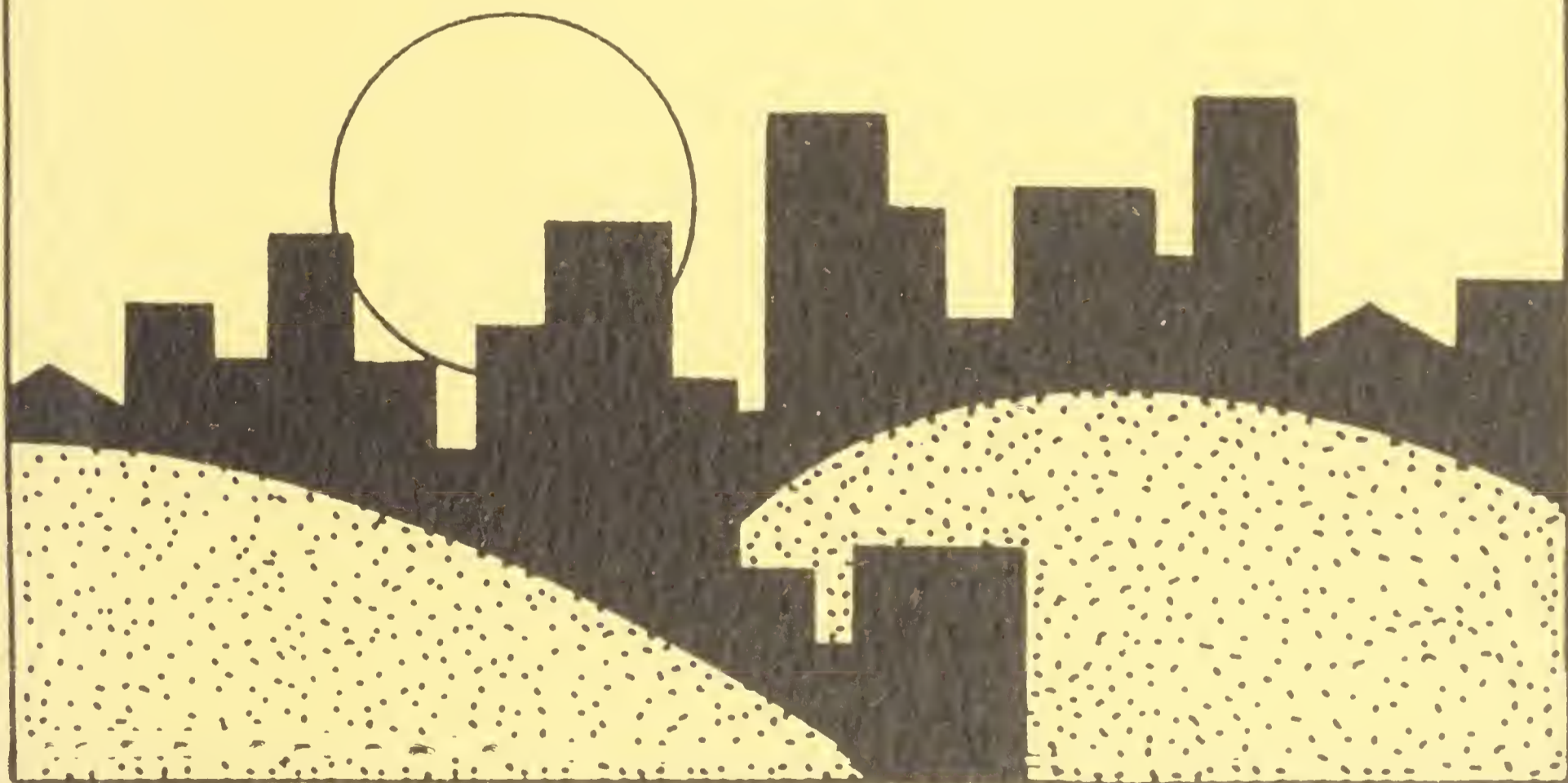


**Backrooms, Wards and Backlanes: The Landscape
of Disability in Nineteenth-Century Melbourne**

Brendan Gleeson

Urban Research Program
Working Paper No.64
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**URBAN RESEARCH PROGRAM
RESEARCH SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY**

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Abstract

The spatial and the historical dimensions of disability have both been poorly documented and analysed in Western social sciences. The spatial social sciences — geography, urban planning and architecture — have either largely ignored or trivialised the issue of disability. The discipline of history has also paid scant attention to the question of disability.

This paper contributes to the historical-geographical understanding of disability by exploring the spatial context of physical impairment in nineteenth-century Melbourne. The paper has two specific objectives

- (i) to 'locate' disabled people in nineteenth-century Melbourne by showing where and how they lived; and*
- (ii) to illustrate the socio-spatial relations that shaped their lives.*

The analysis focuses on three key sites of everyday life for disabled people: home, workplace and institution. It is argued that the socio-spatial relations which cohered around and between these pivotal locations played an important role in shaping the everyday life patterns of disabled people.

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Backrooms, Wards and Backlanes: The Landscape of Disability in Nineteenth-Century Melbourne

Introduction: The Lost Landscapes of Disability

This paper explores the spatial context of physical disability in colonial Melbourne. Here ‘disability’ refers to permanent or long-term impairment(s) to a person’s limbs or bodily organisms. This analysis will not include consideration of mental illness, a specific set of health-related conditions and socio-spatial experiences that can be distinguished from physical and intellectual disabilities. Also, the study will not directly consider the question of chronic illness. The confines of the present analysis cannot extend to all disability experiences, and neither of course would this be appropriate in a single, empirically-focused work. A range of commentators have rightly pointed to the heterogeneity of physical conditions and social experiences that are commonly lumped under the ‘disability’ rubric. These analysts have opposed overly-general approaches that avoid or understate these profound differences (e.g., see Butler & Bowlby, 1997; Parr, 1997; Wendell, 1996).

The spatial and the historical dimensions of disability have both been poorly documented and analysed in Western social sciences. Several observers (e.g., Chouinard, 1997; Imrie, 1996) have commented that the spatial social sciences — geography, urban planning and architecture — have either largely ignored or trivialised the issue of disability. However, in recent years there has been an upsurge of interest amongst geographers in disability issues, and new theoretically-informed studies have been made of the spatial experiences of physically and intellectually impaired people (e.g., Butler, 1994; Chouinard, 1997; Imrie, 1996; Parr, 1997). Nonetheless, these new geographical analyses have barely begun to explore the many spatial issues that disability raises, and the spatial understanding of impairment remains in a state of empirical and theoretical underdevelopment.

The discipline of history has also paid scant attention to the question of disability (Haj, 1970; McCagg and Siegelbaum, 1989). Nearly three decades ago Haj commented on the disabled body’s absence in the historical discourse: for him, disability represented “a vast uncharted area...of...history” (1970:13). This observation, it seems, was to go unheard as twenty years later Oliver (1990:xi) felt compelled to claim that “On the experience of disability, history is largely silent”. Only a few historians (e.g., Garland, 1995; Riley, 1987) seem to have acknowledged that the issue of impairment in past societies has been largely ignored. Garland (1995), invoking Foucault, has described the historical experience of disability as a ‘subjugated history’.

Not surprisingly then, there have been few historical-geographical examinations of disability. Only a few studies have attempted an integrated spatio-temporal analysis of disability (e.g., Dorn, 1994; Gleeson, 1993).

Whilst most theorists of disability now accept that this form of identity is, at least to some extent, socially-determined, there has been little attempt to extend and refine this understanding through empirical studies of how impairment has been experienced in different times and places. This paper seeks to address this need through a new empirical-theoretical examination of disability in a distinct historical setting, nineteenth-century Melbourne.

Melbourne is a worthy exemplar of the industrial city (Davison, 1978). The capital of the Colony (now State) of Victoria, Melbourne had an 1891 population of nearly half a million. By the late nineteenth-century Melbourne was regarded as one of the premier cities of the British Empire with a rateable value surpassed only by London and Glasgow (Briggs, 1968). By the early 1890s, the city's extensive manufacturing sector employed about 30 percent of the male labour-force. Most industrial establishments and the proletarian labour-force were located in the inner ring of suburbs circling the Central Business District (CBD) (Lack, 1991). The fragmentary historical records of life in this industrial, proletarian core suggest the presence of a considerable, if marginalised, population of disabled people.

As with most other past societies, there has been no specific analysis of disability in nineteenth-century Melbourne, and disabled people remain largely invisible in the many histories of this city. Simply put, there is no empirical map of where and how disabled people lived in nineteenth-century Melbourne. In turn, this has made it impossible to contrast theoretically the the social construction of disability in this and other historical settings.

In view of the foregoing considerations, this paper has two specific objectives

- (i) to 'locate' disabled people in nineteenth-century Melbourne by showing where they lived and worked; and
- (ii) to illustrate the socio-spatial relations that shaped their lives.

Thus the paper will explore the 'social space of disability' in this setting by exploring the spatial dimensions of everyday life for physically impaired people and by relating this to the broader historical-geographical character of nineteenth-century Melbourne. Of course, no single analysis could achieve an exhaustive account of this historical social space, and this paper will focus on three key sites of everyday life for disabled people: home, workplace and institution. It is argued that the socio-spatial relations which cohered around and between these pivotal locations played an important role in shaping the everyday life patterns of disabled people.

This is not to deny the possible significance of other nodes (e.g., commercial establishments, political spaces) for this historical social space. However, the historical evidence, limited as it is, suggests that disabled people were largely excluded from formal public spaces in the nineteenth-century industrial city (e.g., Davis, 1995; Ryan & Thomas, 1978). Oliver (1990), for example, argues that most disabled people in the industrial city

lived ‘invisible lives’ in private homes and in the range of charitable and public institutions which provided marginal social groups. This paper will examine the relationship between one key space of exclusion — the industrial workplace — and the spaces of marginality, the home and the institution. Furthermore, the analysis will focus on the specific experience of disabled people within the industrial proletariat. The influence of class stratification doubtless meant that disabled members of bourgeoisie and the proletariat had distinct social geographic experiences. Spatially, the study concentrates on the inner, proletarian suburbs which ringed Melbourne’s CBD.

