

Nurses, Foster Mothers, Businesswomen, and Baby-Farmers: Market-Based Infant Care in Pre-WWI Australia

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Abstract

In 19th-century Australia, there were few childcare options for mothers who needed to work. Residential institutions emerged as the colonial society's preferred mode of placing older children, but they did not accommodate those below the age of two or three years. Thus, a private foster care market comprised of women prepared to take payment for nursing infants came to provide an essential service. Although the existence of this foster-mother workforce was widely known, it did not attract significant public debate until the latter decades of the century. This article uses historical newspapers and the records of the government's child welfare department in the Australian Colony of Victoria to trace the discourses invoked in debates about paid motherhood with a particular focus on the period from 1850 to 1915. It argues that by the time public alarm about private arrangements peaked in the 1890s, paid infant placements that were entirely unregulated by the state were almost non-existent, and that by the end of this period, the government and private systems were effectively working as one. Nevertheless, moral panics about so-called baby-farming and infanticide helped entrench an association in social discourse between “mothering” for payment and infant exploitation, and by the early 20th century there was a general suspicion about the motives of people who wanted to be remunerated for their work and expenses as foster parents—a suspicion which lingers in the 21st century.

Keywords

Australia; baby farming; child welfare history; foster care; infant nursing

1. Introduction

In 21st-century Australia, foster care is provided through state, as opposed to federal (national), departments. These child welfare structures are the direct legacies of systems put in place in each Australian colony prior to

the 1901 Federation of Australia as a nation within the British Commonwealth. While the foster care systems in each state draw on shared discourses about child protection and parenting, they do not form one cohesive system—nor have they ever. Therefore, in order to present a deep study of debates around paid parenthood, this article takes the present-day state of Victoria as its historical case study, tracking the issue across almost a century: from colonisation of the region in the 1830s to World War One (WWI). It argues that debates about paid parenthood were fuelled by moral panics associated with the private foster care market which grew during the second half of the 19th century, and that even as the state’s regulation of that market increased, fears about so-called baby farming and infant mortality helped entrench an association in social discourse between “mothering” for payment and infant exploitation. This period of history provides a valuable insight into how Western society navigated some profound changes. Historians of childhood now broadly agree that the mid-to-late 19th century witnessed a transformation in the emotional and social value placed on children, and sociologist Viviana Zelizer, by insisting on the importance of the concept of sentiment in understanding childhood, provided a conceptual intervention that helped historians theorise this transition (Cunningham, 2005; Fass, 2012; Musgrove et al., 2019; Zelizer, 1985). The period examined in this article was also one of shifting approaches to governing perceived social problems, and as key scholars have illustrated, the decades bridging the 19th and 20th centuries witnessed a profound growth in tools of governmentality concerned with shaping and controlling the self or individual (Foucault, 1979, 2009; Rose, 1999; Rose et al., 2006). Children, youth, and family life were the targets of many such tools (Donzelot, 1979; Rose, 1999; Yeo, 1996). This article illustrates the uncertainty and anxiety that navigating such change could create. It also demonstrates that the ill ease about paying for parenting examined in other parts of this thematic issue is not unique to the 21st century. Western society has a long history of accepting rhetoric and structures that separate care, intimacy, and tenderness from money, and the persistence of practices that necessitate the blurring of these boundaries produces tensions around the notion of care as work (McCabe & Wanhalla, 2019; Zelizer, 2005).

To examine big-picture social debate and discourse about paid parenting across a relatively broad sweep of time, this article’s methodology deploys both traditional historical analysis of government archives (including more than 1,500 records of the government’s child welfare department and 365 inquests), and an analysis of digitised historical newspapers. The archival research began by looking for evidence about the evolution of foster care in Victoria through a systematic sampling of the Chief Secretary’s Inward Correspondence files which contain, scattered amongst thousands of archival boxes covering a range of government responsibilities, the documentation about the individual and systemic decision-making processes of the government’s colonial child welfare system. The people and cases identified through that sampling could then be traced through other archival collections including inquests and police files. Parliamentary documents and departmental reports also provided important data. The work with historical newspapers utilises a technique developed by the author for combining big-data harvesting and analysis with finer-grained qualitative reading of selected articles. As detailed elsewhere (Musgrove, 2020), this involved leveraging the National Library of Australia’s digitised historical newspaper archive’s OCR-searchable texts to identify articles from newspapers published in Victoria that utilised the terms “baby farming” (and variations as detailed below) and “infanticide” to map the prevalence of these terms over time. This produced a collection of just over 7,600 articles covering the period 1840–1915, and then headlines and the first line of text, harvested into the database along with the publication details of each article, were used to identify those suitable for closer reading. Combined, these research approaches provide insight into both the nature and relative profile of debates about paid parenting, specifically as it related to infants, from colonisation until WWI. The first section of the article examines the period up to 1883, when the private

nursing of infants was largely unregulated, and the second section shows how the gradual regulation of the private system ultimately merged government and non-government foster care, noting that both were profoundly impacted by shifting social attitudes towards paid parenthood across the period.

2. Establishing Child Placement Structures in Colonial Victoria

The history of paid foster care in Victoria begins with colonisation because, prior to that invasion, Aboriginal society did not separate mothers from their children to free their labour for other purposes, and when parents were incapacitated or deceased, rich kinship networks provided other parental figures to undertake the care of children. In the mid-1830s, pastoralists from the British colony of Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania) began arriving and setting up sheep runs, constituting the first ongoing colonial occupation of present-day Victoria. A combination of local births and an influx of people from the northern colony of New South Wales raised the non-Aboriginal population to almost 80,000 people by 1850, a sizeable proportion of whom were under the age of 14 (New South Wales Colonial Secretary's Office, 1846; Serle, 1968). The gold rush, which began in mid-1851, boosted the population to more than 500,000 by the end of the decade (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014). Aboriginal people were not counted in the colonial census, but historical research has shown that as a consequence of savage and systematic violence, colonial land dispossession, and introduced disease, the Aboriginal population of Victoria was devastated to fewer than 2,000 people by the end of the 1850s, having been close to 60,000 prior to colonisation (Ryan, 2010; Smith et al., 2008).

