The exhibits at the Grenfell juvenile industrial exhibition were not too dissimilar to those routinely displayed at the exhibitions of schoolwork organised by schools in this period. The bulk of Grenfell exhibits consisted of specimens demonstrating children's scholarly achievements (ornamental penmanship, writing, reading, recitation, drawing, playing music and singing), girls' mastery of needles of different kinds (embroidery, crochetwork, patchwork, braiding, fancy work in different fabrics, etc.) and their cooking skills (breads, preserves, cakes).¹⁶ The only manufactured item at the exhibition came from an apprentice bootmaker named James Young. A regular exhibition of schoolwork, too, displayed items that demonstrated colonial children's

¹¹ "Grenfell Grand Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *Grenfell Record and Lachlan District Advertiser*, November 17, 1877, 4.

¹² "Grenfell Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *Grenfell Record and Lachlan District Advertiser*, August 4, 1877, 2.

¹³ "Grenfell," *Wagga Wagga Advertiser*, November 14, 1877, 2; Stephen Pile and Hillarie Lindsay, *Grenfell Sketchbook* (Adelaide: Riby Limited, 1977), 38.

¹⁴ "Grenfell Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *Grenfell Record and Lachlan District Advertiser*, November 17, 1877, 2.

¹⁵ William A. Bayley, *Golden Granary: The History of Grenfell and the Weddin Shire New South Wales* (Sydney, NSW: Halstead Press Pty Ltd, 1954), 42.

¹⁶ "The Juvenile Industrial Exhibition at Grenfell," *SMH*, November 14, 1877, 7; "Grenfell Grand Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *Grenfell Record and Lachlan District Advertiser*, November 17, 1877, 4.

academic prowess and household skills. Wallsend Public School exhibition is one of many such exhibitions.¹⁷

The inspiration behind Rev. Wilson's decision to hold a juvenile industrial exhibition in Grenfell remains uncertain. Historical context might offer some clues, however. Located in central NSW, Grenfell was a young town in 1877, having been established only ten years earlier. It had rapidly transformed from an unnamed sheep run into a bustling town with houses, stores, hotels, a hospital, a school, and numerous churches.¹⁸ This transformation was spurred by the discovery of gold in 1866, attracting large groups of miners from nearby gold mining centres like Lambing Flats and Forbes. Grenfell was officially proclaimed on January 1, 1867, named after Gold Commissioner John Granville Grenfell.¹⁹ During the late 1860s, Grenfell's goldfields were the richest in NSW, producing over 40,000 ounces of gold annually. Initially, Grenfell's economy centered around industries supporting gold mining and transport, including blacksmiths, wheelwrights, sawmills, iron foundries, a tannery, drink manufacturing, and various shops and businesses.²⁰ However, the decade when Rev. Wilson planned the exhibition was marked by decline. By 1870, easily accessible gold deposits had been exhausted, leading to a population decrease. By 1873, Grenfell's population had dwindled to 3,000, with only 1,250 residing in the town itself. This decline resulted in the suspension of many services, the closure of institutions like the hospital, and the abandonment of houses.²¹

Rev. Wilson's Juvenile Industrial Exhibition in Grenfell during the 1870s may have been a calculated initiative to retain population and secure funds for the new church amidst significant economic challenges. Retaining the remaining population was crucial for Wilson since his stipend and long-term viability as a clergyman depended on the town's size. Following the cessation of

¹⁷ "Wallsend Public School Exhibition," *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, May 13, 1878, 2; "School Work," *Australian Town and Country Journal*, April 29, 1876, 7.

¹⁸ Bayley, *Golden Granary*, 20.

¹⁹ Thomas G. Cottome, *Letters from Grenfell: From a New South Wales Goldminer in the 1870s* (Sydney, NSW: Sydney University Press, 1971), 7, 11.

²⁰ Bayley, *Golden: Granary*, 23, 38.

²¹ Cottome, *Letters from Grenfell*, 23-24.

state aid to churches in NSW in 1867, church funding relied heavily on local economies.²² Wilson's exhibition could have been a strategic effort to teach children industriousness and the virtues of labour, thereby supporting the local economy and ensuring the church's survival. Additionally, Wilson may have had immediate financial needs. Most juvenile industrial exhibitions in NSW were organised to raise funds, whether for paying off loans, completing buildings, or supporting charitable institutions.²³ The history of the Holy Trinity Church in Grenfell supports this theory. In 1877, tenders were called for a new church to replace the original wooden structure built in 1867, with the foundation stone laid in May and replaced in January 1878. The church officially opened in February 1879.²⁴ The construction of a new church, combined with the financial strain from the lack of state aid, suggests that Rev. Wilson might have seen the exhibition as a fundraising opportunity for the new church. His request for donations on the day the foundation stone was laid further indicates the financial urgency.²⁵ Thus, Rev. Wilson's juvenile industrial exhibition likely served as an attempt to stabilise the town's population and secure necessary funds for the new church amidst challenging economic conditions.

Rev. Wilson was probably also driven by his participation in the temperance movement and his conviction in educating youth about abstinence early on. As the president of the local branch of the Church of England Temperance Association, Rev. Wilson was committed to the temperance cause, which had gained traction in Australia in the 1830s after spreading from Britain and America. The movement generally opposed the consumption of spirits, though some members advocated for total abstinence from all alcohol.²⁶ The Church of England initially hesitated to embrace the temperance cause but eventually formed its own temperance society in

²² Bruce Kaye, *Anglicanism in Australia: A History* (Melbourne, Vic.: Melbourne University Publishing, 2002), 61.

²³ "Annual Meeting," *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, February 15, 1882, 2; "Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *Cumberland Mercury*, August 18, 1883, 4; "The National Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *Town and Country Journal*, January 19, 1901, 7.

²⁴ Bayley, *Golden Granary*, 32-33.

²⁵ "Church of England—Laying the Foundation-stone of the New Building," *Grenfell Record and Lachlan District Advertiser*, May 26, 1877, 2.

²⁶ Kaye, *Anglicanism in Australia*, 25.

the 1870s, with the NSW branch established in 1874.²⁷ Rev. Wilson was a staunch advocate for complete abstinence and believed that inculcating these principles from a young age was crucial.²⁸ He promoted the formation of a juvenile branch of the Temperance Association, aligning with the prevalent belief among temperance supporters that children, being impressionable and inexperienced with alcohol, were ideal candidates for lifelong temperance pledges.²⁹ This conviction may also have underpinned the idea of the Grenfell Juvenile Industrial Exhibition.

Historian Lilian Shiman's research supports the notion that temperance reformers often focused on children, creating recreational clubs to provide alternatives to alcohol-related activities. By engaging children in wholesome pastimes, they hoped to foster resilience against alcohol temptation in adulthood.³⁰ Newspaper reports on Grenfell's Temperance Association meetings reveal that Rev. Wilson consistently prioritised children's entertainment, reflecting this broader strategy. On one occasion, to capture the children's interest, he drew diagrams to depict some of the "incongruous titles" he had observed hotelkeepers using for their establishments. For example, to illustrate "Welcome In," he drew a picture of a spider's web with a landlord in the center and several flies hovering around. If he could not provide amusement, Rev. Wilson would apologise to children profusely and promise to make up for it next time. The Grenfell Juvenile Industrial Exhibition can be seen as an extension of these efforts. During a meeting on November 25, 1876, when a prize for a temperance-themed essay competition was suggested, Rev. Wilson hinted at a more ambitious project, which likely evolved into the exhibition.³¹ This event not only aimed to

²⁷ Lilian Lewis Shiman, *Crusade Against Drink in Victorian England* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1988), 45 and 53; "New South Wales Church of England Temperance Society," *SMH*, July 14, 1874, 5; Ross Fitzgerald and Trevor L. Jordan, *Under the Influence: A History of Alcohol in Australia* (Sydney, NSW: HarperCollins Publishers Australia Pty Limited, 2009), 152.

²⁸ "Church of England Temperance Society," *Grenfell Record and Lachlan District Advertiser*, October 14, 1876, 2; "Temperance Society," *Mining Record and Grenfell General Advertiser*, September 18, 1875, 2.

²⁹ "Temperance Society," *Mining Record and Grenfell General Advertiser*, September 18, 1875, 2; Fitzgerald and Jordan, *Under the Influence*, 153-54.

³⁰ Shiman, *Crusade Against Drink in Victorian England*, 241.

³¹ "Church of England Temperance Association," *Grenfell Record and Lachlan District Advertiser*, November 25, 1876, 2.

showcase children's talents and skills but also served as a platform to promote temperance values subtly.

The other early juvenile industrial exhibition in Australia also took place in a gold town—Ballarat, a city in central Victoria on the Yarrowee River. The exhibition opened on February 15, 1878, and ran for fifteen weeks till June 1, 1878. During this period about 160 000 people attended the Alfred Hall where the exhibition was staged.³² According to the organisers, large attendance was owing to the Minister of Railways granting concessions that allowed the children in the state schools throughout the colony to visit the exhibition at cheap fares. Two thousand one hundred fifty-three boys and girls participated in the exhibition having altogether sent in five thousand one hundred exhibits.³³

The Ballarat exhibition in Victoria featured a diverse range of exhibits categorised into twenty-four classes. These included:

1. Machinery: mining, agricultural implements, models of machines and mines.
2. Vehicles: carriages and models.
3. Building materials: decorations, building models.
4. Furniture: household items in wood, inlaying, basketry.
5. Leather goods: harnesses, skins, boots, and shoes.
6. Men's clothing: hats and other apparel.
7. Women's clothing: dresses, millinery, children's clothing, needlework.
8. Ornamental work: wax, paper, feathers, wool, leather crafts.
9. Food items: confectionery, jams.
10. Instruments: philosophical, mathematical, cutlery, tools.
11. Musical instruments and compositions.
12. Boats: models and life-saving apparatus.

³² "Closing of the Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *Geelong Advertiser*, June 4, 1878, 4.

³³ "Closing of the Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *Geelong Advertiser*, June 4, 1878, 4.

13. Fine arts: painting, drawing, sculpture, printing, photography.
14. Jewellery: watches, clocks, ornaments.
15. Metalwork: brass, copper, zinc, iron castings.
16. Glass and pottery.
17. Toys: made from various materials.
18. Pot plants and seeds.
19. Natural collections: shells, ferns, mosses, animals, insects.
20. Carvings: stone, marble, ivory, bone, metal.
21. Textiles: fabrics, silk, wool, ropes, brushware.
22. Mineralogical collections: chemicals, dyes, fertilisers.
23. Written works: essays, poems, compositions.
24. Miscellaneous items.³⁴

These categories indicate that the main focus of the exhibition was to showcase children's industrial achievements, which made up the bulk of the exhibits sought. The organisers of the Ballarat exhibition did not emphasise schoolwork, as "written works" was listed last. This contrasts with the Grenfell exhibition, where schoolwork took precedence.

Robert Dixon Bannister was the mastermind behind the Juvenile Industrial Exhibition in Ballarat, an event he had allegedly long envisioned but only found the right moment to propose in June 1877, during a meeting at the Mechanics' Institute in Ballarat.³⁵ His long-standing involvement with children's education and the temperance movement, similar to Rev. Wilson's, likely motivated him to organise an exhibition for child participants. Bannister's enduring commitment to children's welfare is evident in his early advocacy for juvenile temperance. He co-founded the Band of Hope movement in England as early as 1841 and continued his efforts after

³⁴ Charles J. Richardson, *Australian Juvenile Industrial Exhibition, Ballarat, 1878: Official Record*, 10-11.

³⁵ "Australian Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *Age*, December 15, 1877, 6.

moving to the colonies in 1854.³⁶ His interest in children extended beyond temperance, as demonstrated by his lecture to a group of women on proper infant care and nutrition.³⁷ To contextualise, Bannister was a professional lecturer regularly invited to speak at Mechanics' Institutes and many other organisations in the ten year period from 1865 to 1875 when he worked as a travelling agent for the Australian Mutual Provident Society, a non-profit life insurance company and mutual society.³⁸ His lectures on various popular subjects were instrumental in persuading people to subscribe to life assurance, showcasing his ability to engage and mobilise audiences effectively. Bannister's multifaceted engagement with educational and social issues positioned him uniquely to conceive and champion the Juvenile Industrial Exhibition in Ballarat.

Bannister's association with the Mechanics' Institutes and his role as a frequent lecturer, likely influenced his decision to organise the 1878 Ballarat Juvenile Industrial Exhibition. These institutes, originating in Britain, aimed to educate adult mechanics and tradesmen in scientific principles, addressing skill shortages exacerbated by industrial growth that rendered traditional apprenticeships obsolete.³⁹ In Australia, Mechanic's Institutes were widespread, with over two thousand nationwide by the late nineteenth century. The early formation and proliferation of Mechanics' Institutes in Australia, despite the lack of an industrialised society, can be attributed to the influence of first-generation colonists who had been members of British institutes and their strong belief in the power of science.⁴⁰ In Victoria, the discovery of gold fuelled the growth of these institutes, which provided a sense of propriety and stability to settlements around the

³⁶ "Sydney International Exhibition, 1879-1880," *Illustrated Sydney News and New South Wales Agriculturalist and Grazier*, November 29, 1879, 22 and "Temperance Lectures," *Newcastle Chronicle*, September 24, 1868, 3.

³⁷ "Nurses and Doctors; Ancient and Modern," *Border Watch*, June 21, 1871, 2.

³⁸ "Sydney International Exhibition, 1879-1880," *Illustrated Sydney News and New South Wales Agriculturalist and Grazier*, November 29, 1879, 22; "Good Old Times, and Modern Progress," *Border Watch*, May 24, 1871, 2; "Town News," *Australasian*, May 11, 1867, 18; "Mr. Bannister's Lecture," *Avoca Mail*, June 5, 1869, 3; "Sandhurst, Monday, Aug 29, 1870," *Bendigo Advertiser*, August 29, 1870, 2.

³⁹ Jeffrey A. Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Nation on Display* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, c1999), 10.

⁴⁰ Stuart Dawson, "Useful Knowledge and Lifelong Learning" in *Rediscovering Mechanics' Institutes: Australian Mechanics' Institutes Conference 2000* (Melbourne, Vic: Local Government Division, Department of Infrastructure, 2000): 25-35, here 29.

goldfields.⁴¹ Though initially focused on science and technology education, Australian Mechanics' Institutes evolved into cultural institutions. They offered intellectual recreation through a variety of activities, including lectures by both local and visiting educators.⁴² In sum, Bannister's connection with Mechanics' Institutes, focused on community education and enrichment, must have inspired and supported his organisation of the juvenile industrial exhibition, aligning with its educational goals.

The history of Ballarat provides further insights into why Bannister conceived of the first juvenile industrial exhibition of its character at this time. Initially settled by shepherders in the late 1830s and early 1840s, Ballarat experienced rapid development following the discovery of rich alluvial gold deposits in August 1851.⁴³ Within a year, approximately 3,500 diggers were mining the Ballarat Goldfields, leading to Ballarat's proclamation as a town in 1852.⁴⁴ Surveyor W.H. Urquhart was tasked with designing the township, which quickly progressed to a municipality by 1855, a borough by 1863, and a city by 1871. However, by the 1860s, the gold reserves in Ballarat East had significantly dwindled. This decline in alluvial mining prompted companies to pursue deeper mining ventures in the west and south of Ballarat, requiring heavy equipment and leading to the establishment of foundries such as the Phoenix Foundry.

Unlike many other gold towns, Ballarat did not fade away as the gold declined. Instead, it maintained a stable population of around 40,000 between 1870 and 1900. Although mining slowed, Ballarat's proximity to the Western and Wimmera districts supported its manufacturing, commercial, and service industries. New enterprises, such as Munro's farm implements and

⁴¹ Sarah Comyn, "Literary Sociability on the Goldfields: The Mechanics' Institute in the Colony of Victoria, 1854–1870," *Journal of Victorian Culture*, vol. 23, iss. 4 (September 2018): 447–462.

⁴² Donald Barker, "Funding Communal Culture: Opportunism and Standardisation of Funding for Mechanics' Institutes in Colonial Victoria," *Australian Library Journal*, vol. 51, no. 3 (2002): 247–257, here 24; P. C. Candy and J. A. Laurent, eds., *Pioneering Culture: Mechanics' Institutes and Schools of Arts in Australia* (Blackwood, SA: Auslib Press, 1994), 11.

⁴³ Weston Bate, *Lucky City: The First Generation at Ballarat, 1851-1901* (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2003), 7–8.

⁴⁴ Bate, *Lucky City*, 25, 30.

McKay's harvester factories, also contributed to the city's economic stability.⁴⁵ In the last three decades of the nineteenth century, Ballarat saw the emergence of various social institutions, including the Old Colonists' Society, the Ballarat Club, and the School of Mines. Unlike Grenfell, which became a ghost town after its gold rush, Ballarat thrived as a bustling city. Therefore, the rationale for holding a juvenile industrial exhibition in Grenfell—to revive industrial development—would not apply to Ballarat.

The inception of the Ballarat juvenile industrial exhibition at this time may be attributed to concerns regarding the growing need for technical education in the colony. In the early 1860s, Victoria experienced a surge of interest in technical education due to the depletion of shallow alluvial gold deposits in Ballarat, leading to a shift towards deep mining that required significant capital investment and mechanisation.⁴⁶ This transition was complicated by an exodus of skilled workers to New Zealand, leaving less capable labour in Ballarat and prompting inefficiencies in mining operations. A Royal Commission in 1862 recommended establishing a School of Mines to address these challenges. Subsequently, the Commission for Promoting Technological and Industrial Instruction was formed in 1869 under S.H. Bindon, emphasising the role of technical education in nation-building, echoing concerns also present in Britain regarding industrial efficiency and standards.

The decline of traditional apprenticeships further underscored the need for technical education. Technological advancements led to a reorganisation of industrial processes, making it impractical to train artisans extensively in all production stages.⁴⁷ Employers still required qualified and skilled workers, but the traditional apprenticeship structure was no longer sufficient. The decline of traditional apprenticeships due to technological changes led to the emergence of two influential groups—the labour movement and employers—who pushed for the creation of

⁴⁵ Bate, *Lucky City*, 190.

⁴⁶ Stephen Murray-Smith, "A History of Technical Education in Australia," (PhD diss., University of Melbourne, 1966), 81-146.

⁴⁷ Murray-Smith, "A History of Technical Education in Australia," 272, 274-286.

institutions offering technical education. These groups had distinct reasons for promoting industrial instruction. The labour movement aimed to provide universal education for all colonial children, believing that technical education was crucial for addressing working class issues and criticising existing secondary education institutions for high fees and lack of practical skills. Trade unions also pushed for industrial training to properly train and regulate juvenile labour, concerned that poorly trained young workers were driving down wages and work standards for highly skilled adult workers. Meanwhile, manufacturing interests supported industrial training due to the rapid growth of industry and the cessation of assisted immigration, which heightened the need for skilled workers. These factors likely contributed to the inspiration behind the Ballarat exhibition's focus on industrial training.

The Grenfell and Ballarat juvenile exhibitions set precedents for two types of juvenile industrial exhibitions in NSW over the next three decades. The Grenfell model, typically organised by churches, centered on local children's schoolwork and housework. In contrast, the Ballarat model was run by those affiliated with Schools of Arts or youth institutions and was grander, often involving the entire colony and/or neighbouring colonies.⁴⁸ The Grenfell and Ballarat exhibition styles in NSW also differed in focus and frequency. Both exhibition types included displays of academic and domestic achievements, but Ballarat-style exhibitions prioritised showcasing young people's technical skills, as reflected in their prize schedules. Grenfell-style exhibitions were held

⁴⁸ The 1879 Sydney Juvenile Industrial Exhibition was promoted by the Petersham Juvenile Association (a temperance organisation). "Sydney Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, December 24, 1879, 3; The 1881 Bathurst Juvenile Industrial Exhibition was promoted by the local School of Arts, "Bathurst Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *Illustrated Sydney News and New South Wales Agriculturalist and Grazier*, November 26, 1881, 2; The 1883 Parramatta exhibition was, too, organised by a local School of Arts. "Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *Cumberland Mercury*, December 15, 1883, 4. The 1901 exhibition was arranged by Samuel Skeritt, who was associated with the Boys' Brigade (an organisation which used military drill and fun activities to inculcate in children Christian values). "State Children's Relief," *SMH*, August 7, 1903, 3; "Boys' Brigades: How It All Started," *Herald*, December 10, 1901, 2. Only the organiser of the 1891 exhibition, Jules Joubert, was an exception. He, it could be said, was a professional exhibition maker as he was involved in the organisation of a great many exhibitions both in Australia and overseas. Martha Rutledge, "Joubert, Jules François de Sales (1824–1907)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University*, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/joubert-jules-francois-de-sales-3874/text6169>, published first in hardcopy 1972, accessed online December 22, 2019.

more frequently, even becoming annual events in some regions.⁴⁹ In contrast, Ballarat-inspired juvenile exhibitions were less common in NSW, with only five taking place between 1879 and 1901. Thus, the Grenfell and Ballarat models established distinct traditions for juvenile industrial exhibitions, each reflecting different educational priorities.

Although Grenfell-style exhibitions in NSW were more numerous and lasted slightly longer, ending in the late 1900s, this chapter primarily examines the Ballarat model exhibitions. The main reason for this focus is a better documentation of these grander events, which featured up to 20,000 exhibits from beyond the local area, including contributions from other Australian colonies, New Zealand, and Fiji.⁵⁰ The involvement of influential colonials likely contributed to better record-keeping and more comprehensive press coverage.⁵¹ Consequently, the juvenile industrial exhibitions in NSW based on the Ballarat model provide a clearer view of contemporary perspectives on child labour than those following the Grenfell model.

Between 1879 and 1901, NSW hosted five exhibitions modelled after the Ballarat Juvenile Industrial Exhibition: Sydney in 1879, Bathurst in 1881, Parramatta in 1883, and Sydney in 1891

⁴⁹ “Rockwood Industrial Exhibition,” *Cumberland Argus and Fruit growers Advocate*, October 9, 1897, 2; “Juvenile Industrial Exhibition at Rockwood,” *Cumberland Argus and Fruit growers Advocate*, November 16, 1901, 11; “Bankstown Wesleyan Church: Industrial Exhibition,” *Cumberland Argus and Fruit growers Advocate*, October 17, 1896, 2. “Wesleyan Flower Show and Industrial Exhibition,” *Dubbo Liberal and Macquarie Advocate*, November 13, 1897, 2; “The Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *Windsor and Richmond Gazette*, October 14, 1899, 4.

⁵⁰ “The Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *Australian Town and Country Journal*, December 29, 1883, 26; “Young People’s Industrial Exhibition,” *Evening News*, March 9, 1901, 3.

⁵¹ The 1879 Sydney Juvenile Industrial Exhibition, for example, had the support of the Governor, Council of Education and members of the government. “The Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *Evening News*, December 23, 1879, 3. Further, the 1881 Balmain exhibition was opened by the NSW governor, Lord Augustus Loftus. “Balmain Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *Australian Town and Country Journal*, October 22, 1881, 14. The 1881 Bathurst exhibition had Sir Alfred Stephen, Lieutenant Governor, as one of its patrons and it was attended by Ministers Sir John Robertson, Hon. R. Wisdom and many other members of the Parliament on the opening day. “Bathurst Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *Illustrated Sydney News and New South Wales Agriculturalist and Grazier*, November 26, 1881, 2; “Bathurst Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *SMH*, November 3, 1881, 6; The 1883 Parramatta exhibition was again opened by Lord Augustus Loftus and attended by many members of Parliament and prominent citizens. “Intercolonial Juvenile Industrial Exhibition, Parramatta,” *Nepean Times*, December 22, 1883, 4; “The Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *Australian Town and Country Journal*, December 29, 1883, 26; The 1891 exhibition was patronised by the current NSW governor, His Excellency the Earl of Jersey; mayor of Sydney and Minister for Public Instruction, Hon. J.H. Carruthers. “The Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *Evening News*, February 16, 1891, 2.

and 1901. Notably, the 1879 Sydney Juvenile Industrial Exhibition incorporated aspects from both the Grenfell and Ballarat models.⁵² Although it initially aimed to follow the Ballarat model, reports indicate it focused primarily on schoolwork and household skills, with no mechanical contrivances.⁵³ However, it solicited displays from across Sydney, involved youth under twenty-two, and garnered support from prominent colonials, paralleling the Ballarat exhibition's characteristics. The Bathurst exhibition included an auxiliary event in Balmain earlier in 1881. Plans for a major intercolonial juvenile exhibition in Sydney in 1882 were thwarted by a fire at the Garden Palace, which destroyed numerous exhibits, census records, pastoral run records, artworks, library books, and much else besides.⁵⁴ Despite the main event's cancellation, an auxiliary exhibition took place in Lithgow in 1882. While specific classifications for the Balmain and Lithgow exhibits are not documented, press reports indicate they were similar to the Ballarat style, with the key difference being their local focus.⁵⁵

Ballarat style juvenile industrial exhibitions in NSW were mainly organised by prominent men in the community who were often affiliated with Schools of Arts or youth organisations, as mentioned earlier. From the 1830s onward, these Schools' membership increasingly consisted of middle-class professionals—merchants, shopkeepers, clerks, and office workers—a pattern of patronage that later spread to similar institutes in Sydney.⁵⁶ To assist with various tasks, these male organisers sometimes formed a Ladies' Auxiliary Committee, enlisting the help of women to work alongside the main Committee of Management. This practice was common in events like the Bathurst, Parramatta, and Sydney Industrial Juvenile Exhibitions (1881, 1883 and 1901), where

⁵² "Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *Evening News*, June 16, 1879, 3.

⁵³ "Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *SMH*, December 24, 1879, 6; "Sydney Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *SMH*, December 6, 1879, 6; "Sydney Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, December 13, 1879, 5 and "Sydney Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, December 19, 1879, 4.

⁵⁴ "The Garden Palace Fire," *Burrowa News*, October 6, 1882, 4 and "The Garden Palace Burnt to the Ground," *Clarence and Richmond Examiner and New England Advertiser*, September 23, 1882, 4.

⁵⁵ Specimen exhibiting colonial youth's mechanical ingenuity were represented and very much highlighted. "The Balmain Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *SMH*, October 22, 1881, 6; "Lithgow Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *SMH*, November 10, 1882, 3.

⁵⁶ Derek Whitelock, *The Great Tradition: A History of Adult Education in Australia* (St. Lucia, Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1974).

women, often the wives of male organisers, played crucial roles.⁵⁷ For example, Mrs. Rutherford, the wife of the 1881 Bathurst exhibition organiser, was involved. The responsibilities of the Ladies' Auxiliary Committees included advising on matters related to the ladies' department, most likely needlework and cooking, recommending judges for that department, arranging and classifying exhibits, assisting in decorating the exhibition building, and generally advising and suggesting plans to ensure the exhibition's success.⁵⁸ Their involvement was found helpful in managing the logistics and aesthetics of the exhibitions.

