

**IDEAL, REALITY AND OPPOSITION:**

**WHITE WOMEN IN DURBAN**

**1900 - 1920**

**KERRY N NOBLE**

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## PREFACE

A rare publication, a compilation of letters housed in Killie Campbell Library, sparked my interest in this topic. The bound work, titled *Memories* and written by Alys Booth, consisted of a collection of letters to her mother, chronicling her experiences in Durban over a period from March to November. Though the year in which she was writing was not given, by pinpointing a reference to a major storm it became apparent that the year referred to was 1908.

Although Alys's letters were chatty and frivolous, they provided the incentive for a social history of Durban during the eight month period covered by the correspondence. That project, which became the topic for my History Honours dissertation, stimulated my interest in the experiences of women in Durban.

Again and again in newspapers and other publications, it was made obvious that an 'ideal' existed where women were concerned. During this period generalisations surrounding the 'true nature' of women were put forward. In reality however, it was clear that many, indeed the majority of women, did not conform to this 'ideal' given the actual demands that society placed upon them. Also evident was opposition on the part of women, both to the ideal and to the reality of their lives.

Bearing these concepts - ideal, reality and opposition - in mind, issues pertaining to women such as marriage, children, contraception, abortion, prostitution, women's organisations and employment, to name but a few, became obvious foci for research analysis.

Given the vastness of the theme, I decided to confine this thesis to the period 1900 - 1920. The beginning of the

century saw the 'ideal' still at its strongest, while the next decade produced an interesting reflection of the three elements - ideal, reality and opposition - in a society patterned on the British norm, but set in a colonial context. The upheaval of the 1914 - 1918 war years gave an impetus to 'reality' such the 'ideal' could never completely revert, with important consequences for women. Finally, by including the last two years of the decade in this research, it has been possible to bring the period of upheaval into some perspective.

It should also be pointed that, due to time constraints, much emphasis has been placed on the *Natal Mercury* as a primary source. Subsequent research may find much of value in other newspapers (such as the *Natal Witness* and *The Prince*) and records (such as the Town Clerk's files).

I hereby declare that this thesis, unless indicated or acknowledged to the contrary herein, is my own original work.

## ABSTRACT

In 1900 Durban's 'white' society closely resembled its British counterpart. As in Britain an ideal of womanhood encompassed various generalisations concerning woman's 'true nature' and purpose. Women were upheld as pure, chaste nurturers, and homemakers. In order that they might remain so fulfil their destiny as wives and mothers, women were expected to remain in the private sphere, protected and supported by bread-winning husbands and fathers.

Reality did not conform to the ideal. Not all women were happy or satisfied by marriage and motherhood. Large numbers of women were neither supported nor protected but forced to enter the public sphere, finding employment to secure a livelihood. They faced discrimination within an ideology which admitted them to the labour force under sufferance. 'Women's work' was poorly paid, of low status and offered little opportunity for advancement.

For these and other reasons some women became prostitutes. The prostitution issue was extremely controversial in the period under discussion. Ambiguities and contradictions inherent in the ideology of sexuality were revealed, as were various attempts to cope with these issues. Prostitutes were exploited sexually but this exploitation was at least lucrative. 'Continental women' probably earned more money in a year than a housewife, cleaner or factory 'drudge' ever saw in their lives. Many women therefore chose to go 'beyond the pale' of society.

Women resisted constraints placed upon them in a number of ways: they refused offers of marriage (supposedly their highest attainment); they left their husbands; they attempted to learn about and obtain forms of contraception, in direct opposition to the ideology of motherhood; they risked abortion despite the possibility of death, injury, prosecution or societal ostracism. Women attempted

to improve their wages, working conditions and status. During the 'Great War' some of their ambitions were realised though most concessions gained were lost by 1920.

Most of Durban women's organisations (all middle-class) accepted and were reflective of the 'ideals' held by society. The Women's Enfranchisement League however, though working within the ideology of the time, challenged women's relegation to the private sphere.

# CHAPTER ONE

VICTORIAN SOCIETY AND COLONIAL CONTEXT - IDEAL, REALITY AND OPPOSITION: 'AS A CHASTE WIFE, FAITHFUL WIDOW AND LOVING MOTHER SHE HAD NO RIVAL'.

In January of 1901, black-edged newspapers announced the death of Queen Victoria to Durban. 'Surely it cannot be, we incoherently mutter to our inmost selves'<sup>1</sup>, wrote a *Natal Mercury* Columnist, obviously passionately grieved.

Inhabitants of the town - 'bastion of the empire' - were shocked and saddened. The Queen had not just been a leader or political figure-head, she had been the 'mother of the nation', the epitome of womanhood, embodying the values of the time.

Anderson and Zinsser feel that her reign 'marked not only the decline of royal power, but also its replacement by domestic values'<sup>2</sup>. Though at first politically active, she was advised of the limits of royal power by both Lord Melbourne (her first prime minister) and her husband, Prince Albert. She was to symbolize the perfect wife (deferential to her husband), the perfect mother (she eventually had nine children) and the perfect lady. Her cultivation of a domestic image is evident in her appearance at her Golden Jubilee in 1887 (the fiftieth anniversary of her crowning)



wearing a lace bonnet rather than a crown<sup>3</sup>. Indeed `her Diamond Jubilee ten years later and her funeral in 1901 were occasions of national celebration of the "little woman" who had come to symbolize an age'<sup>4</sup>.

The international adulation was evident in Durban as well. `Man in the Moon' - a popular weekly columnist - eulogised her domesticity and femininity, writing: `Of all Queens the greatest, she was of all women the simplest and here gave matchless example to her sex. Above the splendours of her position and enthronement she was pre-eminently woman in the sweetest and most womanly sense of the word'. He felt that she was one who was `gifted with fine sympathies, and who had the supreme and exquisite tact which is or should be inherent in every true and unselfish feminine nature'. In the climax to his column, he cited the queen as possessing the `natural endowment of the fairest virtues of her sex; for as a chaste wife, faithful widow and loving mother, she had no rival'<sup>5</sup>. Man in the Moon's statements were added to in a sermon given by the Reverend J. Cottingham at the Musgrave Road Congregational Church. `We have seen' he opined, `that in the palace as well as the lowliest cottage, the domestic virtues constitute the truest glory of womanhood'<sup>6</sup>.

In 1900 a woman's ideal destiny was seen as involving the roles of wife, mother and homemaker. The conception of woman in these roles was seen as natural in that her biology (especially in the absence of widespread and effective forms

of birth control) was seen to constitute her destiny. The creation of these roles involved, however, a combination of factors. The relegation of women to the private sphere may be traced to the advent of capitalism. The ideology which justified her position had its origin in Judeo-Christian thought and was restated by scientists in the wake of the Scientific Revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These factors must be examined, with particular reference to England, as Natal was a British colony and Durban was part of the empire, indeed a bastion of the empire. British settlers brought with them attitudes forged by the developments and corresponding ideology of their nation. It is therefore pertinent to elucidate the English experience for this study. This chapter will be devoted to an examination of such background with particular reference to the contrast presented by the Victorian ideal of womanhood against the reality, and the consequent opposition.

The Middle Ages saw work defined as activities which contributed to the collective production process - supporting the individuals and their families. In the pre-industrial economy the household was the basic unit of production and the family itself constituted a productive unit. It was largely self-sufficient. Though ideologically women were seen as subservient to men and valued in terms of their sexuality, they were important economically, being directly involved in the production process. Weisner argues that 'domestic and productive tasks were both considered work, and

all women, except perhaps those from very wealthy families, could be called working women'<sup>7</sup>.

The advent of capitalism saw the separation of home and work place and the home was gradually transformed from a hub of production into a centre of consumption. Work was increasingly defined as paid activity. Though men were freed for full-time wage labour by women's unpaid domestic labour, domestic tasks and child-rearing were no longer considered work unless performed for wages<sup>8</sup>. Thus the English census of 1881 excluded women's household chores from the category of productive work. Housewives were classified as 'unoccupied'<sup>9</sup>.

Capitalism espoused the creed of the self-furthering individual. It did not take responsibility for the reproduction of labour. In pre-industrial societies, children had been viewed as diminutive adults and as economic assets - they contributed to the production process from an early age. As work took place in the household, child supervision was easily facilitated. After the separation of home and work-place however, the situation altered. Children were viewed as dependants and arrangements for child care became far more problematic.

It was regarded as biologically natural that women be responsible for child care. In an extension of this ideology of women as nurturers, an additional role was allocated to them. They were to maintain the home as a place of support

and comfort - a haven to which the male breadwinner could return and seek succour and comfort after the harsh demands of the public sphere. His physical and spiritual needs would be attended to and he could return refreshed and productive to the public sphere.

Capitalism therefore affected the roles of both men and women in different ways. Whereas it enlarged the world for men by increasing the range of occupations they could enter, a woman's world became identified with that of her home. Women lost their economic independence and came to be seen as responsible primarily for reproduction and house-work.

This ideal of domesticity was reinforced by the emergence of the 'family wage'. Rowbotham writes: 'The peasant judged his woman by her capacity to labour and breed more hands for toil ... But from the seventeenth century the idea gained currency that men should be able to support their wives from their wages. Although many women still continued to work alongside their husbands, their role in family production came increasingly to be regarded as supplementary'<sup>10</sup>. In addition, bourgeois philanthropists of the nineteenth century linked the moral virtue of the society to the preservation of the family. Lewis asserts that 'a breadwinning husband and dependent wife and children were ... believed to secure male work incentive and thus national stability'<sup>11</sup>. It was argued that a sexual division of labour - man the breadwinner and women the nurturer - would secure moral and economic

integrity and safeguard the socialisation of the children. A family wage came to be called for.

That ideal was accepted by men of the working- and middle-classes. By the nineteenth century the ability to support a wife had become an indication of a working-class male's respectability. (One can also argue that part of the attraction of the family wage was that it gave economic power to the male breadwinner. As his wife was in essence his dependant, his power over her was reinforced.)

The family wage was adopted as an important bargaining point by trade unions. Profit maximisation, which is integral to capitalism, is dependent on the control of workers, achieved through the division of labour in the production line. Capitalism is characterised by competition for jobs. New technology and mechanisation in the nineteenth century undermined workers' traditional skills and their bargaining power was decreased. The confinement of women in the private sphere meant therefore that male workers would have less competition for jobs. It seems that trade unions adopted the family wage as a platform to increase wages and limit competition. This argument is given fuel by statements made by Tom Mars, giving evidence to the Royal Commission of Labour in 1894. He was loath to see mothers of families (or women at all) working in factories for he considered that 'their employment has nearly always had a very prejudicial effect on the wages of the male worker'<sup>12</sup>. (As will be

discussed in Chapter three, women were generally paid less than men. As they were cheaper to hire, this could undermine men's bargaining power.)