This rapid and violent imposition of a colonial population occurred with little consideration for what became of children whose families could not provide for them, yet colonial society itself produced situations which required non-familial care of children. The socioeconomic structure assumed that families would have a male breadwinner, and a female caregiver. The lack of wider familial supports in a society filled with recent migrants meant that families who lost their male breadwinners through death, incapacitation, or desertion could be thrust into poverty rapidly. Furthermore, the stigmatisation of unmarried mothers meant that there was little interest in helping mothers who had no male breadwinner to begin with, and even less interest in solutions focused on keeping unmarried mothers and their children together (Swain & Howe, 1995). In the total absence of government social relief, and minimal private philanthropy, many women needed to earn an income. The most widely available work for women was live-in domestic service, and few employers allowed mothers to bring children with them (Higman, 2002). There were, therefore, children of all ages who needed care outside the family unit.

Government-run child welfare provisions were slow to emerge, first because of opposition from the colonial government of New South Wales which officially governed the district until 1851, and then because of local opposition to imposing a British Poor Law equivalent. In the late 1840s, some local church groups in Melbourne, the colony's largest city, arranged ad hoc boarding out (foster care) for children, but by the early 1850s it was clear that these foster schemes could not meet demand (Musgrove, 2013). In any case, colonial society viewed residential institutions as the most reliable form of poverty relief, whether that be for children or adults. In Britain, such institutions had been predominantly funded by Poor Law provisions, but rather than any such direct provision of poverty relief, the Victorian government opted to partially support the work of private charities to undertake the work (Musgrove, 2023). During the 1850s and 1860s, religiously based philanthropic organisations opened both Protestant and Catholic orphanages in the colony's largest cities, but they did not have capacity for all the children seeking admission. Generalist relief

institutions took in some of the children who could not find places in orphanages, and others found themselves in the colony's gaols (Musgrove, 2013). Institutions did not provide for very young children—certainly not children still breastfeeding, but even weaned infants required much more intensive care than institutions were equipped to provide. This left a sizeable number of mothers who needed to work but whose children were too young for an institution, and so there was a market demand for infant nursing services.

The informal, and often purposefully concealed, work of paid infant care poses challenges to its historical study, but there are some clear features of both its providers and its consumers in colonial Victoria. Although this article argues that the women who obtained market-based care for their infants did so in the context of few alternatives for survival, it is also important to acknowledge that Aboriginal women in this period almost never had even the limited options available to working-class non-Aboriginal mothers. Aboriginal women's labour was exploited, and they were often forcibly separated from their children, but they were rarely afforded an opportunity for input into how or where their children would be raised. White women were the primary consumers of market-based infant care and, unlike places such as the Antebellum American South, in Victoria they also constituted the majority of women undertaking this care work (West & Knight, 2017). The workforce was also almost entirely working-class women who either accepted positions in wealthier households or took children into their own homes.

Infant nursing services broadly fell into two categories: wet nursing (breastfeeding) and dry nursing. Wet nursing was, by far, the most reliable way of keeping infants alive until artificial feeding methods improved in the early 20th century, thus this service commanded higher rates of pay. This created an employment opportunity for women who were still lactating, but unless they were financially secure enough to have an established home from which they could offer their services, they usually had to place their own infant with a dry nurse to take live-in work with a wealthier family. The fashion amongst wealthier families in Victoria by the mid-19th century was turning against hiring wet nurses unless a mother was unable to supply sufficient breastmilk herself, but relatively high maternal mortality and ill-health meant that there was always work for wet nurses (Thorley, 2021). Dry nursing dominated the private infant nursing market because it was more affordable and because anyone, not only lactating women, could do it. It was risky because of the unreliability of artificial feeding and high infant mortality in general, yet the relatively low social value placed on the types of children typically sent to dry nurses—those of unmarried mothers and children of poor widowed or deserted women—meant that this market operated without significant scrutiny or regulation for several decades (Swain, 2010).

Even the most devoted dry nurses could struggle to keep infants alive. Fresh cow milk was generally considered the gold standard in feeding for dry-nursed infants, but few nurses had their own cow, and without refrigeration or even reliable controls over the quality of milk supply, maintaining a supply could be costly and time-consuming. In addition to feeding and changing infants several times a day, nurses often had to make multiple trips to buy fresh milk. Some were also caring for older children, although typically not ones old enough to help with the work (older children were easier and cheaper for families to place elsewhere, such as with friends or in an institution, and some found that they could take children's care back themselves when they reached roughly school age). Little wonder, then, that some dry nurses used alcohol or medications to sedate infants to keep them sleeping—another risk factor for infant life (Swain, 2005).

As Swain (2010, 2018) has argued, there is no one archetype that captures who dry nurses were or what motivated them, and the research for this article confirms that view. Some women were clearly accepting payment for dry nursing but also hoping the arrangement would become a pseudo-adoption; others took in one child to supplement family income—almost akin to what might be termed a side-hustle in the present day; while others established relationships with midwives and institutions that needed regular placements for babies and took as many as they could manage at a time, sometimes even employing other nurses to assist them. Some children arrived at dry nurses within hours of birth, while others were nursed by their mothers for several months, but in either case babies typically arrived on their own and not in sibling groups. The size of the private market is impossible to quantify because it was covert by nature, but a conservative estimate would be that it involved hundreds of children at any given time, and it probably provided for a larger number of infants and toddlers than did the government-run foster care system for much of the period before the 1890s. By the early 20th century, the number of infants registered with dry nurses was roughly equal to the number of children aged 0–5 within the government system.