As part of the analysis, three key sets of primary materials are consulted. Each set relates to one of the three sites that compose the social space of disability in this analysis. The voluminous case records left by the Melbourne Ladies’ Benevolent Society, the city’s principal source of outdoor charity, are used to shed light on the homelife of the proletariat.¹ The industrial workplace is examined with reference to the employee engagement records (1888-91) of Guest and Company, a large biscuit and cake manufacturing concern whose principal plant was located in the CBD.² Finally, the admissions records (1860-80) of Melbourne’s principal nineteenth-century poorhouse, the Melbourne Benevolent Asylum, are consulted in an exploration of the city’s institutional landscape.³

The paper is structured in three main sections which examine, in turn, the home, workplace and institutional contexts of proletarian life in the city’s inner regions. Here a combination of secondary and primary materials are used to illustrate the everyday life of disabled people within this class landscape. The conclusion summarises the relationships that constituted the social space of disability in nineteenth-century Melbourne, whilst also pointing to some of the ways that disabled people resisted the forces of socio-spatial exclusion that overshadowed their lives.

The Domestic Context of Everyday Life

Marginal Work Forms and Settings

In the last century, most of Melbourne’s working class families had to sell all their available labour power in order to survive. Those households in the wealthier, ‘aristocratic’ stratum could sometimes afford to rely on the wage of a single male breadwinner (usually a craftworker), but in most other families men, women and children sought paid work (Fox, 1991). The bulk of the working poor were concentrated in factories, the casual labour market and domestic service. In addition to these occupations, many families relied upon marginal economic activities such as outworking and street-hawking as income supplements. As Ryan & Thomas (1978) have argued, the nature of industrial production — in particular the emphasis on standard productivity

¹ Held at La Trobe Library, State Library of Victoria, Melbourne, Victoria.

² Held at the University of Melbourne Archives, Victoria, Australia.

³ Held at the La Trobe Library, State Library of Victoria, Victoria, Australia.

norms for labour — prevented most physically impaired people from obtaining work in mainstream employment settings, and no real attempt was made to change this exclusionary structure. Thus, the ‘marginal’ economic activities — outworking and street-trading — were of significance to disabled people. Outworking is of particular importance to this analysis as it was a largely domestic activity undertaken in the homes of the poor.

Industrial outworking was present in the colony from at least the late 1860s, and probably earlier. By the 1880s outworking was flourishing in the clothing and boot industries (Fry, 1956). Extra-factory production, for example, accounted for about half of the volume of manufactured clothing (Serle, 1971). The system invariably involved sweated conditions, which meant low pay (piece rates) and long hours, for workers, most of whom were females. Outwork was conducted in a variety of locations, including small workshops run by sub-contractors, but was mostly undertaken by working class women in their homes (Fry, 1956).

Public controversy over sweating paralleled similar popular concerns in Britain during the 1880s. The 1884 Royal Commission on Employees in Shops noted the prevalence of outwork, and it concluded that many of those engaging in home production “might not be willing or able to work in a factory” (Fry, 1956:80). A series of strikes by the Tailoresses’ Union (1882-83) and the Bootmakers’ Union (1884-85) were in part provoked by the abuses associated with outworking (Brooks, 1983). Settlement of the latter dispute involved the limitation of outwork to “persons who for family, personal, or *physical* reasons would be at a disadvantage working in a factory” (Fry, 1956:82) (emphasis added). This agreement was quickly broken by employers, but it does give an indication of the types of labour power absorbed by outworking; viz., those incapable of being sold within formal production settings.

A revised *Factories Act* in 1884 created a factory inspectorate charged with the prevention of abuses such as sweating (Serle, 1971). But the first Inspector, J.A. Levey, was constrained from controlling outwork by a legislative provision that limited his authority to workplaces employing six or more persons. In 1890, after continued public agitation, Levey decided to investigate the outworking system himself. The results of his survey of over 300 ‘outside workers’ were presented to Parliament as a special report.⁴ According to this survey, some of the outworkers were ‘merely’ supplementing household income, but 89 others — including 61 people who “could not leave their homes to go and work in a factory” — relied on the piece wages for survival.

The Chief Inspector provides by way of summary appendix some biographical details of the sample group of outworkers whom he interviewed. From this it emerges that the visceral world of outworking was inhabited by a significant number of disabled people. Levey made the

⁴ *Report of the Chief Inspector of Factories on the ‘Sweating System’ in Connexion with the Clothing Trade in the Colony of Victoria*, VPP 1891, vol 3, no.138

following annotation concerning a pair of girl outworkers he interviewed: “These girls live with parents, and pay them for keep...One is a cripple and is laughed at by factory hands”. The Chief Inspector asked each interviewee why she or he (most were women) did not work in factories. Many of the answers given indicate a physical incapacity to sell labour power outside the home. These reasons include: ‘ill-health’, ‘could not walk to factory’, ‘too fat to walk, and can’t leave home’, and, simply, ‘is a cripple, and could not’.

Outworking was a highly exploitative production circuit that attached itself to individual households within proletarian domestic space, thereby tapping those labour powers which could not be marketed in the external sphere. The evidence suggests that many of these marginal labour powers were physically impaired. Linge (1979:285) writes:

Many households had reason to be grateful for an industrial system that was sufficiently flexible to allow women and girls and unemployed or disabled men to earn money at home as and when their domestic or medical circumstances allowed or required.

Male workers accused women outworkers of depressing overall wages by accepting low piece rates (Linge, 1979). This resentment towards outworkers, often articulated by a patriarchal union movement, rose during the 1890s, no doubt exacerbated by the severe economic downturn that plagued the Australasian colonies during this time. In April of 1896, a well attended meeting of the ‘National Anti-Sweating League’ in the Melbourne Town Hall was told the remarkable fact that, out of an overall industrial labour force of 96,013 workers, only 46,649 (49 per cent) were employed within factories — the rest (49,364) were outworkers.⁵ In the same year, the government moved to enclose marginal labour powers by proclaiming a new *Factories Act* that aimed to minimise outwork by prescribing piece rates (Fry, 1956). This and other measures eventually closed one of the few opening points (albeit an exploitative one) for impaired people in an otherwise exclusionary labour market.

The Spectre of Poverty

Destitution was never far from the working class family’s door, even in boom times. Apart from the usual seasonal slumps and intermittent depressions, a range of other precipitating events — especially illness and injury — could lead to sudden impoverishment for a proletarian family (Kennedy, 1985). An incapacity for labour amongst any of its adult members was a disaster for the proletarian household. Serle (1971:92) has remarked that most of the poverty-stricken in colonial Melbourne were “either physically afflicted, elderly, widowed, or deserted wives and children...”. Many poor families were burdened by both the loss of a male breadwinner and the presence of a member whose labour power was unsaleable.

⁵ *The Age*, 14 April, 1896:5

Lee and Fahey (1986:24) speaking of this same labour context agree that “Even a slight injury or illness could put a worker off for some time...”. Moreover:

The best a labourer whose strength was failing could expect was to find a billet as a watchman, a carter, or perhaps as a hutkeeper on some pastoral station; at worst, he could wind up as one of the derelicts in the city parks or in a benevolent asylum...(ibid).

But in most cases it must be supposed that the disabled male remained in the home, supported by a working wife and/or children. Many of the women interrogated by Levey listed the need to support an invalid husband or child as the reason for their involvement in outworking.

Swain (1976:105-6) also makes the point that the “handicapped person was condemned to almost certain poverty” because impaired people were hampered or prevented “from earning an income and thus becoming self-supporting...”. Thus, for this author, most impaired people in colonial Melbourne were “forced to beg or live on charity” (Swain, 1976:105-6). But this construction is too final — many impaired persons must have resisted economic marginalisation. It has already been shown, for example, that outworking provided a means for impaired people to contribute to household income. Further evidence will soon be presented of the struggles waged by many disabled people in colonial Melbourne against marginalisation and dependence upon charity.

One contemporary estimate (James, [1876] 1969) put the cost of private care of invalids and ‘cripples’ at 100 pounds a year, an enormous sum for proletarian families. This fact must have encouraged many working class families to at least consider placing impaired children in charitable institutions. Friendly societies, or medical benefit ‘lodges’, provided the safeguard of accident cover for middle class and wealthier proletarian workers (Nichol, 1985). By 1890, lodge membership in the colony amounted to over 88,000 persons (Pensabene, 1980). Society membership presupposed a regular income (for weekly subscriptions), thus locking out the great bulk of the working class who were dependent upon casual labour (Garton, 1990).

The burden of unemployment — whether they bore the impairment or not — invariably fell on women. Proletarian women survived the loss or disablement of a partner by combining work, as they could get it (often outworking), with charitable assistance. The Queen’s Fund was one charity which focused on needy women.⁶ The Fund particularly targeted widows, wives with disabled husbands and women who were themselves impaired. Hateley (1972) has estimated that, of the 1,315 women assisted by the Fund between 1887 and 1900, some 18 per cent were disabled by illness or impairment. The most important sources of support for poor women were,

⁶ The Fund was a public charity which was established as a commemorative gesture by the city’s bourgeoisie on the occasion of Queen Victoria’s Jubilee (1887) (Hateley, 1972)

however, the various ladies' benevolent societies which were active in most working class areas by the latter part of the century.

A Portrait of Disablement: the Case Records of the Melbourne Ladies' Benevolent Society

The Melbourne Ladies' Benevolent Society

The British pattern of charitable 'assistance' to the lower classes was largely replicated in the colonial setting. The voluntary organisations with the most intimate knowledge of proletarian domestic space were the ladies' benevolent societies. These associations, commonly with Protestant evangelical ties, consisted of 'lady visitors' who visited the homes of needy working class families, dispensing limited assistance and boundless advice. Members were drafted from women of the lower or middle strata of the bourgeoisie, usually the wives of doctors, businessmen, and minor clergymen. Colonial Melbourne had 26 such ladies' benevolent societies by the 1880s (Kennedy, 1985). Amongst these, the largest and most influential was the Melbourne Ladies' Benevolent Society (hereafter, MLBS or 'the Society') (Kennedy, 1974). Throughout the second half of the nineteenth-century, the Society was the principal source of outdoor — that is, 'home delivered' — charity in the city.

The Society's minute books detail the casework of the lady visitors and thus contain extremely rich accounts of the domestic and public life of the industrial working class. The discussion that follows is based upon analysis of the minute records covering the period 8 June, 1850 to 19 June, 1900.