The growing prosperity of the middle classes meant that more and more men were able to support their wives. More and more women became house-bound and the ideal gained further strength. The separation of the spheres exaggerated the traditional opposition of the sexes. Men were seen as ideally active, rational and competitive. Qualities such as courage and honour were valued. It is very evident that these qualities were appropriate for success in the public sphere. Women however, were defined as passive, emotional and gentle; virtuous if chaste and obedient. Thus, women were creatures designed to preside over the household, not to work. Although work opportunities for men expanded rapidly, what was perceived (erroneously) 'as the relative lack of change in the lives of women within their families, heightened the supposed opposition of the sexes, which consequently seemed all the more natural and eternal'<sup>13</sup>.

In addition, reliable methods of birth control were not available. This meant certain forced interruptions of working life for those women who were compelled to seek employment, necessitated by childbirth and child care. The arguments of those who felt that a woman's place was in the home gained strength.

Economic changes which affected women in the labour market, allied to this absence of reliable birth control, played a major part in the creation of an ideology of 'separate spheres'. An already-present ideology which predated the transition to capitalism justified the subordinate position occupied by women in capitalist society. That ideology had its roots in Christian thought. Early Christian theological tradition, influenced by Gnosticism, with an emphasis on celibacy, held women to be temptresses. Genesis provided the basis within this theological framework for the interpretation of women. Eve, responsible for the punishment of man and humanity, became a symbol of womankind as intellectually, physically and morally inferior, and a casual temptress. However, at the other end of the spectrum, in direct opposition to Eve, stood Mary. Mary was not symbolic of womanhood. She was essentially sexless. Unlike Eve, Mary possessed the qualities of silence, obedience, modesty and prudence. Mary therefore redeemed Eve.

These two ultimately contradictory views of women persisted to the late nineteenth century, when women were cast as either 'angels' (a secularized version of Mary), or 'Eves'. 'Good' women came to be seen as chaste, sexually pure beings with a strong moral sense. Woman could revert to a lustful, sexually tempting creature, but not if she was protected, sheltered and nurtured, for now she had been redefined as naturally sexually passive. (The double standard and the role of the prostitute in maintaining the purity of wives,

mothers, sisters and daughters will be discussed in Chapter four.)

The religious revivalism of the nineteenth century stressed the task of women as bearers of religious and moral values in the home. As has already been argued, with the separation of home and work-place, children slowly ceased to be seen as little adults playing a role in the process of family production. Childhood became increasingly important in its own right, thereby reinforcing the importance of mothering. The moral education of children fell to mothers. Women were told they were doing work of vital importance to the nation, for they were rearing the future generation, instilling in them Christian values and ethics. Thus, as Levine points out, while their spiritual role was elevated, that also justified their being confined to the family and the home<sup>14</sup>.

This ideology was enforced and restated by scientists in the wake of the scientific revolution of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Scientists took the inferiority of women for granted and tried to restate it in 'scientific' terms. To summarize, one can argue that no scientific revolution occurred for women. Anderson and Zinsser assert that when men 'studied female anatomy, when they spoke of female physiology, of women's reproductive organs, of the female role in procreation, they ceased to be scientific.

They suspended reason and did not accept the evidence of



their senses. Tradition, prejudice and imagination, not scientific observation, governed their conclusions about women<sup>15</sup>. Traditional views on women's nature, function and role were given a bogus physiological backing. 'Science affirmed what men had always known, what custom, law and religion had postulated and justified ... Objective scientific experiment revealed the natural superiority of the male and the justifiable subjugation of the female'.<sup>16</sup>

It was postulated, giving anatomical 'proofs', that women could not indulge in abstract thinking due to the delicate nature of their brains. A woman's principle function was procreation (though semen, naturally, was held to be responsible for the life-giving process) and her body was dominated and weakened by procreative functions. Anderson and Zinsser sum up: 'Instead of breaking with tradition, descriptions of the female accumulated traditions: the classical, the religious, the literary, the customary and the legal - all stated afresh in the secular language of the new age. Instead of being freed, women were ringed with yet more binding and seemingly incontrovertible versions of the traditional attitudes about their inferior nature, their proper function and role, and their subordinate relationship to men.'<sup>17</sup>

The ideology of the inferiority of women was supported also by late nineteenth century theory. The highest level of human development was held to be patriarchal Victorian society,

made up of monogamous nuclear families. As Lucy Bland explains, evolutionary 'needs' tied women, naturally reproducers and moralisers, to the private sphere while man, the natural competitor, was assigned to the public sphere. She adds that it was believed that human development at this stage involved a heightening of gender difference, most notably evident in man's sex urge and woman's maternal urge. Despite man's more animalistic sex urge woman was deemed inferior, more primitive than man and, says Bland, 'less evolved in every other respect, and ultimately more fundamentally defined by her biology, for woman was believed to be unable to escape the total domination of her reproductive system'.<sup>18</sup> Lewis writes of Otto Weiniger, gynaecologist and polemicist who wrote in 1906 that 'men possess sexual organs; her sexual organs possess women'. She backs Bland, noting: 'Darwinistic Victorian science derived psychological and cultural differences between men and women - such as women's stereotypically greater tenderness, generosity and intuition - from male and female biology'.<sup>19</sup> She added that Darwin insisted that children of both sexes were more like adult women than men. According to an evolutionary doctrine, this implied that women were less completely evolved than men.

By the early twentieth century, a number of factors had combined to attest to the inferiority and necessary subordination of women. Women were cast as wives and mothers, as nurturers and homemakers, these roles seen as

natural and therefore unchangeable. Ideally therefore a woman was to be confined to the house, to the private sphere. Insofar as she was not meant for the public life with its stress on competitiveness etc, the home was seen as a sanctuary free of the cares of the male world. It was here that men were nurtured and gathered strength for the challenges of daily life. Within the home, the ideal woman was submissive, obedient, chaste, passionless but supportive and caring - the 'Angel in the House'.

The ideal division between public man and domestic woman was never realised in many homes, and did not become the dominant reality. Nevertheless Levine points out that 'it is rare to find a thorough consonance between ideology and practice in any instance' and that the ideology on the nature of women was 'highly effective in ordering people's values according to its precepts'.<sup>20</sup> It had very tangible and far-reaching effects on the reality of women's lives.

The ideal reflected the interests and aspirations of the middle-class, and served as a yardstick against which middle-class women could be judged, even though their lives were not necessarily in accord with that ideal. Though, as Dyhouse points out, the idea of family had become so sacred that most women were willing to sacrifice themselves to it,<sup>21</sup> many middle-class women were socially and intellectually deprived, their home a prison. Some were able to involve themselves in the public sphere in the guise of

philanthropic work and organisational involvement. This provided an outlet and channel for the energies of a large number of frustrated women. It was socially acceptable in that any work involved was unpaid and of a type which conformed to the idea of women's sensitivity and superior moral development. (It also saved municipalities and governments large sums of money in the form of provision for poor relief.)

Marriage and motherhood often proved unsatisfying. Women were subject to their husbands and though the ideal held that men were to protect and cosset their womenfolk, not all men did so and there was little that women could do about it. Motherhood if (in the absence of birth control) unremitting, could become a trial. Married middle-class women generally had little control or choice in the direction their lives would take.

A much publicised 'excess female population' meant that not all women of the middle-class could marry. Single women whose parents had not made provision for their support, were forced to enter employment to earn a living. Most working-class women were forced to take employment for reasons of basic subsistence. Reality, for these reasons, could not mirror ideal. The ideal had, however, vital ramifications for working women.

As women, ideally, were not to work, and as the idea of the

family wage was demanded and accepted as reality by increasing numbers of employees and employers, women who did work were regarded as working only for 'pin money' - money to be spent in luxurious consumption. Single working women were regarded as biding their time until marriage and saving for their dowries. Married women who worked (and this was obviously frowned on), were held to work in order to buy luxuries which could not be provided by their husbands. The assumptions surrounding the ideology of womanhood meant that a woman who did venture into the labour market was held to do so out of desire and not necessity.

These beliefs (erroneous as they were) had far-reaching consequences for women workers. They were paid lower wages than men for it was assumed that they did not have to support themselves or a family. In addition, they were offered no opportunity for advancement as they were not seen to be involved in or pursuing a career, but working until marriage and motherhood brought them fulfilment. Women's advancement was limited for another reason. As will be seen in chapter two, education for girls was of a lower standard than that offered to boys, for girls were to be prepared for wifely and motherly duties. They were thus further disadvantaged once they did enter the labour market.

Women's employment was therefore of a low-paid and low-status nature. (Thus for some women prostitution was an economically attractive alternative.) It was also

circumscribed. Because women were seen as responsible for work of a domestic and nurturing nature, the type of occupations that were open to them were limited. Teaching and nursing were seen as professions 'naturally' suited to women, as were domestic service, childminding and working as governesses. Women were also employed as waitresses or barmaids. Some became increasingly involved in the new tertiary or service sector of the economy as postal clerks, telegraphic operators, clerks or typists. These activities were regarded as dovetailing neatly with women's traditionally supportive role.

Women's involvement in the range of activities termed 'services' can also be explained by the previously mentioned absence of reliable methods of birth control and the resultant forced interruptions of a woman's working life. Most jobs open to women, as Weisner points out, 'required little or no specialised training, so women could start or stop frequently, work only when financially pressed, or work part-time if they had a family to care for. Because of this flexibility and fluidity, women working in the service sector were (and are) often underpaid and rarely organised or protested to get ... higher salaries'.<sup>22</sup>

To pick up on this point, one must ask whether women ever did offer organised opposition to the nature of their working conditions. As has been seen, male trade unions were generally actively against the incorporation of women into

the labour force. Levine asserts that these trade unions were themselves barely acceptable and faced the problem of recruitment and sustaining membership. The economic competition which women posed as a cheap labour supply further determined them not in unionizing women but in deterring their existence in the work force'.<sup>23</sup>

In England in the second half of the nineteenth century however, women formed their own trade unions. The Women's Protective and Provident League (WPPL) - which later became the Women's Trade Union League - was founded by Emma Paterson in 1874. The Women's Industrial Council (WIC) was inaugurated in 1894. It sought to educate working women in social questions, economics and legal rights, and provided legal advice to women workers. It attempted also to widen vocational training for girls. The late 1880's and early 1890's saw the formation of a number of other women's unions. One can cite, for example, the Women's Employment Defence League (WEDL) of 1891 and the Women's Trade Union Association (WTUA) which was formed in 1889 and which merged with the WIC in 1897.