Despite a persistent need for dry nursing services, it was perceived as somewhat disreputable because of its association in the public imagination with “illegitimate” children and high infant mortality. Dry nursing multiple infants for payment became known as baby farming from the late 1860s, a term which became connected with the idea that supposed baby farmers would accept money for infants but then murder them by force or neglect rather than spending the money on their care (Homrighaus, 2001; Swain, 2005). Scholars agree that moral panics about so-called baby farming overestimated its extent, but the very notion cast doubt on all dry nursing, and the genuine challenges of keeping dry-nursed infants alive, combined with negative assumptions about the trustworthiness of the kinds of poor women who would be willing to perform such work, tainted many people’s views (Hinks, 2022; Swain, 2005).

Nurses, therefore, had a vested interest in keeping their work somewhat clandestine. So too did many of the mothers who sought to conceal the existence of an ex-nuptial child by placing it out. Midwives helped mothers find nurses, and mainstream newspapers were also used to advertise dry nursing services (Swain, 2005, 2018). Such advertisements appeared in Victorian newspapers from the 1850s, their frequency tapering away after formal regulation of dry nursing began in the 1880s. Typical examples from the 1850s, 1860s, and 1870s pushed back against stereotypes by emphasising the respectability of the woman, e.g., “A respectable woman wishes a child to dry nurse; references given,” and concealed the location and identity of the nurse by listing a doctor or local business as the contact (“Advertising,” 1856a). Some more plainly positioned the work as part of wider services, e.g., “Wanted a child to dry nurse, and needlework” (“Advertising,” 1856b), and during the 1860s more candid acknowledgements of the financial transaction began to appear: “Wanted, a child, to dry-nurse. Every care taken. Terms moderate” (“Advertising,” 1864). Others distanced themselves from the image of the baby farmer who archetypically took in many children at once, while remaining clearly transactional: “Wanted, charge [of] child to dry-nurse. 8s [shillings] weekly. No other children” (“Advertising,” 1871). These decades thus contained a space for women to position themselves as businesswomen, of sorts, albeit while actively contesting a discourse that questioned the legitimacy of their work. Such an approach was the more common one within the newspaper advertisements of this period, but there were also examples of women drawing on the discourse of providing a skilled profession by stating that they had “great experience” (“Advertising,” 1868), and other instances of women emphasising that the child would “receive motherly care” (“Advertising,” 1861)—two approaches to positioning the work which would become more prominent in later decades.

There are scattered examples suggesting that some private foster care accommodated slightly older children (e.g., “Advertising,” 1865), but it primarily provided for infants. By the 1860s, it was clear that neither the private market nor the colony’s orphanages were accommodating all of the older children in need of support. Concern about growing numbers of children in the colony’s gaols, and about visible groups of children on the streets of the cities and larger towns, pressured the government to directly enter child welfare provision. The Neglected and Criminal Children Act (Colony of Victoria, 1864) reflected the government’s expectation that its new institutions would be catering to older “wayward” children—those who might now be described as teen and pre-teen—who had either committed a crime or who were living “unruly” or “unsupervised” lives that might be leading them towards a life of crime. Consequently, it established industrial schools and reformatory schools following the model set out by British social reformer Mary Carpenter. However, the Act inadvertently provided a legislative mechanism for parents to essentially force the government to take custody of their children, and the new system was quickly overwhelmed by large numbers of very young children for whom its institutions were entirely unsuitable (Musgrove, 2013). Mothers who feared they would be unable to keep up with payments to nurses, and who therefore worried about what would become of their children, quickly understood that if they could persuade a magistrate to commit their child as neglected, the state would have to retain custody of the child even if maintenance payments ceased (Twomey, 2002). However, not all mothers were prepared to surrender their children to the state, and the private foster care market did not disappear.

The colony’s non-government institutions also continued to more than fill their available places. In addition to providing for children without requiring parents to relinquish legal control, non-government institutions were viewed as providing higher quality care, and some parents used the government system as an immediate crisis-aversion strategy while continuing to seek places for their children in non-government institutions (Chief Secretary’s Department, 1865). Although this article is primarily interested in following the relationships between government and non-government foster care, it is also worth noting that the 1864 legislation included a provision for the government to pay non-government institutions a fee if they were willing to provide for children placed under the Act. There were some non-government institutions, most notably Catholic ones, which took in “wards of the state” under this provision during the 19th century, but it was not until the post-WWI era that the non-government sector became a major provider of institutional places for the government (Barnard & Twigg, 2004; Musgrove, 2013).

In addition to suddenly being responsible for a significantly larger number of children than it had expected, the government system was forced to solve the problem of keeping infants in its custody alive. The legislation did not allow for children to be placed anywhere except an institution, and so the only apparent solution was to hire wet nurses to care for the infants within institutional walls. Ironically, this contributed to the demand for private dry nursing, since most women who accepted positions as wet nurses within government institutions had living infants of their own who then needed to be placed elsewhere. Women could wet nurse two infants at a time in the government institutions, and thereby make a profit even after paying a dry nurse for their own child (Musgrove, 2013). Colonial society was selectively concerned about infant deaths resulting from this arrangement. In 1869, Adelaide Anne Grant was lambasted in the press and charged with manslaughter (of which she was acquitted) when a child she was wet-nursing at the Melbourne Industrial School died (“Manslaughter,” 1869). It was only four years later when another woman, Ellen Davis, was found to be running a dry nursing business out of a “wretched filthy den” that the newspapers even made a passing mention that Grant’s own infant had died in Davis’s care while Grant was wet nursing at the industrial school (“A specimen of wretchedness,” 1873, p. 5). Even then, there was little

sympathy for Grant or her child, but instead a suggestion that the association of Grant and Davis further evidenced each of their poor characters.