From 1855, the Society's field of operation settled upon the CBD and four adjoining suburbs; the whole divided into forty smaller districts, each with its own lady visitor (Figure 1). By the 1890s, the Society's operating area was home to about 150,000 persons. These areas contained extensive slum tracts and a considerable lumpenproletariat of widows, deserted families, the aged, the sick and disabled people. The five districts — central Melbourne, Carlton, Fitzroy, Collingwood and North Melbourne — in which the MLBS operated were amongst the poorest localities in the colony (Swain, 1976).

Analysis of the records indicates that assistance was given to 1,004 disabled or possibly disabled individuals, and, in certain cases, their families, during the study period (Table 1). In addition to 671 clear cases of disability, the minutes describe a further 333 individuals with possible impairments. The lady visitors had a practice of using the adjective 'bad' in a very ambiguous way when referring to damaged limbs, and this class of references must be counted as a potential addition to the impairment group. It was decided that all cases described as 'delicate', and most references to 'invalids', would be excluded from the present enumeration of impairment as

these most probably referred to instances of chronic illness.⁷ Nonetheless, the existence of these categories raises the possibility that the present estimation of impairment is an understatement of its actual historical prevalence. Impairment types are reported verbatim.

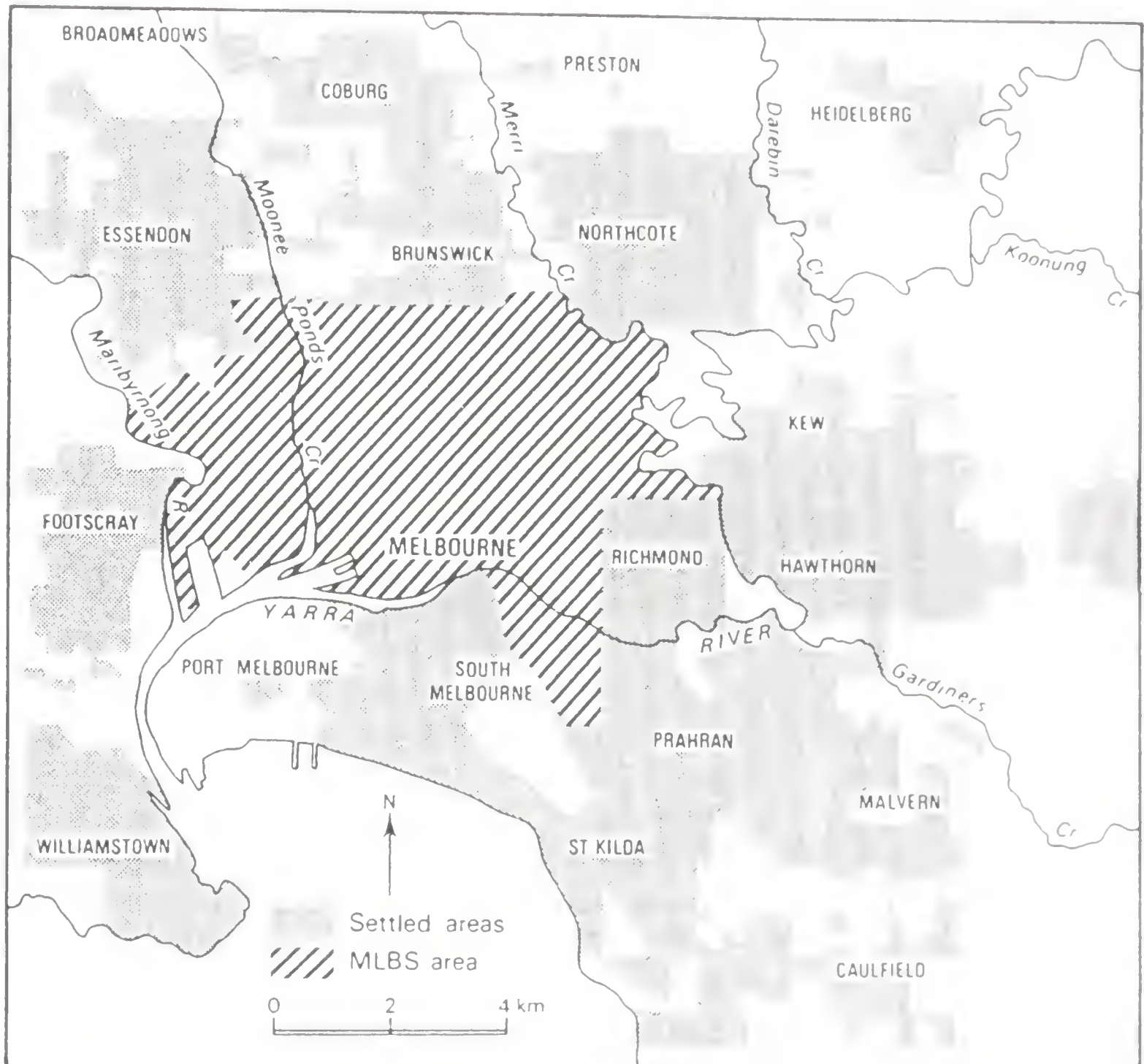


Figure 1. The sphere of operation of the Melbourne Ladies' Benevolent Society, 1855-1900

⁷ For a few (7) individuals reported as 'invalids', contextual remarks in each case clearly indicated that the term described impaired persons. These cases have been included in the tally

Table 1: Numbers of Physically Impaired Children and Adults by Stated Impairment Type, 1850-1900

	No. of Children	No. of Adults	Total Persons
Impairment type			
Crippling condition	60	107	167
Disabling condition	3	33	36
Loss of limb(s) ^a	3	76	79
No use of limb(s) ^a	1	36	37
Weakness of limb(s) ^a	-	4	4
Deformity	8	5	13
Paralysis	10	179	189
Lameness	8	58	66
Disease of spine, etc. ^b	31	21	52
Club foot	1	1	2
St. Vitus' Dance	1	-	1
Permanently invalided	-	7	7
Long term injury ^c	-	18	18
Total impaired persons	126	545	671
Possible impairment ^d	3	330	333
Total impaired and possibly impaired persons	129	875	1004

Source of data: MLBS Minutes, 1850-1900

- Notes: a Includes persons having lost part of limb(s).
 b Includes persons with diseases of leg(s) and hip(s).
 c Includes persons disabled for at least six months by injury.
 d Includes persons with 'bad' limb(s) or part thereof.

Some of the categories obviously overlap and refer to the same impairment condition (though it is impossible to identify the precise extent of this). The data do not allow a comprehensive aetiology of impairment, but some observations on causal aspects are possible. It is clear that congenital (usually disease related) and childhood impairment was significant, and a cause of hardship for working class families. The growth in impairment prevalence in adulthood no doubt reflects the hazards of labour, the presence of disease in working class communities and the effects of age. All three processes increased an adult proletarian's chances of becoming impaired, and by consequence, need for charitable assistance.

Paralysis, whilst having a relatively minor (though not insignificant) prevalence amongst children, appears from these data to have been the most

common form of adult impairment. This is a very uncertain category and may refer to motor impairment caused by either disease (e.g., syphilis and Parkinson's disease) or trauma (e.g., stroke). It is likely that many of these cases of paralysis were the consequences of syphilis. Penicillin was, of course, unknown in the nineteenth-century and infection rates for syphilis must have been high in the subject communities.

Considering that the MLBS probably never relieved more than three per cent of the population within its operational area, the data suggest that impairment was a relatively common condition amongst the colonial working class. It is nearly impossible to obtain a reliable indication of how many impaired people lived within the MLBS area at any one time. The closest estimate comes from 1871 census data which enumerated the numbers of 'crippled' persons.⁸ For the 1871 census, an approximate count of impaired people can be obtained by combining the numbers of people listed as 'crippled' and 'accident sufferers'.⁹ Thus, from the census data, it appears that there were (at least officially) 246 impaired or possibly impaired people (184 males and 246 females) in the Society's five districts in 1871.¹⁰ In the same year, the Society's case records indicate that it was assisting at least 33 impaired or possibly impaired individuals — just over 13 per cent of the enumerated disabled population.

The disabling effect of impairment probably meant that the Society aided many of those in inner colonial Melbourne who were locked out of the labour market for physiological reasons. But there were probably many other impaired people amongst the working class who never sought charity. These people would have included those supported by families (especially from the wealthier stratum of the proletariat) and homeless disabled people. The relief system operated by the MLBS presumed that recipients had a home for lady visitors to call upon; consequently, the city's homeless population, which included many impaired people, were forced to rely mainly on begging, street-trading and various short term forms of institutional charity.

Work and Impairment

Of the 1,003 persons identified as impaired or possibly impaired in the study period (1850-1900), only 36, or just less than four per cent, appeared to be working (Table 2). It is possible that more of the impaired relief recipients were working for income, and that this was concealed from the lady visitors in order to prevent the cessation of aid. But such deceit would not have worked for long — the visitors were ever wary of this ploy, and

⁸ Unfortunately, none of the other censuses provide reliable data on this variable. The state was little interested in the issue of impairment.

⁹ The Colonial Statist provided support for this method, admitting that many of those listed as suffering from accidents were probably 'crippled'. See his remarks in *Census of Victoria, 1871 — General Report and Statistics*, VPP 1874, vol.3, no.28

¹⁰ *Census of Victoria, 1871 — VIII: Sickness and Infirmary*, VPP 1873, vol 2, no 4

the slightest evidence of material comfort in an assisted household was often sufficient to ensure the immediate withdrawal of relief. It can be safely assumed that only a very small minority of assisted impaired persons were successful in obtaining paid work.

From the data it can be seen that 9 of the 24 listed occupations were street-based, most involving some form of hawking or entertaining. It is doubtless that disabled people often resisted complete social marginalisation by taking to these sorts of interstitial economic activities. Another four of the occupations possibly indicate outworkers.