The ideological stance, aims and intentions of these (and other) unions varied. They had in common, however, their focus on women workers. By 1896, 117888 women were trade union members, constituting some 7.8 % of all union members, and gains were made.<sup>24</sup> One can point to the successful strike action of the women at the Bryant and May match factory in London, or the strike of the Coat Makers' Union which

demanded, and won, reduced working hours, as examples.

In the final analysis however, the obstacles placed in the way of women's unions proved too great for them to succeed. Women's work, interrupted by pregnancies and domestic labour, was generally of a sporadic nature. Interruption, relegation to monotonous work and low pay, Levine suggests in agreement with Weisner, did not encourage women to invest energy in their identity as workers.<sup>25</sup> In addition, women were generally unskilled and therefore easily replaceable. Any vaguely threatening or militant attitudes could result in their dismissal. The number of women involved in domestic labour and work performed at home were high. Proximity and involvement with other women workers in similar occupations was therefore prevented and organisation was difficult. Women were largely excluded from public spaces (they could not meet in a pub, as men could, for example). Meeting times were also problematic as women faced responsibilities other than paid labour, in the form of domestic duties.<sup>26</sup>

Due largely to these obstacles, women's unions did not succeed in winning far-reaching gains for women workers. Women continued to be excluded from and discriminated against by male unions, which continued to espouse the family wage. Levine feels that this was, in essence 'an act of hostility towards the working women and hardly an encouragement to her unionisation'.<sup>27</sup> It presupposed the existence of nuclear families while in many single-parent families women were



primary bread-winners.

In essence, the ideology of the period propounded the ideal that women be relegated to the private sphere of home and family. In reality, for many women the 'joys' of marriage and motherhood were illusions, and women were forced into the public sphere to enter employment. Though ideology did not reflect reality, its effects were pervasive and women worked within a labour market which discriminated against their gender and relegated them to wage labour which was menial and poorly-paid. Male trade unions did not represent women, generally, and the activity of women's trade unions did not bring about sufficient gains.

Women did however offer additional resistance to ideology and to social structures. Indeed it was in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that women mobilized in what has come to be known as the First Wave of Feminism. Their demands for equality in the political and educational realms in particular brought them squarely into the public arena. These early feminists were certainly not fragile, weak women. They were assertive, resourceful and persistent and won important victories in the cause of an equal society. The struggle for the vote dominated that first wave.

The First Wave was essentially made up of middle-class women (though there was working-class involvement in the suffrage movement and over the Contagious Diseases Acts). Middle

class women had the benefit of education which was not accessible to working-class women. They were generally inspired by liberal ideology of the sort propounded by J.S. Mill. Anderson and Zinsser argue that women found it easier to become feminists and organise women's rights movements where liberalism flourished. They add that the two movements shared many positions and tenets: both opposed traditional society and its beliefs; both prized the individual and trusted individual reason and judgement over received authority, and both 'believed in the power of education and reform to eradicate age-old boundaries and hierarchies'. Causes ranging from the abolition of slavery, from philanthropy to political revolution, led women to feminism.<sup>28</sup>

It is true that in England some of the women involved in the first wave of feminism had been involved in other political struggles. In the 1830's and 40's women had indeed worked towards the abolition of the slave trade, and in support of a 'Charter' aimed at extending the franchise to working-class men. Women's involvement in the Anti-Corn Law League is also of note. This was formed in the 1830's over the high cost of bread. Anger was directed at a tariff, placed on corn, which was of benefit to wealthy landowners. Attacking aristocratic privilege, the league used the tactics of popular protest - rallies, parades and slogans for example - and in the mid 1840's the tariff was eliminated. Involvement here helped to conscientize many middle class women and convince them of the benefits of group or even mass action

and organisation, and of the practical efficacy of tactics used.

During the second half of the nineteenth century women campaigned for a number of legal and political rights. One of these was the right of access to education for women, an area of major feminist activity and focus. Levine states that

Women saw education as the key to a broad range of other freedoms; as a means of training for paid employment, as a means of alienating the vacuity and boredom of everyday idleness and, of course, as the means to improving ability to fight for the extension of female opportunities

in a host of other areas.<sup>29</sup>

Before 1840 there were no women's colleges in the tertiary sector and though there were girls' schools - church, factory, philanthropic and fee-paying ventures - the standard of education, as found by the Royal Commission on Secondary Education in 1864, was poor indeed. In the late 1840's two women's colleges were established (after a public scandal over the plight of England's numerous governesses). These were Queens' College and Bedford College. Both provided women with college-level lectures. However, as Anderson and Zinsser suggest, 'at these first colleges, both in London, middle class women not only gained an education, they met others like themselves, forging the connections which made the creation of a woman's rights movement possible.'<sup>30</sup> In the

1850's further gains were achieved, for example North London Collegiate School and Cheltenham Ladies College. The 1860's saw increased feminist agitation. The findings of the Taunton Commission (which widened its census to include girls' education only at the strong urging of feminists) resulted in the beginnings of widespread secondary schooling for girls.

Tertiary education for women continued as an area of focus. Demands were made that women be allowed to enter medical training and indeed all universities. Evening classes for working women were established. In 1865, after a fierce struggle, the entry of women through Cambridge's hallowed portals was allowed. Other universities followed suit.

In 1871 the Women's Education Union was inaugurated due to the work of Maria Grey and Emily Sherriff. It committed itself to raise academic standards, to standardize and raise the status of women teachers and to help finance girls' schools. To this end the Girls' Public Day School Trust (later 'Company') was set up and by 1883 seventeen schools had been established, with over 2800 pupils.<sup>31</sup>

In 1870 women became eligible for election to School Boards. Though socially stigmatised, a large number of women (many of them active feminists like Elizabeth Garrett and Emily Davies) ran for election in the hope that they would be able to

influence schooling policy. The fight for women's higher education continued. In 1873 and 1886 two Medical Colleges for Women were established and the issue of women's education was brought to the attention of the government and into the public eye.

One can argue that the gains made were to the benefit, in the main, of the middle class only. Nevertheless, by the 1890's as Levine points out, 'universal elementary schooling had been in existence, legally at least, for two full decades, many new and academically competent private schools for girls had been founded, womens colleges ... were awarding degrees to women, women were becoming doctors, and teachers' training colleges were producing competent teachers'.<sup>32</sup> The feminist campaign centered around education thus had many successes.

Feminists concentrated also on obtaining legal rights for women. Some of the earliest feminist campaigns centered round the inequalities within marriage. Mid-nineteenth century married women were legal minors; they therefore could not sue or be sued, or enter into contracts. Any debts were their husbands' responsibility. On marriage a woman passed ownership and control of property and any earnings to her husband (unless - as rarely happened - a contract had been drawn up to the contrary).

Divorce laws were also the subject of controversy. A wife's

adultery invariably resulted in the success of a husband's petition for divorce. To wives who had caught their husbands in adultery, divorce was denied. In addition, on the dissolution of marriage, custody of the children of the marriage was automatically ceded to the man.

Feminists lobbied around the laws pertaining to marriage and divorce, and 'the campaign for legal change remained a prominent and central one for many years.'<sup>33</sup> Public meetings were held to debate these issues. Married womens' property committees were established and parliament was pressured by petitions, memorials and articles in journals. In March 1856 a petition, containing over 26 000 signatures, demanding that married women be granted control over property, was presented to parliament. The First Married Women's Property Act of 1870 did not make women financially independent of their husbands and was deemed unsatisfactory. The Act of 1882 which 'equalized the rights and responsibilities of women irrespective of marital status, was however regarded as a victory'<sup>34</sup> as was the 1878 Matrimonial Causes Act which gave magistrates' courts the power to grant a separation order with maintenance to a wife whose husband had been convicted of assault upon her.

The Divorce Act of 1851 did not challenge the double standard. While divorce was granted to males on the grounds of their wife's adultery alone, for women to obtain divorce, adultery and one of the following additional causes - desertion,

cruelty, incest, sodomy or bestiality on the part of their husbands - had to be proved. Though feminists continued to lobby around the issue of divorce, the equalisation of the divorce law was not introduced until 1923.

Another important campaign was that which centred around the Contagious Diseases Acts passed in England in 1864, 1866 and 1869. These made it obligatory for any woman, merely suspected of being a prostitute in designated areas (ports and any military towns), to report to the police station for a gynaecological examination. If found to have venereal disease she was forced to enter a 'lock hospital' for a period of up to three months or until cured.

By the end of 1869 a Ladies National Association, headed by Josephine Butler had been founded, aimed at the repeal of the acts. The double standard inherent in the Acts was criticised, for men were not screened for venereal diseases and it was argued that the Acts sanctioned the buying and selling of the female body, that they were designed 'not to prevent prostitution but to provide a degree of state regulation'.<sup>35</sup> In addition, the fact that the Acts led to the harassment of working-class women (for any working-class woman suspected of being a prostitute could be examined) won the support of working-class men, who feared for their wives and daughters. Part of the social purity crusades (mentioned in chapter five), the agitation eventually culminated in the suspension of the Acts in 1883 and their repeal in 1886.

The double standard implicit in views on sexuality had implications in another sphere, that of birth control. The issue of birth control was contentious. As early as 1877, Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh were tried for publishing a pamphlet titled 'The Fruits of Philosophy' which contained information and advice about contraception. Annie conducted her own defence and was eloquent in her description of the consequences of too-frequent child-bearing. The case went as far as the Court of Appeal, where it was at last dropped. The subject had been brought out into the open, but not all feminists demanded contraception for it was argued that women might become sexual objects if the last check on male sexuality was removed, and that contraception was unnecessary, for couples could abstain from intercourse. Only in 1921 was a birth control clinic established in England.

One can link this time lapse to views on sexuality. It was held that women, unlike men, were not active sexual beings. A large number of feminists of the period therefore felt that birth control would mean further exploitation by allowing male sexuality free rein. It was felt that the availability of contraception would increase male demands on women and make it harder to eradicate prostitution. While (as we will see in chapter two) contraception remained an issue of concern for many women, it was not demanded by all feminists.