Despite mounting criticism in the press about deaths in government institutions, the issue that eventually forced a change in practice was the concern that wet nurses, most of whom were single mothers and therefore seen as morally tainted, were corrupting children in the institutions, particularly the older girls (Musgrove, 2024; Musgrove & Michell, 2018). The department moved wet nursing out of its institutions as early as 1872, although the legislation which formally enabled the placement of children in private homes was not passed until 1874. Somewhat optimistically, the advertisements for women to wet nurse industrial school infants in their own homes, rather than as residential wet nurses, sought married women:

Wanted, Married Women, lately confined, who have lost their own children, to take and wet-nurse, at their own homes, the neglected infants at the Industrial Schools, Melbourne. Rate of payment, 10s. per week for each child. Apply to Dr. McGauran at the Industrial School...at 2pm to-day. ("Advertising," 1872)

The records about the women who took children into their own homes to wet nurse in the early 1870s are scant, but the change certainly made things more difficult for single mothers. First, the work was more attractive to a wider range of women than the residential work in the industrial schools had been, so the department could be somewhat more selective. Second, women had to have a suitable home into which they could take the children, and many of the single mothers who had taken work in the schools had been willing to accept that work precisely because they could not secure lodging without parting with their child. There were likely single mothers employed as wet nurses in these early years, but they were removed from the public eye and no longer a source of embarrassment for the government. Just like the private nursing market, the government relied on newspaper advertisements, as well as the knowledge of local midwives and philanthropic ladies who knew the women prepared to take on the work, to staff its new wet nursing scheme.

Removing wet-nursed infants from institutions had been the most pressing issue for the government, but it was just the first move towards restructuring the government system away from institutions. The 1874 amendment of the Neglected and Criminal Children Act made boarding out legal within the government system, and over the next decade the government gradually closed almost all of its institutions so that most children under government guardianship were in foster placements. One factor that limited the transition was the availability of people willing to foster. Historians examining other locations in this period have found a general acceptance of the idea that people prepared to do the work of the state by taking children into their homes should be able to make a modest profit (Abrams, 1998; Engberg, 2005; MacDonald, 1996). The same was true in Australia, although this did not mean that foster care was entirely reduced to a financial transaction; for both practical and philosophical reasons, government officials hoped that women would bond with their foster children and keep them long-term out of affection rather than purely for profit (Evans, 2002; Musgrove & Michell, 2018).

Whatever the government hoped would motivate women to foster, their early efforts to secure a stable supply of foster homes suggests that the women providing those homes were very much concerned with the money they could earn. The first official boarding out payment schedule in Victoria had three tiers:

12/- (shillings) for children under one year (or any child placed with wet-nursing foster mothers), 7/- for children aged three to five, and 5/- for children aged 6 to 14. At first, the Ladies Visiting Association—the group of philanthropic women overseeing the local voluntary Ladies Committees responsible for finding and supervising foster homes for the government—argued that the rate for wet nursing was too low to enable them to attract “suitable persons” (Chief Secretary’s Department, 1874, p. 10). However, within a few years, the local Ladies Committees had solidified their recruitment networks, and their concern shifted to the phenomenon of foster mothers returning children when the payments dropped—either when their wet nursing period ended, or when they turned six. The government’s first response was to cut the middle rate to set the payment for all weaned children, regardless of age, at 5/-, but women persisted in returning weaned children to obtain new infants for wet nursing.

Debates about how the government should remunerate wet nurses revealed competing understandings of the role. The Ladies Visiting Association argued that the rates for wet-nursed and weaned children should be brought closer together, to 10/- and 7/-, to encourage foster mothers to establish long-term homes for children. The colony’s chief medical officer agreed that long-term homes might be ideal but argued that the government relied on having a steady supply of wet nurses, and that the children sent out by the government could be particularly demanding in terms of the care they required: “Many of the infants given out,” he wrote, “are miserable sickly children requiring much attention in regard to cleanliness and the nurse’s sleep is disturbed at night, and the responsibility is considerable” (Chief Secretary’s Department, 1881, pp. 7–8). Wet nurses were in constant demand on the private market, and while those nursing for the government avoided the risk of people missing payments, they also had less choice over which infants they nursed and had to allow oversight of their work by local Ladies Committees. Reliable and generous rates of payment were, the chief medical officer argued, an important tool at the government’s disposal for maintaining sufficient numbers of wet nurses. Ultimately, the government followed the views of the chief medical officer, although this appears to have been more due to the overall cost to the department than the acceptance of one philosophical position over another: There were far more weaned children than those requiring wet nursing, and so raising payments for weaned children would have cost far more than the savings made by lowering payments to wet nurses (Chief Secretary’s Department, 1881).

Thus, by the early 1880s, the government was running a parallel system that looked very much like the private infant nursing networks. The main advantage of the government system for parents was that they did not have to pay for foster care, unless they were judged able to afford it, and they knew that someone would keep providing for their children even if they agreed to payments they were unable to make; the disadvantages were the loss of legal control of their children, and the government’s rule against children in foster homes having any visitation with their parents (Musgrove & Michell, 2018). For providers of foster homes, the government system offered more reliable payment but less autonomy than the private market. However, right at this moment, legislation introduced to regulate the private infant-nursing market began to significantly change the independence of people performing that work.

3. Regulating Private Foster Care

The Public Health Amendment Statute was the Colony of Victoria’s (1883) first legislative effort to regulate private foster care. Part III required the registration of any person “retaining or receiving for hire or reward...more than one infant, or in the case of twins more than two infants, under the age of two years” if

“maintaining such infants apart from their parents for a longer period than twenty-four hours,” required local health boards to maintain such registers (striking off unsatisfactory nurses), and ordered inquests for any infants dying in the custody of registered nurses unless exempted by a medical professional (Colony of Victoria, 1883, pp. 635–637). The legislation was ineffective because it did not require or empower the inspection of either the children themselves or the nurses’ homes in which they lived, and the public health authorities were not proactive in their duties. However, the adoption of the principle of legally regulating the private market was a significant development.