Table 2: Occupations of Working Impaired Persons^a

Occupation	No.
Streethawker	5
Needle woman	4
Carter	2
Musician	2
Organ grinder	2
Writer	2
Coffee stall holder	2
Parasol mender	1
Office worker	1
Washer woman	1
<u>Flower maker</u>	1
Flower seller	1
<u>Boot finisher</u>	1
Rag picker	1
Toymaker	1
Mill worker	1
Presser	1
Messenger	1
<u>Shirtmaker</u>	1
Tinsmith	1
<u>Knitter</u>	1
Newspaper seller	1
Caretaker	1
Match seller	1
Total	36

Source: MLBS Minutes, 1850-1900

Notes: a 'Street occupations' indicated by bold type.

Possible outworkers indicated by underlined type.

By turning to individual cases in the data, it is possible to discern certain features of the historical struggle of disabled people to secure paid work. The first observation is that men commonly reacted to the event of

impairment (usually the loss of a limb) by taking to a street trade. The Society was frequently approached by newly-impaired men seeking funds to purchase the stock and equipment required for these trades. In a typical example, the Society, in September 1856, assisted

a carpenter, who had lost his right arm through the mis-management of a medical practitioner. He was anxious to procure as much money as would purchase a horse and dray.

In 1873, the Society helped a recently disabled Collingwood man establish himself as a produce hawker:

respectable couple, husband has had a broken leg, not properly set, and is anxious to get a stand in the market.

Seventeen years later, the practice was still common, as one lady visitor's report on the plight of a Collingwood woman makes clear:

husband wooden leg, and wants pounds to start with vegetables...4 children.

For women in such a position, the procurement of a basket to facilitate the selling of fruit or flowers was sometimes a means to some form of economic independence:

[name] is desirous of obtaining a basket to sell fruit, one arm being disabled preventing her taking a situation.

Other impaired people attempted the life of a street musician. The Society sometimes helped with the purchase of an instrument in such cases. In 1875, for example, it assisted a Carlton

widow, with a grandson, who is a cripple, and a musician — is anxious for aid towards the purchase of a flute.

Some impaired people seem to have survived by combining street trading and charity with a measure of mild villainy. In March 1891, a visitor reported assisting a Fitzroy woman whose

husband is a cripple, but has a coffee stall. They are dirty thriftless people — brawling and noisy....

One can almost hear the clicking of tongues which greeted this disturbing news and it was duly recorded that aid was to be discontinued in this case. But, in practice, the ladies were rarely as stern as their recorded pronouncements, and the visitor clearly relented in this case, because two months later she was forced to make the following distressing report about the obstreperous coffee vendors:

on visiting found everything cleared out of the house. The coffee stall was in the yard. Mrs — learned from Sergeant of Police that they had nothing to pay for the stall, and that a warrant was out for —'s husband.

The market for paid domestic work was highly resistant to impaired labour power. Even the smallest impairment might make a woman incapable of selling her labour power in this very important sphere of work. Consider the following case:

deserted wife, one child, was relieved when just out of hospital, where the upper of one of her thumbs was amputated — has since been in place but obliged to leave, owing to her inability to wring clothes.

The same can be said in respect of the somatic requirements of men's work. There are several references in the data to men being disabled from work due to seemingly minor impairments such as finger injuries. It is timely to recall the contemporary observation of the English Factory Inspector, Horner, that "A workingman's living and prospects depend so much upon his fingers that any loss of them is a serious matter to him" (quoted in Marx, 1976:553n).

There is no doubt that outworking must have provided a limited (and exploitative) source of income for disabled women, and possibly disabled men. In 1891, for example, a Fitzroy visitor reported the following:

elderly widow, with very bad leg, found her working at shirts, with her leg up on bed.

The ladies would very occasionally express the hope that an impaired person might obtain waged work. In 1877, the Society recorded its belief that a North Melbourne boy with "a crippled arm" might obtain a situation "if he had proper clothes". It sounds as if the ladies had an office-related job in mind; something like a message runner.

But the great bulk of the minutes record no such hope for the majority of the disabled people assisted by the MLBS. Taken as a whole, the visitors' reports betray the ladies' rarely questioned belief in the connection between impairment and 'inability for work'. Most entries don't even bother to state the incapacity for wage labour, and are expressed in simple forms like "infirm couple, husband one arm, wife rheumatic", or even just, "widow, lame arm". Impairment, for the individual, almost always meant economic exclusion, and, by virtue of this, 'deserving' poverty. Only in exceptional cases was an impaired person's 'natural' status as deserving of charity questioned, and these usually arising from extreme impertinence or immorality on the part of the relief recipient. Even in cases judged 'undeserving', the ladies' sympathy for impairment usually prevailed over their distaste for 'immoral' conduct and relief was given.

In a sense, the ladies cannot be blamed for equating impairment with economic inability: in this, they were simply reflecting prevailing social attitudes which were themselves shaped by the nature of the colonial labour market. In spite of the demonstrated success of some individuals in resisting economic dependency, it cannot be doubted that wage labour was denied to most impaired people in colonial Melbourne. The predicament of a young

Collingwood man, who, in 1890, was “very disheartened at being unable to get anything to do, with his wooden leg”, must have been common.

Injury and Compensation

As noted previously, employers were not properly made liable for injured workers until 1914. Many of the disabled individuals assisted by the Society had experienced impairment through a work-related injury. There are only three reported instances of employers assisting injured workers. All three cases involved spinal injuries to male workers. The compensations were parsimonious by contemporary standards, in one case amounting to only two pounds. In one case, the employer’s main form of assistance was to organise a subscription from other workers(!). There is good reason to believe that this represents the extent of compensation to those (long-term) injured workers helped by the MLBS. The Society was ever vigilant in ascertaining the income and assets of those it aided, and a compensation payout would have been a very difficult thing to have concealed from the lady visitors.

There are two other recorded instances of employers helping former employees who had become disabled through non-work related events. Neither act of generosity was very significant. Only one injured worker is noted as having received benefits from a medical lodge. Lodge membership would have been beyond the resources of most of the proletariat, and would generally have precluded families from receiving support from the MLBS. A work-related injury was a catastrophic event for the majority of proletarian families who had few savings and limited amounts of saleable labour power to fall back on.

‘Quite Cases for the Benevolent Asylum’¹¹

The institution’s role in the colonial social space of impairment will be taken up in a later section. It should be noted here, however, that the MLBS acted as a sort of unofficial referral agency for major custodial care institutions in colonial Melbourne. Those impaired people considered too ‘feeble’ to care for themselves were invariably assessed as ‘fitting cases’ for institutionalisation. The Society would then persuade these ‘fitting inmates’ to remove themselves to an institution. The persuasion was often little less than bullying; as a rule, aid was stopped to those who resisted institutionalisation.

During the study period, the Society arranged for 25 disabled individuals and couples to be admitted into the Melbourne Benevolent Asylum, and a further 13 to be received into the Immigrants’ Home. In addition, five disabled individuals and couples were ‘assisted’ into residential facilities like Industrial Schools (effectively, state reformatories for children), Convalescent Homes and the Society’s own Industrial Home. By the mid-1860s, the major poorhouses had relinquished most outdoor relief

¹¹ A quote from case note made on 10/2/63.

activities in favour of the Society, and thereafter concentrated on providing indoor charity. The MLBS co-operated with the committees of both institutions in a joint assessment of cases aimed at preventing the overlapping of relief.

By combining case surveillance with institutional referral, the Society reduced the everyday autonomy of its disabled beneficiaries. The major pivots of impaired people's social space were clearly demarcated as home and institution — public space was all but absent from the scenario. The home was a legitimate refuge for the disabled person, providing that she or he did not unduly 'burden' the household (and hence the Society). The institution, on the other hand, was the proper place for those who had crossed the threshold of dependency, and were thus seen as totally reliant upon charity. This careful articulation of indoor and outdoor relief was a feature of the colonial charity network, at least within the Society's sphere. The ensnaring power of the charity web meant that many disabled people became caught within patterns of daily life over which they had little control.

'Many Little Ones Were Concealed'

Many disabled people, especially children, were trapped — sometimes hidden — in the homes of working class families with the result that their lives went largely unrecorded in the public sphere. The MLBS manuscripts have a singular power to communicate some of the domestic experience of impaired people in colonial Melbourne. But these are only echoes resonating from the lives of charity recipients and it cannot be doubted that the struggles of most impaired proletarians are lost to recorded history. Faint traces of disabled people's lives survive in popular literature from the day. Of interest is the modest colonial tradition of realist stories and poems of inner city life. (Henry Lawson, for example was a powerful exponent of this populist realism.) Within these graphic tableaux of city life one occasionally encounters an impaired person in a quotidian setting. This selection from Edward Dyson's sketch of slum life in inner Melbourne, *In the City* (1896), provides an example:

Home — good Lord! a three-roomed hovel 'twixt a puddle and a drain,
In harmonious connection on the left with Liver Lane,
Where a crippled man is dying, and a horde of children fight,
And a woman in the horrors howls remorsefully at the night.

Dyson's melancholic eye only fleetingly glimpses the impaired man in an extended survey of life in an industrial slum (there are another eight verses). One wonders how many disabled lives went all but unnoticed.

In fact, it is probable that impaired children were often kept a family secret in working class areas. At the conclusion of World War One, a 'child rescue' movement, embodying various public and philanthropic organisations, vigorously pursued the cause of impaired working class children (Norris, 1974). Coles and Donaldson (1976) detail the early efforts

of Rotarians in the rescue of ‘crippled’ children in New South Wales. The job was a difficult one as “many little ones were concealed” by their proletarian families, a practice which the authors attribute to the prevalence of “a deep sense of stigma about having an ‘odd’ child” amongst the working class at the time (Coles and Donaldson, 1976:1-2). In Sydney, “The Rotarians found hundreds of crippled children living out a lonely obscure life in the ‘backrooms’ of their homes” (Coles and Donaldson, 1976:4).

Melbourne’s first rescuer of ‘crippled’ children and ‘physical weaklings’ was a Methodist missionary, ‘Sister Faith’ (Evangeline Ireland). Sister Faith had begun her mission of ‘saving’ impaired working class children in Fitzroy after one day discovering a ‘crippled’ child who had been penned under a chicken coop so that her parents could attend work (Marshall, 1978). Readers of the Methodist *Spectator* in April, 1918 were taken into the household of a typical impaired child by Sister Faith:

Look for a moment into this house, that of a returned soldier, absolutely incapacitated. The mother is dying upon her feet, one boy has both legs in irons, other children of four and two claim constant attention, and the hunger wolf is in the house. Just to glimpse that mother’s face reveals a world of such exquisite suffering and tragedy (quoted in Marshall, 1978:3).