Dominating the first wave of feminism however was the



campaign for the vote. The parliamentary suffrage was seen as crucial in the fight to effect legislation to counter discrimination against women. In 1832 the 'Great Reform Act' broadened suffrage eligibility. Based on property qualifications approximately one out of every five Englishmen gained the franchise. Women were specifically excluded. In 1866 the first women's suffrage committee was organised. Though Englishwomen only obtained the franchise in 1918 (and even then only women over thirty were eligible), Levine cautions that the political wing of the feminist movement should not be seen as a failure for its lack of immediate success.<sup>36</sup> She notes that the municipal franchise was granted to single rate-paying women in 1869. It was extended over the next thirty years and 'exploited to the full, offering women not only the experience of government but a growing conviction of their capacities and value.'<sup>37</sup>

Various suffrage organisations came into being - the National Society for Women's Suffrage (NSWS), and the Women's Franchise League (WFL) for example - and in 1897 the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) was formed, uniting a number of bodies. Previously middle-class societies, under this banner, began actively to recruit working-class women. Anderson and Zinsser point out that over twenty-nine thousand female Lancashire factory workers signed a petition demanding the vote.<sup>38</sup> The NUWSS led by Millicent Garrett Fawcett attempted to gain the franchise using constitutional measures - petitions and deputations to

parliament, for example. In 1906 a deputation of 300 women representing various women's organisations, met with the Prime Minister, who counselled the 'virtue of patience'.<sup>39</sup>

However by that stage number of feminists in fact lost patience, and broke away from the NUWSS. The Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) led by Emmeline Pankhurst was formed. The tactics this organisation used were far more aggressive. Huge rallies and demonstrations were held, publicising women's demand for the vote. Fires were lit and property vandalised. Suffragettes (as they came to be known) chained themselves to railings, disrupted meetings and invited arrest. Once in prison, they went on hunger-strikes. Suffragette militancy and government repression climaxed in 1913 and 1914;<sup>40</sup> by 1913 over one thousand suffragettes had been imprisoned for their cause and were classed as criminals rather than political prisoners.

Britain's entry into World War One however, put an end to these activities. Both the NUWSS and the WSPU committed themselves to war work. It seems that women's exemplary conduct during the war, when in the absence of able-bodied men they kept the country functioning, swayed public opinion. In 1918 women over thirty obtained the vote (as earlier touched upon) provided they met the property qualifications set. Though this was only extended to women over twenty-one in 1928, the decision of 1918 was nevertheless regarded as a great victory, coming as it did at the end of a sixty-year struggle.

Importantly, the suffragettes' struggle for the franchise posed a challenge to the ideal of womanhood in England. Their visibility meant that their militant activities and the fact that many of them were single, could not be ignored. While they were condemned by many as 'unnatural' (as will be discussed in chapter three), the foundations on which the ideal rested were shaken, and then further damaged by the way that women adapted to the demands of the public sphere during World War One. Although women continued to be discriminated against and suppressed after the War new ground had been broken.

It is against this English backdrop of ideal, reality and opposition (the challenge inherent in the First Wave of Feminism) that the circumstances of white women in Durban will be analysed. It must be borne in mind however that settler gender ideology and the position of white women, cannot be understood in isolation. Some brief consideration of the larger colonial context in which white women were located - in particular the impact of the racial order - is necessary, for one can argue that the backdrop of Victorian England was mediated in South Africa through these colonial and racial orders, with implications for women in Durban.

Essentially, though white women were circumscribed and controlled by Victorian patriarchy, in Durban their position was elevated by the presence of blacks - both men and women - for white women formed part of a ruling hegemony. The

issue of race subtly altered the way in which white women were viewed and expected to behave in society; it had implications for the actuality of their day-to-day existence and even affected the way in which they opposed attitudes and structures. The ramifications of the colonial and racial order on white women's lives must be examined, both briefly here and in the body of the text.

In Victorian and Edwardian England, as has been seen, women were subject to patriarchy. They were viewed as beings in need of protection and control by men. Class differences meant differing levels of discrimination for women - with working class women at the 'bottom of the ladder' in terms of discrimination. During the period under discussion however, as has been pointed out, the beginnings of solidarity between women of different classes, in opposition to common oppression, were evident.

In Durban, though class structures were somewhat altered, no solidarity was experienced by women as a group. Black and white women were divided, unified by no common cause. The presence of black men and women in Durban was tolerated only as a source of labour and the supposed inferiority of the black races went virtually unquestioned by the white settler population. Joe Beall points out that while white women in Durban were subjected to the operation of Victorian patriarchal values and standards, the conditions of settler women were vastly improved and their position in society

elevated by the employment of first male and later female black domestic labour.<sup>41</sup>

All women, be they working, middle or upper class, became part of a ruling white hegemony. This point is confirmed by Bozzoli, who puts forward the idea of a 'patchwork quilt' of patriarchies in nineteenth century South Africa.<sup>42</sup> Women in each patriarchy were subject to men but there were important contrasts in the operation of gender between different social systems. Walker reduces the various forms of patriarchy to two dominant systems - the indigenous and the settler sex-gender systems, and emphasizes the domination of the settler over the indigenous, pointing out that white women's membership of a privileged racial group softened the impact of gender discrimination and (as will be seen in Chapter Five) worked against their identification with black women as women, with shared problems.<sup>43</sup> These ramifications of the colonial context should be examined in some detail.

The ideal of women as wives, mothers and guardians of the moral order took on, Walker argues, a new symbolic significance in the light of racial division and the concomitant categories of 'civilized' and 'uncivilized'. White women came to be seen as custodians of 'civilized values'.<sup>44</sup> Miscegenation and its threat to racial hegemony meant that white women in South Africa and Durban were further pedestalized - upheld, in the words of Walker, as 'icons to the ideology of racial supremacy'<sup>45</sup>, but an increased

policing of their sexuality took place.

Thus, in Durban, a supposed 'black peril' made headlines. Sexual assault by black men on white women was, during this period, a highly emotive issue. Each case was widely publicized and seemed to fuel white hysteria. In Natal a statute included, in the category of indecent assault, cases of trespass where it was presumed that the object was sexual assault. Though no physical assault took place, sentences imposed on those convicted of this type of trespass were harsh. For example, in July of 1900 a 'native', having been found in the bedroom of a lady on the Berea, was sentenced to three months imprisonment.<sup>46</sup> In 1905, an 'insolent umfaan' who took hold of a teenager's arm and told her: 'you are a nice girl. I like you,' was accused of assault and sentenced to three months imprisonment and twenty strokes of the lash.<sup>47</sup> Mr D Calder, clerk of the court, summed up public opinion succinctly when he commented, in another case, that 'the community were not going to allow natives to lay their hands on their women.'<sup>48</sup> Cases of indecent assault - the vast majority of them including no physical contact - were widely publicized.<sup>49</sup>

Such was the level of disquiet that in 1912 a commission was appointed by the Governor-general, Viscount Gladstone, to enquire into the issue of assault on women. The report of the commission was published in 1913. Figures for Natal showed that between 1901 and 1912, four rapes by black men of

white women had occurred. Twenty attempted rapes had taken place. There had been seventy-three cases of indecent conduct and, in all, ninety-seven convictions in these categories. (The report noted that the number of cases of indecent assault in Natal was increased by the statute already mentioned.)<sup>50</sup>

The commission concluded that 'a very serious evil in respect of sexual assault on white women does exist'.<sup>51</sup> (Though it felt compelled to add that a number of white witnesses had stated that the prevalence of these offences had been greatly exaggerated.) It advised that measures should be taken to check the evil 'not merely by administrative action but mainly by upholding and where necessary, uplifting the status and prestige of the white race, by maintaining the respect in which it should be held.'<sup>52</sup>

The commission listed, as one of the causes of sexual assault by black men on white women, the employment of male 'natives' as domestic servants.<sup>53</sup> Some background is necessary here. During the period under discussion, the majority of domestic labourers in Durban were male rather than female. A census of 1904 showed only 693 black women in service in the Durban municipal area, as opposed to 18236 black men.<sup>54</sup> The census of 1911 showed that in the whole of Natal, only 6335 black women were engaged in domestic labour, as opposed to 19417 men.<sup>55</sup> This trend, reversed in the Cape and the Orange Free State, and the change-over to the employment of female

domestic labourers, has been the focus of study and various reasons for the prevalence of black domestic servants in certain areas at this time, have been put forward.<sup>56</sup>

A large number of witnesses alleged, stated the commission, that the 'house-boy system' was the root of the evil of the 'black peril'.<sup>57</sup> The commission therefore spent some time deliberating on whether to recommend that the utilisation of black domestic labour be outlawed. It concluded, finally, that 'to eliminate him would inflict a very great hardship on many a household, in the absence of any substitute which can at present be found ...' and advised that 'precautions' be taken instead. It hoped that employers would be careful to ascertain the past record of their domestic help in order that only servants of 'good character' would be employed. It cautioned also that white women should be very careful to avoid familiarity with servants, or the placing of temptations in their way and noted that black male servants should at no time be allowed into white 'mistresses' bedrooms.<sup>58</sup>

The chairman of the committee, Melius de Villiers, made a telling statement. He said that 'the superior race ... must be infinitely more jealous of the contamination of its women by intercourse with males of the inferior race than the inferior race can be supposed to be in the case where the man belongs to the superior race and the women to the inferior.'<sup>59</sup> The issue of race can be seen to have affected the ideology



of womanhood. Racial supremacy relied on racial separation. Sexual contact between white men and black women, while certainly not approved of, was tacitly tolerated if not blatant, in the light of ideas on male sexuality. Any reslutant offspring could be ignored. (As will be seen in chapter four however, it was generally deemed preferable to tolerate white prostitution than to allow miscegenation between white men and black women.) Sexual contact between white women and black males was, however, deemed abhorrent.

As custodians of 'civilized' values, the purity of white women themselves, along with the purity of the white race, would be contaminated by miscegenation. Women became the symbols of white supremacy and were to be even more guarded and protected than in England, while achieving a somewhat higher status. The way in which white women were viewed and expected to behave was subtly altered.

The issue of race also affected the status and daily lives of white women on a more practical level. In the presence of a domestic labour supply both low-waged and plentiful, women who in England may have been forced to perform their own domestic labour, were in South Africa able to afford domestic servants. They were thus freed from domestic toil, making for an easing of physical burdens and an elevation of status. The *Imperial Colonist* (as quoted by Beall<sup>60</sup>) reported in 1902 that 'even the meanest white has his or her "boy" to do the general work.' White women held a position of privilege and

authority in relation to blacks - both men and women.

Even the position of white domestic servants was altered. It must be remembered that in South Africa as a whole, white servants comprised only 4.79 % of all domestic servants in 1911<sup>61</sup>. As a lower percentage of women entered the field of domestic service, one can assume that a higher percentage must have entered the clerical and service sectors to earn their living. Those who did enter into domestic service found that their tasks were substantially different from those of their equals in Britain, being less onerous as they were employed in largely supervisory capacities, or as companions. Black servants had impact therefore on both domestic and waged labour for white women.