Although the 1883 Statute made no mention of illegitimate infants, infanticide, or baby farming, it was a direct response to social anxieties about these perceived social ills that had been building for several decades. Examining the usage of the terms “infanticide” and “baby farming” (including “baby farm,” “baby farmer,” and all three forms with hyphenation) in Victorian newspapers reveals the shifting nature of social concerns attached to these concepts over time. Trove, the National Library of Australia’s mass newspaper digitisation project (<https://trove.nla.gov.au/search/advanced/category/newspapers>), has made entire runs of historical Australian newspapers available and text-searchable, enabling studies of language usage over time. While there are some newspapers known to have existed which are not included in the database, for the period covered in this article, most of Victoria’s major newspapers are available. The earliest Victorian newspaper in the database is from 1838, and the total number of articles (across all topics) for that year was just 236. By 1840, the year the term “infanticide” first appeared in the Victorian press, the total number of articles was more than 2,500, and as the population grew, so too did the size of the press. The total number of articles in the press was more than 100,000 articles for the year 1865, topped 500,000 in 1899, and exceeded 1,000,000 by 1914. In assessing press coverage invoking the terms “infanticide” or “baby farm,” it is useful to consider the raw numbers of articles using the terms each year, as well as those articles as a percentage of all Victorian newspaper articles on Trove for the year. Figure 1 provides each of these side by side.

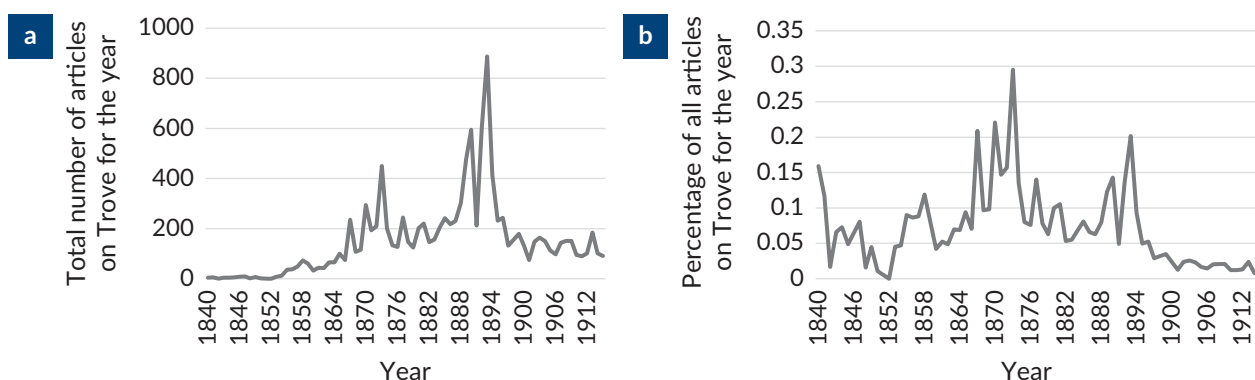


Figure 1. Victorian newspaper articles including the terms *infanticide* and/or *baby-farm* for each year (a) number of articles in sample for each year; (b) articles in sample as a percentage of all articles on Trove for the year. Source: Created based on original research by the author using the GLAM Workbench (see also Sherratt, 2024).

The apparently high profile of the issue through the 1840s in Figure 1b is deceptive, given that the relatively high percentage of coverage reflects no more than 10 articles in any year, but it is fair to say that the two graphs read together reflect a level of social concern about infanticide in the 1840s and 1850s. Until the mid-1860s, the newspaper coverage focused on newborns killed or abandoned by their mothers in presumed

attempts to conceal illegitimate births. As early as 1840, the *Port Phillip Herald* declared “that the horrible crime of infanticide is of frequent occurrence in this small town” (“Domestic intelligence,” 1840, p. 3). In 1856, another newspaper claimed that there was “scarcely a week” in the colony “without some record of inhumanity perpetrated by mothers in the abandonment or wilful murder of their offspring,” and urged for “some stringent measures” to be adopted against the “offences of child dropping and infanticide” (“Melbourne,” 1856, p. 2). In 1859, an infant died from apparent starvation and neglect while placed with a wet nurse in Melbourne. A court reporter described the police officer who discovered the dying infant testifying in court:

[He said that he] found [the nurse] lying drunk on an old mattress. On an old sofa was lying a child, crying piteously. One of its eyes was closed, and the other open. It was wrapped in some filthy clothes, and the smell was horrible. The face of the child was shrivelled and distorted....The child had since died. (“Child murder,” 1859, p. 6)

The case itself was reported by several papers, but the coverage ceased when the jury failed to convict the nurse, and press coverage of infanticide remained primarily interested in so-called “child dropping” by mothers.

The number of articles mentioning infanticide, and the size of the Victorian press, grew during the gold rush era of the 1850s and 1860s. By 1865, the overall size of the press means that the percentage of articles using the terms becomes the most meaningful measure for understanding the changing profile of the topic within the press. To illustrate the relative profile of this issue, Figure 2 maps coverage of infanticide and baby farming against coverage of unemployment, a persistently significant social concern, from 1865 through 1915. Aside from a short period in the 1870s, unemployment was a higher priority of the press, but infanticide and baby farming emerge as prominent social issues of the 19th century, including during the economic depression of the 1890s, when coverage of unemployment unsurprisingly spiked.