Replace the disabled soldier with a husband suffering a work injury and the situation could surely have come straight from the previous century.

The Industrial Workplace in Colonial Melbourne

A Landscape of Exclusion

As mentioned earlier, inner Melbourne was an industrial area from the 1860s. From this time, the factory established itself as an important source of employment for the working class residents of the central and inner areas of the city. Obviously factory employment was far from universal amongst the working class. Proletarian women and men engaged in a variety of waged work ranging from domestic service to casual labouring on building sites. Nonetheless, the factory was a powerfully exclusionary place for disabled people in nineteenth-century labour markets, and, for this reason, is accorded a pivotal place in the present enquiry.

Colonial factories were dangerous places to work in and industrial accidents in them continually added to the population of impaired people. There are several references in the MLBS minutes to people who had lost limbs or parts of limbs through mishaps with machinery. From the 1850s, mechanisation of the forces of production proceeded (albeit unevenly) in various industries. However, the first safety regulations concerning the use of machinery were not enacted until 1885. The 1885 *Factory Act* required the use of safety devices with dangerous equipment and restricted women and youths from using machinery. The Chief Inspector of Factories continued to inform parliament of his concerns about the use of dangerous machinery

throughout the late 1880s and early 1890s.¹² The 1885 legislation had established compulsory reporting of industrial accidents and Levey's reports for the four year period, 1889-91, detail 400 mishaps, 129 of which resulted in a loss of limb(s). It is ironic that the production sites which were strongest in excluding impaired labour power were also important generators of physical disability.

From the 1870s, legislative, technological and social pressures combined to exclude certain forms of labour power from factories. Victoria's 1873 *Factory Act* (Australia's first) introduced restrictions on the use of female and juvenile labour powers for certain industries, controls that were progressively tightened in subsequent legislation (Hagan, 1964). In addition to this, the labour process of colonial factories became progressively more exclusionary for impaired people during the late nineteenth-century. Mechanisation was uneven, and delayed in some industries by the availability of a homeworking labour force that was prepared to work for low wages in poor conditions (Fox, 1991). This dimension of colonial industrial development probably ensured the availability of some paid (though highly exploited) work for disabled people. But the factory in colonial Melbourne probably always resisted the absorption of impaired labour power within its internal labour regime. In any case, the tempo of mechanisation quickened during the 1890s as machinery became available on lease to manufacturers (Rimmer, 1968), ensuring a further devaluation of impaired labour power. Mechanisation was predicated upon a supply of standardised, non-impaired labour power which could be combined with machinery in a closely coordinated production process.

Although Victorian artisans were the first in the world to achieve an eight hour day (Gollan, 1960), many sections of the working class continued to work far longer hours throughout the nineteenth-century. About two-thirds of Melbourne's wage earners had gained a 48 hour week by 1889, but much of the factory labour force — including all workers in the clothing trade and in woollen mills — still laboured for ten hours or more each day (Serle, 1971). There is, therefore, every reason to believe that factory work in colonial Melbourne was just as hard and continuous as its equivalent in Britain.¹³ The strenuous character of factory work no doubt made impaired workers unattractive sources of labour power for employers. The 1885 *Factory Act* actually sought to exclude certain impaired labour powers from industrial workplaces by proscribing the employment of any youth under the age of sixteen who was "incapacitated by disease or bodily incapacity".

¹² See, for example, Levey's remarks on dangerous machinery in *Report of the Chief Inspector of Factories, Work-Rooms and Shops for 1888*, VPP 1889, vol.3, no.30

¹³ Most industrial occupations involved either standing or moving for long periods, a stamina requirement which was beyond certain labour-powers. Dingle (1984) estimates out that less than three per cent of Australian workers were able to sit to their work a century ago.

‘Slow Workers’

The 1896 *Factories Act* established Wages Boards which, in subsequent years, succeeded in abolishing many areas of outworking (McCalman, 1984). The tactic used by the Boards was to increase piece rates to the point where they were uncompetitive with wage labour. Employers were hardly willing, however, to enclose the impaired labour powers which they had been exploiting through outwork, and many retaliated by introducing the ‘task system’ in their factories. McCalman describes how the system ensured that impaired workers remained excluded from factory work:

Workers were set a task to complete in the eight-hour day *and the standard was based on the speeds of the fittest and fastest*. Slow workers were sacked or kept on if they agreed to hand back to their employers a portion of their pay after the wages book had been entered up to the satisfaction of the factory inspectors (1984:30) (emphasis added).

This callous manipulation of average necessary labour times meant that the “factory system had no place for slow workers” (McCalman, 1984:31). A very small number of impaired labour powers were bought at exploitative rates, and, after 1896, the state regularised these abuses by issuing ‘Slow Worker’ Permits to certain employers. Brabet and Brooks (1990) estimate that the Department of Labour was aware of 80 cases of underpaid ‘slow workers’ between 1896 and 1899. There was some increase in the issue of the permits in the early years of the twentieth-century (227 in 1902) (ibid). However, these authors believe that most of the ‘slow workers’ had become impaired through either industrial accidents or diseases. Thus, it is probable that the permits were a means for employers to retain injured or diseased workers, rather than an opening in the factory labour market for impaired people.

The Guest Engagement Books

A vivid illustration of labour in colonial Melbourne’s factory system survives in the records of Guest and Company, a large biscuit and cake manufacturing concern whose principal plant was located in the CBD for most of the Victorian period. The manufactory was of a considerable size by colonial standards, and in 1888 employed over 100 hands (though this was reduced in 1891 with the onset of a severe local economic downturn). Most of the labour force were youths aged less than twenty years. A total of 708 new engagements were identified in the records covering the period 1888-91.

Lee (1988) has made her own study of records surviving from Guest’s Manufactory. From this empirical examination, Lee has been able to construct a description of the Guest labour process:

Most of the work was repetitive and light: at one end the dough was set out ready for the oven, and at the other the cooked biscuits were picked up by hand...and packed into tins ready to be despatched. Women and girls iced

and packed the cakes and fancy biscuits, but young boys made up most of the factory's workforce (1988:195).

According to Lee (1988), labour discipline was tight, but, withal, frequently resisted by the juvenile labour force. The engagement books record countless acts of insubordination — mostly involving stealing, fighting and impertinence — which usually caused the offender's dismissal.

The first effects of the Depression are evident in the final year of the study period (1891), with the engagement books revealing a noticeable fall off in new hirings. Lee (1988) claims that the business's owner and founder, T.B. Guest, responded to the slump by tightening labour discipline in an effort to economise and raise productivity. A stringent work regimen was introduced involving the use of body searches, fines for pilfering, and pay reductions for lateness. An additional strategy was the removal of 'slow workers': "Guest and his managers and foremen started prowling around the works singling out workers they considered slow, careless or ill-disciplined" (Lee, 1988:198). Guest demanded 'steadiness' from his workers; just to drop a biscuit tray was a guarantee of the sack. The labour tempo was heightened as part of the crackdown, so that "The pace of work was unrelenting, and managers and foremen were...likely to pop up at any time to sack the 'slackers'" (Lee, 1988:202).

The duration of work was also increased. In 1888, Alexander Sutherland, in his survey of the colony's manufacturers and artisans, had reported that the firm had "reduced their employees' time to the eight hours system" (Sutherland, 1888:605). Mechanisation had reduced the need for absolute surplus value extraction: "By acquiring all the latest inventions, they are able to turn out goods with the minimum of labour" (ibid). But the Depression halted the humanising advance of technology in Guest's manufactory and more primitive methods of productivity improvement were resorted to. In 1895, Guest lengthened hours of work at the manufactory, with the wages book noting that "Mr G. will not have any of this eight hours punctual business — these are not the times for it" (quoted in Lee, 1988:200). Lee describes the post-1890 labour process at Guest's as "a refined form of torture" for its child workers (1988:203).

The engagement books certainly confirm the accuracy of Lee's (1988) observations, with many recorded dismissals of workers for being 'too slow', 'useless', 'careless', and 'unsteady'. Speed, dexterity and obedience were demanded of the workers. There is one recorded instance in which impairment is cited as a reason for dismissal in the study period. On 4 June, 1889, the foremen noted the departure of a 15 year old boy with the following remark: "no good, paralysed hand". It is doubtful that the internal work process at Guest's ever admitted impaired labour power, and it is certainly true that the production regime became highly disabling during the 1890s.

One must assume that there was a considerable mobility expectation in the colonial labour market. In order to be fully saleable, labour power had

to be mobile, and, thus, workers needed to be ambulatory. This exigency was a consequence of the generalised separation of home and workplace which industrialism had made a pivotal feature of proletarian social space.

The engagement books indicate the home address of all employees engaged during the study period (1889-91). Of the 708 employees engaged, some 347 (49 per cent) lived within the MLBS operational sphere. From these data it was possible to calculate an average home-work trip distance for the study period. The data indicate that Guest employees travelled, on average, nearly six kilometres to and from work each day during the study period. There are good reasons to believe that this figure does not overestimate the average distance between home and work for factory workers in colonial Melbourne. In 1884, a union official estimated that the women in one bootmaking plant lived, on average, about three miles (5.4 kilometres) from their place of employment.¹⁴ In addition, the studies of Davison (1974 & 1978) and Lack (1980) support the view that workers travelled considerable distances to the sites of their employment each day.

Most workers in inner Melbourne travelled to work on foot each day (Davison, 1978). The fares for horse omnibus, and later trams and trains, were usually too high for most. The Depression also forced many of the better-off amongst the proletariat to economise by walking to work, causing a considerable decline in railway and tramway traffic (Davison, 1974). The youths employed at Guest's no doubt walked to work. One annotation in the engagement books, for example, refers to a 14 year old Fitzroy boy who rose at 5.30 a.m. everyday and walked to the manufactory.

