

The South Adelaide Creche, 1887-1936

by

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The South Adelaide Creche, sometimes also referred to in its annual reports as the South Adelaide Day Nursery, was established by Mrs Laura Corbin, wife of an Adelaide doctor, in 1887.¹ Its aim was 'for the purpose of taking care of children' of mothers 'who go out to work by day'. For the next fifty years this charitable institution received children too young to go to school from 7a.m. on working days, fed and cared for them until they were collected by their mothers up to 6p.m. in the evening. It charged a fee towards the cost of this child-care service, but it always needed to supplement this modest contribution by raising funds from the philanthropic public - indeed, the mothers' contribution usually made up only 10% of total income. It attracted mothers within walking distance of its central city locations, and at peak had about thirty children attending daily. Sometimes the mothers received clothes for a small charge if they were 'really poor'.

Much more needs to be said about this modest late nineteenth century charity.² Certainly it was an organisation aimed at women in difficult circumstances, and it was conducted largely, though not solely by women. The method was to assist women in need to go out into the workforce, usually where there was no other breadwinner, or where the family income was inadequate. At the same time, the creche organisers were concerned to improve the health of deprived children by offering wholesome food and an adequate and protected environment while their mothers worked. Third, and this must never be forgotten in considering this charitable agency, the creche was designed to provide a regular supply of respectable charwomen and other casual domestics for the ladies who resided in the big houses of Adelaide. There was, in other words, a transaction in this charitable agency: in return for subsidised child-care, these needy women submitted themselves to inspection by lady visitors, provided references from respectable householders, and gave evidence that they were properly married. Under those strict conditions, they then gained work under the eye of committee members or their friends, or at least the privilege of leaving their children at the creche while they proceeded to work they themselves had arranged.

All this signals a mode of social relationships in which a degree of social control was exercised by the ladies conducting the charity over the women recipients of their aid. The working women never controlled the creche, despite the small contribution they made to its upkeep.³ Thus the organisers were not challenging existing ideas about class and gender relations in late nineteenth century Adelaide: rather, they were reinforcing them, with their emphasis on work, respectability, subordination and cleanliness. The creche organisers were definitely not harbingers of modernity and participation in the provision of services by and for women in Adelaide.

Mrs Corbin and her first helpers rented three sites in succession: 218 King William Street, a house in Gilles Street, and then in Nelson Street 'near the cold stores'. Initially, the householder provided care for the few children brought each day. During a visit to Europe in 1891,⁴ Mrs Corbin viewed two similar operations, one in Paris, the other in London. These strengthened her desire for a purpose-built location to replace the succession of rented sites. She also hoped to be able to improve the feeding of the children.⁵

So, despite the economic depression South Australia was experiencing in the early 1890s, she set about raising funds and expanding her support base. For example, she gained the help of 'Uncle Harry' and his 'Sunbeams', that children's club conducted through the columns of the Observer with such doting sentimentality.⁶ At the foundation stone laying of the new building at 15 Gouger Street on Saturday 8 August 1896, a long line of pennies was laid by the Sunbeams as their contribution: £600 in fact, of the eventual £1700 it cost to erect the building.⁷

At the stone laying several Adelaide identities gave their support. Chief Justice Way, ever ready with warm words of encouragement, however superficial they might later read, concentrated on the good works of Uncle Harry and his Sunbeams. So did J.G. Jenkins, Commissioner of Public Works, while Bishop Harmer spoke conventional words of congratulation to the organising committee. All this signalled the importance for any charitable organisation in gaining public approval for its activities. That was why the patronage of the Countess of Kintore had earlier been an encouragement while her husband had been governor.⁸

Yet a review of the committee lists suggests there were limits. The original group led by Mrs Corbin contained Mrs A.A. Hamilton, Mrs Alfred Hardy, Mrs W. Longbottom, Mrs Poole, Mrs F.H. Stokes, Mrs W. Wicksteed, Miss K. Kell Miss