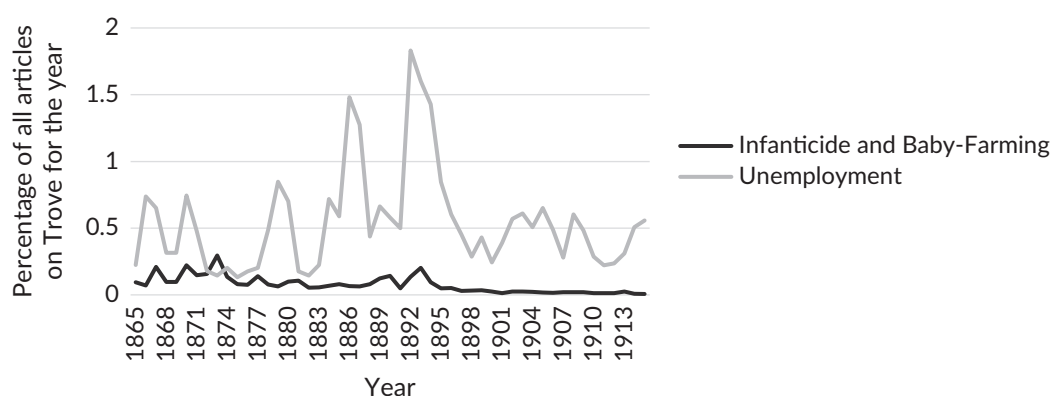


Figure 2. Victorian Newspaper articles including the terms “infanticide” and/or “baby farm” and articles including the term “unemploy*” (which includes “unemployed,” “unemployment,” “unemployable,” etc.) for each year as a percentage of all articles for the year. Created based on original research by the author using the GLAM Workbench (Sherratt, 2024).

Even before the term was coined, the spectre of the baby farmer was invoked in Victorian newspapers. In 1865, in England, Charlotte Winsor was charged and convicted for murdering a child she had agreed to nurse for payment in her home near Torquay, and the case caused a scandal across the British Empire, including Victoria. The Melbourne *Herald* titled Winsor “a professional child-murderess” and alerted readers to the “frightful prevalence of child-murder in the colony,” describing it as “proportionately as common and

prevalent in Victoria, as it is in England” (“The prevalence of child murder,” 1865, p. 2). As Homrighaus (2001) argues, Winsor played a pivotal role in constructing the image of the baby farmer, yet she was not described as one because the term itself was not coined until 1867 when it appeared in the *British Medical Journal*. The following year, the term was used in the Victorian press. Figure 3 shows the appearance of the term “baby farmer” (and variations as noted above) in the Victorian press on the left, and on the right, the percentage of all articles about infanticide that also used the term “baby farmer.” It shows how quickly baby farming became a prominent feature of all press coverage addressing infanticide, and that after 1900, as infant mortality rates began to notably decline, while other coverage of infanticide diminished to negligible levels, discussion of baby farming persisted.

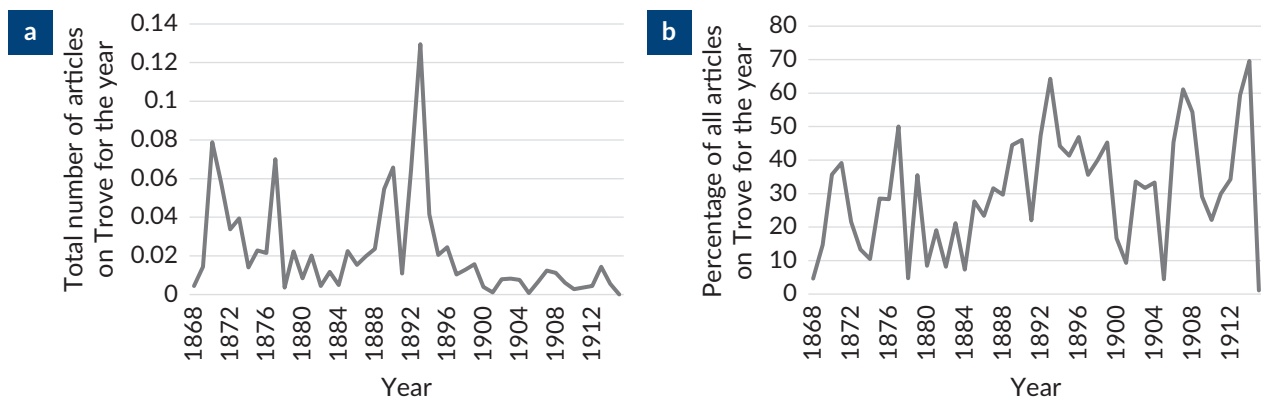


Figure 3. Victorian Newspaper articles (a) including the term “baby farm” for each year as a percentage of all articles for the year; and (b) including the term “baby farm” as a percentage of all articles mentioning infanticide in each year. Created based on original research by the author using the GLAM Workbench (Sherratt, 2024).

During 1868 and 1869, Victorian newspapers began to use the term “baby farmer” in relation to English and French cases, and in January 1870, the *Herald* wrote:

Has baby-farming become an institution in Victoria? From the account of an inquest held on the death of an infant at Emerald Hill, and from inquiries made elsewhere, proof has been obtained that the practice of baby-farming obtains to a very wide extent in Melbourne. Although this practice here is not attended with the meditated cruelty that is connected with it at home...in the majority of cases the result is the same, for the death of the infant almost always follows its being put out to nurse. (“Has baby-farming become an institution,” 1870, p. 2)

Baby farming had been “discovered” in Victoria, and in April the same year the death of an infant placed with a dry nurse in the city of Ballarat scandalised the press (e.g., “An infant starved to death,” 1870). Another British case, the conviction and execution of Margaret Waters for baby farming, gained much attention in the Victorian press during the second half of 1870, and throughout the decade concerns about both baby farming and maternal infanticide in the colony remained high. In part, this reflected a colonial tendency to see the local “discovery” of the worst social ills of Europe’s large cities as simultaneously horrifying and validating of Melbourne’s status as true city of the world, but it was also fuelled by growing concerns during the 1870s that the settler population was not reproducing quickly enough to ensure the long-term security of the colonial society (Musgrove, 2013; Swain, 2005).