Organisers of juvenile industrial exhibitions employed various methods to ensure broad participation and recognition of young talent. Children and parents were notified about an upcoming exhibition in several ways: via circulars sent directly to schools; announcements printed in the press; invitations sent to various institutions (the municipal institutions, schools of arts, reading rooms, etc.) and manufactories; and personal visits of the committee members of the intended exhibitions to the same institutions.⁵⁹ The organisers welcomed, indeed sought after, works of a wide range of children, including the works of Aboriginal youth from missions and inmates of the Institution of the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind and of the Destitute Children's Asylum.⁶⁰ The winners and participants were awarded monetary prizes, certificates, and gold and silver medals.⁶¹ The extensive outreach and inclusive criteria highlighted the exhibitions' commitment to showcasing the diverse skills and contributions of all young participants.

⁵⁷ "The Proposed Juvenile Industrial Exhibition at Bathurst," *Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*, July 2, 1881, 9; "Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *Cumberland Mercury*, August 18, 1883, 4; "Royal Visit: Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *Australian Star*, February 11, 1901, 6.

⁵⁸ "The Proposed Juvenile Industrial Exhibition at Bathurst," *Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*, July 2, 1881, 9; "Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *Cumberland Mercury*, August 18, 1883, 4.

⁵⁹ "Australian Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *Age*, December 15, 1877, 6; "A Juvenile Exhibition," *Evening News*, May 6, 1881, 3; "Bathurst Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *SMH*, November 3, 1881, 6; "Intercolonial Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *SMH*, September 21, 1882, 9; "Sydney Intercolonial Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *Albury Banner and Wodonga Express*, June 16, 1882, 14; "Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *Cumberland Mercury*, August 18, 1883, 4.

⁶⁰ "Young People's Industrial Exhibition," *Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*, June 1, 1901, 1396.

⁶¹ "Australian Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *Age*, December 15, 1877, 6; "Young People's Industrial Exhibition," *Evening News*, March 9, 1901, 3; "Young People's Industrial Exhibition," *Sydney Stock and Station Journal*, March 19, 1901, 4; "Young People's Industrial Exhibition," *Sunday Times*, July 7, 1901, 2.

Significant efforts were made to ensure accessibility and affordability for participants and visitors, with strong support from political elites and influential colonists. To make the delivery of exhibits affordable, organisers often secured assistance from government railways and private companies, allowing for free or reduced-fee transportation of items.⁶² Admission fees were deliberately kept low to attract working-class families, and there were attempts to lower transportation costs for visitors as well.⁶³ Additionally, schools sometimes closed to enable children to attend the exhibitions.⁶⁴ Political elites, including leading politicians, heavily supported these exhibitions. For example, the NSW Premier opened the 1879 Sydney exhibition, and colonial governments provided substantial funding.⁶⁵ Influential colonists such as members of parliament often pledged financial or organisational support for these events and also gladly attended them.⁶⁶ However, despite the extensive efforts and strong backing from political elites and influential colonists, the exhibitions sometimes struggled to achieve financial success.⁶⁷

⁶² “Australian Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *Age*, December 15, 1877, 6; “Government Railways,” *SMH*, February 9, 1878, 10; “Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *Cumberland Mercury*, August 18, 1883, 4.

⁶³ The admission fee for the 1901 exhibition was 1s (initially, however, it was intended to be 2s 6d). “Young People’s Industrial Exhibition,” *Daily Telegraph*, May 29, 1901, 8; “Juvenile Industrial Exhibition, Bathurst,” *SMH*, November 9, 1881, 8; “Sydney Intercolonial Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *Albury Banner and Wodonga Express*, June 16, 1882, 14; “Bathurst Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, October 26, 1881, 3.

⁶⁴ “Juvenile Industrial Exhibition, Bathurst,” *SMH*, November 9, 1881, 8; “Sydney Intercolonial Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *Albury Banner and Wodonga Express*, June 16, 1882, 14; “The Juvenile Industrial Exhibition at Parramatta,” *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, October 27, 1883, 7; “Young People’s Industrial Exhibition,” *Daily Telegraph*, May 13, 1901, 3; “Bathurst Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *SMH*, November 3, 1881, 6; “The Parramatta Intercolonial Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *Australian Town and Country Journal*, November 24, 1883, 25.

⁶⁵ “Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *SMH*, July 30, 1881, 3; “Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *Evening News*, June 8, 1883, 2. “Young People’s Industrial Exhibition,” *SMH*, May 18, 1901, 7; “Bathurst Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *Illustrated Sydney News and New South Wales Agriculturalist and Grazier*, November 26, 1881, 2.

⁶⁶ “Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *SMH*, July 30, 1881, 3; “Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *Evening News*, June 8, 1883, 2. “Young People’s Industrial Exhibition,” *SMH*, May 18, 1901, 7; “Bathurst Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *Illustrated Sydney News and New South Wales Agriculturalist and Grazier*, November 26, 1881, 2; “Bathurst Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*, November 5, 1881, 792.

⁶⁷ The 1879 Sydney Juvenile Industrial Exhibition was financially unsuccessful “The Late Sydney Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, January 9, 1880, 3. The 1881 Bathurst exhibition was very successful, making £900 profit. “Bathurst,” *The Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*, February 25, 1882, 322. The 1882 Lithgow exhibition was likewise successful in the sense that it paid its own expenses. “Lithgow Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *SMH*, December 20, 1882, 8; The 1883 Parramatta Exhibition did not make any profits. “Closing of the Parramatta Exhibition,” *Daily Telegraph*, February 11, 1884, 6.

The voices of child exhibitors in juvenile industrial exhibitions are largely absent from historical records, with no first-hand accounts from the children who submitted works or received awards. It is clear, however, that participants did not come from families struggling to survive, as such children lacked the time or resources to create exhibition displays. A newspaper article about the Bathurst Juvenile Industrial Exhibition echoed this, stating that the needlework was made not by “tired and overworked juvenile sempstresses,” but by cheerful girls with ample time and dedication to balance their studies with artistic activities such as needlework and drawing.⁶⁸ This suggests most participants came from relatively well-off working-class or middle-class families, like Amy Jay, winner of the pianoforte competition, who was the granddaughter of Frederick Cane, superintendent of the Asylum for Imbeciles in Newcastle.⁶⁹

The Bathurst Juvenile Industrial Exhibition (1881) provides a good example of the type of venues typically used for such events and the prevailing atmosphere within them. The building where the Bathurst Juvenile Industrial Exhibition was held was a grand and spacious structure, originally intended to be housed entirely in the Bathurst Agricultural Society’s Hall, located on the banks of the Macquarie River at the eastern end of town.⁷⁰ However, due to the sheer volume of exhibits, additional space was required, leading to the erection of three extra marquees. The main hall itself was a sizable building, measuring 120 feet (36,5 m) in length by 75 feet (23 m) in width. Flanking it were two large school tents, each 73 feet (22 m) by 20 feet (6 m), and another marquee 82 feet (25 m) by 30 feet (9 m), all of which were borrowed or erected specifically for the exhibition. The atmosphere of the exhibition was vibrant and lively, with the entire space beautifully decorated and well-lit with gas, allowing visitors to attend even at night. The entrance to the main building was adorned with pendant wreaths, loops of foliage, creating a picturesque and welcoming scene.

The 1901 exhibition held in Sydney made £1000 profit. “The Young People’s Industrial Exhibition,” *Glen Innes Examiner and General Advertiser*, September 4, 1901, 6.

⁶⁸ “The Bathurst Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, November 2, 1881, 3.

⁶⁹ “Sydney Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners’ Advocate*, January 17, 1880, 8.

⁷⁰ “Bathurst Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *SMH*, November 3, 1881, 6.

Inside, the halls were filled with tree ferns, evergreens and moral texts urging the virtues of industry over idleness. The central space was dotted with tables and display cases showcasing a variety of items, from practical tools to luxurious curiosities, all enhancing the visual appeal. The exhibition also featured a concert platform, a horticultural show, live music from the Bathurst Band, and outdoor sports, creating a festive environment for attendees, including children, who were treated to buns, lollies, oranges, and ginger beer.

Organisers of juvenile industrial expositions in NSW, following the Ballarat model, prioritised industrial items, with schoolwork displays and domestic skills as secondary focuses. In the 1881, 1883, and 1891 exhibitions, the majority of over twenty categories focused on highlighting children's technical skills and their ability to use machinery to produce industrial goods. The emphasis on mechanical ingenuity and technical skills in Ballarat style juvenile industrial exhibitions in NSW must be understood in a historical context. Similar to the original Ballarat exhibition, NSW counterparts primarily focused on these aspects to encourage technical education. This push for technical education became a prominent social issue in NSW during the final quarter of the nineteenth century, though the recognition of the need for technical training facilities dates back to the mid-1800s, as seen in the establishment of Mechanics' Institutes. Between 1870 and 1890, three main groups pushed for the development of technical education in NSW: professional organisations (such as the Engineering Association and the Builders' and Contractors' Association), academic institutions (notably the University of Sydney), and communal entities (like the School of Arts).⁷¹

The movement for industrial training in NSW stemmed from concerns about the colony's reliance on foreign skilled labour, declining apprenticeships, and the need to build local industries. Advocates argued that long-term prosperity depended on developing a homegrown skilled workforce, as relying on overseas workers was unsustainable. The decline in apprenticeships,

⁷¹ Murray-Smith, "A History of Technical Education in Australia." 343-446.

combined with the growing industrial demands of the time, highlighted the need for vocational education. Nationalistic motivations also played a role, with concerns that Australia would become merely a supplier of raw materials and an importer of finished goods if it did not develop its own industries by applying technical knowledge to local resources. Global competition and advancements in scientific and technical education, particularly in America and Europe, further spurred efforts to establish industrial training in NSW. Concerns about the colony's industrial lag were highlighted during discussions of juvenile industrial exhibitions, with warnings that NSW risked falling behind without significant change: "The army that equips itself with the flint lock musket of a century ago must go down in squadrons before troops armed with the breechloader of today".⁷² This military metaphor echoes the social Darwinism of the time, where various "races" were believed to be competing in the so-called "race of life."

The movement for technical education in NSW and Australia, in general, differed from similar initiatives elsewhere, like in Britain, due to two main factors. First, NSW's strong anti-elitist sentiment and commitment to reducing class distinctions sparked widespread interest in ensuring that everyone, especially the working class, was prepared for the "great struggle for existence."⁷³ This perspective fuelled the push for technical education as a tool to empower the general population. Second, Australia's industrial landscape was less advanced than Britain's, with limited manufacturing sectors focused on consumer goods like textiles, food, and tobacco. These industries relied heavily on cheap, unskilled labour, particularly from women and boys, which left few opportunities for young people to gain technical skills. This gap prompted the call for alternative educational facilities to address the region's vocational training needs. Juvenile industrial exhibitions emerged in Australia as a unique and popular way to promote technical education. These events showcased practical skills essential for the colony's future workforce and economic growth, reflecting the broader push to prepare young people for industrial and vocational roles.

⁷² "The Proposed Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *Cumberland Mercury*, June 9, 1883, 4.

⁷³ Murray-Smith, "A History of Technical Education in Australia," 115, 370, 435-445.

The 1881 and 1883 juvenile industrial exhibitions aimed to promote more effective technical education, while the 1891 Sydney exhibition showcased the results of publicly supported technical education. In the 1880s, technical education was largely driven by local initiatives like schools of arts and mechanics' institutes, which emphasised theoretical instruction but neglected practical training. The founding of the Working Men's Technical College in 1879 under the Sydney School of Arts reflected some government support for technical instruction, but it was not seen as sufficient to meet broader needs. The juvenile exhibitions of the 1880s can be understood as calls for more action to advance technical education. By the 1890s, financial challenges faced by the Technical College led to its recognition as an official government institution. This resulted in the Department of Public Instruction taking a more central role in managing technical education, marking a shift toward structured oversight. The 1891 Sydney exhibition celebrated this development, showcasing the outcomes of publicly supported technical education and encouraging more youth to take advantage of these opportunities.⁷⁴ By then, the focus had shifted from advocating for the establishment of technical education to demonstrating its availability and benefits, urging young people to participate in the growing educational system aimed at preparing them for industrial and technical careers.

It is important to highlight that the 1901 exhibition had a significantly less detailed prize schedule compared to previous events, featuring only fifteen categories.⁷⁵ The various detailed categories for industrial items from earlier exhibitions were consolidated into a single category "apprentices and technical students' work," as noted by the press.⁷⁶ The organisers of the 1901 exhibition likely merged less popular manual work exhibits into a single category due to the predominance of non-industrial entries in previous exhibitions, particularly in schoolwork-related categories. Another aspect that distinguished the 1901 exhibition from earlier ones was the

⁷⁴ "Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *SMH*, March 30, 1892, 3.

⁷⁵ "The Industrial Exhibition," *Evening News*, May 29, 1901, 3.

⁷⁶ "The Industrial Exhibition," *Evening News*, May 29, 1901, 3.

introduction of new prize categories, such as calisthenics, home pet displays, and kindergarten exhibits. This shift in focus marked a departure from the earlier emphasis on technical skills.

Schoolwork, while receiving less attention than displays of mechanical ingenuity, was an important feature in youth industrial exhibitions. These exhibits showcased skills like writing, ornamental penmanship, drawing, mapping, music, spelling, and essay writing, most of which aligned with the standardised curriculum of NSW elementary schools, shaped by the Public Instruction Acts of 1866 and 1880.⁷⁷ By 1880, school attendance was mandatory for children aged eight to fourteen, with a primary focus on reading, writing, and arithmetic, as well as subjects like spelling, composition, and grammar.⁷⁸ The absence of arithmetic competitions in juvenile industrial exhibitions, despite their close alignment with the elementary school curriculum, is noteworthy. Arithmetic was valued for its practical uses and benefits to logical thinking, yet exhibitions did not highlight this subject.⁷⁹ Organising such contests would have been as feasible as spelling bees, but contemporary beliefs held that advanced arithmetic was only necessary for boys pursuing careers in commerce or trade.⁸⁰ According to historian Patricia C. Cohen, beyond basic skills, higher arithmetic was considered unnecessary for most, including wealthy children destined for professions like law or ministry. Thus, while arithmetic was valued enough to be part of the school curriculum, its mastery was not considered essential unless one's future involved commerce. Exhibition organisers appeared to agree with this latter view, deeming arithmetic excellence unnecessary for the general child population.

Music education, a significant part of the exhibitions, featured prominently through competitions in singing and playing instruments like the pianoforte and violin. Music's inclusion reflected its early integration into school curricula, beginning as early as 1848 when "vocal music"

⁷⁷ Barcan, *A History of Australian Education*, 112, 137, 143.

⁷⁸ Barcan, *A History of Australian Education*, 143, 155-157.

⁷⁹ Rachel Griffiths, "A Tale of 804,573 Horses: Arithmetic Teaching in Victoria 1860-1914," *Educational Studies in Mathematics*, vol. 18, no. 2 (May 1987):191-207, here 193.

⁸⁰ Patricia C. Cohen, "Numeracy in Nineteenth-Century America," in *A History of School Mathematics*, ed. George M.A. Stanic and Jeremy Kilpatrick (Reston, VA: The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, Inc., 2003), 143-76, here 45.

became part of the elementary education system alongside reading, writing, and arithmetic.⁸¹ Music education was valued for its civilising and moral impact, believed to help shape industrious, religious, and loyal citizens. By the late 1860s, its recreational benefits were also emphasised, providing innocent amusement and cheer, which explains the frequent use of large choirs at exhibition openings. Despite the lack of formal instrumental training in elementary schools, many exhibition participants played instruments, suggesting that they likely attended private high schools where advanced musical instruction was offered. The emphasis on music in both education and exhibitions reflects a broader societal belief in its moral and cultural benefits.

The inclusion of schoolwork in youth industrial exhibitions likely served multiple purposes. One reason was to showcase the success of publicly funded education, as evidenced by a newspaper report on the 1879 Sydney exhibition, which noted that schools provided a morally upright environment: “The result of the exhibition certainly shows that the schools are not the “seed plot of immorality....” but that really good useful work is taught to the children, of which they are not slow to profit.”⁸² The report referenced Catholic Archbishop Roger William Bede Vaughan, who, concerned that the colonial government might end state funding for church schools, described public schools as “seed plots of future immorality, infidelity, and lawlessness” in a Pastoral Letter he issued in 1879.⁸³ Another goal may have been to attract as many young participants as possible, a strategy that proved highly successful. In fact, the number of schoolwork exhibits consistently outnumbered industrial displays, leading some to question whether the exhibitions could still be called “industrial.”⁸⁴ Lastly, the invitation to submit schoolwork items such as writing, drawing, mapping, and spelling likely reflected the organisers’ views on what academic skills were important for children to develop. Overall, the inclusion of schoolwork in

⁸¹ Robin Stevens and Jane Southcott, “Australia: Recurring Problems and Unresolved Issues,” in *The Origins and Foundations of Music Education: Cross-Cultural Historical Studies of Music in Compulsory Schooling*, ed. Gordon Cox and Robin Stevens (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010): 171–188, here 173–177.

⁸² “The Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *Evening News*, December 23, 1879, 3.

⁸³ Barcan, *A History of Australian Education*, 142–143.

⁸⁴ “The Proposed Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *Cumberland Mercury*, June 9, 1883, 4.

youth industrial exhibitions showcased public education's success, attracted young participants, and emphasised the importance of academic skills, turning these events into a blend of educational and industrial displays.

Just as the exhibits were divided into categories, the child participants were also classified, with age being the primary factor. However, these age classifications varied slightly between the events. For the Bathurst Juvenile Industrial Exhibition, Section A included participants under fifteen years old, Section B comprised those between fifteen and eighteen years old, Section C was for individuals under twenty-one years old, and Section D was for bona-fide apprentices under indentures, not exceeding twenty-two years old.⁸⁵ The organisers of the 1883 Parramatta exhibition categorised participants by age into the following groups: Section A for those under thirteen, Section B for those under fifteen, Section C for those under eighteen, Section D for those under twenty-one, and Section E for apprentices of all ages and improvers under twenty-three.⁸⁶ Complete details about the age classifications for the 1891 Sydney exhibition are unavailable, but it is known that Section A1 included children under fourteen, Section A covered ages fourteen to sixteen, Section B included those aged sixteen to eighteen, and Section C encompassed participants aged eighteen to twenty-one. The classifications for other sections remain unknown.⁸⁷ Finally, based on the limited information available about the 1901 exhibition, participants were grouped into the following age categories: under twelve, under sixteen, and under twenty-one.⁸⁸ The rationale behind dividing participants by age was to ensure fairness, as noted by the press.⁸⁹

Detailed expectations for each age group are available for the Bathurst and Parramatta expositions (1881 and 1883). At the Bathurst Juvenile Exhibition, children under fifteen were expected to submit pen and pencil work and needlework articles, while children between fifteen

⁸⁵ "The Proposed Juvenile Industrial Exhibition at Bathurst," *Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*, July 2, 1881, 9.

⁸⁶ "The Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *Cumberland Mercury*, August 15, 1883, 2.

⁸⁷ "National Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *SMH*, April 5, 1891, 5.

⁸⁸ "Young People's Industrial Exhibition," *SMH*, May 29, 1901, 5.

⁸⁹ "A Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *Daily Telegraph*, March 24, 1891, 3.

and eighteen were to submit similar exhibits with the addition of watercolour drawings and etchings.⁹⁰ The section for children under twenty-one featured similar exhibits to the younger groups, adding non-industrial categories like collections of minerals, stamps, etc., essays, preserves, pickles, and artificial flowers.⁹¹ Meanwhile, the apprentice section was expected to display manufactured items such as various types of engines, buggies, ploughs, harrows, horseshoes, iron castings, tin and brass ware, leather work, paintings, woodwork, and gold and silver ware. At the Parramatta Juvenile Exhibition, younger children faced different expectations: those under thirteen were invited to submit both non-industrial items, like penmanship and needlework, as well as industrial items such as carpentry and wheelwright work.⁹² Children under fifteen were expected to present schoolwork and most industrial items, except those related to leatherwork, textiles, brushware, and mechanical or architectural drawings. All items on the prize schedule were open to participants under eighteen and twenty-one. Apprentices and improvers could submit any item from the prize list except for needlework or plants.

Information on the organisers' expectations for the juvenile industrial exhibitions held in Sydney in 1891 and 1901 is unavailable. However, the list of awards granted at the 1891 exhibition (the 1901 list being incomplete) offers insight into what participants were expected to submit.⁹³ Exhibits varied by age group, with each successive group submitting both younger participants' items and more advanced works, except in music and elocution, limited to children under fourteen. Children under fourteen contributed simpler items such as writing, penmanship, drawing, needlework, food, woodwork, toys, and essays. Participants between fourteen and sixteen expanded on this by adding more complex materials like metalwork, jewellery, type-composing,

⁹⁰ "The Proposed Juvenile Industrial Exhibition at Bathurst," *Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*, July 2, 1881, 9.

⁹¹ "Bathurst Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *Evening News*, November 8, 1881, 7.

⁹² "The Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *Cumberland Mercury*, August 15, 1883, 2.

⁹³ "National Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *Evening News*, April 1, 1891, 2; "Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *Evening News*, April 2, 1891, 6; "National Juvenile Exhibition," *Evening News*, April 4, 1891, 6; "National Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *Evening News*, April 9, 1891, 3; "National Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *Evening News*, April 13, 1891, 6.

bookbinding, and mechanical dentistry, alongside industrial items like stonework, casting, and clock-making. The sixteen to eighteen group included many of the same items but introduced more advanced projects, such as machinery, engineering work, agricultural implements, and architectural drawings. Finally, the eighteen to twenty-one age group, while still submitting works from the previous categories, displayed the most sophisticated entries, including steamboat models, advanced metalwork, civil engineering projects, and technical models. It is important to note that the awarded exhibits do not necessarily reflect the full scope of the organisers' expectations. The absence of awards in certain categories, such as agricultural implements for children under sixteen, does not mean that organisers did not expect submissions in those areas. It is possible that no children from that age group submitted entries in those specific categories. Thus, the list of awarded exhibits offers a partial but valuable understanding of the organisers' expectations.

The differing expectations of the Bathurst, Parramatta, and Sydney exhibition organisers highlight the lack of a consistent view on whether children should focus on schoolwork or industrial labour, and which industrial skills were suitable for different age groups. Held two years apart—Bathurst in 1881 and Parramatta in 1883—the exhibitions had contrasting views on what the youngest children should submit. Bathurst organisers believed children under fifteen should focus on schoolwork and needlework, while Parramatta organisers expected children under thirteen to present some industrial displays alongside schoolwork. Sydney's organisers accepted industrial displays, some quite challenging, from children starting at fourteen years old. The second youngest age group also faced varying requirements. Bathurst's organisers expected children aged fifteen to eighteen to submit similar work as younger participants, with the addition of watercolour drawings and etchings. Meanwhile, Parramatta's organisers required children under fifteen to submit schoolwork as well as most industrial items listed in the prize schedule. These differences, along with Sydney's approach, underscore the absence of consensus on children's roles in education and industrial activities at the turn of the nineteenth century.

The age-based classifications at the Bathurst and Parramatta exhibitions reveal a disconnect between organisers' expectations and the realities of children's lives at the time. Bathurst organisers expected children under fifteen and those aged fifteen to eighteen to submit academic work, reflecting an idealised view of childhood. However, school attendance was not compulsory at the time, with primary education typically ending at age fourteen, and high schools not yet established. Technical classes provided by Schools of Arts were also voluntary, making the assumption that working-class children, especially in their late teens, would prioritise academic performance unrealistic. Similarly, the Parramatta organisers' expectation that children under fifteen would produce industrial items was also out of touch, as apprenticeships were in decline and most youth were engaged in unskilled labour. The absence of any awards for industrial items in these categories likely suggests that no children from this age group submitted exhibits to the Parramatta exhibition.⁹⁴ These exhibitions thus appear more aspirational than practical, promoting the notion that working-class children should pursue academic and industrial skills. Despite being disconnected from the social realities of the time, these exhibitions signalled a broader societal shift towards valuing both education and industrial skills for working-class children, encouraging them to aspire to a more skilled future.

While juvenile industrial exhibitions in NSW were largely aimed at promoting technical education, they also addressed broader concerns. Organisers were deeply worried about children's perceived lack of industriousness and sought to instil a strong work ethic through both school activities and industrial training. The widely advertised Ballarat exhibition emphasised its primary goal as: "To enlist the sympathies and arouse the energies of the young people to compete in works of industry and usefulness, and impress on parents, their sons, and daughters the dignity and honour of labour."⁹⁵ The Parramatta Exhibition of 1883 exemplified this by adorning its interior

⁹⁴ Minutes to the Meetings of the Organising Committee for the Parramatta Juvenile Industrial Exhibition January 8, 1884–April 7, 1884, 274-277.

⁹⁵ "Australian Juvenile Industrial Exhibition," *Bendigo Advertiser*, October 13, 1877, 3.

with work-related mottos such as “Detur lux prima labouri” (Let the dawn be devoted to toil), “Labour conquers all things,” and “Labour must prosper.”⁹⁶ Influential figures who were invited to open these exhibitions clearly understood their core purpose. For instance, Alfred Steven, the acting governor who inaugurated the Bathurst Exhibition in 1881, conveyed to visitors that: “The lesson here taught is that work is, after all, pleasure; that it is, moreover, a grand and honourable thing in itself, yet not the less worthy of commendation and reward...Idleness is not happiness; and that truth may here, in the examples before us, be enforced and illustrated.”⁹⁷ There was also a view that love for labour could lead to a higher social status for individuals, while also promoting national progress.⁹⁸ This emphasis on the virtues of labour and industry underscores the exhibitions’ role in promoting these values among the youth.

The concern with industriousness dates back to the dawn of industrialisation in eighteenth-century Britain. Historian Sarah Jordan notes that “industriousness” was a distinctly British trait, defining ideal Britishness. During this period, people’s identities were increasingly tied to their occupation and wealth rather than their birth.⁹⁹ Industriousness, rewarded with money, became a value that enabled the emerging middle class to climb the social ladder. This class positioned itself as responsible for the nation’s wealth and power, celebrating hard work while condemning idleness, particularly among the working classes. Three key assumptions shaped the notion of working-class idleness: the belief that the lower classes had no right to leisure, that the poor must labour to advance middle- and upper-class interests, and that manual labour was the only suitable work for the poor. The widespread belief in the idleness of the labouring class served the interests of those who employed and profited from their labour. Idleness was feared for its potential to harm the nation’s welfare and disrupt middle and upper-class stability. Thus, efforts to combat

⁹⁶ “Juvenile Industrial Exhibition, Parramatta,” *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, December 20, 1883, 3.

⁹⁷ “Bathurst Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*, November 5, 1881, 792.

⁹⁸ “Parramatta Intercolonial Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *SMH*, December 20, 1883, 9.