Ward and Miss Wicksteed, together with Mr F.H. Stokes, with H.B. Corbin as treasurer, whom I presume was Laura Corbin's husband. Miss Corbin was secretary. Much was made over the next few years of the help of Mrs C.H. Hussey of Port Eliot, as a fund raiser from afar; eventually W.B. Hussey, her son who lived in Adelaide, became organising secretary. Presumably they were related to Henry Hussey, evangelist and founder of Hussey and Gillingham, printers. Certainly that firm printed all the annual reports published by the Creche. But at no time did the list of organisers reflect the rich and powerful of Adelaide. One presumes they lived too far away in their mansions on the other side of the Torrens at North Adelaide and Medindie, with a separate line of supply for domestic help? The names of the husbands of the ladies who did help conduct the Creche seem to have been merchants and professionals linked to the city centre itself.

Nor had the early years been easy. The succession of locations went with a succession of matrons. A death at the Creche in 1888-9 and the resultant coroner's inquest brought bad publicity. The Committee had to be alert to the danger of infectious diseases and the effects of narcotics designed to keep children sleepy.

Nonetheless, in those early reports the emphasis was repeated: the creche was 'not a registry office' but a charity: 'our aim is to get work by the day, such as washing, ironing, cleaning, scrubbing etc for deserving mothers who make use of the Creche'. The women were visited and inspected, the Matron kept a list of names available 'to our friends'.⁹ All this guaranteed respectability.

The permanent home of the creche was opened on Thursday 17 December 1896, amidst the usual media event celebrations. Fewer of Adelaide's great and powerful were present, and for once Mrs Corbin herself made a public speech. The Rev. W. G. Marsh, Rector of St Luke's, Whitmore Square, seems to have made the main approving speech. Mrs Hussey opened the building, and the assembled crowd then explored the building and spent money at the fund raising stalls. After all, it had cost £1700 to erect.¹⁰

The building was designed by F.W. Dancker, an Adelaide architect, without fee. Observers have always found the front facade detailing appealing in a two-story building which partook both of commercial and domestic characteristics. There was office space and presumably living quarters for the matron, above a dining room and playroom, a dormitory and a cot room. Soon outhouses, storerooms and an asphalted

playground were added, plus some utilitarian covered areas for indoor/outdoor recreation.

To give legal security, the organisation was incorporated under the 1858 Associations Incorporation Act, with rules which reiterated its aim of caring for children of women obliged to go out in search daily for casual work. The Trustees were, of necessity two men: Dr Thomas Hamilton and Dr Thomas Corbin, who was presumably the founder's son. The executive appointments of secretary and treasurer were prescribed in male terms. They were subject to the guidance of a committee, and a Matron carried out the day-to-day affairs of the creche. This gender pattern reflected the structure usually adopted in women's charities: it emphasises the conservative and cautious character of the South Adelaide Creche. 'The work for them and the glory for us!'¹¹

The rules also spelt out the dietary and the daily routine. Breakfast was provided between 8a.m. and 8.30 and consisted of one of bread and milk, porridge, bread and jam, bread and dripping (how extraordinary to find official confirmation of that much joked about folk remedy for hunger amidst poverty!). A piece of bread was to be distributed mid morning, while dinner followed at noon, of soup and bread, pudding of sago or rice, plain suet pudding etc, or bread and fruit in summer. Once a week there was meat. Tea was at 4p.m.

The account which emerges is then of a modest charitable operation, with few linkages to other philanthropic agencies in Adelaide, focussed essentially on women within walking distance of the centre of the city. This view is reinforced by a study of the enrolments and income.