The Institution in Colonial Melbourne

The Carceral Landscape

Although it did not possess a legislated workhouse system, colonial Victoria nonetheless contained a sizeable institutional network. Whilst not all facilities were explicitly carceral, the institutional landscape was, in reality, a 'country of confinement'¹⁵ for most of its inhabitants. It has already been shown that charity recipients were often driven through institutional gates by the bullying of outdoor relief agencies, anxious to have 'desperate' cases off their books. Despite their espoused 'benevolent' charter, most indoor relief facilities were run as punitive institutions for people whose only crime was poverty. The colony's institutional system was constantly overcrowded and underfunded, with the result that many poor and disabled people were forced into inappropriate institutions, such as gaols and 'lunatic' asylums. In this sense, then, the colonial institutional network was truly a carceral landscape. Kennedy (1985:29) writes:

¹⁴ *Royal Commission on Employees in Shops: Report on the Operation of the Factory Act 1874*, op. cit.

¹⁵ As Foucault would have it.

Melbourne was ringed by institutional bastilles established in the belief that the punishment of isolation and separation from kith and kin should be inflicted on those whom society had done the favour of rescuing from distress.

By the 1880s, Melbourne had at least 20 sizeable ‘bastilles’ administered by philanthropic bodies (though most relied upon some level of public subsidy) (Cullen History Committee, 1989). This included a diverse collection of hospitals (six), poorhouses (two), homes for sailors, inebriates, ‘fallen women’ and ‘old colonists’, convalescent facilities and asylums for the blind and deaf. In addition to the private institutional sector was a network of publicly operated facilities which functioned as places of confinement for troublesome social groups. The government institutional network included prisons, ‘lunatic’ asylums and industrial reformatory schools for children (Kerr, 1988). Many of the public institutions were large by international standards. In 1870, the Yarra Bend Asylum, with 1,043 inmates, was reputed to have been one of the largest in the world (Brothers, 1957).

Although the public and private networks were separately administered, there was a continual transfer of inmates between and within the two institutional systems. The velocity of movement rose sharply during periods of general overcrowding when many inmates were shunted from one facility to another, or even imprisoned for want of alternative institutional accommodation. The polyglot nature of most facilities makes it difficult to trace precisely the institutional experience of any particular social group. In any case, this would be impossible as many institutional records are lost and others are incomplete. This inquiry will focus on one surviving set of institutional records, the admissions books of the Melbourne Benevolent Asylum.

Whilst institutions for ‘the blind’ and ‘the deaf’ were established in the early period of Melbourne’s development — the first, the ‘The Victorian Deaf and Dumb Institution’ opened its doors in 1862 — a dedicated facility for physically disabled people was not opened until 1917.

‘It Was Necessary to Send...Infirm Persons to Gaol’¹⁶

Gaols were common places of confinement for poor disabled people in colonial Australia. Indeed, Kennedy (1982:67) has made the observation that gaols were “arguably Australia’s first welfare institutions”. Research on colonial prisons by Lynn (1990) has disclosed the fact that dependent persons — mostly those amongst the poor with disabilities or psychiatric illnesses — were frequently imprisoned by judicial authorities for want of institutional alternatives. The usual pathway to prison for the disabled poor was via an arrest for vagrancy. This was not always intended as a punitive measure; police commonly used their powers under the vagrancy statute on compassionate grounds when a needy indigent was brought to their attention.

¹⁶ Quoted from a letter written by Claude Farie, Sheriff, to the Chief Secretary, dated 4 July, 1865. Letter held at Public Records Office of Victoria — Series 3991, Unit 151

The problem was that, in the face of perennial institutional crowding, magistrates had little option but to commit the vagrant poor to the city's gaols. In 1863, an anonymous correspondent to the *Argus* (very possibly a Member of Parliament) stated the problem succinctly:

Victoria might well be proud of her public institutions, considering her youth...However much our Government has done, there are some unfortunate classes unprovided for. The maimed, the diseased, and the unfortunate widows and destitute children are insufficiently cared for. It is scarcely right that an unfortunate cripple should be treated as a vagabond, and sent to prison under the Vagrant Act, merely to provide sustenance. Yet it is the only humane way for the bench at present. It is really too bad that no comprehensive legislative measures have been made to provide for those who are physically incapable of earning their living.¹⁷

Letters unearthed by Lynn (1990) reveal that the colonial Sheriff, Claude Farie, made repeated representations to the government during the 1850s and 1860s concerning this issue. In as early as 1853, Farie told the Colonial Secretary of "another class of prisoners that is pressing hard on the Gaols in their present crowded state — viz., indigent sick, feeble and debilitated persons of both sexes...".¹⁸

The Sheriff thought that a hospital or benevolent asylum were more fitting places for the reception of such persons. Two years later, Farie reported the presence of 'some few cripples' in the Richmond stockade.¹⁹ The problems of overcrowding and inappropriate confinement obviously remained, or even worsened, over the next fifteen years, a fact evidenced by Farie's persistent epistolary protests to the government. In 1861, Justices inspecting the colony's gaols noted that they still harboured many 'lunatics', 'vagrants' and the destitute.²⁰ In 1865, the Sheriff was still pleading the case of 'imbecile and infirm' persons who had been gaoled, even though 'guiltless of any offence'.²¹ Two years later, Farie laid the blame for the problem at the feet of the colony's charitable institutions; these, he claimed, "are largely supported by Government funds yet refuse the indigent and destitute".²² The Sheriff begged the government to establish an inquiry into the matter.

The compassionate Farie struggled with the coarse pragmatists of colonial officialdom for many years without much result it seems. Kennedy (1985:113) reports that

¹⁷ *The Argus*, 22 October, 1863.

¹⁸ Letter of Claude Farie, Sheriff, to the Colonial Secretary, dated 18 May, 1853. Letter held at Public Records Office of Victoria — Series 1189, Unit 63

¹⁹ *Penal Department — Report of the Inspector-General for 1855*, VPP 1856, vol.4, no.66

²⁰ *Visiting Justices Journal — 1861*. Held at Public Records Office of Victoria — Series 1180, Unit 429

²¹ Letter of Claude Farie, Sheriff, to the Chief Secretary, dated 4 July, 1865. Held at the Public Records Office of Victoria — *op. cit.*

²² Letter by Claude Farie, Sheriff, to the Colonial Secretary, dated 26 January, 1867. Held at Public Records Office of Victoria — Series 3991, Unit 302

In Melbourne during the month of June 1889, twenty-five people were committed to gaol, ostensibly on vagrancy charges, but actually because of their age, incapacity and destitution; forty were committed in July and thirty-nine in August.

Things obviously worsened during the Depression. In 1893, the *Age* lamented the sad fact that “a fresh draft of stricken men and women, innocent of any offence against the laws, must go to the gaols to die”.²³ There can be no doubting the significant presence of disabled people amongst these afflicted poor.

The Industrial Schools

The 1864 ‘*Neglected and Criminal Children Act*’ prescribed the establishment of ‘industrial’ schools and reformatories. Three schools and three reformatories were initially set up. Various other facilities were opened in subsequent years as some of the early sites were closed.

It would be pointless to recount the chaos, ineptitude and abuses which marked the operation of the industrial and reformatory schools. Judge and Emerson (1974) have already provided an account of these disastrous early attempts to institutionalise wards of the state. Suffice it here to remark that the facilities were horror camps within which both disease and brutal discipline reigned. Many of the colony’s youthful wards succumbed to these twin depredations, and death rates in the facilities became the object of both official and popular concern. The facilities were soon acknowledged as a grave error by the state, and, in 1871, the government responded by enacting Victoria’s first deinstitutionalisation programme. The schools were eventually emptied by a ‘boarding-out’ scheme which established publicly-funded placements for the children in private homes. The scheme was considerable in size, initially involving the community placement of the schools’ 2,300 inmates. By 1883, some 18,199 children had been boarded-out (Judge and Emerson, 1974).

Many working class families relied on the wages of children, and it is possible that some of these regarded an impaired youngster as an economic burden (particularly when medical interventions were required). Other families — especially those headed by a sole parent — may have found the physical effort of rearing an impaired child in a disabling environment to be a great hardship. It is conceivable that certain families in these situations sought to place their impaired children in the industrial schools, some no doubt hoping that the youngster would learn an appropriate trade which would help her or him to survive in adult life. Relief bodies, like the MLBS, may have even assisted in the committal of some ‘burdensome’ children to state ‘care’; particularly in cases where it was thought that the presence of an impaired child was preventing a family from remaining independent of charitable support. There is one recorded case in the MLBS minutes which

²³ *The Age*, 23 November, 1893.

indicates that the Society may have occasionally engaged in this practice. In August 1871, one lady visitor reported her conversation with a doctor treating the impaired child of a relief recipient. The visitor informed the Society that the doctor he had treated the

child for six months in the children's hospital, and wishes [the mother] to give up the child to the Industrial Schools, as he cannot get well, having disease of the hip joint, as well as a broken leg.

The visitor then expressed her belief that "it would be necessary to give a trifle in food for the child, till admitted into the School". One wonders how often such collaborations between medical professionals and charity volunteers were responsible for the institutionalisation of impaired children.

The Department of Industrial and Reformatory Schools continued to care for impaired children well after most of the schools were closed. The Department's report to Parliament for 1883 mentions that 36 'diseased and crippled' children were in its care.²⁴ A further eight 'incapacitated' children were known to be in the Immigrants' Home (three) and at the Abbotsford Reformatory for Roman Catholic Girls (five).

This Terrible Golgotha of Ruined Lives'²⁵: the Melbourne Immigrants' Home

The oddly named 'Immigrants' Home' was one of two major poorhouses in colonial Melbourne; the other being the Benevolent Asylum. The Home was established by the Immigrants' Aid Society (IAS) in 1852 as a refuge for the considerable numbers of goldrush arrivals who found only misfortune and ruin in the new colony. By the late 1850s, the facility had broadened its commission to that of a "regular poor-house" catering for "convalescent persons from the hospitals, destitute women with children, and other houseless persons" (Greig, 1936:7). The Home operated in a collection of ramshackle buildings located by St. Kilda Road (near the present day Government House) for much of the nineteenth-century, though male inmates were moved to a new site in Royal Park (in fact, an abandoned industrial school) in 1882 (Uhl, 1981). By 1872, the IAS was attempting to accommodate the diverse needs of the homeless poor by operating a hospital, blind asylum, 'benevolent asylum' (i.e., for long term residents) and a night refuge within the Home (Uhl, 1981).