⁹⁹ Sarah Jordan, *The Anxieties of Idleness: Idleness in Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Culture* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, c2003): 13-22.

laziness in the working class were measures by the elites to safeguard their economic interests. Insisting on constant labour for the poor also aimed to prevent their involvement in radical activities, ensuring the preservation of the status quo.¹⁰⁰ The emphasis on work ethic during NSW juvenile industrial exhibitions reflects middle class Australians' similar concerns. Like their British counterparts, they were troubled by the perceived lack of industriousness among labourers and were determined to fight against this alleged problem. This contrasts with earlier years; while employment addressed idleness in the 1850s–1860s, education became the focus in the late nineteenth century.

Juvenile industrial exhibitions were designed not only to instil a work ethic in working class children but also to encourage members of the feared working-class subculture, known as larrikins, to appreciate the virtues of labour. The term “larrikin”, which gained popularity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, originally referred to young people, often sporadically employed, who spent much of their time loitering in the streets.¹⁰¹ On a number of occasions, while elaborating on the benefits of juvenile industrial exhibitions, spokespeople voiced the opinion that the exhibitions had the potential to deter larrikinism. For example, after the Ballarat exhibition, the chairman of the Melbourne auxiliary committee, the Hon. Caleb Joshua Jenner, remarked that something was needed to productively engage apprentices and other young people who otherwise roamed the streets aimlessly, falling in with bad influences and facing ruin.¹⁰² Similarly, a commentator discussing the 1881 Bathurst Juvenile Industrial Exhibition claimed that such events could curb the rising problem of larrikinism, which was seen as a significant issue for the future.¹⁰³ A report on the 1881 Balmain exhibition echoed this sentiment, suggesting that the

¹⁰⁰ Jordan, *The Anxieties of Idleness*, 37-39.

¹⁰¹ Melissa Bellanta, *Larrikins: A History* (St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 2012), xiv. Although the term is Australian, the phenomenon is not unique. Similar groups formed in other parts of the world at this time: in England they were called hooligans, in America—hoodlums. See Kylie M, Smith, “Subjectivity, Hegemony, and the Subaltern in Sydney, 1870-1900,” *Rethinking Marxism*, vol. 19, no. 2 (April 2007): 169-179, here 170.

¹⁰² “The Ballarat Juvenile Exhibition,” *Herald*, September 30, 1878, 3.

¹⁰³ “The Bathurst Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, July 30, 1881, 7.

event might check “the tendency, unhappily too common in young communities, to engage in lawless and debasing pursuits”.¹⁰⁴ These exhibitions were thus seen as essential in not only providing constructive activities for youth but also in combating the social ills associated with larrikinism.

The issue of larrikinism was coming to a head just as juvenile industrial exhibitions were gaining popularity. While the presence of youth on the streets contributed to the larrikin problem, it was their disruptive behaviour—marked by overt sexuality, flashy attire, drinking, provocative dancing, gambling, and violent sports—that set them apart from the broader working class.¹⁰⁵ Larrikins were notorious for forming gangs, engaging in fights, and openly defying authorities.¹⁰⁶ Historian Melissa Bellanta argues that the increasing concern over larrikins in the late nineteenth century was linked to changing attitudes towards troublesome youth and new methods for addressing them, alongside the emergence of a more disruptive “rowdy class”. The emerging colonial middle class, which valued propriety, respectability, and a strong work ethic, found larrikins to be the antithesis of their ideals.¹⁰⁷ As a result, alleged “larrikin” behaviour was increasingly criminalised, leading to a surge in arrests. These dynamics fuelled the belief that juvenile industrial exhibitions could potentially check rowdy youths who spent their lives thumbing their nose at respectability while failing to engage in productive pursuits or develop useful skills.

These exhibitions were intended to address larrikinism both as a preventive measure and as a corrective one. For instance, the Parramatta Exhibition of 1883 included works submitted by inmates from the Darlinghurst jail, many of whom were considered larrikins.¹⁰⁸ This inclusion was not widely publicised but came to light through an outraged letter to the *Sydney Daily Telegraph*. The

¹⁰⁴ “Balmain Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, October 19, 1881, 4.

¹⁰⁵ James Murray, *Larrikins: Nineteenth Century Outrage* (Melbourne: Lansdowne Press Pty Ltd, 1973): 32-63.

¹⁰⁶ Bellanta, *Larrikins*, xiv.

¹⁰⁷ Kylie M, Smith, “Subjectivity, Hegemony, and the Subaltern in Sydney, 1870-1900,” *Rethinking Marxism*, vol. 19, no. 2 (April 2007): 169-179, here 172-174.

¹⁰⁸ Murray, *Larrikins*, 100.

writer sarcastically criticised the display, suggesting it promoted criminal behaviour by showcasing “larrikin talent”:

It might be thought bitter irony on my part to suggest that possibly these exhibits were made by some of our juvenile offenders, but why not ticket them as the result of “larrikin” talent? What a grand incentive to crime this would have proved! True it is that these articles come under the designation of industrial arts, but are we so thoroughly demoralised as a community that we need the victims of gaol life to teach us what we ought to do.¹⁰⁹

The writer misunderstood the organisers’ intentions. By including juvenile offenders, the organisers demonstrated their belief that larrikins could be reformed if provided with the right incentives and role models, rather than implying that society had no better examples to follow. This approach highlighted the organisers’ optimism that even the most troubled youth could be guided toward positive change through the influence of structured, meaningful work.

The motivation for including Indigenous children’s works in juvenile industrial exhibitions was similar to that which lay behind displaying the works of Darlinghurst jail inmates, as observed in the Sydney Juvenile Industrial Exhibition of 1901.¹¹⁰ Prior exhibitions likely did not feature Indigenous handiwork, as suggested by historians Joanne Scott and Ross Laurie, who noted that Aboriginal displays were absent from Brisbane’s annual agricultural shows until the early twentieth century.¹¹¹ This exclusion is attributed to the colonists’ resentment toward the Indigenous population, ongoing conflicts, and the belief that Aboriginal people did not fit the image of cultural progress that these exhibitions aimed to present. Unfortunately, there is limited information about the specific works exhibited in the 1901 Sydney exhibition, with the only record mentioning handicrafts sent by mission children from the South Seas.¹¹² Comparisons with other exhibitions

¹⁰⁹ “Convict Labour and Juvenile Exhibition,” *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, December 22, 1883, 6.

¹¹⁰ “Young People’s Industrial Exhibition,” *SMH*, May 28, 1901, 3.

¹¹¹ Joanne Scott and Ross Laurie, “Colonialism on Display: Indigenous People and Artefacts at an Australian Agricultural Show,” *Aboriginal History*, vol 31 (2007): 45-62, here 48.

¹¹² “Young People’s Industrial Exhibition,” *SMH*, May 28, 1901, 3.

suggest that typical Indigenous displays included school-related items such as sewing samples, garments, copybooks, and possibly literary works, cookery, needlework, flowers, and photography.¹¹³ These displays were intended to showcase the outcomes of training provided by reserves and missions, aligning with the early twentieth-century shift in attitudes toward Indigenous people.¹¹⁴ With new policies permitting Aboriginals to be hired out from mission stations, where their wages were paid to the state, it became crucial to demonstrate their employability by showcasing their capacity to learn and their industriousness. In contrast, international exhibitions used Indigenous works to emphasise the progress of Western cultures against the perceived primitiveness of Aboriginal people.¹¹⁵ Thus, showcasing the works of Indigenous children as well as those of incarcerated youths in juvenile industrial exhibitions aimed to highlight the beneficial impact of structured and purposeful labour.

Another often-repeated goal of the exhibitions, particularly the earlier ones, was to demonstrate that Australian children were not lazy but were just as capable as youth in other countries. For example, Bannister, the organiser of the Ballarat exhibition (1878), wrote in a letter published in the press that the aim of the exhibition was to “... show the colony at large and the neighbouring colonies that girls and boys of Ballarat have energy, talent, and industry...” and “... to show to the world that the young Australians are an industrious and intelligent race.”¹¹⁶ A press report from the same exhibition made a similar point:

The hall is full of all sorts of exhibits which appeal to the senses, swell trade, give a stimulus and importance to manufactures, and show the good taste, the industrial activity, the deft fingers, and the aptitude of design and execution which belong to the Australian youth of both sexes, just the same as they prevail among the youth

¹¹³ Scott and Laurie, “Colonialism on Display,” 50 and “Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *Watchman*, May 23, 1903, 1.

¹¹⁴ Scott and Laurie, “Colonialism on Display,” 54.

¹¹⁵ Elizabeth Wills, “Exhibiting Aboriginal Industry: A Story Behind a “Re-discovered Bark Drawing from Victoria,” *Aboriginal History*, vol. 27 (2003): 39-58, here 51-52.

¹¹⁶ “A Juvenile Industrial Exhibition in Ballarat,” *Ballarat Courier*, June 5, 1877, 5.

of other climes where the field of competition is far greater and where the means of instruction are more facile and comprehensive.¹¹⁷

Henry Parkes, a five time premier of NSW, also drew comparison between Australian youth and children elsewhere during the opening ceremony of the 1879 Sydney exhibition, noting with contentment that the former fared well: “the show of the industry of the boys and girls of the colony is highly satisfactory, and demonstrates that we are not behind the people of other parts of the world in the general character of our children, but that they will compare very favourably with the juveniles of older countries than our own in their natural capacities for work both useful and ornamental in character.”¹¹⁸

These comments about Australian children measuring up to youth in other countries indicate some insecurity about the evolution of the Australian population. Chapter One of this thesis has examined the health aspect of this theme, discussing the forces that brought about the passage of the first child labour law in NSW, including concerns that Australia’s hot, dry climate was unsuitable for white people and that European settlers in Australia would thus eventually degenerate and die out. Believing that colonists were already under this climactic strain, which made overwork twice as dangerous as in countries like Britain where the climate was milder, they banned the labour of children under thirteen in mines. Yet there were also other reasons for Australia’s poor self-image, which were reinforced by negative comments made about Australian colonies overseas, especially in England, Europe and North America. The colony’s pre-industrial economy, frontier violence, large Irish Catholic population, and the chaos that accompanied the silver and gold rushes of 1850-51 all contributed to the unflattering image that the Australian colonies evoked abroad.¹¹⁹ Colonies tried hard to change these preconceptions about themselves, as the discourse around juvenile industrial exhibitions attests. Interestingly, this was not the first

¹¹⁷ “Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *Herald*, February 15, 1878, 3.

¹¹⁸ “Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *SMH*, December 24, 1879, 6.

¹¹⁹ Peter H. Hoffenberg, *An Empire on Display: English, Indian and Australian Exhibitions from the Crystal Palace to the Great War* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 134, 136.

time that exhibitions were used as a forum to re-negotiate the image Australia sought to project. Attempts along these lines started as early as 1851, when the Crystal Palace Exhibition was held, and continued into the twentieth century. Australian colonies were quite selective when it came to deciding what to send to overseas industrial exhibitions, forwarding exhibits clearly designed to demonstrate colonial progress—such as pieces of machinery, oil paintings of the natural environment, printed proceedings of the learned societies—along with natural riches such as wool, coal, timber, gold. Organisers of juvenile industrial exhibitions also aimed to counter negative overseas perceptions of Australia by showcasing the talent and industriousness of Australian youth, demonstrating the colony’s progress and challenging the unflattering image of a pre-industrial, chaotic society.

Juvenile industrial exhibitions among other things aimed to encourage girls to excel in household skills, leading to the invitation to display items such as plain and decorative needlework and prepared food. Henry Parkes placed significant value on women’s household skills: “No woman, no girl can set before herself a higher object than to become a ministering—I was going to say angel why should I not?—ministering angel to those around her, and that is not to be done so much by a fancy accomplishment as by learning thoroughly all household duties, and cultivating a taste for all true womanly virtues”.¹²⁰ Apparently, he agreed to open the exhibition only after he had learnt that skills manifesting household work would be displayed at the event. During the opening ceremony of the Bathurst exhibition, acting governor Sir Alfred Stephen also expressed approval at the sight of bread, jams, cakes and preserves prepared by young colonial girls. He claimed that the “making of good housewives was a matter which intimately affected the well-being of the whole community”.¹²¹ He also complimented girls’ needlework: “The girls of the colony come out splendidly in the use of the needle, for the long rows of plain and fancy sewing speak volumes for the thorough manner in which the future wives and mothers of NSW have

¹²⁰ “The Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *Australian Town and Country Journal*, December 27, 1879, 13.

¹²¹ “Bathurst Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, November 3, 1881, 3.

been taught the valuable accomplishment”.¹²² Commenting along the same lines in regard to the 1891 exhibition, a reporter for the *Australian Star* noted with delight that “the very first essential to a happy home—good cooking—has not been forgotten...”¹²³ These endorsements from influential figures and the focus on household skills at these exhibitions underscore a broader societal effort to promote and standardise domestic virtues among young women.

The focus on domestic skills at exhibitions along with the introduction of home economics into the school curriculum in the 1880s stemmed from a shared origin, reflecting the dominance of an ideology of domesticity among the privileged classes in Australia and other English-speaking nations at that time.¹²⁴ This ideology dictated that a woman’s role was ideally confined to the home, where she was expected to cultivate a warm, supportive, and virtuous environment. Male educational bureaucrats and middle-class women’s groups sought to instil these values in working-class families, often driven by self-serving motives.¹²⁵ One key reason for advocating home economics in schools was the scarcity and perceived poor quality of domestic servants, with middle-class women hoping to elevate the occupation’s status and attract suitable candidates.¹²⁶ Additionally, there was scepticism about the ability of working-class mothers to properly raise their daughters according to contemporary standards, leading the Education Department to take on this responsibility.¹²⁷

Interestingly, archaeological excavations at three sites in Port Adelaide, South Australia, revealed mixed success in the adoption of domesticity among working-class families. The findings, based on artifacts such as evidence of women’s paid work within the home, children’s toys, and home decorations like ornaments and house fittings, showed that one family fully embraced

¹²² “Bathurst Juvenile Industrial Exhibition,” *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, November 3, 1881, 3.

¹²³ “Juvenile Exhibition, the Opening Ceremony,” *Australian Star*, March 28, 1891, 6.

¹²⁴ Kerreen Reiger, “All but the Kitchen Sink: On the Significance of Domestic Science and the Silence of Social Theory,” *Theory and Society*, vol. 16, no. 4 (July 1987): 497-526, here 504.

¹²⁵ Beverly Kingston, “When Did We Teach Our Girls to Cook?” *Australian Cultural History*, vol. 15 (1996): 89-101, here 97.

¹²⁶ Jill Matthews, “Education for Femininity: Domestic Arts Education in South Australia,” *Labour History*, no. 45 (November 1983): 30-53, here 36.

¹²⁷ Reiger, “All but the Kitchen Sink,” 507-508 and Matthews, “Education for Femininity,” 40-44.

domesticity, another balanced it with a working wife, while the residents of yet another household struggled to adhere to these ideals, often facing sacrifices in doing so.¹²⁸ Ultimately, these efforts to promote domestic skills at exhibitions and in schools reflected broader societal ambitions to shape and control the domestic lives of working-class families according to middle-class ideals.

By the time of the final juvenile industrial exhibition in 1901, many of the original reasons for holding such events had become obsolete. While the promotion of hard work and showcasing technical college skills remained from earlier exhibitions, the focus had shifted significantly.¹²⁹ Industrial exhibits were no longer a priority, with the long list of industrial items reduced to a single line in the prize schedule, as mentioned earlier. Instead, the 1901 exhibition centered on the visit of the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York.¹³⁰ The organisers aimed to foster loyalty and national pride in the youth by connecting the royal visit to activities that would engage them, promoting unity within the British Empire.¹³¹ Additionally, the exhibition sought to raise funds for charities such as Sydney Hospital, the Hospital for Sick Children, and Prince Alfred Hospital.¹³² While previous exhibitions had also raised funds for various causes, this time it was an explicitly and repeatedly stated goal. The press gave minimal coverage to the actual exhibits, reflecting the shift in priorities from industrial education to broader nationalistic and charitable aims.

During the 1901 exhibition, a lot of attention was on children's physical exercises and games. The inclusion of physical training as a category at the 1901 juvenile exhibition reflected the growing importance of physical education in society and the school curriculum at the turn of the nineteenth century. In Australian elementary schools, physical training consisted mainly of class drills that combined military manoeuvres—such as marching, rifle shooting, and squad drill—with

¹²⁸ Susan Lampard, "The Ideology of Domesticity and the Working-Class Women and Children of Port Adelaide, 1840-1890," *Historical Archaeology*, vol. 43, no. 3, (2009): 50-64.

¹²⁹ "Young People's Industrial Exhibition," *Australian Star*, May 29, 1901, 4; "The Industrial Exhibition," *Evening News*, May 29, 1901, 3.

¹³⁰ "Young People's Industrial Exhibition," *Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*, June 1, 1901, 1396.

¹³¹ "The Young People's Industrial Exhibition," *SMH*, June 3, 1901, 6.

¹³² "Young People's Industrial Exhibition," *Sunday Times*, June 2, 1901, 8; "The Industrial Exhibition," *Evening News*, May 29, 1901, 3.

Swedish gymnastics, or callisthenics.¹³³ This focus on physical training was primarily driven by concerns about health, particularly fears of the physical decline of a vaguely defined “Anglo-Celtic race”, a subject widely discussed in Britain.¹³⁴ These anxieties spurred efforts to improve public health by incorporating physical fitness into education to build a strong and robust population. Additionally, physical training was seen as crucial for military preparedness, instilling the discipline and strength needed for future service.¹³⁵ Schools aimed to cultivate citizens who were not only intellectually capable but also physically fit to contribute to society’s economic productivity. The 1901 juvenile exhibition provided a platform to showcase the results of this physical training, demonstrating the success of incorporating fitness into education. Through these displays, the exhibition highlighted the broader benefits of physical education, reinforcing its role in promoting health, national pride, and loyalty. This shift suggests that by the time the 1901 exhibition, the last juvenile industrial exhibition, was held, organisers’ goals had somewhat evolved. Beyond promoting schooling and technical training, they now envisioned a more structured childhood that also included physical exercise as an essential component of a well-rounded education.

The juvenile industrial exhibitions in NSW held between the late 1870s and early 1900s were part of a broader trend of industrial exhibitions taking place in various Western countries in the second half of the nineteenth century. Organised primarily by middle-class men with the assistance of their wives, these events required considerable time and effort. Organisers went to great lengths to secure support from influential colonials, the Department of Public Instruction, and transport companies to promote their values and ideals to the working classes. The main goal of the organisers was to promote technical education and address the colony’s reliance on foreign skilled labour. By showcasing children’s mechanical ingenuity and technical skills, these exhibitions

¹³³ David Kirk and Karen Twigg, “The Militarisation of School Physical Training in Australia: the Rise and Demise of the Junior Cadet Training Scheme, 1911-31,” *History of Education* (December 1993), vol. 22, no. 4, 391-414, here 393-396.

¹³⁴ Pablo Ariel Scharagrodskya and Valeria Varea, “Tracking the Origins of Physical Education in Argentina and Australia,” *International Journal of the History of Sport*, vol. 33, no. 8, (2016): 777–799, here 782-785.

¹³⁵ David Kirk and Barbara Spiller, “Schooling the Docile Body: Physical Education, Schooling and the Myth of Oppression,” *Australian Journal of Education*, vol. 38, no. 1 (1994): 78-95.

aimed to prepare a homegrown workforce that could support local industries, reducing the need for imported expertise. The exhibitions reflected a growing concern in NSW about industrial lag and the decline of apprenticeships. Advocates believed that the colony's prosperity depended on cultivating a technically skilled workforce capable of using machinery and producing industrial goods. Furthermore, these exhibitions highlighted the importance of vocational education in an increasingly competitive global economy, where advancements in technical education, especially in Europe and America, set high standards. The inclusion of schoolwork in the exhibitions aimed to demonstrate the successes of publicly funded education. It also helped attract more young participants, with schoolwork exhibits often outnumbering industrial displays. Additionally, the focus on skills like writing, drawing, and mapping reflected the organisers' belief in the importance of academic development. Ultimately, the events served to blend educational and industrial displays, reflecting societal values surrounding education and the development of children's skills.

The juvenile industrial exhibitions in NSW served multiple purposes beyond promoting technical and primary education, reflecting broader societal concerns. A key motivation was to instil industriousness and a strong work ethic in children. Organisers aimed to emphasise the dignity of hard work, featuring mottos like "Labour conquers all things" and hosting speeches that reinforced the nobility of labour. This marked a shift from earlier approaches—while employment was used to combat idleness in the 1850s–1860s, education took precedence at the turn of the nineteenth century. Additionally, the exhibitions sought to combat the perceived threat of larrikinism. By offering structured activities focused on industrial skills, these exhibitions aimed to divert at-risk youths from lawlessness and cultivate discipline and productivity. The events also showcased Australian youth's capabilities, aiming to counteract concerns that the country lagged behind more developed nations. Finally, the exhibitions reflected middle-class views on gender roles; boys were encouraged to pursue technical skills, while girls were expected to excel in domestic duties like needlework and cooking. This emphasis on domestic skills aligned with the prevailing ideology of domesticity, preparing young women for future roles as wives and mothers,

and addressing the scarcity of quality domestic servants. Overall, these exhibitions reinforced social and moral objectives while promoting a positive image of Australian youth.

The organisers of juvenile industrial exhibitions, along with their supporters—such as political leaders, high-ranking bureaucrats, and other influential NSW residents—who contributed through funding, attendance, and allowing schoolchildren to miss classes, inadvertently revealed their developing views on child labour and children's roles in society. Working-class youth were increasingly expected to develop technical skills, with organisers strongly encouraging such training to prepare them for skilled industrial jobs. At the same time, the inclusion of schoolwork categories, such as writing, drawing, and music, in these exhibitions suggests a broader educational agenda. This blend of academic and industrial displays indicates that the ruling classes believed children's youthful years should be spent acquiring an education that combined some intellectual development with practical skills. Nonetheless, inconsistencies in the expectations of various exhibitions reveal a lack of consensus on children's roles. While some organisers believed younger children should focus primarily on academic skills, others expected them to engage in industrial activities too. This period marked an evolving attitude toward child labour and education, as society grappled with how best to prepare children for productive work.

The next chapter details the ongoing discourse in NSW around child labour, this time with a particular focus on street trading by children. As we will see, debates on this issue began in the late nineteenth century and carried through into the early twentieth century, reflecting broader concerns about child welfare, education, and social order. This chapter will examine the key advocates who pushed for restrictions on children's street trading, including reformers, politicians, and youth organisations. Their motivations ranged from fears that street work exposed children to moral dangers to concerns that it disrupted schooling and limited future opportunities. The arguments for the ban did not emerge in isolation but were shaped by wider social developments. The growing influence of the international child welfare movement and evolving perspectives on the nature-versus-nurture debate played a significant role in shaping the arguments of reform

advocates. Additionally, anxieties about urban poverty and juvenile delinquency fuelled efforts to remove children from unsupervised work in public spaces. Finally, this chapter will explore the legislative outcomes of these advocacy efforts. As a result of these advocacy efforts, legislation was enacted to regulate child labour. The Neglected Children and Juvenile Offenders Act reflected shifting perceptions of childhood and work, aiming to protect children from the dangers of street work and encourage their education and moral development. By examining the individuals and movements that shaped these reforms, this chapter provides insight into how child labour policies in NSW evolved in response to both local debates and global trends.

Chapter Four

Enhancing Legal Controls on Child Labour: The Regulation of Juvenile Street Trade in NSW in the Early 1900s

“Here you are, sir, the athletic skeleton;
he’s a scorcher; performs on the bar like
a live athlete—a penny.”

“Take the children home a toy; they’ll
never tire the mechanical cat and mouse
—only one penny.”

“Blondin on a bicycle; rides without
stopping over a yard of string— a penny.”

“Have a flower for your buttonhole,
sir; the pick of the board for a penny.”

“The monster song book, all the latest
pantomime songs, comic, sentimental, and
music hall novelties only one penny...”¹

Anyone regularly walking through the streets of Sydney at the turn of the nineteenth century would have heard juvenile hawkers broadcasting their wares. The city’s major thoroughfares were filled with children of various ages desperate to earn a living. As the above calls suggest, the merchandise or services they sold were many and varied, including toys, newspapers, flowers, fruit, matches, shoe blacking, and delivering messages.² Life for young street

¹ “Ways of Living: A Little City Pirate,” *Narrandera Argus and Riverina Advertiser*, January 25, 1901, 5; The “Blondin” referred to Henri L’Estrange, an Australian tightrope walker, aeronaut, and showman who gained fame in the 1870s and 1880s. Inspired by the renowned French tightrope walker Charles Blondin, L’Estrange performed daring tightrope walks across Sydney Harbour and attempted gas balloon flights over the city, captivating audiences with his feats. Nicole Cama, “The Australian Blondin: The Dangerous Adventures of Henri L’Estrange,” *The Dictionary of Sydney*, 2017, https://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/the_australian_blondin accessed online February 26, 2025.

² “Street Trading by Children,” *Evening News*, July 26, 1906, 4.

traders was no quaint tale. Flower sellers, for instance, lived quite difficult lives. If these sellers worked on their own rather than in a team, they had to leave home early in the morning and travel to places that produced popular wild flowers such as wattle, native rose, boronia, waratah, flannel flower, or Christmas bells.³ After a long train trip followed by an often lengthy walk, they scouted out areas with flowers, gathered these up, then journeyed back the other way with up to thirty kilograms of flowers in a bag. The next morning a flower seller would arrive at one of the most popular stands—Pitt street, the corner of King street to the Strand Arcade—and remain there till evening, calling out to passersby. Not allowed to place their heavy load on the footpath, vendors carried flowers in a basket secured by a strap round the shoulders. If customers didn't buy, the flowers could wilt, wasting the sellers' efforts. However, successful sales could yield £1 to £3 a week, offering crucial financial support to their families. In 1901, essential food items were relatively affordable—a loaf of bread cost three pennies, half a kilogram of mutton was three pennies, and half a kilogram of butter was fifteen pennies.⁴ With 240 pennies in a pound, these earnings could significantly support a family, which typically had 3 to 4.5 children, especially those led by single mothers.⁵

Social commentators often failed to acknowledge the hard work of young street vendors and held rather scornful opinions of their parents. Press coverage during the period mostly depicted these youths in a negative light, portraying them as deceitful, prone to criminal behaviour, and engaging in socially unacceptable activities. Besides, there was a widespread belief that legitimate child hawkers were non-existent; that young people making a living on the streets were actually beggars, using their goods as props to fool the unwary. In a 1902 *Truth* article, Bernhard Rose Wise, who led efforts to restrict juvenile hawking, argued that “these youngsters [juvenile

³ “Street Flower Sellers,” *Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*, December 24, 1902, 1650.

⁴ Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, *Labour and Industrial Branch Report No. 1: Prices, Price Indexes & Cost of Living in Australia* (Melbourne: McCarron, Bird and CO, 1912), 12.