The attendance figures were reported as an annual total of children who attended the creche, which was open for 52 weeks of the year. There were 2358 admissions in 1889-90, 3581 in 1907-8, 70075 in 1915-16 (the peak) and 2342 in 1932-3 (the last). If the creche took children six days of the week, daily average figures can be struck which show that up to 1911, the average daily attendance was less than 13 (only three years exceeded that figure). From 1912-1929, the range was 15-25, with the peak in the years 1914-20, when there were enlarged opportunities for working mothers with so many men away at the war, and when so many mothers needed the money to tide them over the separation war imposed. If the creche opened only five days a week, which is unlikely but possible, the average daily figures are a

little larger by a margin of perhaps two children a day. Either way the daily attendance was modest and stable.

The weekly attendance peak came on Mondays, when respectable families expected to have their washing done. From the late 1920s demand for places fell off. The Depression saw the contraction of opportunities for casual domestic labour, and the emphatic assertion of the doctrine of the dominance of males in the work force. Women should not compete against men for the scarce jobs. They should stay at home and care for their children.

Similarly, income was relatively stable and not large when compared with the operations of the Orphan Home or the Female Refuge.¹² Until the 1920s, between £200 and £300 was raised each year, about 10% coming from mothers' fees. In the 1920s inflation pushed up costs by 50% and more money had to be found. The racing industry was the most substantial contributor from about 1910, as the various clubs sent their 'totalisator fractions' to the creche. Mothers were also asked to pay more: eventually 6d a day.

The daily round continued little changed over the whole period of the creche's existence. Committee members came and went. Mrs Corbin dropped out in 1897, succeeded by Mrs H.L. Ayers, who served until 1923. It was always necessary to deny that the creche pauperised the women clients: they were the ones who were 'really willing to work', not that class 'who seek to get rid of their responsibilities at the expense of the public'.¹³ Matrons came and went. An important duty for her continued to be the inspectorial visits to the homes for the women, especially to prevent impostors.¹⁴ E.E. Robilliard replaced W.B. Hussey as secretary/treasurer in 1910, and the next year the telephone was installed. Presumably this aided enquiries about possible employment and the bona fides of clients, for example by contacting the Destitute Board or the Adelaide Benevolent and Strangers' Friend Society. Occasionally bequests were gratefully received, and promptly used up in paying of capital debt.

Finally the creche closed in 1936 and the site was sold to Automobile Trading Co Pty Ltd and the premises taken over by Solomons Carpets.¹⁵

What can be said about the significance of the South Adelaide Creche? First, it must be emphasised how modest an operation it was for the whole of its life. Its catchment area was limited to the core of the city, for it would have been impossible for a woman with a small toddler to have walked to the creche from anywhere outside

the parklands, then to and from work, and then home again. Of course, the tram system could have brought women from further out: we do not know. As we have seen, this limitation was reflected in both the number of enrolments and the annual income.

Secondly, the creche never became the basis of a movement. Its title spoke of its geographic limitations, not the ambition of its conductors to replicate it in, say, North Adelaide or Kensington. The nearest the committee came was a brief reference in the 1906 report to consideration of such a scheme of further day nurseries. Instead, another model of child care became widely popular in the years before World War I. Rather than just supervision, the key concept of the creche's approach to child care, the kindergarten movement offered the notion of education. From 1905 onwards kindergartens were established in working class areas of Adelaide with great enthusiasm. This new model was quickly adopted as the preferred model of intervention into the lives of working class families in Adelaide. By 1907 a training college had begun for the teachers who were to conduct these new agencies.¹⁶ This emphasised the distance between the new, vigorous, professionally-oriented movement, and the essentially conservative and domestic emphasis of the creche.

Another model for child care was also introduced in these same years when there was so much concern about the fate of the nation's population. This was a medical model of charitable action embodied in the School for Mothers Institute, in which a much greater emphasis on the scientific care of babies and young children was apparent. There was too, the flavour of professional competence in the person of the trained nurses and their supervising medical practitioners, notably Dr Helen Mayo.¹⁷

When confronted with such choices, the working class mothers of Adelaide were little interested in mere child care unless their economic and family circumstances compelled them to seek the charity available in Gouger Street and unless they lived near enough to take advantage of it.