In the wake of the Waters case, the United Kingdom introduced the Infant Life Protection Act which required that infant nurses be registered with local authorities and that inquests be held upon the deaths of infants placed with such nurses; Victoria’s Central Board of Health urged for the same to be implemented in the colony (“The central board,” 1872). The board repeated this recommendation to the government in 1876, but there was no parliamentary action until late 1883, the Public Health Amendment Bill being debated in October that year (“News of the day,” 1876; “Parliament,” 1883). The wheels of colonial government often moved slowly, but public concern about infant mortality—particularly the revaluing of illegitimate children of the poor in the face of declining birth rates—helped make this a more pressing matter (McCalman et al., 2011; Swain, 2010). The impact of this first attempt at regulating private infant nursing was minimal; local authorities were relatively haphazard in registering nurses, the Statute gave authorities little power for meaningful oversight, breaches of the legislation incurred relatively minor fines, and even when inquests into infant deaths revealed systematic baby farming, establishing grounds for murder trials proved difficult (State Coroner’s Office, 1885; “The day’s news,” 1886).

One noticeable effect of the 1883 Statute was that it stimulated the press’s attention on the notion of baby farming, with coverage of the topic increasing significantly during the latter part of the 1880s (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Victorian Newspaper articles including the term “baby farm” for each year as a percentage of all articles for the year, 1880–1890. Created based on original research by the author using the GLAM Workbench (Sherratt, 2024).

The articles of the 1880s leaned heavily on depictions of nurses as either heartless or incompetent, and of mothers as either desperate to hide the shame of an illegitimate birth or vicious conspirators in the disposal of a child—one the mother may not value, but whom society should attempt to save:

All over the colony unhappy infants...presently drop into premature graves, or die, abandoned to the...cruel hands of the baby farmer, or...are slaughtered by the unhappy mothers whose pride and glory they would be under more fortunate circumstances. We cannot...lighten the burden which the support of a base-born child places upon its unfortunate mother....But we can do something towards saving the lives of the helpless little beings who are now slaughtered in hundreds....For these infants would presently become useful citizens, repaying, directly and indirectly, all care and cost of their maintenance. Surely we might have a Foundling Hospital...where the unhappy women who have been

deserted by their betrayers might find shelter for the children they cannot themselves support. ("The cry of the children," 1889, p. 2)

This passage, which captures many tropes of the decade, also reflects the limits of the solutions most people were prepared to consider. That is, there was much debate about strategies for keeping infants alive while separated from their mothers, but very little interest in the idea of keeping mothers and children together to achieve this. Popular sentiment about the need to punish "fallen" women through separating them from their children remained strong long into the 20th century (Swain & Howe, 1995).

The Royal Commission on Charitable Institutions (Colony of Victoria, 1890–1891) inquired into the desirability of establishing a foundling hospital in Victoria. Most witnesses consulted on this either supported it because it would save infant lives or opposed it because it would encourage "immorality" by making it too easy for mothers to "unburden themselves" of illegitimate children. However, some leading figures working at the coalface of infant deaths and child welfare in the colony advocated a different approach. When asked whether he opposed a foundling hospital, former City Coroner Dr Richard Youl replied, "Yes, on the ground it is a baby farm. The children will live a little longer; they will have spasms and pains for six months instead of six weeks, but the result is just the same" (Colony of Victoria, 1890–1891, p. 313). Youl argued that being fed on its own mother's milk was the best way to keep any child alive, and that providing places for mothers to nurse their own infants not only saved lives but helped prevent children becoming a cost to the state in the longer-term because mothers bonded with their children and became more determined to remain united with them. Others, including Selina Sutherland, prominent child rescue figure, and George Guillaume, head of the government's child welfare department, agreed, and added that providing for mothers to nurse their infants would awaken "the best part of their nature" and help prevent them becoming "ready prey to a new temptation" (Colony of Victoria, 1890–1891, pp. 536, 587). Indeed, Guillaume had pushed for the government to approve funds for boarding some young mothers in homes with their infants in the 1880s, a scheme which had grown modestly over time but which sat uncomfortably with public understandings of both the causes of illegitimacy and the purposes of welfare provision (Musgrove & Michell, 2018). Ultimately, the government opted for the more popular route of tighter regulation of infant care.

The Infant Life Protection Act 1890 transferred oversight of private infant nursing from local health boards to the police, clarified some language pertaining to who fell under the scope of the Act, and removed the capacity for a medical officer to exempt a privately-nursed infant's death from inquest. The Act formally came into effect in January 1891, but the regulations which provided the details for registration and the guidelines for inspection were not released until January 1893, making this the effective start date of the new legislation (Harris, 2010; Victoria Police, 1893). Victoria's most infamous baby farming case, which ended in the conviction (1893) and execution (1894) of Frances Knorr, combined with the increased number of inquests under the new Act (many of which were reported by the press), fuelled public anxiety about the private nursing of children. This was reflected not only by the clear spike in press coverage (see Figure 3) but also in the increasing prevalence of people reporting their neighbours to police for suspected unregistered private nursing—a phenomenon which continued into the early 1900s (e.g., Victoria Police, 1904, 1905). The volume of work this generated for the police proved immense. The Infant Life Protection Act 1907 transferred registration and inspection of private infant nurses to the government's child welfare department and required that all private placements be approved and paid for via the department.

The 1907 Act brought private and government-run foster care even closer together and created a pathway for children to move seamlessly between the two. The new legislation included a provision for making privately nursed children wards of the state if a nurse stopped receiving payments. Often, nurses were happy to keep the children on and simply switch to being paid the government-approved rate (which was guaranteed even if it were lower than the price they had privately negotiated). Thus, both nurses and children could move from the private to the government system with but the stroke of a pen, as happened frequently from early in 1908 when the Act came into force. Harold L. was born in 1908, and his mother, who was not married to his father, placed him with a private nurse very shortly after his birth so that she could take a live-in domestic service position. Harold's father agreed to pay the nurse and apparently kept up the payments for several years. However, by mid-1912, he had fallen into arrears, and Harold was made a ward of the state. Harold remained with the same nurse, and likely knew nothing of the legally significant change in his status (Chief Secretary's Department, 1912; Department for Neglected Children, 1908). This was part of a wider trend, and the department's Annual Reports also show that children moved back the other way: Parents resumed payments and regained legal control of their children in roughly equal numbers to those being made wards of the state through this process.