⁵ Janet McCalman and Rebecca Kippen, “Population and health,” in *The Cambridge History of Australia*, ed. Alison Bashford and Stuart Macintyre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 294-314, here 300-304.

street traders], without almost an exception, make merely a pretence of hawking for the purpose of begging”.⁶ Children who begged, it was believed, had no alternative but to become adult beggars, a prospect that was concerning on many accounts. Middle-class social commentators likewise depicted the parents of child hawkers negatively, often subjecting them to harsh criticism, including accusations that they neglected their children and exploited them for profit. These negative perceptions of juvenile street traders and their families prevailed in the years leading up to the enactment of legal measures to regulate and control child hawking.

During the early 1900s, a group of influential reformers initiated a coordinated campaign to regulate child hawking, leading to the enactment of legislation dedicated to this purpose—the *Neglected Children and Juvenile Offenders Act* (1905). As discussed in Chapter Three, the juvenile industrial exhibitions held between the late 1870s and early 1900s promoted the idea that childhood should be dedicated to education and that NSW would benefit as a whole from this focus. During this period, the 1896 Factories and Shops Act was also passed, which strongly opposed the premature employment of children in factories.⁷ In this context, the 1905 legislation restricting children’s involvement in street trading was another significant step in a larger societal movement, combining legal reforms and social advocacy, all aimed at further distancing children from the workforce.

Some of the reasons behind the *Neglected Children and Juvenile Offenders Act* included the belief that urban streets were full of ruinous temptations. If society did not make attempts to reclaim these youths while it was still possible, there would be no future for either the children or their society. The latter concern—the consequences of ignoring the problem of street children for the whole community—loomed particularly large in discussions around juvenile street trade. Other ideas that were instrumental in bringing about the regulation of juvenile hawking were related to

⁶ “Neglected Children: The Attorney General Proposes Effective Measures of Treatment,” *Truth*, August 10, 1902, 4.

⁷ See Ulduz Salmanova, “Banishing Children of “Tender Years” from the Workplace: Examining Child Labour Legislation in Nineteenth-century New South Wales,” (Honours thesis, University of Sydney, 2017).

debates about whether social problems ultimately resulted from heredity or environment and upbringing. Sir Charles Kinnaird Mackellar, who like Wise played a pivotal role in advocating for legislation regulating child street trade, firmly believed that neglected children (a term that encompassed child hawkers in his mind) could only become respectable citizens if raised in proper environments. Mackellar argued that it was the state's duty to ensure such conditions were provided. His insistence on the state assuming the role of the parent reflects the growing influence of the *parens patriae* doctrine, which had evolved to extend its reach to a broader segment of children by this time. A less well articulated yet important reason for wanting to reduce the number of children on the streets had to do with middle-class urbanites' wish for more orderly public spaces, which they viewed as indicators of progress and advancing civilisation. After a few setbacks, reformers managed to enact the Neglected Children and Juvenile Offenders Act in 1905, a law that limited children's abilities to earn money by working on the streets. This, in turn, further contributed to the curtailment of children's opportunities to help support their families financially and contributed to a more uniform experience of childhood across classes.

* * * *

At the turn of the twentieth century, Australia was already a highly urbanised nation, with a population approaching four million in 1901.⁸ Most Australians lived in coastal areas, and a significant portion—about a quarter—was concentrated in the two largest cities, Sydney and Melbourne. Sydney, in particular, experienced rapid urban expansion throughout the late nineteenth century, but unlike British cities, its suburbs were carved directly from bushland rather than expanding gradually onto cultivated rural land.⁹ Between 1871 and 1891, Sydney's population nearly tripled, growing from 135,000 to 383,283, with its share of NSW's total population rising to 34%. The 1880s marked a significant shift, as suburban populations began to surpass those living in the city itself. This shift was facilitated by the expansion of trams and railways, which allowed

⁸ McCalman and Kippen, "Population and health," 300-301.

⁹ Shirlee Fitzgerald, *Rising Damp: Sydney, 1870-90* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 13-51, 52-69.

residents to live further from the city and commute for work. However, the inefficiency, cost, and travel time of mass transit meant that only the elite and upper middle class could afford suburban living.¹⁰ For the majority of the population, living within walking distance of work—largely concentrated in the city core—was the only viable option, despite the growing scarcity of residential space due to commercial development. By 1900, Sydney’s population had reached nearly 500,000, driven by industrialisation, immigration, and economic growth.¹¹ The cityscape featured a mix of densely populated inner-city areas, emerging suburbs, and industrial zones. Despite this suburban growth, inner-city districts like the Rocks remained crowded, with many working-class families living in poor conditions.¹² As a result, suburban expansion was uneven: some areas evolved into affluent enclaves, while others remained industrial and working-class.

Child street traders were once a familiar sight in urban areas in Western societies, where they often gathered in busy commercial districts with high foot traffic. In Sydney, NSW notable hotspots included King Street, Circular Quay as well as major railway stations, the Central, for example, and tram stops.¹³ A rare opportunity to glance at the personal circumstances of juvenile hawkers, namely newsboys, is presented in the evidence gathered by the Royal Commission appointed in 1891 to inquire into the conditions in shops, factories, and workshops in Queensland. For reasons explained by historian Bryan Jamison, commissioners added newsboys as their witnesses even though they did not necessarily fall under the investigation’s purview.¹⁴ The information generated about child newsvendors in Queensland is likely to be largely true for their NSW counterparts and other young street sellers more generally in this period. The youth engaged

¹⁰ Lionel Frost, *The New Urban Frontier: Urbanisation and City-building in Australasia and the American West* (Kensington, NSW: UNSW Press, 1991), 78.

¹¹ J.C Caldwell, “Population,” in *Australians: Historical Statistics*, edited by Wray Vamplew (Broadway, N.S.W., Australia: Fairfax, Syme & Weldon Associates, 1987), 41.

¹² Grace Karskens, “The Rocks,” *Sydney Journal* (June 2009): 117-123.

¹³ “Thieving Newsboys,” *Australian Star*, October 13, 1893, 5; “Newsboys’ Dodge,” *Australian Star*, February 5, 1895, 3; “Newsboys and American Money,” *SMH*, August 22, 1908, 13.

¹⁴ Bryan Jamison, “Making “Honest, Truthful and Industrious Men”: Newsboys, Rational Recreation and the Construction of the “Citizen” in Late Victorian and Edwardian Brisbane,” *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 33, iss. 1, (1999): 61-75, here 63-64.

in newspaper selling were reportedly mostly between ten and sixteen years of age, but there were some who were as young as six or seven. One could occasionally come across a girl newsvendor, but the job was mostly popular with boys. It was not uncommon for several children of the same family to sell newspapers.¹⁵ Some of the questions asked by the commissioners indicate that there was a belief that newsboys had no family or home.¹⁶ Contrary to this misconception, the evidence suggests that most newsvendors had families and homes to go back to once their work was done.¹⁷ This insight into child street traders highlights the broader realities of juvenile labour at the close of the nineteenth century.

Newboys' job, much like that of flower sellers, was rather demanding but critical for supporting their families. Newsboys generally started work around eight in the morning. First, they dusted and swept the premises, then delivered mail until the first edition was published. The rest of the time they were busy selling newspapers, moving from one corner to another.¹⁸ They would normally finish at 6 p.m. unless they did not sell all of their newspapers; in that case they had to stay out later.¹⁹ They were out on the streets the entire time, rain or shine, and always on their feet. Younger newsboys could make between 10s to over £1 pound a week, whilst senior boys made about £2 a week.²⁰ Their help was very much needed by their families. As one of the boys testified, there were newsboys who would have loved to learn a trade, but they could not; they had to hawk to help their mothers, who were often raising them and younger siblings on their own.²¹ The

¹⁵ Queensland Parliamentary Papers 1891 (v.2), *Royal Commission Appointed to Inquire into and Report Upon the Conditions Under Which Work Is Done in the Shops, Factories, and Workshops in the Colony* (James C. Beal: Government Printer, 1891): 927-1321, here 1253-4, 1256. [Hereafter Qld PP 1891]

¹⁶ Qld PP 1891, 1252, 1254, 1255, 1256.

¹⁷ Qld PP 1891, 1252, 1256.

¹⁸ Australians' avid readership fuelled a thriving print culture, with around 600 newspapers in circulation by 1890, including 173 in NSW and 159 in Victoria. This booming demand for news created an increased need for child newspaper hawkers, who played a vital role in distributing papers and ensuring the latest information reached eager readers. Stuart Macintyre and Sean Scalmer, "Colonial States and Civil Society, 1860–90," in *The Cambridge History of Australia*, ed. Alison Bashford and Stuart Macintyre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 189–217, here 212.

¹⁹ Qld PP 1891, 1257, 1280.

²⁰ Qld PP 1891, 1253

²¹ Qld PP 1891, 1253-4.

demanding yet essential work of newsboys not only provided vital financial support to their families but also reflected the harsh realities of urban life, where survival often came at the expense of opportunities that could pave the way for a more financially secure future.

The perusal of the contemporary press shows that child street sellers were portrayed mostly in a bad light. Perhaps, because newsboys were the most visible and populous group of child hawkers, they were particularly prominent in these negative accounts. In September 1893, for example, the *Sydney Morning Herald* featured a letter from a certain C. F. Digby Smith who informed readers of a trick that newsboys supposedly used to rob unsuspecting passengers of their tickets. He shared that while he was purchasing a ticket from the ticket office on King Street, he was being closely watched by a group of newsboys. When he was about to get on the tram, one newsboy allegedly threw a newspaper in his face to create a distraction while another stole his ticket. Smith was beside himself with rage for not being careful enough, especially given that he had overheard a fellow passenger on the tram earlier that day talking about this same trick being used on them.²² Newspaper accounts accused newsboys of other kinds of wrongdoing, too. According to one report, they were involved in a scam in which they claimed that the coin they were paid was bad (meanwhile swapping the legitimate coin with a fake one) and insisted on additional payment.²³ If members of the public refused to pay more, newsboys allegedly resorted to insulting them or even hurting them physically. Similarly, newspaper readers learned that newsboys were associated with such unsavoury pastimes as gambling, drinking, smoking, and swearing.²⁴ In short, negative portrayals of young street sellers dominated the press prior to the enactment of the law regulating street trade.

Studying the press at the turn of the nineteenth century also reveals a widespread denial that child street hawkers were genuine vendors, along with a conviction that these children would

²² "A Warning to Tram Travellers," *SMH*, September 19, 1893, 6.

²³ "Newsboys at the Tram Stations," *Daily Telegraph*, July 13, 1893, 3.

²⁴ "City Newsboys' Society," *Herald*, June 8, 1905, 2; "Newsboys' Home," *Daily Telegraph*, March 8, 1888, 6.

never amount to anything but stay beggars for the rest of their lives. According to the *Catholic Press* “the city streets were simply flooded with juveniles disposing of matches, bootlaces, flowers ... They were not honestly trying to sell. They were begging under cover of trading.”²⁵ Another article devoted to the discussion of child beggars disguised as street sellers contained the grim prediction that these children would grow to become a certain “lazzaroni class”: “juvenile street waifs of today will be the men and women of a few years hence and we certainly do not want to witness the growth of a lazzaroni class in these Australian cities under our very eyes.”²⁶ Rather than a singular instance, beggars were frequently referred to as the “lazzaroni class” in this period.²⁷ These discussions of child street trade often blurred into accusations of vagrancy, with concerns that these children, viewed as nothing more than beggars in disguise, would eventually contribute to the rise of a “lazzaroni class” in Australian cities.

The term “lazzaroni” was employed to conjure the image of the Neapolitan beggar class, known for their extreme poverty. In the seventeenth century, the Spanish of Naples pejoratively labelled the poor of Naples as lazzaroni after they revolted against Spanish rule. This was an allusion to Lazarus, the New Testament leper, who laid outside a rich man’s door. Naples by this time had become notorious for the size of the so-called lazzaroni population. In the eighteenth century, it was estimated that there were between 4,000 and 40,000 lazzaroni in Naples (in a population of just over 400,000).²⁸ Grand Tourists and travel writers who visited Naples in the eighteenth century customarily described lazzaroni as indigent, half-naked, carefree street dwellers. Although divergent views on the lazzaroni existed (Goethe, for instance, wrote about the poor of Naples as hard-working street sellers, not beggars) these accounts nonetheless cemented long-

²⁵ “Children and Street Selling,” *Catholic Press*, June 28, 1902, 10; “Protecting Children,” *Catholic Press*, October 20, 1900, 16.

²⁶ “Neglected Children,” *SMH*, August 27, 1902, 8.

²⁷ “Sydney’s Lazzaroni,” *Sun*, January 5, 1913, 18 and “Lazy Lazzaroni and the Boy Beggars of Sydney,” *Truth*, May 25, 1902, 5.

²⁸ Melissa Calaresu, “From the Street to Stereotype: Urban Space, Travel and the Picturesque in Late Eighteenth-Century Naples,” *Italian Studies*, (2013), vol. 62, iss. 2, 189-203, here 192, 200.

standing stereotypes. Clearly, these stereotypes of the Italian poor had wide purchase, having been transplanted all the way to Australia.

The use of the term “lazzaroni” in relation to child hawkers in NSW may have been influenced by the attitude of the “Italian Peril” or “Italophobia” in Australian society at the close of the nineteenth century. This era saw a rise in Italian immigration to Australia, although notably smaller compared to the USA. Between 1876 and 1918, about 18,200 Italians arrived, with over half before 1900 originating from the small northern region of Lombardy, drawn by its connections to Switzerland and the port of Hamburg.²⁹ Many returned to Italy, with reports suggesting high return rates even outnumbering arrivals in some years. The majority of those who remained originated from Southern Italy and established communities in northern Queensland and Western Australia. Queensland’s initiative to sponsor 300 Italians for sugar cane field work in 1891 meant to replace South Sea Islander workers further incentivised Italian migration to the region. With the halt in Melanesian and Asian immigration following the *Immigration Restriction Act* of 1901, Italians became the largest non-British group to arrive.³⁰ Despite their marginal presence in Australian population, Italian concentrations or employment sparked concern.

The perceived “inferiority” of Italians and their potential competition with British labour formed the grounds for concern. Italian immigrants raised the alarm due to prevailing racial anxieties in Australia. Southern Europeans, including Italians, were seen as inferior and racially suspect, with fears of their perceived savagery and criminality.³¹ This perception was exacerbated by Social Darwinists’ theories and concerns about national virility.³² Politicians expressed worries

²⁹ Michael Williams, “Sojourners & Birds of Passage: Chinese and Italian Migrants in Australia and the United States in Comparative Perspective, 1871-1914,” *Journal of the European Association for Studies of Australia*, vol. 11, no. 2 (2020): 2-16, here 4-5.

³⁰ John S. Macdonald and Leatrice D. Macdonald, “Italian Migration to Australia: Manifest Functions of Bureaucracy versus Latent Functions Of Informal Networks,” *Journal of Social History*, vol. 3, no. 3 (Spring, 1969 - Spring, 1970), 249-275, here 253.

³¹ Catherine Ann Martin, “The Backward Stock of the South: The Metaphoric Structuring of Italian Racial Difference in 1920s Australia,” *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, vol. 42, no. 4 (2021), 440-459, here 442

³² Michele Langfield, “Attitudes to European Immigration to Australia in the early Twentieth Century,” *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, vol. 12, iss. 1 (1991), 1-15, here 3.

about being overtaken by what they deemed “servile” races, further fuelling apprehension about Italian immigration.³³ Labour unions had their own motivations for opposing Southern Europeans, particularly Southern Italians who were the most numerous among them. Their opposition stemmed from concerns about job competition and working conditions, and suspicions that agents were recruiting labourers on behalf of mine owners and employers in the timber industry, the two sectors that attracted the most Southern European workers.³⁴ In addition, unions worried that workers under contracts would be unable or unwilling to participate in strikes or advocate for higher wages. Two Royal Commissions were conducted in response to community unrest regarding European immigration. The first, in 1902, was a Commonwealth inquiry into foreign contract labour. The second, in 1904, was a Western Australian investigation into non-British labour immigration, particularly focused on Italians in the mining industry, to determine if they received preferential treatment in employment. Thus, the press used the term “lazzaroni” to evoke a sense of societal fear, dismissing child street hawkers as beggars and suggesting they would remain trapped in poverty with no prospect of escaping their circumstances.

Fear of and hostility towards beggars in NSW related to earlier British developments in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This era saw the emergence of evangelicalism and the rise of classical political economy, particularly in the more pessimistic formulations of Thomas Malthus and David Ricardo.³⁵ These ideologies tended to categorise the lower classes into two distinct groups: the hardworking, respectable “deserving” poor and the idle and potentially criminal “undeserving” paupers, with beggars and vagrants often falling into the latter category. During this period, a principle was established regarding the state’s relationship with the labouring population and the provision of basic needs for those unable to support themselves.³⁶ Assistance to the

³³ Catherine Dewhirst, “Collaborating on Whiteness: Representing Italians in Early White Australia,” *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 32, no.1(2008), 33-49, here 37.

³⁴ Langfield, “Attitudes to European Immigration to Australia in the early Twentieth Century,” 5-8.

³⁵ Christopher Ferguson, “The Political Economy of the Street and its Discontents,” *Cultural and Social History*, vol. 12, iss. 1 (2015), 27-50, here 29.

³⁶ Sandra Berns, “Returning to Our Roots: Australia’s New Deserving Poor,” *Australian Feminist Law Journal*, 16 (2002): 24-52, here 31-32.

nonworking poor was to be limited and difficult to obtain. Aid had to be strictly regulated to ensure that only the truly deserving received it and given at a level lower than the lowest paid worker's earnings, so that only the most desperate would accept it. Another fundamental principle that emerged emphasised the necessity for society to ensure that impoverished individuals remained in the workforce. This was primarily due to two reasons: first, individuals were needed to perform low-wage and undesirable tasks. Additionally, given the substantial number of impoverished individuals, authorities deemed it impractical to provide assistance to them all; they expected that everyone who could work would do so. Sandra Berns argues that these principles of controlling vagrancy, integral to common law, were adopted in Australia from its early settlement. The principles linked criminal law, poor relief, and labour market policy. Vagrancy laws addressed various offenses, distinguishing the "rough poor" from the respectable poor. Colonial governments avoided providing legislative entitlement to relief, fearing it would promote idleness and vice, leaving those in need to seek help from local charities. These historical developments shaped the deep-seated fear of child beggars in NSW; they were seen as future adult beggars and therefore part of the "undeserving" poor, reinforcing concerns about idleness, criminality, and the burden of relief on society.

Concerns about beggars on the streets may have also stemmed from the broader preoccupation with maintaining public order and civility in urban spaces. Since cities were seen as reflections of civilisation, a well-ordered and peaceful street life symbolised a thriving, respectable society, while disorder—including the visible presence of beggars—challenged this image.³⁷ Beggars, by their very presence, could be seen as disrupting the ideal of an orderly and prosperous urban environment. Their presence might have been perceived as a sign of poverty and social failure, which clashed with the aspirations of both the middle-class elite and working-class residents who valued the town's main streets as places of business, commerce, and respectable

³⁷ Andy Croll, "Street disorder, Surveillance and Shame: Regulating Behaviour in the Public Spaces of the Late Victorian British Town," *Social History*, vol. 24, no. 3, (1999): 250-268.

interaction. The business elite, in particular, saw these streets as vital economic spaces, and any obstruction—whether physical or symbolic—was seen as a threat to trade and prosperity. Additionally, the ratepaying class viewed these areas as their domain, reinforcing the idea that those who did not contribute economically were out of place. Concerns about beggars and the anxieties surrounding larrikins in NSW, as discussed in Chapter Three, share a common origin: both stem from broader fears about public order, urban respectability, and the maintenance of a “civilised” society. Both fears stemmed from a desire to impose order on a rapidly changing urban landscape. Public streets were seen as barometers of civilisation, and any visible signs of disorder—whether through poverty, idleness, or perceived lawlessness—were met with strong opposition.

The press in the period under study invariably implied that unscrupulous adults lived off the earnings of child beggars who pretended to be hawkers. The *Sydney Mail and NSW Advertiser*, for instance, noted that: “Lurking somewhere in the shadow of a doorway is usually a man or a woman who live upon the earnings of the mite [a young child] or “I have seen the adult operator dart forward and snatch the sixpence” from the child.³⁸ Likewise, the *Daily Telegraph* warned that “Many parents live in vice and idleness on the money their children earn by selling matches and papers”.³⁹ According to the press reports, these adults typically mistreated children, with one claiming: “I have seen a mite of four struck because he did not succeed in getting anything from a passer-by— was not piteous enough, or aggressive enough”.⁴⁰ The belief that these children’s parents were negligent, or even abusive, was common.

It is, however, possible to find occasional instances of sympathetic attitudes toward young street sellers in newspaper coverage of charity events organised by youth agencies. These reports not only acknowledged the authenticity of street trading by children associated with these agencies but also praised their labour. For instance, an article in the *Riverine Grazier* covering an annual

³⁸ “Mendicancy in Sydney,” *Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*, August 19, 1899, 445.

³⁹ “Save the Children,” *Daily Telegraph*, July 29, 1903, 9.

⁴⁰ “Mendicancy in Sydney,” *Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*, August 19, 1899, 445.

charity picnic organised by a newsboys' club in 1908 highlighted the significant contribution of child street sellers to supporting their households, claiming that not many people in the country "can realise the large number of homes supported by children selling newspapers on the streets"⁴¹. Another similar picnic held in 1906 prompted a similar conclusion on the role of street selling in children's lives: "This annual function is very much appreciated by about 700 lads, who earn their living selling papers on the streets of our city."⁴² A newspaper report on the picnic that Boys' Brigade arranged in 1898 for their youthful members, various youthful streets sellers, provides one of the most sympathetic accounts of newsboys' life:

The newsboy's calling is a precarious one, and in the majority of cases it shuts him off from other lads of his own age, who look upon him as quite beneath them, and unworthy of their companionship. They are compelled to be out in all kinds of weather — many of them wretchedly clad — to earn a few coppers by supplying the public with papers containing the latest scandal, murder, or other sensation; they are abused and credited with all the mischief and villainy under the sun; and as often as not, after being out from early morning until the 'city has sunk to rest,' some of them are ill-treated by cruel parents at home if the day's returns are not considered satisfactory. In their lives there is considerably more of shade than sunshine ...⁴³

The articles were most likely penned by a committee member of the prospective charitable organisations or sympathisers of these establishments as they dwelled on many useful things children had learnt since joining and offered a lot of praise to the committee members of these organisations. Thus, it was mostly youth organisations that had something positive to say about child street sellers.

⁴¹ "Sydney Newsboys Picnic," *Riverine Grazier*, July 10, 1908, 6.

⁴² "Newsboys' Picnic," *Australian Star*, April 7, 1906, 7.

⁴³ "Newsboys' 'Day Out': Second Annual Picnic," *Evening News*, October 17, 1898, 3.



Child street sellers' association with a youth agency generally commanded approval. Above is a gaslight sketch from an article in *Sydney Mail* titled "On Mendicancy in Sydney," depicting a boy newsvendor.⁴⁴ The boy appears to be barefoot, and his short pants suggest he cannot afford new ones that fit properly. He is carrying a stack of newspapers under his left arm and is likely about to go up the stairs to sell them to people inside the building. The caption describes him as "An Honest and Legitimate Trader - News vendor and Member of the Boys' Brigade," aiming to differentiate him from deceitful child beggars depicted on the same page.

Despite having sympathetic views towards young street vendors, youth agencies were actively involved in advocating for legislation aimed at regulating juvenile street trading. An example of such an organisation, the Boys' Brigade, stands out as a supporter of such a proposal. In August 1902, the councils of the Boys' Brigades and Institutions of NSW waited upon the Attorney-General Mr. Bernard Rose Wise, who had just proposed a bill that would control the

⁴⁴ "On Mendicancy in Sydney," *Sydney Mail*, August 19, 1899, 443.

practice of children selling goods on the streets and asked him to make it compulsory for all newsboys to be registered. The announced rationale for the registration was that not all newsboys were “bona fide”; some of them carried newspapers under their arms to pretend to be selling.⁴⁵ The implication was that what they were truly engaged in was begging. A couple of months later, the councils of the Boys’ Brigades and Institutions of NSW sent another deputation to wait upon Wise. This time they requested that licensing for street selling be required of children up to eighteen years of age (the proposed bill suggested sixteen as the cut-off age). They also suggested that the hours for selling should be limited to between 6 a.m. and 8 p.m. and that an advisory committee should be formed to consist of representatives of existing organisations dealing with child life in order to assist the authorities in the administration of the proposed act.⁴⁶ Not only was the leadership of the brigade interested in having child street curbed, but they also wanted to actively participate in the enforcement of the future law.

It is no wonder that an organisation such as a Boys’ Brigade would show interest in the restriction and regulation of child street trade. After all, they had been attempting to counteract the perceived harmful effects of the occupation well before Wise introduced his bill. Boys’ brigades emerged in Australia at the end of the nineteenth century; the Sydney branch dates to 1882.⁴⁷ Boys who joined the brigade were typically newsboys, bootblacks, rag and bone pickers⁴⁸, factory lads, lace and knick-knack sellers.⁴⁹ The mostly middle-class founders and committee members of the organisation were convinced that street trade would inevitably result in boys turning to crime. This had a lot to do with the thinking that street trade was a “blind alley” job, that is, one that developed

⁴⁵ “A Nursery of Crime: Children of the Streets,” *Australian Star*, August 27, 1902, 3.

⁴⁶ “Control of Children: The Bill before Parliament,” *SMH*, October 17, 6.

⁴⁷ *Annual Report of the Boys’ Brigade, 1895-1896* (Sydney: W.C. Penfold and Co., General Printers, 1896), 7.

⁴⁸A “rag and bone picker” was someone who collected rags and bones. Bones were sold for boiling into glue and fertiliser, while rags were sold by weight and quality to rag merchants, who repurposed them into cloth called “shoddy.” B. W. Clapp, *An Environmental History of Britain Since the Industrial Revolution* (London: Routledge, 1994), at 194.

⁴⁹ Michael E. Hoare, *Boys, Urchins, Men: A History of The Boys’ Brigade in Australia and Papua-New Guinea, 1882-1976* (Terrey Hills, N.S.W.: Reed, 1980), 29.

no valuable skills.⁵⁰ Besides, life on the streets confronted children with all manner of temptation, from drinking, smoking, and gambling to sexual profligacy. Hence, the leadership of the boys' brigade and similar organisations (boys' clubs, girls' clubs, boys' scouts, etc.) busied themselves with providing working-class youth with schooling and wholesome forms of recreation that could hopefully instil honesty, sobriety and industry and thereby raise worthy citizens.⁵¹ The membership of these organisations was never particularly high and kept fluctuating so these youth organisations could not extend the civilising activities to all youthful street sellers. This led to efforts to restrict child street trading. Although the leadership of youth agencies were among the first to concern themselves with child street traders, there is no evidence that they had called for a legislation regulating the work of a child hawker until Charles Mackellar and W.B. Wise proposed it in the early 1900s.