Fourthly, the creche can be located in the period of transition in the conception of women's proper sphere.¹⁸ The original intention of the creche to provide child care while women went out to seek work reflected attitudes about work which assumed that working class families needed all the income they could gain, and thus all, mother included were expected to work. Women with small children could only do this if some sort of child care was available. The creche then competed with the informal

modes of care provided by neighbours and relatives, offering shelter, supervision and food as the inducement, less the costs which have already been discussed.

The years before World War I saw a rising tide of masculinity in the definition of the proper work force. The most striking expression of this shift was the declaration of the basic wage in 1907 by the Commonwealth Arbitration Court. It was based on the notion that the basic wage was designed for a man with a wife and two or three children. When a wage for women was struck, it was set a little over half the amount for men. That clearly indicated the preferences of the court and the participating groups in the arbitration system. The preferred place for married women was in the home. The task of providing for a family was now interpreted in masculine terms. Only in times of emergency such as the war, when many men were away serving King and Empire, was it right to tolerate a return to active female participation in the workforce, especially at the lower end.

It easy enough to generate these analytic and patronising comments on the social significance of a charitable agency of a past generation. The outcome might appear to be to denigrate the efforts of the organisers of the South Adelaide Creche, or to dismiss their clients as unimportant. Yet, for the women involved in this transaction, it was no doubt a satisfying and valuable arrangement. Work in return for care was a reasonable bargain, and one easily understood by all concerned. The very professionalism and modernity of the alternatives have their own harsh unpleasant air. For those involved in the creche, however few in number, it was probably an intimate and lively arrangement which served its purpose while economic and social circumstances permitted.

¹ 2 AR, 1887; not 1880 as in Helen Jones, *In Her Own Name: Women in South Australian History*, Adelaide: Wakefield, 1986, 44, 119.

² The research for this paper was originally carried out while preparing a report which for the SA Planning Appeals Tribunal, which was deliberating in 1988 on whether or not to permit the demolition of what remained of the Creche building, namely the front facade. I thank the SA State Government Insurance Commission for permission to report that research here. At time of writing the decision of the Tribunal was not known.

³ Nor was it ever called the 'Working Women's Creche', a pseudo-title which has recently crept into use, most notably via the City of Adelaide Heritage Report, 1981-6.

⁴ Jones, 119, is in error.

⁵ 9 AR 1896.

⁶ 'Uncle Harry', or David Bottrell, had originated the Sunbeam Society in Adelaide in 1894 as a children's club to teach 'the blessedness of helping others ... and loving kindness and self-denial'. The Sunbeams raised large amounts to aid the Adelaide Children's Hospital and other charities. *ADB* 7, 353.

⁷ *Register* 10 Aug 1896.

⁸ 3 AR 1890.

⁹ 7 AR 1894.

¹⁰ *Register* 18 Dec 1896

¹¹ Judith Godden, ch. of that title in R. Kennedy (ed.), *Australian Welfare History: Critical Essays*, Melbourne: Macmillan, 1982, 84-102

¹² These comparisons can be made from Brian Dickey, *Rations, Residence, Resources: A History of Social Welfare in South Australia since 1836*, Adelaide: Wakefield, 1986.

¹³ 13 AR 1900.

¹⁴ 20 AR 1907.

¹⁵ As implied above, the site has attracted attention recently from developers, heritage conservationists and others concerned with women's history.

¹⁶ Christopher Dowd, *The Adelaide Kindergarten Teachers College: A History 1907-1974*, Adelaide: SACAE, 1983, chs 1&2.

¹⁷ Kevin Smith, *A Family Affair: the School for Mothers Institute*, Adelaide, 1909-1927, Flinders University: BA thesis, 1978.

¹⁸ Kereen Reiger, *The Disenchantment of the Home: Modernizing the Australian Family 1880-1940*, Melbourne: Oxford, 1985.