It appears that the Home was completely overwhelmed by the numbers seeking casual and longer term relief throughout the colonial period. The institution was of a considerable size, holding 387 inmates at the end of 1869

²⁴ *Department of Industrial and Reformatory Schools — Report of the Secretary for the Year 1883*, VPP 1885, vol.2, no.4

²⁵ Marcus Clarke's assessment of the Immigrants' Home in 1869 (1976:653)

(including 64 children).²⁶ The Home continued to expand in subsequent years and in June 1889 contained 680 inmates.²⁷

The Melbourne Benevolent Asylum was a celebrated charitable cause for the bourgeoisie and its roll of benefactors and committee members reads like a ‘Who’s Who’ of colonial Society (its founding committee included luminaries like John Pascoe Fawcner and Charles Ebdon). The Immigrants’ Home, by comparison, was all but neglected by ‘polite’ society, most of whom no doubt wished to ignore this desperate testament to the deprivation and misery which lurked beneath the bright ideological diorama of the ‘workingman’s paradise’. The Home was clearly the place of last resort for those in wretched circumstances. These included the homeless sick poor, their numbers constantly increased by those released from hospitals with nowhere to go.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to ascertain precisely the extent of disability amongst the Home’s nineteenth-century inmates. Certain records containing inmate data have already been lost. The data problem is compounded by opacity in surviving manuscripts: the Home’s medical officers, for example, routinely classified people with spinal diseases as ‘miscellaneous’ (Uhl, 1981). In spite of these difficulties, enough contemporary commentaries on the Home’s residents survive to confirm the view that it was a, perhaps *the*, major place of institutionalisation for disabled people.

After examining the Home’s inmates in 1873, one IAS committee member commented: “I was much struck with the number of comparatively young men who seem to be permanently disabled, and likely to be for the remainder of their lives a burden on the community” (quoted in Uhl, 1981:38). Uhl’s (1981) history of the Home reveals the presence of many impaired persons amongst inmate ranks. One case in 1865 concerned a ‘crippled’ girl who had recently arrived from England with her family. The ground cited for her admission into the Home is most revealing; she being received in order to “enable the father to get a start in the colony” (quoted in Uhl, 1981:48).

In 1869, the renowned colonial author, Marcus Clarke, related his experience of ‘A Night at the Immigrants’ Home’ for readers of the *Australasian*. Clarke described the institution as “the home of the homeless, the place to which gravitates all the vagabondage, crime, poverty, and disease that exist in Melbourne” (1976:652). Clarke’s account includes references to a ‘cripple’ and a ‘lame Irishman’ who were amongst the casuals with whom he spent the night. For him, the Home was “the last refuge of the poor”, where the marginalised waited to die (Clarke, 1976:659). Things were obviously not much different two decades later when John Freeman, in his

²⁶ *Royal Commission on Charitable Institutions, 1870*, VPP 1871, vol.2., no.1

²⁷ *Statistical Register of Victoria, 1889 — IX: Social Condition*, VPP 1891, vol.3, no.27

survey of Melbourne's 'darker' regions, described the Immigrants' Home as a place "where the invalided vagrant...can crawl to die" (Freeman, 1888:5).

In 1890, a former medical officer of the Home, David Grant, told a Royal Commission that the institution had become "the medical 'Tip' for the city".²⁸ James Greig, Superintendent of the Home, confirmed before the same inquiry that the facility was continually receiving disabled people. One must conclude that the Immigrants' Home was a frequently used refuge for many of colonial Melbourne's disabled poor.

Table 3: Numbers of Physically Impaired Males and Females by Stated Impairment Type, 1860-80

	No. of Males	No. of Females	Total Persons
Impairment type			
Disabled ^a	14	6	20
Loss of Limb(s)	11	7	18
Palsy	2	3	5
Hemiplegia	1	2	3
Paraplegia	4	0	4
Paralysis	264	52	316
Part. Paralysis ^b	31	6	37
Impairment to:			
Shoulder	1	0	1
Arm(s)	9	4	13
Hand(s)	7	3	10
Spine	20	16	36
Side	26	11	37
Hip(s)	17	9	26
Leg(s)	44	8	52
Knee(s)	6	8	14
Foot/Feet	4	1	5
Total impaired persons	461	136	597

Source of data: Melbourne Benevolent Asylum Registers of Applicants and Inmates, 1856-90

Notes: a Includes those inmates described as 'disabled', 'crippled', or 'lame'.
b Includes those cases only described as 'partially paralysed'. In the case where paralysis of a specific part of the body was indicated, the observation has been included in the relevant impairment category.

²⁸ *Royal Commission on Charitable Institutions, 1890-1 — Synopsis, Minutes of Evidence, and Appendix, op. cit.*

'For the Aged, Infirm, Disabled and Destitute'²⁹: the Melbourne Benevolent Asylum

The Victoria (later 'Melbourne') Benevolent Asylum opened its doors to the city's poor in July, 1851. Although the colonial government had voted a considerable sum towards the Asylum's construction, it was a very much a charitable endeavour whose conception and establishment was presided over by the city's upper classes. The founding of poorhouses, like the Melbourne Asylum, were opportunities for the local patriciate to demonstrate its peerless wealth and charity. Victoria's Asylums were built in the style of palaces (at least outwardly), and usually situated in prominent locations.

By erecting these monuments to its own benevolence, the local bourgeoisie was able to distance itself from its responsibility for poverty in the colony. Institutions, like the Melbourne Asylum, helped sustain the colony's cherished 'no poverty' myth (Kennedy, 1985). Symbolically, the facilities supported the ideological construction of Victoria as an affluent and civilised fantasyland, where even paupers got to live in palatial homes. The reality, however, was that conditions in the asylums were nothing less than barbarous. Life for those impoverished disabled people who were 'lucky' enough to gain admittance to the 'benevolent' was generally wretched and short.

A total of 597 impaired persons were received into the Asylum during the observation period (1860-80). As can be seen from the summary table (Table 3), the impairment profile for the Home closely resembles that of the MLBS aid recipients (cf. Table 1). (Though different descriptive approaches in the data sets have made for a minor classificatory variance between the typologies.) Again, paralysis is the largest individual impairment type, accounting for 57 per cent of male impairments and 38 per cent of female cases.

The data do not permit calculation of a reliable figure for total individual admissions for the study period, but a rough estimate would place it at a few thousands. There is no doubt that a considerable proportion of individuals received into the Asylum in the study interval — perhaps as many as 40 per cent — were impaired in some way. The data lend support to certain contemporary descriptions of the Asylum's residents. One such account was left by Melbourne's celebrated slum journalist, the 'Vagabond' (John Stanley James), who spent three days (under an assumed identity) as an inmate in the Asylum in 1876 and later recounted his experiences for readers of the *Argus*. James' account features several impaired men whom he met in his time within the male quarters. Indeed, he observes: "There seems hardly a man in the asylum who does not walk by the aid of one stick, and the majority seem to require two" (James, 1969:152). James described one impaired man, with the interesting sobriquet of 'Scandalous Jack', who

²⁹ This principal object of the Melbourne Benevolent Asylum was inscribed on its foundation stone (Kingston Centre, 1990).

appeared to have acquired a trade in the Asylum: “This celebrated individual is a cripple, a comparatively young man, now engaged in tailoring, which he has picked up since being here” (1969:164).

Table 4: Average Age^a of Admissions^b, Quinquennially

	Average age of all persons admitted	Average age of impaired persons admitted
1856 ^c	41 years	n.a. ^d
1860	52	37
1865	58	51
1870	58	51
1875	62	56
1880	66	57
1885	68	n.a. ^d

Source: Melbourne Benevolent Asylum Registers of Applicants and Inmates, 1856-90

Notes: a Rounded to nearest tenth.

b To prevent double counting, only the first admission of any individual is included.

c Data for 1855 not available.

d Data on impairment unreliable prior to 1860 (see discussion above).
Data on impairment not collected after 1880.

The mean age of impaired people at admission increased from 37 years in 1860 to 57 years in 1880. This increase parallels a general ageing of the population of admissions during the study period (Table 4). Impaired persons received into the Asylum tended to be younger at every quinquennial stage than the overall population of admissions. The gap between mean ages for the impaired and population groups is even larger if cases of paralysis are excluded from the calculation of the former score. Most people with paralysis tended to be older — a pathology of the condition — than persons with other types of impairments. These data confirm the view that impairment was a disabling condition which tended to cause social dependency amongst the poor at a relatively early age.

It is difficult to know whether this finding is an effect of demand for, supply of, Asylum beds, though contributions from both factors cannot be discounted. It is conceivable that the Asylum’s committee of management sought to concentrate on the provision of aged care in later years. Smith’s (1904) reflections confirm that the Asylum largely operated as a place of last refuge for the ageing generation of goldrush pioneers. (In support of this, the manuscripts indicate that most of the impaired inmates had arrived

during the 1850s.) The ageing of this population doubtless explains much of the rising mean age of admissions. The concomitant ageing of the impaired sub-group may be largely explained by the onset of paralysis amongst the poor of the goldrush generation.³⁰ There were still significant numbers of younger, non-paralysed impaired people being admitted in the late 1870s.

Occupational descriptions reveal that inmates were overwhelmingly drawn from the working class; artisan and unskilled activities make up the majority of recorded employment types. The most commonly listed occupations for impaired male inmates were labourer, sailor, miner and farmer. Many impaired women were listed as domestic servants, housekeepers and needlewomen. The 'Vagabond' confirms the picture of residents which has thus far emerged from the data: "There is nearly every class of mechanics and labourers here, but they are all crippled, or so old as to be past work" (James, 1969:158). It is quite impossible to tell whether impaired inmates were active in these employments at the time of admission. It is likely that many people were no longer active in their occupations at the time of admission, having ceased their involvement after experiencing impairment.

A large proportion of impaired people who were admitted into the Asylum — perhaps as much as 50 per cent — remained there until their death. Many others, however, resisted long-term institutionalisation and left of their own accord to unknown fates. A few were dismissed for impertinence or impropriety. In 1896, the MLBS recorded assisting an impaired woman who had recently been ejected from the Asylum:

is paralytic, and goes on crutches. Been turned out of the Benevolent Asylum for abusing the Superintendent. She admitted having quarrelled with the Nurse. Has applied to be re-admitted but refused. Is single — been a hawker.