Charles Mackellar (1844-1926), physician, politician and businessman was one of the major forces pushing for the legislation. Throughout his life, Mackellar showed a steady and sympathetic interest in the lot of children, such that contemporaries described him as "the children's friend."⁵² He introduced the *Dairies Supervision Act* of 1886 which helped to reduce infant mortality. He was also responsible for the introduction into the NSW Parliament of the following legislation affecting children: the Crimes (Girls' Protection) Bills (1903, 1905), and the Infant Protection Bill (1902, 1903); the latter became law in 1904. Juvenile offenders in particular commanded Mackellar's ready sympathy. It is likely that his links with the State Children Relief Board, a government agency established by the State Children's Relief Act (1881) to introduce the boarding out system, had a lot to do with this. In 1882-85 Mackellar was a member of the State Children Relief Board. In 1902-14 he was the president, and it is in this period that he sponsored the Neglected Children

⁵⁰ Jamison, "Making "Honest, Truthful and Industrious men," 62-64.

⁵¹ Jamison, "Making "Honest, Truthful and Industrious men," 62; Hoare, "Boys, Urchins, Men," 29.

⁵² Ann M. Mitchell, "Mackellar, Sir Charles Kinnaird (1844–1926)," Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/mackellar-sir-charles-kinnaird-7382/text12833>, published first in hardcopy 1986, accessed online March 26, 2024; Ann Millar, *The Biographical Dictionary of the Australian Senate*, vol. 1, 1901-1929 (Melbourne University Press: Carlton South, Vic., 2000), 39-41.

and Juvenile Offenders Act (1905) that limited children's ability to contribute to the family economy by hawking.

Mackellar shared some of the contemporary beliefs regarding juvenile street sellers but also had his own strong opinions on the matter. He believed that children on the streets either pretended to sell while actually engaged in begging, or they were selling because they had neglectful parents who had forced them to do so: "large numbers of children, both boys and girls, of ages from 7 to 16 years, are habitually driven upon the streets by their worthless parents, at all hours of the day and even far into the night, with a view to their earning money by selling matches, newspapers, and other articles, or to beg under the pretence of doing so".⁵³ Streets were not the right place for children, Mackellar thought, as street life invariably led to dire consequences—truancy, drinking, gambling, sleeping out at night, thieving, and being committed either to the reformatory or the jail.⁵⁴ For boys, the ultimate evil was incarceration, whereas for girls it was prostitution. Mackellar cited various administrators of state institutions dealing with youth to argue that most juvenile crimes stemmed from the neglect of parental control and resultant truancy. One such person he frequently referred to was Captain Neitenstein, comptroller-general of NSW prisons. Captain Neitenstein did, indeed, mention this point in several reports he produced over the years in various capacities: "After nearly a quarter of a century's experience, and after dealing with some thousands of boys, I am impressed with the fact that truancy is the most prolific cause of juvenile crime; nine out of every ten who come here owe their fall to this great evil ..."⁵⁵ His long experience on training ships *Vernon* and *Sobraon*, no doubt, had a say in forming this

⁵³ Charles Mackellar, *Address on Parental Right and Parental Responsibility Viewed in Relation to the Right of Community* by Hon. C.K. Mackellar, M.B, M.L.C., President, State Children Relief Board, at the Public School Teachers' Conference, 26 June, 1905 (Sydney: Government Printer 1905), 1-17, here 3.

⁵⁴ Mackellar, *Address on Parental Right and Parental Responsibility*, 3.

⁵⁵ "The Work on *Sobraon*: Captain Neitenstein's Report," *Australian Star*, August 21, 1896, 2; "The Realms of Retribution: Neitenstein's Report," *Truth*, August 28, 1898, 3.

conclusion and trusting this conclusion Mackellar strove to impose restrictions on juvenile street trade.⁵⁶

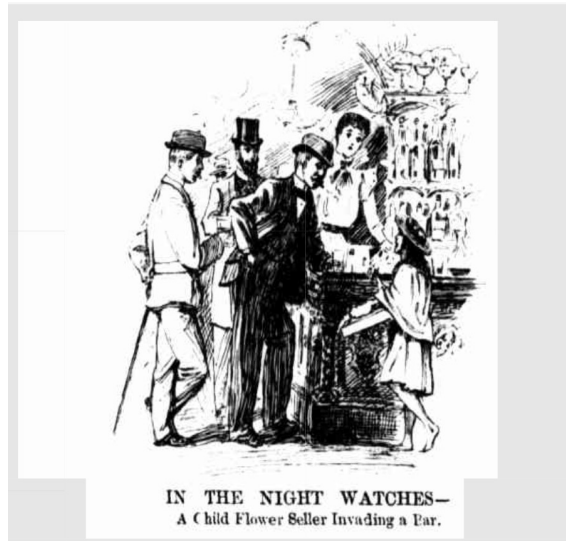
Talking about neglected children in general, Mackellar claimed that the state had the right to have a say in the upbringing of such youth. He passionately argued that parents were not always eligible to exercise undivided attention over their children. He claimed this on a number of occasions but nowhere as loudly and clearly as in his address at the Public School Teachers' Conference held on June 26, 1905. Although parental rights were a "sacred thing," he explained, the moment parents stopped attending to their duties of taking care of their sons and daughters, they lost that right.⁵⁷ The title of his address somewhat indicates his reasons for this line of thinking—*Address on Parental Right and Parental Responsibility Viewed in Relation to the Right of the Community*. He maintained that according to his experience children all too often became "a charge upon the taxpayers of the State" through "the gross carelessness and sometimes the immorality and vice" of parents. To prove his point, Mackellar used statistics generated via the State Children Relief Board, of which he was the president at the time; he mentioned that no less than thirty percent of children in the care of the board were children of "utterly degenerate and vicious parents".⁵⁸ And since it was the community that had to deal with the consequences of parental neglect, the state, he argued, had every right to step in and do with children what they saw fit, namely, remove them from their parents and place them into institutions that would do a better

⁵⁶ As discussed in Chapter Two, the *Vernon* was established under the Industrial Schools Act of 1866, which sought to address the issue of "wayward" children, including those who were destitute, abandoned, or involved in crime. As part of this initiative, the *Vernon*, a former merchant sailing ship, was purchased and transformed into a Public Industrial School in 1867. Initially moored near Garden Island and later relocated to Cockatoo Island, the ship housed boys—some as young as three—who received a combination of moral, nautical, industrial, and elementary education. In 1892, the *Vernon* was replaced by the much larger *Sobraon*, which continued the same traditions, providing training and discipline for boys under the industrial school system. Frederick William Neitenstein joined the *Vernon* in 1873 as a mate and clerk. By 1878, he became the superintendent of the ship, earning a reputation as a reformer. He was convinced that a strict approach, combining discipline, constant monitoring, physical training, and a system of ranks, would guide the boys in his care onto the right path. Mark Dunn, "Vernon Nautical Training ship," *Dictionary of Sydney*, 2008 https://dictionaryofsydney.org/entry/vernon_nautical_training_ship, accessed online February 28, 2025.

⁵⁷ Mackellar, *Address on Parental Right and Parental Responsibility*, 1-2.

⁵⁸ Mackellar, *Address on Parental Right and Parental Responsibility*, 5.

job at raising them to be reputable citizens. In a similar talk Mackellar gave two years earlier, he was not nearly as assertive. Then he settled for a leading question, asking if it was wise to allow “the fetish of the individual liberty to override the good of the general community;” he refrained from making outright recommendations to remove children from negligent parents.⁵⁹



A gaslight sketch of a girl trader epitomising Mackellar’s fear of a sexual danger. The girl is pictured in a bar—an all-male space at this time—surrounded by looming men.⁶⁰

Anxious that the idea of separating children from parents might be perceived as too drastic or unprecedented, Mackellar referred to legislation in other countries that encompassed similar measures. The *Poor Law Act*, recently amended in England (1899), for example, suggested that children could be taken away from parents if the latter were deemed negligent or incapable of providing appropriate nurture and guidance.⁶¹ Mackellar found Germany’s *New Code of Civil Law* particularly admirable: “it is to Germany we must turn to in order to obtain the clearest and most logical application of the principle that it is the duty of the State to control itself with the control of, and, in the broadest sense, the education of the young”, he argued.⁶² He shared that prior to 1901, the German state could take charge of children only if they did not receive proper care and

⁵⁹ Charles Mackellar, *Child Life in Sydney: Address by the Hon. C. K. Mackellar, M.L.C., President of the State Children Relief Board, to the Christian Social Union, on 19 June 1903* (Sydney: Government Printer 1903), 1-12. here 9.

⁶⁰ “On Mendicancy in Sydney,” *Sydney Mail*, August 19, 1899, 443.

⁶¹ Mackellar, *Address on Parental Right and Parental Responsibility*, 14.

⁶² Mackellar, *Address on Parental Right and Parental Responsibility*, 15-16.

committed a punishable crime. But since a New Code of Civil Law came into effect (1901) the latter requirement was dropped; more than that, children could now be removed from parents if a court deemed their school attendance insufficient. To tone down his enthusiasm for the German law, Mackellar attempted to reassure his audience by stating that children should be removed from their parents only as a last resort.

Mackellar's insistence on the state's right to discount parental rights in favour of child street traders' interests reflects the expanding application of *parens patriae*—the state's power to substitute its authority for that of natural parents over their children. The concept of *parens patriae*, believed to originate from the eleventh century, underwent numerous alterations during the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries. These changes might elucidate Mackellar's readiness to implement it. During the eighteenth century, the Court of Chancery in Britain began asserting its authority over testamentary guardianship, despite the traditional inviolability of a father's rights over his children.⁶³ This period also saw the emergence of making a child a ward of court. Initially, the court's involvement in guardianship and wardship focused on administering the property of infant heirs, a trend that persisted until 1847 when the court moved away from this property-centric approach. This shift allowed the court to broaden its jurisdiction to include children of the poor and those with living parents, marking a significant change in the relationship between children, parents, and the state. Concurrently, changes in common law custody disputes gradually began favouring considerations of the child's welfare over paternal rights. While Victorian fathers typically retained custody unless their behaviour was severely questionable, courts increasingly recognised the mother's claims and prioritised the child's interests. Judicial innovations eventually led to statutory changes, with laws mandating consideration of the child's benefit and welfare in custody and access matters. By the late nineteenth century, the welfare of the child became the primary concern for the Chancery Court. Chapters One and Two show that this revised concept

⁶³ John Seymour, "Parens Patriae and Wardship Powers: Their Nature and Origins," *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, vol.14, no. 2 (Summer 1994), 159-188.

had already been implemented in NSW through state intervention in working-class families, enacting laws that restricted children's ability to earn wages and overrode parental authority in determining their children's work. This was evident in the Coal Fields Regulation Act (1862), which regulated the working conditions of children in coal mines, as well as in efforts to extend similar protections to factory child workers. Mackellar's stance exemplifies the evolving doctrine of *parens patriae*, as the state increasingly asserted its authority over children's welfare, extending its reach beyond orphans and heirs to working-class families and child labourers.

Mackellar's call for greater state intervention in families where children were engaged in street trading also reflected a broader shift in child welfare policy during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His advocacy aligned with the evolving definitions of child neglect, expanding beyond traditional concerns about destitution to include parental failure to adequately care for and provide for their children. Historian Shurlee Swain identifies key phases in Australia's child welfare development, highlighting how early colonial policies primarily sought to control destitute children rather than care for them.⁶⁴ Initial child welfare laws focused on removing children from environments perceived as harmful, such as prisons or asylums, where they were housed alongside adults. However, the legislation largely targeted children who were already visible on the streets or in institutions, rather than proactively intervening in family life. From the late 1880s, influenced by Britain's child rescue movement and the passage of the Children's Charter (1889), colonial governments began redefining neglect to include parental failure to uphold new expectations of care. This shift led to laws that allowed authorities to intervene when children were found soliciting or street trading, interpreting such activities as indicators of parental neglect rather than simply the child's misfortune. These legal changes empowered governments to actively seek out and remove children deemed to be at risk.

⁶⁴ Shurlee Swaine, *History of Child Protection Legislation* (Sydney: Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2014), 5-8.

During various public talks Mackellar also fervently argued that the state was capable of reversing the damage inflicted upon children by negligent parents, emphasising the importance of the environment over heredity in character formation. He acknowledged that heredity usually caused children to resemble their parents but argued passionately against the notion that a child's temperament or behaviour came from the same source. Drunkenness, vice, and crime were transmitted by one's environment rather than inherited from parents, he contended.⁶⁵ He confessed that the scientific community did not commonly share his ideas although there were some notable exceptions. Nonetheless, he was convinced that the evidence proved that he was right. Then he proceeded to read out the testimonies produced by volunteer women visitors and head teachers at various schools in regard to children in state care. Here is one piece of evidence provided by the Head Teacher at Quaama Public School concerning boarded-out children that attended his school: "I can safely say that all the children attended school regularly, appeared as well cared for (in many cases better) were as intelligent, attentive, and as well-behaved as any of the other children". Needless to say, all the evidence that he produced pointed to the state's positive role in rehabilitating troubled youth and teaching them useful skills.

Mackellar's firm advocacy for the significance of environment over heredity in the nature-nurture discourse aligns with the prevailing attitudes towards the matter in Australia during this era. According to Bacchi, from 1900 to 1914, most social commentators in Australia tended to emphasise the influence of the environment in debates on evolution, contrasting with the greater emphasis on hereditary determinism in Britain and America.⁶⁶ This inclination stemmed from several factors: first, Australians held a strong belief in their ability to overcome challenges found in the Old World. Second, having earned the reputation of being the "Social laboratory of the World," Australians had confidence in the state's capacity to mitigate class divisions and forge a

⁶⁵ Mackellar, *Address on Parental Right and Parental Responsibility*, 6-11.

⁶⁶ C. L. Bacchi, "The Nature-Nurture Debate in Australia, 1900-1914," *Historical Studies*, vol.19, iss. 75 (1980), 199-212.

new, healthier social structure, thereby granting nurture a dominant position in the nature-nurture discourse. Last, given Australia's convict past, there was a preference for environmental explanations, which provided a more reassuring narrative.

The nature-nurture debate, as it evolved during this period, can be seen as an extension of earlier philosophical discussions by John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Locke's concept of the mind as a *tabula rasa* (blank slate) underscored the transformative power of experience and education, while Rousseau's ideas about the natural goodness of children and the role of society in shaping them resonated with the growing emphasis on environmental influences. Mackellar's advocacy reflected this intellectual lineage, reinforcing the idea that intervention and social reform could shape individuals and, by extension, society itself. Historian Stephen Garton cautions against categorising Mackellar solely as an environmentalist in the nature-nurture discourse, however.⁶⁷ He suggests that Mackellar exemplifies someone who harmoniously integrated two seemingly contradictory perspectives on evolution: environmentalism and hereditarianism. When it came to dealing with neglected and delinquent children who had the potential for reform, Mackellar chose to prioritise environmental arguments.

Although Mackellar was the most vocal proponent of child welfare reform in NSW, it was Bernhard Wise, the NSW Attorney General, who framed and introduced the state children's bill three times in 1902 and one final time with a successful outcome in 1905. The earliest evidence of Wise getting interested in the lot of neglected children dates to the start of the twentieth century. Late in 1901, Herbert Henry Booth's suggestions regarding the Salvation Army's approach to a particular group of neglected children led Wise to arrange a meeting to discuss them..⁶⁸ Arthur Renwick, Mackellar's predecessor as the head of the State Children's Relief Board, Commandant

⁶⁷ Stephen Garton, "Sir Charles Mackellar: Psychiatry, Eugenics and Child Welfare in New South Wales, 1900-1914," *Historical Studies*, vol. 22, iss. 86, (1986), 21-34.

⁶⁸ Herbert Booth, the son of William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, was the Salvation Army Commandant for Australasia between 1896-1901. Renate Howe, "Booth, Herbert Henry (1862–1926)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/booth-herbert-henry-5290/text8923>, published first in hardcopy 1979, accessed online February 28, 2024.

Booth himself, and Captain Neitenstein, comptroller-general of NSW prisons, were among the invited.⁶⁹ At the end of the discussion, it was decided that the proposals were to be translated into legislative provision; Renwick assisted the Parliamentary draftsmen to frame the bill.

Wise's main reason for regulating street trade by children under sixteen was essentially the same as Mackellar's. During a meeting convened in the winter of 1903 by the Women's Progressive Association, Wise, seeking the support of newly enfranchised women, shared his opinion that children on the streets were a ticking time bomb; it was only a matter of time before they turned into criminals.⁷⁰ Wise made this claim by relying on the statistics generated by various state institutions. During the first half of 1902, for example, he argued that over 35,000 children failed to attend school for the required seventy days. Quickly afterwards, he added that in 1902, out of the total number of prisoners in NSW, 375 were children. Not quite demonstrating the existence of a positive correlation between truancy and crime among the youth, Wise found it necessary for the state to get involved and take care of the children as parental rights were not "so sacred that they justified the destruction of those who were going to be citizens of the State."⁷¹ In September 1902, while introducing his bill in the Legislative Council, Wise emphasised the need to restrict children's ability to sell various items. He argued that strict licensing conditions were essential to prevent truancy, which he considered a major cause of crime.⁷² By framing child street trading as a direct pathway to delinquency, Wise reinforced the need for state intervention.

Considering Wise's background, other factors guiding his campaign to regulate child street trade cannot be overlooked. Wise, who grew up and went to school in England, was strongly influenced by William Ewart Gladstone, a four-time Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, and the branch of liberalism he propounded and by his teacher T.H. Green, the Oxford Professor of

⁶⁹ "State Children in Austrasia," *Daily Telegraph*, December 6, 1901, 8.

⁷⁰ "Neglected Children: Address by Mr. Wise," *Daily Telegraph*, August 11, 1903, 6.

⁷¹ "Neglected Children: Address by Mr. Wise," *Daily Telegraph*, August 11, 1903, 6.

⁷² NSW Legislative Council Debate, September 24, 1902, 2933.

Moral Philosophy.⁷³ One of the principles of the Gladstonian Liberalism was a more active role for the government in making society more efficient and fairer as well as the need for an expanded governmental role in extending liberty and toleration.⁷⁴ T.H. Green had similar views, advocating for the right of the state to interfere in family life in order to create better conditions for social justice and economic equality to thrive.⁷⁵ In line with the teachings of Gladstone and Green, Wise boosted the role of the state in making a better society by spearheading some major social reforms: he framed and passed such legislations as the *Early Closing Act* (1899), *Old-age Pensions Act* (1900), *Industrial Arbitration Act* (1901) and the *Women's Franchise Act* (1902). Ultimately, while Mackellar was the most vocal advocate for banning child hawking, it was Wise's legislative efforts—driven by concerns over truancy and crime—that brought about restrictions on juvenile street trade in NSW as part of his broader vision for social reform and state intervention.

In 1905, following the efforts of Mackellar and Wise, the NSW parliament enacted regulations on child hawking as part of the Neglected Children and Juvenile Offenders Act. The primary goal of this legislation was to ensure the protection, control, and reformation of so-called “neglected and uncontrollable” children, as well as juvenile offenders.⁷⁶ A key aspect of the Act was the establishment and regulation of institutions to house such children, alongside one of the most significant developments in the history of childhood—the creation of children's courts.

Between 1895 and 1907, Australian states introduced specialist courts for juveniles, marking a fundamental shift away from trying children in ordinary courts.⁷⁷ South Australia led the way in 1895, with other states following between 1905 and 1907. These courts embodied a growing focus on rehabilitation over punishment in the juvenile justice system. Before specialist children's

⁷³ J. A. Ryan, “Bernhard Ringrose Wise,” *Journal of the Royal Historical Society*, vol. 81, part 1 (June 1995), 71-84, here 73-74, 75.

⁷⁴ Clayton Roberts and David Roberts, *A History of England: 1688 to the Present, Volume 2*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016); 369.

⁷⁵ Ryan, “Bernhard Ringrose Wise,” here 77.

⁷⁶ NSW, *Neglected Children and Juvenile Offenders Act*, Act No 16, 1905.

⁷⁷ Robyn Blewer, “Commonsense Tribunals for Erring Little Folks”: Children's Courts Legislation in Australia -1895 to 1907,” *Limina: a Journal of Historical and Cultural Studies*, vol. 22. iss. 2 (2017); 69-84.

courts, Australian jurisdictions made only minor changes in handling juvenile offenders. In 1850, NSW allowed the summary trial of children under fourteen for larceny. Starting in the 1860s, as mentioned in Chapter Two, neglected and delinquent children were frequently sent to reformatories and industrial homes, institutions that increasingly came under criticism. Between 1880 and 1910, the child rescue movement, supported by charities, politicians, and women's groups, pushed for stronger child protection laws and juvenile justice reforms. It stressed the importance of providing guidance and support to steer children toward becoming contributing members of society, rather than allowing them to fall into cycles of crime and institutionalisation. The introduction of children's courts reflected a broader shift in juvenile justice, reinforcing the era's commitment to rehabilitation over punishment and further expanding the state's role in child welfare and protection.

The final goal of the Neglected Children and Juvenile Offenders Act was to make provisions for the licensing and regulation of children trading in streets and in certain places open to the public. Addressing child street traders under this Act is not surprising when considering that legislators equated unlicensed child sellers with neglected children, defining them as those “who, not being duly licensed for that purpose, are engaged in street trading.”⁷⁸ The section of the act dealing with street trade by children defined a “child” as someone under sixteen and over five years of age.⁷⁹ Street trading, in its turn, was described as “the hawking of newspapers, matches, flowers and other articles, playing, singing, or performing for profit, shoe-blackening and other like occupation carried on in any public place”⁸⁰. The first annual report (1906) by Mackellar revealed that children sold various goods beyond those listed in the legislation, including fruit, vegetables, and fish.⁸¹ These were classified as street trading since children could obtain licences to sell them. According to the Act, girls under sixteen were altogether prohibited from street trading, and only

⁷⁸ NSW, *Neglected Children and Juvenile Offenders Act*, Act No 16, 1905, cl. 5 (a)

⁷⁹ NSW, *Neglected Children and Juvenile Offenders Act*, Act No 16, 1905, cl.5

⁸⁰ NSW, *Neglected Children and Juvenile Offenders Act*, Act No 16, 1905, cl.5.

⁸¹ “Street Trading by Children,” *Evening News*, July 26, 1906, 4.

boys between the ages of ten and sixteen could be licensed, while the hours during which they may trade were restricted in the case of boys under fourteen years from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., and boys over fourteen from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m.⁸² Boys of school age were prohibited from trading during school hours. Licensed boys also had to wear badges on their arms.⁸³ The badges were of two colours to distinguish those liable to, and those exempt from, school attendance. Playing, singing, and performing for profit was confined by the regulations to boys over fourteen years. This regulation of child street trading, embedded within broader child protection reforms, reflected a growing societal determination to intervene in the lives of children deemed vulnerable.

Licenses could not be issued unless it was shown that the moral or material welfare of the child would not suffer by such trading. The boarding-out officer under the State Children Relief Act was appointed as the authority to issue licences.⁸⁴ His job was to examine and approve the testimony as to the boy's age, satisfy himself by diligent inquiry that the boy's moral and material welfare would not suffer by the trading, and that the attendance at school of a boy under fourteen years of age would not be "injuriously affected." Every license was to be granted for a period of six months but could be renewed from time to time. No charge was made for either license or badge.⁸⁵ These regulations aimed to ensure that child street trading did not compromise children's education or moral development while maintaining oversight through a structured licensing system.

As is clear from the Act, legislators imposed stricter regulations on girl hawkers than on boys by banning them altogether from street trading. Behind this were fears of girls turning to prostitution if allowed to work on the streets. This concern was shared by many, including Mackellar, and was illustrated in a sketch of a girl hawking in a bar. The middle class in Australia

⁸² "Street Trading by Children," *Evening News*, July 26, 1906, 4.

⁸³ A similar requirement was adopted in 1898 in Liverpool – "The Protection of Street Children," *Daily Telegraph*, December 29, 1899, 4.

⁸⁴ "Street Trading by Children," *Evening News*, July 26, 1906, 4.

⁸⁵ "Licensing of Children," *National Advocate*, March 13, 1906, 2.

had been preoccupied with the idea of “feminine sin” since the early days of settlement.⁸⁶ This concern was more about middle-class values and the emerging cult of respectability than the actual number of prostitutes in the colonies. Evidence shows that most women accused of prostitution were merely cohabiting.⁸⁷ The fixation on female chastity in NSW at the turn of the twentieth century was also driven by the colony’s social and moral evolution, influenced by British class distinctions.⁸⁸ These divisions between the upper class, who followed formal marriage laws, and the lower class, who maintained informal customs, were mirrored in the colony, creating a divide between convicts and free settlers. Over time, colonial authorities became increasingly intolerant of alternative moralities, focusing on white female respectability as central to social order. Thus, the perceived danger to girls’ chastity was a sufficient reason to completely stop them from contributing to family economy.

The Neglected Children and Juvenile Offenders Act was the first serious attempt to address children engaged in street trading directly. Before this law was enacted, youthful street traders had been dealt with by using the *Industrial Schools Act* (1866), the *Children’s Protection Acts* (1892, 1900 and 1902), or the *Public Instruction Act* (1880).⁸⁹ The latter law requiring school attendance of at least seventy-six days in each half year, for example, was applied to child street sellers to prosecute truants. Children’s Protection Acts could likewise be used to control children’s behaviour, although these acts did not penalise or suggest ways of managing children themselves; rather they penalised any adult who allowed “any child under the age of sixteen years to be in any place for the purpose of begging or receiving alms, or inducing the giving of alms, whether under the pretence of singing, playing, performing, [or] offering anything for sale”⁹⁰. Similarly, the Industrial Schools Act could be used to force any child into an industrial school who had been

⁸⁶ Michael Sturma, “Eye of the Beholder: The Stereotype of Women Convicts, 1788-1852,” *Labour History*, no. 34 (May 1978): 3-10, here 4.

⁸⁷ Sturma, “Eye of the Beholder,” 6-7.

⁸⁸ Kirsten McKenzie, *Scandal in the Colonies* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2004), 82-83.

⁸⁹ “Children and Street Selling,” *Catholic Press*, June 28, 1902, 10.

⁹⁰ NSW, *An Act to Amend and Extend the Children’s Protection Act*, 1892, Act No. 52, 1900, cl. 11.

“found begging about any street highway court passage or other public place” or “found habitually wandering or loitering about the streets highways or public places in no ostensible lawful occupation”.⁹¹ All of these laws had been employed against juvenile hawkers, but none regulated street trading by children in any consistent manner.