In addition, Walker makes an important point in this regard, to be touched on in chapter five. 'The racial attitudes reproduced daily in a domestic setting, white women took into the world with them, and into movements such as the suffrage campaign.'<sup>62</sup> White women were granted, to an extent, the time and freedom for involvement in organisations that challenged their subordination as women, by the labour of male and female domestic servants. Because they saw blacks as inferior, uncivilized beings however, they found no common cause with black women and excluded them from the franchise struggle.

In a study of white women in Durban during this twenty year

period, an English historical context is vital, for much of the ideology which governed women's lives had its roots there. At the same time however, a colonial and racial context meant that English values were not simply reproduced in Durban and the reality of white women's lives was substantially altered, as was the type of opposition to structural norms that they offered. Those backdrops must be borne in mind as the lives of white women are dealt with in a thematic way, beginning with a discussion of marriage, motherhood and the home - all central to the ideal of womanhood.

## END NOTES

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## CHAPTER TWO

### MARRIAGE AND MOTHERHOOD IN DURBAN: 'THE POETRY OF EXISTENCE'

As has been discussed, the patriarchal ideal of women as wives and mothers, nurturers and homemakers, dominated Britain at the turn of the century and a woman's biology was seen to constitute her destiny. The same was true for Durban, at this time a bustling seaport town<sup>1</sup> with a European population which increased from approximately 28 000 in 1902<sup>2</sup> to 37 000 in 1917.<sup>3</sup> Strong links bound Durban's English population to Great Britain. The aftermath of the Victorian era lingered perhaps most strongly in the sphere of sexual stereotypes and behaviour deemed desirable for women. Suitable behaviour in Durban was seen to involve marriage and motherhood. Women were to be relegated to the private sphere of home and family. Men's involvement in the public sphere however (a sphere consisting of politics, the law, employment - basically everything outside of the home) was encouraged.

The idea that women give themselves over to domesticity was made very evident in a speech made by the Honourable John X. Merriman, Cape Prime Minister. This speech was reported to Durban's public under the heading : 'Merriman and Women's Rights' He was, he said,

... a great advocate for women's rights, that was to say the proper kinds of rights not fiddling about with votes, but trying to improve and beautify their homes, in which respect there was a great opening for women in South Africa.<sup>4</sup>

Ramifications of this type of attitude were many : educationally, an emphasis on preparing women to become wives and mothers was apparent. In terms of the Education Act - No 5 of 1894, education was placed in the hands of a Minister of Education (Sir John Robinson being the first).<sup>5</sup> What was termed 'useful education' was focused on, and 'Technical Instruction' was to be given in Government Schools.<sup>6</sup> For girls, as Vietzen points out, technical instruction 'was initially directed to home use. It included within its somewhat wide gamut, such subjects as domestic economy, cookery, scientific dress cutting, health and temperance, physiology, numerous variations of drawing, botany, gardening and later shorthand and typing.'<sup>7</sup> (Vietzen does note that not all these subjects were covered in each school. She gives the example of Addington Girls Primary, where 'technical education' consisted of lessons in how to cut out undergarments.<sup>8</sup>)

The Durban Girls Model School opened in new premises in 1899. Pride was taken in the large, fitted kitchen and authorities stated that the school intended to become noted for needlework, dressmaking, domestic economy, cookery and singing.<sup>9</sup> In 1901, a prize was offered by Lady Hely-Hutchinson to a pupil of this school who over the past year had been the



most self-denying<sup>10</sup> - obviously a quality deemed appropriate in a woman if she was to deny herself any pursuits outside of the home and subjugate herself to husband and family. In May, the Guild of Loyal Women, a Durban women's organisation anxious, as the name implies, to uphold the empire and its values, set up a scholarship. This was named the 'Happy Homes Victorian Memorial' to immortalise the Queen, and provided for a deserving Durban girl to be educated in England, the emphasis being on domestic skills. FM Rose, who gave details of this scholarship in a letter to the press, opined that the art of home-making was all-important and that 'one third of the present standard of education can be very well dispensed with as altogether unnecessary.'<sup>11</sup>

Vietzen points out that the inspiration for the Natal Education Department's policy of fostering technical education lay in Britain. There, development of Polytechnics and passage of the Technical Instruction Act of 1889 changed the direction of education. She states that 'with very little time lag these ideas reached ... Natal, where they underwent adaptation in the upper reaches of the government primary schools.'<sup>12</sup> An article appeared in 1903 in the *Natal Mercury*, supporting Vietzen's view. The writer stated that it was woman's destiny to marry, but that they did not possess adequate knowledge of the duties of wifhood and motherhood. Patronizingly the writer stated :

Where is the husband who would not be better off-

physically and financially - for a little knowledge of cooking etc acquired by his young wifey beforehand? Certainly there would be fewer victims to indigestion, fewer insolvencies and fewer divorces if this was the case.

He (the correspondent certainly sounds like a male writer though it must be admitted that many women held the same kind of attitudes; however they did not generally express them quite so disparagingly) referred approvingly to the 'polytechnics or "schools for wives" ' that were being established, and noted that in these schools 'the perfect wife - that is as regards housework - is evolved. Cooking, dressmaking, millinery, laundry work etc are taught'.<sup>13</sup>

In early 1909, an education commission was appointed by the Governor. It made its recommendations in September, noting with approval that technical education was beginning to take hold and reiterating that 'girls should be instructed in the methods of spinning, washing, ironing, dressmaking, general needlework and, towards the end of their school period, should get some instruction in cooking, hygiene and human physiology'.<sup>14</sup> The report also mentioned the need for further government sponsored secondary education for girls, for at this time this was largely in the hands of private schools, (though high schools for boys had by law been established in Durban and Pietermaritzburg, once more indicative of the attitude that education for women was of little value).

Also in 1909, Mr Merriman was asked to open a school in King-williamstown. The *Natal Mercury* reported excerpts from his speech with glee. Apparently the Premier asked the girls to remember that passing examinations was the very smallest part of their education. He asked that more attention be given to the art of letter writing, elocution and cookery, 'the latter being far more necessary in a woman than the knowledge of chemistry'.<sup>15</sup>

In 1910, 'an educationalist' was quoted in an article in the *Mercury*. He mentioned the 'Continuation School' which had been attached to the Gale Street School. Here, at approximately age 13, girls were prepared for their future vocation by a course including cookery, dressmaking, laundry work etc. He stated that the aim of the school 'was that a girl leaving school at 15 or 16 should be able to enter a household or other occupation with a fair degree of proficiency'. He added though that the standard of an education which could be completed at 13 was low. He noted that only approximately 300 - 400 girls in the borough were receiving secondary education and appealed to parents of promising youngsters to fund their secondary education.<sup>16</sup>

This was deemed unnecessary by the Reverend Allen Heath who asserted that :

most girls forget all about algebra when they put their hair up, but the instinct that makes a girl love a doll abides through all the years. It

would pay us better to refrain from telling girls how many wives the voluptuous Henry Tudor had and teach them how to be good wives of the Henry Smiths of today.<sup>17</sup>

Throughout this period girls' education can be viewed as inferior to boys'. Only a select few<sup>18</sup> continued on to high school and in primary and 'continuation schools' the emphasis on domestic skills took time away from other subjects. It seems that most parents were satisfied if a girl was equipped with household skills, in line with the ideal that women become wives and mothers. (It is interesting to note that in England, as has been seen, the struggle to improve girls' education was central to first wave feminism. In Durban the inferiority of girls' education did not become a rallying point. Possible explanation for this will be included in the conclusion.)

In Durban the goal of matrimony was easier to achieve than in Britain. A 1901 English census showed that there were 1 068 women to every thousand men.<sup>19</sup> This ratio of women to men was further increased as a result of the first world war. It was therefore not possible that all women could marry. In Durban however this ratio was reversed. In 1901 there were 6733 'European' women resident in the borough and 10 396 'European' men.<sup>20</sup> A census of April 1904 showed 12 525 European females and 18 777 males - a difference of over 6 000.<sup>21</sup> South Africa in general was described as a 'booming wide open frontier short of women'.<sup>22</sup> During the war this situation was

exacerbated as Durban became a transit camp for troops. At times hundreds and even thousands of troops were present in the borough.

The South African Colonisation Society<sup>23</sup> tried to remedy this state of affairs. Hammerton argues that 'notions of imperial destiny and racial superiority were grafted onto the traditional views of refined English motherhood to produce a concept of the Englishwoman as an invincible global civilizing agent'.<sup>24</sup> British ideals were to be brought the abandoned male settlers. 'These ideals', continues Hammerton, 'could only be implanted by women who occupied their "proper sphere" in the colonies as civilized domestic helps, teachers, wives and mothers'.<sup>25</sup> He found that these emigration societies actively promoted marriage and stated or implied that in colonial societies motherhood was to be viewed as one of the highest aspirations for educated womanhood.<sup>26</sup>

We are reminded then that white women were perceived and upheld as 'icons of civilization'. As guardians of the moral order, they would protect white men from the barbarism of the races they came into contact with. Women themselves would be closely guarded for it was through them that the purity of the race would be maintained. Motherhood was especially important in colonial society for white (and specifically English) hegemony was threatened by numerical inferiority.

A writer in what seems to have been a periodical published in

April 1902, put forward the views that 'the emigration of women to South Africa has become a question of national importance ... a new era is dawning in South Africa and the moral force that women must exert on its fortunes cannot be underestimated'.<sup>27</sup> Lord Brassey, presiding over a large meeting in support of the British Women's Emigration Association for South African Colonisation and Work, expressed the conviction that the future prosperity of that country depended largely on the success of that movement. The Duke of Argyll said that British women would do more for English rule than regiments of soldiers. Failing that, colonists would be driven to select wives from the Boers, and their children would be brought up with Boer privileges, reported the *Natal Mercury*.<sup>28</sup> The British government was keen to increase the numbers of English women in South Africa. It worried about the effect of Anglo-Afrikaner marriages and the high black birth rate. Assisted passages were granted to intended wives of colonists, female relatives and female domestic servants. In 1906 the rate for an assisted passage stood at 5 per adult. Those not assisted had to pay 12.12s for their tickets.<sup>29</sup> Societies made sure that female emigrees were suitably chaperoned on the journey and met in Durban.