Harold L.'s story is also interesting because it illustrates an example that sits comfortably neither in the notion of nurses as professionals, nor as motherly figures motivated purely by love, yet by the late 19th century, these were the two discourses available to women seeking to position their paid care of children as legitimate. The nurse had initially made a private arrangement for payment, and when the money stopped arriving, she sought continued payment from the government. However, in 1922, as Harold approached the age at which the government would have removed him from his foster home to send him to a work placement, the nurse applied to have him released into her custody without payment—a request which was granted (Chief Secretary's Department, 1912). This suggests that despite seeking payment in return for providing a foster home, she had also been invested in Harold and was unwilling to part with him.

As Swain (2010, 2018) has shown, the reasons for which women acted as infant nurses were complex, and even in individual cases the lines between nursing for profit and using it as a form of de facto adoption (there was no legal adoption in Victoria until 1928) could be blurred. Usually, women could navigate their available choices within the private and government foster care systems without having to explain how they understood the nature of the care they provided. However, when nurses were called before an inquest into the death of a child in their care, they could feel compelled to defend the quality of the care they had provided. A sample of 365 Infant Life Protection inquests suggests that between the mid-1890s and the mid-1910s, the space for paid nurses to deploy motherly love or motherly knowledge as a way of justifying why they should not be held responsible for the child's death diminished. In the 1890s, women might explain the actions they took when a child fell ill as having been based on experience gained through mothering children of their own (e.g., State Coroner's Office, 1898b), or position accepting money as the first step towards family formation—some even pointing to having older “adopted” children obtained through the same process (e.g., State Coroner's Office, 1898a). By the 1900s, women were more likely to emphasise how long they had been successfully working as a registered nurse, to describe their actions in more distanced and clinical terms, and to emphasise their regular provision of nursing services to registered maternity homes for unmarried mothers (State Coroner's Office, 1900, 1902, 1905, 1906). Those who could distance their willingness to care for children from payment might do so by explaining that they had made no “complaint about not being paid” nor made any move to have the child moved into the government system (State Coroner's Office, 1913).

This shift away from a comfort in conflating payment with mothering aligns with the emotional revaluing of the child that took place across the late-19th and early-20th centuries, and reflects how this prompted a social distinction to emerge between the kinds of “care” a mother-like figure might provide and the more professionalised style of infant nursing that one might rightly expect to be paid for. There was, perhaps, also more public space for women who were somewhat transactional about payment for their work during the 1890s economic depression, which caused notable poverty and unemployment for much of the decade. There are rarely single explanatory factors for why social perceptions change, but a shift in views about paid parenting is clear. This also influenced the government’s rhetoric about payments to foster mothers for wards of the state, and even though a series of men who led the department asked the government to increase foster payments to help them attract enough placements, the government’s position was that they would secure a better quality of home if they offered less financial incentive. As had been the case in the 19th century, the government’s refusal to increase funding was at least partly shrewd cost-cutting, but a repetition in public forums of the idea that good foster parents would have no concern for the money they received indicates the growing social traction of this attitude to paid parenting (Musgrove & Michell, 2018).

4. Conclusion

This article has traced the practice of paid infant nursing through both structural and discursive lenses across almost a century. It has illustrated that the social structures which created the need for mothers to separate from their infants created a demand for nursing services that was ultimately met through a combination of government-run and private placements. Increasing social value placed on infant life, particularly white infant life, combined with moral panics about so-called baby farmers, meant that, over time, tolerance for an entirely unregulated infant nursing market evaporated, and during the 1890s and 1900s the role of the state in the care of all infants separated from their mothers increased steadily. In a society that had little interest in supporting families to stay together, this became a costly approach, and by the end of WWI the government-run foster care system was so large that increasing foster payments to keep up with the cost of living was impossible. The number of available foster homes dropped away in the following years as decreasing numbers of families could or would operate at a growing cost to themselves. This led to the almost total collapse of government foster care. The demand for infant placements also dropped away after WWI. Employment options for women were expanding so that more could avoid live-in work, other day-based childcare options were gradually becoming available, and government social welfare also (slowly) grew. The details of those developments are beyond the scope of this article, but they help explain why fewer women needed full-time infant nursing. So too, across the period examined here, the work became less attractive to providers. As society became more deeply invested in the survival of children placed with private nurses, it also committed to more stringent regulation of private foster care. This led to an intertwining of the private and public foster care systems, and while this offered a greater certainty that payments would be received, it also required greater intrusion into the nurses’ homes.

The article also illustrated that while there were observable discursive shifts in social debate about paid infant nursing, the concerns of public debate were often out of step with the reality of the practice. “Discovering” baby farming in Victoria captured the public imagination in good part because locating such “evil” as had been found in the great cities of the world alleviated fears that the colony might just be an insignificant backwater. Furthermore, by the time the moral panic about baby farming reached its peak in the 1890s, the effective regulation of private nursing had all but ended the practice in its true sense of intentional and systematic

child murder. Nevertheless, the stigma that had attached to private nursing by the late 19th century because of moral panics about infanticide and baby farming endured. Indeed, long after WWI, when privately paid fostering had shrunk to a negligible size, the press continued to invoke the spectre of the baby farmer. In tracing changes in social attitudes across such long periods of time, it is impossible to quantify the impact of single factors or ideas, but there is little doubt that this period was central in enshrining social suspicion about the idea of paid parenthood and, as other articles in this thematic issue illustrate, many of the stigmas about paying for foster care have proven sticky in the public imagination—not only in Australia, but across the globe.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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