Similar laws regulating children in street trades had been enacted in various places beyond NSW. In Britain, the Employment of Children Act 1903 imposed restrictions on street trading by minors and notably influenced NSW legislators, who adopted the idea of requiring child street traders to wear badges.⁹² Around the same time, several states and cities in the United States introduced similar legislation.⁹³ Massachusetts and New York enacted such laws in 1902, followed by Wisconsin in 1908 and Oklahoma in 1909. At the municipal level, cities like Boston (1902), Newark (1904), and Cincinnati (1909) also passed ordinances regulating child street trading. These measures were driven by concerns about the supposed dangers of street trading, including moral corruption, exposure to crime, and harm to children’s health and education—risks that legislators perceived as serious threats, even if their reality was debatable. These laws reflected broader societal anxieties about childhood, labour, and urban life, shaping policies that sought to regulate rather than fully understand the realities of children’s work in the streets.

A significant number of children complied with the Children and Juvenile Offenders Act by applying for licenses to sell goods on the streets. Within the first six months of the law’s enactment, over 400 children in the metropolitan NSW sought street trading licenses, with ninety percent intending to sell newspapers and the rest opting for matches, fruit, and vegetables.⁹⁴ While the application process required proof of regular school attendance for children under fourteen, many applicants had irregular attendance or did not attend at all. Despite this, the issuing authority granted licenses to most, with the condition of future regular school attendance. This leniency was

⁹¹ NSW, *An Act for the Relief of Destitute Children*, Act No. 2 Vic. 30, 1866, cl. 4.

⁹² UK *An Act to Make Better Provision for Regulating the Employment of Children* August 1903.

⁹³ Edward N. Clopper, *Child Labour in City Street* (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1912), 128-159, 194-196.

⁹⁴ “Street Trading by Juveniles,” *SMH*, February 7, 1906, 7.

justified by the authority's reluctance to deprive families of much-needed income. However, ten applications were rejected due to complete absence from school.⁹⁵ In the subsequent six months the number of children receiving street trading licenses increased to 898, with the majority still opting for newspaper sales.⁹⁶ Although these regulations may have frustrated the children, they appeared to seek licenses to trade without interference.

The recently enacted law did not appear to cause any public outcry, at least, not as reported in the media. Despite this, newsboys, who make up a large portion of the young street traders, have a history of showing dissatisfaction with their working conditions. For example, in 1900 and 1909, newsboys in Broken Hill, NSW went on strike to push for lower newspaper prices.⁹⁷ They succeeded in their demands during the 1909 strike, even picketing the newspaper office with sticks and clubs. In another instance in 1915, newsboys protested for two months against price increases for two evening newspapers, the *Evening News* and the *Sun*.⁹⁸ The lack of press coverage on dissatisfaction with the new law might be because it was not considered newsworthy or because child street traders chose to protest covertly by continuing to sell without obtaining licenses. However, despite this, they risked apprehension and appeared in court, such as the case of a nine-year-old boy charged with selling newspapers without a license.⁹⁹

The authorities often showed leniency towards children trading without licenses. Despite the legislation suggesting treating such children as neglected and placing them in state care, evidence indicates that authorities did not always resort to this measure, allowing the youth a chance to rehabilitate. For first-time offenders, it was common practice to release them on probation, as seen with the nine-year-old newsboy mentioned earlier and an eleven-year-old girl in September 1909.¹⁰⁰ At other times, authorities opted to penalise the employers of unlicensed

⁹⁵ "Street Trading," *Daily Telegraph*, March 31, 1906, 8.

⁹⁶ "Street Trading," *Daily Telegraph*, March 31, 1906, 8.

⁹⁷ "The Newsboys' Strike," *Barrier Miner*, January 23, 1900, 2; "Newsboys' Successful Strike," *Casino and Kyogle Courier and North Coast Advertiser*, February 3, 1909, 5.

⁹⁸ "Newsboys 'Strike Ended,'" *Clarence and Richmond Examiner*, March 2, 1915, 4.

⁹⁹ "The Children's Court," *Daily Telegraph*, October 13, 1909, 14.

¹⁰⁰ "The Children's Court," *Daily Telegraph*, October 2, 1909, 22.

juvenile hawkers instead. An example is a case heard before the Bathurst Police Court in the summer of 1906, where the court held the employer, Joseph Stevens, responsible for employing unlicensed juvenile hawkers, fining him for employing two boys, Alfred Jackson (15) and Frederick Winsett (14), who were not duly licensed.¹⁰¹ Similarly, in another instance, the court again showed leniency to unlicensed child hawkers, fining the news vendor who employed them.¹⁰²

The enactment of the Neglected Children and Juvenile Offenders Act was driven by several motivations rooted in societal concerns and the advocacy of key figures and organisations. Youth organisations like the Boys' Brigade, formed in the late nineteenth century, played a tangible role in pushing for restrictions on child street trade. These groups, primarily founded by middle-class individuals, believed that street trading led to juvenile delinquency, crime and a bleak future for children, as it exposed them to various vices and offered no valuable skills. They aimed to provide education and wholesome recreation to instil positive values in working-class youth but struggled to reach all child street traders, prompting efforts to legislate restrictions. Charles Mackellar was a leading advocate for legislation regulating child street sellers, driven by his extensive involvement in child welfare. He viewed these children as neglected due to parental negligence, which he believed led to truancy, crime, and even prostitution among girls. Mackellar supported his arguments with evidence from figures like Captain Neitenstein, who linked truancy to juvenile crime. He asserted the state's right to intervene in child upbringing when parents failed, citing examples from other countries like England and Germany. Mackellar championed the state's role in counteracting the negative impacts of negligent parenting on children, emphasising the influence of the environment over heredity in shaping behaviour. He believed traits like drunkenness and criminal behaviour were more a product of one's surroundings than inherited, aligning with prevailing attitudes in Australia that favoured environmental explanations in the nature-nurture debate. NSW Attorney General B.R. Wise also played a crucial role in introducing

¹⁰¹ "Unlicensed Juvenile Hawkers," *National Advocate*, June 2, 1906, 2.

¹⁰² "The Children's Court," *Daily Telegraph*, October 13, 1909, 14.

the bill. Influenced by Gladstonian liberalism and T.H. Green's philosophies, which advocated for state intervention to promote social justice, Wise believed in regulating child street trade to prevent truancy and subsequent criminal behaviour. He framed and passed significant social reforms, reflecting his broader aim to improve society. Both Mackellar's and Wise's efforts were grounded in a desire to ensure children's proper development into responsible citizens.

The fear and apprehension towards beggars in NSW in general played a significant role in prompting the regulation of child street trade. The fear stemmed from several interconnected factors. Firstly, there was a widespread belief, often perpetuated in the press, that child street hawkers were not genuine vendors but rather disguised beggars, destined to remain in poverty for the rest of their lives. They were seen as contributing to the emergence of a class similar to the notorious Neapolitan beggars known as the "lazzaroni." Additionally, the fear of beggars was rooted in earlier British ideologies of evangelicalism and classical political economy, which categorised the poor as either deserving or undeserving and emphasised the necessity for poor people to perform wage labour. Moreover, the growing emphasis on public order and civility in urban centres heightened concerns about beggars, as their presence was seen as disruptive to the social fabric of society, particularly in main streets that were considered vital channels for commerce and indicative of the town's civilisation. Ultimately, the convergence of Mackellar and Wise's efforts led to the passage of the Neglected Children and Juvenile Offenders Act, reflecting broader debates about parental rights, state intervention, and child welfare in early twentieth century Australia.

The passage of the Neglected Children and Juvenile Offenders Act marked another advancement in the ongoing efforts to remove children from the workforce. These efforts began in the 1860s, beginning with the removal of children from unhealthy underground coal mine work, as explored in Chapter One. The efforts continued through the 1870s and late nineteenth century, as outlined in Chapters Two and Three. Key milestones during this period included state inquiries into child factory labour and its eventual regulation in 1896, along with juvenile industrial

exhibitions that reflected a growing belief that childhood should be dedicated to education rather than early employment. By the early 1900s, the focus shifted to regulating juvenile street traders, as middle-class reformers feared these children would grow into criminals or burdens on society. Unlike earlier concerns about child labour in coal mines, which focused on health risks, the emphasis now was on the potential for criminality. This concern was not new, as similar fears were present when discussing children's involvement in factory work. As Chapter Two highlighted, juvenile unemployment in the late 1850s and mid-1860s was believed to lead to crime, and in the 1870s, factory work was similarly seen as a risk. By the early 1900s, concerns shifted to street trading, with reformers fearing that children who skipped school to trade would grow into criminals. While the reasons for this fear evolved, the outcome—future criminality—remained the same. A new concern that emerged in the discussion of child hawking was the long-term impact of children missing out on education. Reformers feared that by engaging in street trading instead of attending school, these children would fail to develop the skills necessary for future employment. This, in turn, would lead them to become a burden on society, unable to contribute economically and potentially resorting to criminal behaviour. All efforts to redefine children's roles shared a common concern for the long-term consequences of child labour on society, rather than focusing on the immediate welfare of the children.

The final chapter delves into the continued efforts to redefine working-class childhood, demonstrating yet again that these efforts extended beyond formal legislation. This time, attention turned to the widespread practice of child labour on family farms, which increasingly came under scrutiny. As in previous debates, concerns over both health and education were raised, though arguments centred primarily on the importance of schooling. Unsurprisingly, the strongest opposition to farm child labour came from teachers and education administrators of the newly federated state. The chapter will explore their motivations, the broader social and political context of their critique, and the reasons why their advocacy ultimately failed to result in legislative action banning child labour on farms.

Chapter Five

“The Influence of the Cow Upon School Life”¹: The Debate Over Child Farm Labour

In the early 1900s, when street trade by children was problematised, a debate also emerged over the acceptability of child labour in agriculture. This debate unfolded against a backdrop of long-held reverence for rural life and a wholehearted approval of children working on farms. Since colonisation, white Australians idealised country life, believing rural areas were healthier for raising children than cities. The expectation that children would help on the farm significantly reinforced this preference, leading many to view rural environments as superior for their health and moral growth. Growing up on farms youths might engage in harvesting, dairying, shepherding, shearing, herding, lambing, rabbit trapping or house chores. Compulsory schooling introduced in 1880, which required parents of school-aged children (six to fourteen years old) to ensure their children attended school for at least seventy days every half-year, did not necessarily reduce the amount of work children were expected to do on farms. It rather shifted the time they performed their various tasks to before and after school. At times, when there was an urgent need for spare hands, during harvesting, for example, parents often kept their children from school, and authorities were initially understanding of this practice.

Interestingly, in the early twentieth century, strong voices began opposing child labour on farms. The disapproval concerned mainly white country children living with their parents; the labour of Aboriginal children living in rural areas was never problematised, at least in this context, by white social commentators writing for the mainstream press. Similarly, there were no objections to the work of children in state care living with rural families. On the contrary, in NSW around the early twentieth century, there was a prevailing belief that work was the most beneficial path for both Indigenous and boarded-out youth. Critics of child labour focused particular attention on the

¹ “Child Labour,” *Singleton Argus*, July 13, 1909, 2.

labour on dairy farms, likely because, unlike other types of farming, dairy work was more disruptive and affected children's routines throughout the year, whereas other forms of agriculture may have only interfered with schooling during shearing or harvesting seasons.

Opposition to children's labour on dairy farms came largely from the ranks of NSW educators. The issue surfaced several times in meetings held by various teachers' associations and in school inspectors' reports written in the 1900s. Objections to child farm labour tended to centre around the harmful effects of such labour on children's physical health and mental capabilities. Matters escalated with the public release of a school inspector's 1908 report, which painted a dire picture of childhood exploitation on dairy farms and bemoaned neglectful parents who failed to send their children to school. The report caused unprecedented activity among various teachers' associations, which initiated the collection of more evidence to assess the school inspector's claims. The criticism of dairy farms continued into the second decade of the twentieth century. Under growing pressure, the NSW legislature in 1915 even considered appointing a Royal Commission to investigate the issue.

Providers of education in NSW may have cared about rural children's welfare, yet it was emerging educational ideas and dissatisfaction with NSW's education quality in the early 1900s that largely sparked discussion and interest in the issue among educators. The late nineteenth century saw significant shifts in educational ideas across Western countries, which soon reached Australia, causing traditional teaching methods to be seen as inadequate. To help the new federation prosper, many influential figures turned their attention to schools. Teachers now found themselves under increased scrutiny, with widespread doubts cast on their competence and suitability for an evolving educational landscape. The attacks on teachers at this time were extensive and likely motivated country teachers to try and shift the blame for perceived educational deficiencies onto the parents of school-age children. This surmise is plausible, given that children's farm labour was never banned in NSW. Teachers may have criticised the practice, stating that it endangered children's physical and mental wellbeing and minimised their education, thus

restricting future career prospects, but they never called for any legislation that would prohibit or even limit children's farm work. Perhaps, they were dissuaded by the widespread veneration of rural life. More likely, their impassioned utterances on the subject, coupled with a failure to call for any solution, reflected an attempt to deflect attention away from themselves.

One thing was clear, however; they wanted children to attend school without interruptions. This was achieved by the passing of a new education law in 1916, which made full time attendance at school compulsory. This legislation changed the timing of child labour in rural areas but did little to alter the practice; child labour on farms remained unregulated, even though it received a fair share of negative coverage in the early 1900s, and, indeed, it remains unregulated to this day. Although NSW society had a chance to specify which forms of farm labour were acceptable for children to perform and which should be prohibited, everyone—including teachers—shied away from this opportunity.

* * * *

By the 1900s, NSW had established a resilient and diverse agricultural industry. Agriculture in the region began with the establishment of Australia's first wheat farm by ex-convict James Ruse at Rose Hill in 1789.² Early farming efforts relied on rainfall distribution, leading to the development of the wheat belt in inland NSW, where moderate rainfall supported wheat cultivation. Wool production began in 1796 when John Macarthur introduced merino sheep and, by 1807, Australia's first bale of merino wool was exported to England, cementing wool as a key industry. Following European expansion beyond the Blue Mountains in 1813, vast grasslands were settled for grazing livestock. Extensive land clearing for pasture and crop farming saw agricultural expansion such that 480,000 hectares were under cultivation by 1860. Despite economic depressions and droughts in the late nineteenth century, Australian agriculture diversified to include meat cattle, dairying, sugar cane, and horticultural crops. Chinese immigrants played a

² Simone Betti and Alessandro Ceccarelli, "Is Family Farming Educational? The Australian Experience," *Journal of Research and Didactics in Geography* (December 2014): 61-71, here 62-63.

crucial role in market gardening, especially during the gold rush era from the 1850s. Scientific advancements and mechanisation further expanded wheat farming in low-rainfall areas. By the early twentieth century, NSW agriculture had become highly diverse, with dairying thriving in coastal regions alongside beef, grain, fruit, and vegetable production.

Rural families in NSW depended heavily on children's labour, mirroring agricultural practices long established in England and America. In England, young people had worked for larger yeoman farmers for centuries, while smaller landholders depended on their own children.³ Similarly, in America, children's labour was crucial for sustaining rural families.⁴ This reliance on children was deeply ingrained in farming communities, shaping the way they organised agricultural work. NSW followed these patterns. Rena R. Henderson, who has looked at Castra district in North-West Tasmania from early European colonisation to the end of the twentieth century, concludes that the age-old tradition of country children labouring was still at work there at the start of the twentieth century and that the most important criterion in assigning tasks to the young was not so much gender as age; children tackled what they were physically capable of managing.⁵ Historian Maree Murray concurs that a child's age generally determined what jobs they were given, although she does stress that some work, such as child minding, was strictly performed by girls.⁶ Using school inspectors' reports from the 1870s, Murray documents various tasks performed by NSW farm children, including farming, dairying, herding, lambing, rabbit trapping, and household chores.⁷ This widespread involvement in farm labour affected a significant portion of the child population, as despite NSW's urban character, the number of children in rural areas was larger,

³ Nicholas Orme, *Medieval Children* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 310.

⁴ Joyce Appleby, "Commercial Farming and the "Agrarian Myth" in the Early Republic," *Journal of American History*, vol. 68, no.4 (1982): 833-849.

⁵ Rena R. Henderson, *Sustainable Family Farming and Yeoman Ideals, 1860 to 2000 in North-West Tasmania* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2021), 159-161.

⁶ Maree Murray, "Children's Work in Rural New South Wales," *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, vol. 79, iss. 3-4 (1993): 226-244, here 238.

⁷ Murray, "Children's Work in Rural New South Wales."

mostly due to lower birth rates in the cities.⁸ The enduring presence of child labour in rural NSW highlights its deep-rooted necessity in agricultural life, shaped by tradition, economic demands, and the practical capabilities of children within farming communities.

In general, public attitudes toward child labour on farms were encouraging. Farms were thought to be a much healthier environments for the young than cities, where they were all too prone to descend into larrikinism. Farm work allegedly educated children in discipline, hard work, and self-sufficiency. In a report from 1873, one school inspector expressed what had become a truism by this point: that farm work taught children more important lessons than they could learn in school, namely, “the means of earning an honest livelihood.”⁹ In the last decades of the nineteenth century as concerns over young city dwellers increased, so, too, did the romanticisation of the country and the belief in the beneficial influence of rural work.

Such attitudes, along with plentiful opportunities for work, help to account for the rise of boarding out schemes at the turn of the century. These schemes took children in state care and sent them to live with rural families. Children’s work “was a major part” of the boarding out scheme: skills acquired during their stay in the country were supposed to help with the state’s goal of raising good future citizens and workers. In line with this goal, the state’s future citizens were not simply to become dutiful in their attitudes toward work but were supposed to develop enthusiasm for their labour. Boarding out was also meant to help children themselves, preparing them for adult roles by teaching them to earn their living and helping them to stay away from crime.¹⁰ Efforts were supposed to be made to prevent the exploitation of foster children through the careful selection of applicants. But as we now know, this process was nowhere near as

⁸ J.C. Caldwell, “Population” in *Australians, Historical Statistics*, ed. Wray Vamplew (Broadway, N.S.W., Australia: Fairfax, Syme & Weldon Associates, 1987): 23-41, here 24.

⁹ New South Wales Legislative Assembly Votes & Proceedings 1873-1874 (v.5), Inspector’s Report, Camden District, 319. [Hereafter NSW LA V&P]

¹⁰ Maree Murray, “The Child is Not a Servant:” Children, Work and the Boarding out Scheme in New South Wales, 1880-1920,” *Labour History*, no. 77 (November 1999): 190-206, here 193.

thorough as it should have been; exploitation and abuse tended to be rife, as multiple government inquiries, memoirs, and studies have now shown.¹¹

Thus, in early twentieth-century NSW, public opinion largely favoured child farm work, though some began to raise objections, challenging the practice for the first time. The first public criticism of child labour on farms in NSW appeared in April 1904. During an Education Conference session at Centenary Hall, York Street, the issue was discussed in the context of truancy. Some attendees noted that dairy farmers in certain rural areas kept young boys working “when they ought to be at school” for the sake of “saving a few shillings weekly on the employment of outside labour,” highlighting the conflict between child labour and school attendance in these communities.¹² Around the time of the 1904 Education Conference, Ms. C. D. Spence spoke at the Sydney School of Arts, voicing concerns over child labour on dairy farms, particularly its harmful impact on children’s health.¹³ She outlined the exhausting daily routine for these children: early mornings, milking, school, then more milking and farm duties, leading to extreme fatigue and poor school performance. According to Spence, however, the mental and physical damage inflicted by such labour was even more detrimental. The discussion of truant country children during the Education Conference and Ms. Spence’s speech made some waves; there was a lot of heated discussion around the issue in the NSW press. One article even recalled the darker times from British history to emphasise the unacceptability of child farm labour: “We cannot afford to have on our farms a repetition of the conditions which prevailed in the English coal mines before Lord Shaftesbury began his beneficent work,” pronounced one editorial.¹⁴ These debates, intensified by

¹¹ Marian Quartly, Shurlee Swain, Denise Cuthbert, Kay Dreyfus and Margaret Taft, *The Market in Babies: Stories of Australian Adoption* (Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2013); Shirleene Robinson, “Regulating the Race: Aboriginal Children in Private European Homes in Colonial Australia,” *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 37, no. 3 (2013): 302–315; Nell Musgrove, “Abuse of Foster Children in Nineteenth-Century Australia: Why Did It Happen Then, and Why Does It Matter Now?” *History of Education*, vol. 45, no. 4 (2016): 460–476.

¹² “Child Labour in the Country,” *Goulburn Evening Penny Post*, April 16, 1904, 4.

¹³ “Children’s Work on Dairy Farms,” *Kiama Reporter and Illawarra Journal*, April 20, 1904, 2.

¹⁴ “The Care of Children,” *SMH*, April 15, 1904, 4.

media comparisons to past injustices in British coal mines, marked a growing opposition to child farm labour.

Truancy had long been a concern in NSW, with criticism prevalent in the late nineteenth century. Newspapers portrayed children with irregular attendance, primarily from cities, as destined for lives of crime, often becoming “larrikins” or future prisoners.¹⁵ One issue was the lack of a mechanism to enforce school attendance if a child was not enrolled. For those in private schools, attendance was also difficult to track, as only public schools monitored it. Under the 1880 Education Act, families could be prosecuted only if their child, enrolled in a state school, failed to attend the required seventy days per half-year.¹⁶ In the early 1900s, various Ministers of Education sought to amend the Act, hoping to strengthen enforcement and address non-attendance by introducing a truancy bill, though their attempts failed.¹⁷ A notable shift, however, was the emerging focus on rural truancy; for the first time, farm children, particularly those working on dairy farms, faced criticism for absenteeism.

The objection to farm child labour in the early 1900s seems unusual given farm work was considered beneficial for children in this period, as mentioned above. These objections are even more surprising given white Australians’ deep affection for “the country,” (by which they meant rural living) which they revered and idolised as a cherished part of their national identity.¹⁸ This mindset can be traced back to Britain, where a lot of settlers came from. England at the turn of

¹⁵ “Juvenile Crime,” *Port Macquarie News and Hastings River Advocate*, July 15, 1893, 7; “Truancy and Juvenile Crime,” *Sunday Times*, September 5, 1897, 10; “Truancy and Crime,” *Sunday Times*, November 22, 1896, 3.

¹⁶ “The Truancy Bill,” *Wagga Wagga Advertiser*, December 3, 1901, 2.

¹⁷ “Child Labour and the New Truancy Bill,” *Australian Star*, September 16, 1908, 6; “Truancy. Mr. Perry’s Bill,” *Evening News*, April 14, 1904, 4; “The Truancy Problem,” *Watchman*, August 8, 1903, 3; “Truancy in Schools,” *Star*, May 22, 1909, 15; “The Truancy Question,” *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners’ Advocate*, December 20, 1906, 4; “Educational Reform,” *Crookwell Gazette*, December 13, 1901, 4.

¹⁸ Indigenous Australians, of course, had a very different relationship to Country, spiritually, socially, culturally, and historically. On this topic, see, for instance, Melissa Lucashenko “Country: Being and Belonging on Aboriginal Lands,” *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 29, iss. 86 (2005): 7-12.

the nineteenth century was the most urbanised society in Europe.¹⁹ The intensification of urban crowding generated new ideas about city life: if in the previous period, cities were considered civilised and healthful, they were now deemed to have a detrimental impact on human health and morality. This, in turn, led to the country becoming valued as a safe and healthy place. Many newcomers to Australia retained the strong belief in the virtues of the country life.

Immigrants' idolisation of the country grew stronger in the context of newly colonised Australian regions, which had been formed into colonies.²⁰ The country was seen as the true key to wealth, with small-scale farming thought to promote lasting settlement, independence, self-sufficiency, and democratic values. To encourage the growth of small farms and towns across the countryside, legislators passed a series of land settlement acts, the *Crown Lands Alienation Act 1861* and the *Crown Lands Occupation Act 1861*, whereby Crown Land could be selected on credit terms.²¹ The Alienation Act provided for the sale of town and suburban land by public auction while the Occupation Act allowed for the leasing of Crown land. The latter permitted any person in the colony to select up to 320 acres (130 hectares) of non-urban land and purchase the freehold at a rate of £1 per acre. The Crown Lands Acts, however, fell short of expectations, failing to significantly expand small farms and rural settlements.²²

NSW remained very urban just like it had been before the land acts. From the early days most of the NSW population lived in cities; forty years after the colonisation of NSW more than forty percent of the population was located in Sydney and the next seven largest towns contained

¹⁹ Graeme Davison, "Country Life: The Rise and Decline of an Australian Ideal," in *Struggle Country: The Rural Ideal in Twentieth Century Australia*, eds., Graeme Davison and Marc Brodie (Clayton, Victoria: University ePress, 2005), 17-33, here 17.

²⁰ Indigenous landowners from the outset contested the idea that the crown "owned" this land and had the right to distribute it. On this point, see Ann McGrath, *Contested Ground: Australian Aborigines Under the British Crown* (NY: Routledge, 2020).

²¹ P. J. Smailes and J. K. Molyneux, "The Evolution of an Australian Rural Settlement Pattern: Southern New England, N. S. W.," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, no. 36 (June 1965): 31-54, here 37.

²² For reasons why the Crown Lands Act failed see Richard Waterhouse, "Rural Culture and Australian History: Myths and Realities," *The Journal of the Sydney University Arts Association*, vol. 24 (2002): 83-102, here 86.

together less than half the population of the capital itself.²³ By 1907, despite the Crown Land Acts, Sydney's population made up a significant 35.29% of NSW's total population.²⁴ In terms of the provision of services and conveniences, employment, and entertainment, city life was advantageous, hence the concentration of population in cities.²⁵ Thus, despite efforts to promote rural settlement, the advantages of city life continued to drive population concentration in NSW's urban centres.

Perhaps due to the Crown Lands Acts failing to turn NSW into a rural paradise for white settlers, there was a brief moment around the turn of the nineteenth century when the country did not evoke such happy feelings. Historian Richard Whitehouse highlights that during the 1880s and 1890s, people viewed rural NSW less favourably, longing for an earlier bush and gold rush era, which they believed offered greater opportunities for egalitarianism, independence, and economic self-sufficiency.²⁶ Whitehouse shows that selectors (small farmers) were presented as ignorant of farming, lazy at their work, and, because they could barely make ends meet, "the worst taskmasters and the poorest payers." Consequently, this shift in perception reflected a growing disillusionment with rural life in NSW, as many began to romanticise a past that seemed more promising for egalitarianism and economic security.

In the early twentieth century, the country regained its positive reputation. Whitehouse observes that the celebrations held on May 25, 1913 to mark the centenary of the crossing of the Blue Mountains were used to emphasise the role of rural Australia in bringing progress and prosperity to the nation. The image of selectors also became more favourable; now they were considered the backbone of the nation. It was thanks to their hard physical labour that so-called waste country was turned into productive farmland. Historian Kate Murphy concurs that in this

²³ Davison, "Country Life: The Rise and Decline of an Australian Ideal," 17.