Once in Durban the 'shortage of women' meant that most women had a good chance of receiving proposals of marriage. Alys Booth's letters substantiate this claim. Born into a petit bourgeois family as one of eight children, Alys worked in England from the age of seventeen as a cook. A few years

later she contracted a chill which turned into lung trouble and was told that she would die unless she embarked on a sea voyage to a warmer climate. Accepting a position as manageress of a cafe in Durban, Alys arrived in the borough in March 1908.<sup>30</sup>

Less than a month later, on April 11th, Alys wrote home in good spirits having had her ego boosted. She informed her mother that she had received a proposal of marriage from a certain 'Neville' staying at the Marine Hotel. It was obvious that Alys had not known 'Yorkshire Pudding' (as she disparagingly referred to him), long. Nevertheless, he asked her for 'the right to protect (her) always' (indicative of the roles they would assume if married). Alys refused.<sup>31</sup>

Numerous 'men of means' wrote into newspapers desiring to meet 'respectable young women with a view to marriage.' An 'English lady' advertised in the *Natal Mercury*, stating that she gave 'good introductions' to those genuinely desiring marriage.<sup>32</sup> The *Matrimonial Post* was a paper dealing specifically with this issue. Alys' best friend and confidant in Durban, Maggie Bright, whom she met at the Durban Women's Residential Club, accepted the proposal of a man who was to 'take charge of a mine in Johannesburg' and happily prepared for a November wedding.<sup>33</sup>

To summarise, the ideology which saw a woman's biology as her destiny, upheld marriage as the greatest attainment for

women. In line with this ideology, education in Durban aimed at preparing girls for marriage and motherhood. Because of the high percentage of single men in South Africa and Durban, a woman in the borough stood a far greater chance of marrying than in England. (Perhaps this helps to account for the acceptance of the kind of education offered to girls.)

Once married, a woman was defined in relation to her husband. She was subject to him.

In 1906, Eliza Jane Henry, newly married, but unhappily living in her husband's father's house, appealed to the court to compel her husband to pay maintenance if she lived with her mother. The City Magistrate hearing the case told her that she 'had become subject to her husband, and no longer owed obedience to her mother, whose influence no doubt had prompted this resistance and defiance of her husband's wishes'.<sup>34</sup>

A brief explanation of women's legal status should be given, drawing on Walker's explanation.<sup>35</sup> In South Africa a dual civil system exists. One system, based on Roman-Dutch law, applies to all whites, and to blacks in certain cases. The other is based on tribal or customary law (as interpreted by white commissioners and jurists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) and applies only to blacks. Black women under customary law, were perpetual minors, passed from the guardianship of their fathers to that of their husbands.



Though the legal position of white women was somewhat better than that of black women, they too were discriminated against in terms of the legal system. White women had not gained the franchise. They could not, therefore, serve on a jury, as jurors had to be registered parliamentary voters. In terms of private law (governing private relationships between individuals) a woman's marital status was of vital importance.

Single women, at twenty-one - the age of majority - were granted the same legal status as men. Widows, too, were granted full legal capacity. Married women however, unless protected by an ante-nuptial contract (a rare circumstance), remained perpetual minors in the eyes of the law. Husbands assumed guardianship over wives and their property, and enjoyed complete control of the administration of the joint estate. Mothers had no legal guardianship over their legitimate children during the lifetime of the children's father, and even after his death, the father had the legal power to appoint a guardian other than the children's mother.

The fact that women were seen as their husband's property from the viewpoint of the law is made very evident in the case of Solomon versus Solomon. Mr Solomon sued for divorce on the grounds that his wife had committed adultery, citing a Durban advocate, RKK Khan, as co-respondent. Mr Solomon was awarded costs and £400 damages. The Magistrate in passing judgement was reported as saying : 'As to damages, the

object of the Court in such cases was to give compensation and not to punish for an immoral act. It was in the eyes of the law a substantial wrong for a man to seduce the affections of another man's wife'.<sup>36</sup> One can argue that compensation was given for damaged and stolen 'goods'. In a similar case in 1911 - Gammie versus Gammie, the co-respondent was again ordered to pay damages of 200 and the 'wronged' husband was granted custody of the children. Women were granted divorce on the grounds of adultery only if another crime, such as desertion or extreme cruelty was committed. In addition, in law children came under the sole guardianship of their father. (Here the 'double standard', to be discussed in a subsequent chapter is evident. Clearly, as in England, laws pertaining to divorce discriminated against women.)

Belinda, a popular woman's weekly columnist at this time, agreed that women were subject to their husbands, saying however: 'Marriage may be a state of bondage, but if the bride is tactful and discreet, her bonds need not weigh on her unduly.'<sup>37</sup> A clever woman then would strive to please her husband and perhaps be accorded good treatment. To this idea many of the women's pages in the press were devoted.

'Belinda's Diary' from 1903 to 1910 was full of hints to improve a woman's appearance in order either to 'ensnare' or keep a man.

It was felt that the way to a man's heart was through his

stomach. Each week recipes to titillate husbands' (and childrens') appetites were given. In October 1910 'Belinda's Diary' gave way to a whole newspaper page entitled 'Women's Work and Play'. The editor stated that this change had been made, 'it having been thought for some time past that sufficient attention has not been given to our lady readers ... We hope to print ... matters of interest to the fair sex'.<sup>38</sup> A letter from London and a local letter by Rita were included, detailing latest fashions. Household tips were given, as was advice on child rearing and gardening. Occasional stories of the 'inspirational type' were also featured. In the first edition of Women's Work and Play for example, subjects included making lace, ankle exercises, preserves and manicuring. In December, sentiments on 'the dignity of housework' were expressed. 'Let no woman', the article ran, 'ever imagine that housework is without its dignity. The woman who runs a home well combines all the professions'.<sup>39</sup> A whole page of recipes followed.

Under the heading 'Women's Role', an article in Women's Work and Play ran: 'It is an important duty of every woman to look as nice as she can. Woman was intended to look charming. She should supply the poetry of existence'.<sup>40</sup> Gladys, a woman's writer from whom Belinda took over, gave some startling advice to thin women. 'Eat five meals a day' she commanded, 'and rest after each'.<sup>41</sup> Such a regime would have allowed little time for anything else. (Obviously this advice was directed at the woman of the middle class who was

not forced to gain employment and whose domestic duties were limited to the supervision of servants.)

Women were told, over and over, that marriage was an important goal. It would seem that a large percentage of women were dependent on their husbands economically, at least until the advent of the First World War. Married women, even of the working class, were not encouraged to take jobs in Durban and many fields were actively closed to them. (This point will be discussed further in a later chapter.) Women had to please their husbands; given that they were essentially subject to their spouses under the law, their bondage could be pleasant or unpleasant depending on their success in this regard. Women were encouraged to learn to wheedle subtly. The balance of power meant that confrontational tactics were unlikely to succeed.

Young girls were taught that marriage was their destiny. They were taught basic house-keeping and the rudiments of hygiene and baby care. Girls were told of romance, chivalry and weddings and were chaperoned, protected and guarded. How much they were told about the mechanics of their bodies and the details of marital consummation is difficult to discern. This seemed to vary. Certainly though, no system of planned sex education had been introduced in Durban schools. By 1911 M. Walsh, who wrote periodically for 'Women's Work and Play', submitted an article entitled 'Prudery versus Purity' and said that Natal should follow Transvaal's example and intro-

duce a series of lessons in schools dealing with bodily functions and anatomy. 'What is there in our bodies in their natural pure state, as God gave us them, to be ashamed of?'<sup>42</sup> she asked. She continued this train of thought in 1916 under the heading 'Things a girl ought to know', arguing that 'the burden of sin is very unevenly distributed ... Hitherto the man has escaped lightly and the woman is burdened for life ... Why were all girls not taught physiology and hygiene in the schools as they should have a proper understanding of their functions. Forewarned is forearmed'.<sup>43</sup>

Educationalists had to be careful, however. Apparently a by-law existed in Durban which made the publication or dissemination of 'improper literature' an offence.<sup>44</sup> In addition, Section 9 of Act 22 of 1898 reads as follows :

Any person who lewdly uses indecent language or gestures towards or in the presence or hearing of any women, who lewdly gives or sends an indecent letter or any other writing or drawing or the like to any woman, or any person who writes or draws, or in any other way exhibits an indecent or lewd writing or drawing or the like, so as to be likely to give offence to any woman, shall be guilty of the crime of indecency.<sup>45</sup>

This act seems to have been very broad. It is possible that the physiological depictions or descriptions necessary in sex education could have been deemed offensive. (As was the case

in Britain where Charles Knowlton's pamphlet on birth control was judged obscene when reissued by Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh.)

A treatment 'for all inflammatory conditions, either internal or external' was advertised by a group who called themselves the Viavi Company. Between 1904 and 1909 Viavi literature was available on application and every Friday a Viavi address for ladies was set up, at a room in West Street. In 1907 however, the company was denied a licence renewal in the borough. The decision seemed due to some extent to the influence of the public analyst in Pretoria who stated that a batch of the medicine he analysed consisted mainly of alcohol.<sup>46</sup> This however was not what was focused on by the Council. What was brought up and what seemed to play a large part in the Council's decision to reject the application was the fact that they felt that the literature of the company was 'repugnant to good taste'. Mr Molyneaux, medical advisor, deemed it 'objectionable' and mentioned the by-law against the publication of improper literature.<sup>47</sup> The pamphlets probably included diagrams or information pertaining to bodily or reproductive functions.

After a struggle the Viavi Company managed to overturn the Council's decision. They were forced however to assure the Council that they would immediately withdraw any literature the Council found objectionable, and would not canvass in a manner anyone could find improper. The Company swore also

that the product contained no opiates. The licence was granted.<sup>48</sup> After this it would have been impossible to take exception to the Viavi advertisement (except perhaps grammatically).<sup>49</sup> Anything to do with the reproductive system was obscured in mystery. Feluna pills, specifically for the 'ailments of women' - (namely menstruation and pregnancy, according to the pronouncement) were advertised alongside a Woman's Book - 'Knowledge' which was posted to ladies on request. Even advertisements as veiled as this did not appear often.<sup>50</sup>

It seems likely that many women knew little about their bodies or reproductive systems. Still, while home and family were all-important, motherhood was a sacred ideal. Even if the mechanics involved were little understood, the fulfilment of her maternal instinct was supposedly a woman's ultimate joy. According to the ideal, a woman with children would gladly devote herself to them unstintingly, giving up every one of her pleasures if necessary. Women's columns and pages abounded with advice on rearing babies and children. Had all this advice been heeded, mothers must surely have concentrated their very beings on their offspring's every cough, snuffle and utterance.

