

POLITICS, PATRONAGE AND PUBLIC WORKS

Politics, Patronage and Public Works, 1842–1900 is the first of a two-part history of the NSW bureaucracy, commissioned by the State Records Authority of New South Wales. City Historian Shirley Fitzgerald introduces the project in her foreword to the book (published by UNSW Press)

State Records, which is charged with the task of preserving the state's archives, believed it was timely to commission an overview administrative history based on a study of those records as a contribution to commemorating 150 years of responsible government in 2006.

Map of Sydney, 1831; SRNSW: CGS 13859 [SR Map 5449]



This may not at first appear to be the likely stuff of a good read, but if you think about what the records of the state might hold for more than a few minutes you will think railways, water, health, kids' schooling, prisons, floods, plagues and pestilence. The long arm of government may not reach into all aspects of our lives, but it is ever present, providing, barring, cajoling and rewarding at every turn. Tracking the changing assumptions about what makes 'good' government and shifting philosophies that underpin bureaucratic practices tells us a lot about who we all are.

Dr Golder, who has a fine track record in historical publications, including major studies of the NSW magistracy and the Land Titles Office of NSW, was an obvious choice to write this book and we were delighted that she was prepared to take on the formidable challenge it presented. State Records works hard to systematise and simplify access to its records through its guides, indexes and finding aids. Hilary Golder, on the other hand, has a genius for synthesising. She has breathed life into what might otherwise be just a pile of old records, mining the minutiae of the vast 19th-century store to weave a tale that provides a wonderful contextual history for anyone else wanting to use these records, as well as a fine generalist overview for anyone with an interest in knowing how government works.

As we approach 2006, State Records is delighted to be able to contribute this volume to the celebration of responsible government.

Shirley Fitzgerald
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HIDDEN WOMEN

Extract from *Politics, Patronage and Public Works: the Administration of New South Wales*

The early public service, like the colonial workforce as a whole, was overwhelmingly masculine. Contemporary censuses tended not to record women's economic activity, such as their contribution to family businesses or the laundry and needlework that wives took in to supplement a husband's earnings. Domestic service was the only female activity that 'counted'; the 1846 census, for example, recorded 6455 women working as servants, as compared to 4188 men.

Much of women's work for the government was an extension of domestic service. In the early 1840s a small number of women were needed in the low-paid positions of office keeper, nurse etc. There were also 'female turnkeys', as the female role of keeper/carer was stretched by the growth of gaols and other forms of incarceration. The names of these workers were not recorded in the *Blue Book* [published listings of public service staff]. However, there was another 'elite' group of female employees, who had an official identity and a salary. They included the Matron of the Lunatic Asylum, Susannah Digby who earned £100 a year and Sarah Bell, Matron of the Parramatta Female Factory, who had a salary of £150.

Clearly, the most profitable form of government employment for women consisted in locking other women up. These women were also employed as part of a couple: Joseph Digby was the Steward of the Asylum and Thomas Bell was the Factory Steward and Storekeeper. Their double employment was another form of domesticity. Indeed, it seems that married women outnumbered single women in government employment, especially if we count the contribution of wives in the publicly-supported area of education. In many schools they were expected to take the younger children and/or teach feminine skills such as needlework.

However, government employment of married women was problematic because the common law doctrine of coverture meant that wives had no independent legal or economic identity; without a marriage settlement a married woman had no right to her own earnings. The official records of government employment suggest that the government was working out its answers to this problem. Educational returns observed the doctrine of coverture; wives' names might be listed but they did not receive any separate payments. Their contribution was subsumed in their husbands' earnings, confirming their helpmeet status.

But Mrs Bell, for example, earned as much as her husband did, while her name and her separate salary were recorded ahead of his in the *Blue Book*. It was not clear who was the dominant partner and this became an issue in 1843, when it became clear just how profitable the Factory had been for the Bells. They were accused of defrauding the government, by drawing rations for non-existent children and pocketing the money paid for needlework done by Factory inmates.

Although Mrs Bell had organised the second scam herself, the authorities doubted they could prosecute her because the law presumed that a married woman always 'acted under the control of her husband'. In the end the Bells were charged — as they had been employed — as a couple. Questions about the place of women in the public service remained to be pursued in the second half of the 19th century.

Hilary Golder

Sources: SRNSW: CS; CGS 906 [4/273, 1841, pp. 295-6, 4/274, 1842, pp. 274-5, 288-9, 4/279, 1846, p. 440]; Education Returns, NSWLC V&P, 1841, n.p. HRA, I, vol. 23, pp. 170-1, 537-9.