²⁴ Kate Murphy, "The Modern Idea is to Bring the Country into the City": Australian Urban Reformers and the Ideal of Rurality, 1900–1918," *Rural History*, vol. 20, no. 1, (2009), 119–136, here 120.

²⁵ Waterhouse, "Rural Culture and Australian History," 85.

²⁶ Richard Waterhouse, "Australian Legends Representations of the Bush, 1813-1913," *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 31, no.115 (2000): 201-221, here 204, 217.

period the idea that Australia was, or was destined to be, a rural civilisation was pervasive.²⁷ She cites C. E. W. Bean's *In Your Hands, Australians*, published in 1918, as being explicitly optimistic about farms springing up all over Australia. British visions of Australia as primary producer for England's manufacturing industry were influential in sustaining this rural dream, she explains. This renewed optimism about rural Australia and the selectors' contributions played a crucial role in shaping the national identity, reinforcing the belief that the country was destined to thrive as a predominantly agricultural civilisation.

Despite Australians' reverence for the country, dairy farms in NSW faced growing scrutiny in the early twentieth century, likely influenced by developments in the dairying industry. During this period, the dairy industry in the region was beginning to flourish, getting close to becoming the high performing NSW industry of today. As is often the case, the beginnings of the industry were modest.²⁸ Dairy cows were introduced to NSW in 1788 when the First Fleet arrived with two bulls and seven cows. These animals adapted quickly, leading to the growth of a small-scale dairy industry primarily focused on producing butter and cheese for local consumption. By 1800, the cattle population had increased to 322 bulls and 712 cows. In 1805, Dr. John Harris established a dairy with a herd of nine cows on government-granted land. Dairying as a business in NSW began in the 1820s in the Illawarra District, where butter and cheese were the primary products due to limited transportation options. The gold rush brought a wave of settlers, and after its decline, the government introduced pastoral leases that facilitated the creation of new dairy farms. The industry gradually expanded south to Bega and north to the Hunter River, serving mainly local markets until the 1880s. In 1890, the Northern Rivers region saw significant growth as low sugar prices prompted settlers to shift towards dairy farming.

²⁷ Murphy, "The Modern Idea is to Bring the Country into the City," 121.

²⁸ Dairy Australia, "The History of the Australian Dairy Industry & Its People," <https://www.dairy.com.au/our-industry-and-people/our-history#:~:text=By%201800%2C%20through%20breeding%20and,in%20Tasmania%20in%20the%201820s>, accessed online October 27, 2024; Elizabeth A. Kernohan and A. K. Lascelles, "Dairying in Australia," *Journal of Dairy Science*, vol. 53, no. 10 (October 1970): 1516-1519, here 1516.

Dairying in NSW expanded significantly in the late nineteenth century due to the development of the wet frontier, which provided more suitable land for dairy farming, and an increase in butter production, as highlighted by Warwick Frost.²⁹ Before the 1890s depression, British settlers typically preferred inland areas that were sparsely vegetated rather than the damp and humid coastal regions, where they would have to labour to clear denser vegetation. At this time, demand for butter increased manyfold. The economic potential of butter altered government attitudes towards the wet frontier, which was ideal for dairying due to high rainfall. Clearance and settlement were now encouraged. Government built railways and the resultant rise in agricultural exports benefited the whole economy. Between 1886 and 1890, Australia exported an average of 1.7 million hundredweight of butter annually to Britain, which increased to 3.2 million hundredweight per year from 1886 to 1900.³⁰ Technological advancements such as refrigeration and separators in the late 1800s significantly boosted the dairying industry by enhancing farmers' efficiency and profitability.³¹ As a result, the combination of increased demand, government support, and technological innovations had transformed the dairying industry into a vital component of Australia's economy by the early twentieth century, impacting more rural children.

As the industry expanded, it not only involved more children, but also affected them more significantly than most other types of farm work. Many dairy farmers in NSW were tenant farmers, as land was expensive, and landowners charged high rents or took a share of their income.³² To make the farm operation successful, the entire family's labour was essential, with children helping to milk the cows before and after school.³³ Milking was still done by hand in this period, limiting

²⁹ Warwick Frost, "Farmers, Government, and the Environment: The Settlement of Australia's 'Wet Frontier,' 1870–1920," *Australian Economic History Review*, vol. 37, iss.1, (March 1997): 19-38.

³⁰ Frost, "Farmers, Government, and the Environment," 33-34.

³¹ Margaret Henderson, "Dairying: Downturn at the Dairy," *Richmond River Historical Society* <https://www.richhistory.org.au/lismore-history/district-history/dairying/>, 2025, accessed online February 28, 2024.

³² Margaret Henderson, "Dairying: Downturn at the Dairy."

³³ Belgenny Farm, *Share Farms*, <https://www.belgennyfarm.com.au/history/agriculture-at-camden-estate/dairying/share-farms>, accessed online February 28, 2024.

herd sizes to what a family could manage (often around ten to fourteen cows).³⁴ Additionally, milking required children's labour for most, if not all, of the year, unlike other types of farm work that only demanded children's help for short periods, such as during harvest time. As a result, the demands of dairy farming placed a unique and persistent burden on children, making their labour integral to the operation twice a day, year-round.

The growing recognition of the burdens placed on children in dairy farming set the stage for a broader discussion on juvenile labour. After a vigorous debate on farm child labour in the press in 1904, the topic fell silent until 1907, when concerns about the well-being of rural children resurfaced once again. The forum, like in 1904, was a teachers' conference. In hyperbolic terms, one acting school inspector named Bloomer alleged that "the way some people sacrifice their own flesh and blood for a few paltry pounds verges on brutality."³⁵ He clarified that he did not oppose child labour on farms, as it taught values like industriousness. Instead, he viewed excessive work as harmful to children's physical and intellectual development.³⁶ Concerns over the health and mental toll of overwork on rural children were frequently raised throughout the early twentieth century.³⁷ Unlike urban truancy, which was often linked to potential criminality, critics of farm child labour focused on the harm excessive work caused to children's health and intellectual development. Renewed focus on rural child labour underscored ongoing concerns about its impact, with critics treading carefully due to the positive perception of country life. Rather than calling for a ban, they emphasised balancing valuable work experience with protecting children's health and development.

The discussion that resumed in 1907 continued well into 1908 and, in fact, intensified. At the centre of the discussion this time was a school report by a school inspector published in the

³⁴ Charles Fahey, "The Free Selector's Landscape: Moulding the Victorian Farming Districts, 1870–1915," *Studies in the History of Gardens & Designed Landscapes*, vol. 31, iss. 2 (2011): 97-108, here 106

³⁵ "The Cow and the Child," *Evening News*, December 24, 1907, 6.

³⁶ "White Child Slavery," *Wagga Wagga Advertiser*, December 31, 1907, 4.

³⁷ "Child Labour," *Clarence and Richmond Examiner*, October 10, 1908, 9; "Dairying and Child Labour," *SMH*, July 15, 1907, 4; "Dairying and Child Labour," *Muswellbrook Chronicle*, October 14, 1908, 2.

press. In June 1908, a school inspector for Bega in the Nowra district, a south coast region of NSW, accused some of the farmers in his area of treating children cruelly and disregarding their welfare.³⁸ In dairying centres, he noted, pupils tended to be late for school, arriving utterly exhausted. Describing farm children's routine, he noted:

Children of tender years are often up before daylight, tending cows, feeding calves and pigs, cleaning up manure; and when breakfast is over — about 9 or 9.30 o'clock — they have often a long walk to school, where, fagged and sleepy, they are physically unfit to receive instruction. They are often, compelled to leave school early in the afternoon, to assist at home in the same monotony of labour, unrelieved by a bit of fun of any kind. After cutting sorghum, feeding the chaffcutter, and turning the separator, in addition to the routine mentioned for the morning, they have tea and go to bed. Thus live the children of the milking families, and the children of the poor, struggling dairy farmers in this district.³⁹

This inspector, like Bloomer, expressed concerns about the exhausting demands on young farm children, particularly their impact on health and learning, yet both stopped short of calling for a ban, focusing only on its harmful effects.

Prior to the 1900s, inspectors were far less severe in their remarks about farm children. One example can be found in an excerpt from Inspector Thomas's report: "In several localities they [children] do not attend as punctually and as regularly as they should, but this is a defect frequently beyond the teacher's power to remedy, as farming pursuits, shearing, &c., absorb a great deal of juvenile labour."⁴⁰ Inspector Durie's comments illustrate this further: "It will be observed that there was a considerable falling off in the last quarter of the year. This is due to the shearing and the harvesting operations going on then."⁴¹ The issue of children working on dairy farms also

³⁸ "Farms and the Children," *Sunday Times*, June 14, 1908, 6.

³⁹ "Farms and the Children," *Sunday Times*, June 14, 1908, 6.

⁴⁰ NSW LA V&P, 1892-1893 (v.3), Inspector's Report, Forbes, 1178.

⁴¹ NSW LA V&P, 1892-1893 (v. 3), Inspector's Report, Bega, 1189.

elicited little objection from inspectors. One inspector commented: “In some places, namely in dairying localities, children are often detained to assist on the farms.”⁴² Notably, one report praised the benefits of farm work, stating: “The dairying industry, which opens up a wide field for the employment of boys and girls, is beginning to touch the schools. ... the children are not kept from school; but several have to come in late and leave early...It is certainly to the advantage of boys and girls to be trained to habits of industry, and this work fits them for engaging in profitable employment when they leave school.”⁴³ In summary, school inspectors before the 1900s showed considerable tolerance toward the demands of farm work on rural children, viewing it as a reality of country life and, at times, even a valuable preparation for their future roles.

The report authored by the school inspector for Bega in 1907 and 1908 caused quite a stir, prompting the Teachers’ Association to circularise some of the country districts of the State with a view of inquiring into the conditions affecting school attendance. Reports flowed in from Northern Rivers, Goulburn, Bathurst, Dubbo, Hunter River, Newcastle, Broken Hill, Cobar, Bowral, Wagga, Orange, Cootamundra, Murrumburrah, and many smaller centres.⁴⁴ The overall conclusion was that children were being compelled to work hard before and after school hours at dairying, mine work, harvesting, shearing, and rabbiting which resulted in them being exhausted and therefore unfit for learning.⁴⁵ Rural press correspondents were also asked by an unnamed source to inquire into the alleged sweating of children in the country and the Sydney press printed responses from several districts, including extracts from the Manning and Richmond River districts. These extracts were originally featured in the *Clarence and Richmond Examiner* on October 27, 1908.⁴⁶ Both reports concurred that children did, indeed, have to work long hours and perform gruelling tasks on dairy farms. Opposition to dairy farms persisted into the second decade of the twentieth century, with critics raising the same concerns as in the previous decade—that the

⁴² NSW LA V&P, 1899 (v. 3), Inspector Blumer’s Report, 857.

⁴³ NSW LA V&P, 1898 (v. 1), Inspector’s Report, Grafton, 1080.

⁴⁴ “Child Labour: Shocking Sweating by Parents,” *SMH*, October 9, 1908, 10.

⁴⁵ “Children and Dairying,” *Australian Town and Country Journal*, December 2, 1908, 18.

⁴⁶ “Child Labour in the Country,” *Clarence and Richmond Examiner*, October 27, 1908, 2.

gruelling work on farms harmed children's health and education. In response to persistent pressure, the NSW legislature in 1915 went so far as to contemplate establishing a Royal Commission to examine the matter.⁴⁷

Education professionals were not alone in criticising the dairying industry. Randolph Bedford's 1904 book, *The Snare of Strength*, also addressed the issue, as noted in a 1907 article in *The Worker*, an Australian Workers' Union publication.⁴⁸ The author of the article buttressed his own misgivings about child labour on dairy farms by noting that Bedford's work "drew a sharply etched picture of the dull despairing life of certain children on a dairy farm..." This was an accurate portrayal. Randolph Bedford, an Australian poet, novelist, and short story writer, did, indeed, depict a bleak life for children on a dairy farm visited by his novel's protagonist, Liberal candidate George Gifford.⁴⁹ Having gone to the farm in hopes of securing the owner's vote in an upcoming election, Gifford was appalled by the ramshackle farmhouse and the state of the farmer's children. Their house was filthy, lacking even basic furniture let alone decorations. Newspapers were used as a tablecloth and the main bedroom functioned as a cooling room for milk. As for the children, Bedford pictured them as "dirty legged, barefooted...slatternly...staggering [under] the weight of great [milk] cans." Forced to collect the milk first thing in the morning, their "chilblained toes" were "bloated purple by walking barefoot through icy mud." Only the family's youngest child—a one year old—escaped this cruel routine, being too young "to be enslaved by dairying drudgery." With great sympathy for children, Bedford explained that the older youngsters rose at 2 a.m. to do the milking so that the milk could be at the station at 4 a.m. to be transported to Melbourne. He noted that the children's education left much to be desired as a result: they did not know their timetables, nor could they read. Not so subtly, he implied that this was the result of overwork and resultant fatigue. Bedford's portrayal underscored the harsh reality of child labour on dairy farms,

⁴⁷ "Dairy Farm Children. Minister's Statement," *Sydney Stock and Station Journal*, August 25, 1915, 11.

⁴⁸ "Sweating Children on Dairy Farms," *Worker*, June 6, 1907, 8.

⁴⁹ Randolph Bedford, *The Snare of Strength* (Boston, MA: H.B. Turner & Co., 1906), 23-33.

adding a critical voice to growing concerns about its impact on children's health, education, and well-being.

The debate on child labour on farms highlighted not only concerns about health and education but also emphasised the importance of playtime for children's well-being. The school inspector's report from Bega lamented the lack of playtime for farm children, a sentiment echoed by others who argued that youth needed play to thrive and learn.⁵⁰ By the early 1900s, the notion that children were entitled to play had gained widespread acceptance. Historically, children from all backgrounds engaged in play, with wealthier children using specialised toys, while poorer children created their own.⁵¹ Adults had long recognised children's play, but only in the late nineteenth century did they come to value play for its developmental role. Across the Western world, this growing awareness led to an increased emphasis on the importance of play, now distinguished from mere leisure, reflecting a broader, sympathetic view of childhood development that supported playtime as fundamental to a child's life and education.

The road to this development was long and contested. As early as antiquity, various influential thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle propounded the idea that play was valuable for children's development and of great help in the learning process. Yet these ideas did not take root and for many centuries. Instead, play was frowned upon as a potential source of indolence, truancy, vandalism, and inattention to schoolwork or church activities. Hence, adults attempted to control play or replace it with other activities. Children themselves sometimes felt guilty at their feelings of delight while playing, yet played, nonetheless. Opinions began to shift during the Renaissance with one after another philosopher or educator arguing that children should be allowed to play. One of the earlier Renaissance philosophers who noted that children were naturally predisposed to being active—running and jumping—and should not be prevented from doing so was Martin

⁵⁰ "Dairying and Child Labour," *SMH*, July 15, 1907, 4.

⁵¹ Joe L. Frost, *A History of Children's Play and Play Environments: Toward a Contemporary Child-Saving Movement* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 9-26.

Luther. A century later Czech theologian John Amor Comenius stressed the importance of play in learning and healthy development. Living in the seventeenth century, John Locke likewise wrote that children should be allowed to play with toys. Jean-Jacques Rousseau made the case in the following century in *Emile* that play and leisure were essential for developing strong healthy bodies, warning that a feeble body typically produced a feeble mind. Therefore, children should be free to run, jump, and engage in whatever amusements took their fancy. This contradicted the current thinking that playing was equal to doing nothing. The gradual shift in attitudes toward children's play, from mistrust to recognition of its developmental benefits, laid the groundwork for its acceptance as a crucial element of childhood by the early modern period.

Friedrich Froebel, an influential figure from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, is notable for championing the role of play and natural environments in young children's development. A German-born pedagogue, he waxed lyrical about the importance of play:

Play is the purest most spiritual activity of man at this stage and at the same time, typical of human life as a whole of the inner hidden natural life in man all things. It gives, therefore joy, contentment, inner and outer rest, peace with the world. It holds the source of all that is good.⁵²

Froebel is credited with coining the term "playground". In his book *Education of Man*, he proceeds to describe in the smallest details the characteristics and functions of a playground. That is not to say, however, that he was the first one to develop play environments for children. Froebel's playgrounds were very different from those of today; they were essentially nature and gardens, environments similar to the country surroundings and farms. He played a huge role in advancing the role of play in American education, especially in kindergartens and child development centres—the fact recognised by the great American educator William T. Harris. Froebel and his predecessors' emphasis on the importance of play for children's joy and development gained

⁵² Frost, *A History of Children's Play and Play Environments*, 28-29.

widespread acceptance by the early 1900s. This shift is reflected in the inspector's report for Bega, which highlighted the detrimental effects of farm work on children, using the right to play as a key argument.

Additionally, critics of child labour on dairy farms argued that the gruelling work limited children's future prospects and instilled a lasting aversion to rural life. Some predicted that children raised under such conditions would grow into "dull, anaemic" adults with limited knowledge beyond livestock and dairy routines.⁵³ Opponents of child labour on farms also argued that it fostered a strong aversion to rural life. An article highlighted the story of a wealthy farmer whose children, after enduring relentless farm labour in their youth, chose city life over continuing on their father's farm, having grown to resent the hardships of rural living.⁵⁴ This trend was viewed as undesirable, especially given the prevailing belief that Australia's prosperity relied on a strong farming population. For critics who opposed to child labour on farms, it was essential that they were not forced to work so hard that they became disenchanted with rural living. Instead, dedicated playtime would help to develop children's positive connections with rural life.

Objections to child labour on farms and school absenteeism did not apply to Aboriginal children. The labour of these children was used rather extensively in Australian homes through most of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century. European settlers came to incorporate Aboriginal children into their homes in a number of ways—most of them reprehensible.⁵⁵ Aboriginal parents might be killed and their children adopted. The children might simply be kidnapped and used as labourers. Alternatively, settler colonists received Aboriginal children who had been raised and trained in menial labour on missions or reserves. These Aboriginal youth typically worked long hours for little or no pay. A lot of Indigenous girls worked

⁵³ "Child Labour and Education," *Gundagai Times and Tumut, Adelong and Murrumbidgee District Advertiser*, October 27, 1908, 2.

⁵⁴ "Child Labour," *Mudgee Guardian and North-Western Representative*, July 2, 1908, 21.

⁵⁵ Shirleen Robinson, "Resistance and Race: Aboriginal Child Workers in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century Australia" in *Children, Childhood and Youth in the British World*, eds. Shirleene Robinson and Simon Sleight (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 129-143.

as domestic servants, but they did jobs that extended far beyond cooking, cleaning, and tending children; they worked with cattle, dug potholes, and chopped and fetched wood. The majority of their male counterparts who worked for white colonists were employed in the pastoral industry where they mustered cattle—a dangerous job that frequently resulted in broken bones or worse. Considerable research indicates that their lot was akin to slavery, yet few voices spoke up against their treatment. On the contrary, many settlers believed that labour was good for Aboriginal children; a way to reform a problematic population. Historian Shirleene Robinson cites an article from as early as the 1840s which expressed high hopes for the reformatory powers of manual work: “if they [Aboriginal children] are trained in industry and above all, in habits of regularity, a permanent good may, under the Divine blessing, be reasonably expected”.⁵⁶ Thus, while overwork of white children raised concerns, the exploitation of Aboriginal children was widely accepted by settlers, who viewed labour as a means to “reform” the Indigenous population.

School absenteeism among Aboriginal children was likewise largely ignored. Following the 1880 Act, Aboriginal families could enrol their children in local schools, but, in reality, there was a huge obstruction in their way—white families did not want their children to study together with the Indigenous youth, hence, they insisted on the exclusion of Aboriginal children from all public schools.⁵⁷ Reasons for criticism included racist perceptions that indigenous children were “dirty” and “black,” as well as the belief that education could turn them into “rogues.” After the 1900 incident in which an Aboriginal man, Jimmy Governor, killed nine white settlers in Breelong in the central tablelands, it became ever so easier to deny Aboriginal children access to NSW schools. The then Minister of Education proclaimed that any Aboriginal child could be debarred from attending school if there was just one opposing white parent. The unequal treatment of Indigenous

⁵⁶ Shirleene Robinson, “Regulating the Race: Aboriginal Children in Private European Homes in Colonial Australia,” *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol.37, iss. 3, (2013): 302-315, here 306.

⁵⁷ Julia Horne and Geoffrey Sherington, “Education,” in *The Cambridge History of Australia*, ed. Alison Bashford and Stuart Macintyre (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 389-390.

and non-Indigenous children was rooted in the era's racial attitudes, which viewed non-white individuals as inferior, unworthy, and almost subhuman.

The claims regarding the overwork and mistreatment of white country children did not go undisputed. Someone who lived in Bega and signed their name as *Star* sent a letter to the editor of *Sunday Times* regarding the assertions made by the school inspector for Bega; he systematically countered each point raised by the inspector. No one on a dairy farm would allow children to operate such a valuable and delicate machine as a separator, this writer alleged.⁵⁸ Similarly, children were never asked to cut sorghum, nor to wake before sunrise. Lastly, *Star* claimed that children in Bega were as healthy as those anywhere in Australia. At the same time another article in the *Singleton Argus* supported *Star's* claim by arguing that charges of exploitation were vastly exaggerated and mostly incorrect.⁵⁹ Referring to Shoalhaven, another town in the Nowra district, the article maintained that children were happy and content there, unlike city children. Margaret Catchpole voiced another objection in a passionate letter to the *Kiama Reporter and Illawara Journal* in which she challenged the assertion that children on dairy farms were intellectually deficient in any way. "Milking cows and attending to the dairy farm will not turn good brains to bad beef," she contended.⁶⁰ By way of proof, she cited T.J. Byrne, the late Premier of Queensland, who, she asserted, used to be a milk boy as well as other prominent people both in Queensland and NSW who allegedly grew up on dairy farms.

The response to the accusations by education specialists went beyond denying the points they made. It included outright extolling the benefits of farm labour by children, in line with the long-held veneration of the countryside mentioned above. The most frequently cited arguments in favour of farm labour included thwarting larrikinism and learning valuable skills. One proponent of child labour on farms, for example, argued that in the country "there is always something to do,

⁵⁸ "Bega's Answer," *Sunday Times*, June 23, 1908, 7.

⁵⁹ "Farms and Children," *Singleton Argus*, June 23, 1908, 3.

⁶⁰ "Children's Work on Dairy Farms," *Kiama Reporter and Illawara Journal*, April 23, 1904, 2.

and it is in this that the farm life holds its greatest advantage. There is no time for larrikinism, as is the case of the city life.”⁶¹ Another advocate for child labour on farms, who claimed to have grown up on a dairy farm in Kiama, wrote to the *Australian Town and Country Journal* arguing that farm work offered many benefits: farm children attended school longer than city children, were in a better physical shape for apprenticeships, and gained valuable experience for future farm ownership.⁶² Another argument supporting child farm labour claimed that farm-raised children were healthier than city children due to fresh air and good food.⁶³ Girls had the prospect of marrying a steady-going young farmer and boys could look forward to owning their own farm unlike city boys who have “no hope of becoming anything but a hired person working for a bare living, who is always at the mercy of the varying industrial and commercial circumstances.”⁶⁴ These rebuttals from various individuals highlight both the enduring belief that child labour on farms was beneficial and a significant divide in perceptions of its acceptability.

From the discourse around country children related so far, one might get the impression that it was the confrontation between education professionals and everyone else in the state. This was not exactly the case. Some education professionals were reluctant to classify child labour on farms as truancy: during the 1904 Teachers’ Conference, for example, one speaker, Mr. Wigg, said that when it came to truancy proper, he “found in the country very little of it; it was nearly always the case that the parents insisted on using the labour of their children.”⁶⁵ Likewise, in 1904, when Minister for Public Instruction, Mr. John Perry, was asked whether the truancy bill he was proposing would deal with children on dairying farms, he was not keen to include them saying that “he did not think the general practice of parents in dairying districts was to make their children little slaves.”⁶⁶ What is more, he did not intend to take away from the parents the right to work

⁶¹ “Children’s Work on Farms,” *Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*, April 20, 1904, 972.

⁶² “Child Labour on Dairy Farms,” *Australian Town and Country Journal*, June 1, 1904, 11.

⁶³ “Labour on Dairy Farms,” *SMH*, May 28, 1904, 11.

⁶⁴ “Labour on Dairy Farms,” *SMH*, May 28, 1904, 11.

⁶⁵ “Our Education System,” *SMH*, April 15, 1904, 3.

⁶⁶ “Our Education System,” *SMH*, April 15, 1904, 3.

their children; he provided safeguards in the Bill, namely, an opportunity to take out exemption certificates, so that no hardship might fall upon parents in country districts who kept a child at home to assist at harvest time, or in such work as gathering grapes.⁶⁷ He further explained that the Truancy Bill was aimed at city children whose parents neglected their children's education.⁶⁸

In 1908, when Mr. Perry was the Minister for Agriculture, he was much more outspoken about what he thought of teachers' assertions: he found them "ridiculous" and speaking from experience he forthrightly declared:

children as a general thing were none the worse for having to do milking. He had done it, and it had not hurt him. Work would not hurt anybody. If some of the young fellows had had more work and less play, they and the country would be all the better for it. If they were going to bring up a race of youngsters who were taught that it was wrong to work, there was going to be decadence in the nation.⁶⁹

Similarly, in 1915, Minister of Public Instruction Arthur Griffith was sceptical of allegations against dairy farmers, rejecting general accusations.⁷⁰ While he acknowledged that some parents might prioritise profit over responsibility, he saw no evidence of widespread child exploitation and refused to act without full knowledge of the facts. Perry and Griffith may have genuinely distrusted the accusations made by teachers and school inspectors, but their responses were likely influenced by their roles as elected representatives—especially in Perry's case, as he was the member of parliament for Richmond, a key dairy district.⁷¹ They would have been careful not to upset their electorates, particularly at a time when rural life was highly valued, and the dairy industry played a crucial role in NSW's economy.

⁶⁷ "Mistakes of the Past," *Evening News*, April 15, 1904, 3; "Child Labour in the Country," *Daily Telegraph*, April 15, 1904, 4.

⁶⁸ "Our Education System," *SMH*, April 15, 1904, 3.

⁶⁹ "Children and Dairying," *Australian Town and Country Journal*, December 2, 1908, 18.

⁷⁰ "Dairy Farm Children. Minister's Statement," *Sydney Stock and Station Journal*, August 25, 1915, 11.

⁷¹ Gillian Fulloon, "Perry, John (1845–1922)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/perry-john-8023/text13985>, published first in hardcopy 1988, accessed online March 4, 2024.