Motherhood was an emotive subject, and advertisements made full use of it. Ashton's and Parson's Infant Powders were promoted in an advertisement depicting a lace-clad infant in the foreground and a slightly worried but very loving mother in

obligatory bonnet, looking on.<sup>51</sup> Bakers' Biscuits eulogised the strength and purity of mothers in an attempt to sell their product.<sup>52</sup>

We must be aware once more of the colonial context. Motherhood assumed great importance in South Africa because of the presence of other races. Children were very definitely viewed as part of a woman's sphere. Jane Lewis points out that 'the ideology of motherhood strengthened during the early twentieth century in response to the high infant mortality rate and the implications it was feared to have for the health and welfare of an imperial nation'<sup>53</sup> (and Durban was part of this empire).

Mothers in Durban saw themselves written about as incubators. In a health column of 1902, pregnant women were warned by a 'specialist' who said: 'Every fit of anger; every giving way to irritability, sulkiness, impure thoughts, back-biting friends and neighbours, eating and drinking stimulating foods and drinks, all these have an ineffaceable imprint on the sensitive brain substance of the unborn'.<sup>54</sup> It would only have been a small step for him to lament the fact that women had been given any intellectual or emotional faculties at all.

Despite the fact that, as will be discussed, women became involved in the job market to a far greater extent than previously, the ideology of motherhood was strengthened even further by the first world war. An article published in 1916



advising the Durban Municipality to set up maternity hospitals and ante- and post-natal clinics, read : 'Our future place among the nations will be determined by both the quantity and quality of human ammunition we are able to accumulate towards making good the terrible wastage of life'.<sup>55</sup> Women's role in this 'accumulation of ammunition' is evident. An advertisement for Kruschen Salts took much the same line: a mother and baby were portrayed, the caption reading, 'On the safeguarding of Women's Health depends the future of our race. Women, be she maid or mother, owes it not only to herself but also to the state to safeguard her health by taking every reasonable precaution against all ailments'.<sup>56</sup> A woman was now subject not only to her husband, but owed allegiance and duty to the state.

Despite the strong value placed on motherhood, it seems that for some, the discovery of pregnancy may not have been an unmitigated joy. As has been seen, the burden of child-care was placed firmly on the shoulders of women. Once a woman was a mother, she was expected to forget any frivolities of youth and become a gentle, self-sacrificing paragon. In addition, babies were a drain on the economic resources of the family. During this twenty year period there was no maternity hospital in Durban. Babies were therefore born at home, or in private nursing homes like Nurse Habgood's Ladies Nursing Home in Umgeni Road,<sup>57</sup> or Esselmont Nursing Home on the Berea, where the Matron, a Mrs Unger, quoted experience going back to the Duchess of Fife's first-born.<sup>58</sup> The Yorkshire Nursing

Home in Florida Road asserted that patients could be attended by their own doctors.<sup>59</sup>

Nursing homes could prove expensive. The Malvern Home advertised a fee of 6.60 for maternity cases.<sup>60</sup> It seems that most of the poorer women in Durban would have been forced to deliver their babies at home, with a midwife in attendance. The Durban Trained Nurses' Institute in Aliwal Street advertised that it supplied fully trained maternity nurses on a 24 hour basis,<sup>61</sup> and it is certain that there were private midwives. Still, money had to be found to pay these nurses. Thus, as early as 1906 'A Worker' was pleading for a maternity ward to be built onto Addington Hospital, 'where poor women who are unable to have proper care at home or those who have neither home nor friends to fall back on and who cannot go to a nursing home ... could be properly nursed'. He found it strange that a large town like Durban should have no accommodation for lying-in cases, saying: 'perhaps it is hard for people who can afford the services of doctors and English trained nurses to realise what it means for their poorer sisters'.<sup>62</sup> Some concession was made and district nurses made daily rounds at reduced rates.<sup>63</sup> The lack of cheap maternity facilities was however still complained of in 1917. 'A Mother' also begged for a maternity hospital arguing: 'Certainly it is the expense of nursing etc that handicaps so many women. How is any working man to provide his wife with a proper nurse when the cheapest one costs at least 2 or 3 guineas weekly and a nursing home at least £5

weekly?'.<sup>64</sup> It was only in 1929 that the first Mothers' Hospital was established by the Salvation Army.<sup>65</sup>

Childbirth itself was painful and dangerous<sup>66</sup> both for working and middle class women. Forms of pain relief were not generally given though morphine was administered to those 'in extremis'. Advertisements played on the suffering of women giving birth to sell their products. The company behind Feluna Pills published a letter from Mrs JM Grobler who had just given birth to her sixth child: 'My other five children had caused me great suffering and I was very frightened on this occasion. To my great surprise it was as if I had not given birth to a child at all. Within two hours everything was over and I was a mother to a strong healthy little girl. I was able to get up after the third day'.<sup>67</sup> She attributed the ease of this birth to the pills. Another advertisement headed: 'Work and pain' advised women that though their life was made up of the aforesaid, Feluna Pills alleviated symptoms.

Having children did not always bring happiness as it should have according to the rosy ideal. Even for married women of the middle class, to endure pregnancy and birth year after year was exhausting and physically debilitating. Belinda wrote: 'I think that woman, who has to bear the pangs and penalties of motherhood as well as its joys, should not be made to suffer these too often'.<sup>68</sup> Sacrifices had to be made and expenses incurred.

If pregnancy, even for securely married couples, was not always a complete joy, for those whose babies were illegitimate, pregnancy must have seemed a nightmare.

Advertisements like: 'Wanted: Someone to adopt a child a few days old'<sup>69</sup> appeared in the local newspapers. Bodies of White infants, murdered after birth, were found.<sup>70</sup> In 1906 the Salvation Army took in 34 maternity cases and allowed them to remain at the home until their babies were born. After the birth, helpers attempted to find the women employment. This was not always easy, for great stigma was attached to an illegitimate pregnancy. According to the ideology of the time (as will be discussed later) it was accepted that men's sexual urges were stronger than women's. Thus, though not directly sanctioned, a young man sowing his wild oats before marriage was viewed with not too much disapproval. Women however were seen as naturally more chaste and purer than men. The female gender was perceived as less sexually demanding, and a girl or woman was shunned by society if she was found to have indulged in premarital sex. It is not surprising then that a number of Durban women at this time were charged with concealment of pregnancy and infanticide.<sup>71</sup>

Another option was to give the child over to a 'baby farmer.' In 1906 the Chief Magistrate urged that legislation be introduced to curb what he felt was a 'growing evil'. He mentioned a case where a 'Mrs' O'Neill and her 'husband' (the reporter's inverted commas) had given a child to a Mrs Rachel

Dee (a coloured woman) of Gale Street. She had been paid £20 after signing a document stating that she would adopt the child and pay all subsequent expenses.

The Magistrate asserted that this case was not out of the ordinary and that illegitimate children were often 'palmed off' in this way. He outlined a process: 'A low class European woman is sought for, who, for payments - which the evidence shows vary from £25 to £150 - undertakes to take charge of the infant for the rest of its life ... The "baby farmer" as a rule, having obtained the payments, is no sooner satisfied that the parents have departed than she looks about ... for some other woman, usually a low class coloured woman ... and the process is repeated'. (This indicates the unpleasant possibility that in such cases children were passed down, in stages, to the lowest economic sector.) He noted that the position of Durban as a seaport town and the easiness of access from the inland colonies made it a 'frequent place for the reception of women who desire a place of refuge, where they are not known, where they can hide their shame and also arrange for the disposal of their unwelcome offspring'.<sup>72</sup> Three days later Lily Claasen, alias Clarkson, was accused of falsifying a birth certificate to state that a child that had been given to her was her own. She was sentenced to three months hard labour.<sup>73</sup>

Almost a year later, the issue was taken up by the Natal

Parliament. Mr Haggar said that the traffic in white children was becoming scandalous. He quoted several Durban cases and mentioned the daily advertisements offering money if children were adopted. He attempted (but failed) to introduce a bill to regulate adoption.<sup>74</sup> Meanwhile, cases of 'baby farming' continued. Durban was shocked by the discovery of a white child living in 'native quarters' in Sydenham Road. A Cape woman was paying the baby farmer approximately five shillings a month to look after the child.<sup>75</sup>

One can conclude that pregnancy, even amongst married middle class women, was often unwanted. This raises the question of contraception. Lewis, studying letters of working class women, in England in 1915 writes:

What comes across ... is an overwhelming ignorance about female physiology, the difficulty of gaining access to information, and a lack of privacy in homes that would have rendered the female methods of birth control difficult.<sup>76</sup>

Braybon and Summerfield, also talking about the period assert:

Many women ... deplored the lack of contraceptive advice available as they were all well aware of the cost to themselves of bearing too many children, and by the outbreak of war it was still not really acceptable to admit to limiting your family.<sup>77</sup>

Contraception was obviously an extremely difficult subject.

Though there were undoubtedly those who for various reasons would have preferred not to conceive, obstacles prevented a free choice being made. Women were told that it was their duty to produce as many white babies as possible so as to reduce the 'threat' of the high black birth rate. Churches as well as politicians criticised the declining birth rate. Males were generally unwilling to abstain from sexual intercourse and celibacy was often associated with disease. Coitus interruptus was very unreliable, (as was the rhythm method, though both were better than nothing) but pamphlets warned that it might be 'injurious to health'.<sup>78</sup>

The vulcanisation of rubber in 1804 meant that relatively safe forms of contraceptive could be manufactured - the condom and the cap. (Relatively safe if compared to coitus interruptus or the rhythm method.) However, Barbara Brookes writes that 'the association of "artificial" contraceptive devices with sin and vice was strong'.<sup>79</sup> In addition, the subject of contraception was veiled in secrecy - the result of prudery, embarrassment and, it is likely, the provisions of Section 9 of Act 22 of 1898 (the by-law already mentioned).

As a result of these factors it is unlikely that condoms or the cap were easily or widely obtainable in Durban. In 1908, though, a tantalising advertisement appeared in the *Natal Mercury* stating that '(T)he Anglo-French Rubber Company will mail you, in plain envelope, post free, their catalogue of specialities'.<sup>80</sup> The emphasis on 'plain envelope' may mean

that information on contraceptive devices was contained in the catalogue.<sup>81</sup> One wonders how many women picked up its possible implications.

In 1904 a 'book for ladies' was advertised. It seems likely that this was either a sex manual or included information about contraception. The advertisement ran :  
'The knowledge contained in this book is of priceless value to every married lady and will not harm the unmarried to read. It has been the means of brightening the lives of thousands. It contains a valuable amount of information ... The knowledge gained is priceless and cannot do but good ... Sent in sealed envelope ... Address Department C. [was the letter relevant?] Box 725, Cape Town'. A lady wrote: 'I have read your book. It is simply invaluable and gave me the information I have sought for years'.