In 1871, a labourer with a 'weak spine' showed plenty of backbone when assaulting a wardsman, for which act he was sent to gaol. Six years later, a miner with no hands was similarly disposed of after committing another assault.

A few more 'escaped' from the Asylum. One 71 year old shepherd was admitted on 27 October, 1870, with 'sore knees'. The Asylum's austere and loveless mode of 'care' had near-biblical healing powers it seems, as four weeks later it was noted that the same elderly gentlemen had escaped "without leave", having "scaled the fence on the Western side".³¹

³⁰ Support for this view is provided by the remark of an Asylum committee member, Joseph Ankors, who informed the 1870 Royal Commission on Charitable Institutions that the facility was receiving "many cases of paralysis, induced by exposure at the diggings". See *Royal Commission Into Charitable Institutions, 1870, op. cit.*

³¹ The 'Vagabond' caused a public sensation in 1876 by claiming that elderly inmates of the Benevolent Asylum were "purposely starved to death in a primitive form of euthanasia" (Cannon, 1969:7). Some 114 inmates wrote to the *Argus* in support of the assertion. This may explain why our old fellow was anxious to take his leave of the 'Benevolent' Asylum.

Some disabled poor people may have welcomed the Asylum as a refuge, but it is clear that many, if not most, did not. Many impaired people periodically entered the Asylum for short stays, perhaps at the urging of family, friends or charitable bodies anxious to secure relief for (or from) a 'dependant'. But the records show that many impaired people maintained some independence in the face of these pressures to marginalise them, even when this meant a lonely struggle for survival in harsh circumstances.

Conclusion

The Constraints on Everyday Life

Though Melbourne lacked a legislated workhouse system, it nonetheless possessed a considerable institutional network. These institutions, and particularly the two main poorhouses, were the antipodes of production. Factory and asylum were starkly opposed within the social space of disability: the former lay at the centre of centrifugal material forces which invalidated impaired labour power through exclusion, whilst the latter stood at the heart of centripetal dynamics which cast disabled people as 'fit objects' for institutions.

Many disabled people in colonial Melbourne inhabited a visceral landscape whose major features were home and institution. Everyday life for most was a realm of daily interaction restricted to the backrooms of proletarian homes, charity facilities and marginal or liminal zones of commerce. A constant daily migration between these activity nodes constituted a common survival strategy (and a means of avoiding incarceration in some form of institution). Along the way, many must have succumbed to powerful material pressures and experienced long-term institutionalisation as a result.

Swain (1976) believes that many disabled people in colonial Melbourne resisted long-term incarceration through nomadic daily routines. However, she also maintains that old age (for those who achieved it) brought institutionalisation for most:

They drifted around from relative to relative, night shelter to night shelter, with the only semi-permanent home being the gaol, until their age qualified them for benevolent asylum accommodation (Swain, 1976:106).

This paper demonstrated that impaired people countered the disabling dynamics of industrialism through a variety of subversions. Resistance to long-term institutionalisation was common, for example, and some disabled people seem to have maintained some social autonomy through the pursuit of various marginal and interstitial economic activities. But these oppositions were about impaired people asserting some control over their everyday lives, rather than any successful liberation from, or transformation of, the social space allocated to them by industrial capitalist society. It was all but impossible for impaired people to subvert the material structures which

delimited their everyday lives. No disabled individual could hope to radically revalue his or her labour power in a landscape dominated by economic exclusion.

The colonial Statist, Henry Hayter, had remarked in 1881 that “The loss suffered by the community in consequence of physical disablement is probably realised by few”.³² But Hayter, it seems, was alone in his concern. Indeed, the disastrous tendency of capitalist industrialism to produce both organic impairment and social disability was not generally realised until World War One. The Great War plundered capitalist industry’s stock of non-disabled male labour power, returning much of it in a damaged and ‘unusable’ state. The advent of mass incapability amongst the proletariat forced both state and capital to make certain material changes to the evaluation of labour power, through such things as rehabilitation and a limited reorganisation of certain work processes. Even then, however, the concern was often for the removal of ‘unemployables’ from the workforce in order that these damaged labour powers might be ‘repaired’ through medical or educational rehabilitation.

The discussion has presented a general map of the social space of impairment in colonial Melbourne. However, whilst impaired people shared a common set of constraints on daily life, the disabled poor were, withal, variegated by social characteristics like age, sex, religion and ethnicity. These differences must have made for a great variety in how impaired people negotiated the structures of exclusion in their daily lives. Countless individual journeys were made through the landscape of disability, but many of these took shared or similar paths. Recourse to ‘the street’ and indigence was one way in which some disabled people resisted the centripetal pull of the institution.

‘*The Real Bohemia*’

The English fashion for slum journalism was quickly taken up in the colony; from the late 1850s onwards, a string of ‘slummers’ plied the city’s back lanes and rookeries, gathering materials for their lurid accounts of ‘Outcast Melbourne’.³³ The industry of slum journalism was sustained by an enormous middle class curiosity with the city’s ‘low-life’ (Davison and Dunstan, 1985). The heartland of ‘Outcast Melbourne’ was the densely populated collection of lanes, terraces and squares between Bourke Street and Little Lonsdale Street. The outer bounds of ‘Outcast Melbourne’ stretched to slum concentrations in suburbs like Fitzroy and Collingwood and open spaces, including public gardens, government reserves and the banks of the Yarra, where many homeless people passed their time.

³² *Census of Victoria, 1881 — VIII: Sickness and Infirmary*, VPP 1884, vol.2, no.4

³³ ‘Outcast Melbourne’ is the image of social marginality conjured by Davison *et al* (1985) in their review of deprivation in the colonial period. Their work borrows its title from that of a celebrated essay by the ‘Vagabond’, *The Outcasts of Melbourne*, which was published in the *Argus* in May 1876 (Cannon, 1969).

In truth, 'Outcast Melbourne' was a balkanised landscape inhabited by people who had been marginalised for a range of different (though often overlapping) reasons sourced in race, class, sexuality, and physical ability. This landscape of marginality was not entirely hidden to view; 'Outcast Melbourne' intersected at various points and moments with public life, most importantly in the various street trades (including begging) pursued by the indigent poor. By the 1880s, Bourke Street was the centre of an interstitial economy of street traders hawking everything from fruit to matches. These competed for prominent positions with a brigade of street musicians and entertainers (Kennedy, 1982). The evidence from this study (and supported by a variety of observers (e.g., Kennedy, 1985; Swain, 1985)) is that disabled people were active in these street activities. Swain (1985), for example, relates the story of Ada, a partially-blind single mother, who survived in the early 1890s by singing and selling matches on city streets until finally arrested (and separated from her child). Swain notes that "Ada was not atypical, for many similar girls were also physically or mentally handicapped and quite alone in the city" (1985:99).

John Freeman, in his *Lights and Shadows of Melbourne Life* (1888), describes women beggars displaying their crippled children in order to elicit sympathy and alms. (Some are even said to have 'borrowed' impaired children for the purpose.) Freeman's (1888) prose portrait of street begging and trading also contains several references to impaired hawkers and musicians.

There can be no doubting the fact that the citizenry of 'Outcast Melbourne' included many disabled people. In an essay written in 1869, Marcus Clarke set out to demolish the romantic bourgeois notion that 'Outcast Melbourne' was an exotic bohemian underworld (Clarke, 1976). Clarke's realist survey of poverty and the poor in Melbourne is presented under the rubric of 'The Real Bohemia'. This realm of poverty was inhabited by heterogeneous citizenry whom the author classifies with the following taxonomy:

My Bohemians may be divided into three classes. The criminal class, who won't work and will steal; the honest poor, who can't obtain work and won't steal; the diseased, the cripple, the maim, the halt, the blind, who cannot work, and who don't steal (1976:653).

And Bohemia? Clarke leaves us with the following landscape sketch:

These Bohemians live in various places. On the wharves, in gaspipes, behind sheds, near limekilns, in the parks, and around the swamps...Some of them gain a scanty pittance by selling newspapers, and can be seen any hour of the day propping up the walls of the newspaper offices, or standing under *The Argus* 'verandah' waiting for the publication of an 'extraordinary'. Some of them dine at the sixpenny lodging-houses; but all sooner or later sink to the common level of the Home, and there we can see specimens of them all (1976:653).

Clarke (1976) was deliberately trying to discomfit middle class believers in a safely-distant and exotic bohemian underworld when he asserted that “this bohemia of mine is just exactly within a stone’s-throw of your doors...” (1976:653). For some bourgeoisie, however, the irritating propinquity of this bohemia was never in doubt. The 1890s saw the Charity Organization Society (COS) declare war on the traders and beggars whose constant and importunate presence on city streets greatly piqued members of the ‘respectable class’. In its Annual Report for 1897, the COS voiced its concern about the danger to ‘moral character’ which street trading represented. The Report fairly recoils at the “spectacle of old and young, tainted and untainted, commingling and competing in the streets”.³⁴ Strange that these fervent apostles of laissez-faire should find this quintessentially-capitalist assemblage so disturbing. Interestingly, the COS sought to regularise (and control) the presence of one class of bohemians:

In the fullness of time the COS would convert governments, local councils and the police to its viewpoint that street begging should be banned, street vending licensed, and the ‘privilege’ of street stalls in some locations ‘reserved almost exclusively for those under some physical disability’ (Kennedy, 1985:209).

During the 1890s, the COS “established a crippled person in Melbourne’s first newspaper kiosk for the disabled” (Kennedy, 1985:199).

The fact that they had finally been allocated a paid work site in public space was doubtless a small comfort to some disabled people. But this small concession also signalled the beginnings of a new confinement for disabled people that was to become generalised during the twentieth-century. The new humanist sentiment which informed Australian political practice after World War One advocated the ‘sheltering’ of impaired people in specifically-allocated work sites which could offer safe and regular employment. The real effect of sheltered workshops was to replace outworking, which was fast disappearing, with a regularised and enclosed form of labour for disabled people. But, in many respects, the new work sites were no different to the garrets they had replaced: disabled people still sweated for a pittance, safely out of the public eye.

³⁴. *Annual Report of the Charity Organization Society for 1897* — held at The Citizen’s Welfare Service of Victoria, Carlton, Victoria.

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