Concern evinced by education specialists such as teachers and school inspectors in relation to children growing up in rural NSW should be viewed in the context of major changes concurrently taking place in the sphere of education in many western societies. In the industrialised countries of the United States and Western Europe, the turn of the nineteenth century was rife with reformist education discourses that came to be known as the “new education” or “progressive education.”⁷² They emerged in large part as an attempt by educationists to improve nineteenth-century schooling that suffered, as it was thought, from regimentation and pedagogical limitations. The discourses contemplated a wide range of reforms, including the introduction of new subjects into the curriculum, the teaching of old subjects in new ways, the adoption of a humanistic philosophy of childhood and learning, the introduction of scientific, psychological, and business efficiency practices to schools and classrooms as well as the introduction of a comprehensive program of school and curriculum reorganisation. These discourses all called for educational reform, but they oftentimes offered conflicting remedies.

These reformist discourses sprang up in Australia, too. Attorney-General B.R. Wise spearheaded the reformist movement in NSW, marking its beginning with his June 1, 1901, address at the Teachers’ Association Conference. In his speech, he sharply criticised the NSW education system, highlighting issues like low teacher pay, the flawed pupil-teacher system, and the state’s neglect of higher education.⁷³ The next day, Francis Anderson, a professor of philosophy at the University of Sydney, found further faults in the education system, criticising its mechanical instruction, emphasis on rote learning, and overly bookish curriculum. He also deplored the lack of focus on the natural, social and physical sciences.⁷⁴ Additionally, he raised the concern that schools were neither free nor compulsory.⁷⁵ Teachers, too, received a fair share of criticism with

⁷² Peter Meadmore, “The Introduction of the “New Education” in Queensland, Australia,” *History of Education Quarterly*, vol. 43, no. 3 (2003): 372-392, here 373-4.

⁷³ Alan Barcan, *A History of Australian Education* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1980), 207.

⁷⁴ Craig Campbell and Helen Proctor, *A History of Australian Schooling* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2014), 110.

⁷⁵ B.K. Hyams and Bob Bessant, *Schooling for the People: The Introduction to the History of State Education in Australia* (Camberwell, Vic.: Longman, 1972), 91.

their defects of character, preparation, and intellect coming under particularly vicious attack.⁷⁶ Anderson's speech was received well by the audience and was promptly published.⁷⁷ These discussions marked a significant turning point in Australian education, highlighting the urgent need for reform.

In the early twentieth century, education gained importance in Australia, not just as an academic pursuit but as a vital component of national and economic development. Historians McLeod and Wright explain that during the early decades of the twentieth century, schooling moved up the priority list not so much because it was valuable in and of itself, but because it was believed to play a critical role in advancing the economic and social progress of the newly federated Australian nation.⁷⁸ Anderson himself said words to this effect in the afore-mentioned conference, arguing that education would play an important role in the forthcoming struggle between the British Empire and other industrial countries for commercial and industrial supremacy.⁷⁹ Teachers, in their turn, received a lot of attention as their identity in this period became closely intertwined with that of the nation. As Green and Reid maintain: "constructing the Teacher and forming the Nation were complementary and congruent practices in the Australian context" at this time.⁸⁰ Moreover, teachers became important players in nation-building. Pedagogic authority went hand in hand with the authority of the newly emergent nation-state. Through their evolving roles, teachers were seen as central to building the nation's identity, linking their professional purpose with Australia's aspirations for social and economic progress, which heightened the emphasis on their knowledge and teaching abilities.

⁷⁶ Bill Green and Jo-Anne Reid, "A New Teacher for a New Nation? Teacher Education, "English", and Schooling in Early Twentieth-century Australia," *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, vol. 44, no.4 (2012): 361-379, 362.

⁷⁷ Campbell and Proctor, *A History of Australian Schooling*, 110.

⁷⁸ Julie McLeod and Katie Wright, "The Promise of the New: Genealogies of Youth, Nation and Educational Reform in Australia," *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, vol. 44, iss. 4 (2012), 283-293; here 285.

⁷⁹ Hyams and Bessant, *Schools for the People?* 91.

⁸⁰ Green and Reid, "A New Teacher for a New Nation?" 362.

Rising dissatisfaction with the quality of education in NSW in the early twentieth century set the stage for teachers' and school inspectors' frustration over parents' reliance on children's labour on dairy farms. Teachers likely felt the need to defend themselves against claims that rural students' underperformance was due to their negligence. That school inspectors sided with teachers on the issue of country children's truancy was the development of the early twentieth century. Before the widespread criticism of education in NSW began, teachers would have been on the receiving end of inspectors' condemnation, not children. School inspectors in the last decades of the nineteenth century were assessors rather than constructive advisors.⁸¹ Their judgement as to a teacher's efficiency was based primarily on the number of pupils who passed the inspector's exams. This led to the relations between the inspector and the staff being forced and formal. As one former school inspector reminisced, the arrival of the inspector "at school turned teachers.... into "boding tremblers." Between 1903 and 1905, school inspection reforms transformed inspectors from examiners into advisors working alongside teachers, strengthening their collaboration to address issues like truancy and advocate for the educational needs of rural students.

Criticism of education quality in the early 1900s that led educators to defend against parents' decisions to keep children home for farm work triggered a series of educational reforms in NSW, leading to the enactment of the *Public Instruction Act* in 1916. Soon after the June 1901 conference, the need for reform was discussed in the parliament. Following two public meetings in November 1901, a fifteen-point reform program was established, addressing teacher training, technical education, compulsory attendance, school fees, and other educational issues.⁸² Additionally, two leading educationalists, George Knibbs, senior public servant, and John Turner, principal of Fort Street Public School, were sent abroad, mainly to the USA, Britain and continental

⁸¹ David S. Bowmer, "The Development of the Inspectorial System in the Public Schools of New South Wales, 1848-1905" (PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 1965), 224-241.

⁸² Barcan, *A History of Australian Education*, 207.

Europe, to search for ideas that might inform the development of improved approaches to education. The Knibbs-Turner reports published subsequently further drove home the point that the NSW education was in serious need of reform and suggested the ways to implement it.⁸³ Much more influential than these reports was the one authored by Inspector Peter Board.⁸⁴ Peter Board funded his own educational tour of Europe and published a concise twelve-page report advocating for public school reform. His report, along with other writings, was shorter and more accessible than the extensive reports by Knibbs and Turner. In response to Wise and Anderson's critique and inquiries into overseas education, NSW implemented education reforms over the decade from 1906 to 1916. NSW education underwent the following changes: the pupil-teacher system was abolished, single gender teacher colleges were replaced by the co-educational Sydney Teachers' College, school fees both for primary and secondary schools were abolished, academic, domestic, commercial, and technical courses were established and, finally, schooling was made compulsory on every half-day that school was open.⁸⁵ These reforms collectively addressed the criticisms of the education system, ensuring that educational quality was significantly improved in NSW.

Educators' concerns about farm labour hindering children's education were indirectly addressed in 1916 through the enactment of the Public Instruction Act, commonly known as the Truancy Act. This legislation mandated strict attendance requirements, compelling students to attend school every half day or risk fines for their caregivers.⁸⁶ After a second non-attendance offense, children could be sent to "an institution selected by the Minister for the detention of truants."⁸⁷ Courts could also impose a maintenance fee of up to ten shillings per week on parents for the child's detention. This Act effectively eliminated the possibility of children working, either in paid positions or at home during school hours, while their caregivers paid fines for school

⁸³ Hyams and Bessant, *Schools for the People?* 91.

⁸⁴ Campbell and Proctor, *A History of Australian Schooling*, 110-113.

⁸⁵ Barcan, *A History of Australia Education*, 210-211.

⁸⁶ NSW *Public Instruction (Amendment) Act*, Act No. 51, 1916.

⁸⁷ NSW *Public Instruction (Amendment) Act*, Act No. 51, 1916.

absences. By introducing these regulations, the Act aimed, among other things, to prioritise education and mitigate the impact of farm labour on children's schooling.

Despite significant concern among critics exposing the hardships of farm life, child labour on farms remained unregulated in early twentieth-century NSW. This stands in contrast to other industries like coal mining, factory work, and street trade, where child labour was increasingly restricted. Several factors may explain this gap in regulation. First, while educators voiced frustration over students missing school for farm duties, they never formally advocated for an outright ban on child farm labour. Secondly, their criticisms gained limited traction; politicians, including John Perry, one of the Ministers of Public Instruction during this period, viewed farm work as harmless for children, deeming it compatible with their physical and moral well-being. Finally, the lack of regulatory pressure likely stemmed from a broader societal belief that rural life provided a wholesome environment. This idealised view of the countryside supported a widespread acceptance of child labour on family farms, framing it as both character-building and beneficial for children, thus stalling any momentum for regulatory change.

To this day, child farm labour in NSW is widely accepted and remains unregulated. A 2019 newspaper article highlighting the impact of drought in rural Australia revealed that primary school-aged children were missing school to assist in euthanising starving animals. Missing school was not questioned; the focus was on addressing youth mental health in drought-affected areas.⁸⁸ However, this acceptance of child labour on farms raises serious concerns when we consider the broader scope of children's involvement in agricultural work. Australian children are actively involved in farming, commonly engaging with machinery and equipment, driving farm vehicles, handling animals from a very young age, and using firearms. This involvement can be dangerous, with many accidents occurring as a result of their exposure to hazardous machinery and farm

⁸⁸ Patrick Wood, "UNICEF Combines Drought Stories of Country Kids to Warn of Worsening Rural Stress." ABC News, February 18, 2019. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-02-19/drought-kids-in-crisis-rural-issues-unicef/10820748> , accessed online October 29, 2024.

vehicles.⁸⁹ Yet, despite the risks, existing laws, including the *Industrial Relations Act 1996*, the *Industrial Relations Act 2006* (Child Employment Act), and *Children and Young Persons Act 1998* (Care and Protection Act) supplemented by the *Children and Young Persons Regulation 2015* (Care and Protection) (Child Employment), do not address child farm labour. Similarly, in the US, children working on family farms are mostly exempt from occupational safety and child labour laws.⁹⁰ Thus, the cultural acceptance of child labour in family farming persists, largely untouched by legislation in both Australia and the United States.

In the 1900s, critics, particularly teachers and school inspectors, expressed concerns about the strenuous work children were doing on farms, especially on dairy farms. A primary argument against child labour on farms centered on its physical toll, affecting children's health, development, and schooling. Critics noted that such exhausting work led to frequent school absenteeism, impeding intellectual growth. Figures like Randolph Bedford echoed these concerns, emphasising the impact on both health and education. Additionally, critics argued that farm labour deprived children of vital play opportunities, essential for their development—a view that society was increasingly embracing. Some contended that gruelling farm work limited children's future career prospects, producing adults with restricted skills. Others claimed that such labour fostered resentment toward rural life, discouraging children from staying on farms. The latter threatened rural sustainability in an era when Australia's prosperity depended on a robust farming population. Notably, however, these concerns were not consistently applied; school absenteeism and physical toll were rarely considered issues for Indigenous or boarded-out children, for whom farm work was viewed as beneficial.

⁸⁹ Alison Kennedy, Myfanwy Maple, Kathryn McKay and Susan Brumby, "Suicide and Accidental Death for Australia's Farming Families: How Context Influences Individual Response," *Journal of Death and Dying*, vol. 83, iss. 3 (June 2019): 407–425, here 409.

⁹⁰ Lisa Hartling, Robert J. Brison, Ellen T. Crumley, Terry P. Klassen and William Pickett, "A Systematic Review of Interventions to Prevent Childhood Farm Injuries," *Paediatrics*, vol. 114, iss. 4, (2004): e483–e496.

Objections to child labour on dairy farms in particular were driven by both the demanding nature of dairy farm work and the broader education reform movement of the time. In dairy districts, children's schooling was constantly disrupted, with their attendance interrupted daily, year-round, as they were required to assist with milking. The criticism of child labour on dairy farms also stemmed from accusations of teacher incompetence, which were part of a larger education reform movement gaining traction across the Western world. In an effort to shift blame away from themselves, educators accused rural parents of undermining children's education, claiming that farm work had harmful effects on their development. The objections to child labour on dairy farms highlighted the tension between agricultural demands and the emerging push for educational reform, revealing the complexities of rural life and the challenges of balancing work and education for children.

While the plight of children living in dairy districts sparked significant discussion in the early twentieth century, including calls for a Royal Commission to investigate the issue, no action was ultimately taken. This was primarily due to strong opposition to the criticism of child farm labour. Many social commentators, including those with firsthand experience of farm life, publicly rejected the claims, arguing that they were inaccurate or exaggerated. This view was shared by key figures, such as John Perry, Minister for Public Education, whose comments on the issue were likely shaped by political motives, including the desire to avoid alienating his electorate in the dairy district of Richmond. Additionally, the widespread belief in the character-building benefits of rural work and the idealisation of rural life made the idea of regulating farm labour less appealing. As a result, while the issue was debated, it failed to lead to any substantial regulatory changes, and instead, policies like the 1916 Public Instruction (Amendment) Act focused on school attendance without addressing the root concerns about child labour on farms. This approach, rooted in educational reform goals, reduced child labour's impact on schooling while allowing societal ideals about rural life to sustain its acceptance.

The 1916 Public Instruction (Amendment) Act marked the end of NSW's early debate on acceptable child labour, a discussion that had spanned decades since the 1850s. This period saw key legislative milestones, including the regulation of child labour in coalfields, factories, and street trades, though farm labour remained untouched. Alongside restrictions on child employment, the growing recognition of education's importance shaped policy decisions. The value of education was understood in various ways over time, but ultimately, removing children from the workforce was seen as an investment in society's future. These early debates and reforms laid the groundwork for modern workforce regulations, ensuring that children are protected from exploitation. The emphasis on education that emerged during this period has endured, evolving into the belief that schooling is central to a child's development and future opportunities. In a nutshell, childhood in NSW today is in large measure shaped by the 1850–1915 shift in attitudes toward child labour.

Conclusion

A defining feature of modern childhood in NSW, as in other Australian states and many countries, is that most children are not seen as economic assets for their families. Children generally do not engage in paid work until their mid-teens and, until recently, NSW law even prohibited them from working before the age of fifteen.¹ While some children may engage in unpaid labour, such as housework or farm work for rural children, this remains a family decision outside the scope of the law. The majority of children's time is dedicated to schooling, and even families facing financial challenges make efforts to prioritise their children's education, aiming to unlock their potential and improve future prospects. In addition to their academic pursuits, modern children spend their free time participating in sports, socialising with friends, and pursuing hobbies, which serve to develop skills, foster creativity, and provide enjoyment rather than monetary gain. Play is also recognised as an essential part of childhood, with a preference among most adults for offline games over online ones. Most parents bear the cost of children's leisure activities and typically view children as a financial responsibility rather than an economic resource for their households.²

In NSW, the nature of a standard childhood today largely stems from legislative and social reforms that took place over approximately seventy years, starting in the 1850s, which aimed to restrict child labour and expand education. By targeting poor working-class families, these reforms led to a significant redefinition of working-class childhood. Previously seen as economic resources

¹ Until 2010, NSW law strictly prohibited children under fifteen from engaging in paid work, except in the performance industry, while mandating school attendance. However, since 2010, these regulations have changed; NSW no longer enforces a minimum working age, though certain restrictions remain. All NSW students must complete Year 10. Children can work up to four hours on school days, must finish by 9 p.m. before a school day, and require principal approval to work during school hours. NSW Government, *School Leaving Age*, 2023, <https://education.nsw.gov.au/schooling/parents-and-carers/pathways-after-school/school-leaving-age>, accessed online January 21, 2025; SBS News, *Minimum Working Age in Australia: When Your Child Can Work*, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/state-by-state-heres-when-your-child-can-start-working-and-what-the-rules-are/q4q0mrsnp>, accessed online January 21, 2025.

² Families from low socio-economic backgrounds may still depend on children's labour to a certain degree, but to a far lesser extent and with significantly reduced social acceptance compared to previous periods.

by both their families and society, working-class children by 1915 were gradually redefined as learners rather than workers. This shift led to the theoretical universalisation of childhood, where all children, regardless of their parents' socio-economic status, ideally shared a similar experience centred on learning. Similar processes that reshaped childhood were taking place in many societies, as governments and reformers worldwide sought to limit child labour and broaden access to education. However, this thesis focuses on NSW, examining the specific factors that influenced these changes and how they shaped the modern understanding of childhood in this context.

Three central considerations catalysed the transformation in attitudes toward child labour in NSW between 1850 and 1916. First, middle-class reformers, many of whom were legislators, increasingly recognised the negative effects of child labour on children's health, a concern that played a central role in discussions about work in coalfields and factories. This understanding of the harmful effects of work on young children was introduced to NSW from industrialised Britain, where concerns about the impact of child labour on health had already taken hold. Physicians played a crucial role in shaping this discourse by publishing books that detailed workers exhibiting symptoms such as sallow complexions, bowed legs, and stunted growth. They also testified before government inquiries, such as the Royal Commission on Children's Employment. Statistical studies, including Samuel Stanway's research on factory children, provided empirical evidence of stunted growth and physical deformities, reinforcing fears about the consequences of excessive labour for the state.

Health concerns were amplified by degeneration theory, which suggested that industrialisation was causing the degeneration of working-class populations. This theory posited that degeneracy was hereditary and progressive, with acquired traits being passed down and leading to progressively sicker generations. Influenced by Jean-Baptiste Lamarck's theory of heredity, which stated that adaptations made during an organism's lifetime were inherited by offspring, this idea gained traction. In the mid-nineteenth century, French psychiatrist Benedict Morel expanded on this theory, claiming that diseases in one generation led to higher sickness rates in the next,

eventually preventing reproduction. This concept heightened fears about the long-term health of children in harsh working conditions, with concerns that child labour could permanently damage the future health of the population.

Fears about the degeneracy of the rising generation in Australia were initially driven not only by overwork in poor conditions but also by concerns over the harsh Australian climate. The prevailing thinking on the effect of climate on health in Australia was that the environment was harmful to European settlers. As medical theories linked hot climates to diseases, and with growing concerns about humans adapting to vastly different climates, many believed that the Australian climate posed health risks for Europeans. These anxieties were widespread, with colonists worrying about the effects of the environment on their health. Medical literature from southern Australia between 1850 and 1880 expressed concerns about fatigue, mental distress, and the harmful impact of the sun on settlers' health, highlighting fears that the Australian climate could negatively affect their constitution and wellbeing.

The health of young children was also a concern, as poor sanitation and hygiene were feared to further jeopardise their well-being. This fear played a key role in discussions around factory labour in the mid-1870s and was also influenced by related developments in Britain. During this period, Britain was undergoing significant advancements in public health, influenced by figures like Edwin Chadwick and John Simon. The link between poor living conditions and disease had led to an interventionist approach, with growing recognition that dirt, overcrowding, and polluted water contributed to illness. As the theory of contagion gained traction over miasma theory, factory environments increasingly came under scrutiny for their potential role in spreading disease. Additionally, the rising middle-class emphasis on personal cleanliness and moral worth influenced perceptions of factory work, as child labour became increasingly associated with filth, disease, and moral decline. Thus, evolving beliefs about sanitation and health of coal field and factory workers reinforced the push to restrict child labour, as reformers argued that protecting future generations required removing children from the unhealthy conditions of factories and coal fields.

When the issue of children working on dairy farms was debated, concerns about their health were also raised. Rural life was widely regarded as a healthy and wholesome lifestyle, and farm work, in general, was associated with positive values such as hard work and discipline. However, the health of children working on farms was increasingly scrutinised, with critics—largely teachers and school inspectors—linking these concerns to the broader issue of children’s education. Many argued that the physical demands of farm labour, particularly the long hours and strenuous tasks, led to extreme fatigue, which in turn affected children’s ability to perform in school. The exhaustion from overwork was seen as impairing their concentration, diminishing their academic potential, and stunting their intellectual development.

This leads to the second key issue that contributed to the shift in attitudes toward child labour in NSW: the focus on education. Education held significant importance for various reasons at different times, and its relevance can be traced throughout the entire period under study, from the late 1850s to 1916. By the 1860s, as legislators debated child labour in coalfields, education had emerged as a key issue, increasingly viewed as essential for societal stability. Education was valued for instilling desirable social attitudes, preparing children for their roles in society, and fostering a population that respected authority and sought peaceful resolutions to grievances. With the extension of the colonial franchise in 1858, the need to educate the working class became even more urgent, as concerns grew that the uneducated masses might wield political power without the necessary intellectual and moral grounding. In the 1870s, as debates shifted to children’s work in factories, education remained crucial for these reasons. Additionally, during this period, education began to be seen as essential for boosting productivity and fostering economic growth.

By the end of the nineteenth century, education gained in importance due to the colony’s growing industrial concerns. This is clearly reflected in the strong support for juvenile industrial exhibitions among middle-class reformers. These exhibitions not only highlighted the value of primary education, as evidenced by the invitation to submit schoolwork exhibits for recognition but also emphasised the need to promote technical education. The focus was on reducing reliance

on foreign skilled labour and addressing the decline of apprenticeships, highlighting the need for a homegrown, technically skilled workforce to support local industries. The colony's economic prosperity depended on cultivating expertise in machinery and industrial production. As global competition, particularly from Europe and America, raised standards, vocational education was seen as key to keeping pace.

Education was also central to debates surrounding child labour in both street trade and farm work. In the context of street trade, education was highlighted because middle-class reformers saw it as a means of steering youth away from crime and preventing them from becoming professional beggars. Similarly, in the case of child farm labour, critics—predominantly educationalists—emphasised education as a pressing concern for NSW. They leveraged this argument during a time of educational reform, driven by widespread dissatisfaction with the inadequacy of previous schooling. Thus, education emerged as a vital tool in addressing child labour, shaping debates and reforms aimed at improving the future prosperity of NSW.

The final major concern that influenced changing attitudes toward child labour in NSW was the supposed moral character of working children, especially those employed in factories and street trading. Legislators feared that factory work led to behavioural issues, questioning whether young workers were disciplined and responsible. They also worried about the effects of financial independence, fearing that wages could encourage reckless spending. They investigated whether children controlled their earnings, if boys spent money in pubs, and whether unemployed child workers returning to school might negatively influence their classmates. Sexual morality was a particular concern, especially for girls. Legislators questioned whether boys and girls working together encouraged inappropriate relationships. Additionally, they suspected that girls chose factory jobs over domestic service because of higher wages and free evenings, which they believed could compromise their morality. Similarly, in the context of street trade, legislators feared that children—again, especially girls—would be drawn into prostitution, while boys might be pushed toward crime. Beyond individual behaviour, these concerns reflected broader anxieties about social

order and gender roles, reinforcing the push to restrict child labour as a means of preserving traditional values.

The rise of the movement to restrict child labour stemmed from growing concerns over the health, education, and moral well-being of young workers. These concerns were influenced by various developments outlined above, but also rapid growth of industrialisation, the extension of *parens patriae* and a shift in societal views, where nurture was increasingly seen as more important than nature in shaping a child's future. Reformers were deeply troubled by the potential future of these children and the adults they would eventually become. There was a strong desire to ensure that, as they grew, these children would mature into responsible, capable citizens and robust workers. It was seen as essential for them to be physically healthy, educated, and skilled, so they could contribute to society, participate in the workforce, and help NSW remain competitive in an industrialising world. The fear was that without proper care and education, these children could fall into crime or beggary, becoming a burden rather than a productive member of society. This concern led to a fundamental shift in how the role of working-class children was perceived, transforming them from breadwinners to learners, with an emphasis placed on their education rather than their immediate contribution to family income.

Thus, the movement against child labour was driven less by genuine concern for children's welfare and more by the priorities of reformers. These reformers, primarily middle-class advocates of child labour restrictions, did not seek to improve the overall living standards of working-class families. They could have advocated for higher wages for parents, reducing families' reliance on child labour. Instead, they were more likely to demonise working-class parents while focusing narrowly on restricting certain forms of child labour for those deemed too young, without addressing the broader economic conditions that made child labour necessary for many families. Moreover, as discussed in the chapter on farm labour, many forms of child labour were never questioned or challenged in this period, including the widespread exploitation of Aboriginal and state children, ranging from indentured servitude to unpaid domestic work. Ultimately, despite the

growing sentimental rhetoric about the importance of childhood play and education, movements to end child labour were fundamentally rooted in more pragmatic concerns. These included ensuring a steady supply of obedient workers, maintaining a morally disciplined population that upheld the status quo, and reducing reliance on state aid. This thesis aligns with Shurlee Swain's conclusion that child welfare in Australia has historically served nation-building objectives, focusing on children as future citizens when aligned with national goals, but adopting a punitive stance when they were seen as potential threats to social stability.³ Through this lens, childhood became a stage for fostering future contributors to the nation's progress, rather than merely ensuring the well-being of children in the present.

This thesis has contributed to a better understanding of the factors that shaped the modern concept of childhood, however, many questions remain unanswered. As a history from above, this study does not explore how working-class families themselves adapted to increasing restrictions on child labour, how they came to embrace the idea that childhood should be dedicated to schooling, or what motivated this shift in perspective. Kerry Wimshurst's research suggests that working-class South Australia families gradually came to appreciate the value of education and, as far as possible, sought to comply with school attendance requirements.⁴ Similarly, Robert van Krieken argues that the working class was not necessarily opposed to state intervention but was instead motivated by a desire to adopt middle-class values.⁵ In the context of child labour restrictions, this may suggest that such measures were accepted as working-class families embraced the same beliefs about childhood protection that the middle class already held. Future research could further examine the extent to which economic pressures, state enforcement, or cultural influences played a role in such shifts. Additionally, an intriguing avenue for further study would

³ Shurlee Swain, "Derivative and Indigenous in the History and Historiography of Child Welfare in Australia" Part One, *Children Australia*, vol. 26, no. 4 (2001): 4-9.

⁴ Kerry Wimshurst, "Child Labour and School Attendance in South Australia 1890-1915", *Australian Historical Studies*, vol.19, iss. 76, (1981):388-411.

⁵ Robert Van Krieken, "Towards "Good and Useful Men and Women": The State and Childhood in Sydney, 1840-1890", *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 23, iss. 93, (1989), 405-425.

be the emergence of the concept of pocket money for children—how and why it developed, and whether it functioned as a substitute for wages in a society that no longer viewed children as economic contributors. Likewise, the reasons why different forms of child labour have provoked such diverse political and social responses bear further scrutiny: Children performing paid work in the performing arts—in theatre, film, or TV—for instance, or those who work in newer fields like modelling or online content creation, have clearly faced a very different response than those undertaking industrial or agricultural work. Finally, there have been interesting shifts in the discussions around child labour in Australia in the years after this study concludes that could do with further analysis. After all, it was only two years ago that Australia ratified the International Labour Organization’s Minimum Age Convention of 1973, which set out a minimum age (15) for young people to begin working, save for the performance of “light work in certain circumstances.”⁶ An interesting story surely lies in the discovering those forces calling for or against ratification, or determining what should count as “light work.”

⁶ Media Release “Australia Commits to International Standards on Child Labour and Stamping out Violence and Harassment at Work” June 14, 2023, <https://ministers.dewr.gov.au/burke/australia-commits-international-standards-child-labour-and-stamping-out-violence-and>, accessed online February 1, 2015.

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