The secrecy that surrounded contraception is therefore very evident. In the absence or failure of contraceptive devices, some women turned to abortion. This like birth control and infanticide, can be viewed as a form of resistance in that women here actively resisted propaganda idealising constant pregnancy and motherhood. In addition, in their shunning of laws created by men proclaiming the sanctity of the foetus and the illegality of abortion, women rejected (to some extent) male domination and attempted to control their own fertility, resisting the notion of biology as destiny.



As in England, abortifacient pills<sup>82</sup> were widely advertised in newspapers in Durban. Under the heading 'Women's Unfailing Friend', Towles Pennyroyal and Steel Pills for females were advertised as the 'Oldest, Safest and most reliable remedy for all ladies' ailments. Quickly correct all irregularities, remove all obstructions and relieve the distressing symptoms so common with the sex'.<sup>83</sup> As confirmation that Towles' Pills were indeed intended as abortifacients, it seems that from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, it was known that Pennyroyal was one of the herbs from which alleged abortifacients were obtained.<sup>84</sup>

Therapion no. 3 was advertised for 'nervous exhaustion, waste of vitality, harassing dreams and all the distressing consequences of early error, excess ...'.<sup>85</sup> This may or may not have been intended as an abortifacient. McElwree's Wine of Cardui was proclaimed 'Woman's Best Friend'. Deemed an old Squaw's remedy, it promised a cure for the 'menstrual derangements of women', and stated that the potion was 'Nature's provision for the revolution of menstrual function'.<sup>86</sup>

If abortifacient pills failed, penetration of the womb in order to induce abortion might be resorted to. As Bradford points out, white birth rates were falling from the 1890's onwards, in South Africa as a whole. She notes that, in the absence of reliable forms of contraception, this probably indicated that abortion was occurring.<sup>87</sup> There were a number of

well-publicised cases of abortion in Durban between 1900 and 1920. (Attempts at abortion generally only became common knowledge when both mother and foetus died, or when doctors were brought in to attempt to repair the damage caused by botched operations. Obviously, no reliable records exist in the case of successful illegal abortions.)<sup>88</sup>

In 1905, Dr Nanji was charged with procuring abortion, before the first Criminal Magistrate. Apparently he had attended on a young woman, Mrs Poynting, whom he admitted treating for haemorrhage. As the patients' health deteriorated, Dr Gray was called. Seeing the wounds, Dr Gray was alleged to have said, 'This sort of thing must be stopped'. He testified that he wanted then to take the case further, but took pity on the patient and urged her to be silent, unless she wanted to get into trouble. It seems however, that the patient died and Nanji was held responsible. Nanji was eventually acquitted on the basis that the wounds involved had been incurred with great clumsiness. The defence argued that such wounds were unlikely to have been made by a qualified medical man. It was asserted that either an unqualified midwife or the woman herself was responsible. The defence also argued that Nanji would have been unlikely to send for prescriptions from the chemist (as he did) had he performed an illegal abortion.<sup>89</sup>

In December 1906 in the Durban Circuit Court before Mr Justice Kock, Alice Maud Morrison answered a charge of

administering drugs with intent to procure the abortion of Flora Annie Salkeld. Salkeld died, but not before making a statement 'in extremis' to the effect that the accused had, over a period of at least four days, administered noxious substances with the intent to procure abortion. Mr Calder, for the prosecution, stated that if this was found to be true, 'notwithstanding the ineffectuality of the process, the intent was present' and the accused should be convicted. The accused admitted to administering salts and gin to the dead girl, but pleaded not guilty, stating that she had administered nothing else and had been accused only because the deceased was angry that she would help her no further.

A few days later Mrs Morrison was charged additionally with murder. Evidence was heard from Dr Mundy who had attended the deceased until her death, over a period of three days, and from Dr Birtwell who attested that in his opinion death was attributable not to noxious substances but to septic peritonitis caused by perforation of the uterus. Using this information the defense attempted to lay the blame at Mr Mundy's door, for he had performed a curettage on the deceased. The jury eventually found the accused innocent. Six voted in favour of an acquittal, three against. For an acquittal however the required number was seven to two. Mrs Morrison's case was therefore remanded to the next season.

In March 1910 Mrs Morrison was again brought up on the same charges. The eleven days during which Sara Salkeld was ill

were once more examined. As sketches of the dead woman's anatomy were produced, the court was cleared of women and children. It was found that the deceased had been given an injection of morphine shortly before her deposition. The evidence against Mrs Morrison appeared shaky and circumstantial. This time a jury was unanimous in finding her not guilty of murder, and on the charge of procuring an abortion the jury also reached a similar verdict (7-2).

While in both these cases the defendants were found not guilty, abortion had arguably taken place, resulting in the death of two women. Despite the ideology glorifying motherhood, the absence or failure of birth control led both unmarried and married women to seek abortion, and in so doing, risk their own lives to prevent unwanted childbirth.

To sum up, women were told that it was their duty to provide the 'poetry of existence'. Their education was geared towards marriage and motherhood. They were encouraged to be passive and submissive to as well as supportive of the male gender. The employment of women was frowned on as marriage was seen as the ultimate goal of womanhood, and married women did not need to be employed. Single women were subject to their fathers and married women to their husbands. Taught very little about their bodies or the realities of sexual intercourse, women were nevertheless expected to 'please' their husbands and adapt joyously to motherhood - no matter how many times pregnancy was visited upon them. Not

surprisingly, there were women who resisted these constraints. They did so, like Alys, by refusing offers of marriage or, like Eliza Jane Henry, by endeavouring to leave their husbands. They did so also by seeking to gain knowledge about their bodies and, importantly, by attempting to control their fertility either by contraception or abortion.

An increasing number of women in Durban were seeking and gaining employment in opposition to the ideal of women as wives and mothers. True, they were discriminated against here too, but it will be shown that, once more, resistance to this discrimination is evident. These themes are explored in the following chapter.

## END NOTES

1. Durban was referred to as the 'town'. Pietermaritzburg was the 'city'.
2. *Mayor's Minutes*, 1902, p 2.
3. *Ibid.*, 1917 p 79.
4. *Natal Mercury*, April 15 1908.
5. *Natal Government Gazette*, Vol. XLVI no 2686, 3 July 1894 p 646.
6. Vietzen, Sylvia, *A History of Education for European Girls in Natal 1837 - 1902* (1980) p 302.
7. *Ibid.*, p 303.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Natal Mercury*, Thursday January 10 1901 p 9.
11. *Ibid.*, Saturday May 4 1901 p 11.
12. Vietzen, *op cit.* p 304.
13. *Natal Mercury*, Thursday November 5 1903 p 13.
14. *Ibid.*, Friday September 17 1909 p 3.
15. *Ibid.*, Tuesday March 4 1909 p 4.
16. *Ibid.*, Saturday July 30 1910 p 13.  
It should be noted however that a tiny number of white women were entering tertiary education, as Walker points out. In 1887 the South African College in Cape Town allowed women entrants into all of its courses. (Walker, C. ed., *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945* (1990) p 322)
17. *Ibid.*, Wednesday December 17 1913 p 5.
18. An educationalist estimated that only some 300 to 400 girls attended governmental secondary schools. (*Natal Mercury*, July 30 1910, p 15.)
19. Lewis, J. (ed), *Labour and Love - Women's Experience of Home and Family 1850 - 1940* (1986) p 125.
20. *Mayor's Minutes*, 1901, p 48.
21. *Mayor's Minutes*, 1904, p 70.
22. E.J. Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice* (1982) p 106.

23. The Society established itself as a sister organisation to the British Women's Emigration Association after the Boer War, in 1902. (A. James Hammerton, *Emigrant Gentle-women: Genteel Poverty and Female Emigration 1830-1914* (1979)p 149).
24. *Ibid.*, p 163.
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*, p 167.
27. Cecil, Alicia M., "The needs of South Africa - Female Emigration" in *The Nineteenth Century* (1902) p 683 and 692.
28. *Natal Mercury*, Saturday July 6 1901 p 10.
29. Atkinson, J, and Co (commissioners of the work), *Durban and District 1906 - Illustrated Almanac and guide* (1906) p 69.
30. Although this collection of letters is undated I was able to locate the year as 1908 due to Alys' description of a 'terrible storm' that hit Durban, in a letter dated April 24. It was apparent that she sent cuttings about it to her mother. Searching through the *Natal Mercury*, April 1905 -1910 I found that the headlines on Tuesday April 21 1908 read : The Rainstorm - A Record Fall - 15 Inches in 48 hours - Inundation in Suburbs. On Wednesday April 22nd the paper reported loss of life, the flooding of a railway and the partial pushing over of a wharf. Alys wrote : 'Last Wednesday night I shall ever remember. I thought I should never get over my nervous terror of the wind.' (*Memories* p31). It seemed certain that the year in which she was writing was 1908.
31. Booth, A., *Memories*, p 28.
32. *Natal Mercury*, Wednesday September 9 1903 p 7.
33. Booth, *op cit.* p 65.
34. *Natal Mercury*, Tuesday, January 30 1906 p 9.
35. Walker, C., 'The Women's Suffrage Movement in South Africa' in *Communications* 2 (1979) pp 55-59.
36. *Ibid.*, Tuesday July 28 1904 p 8.
37. *Ibid.*, 'Belinda's Diary' Thursday July 28 1906 p 9.

38. *Ibid.*, October 12 1910 p 11.
39. *Ibid.*, Wednesday December 7 1910 p 11.
40. *Ibid.*, Wednesday December 14 1910 p 11.
41. *Natal Mercury*, Tuesday January 25, 1900 p 7.
42. *Ibid.*, Wednesday August 16 1911 p 11.
43. *Ibid.*, Wednesday March 22 1916 p 5.
44. *Ibid.*, Tuesday September 24 1907 p 6.
45. As published in the *Natal Mercury*, Thursday October 20 1904.
46. Patent medicines often contained opiates or alcohol. Addiction was frequent (and victims were generally women rather than men for a number of reasons - women were told from birth that they were the weaker sex and physiologically as well as mentally inferior. Often, hypochondria resulted. Women were also often bored and frustrated and these 'medicines' offered some form of escape). For example, a court case was brought against a Mr Pim who 'befriended' a wealthy Durban widow. Under his influence she became an alcoholic and died, it seems an alcohol-related death, leaving a will in Pim's favour. A damaging piece of evidence against Mr Pim was the testimony of a chemist and druggist to the effect that Mr Pim had procured a product called chlorodyne for the deceased on a regular basis. Obviously this product contained either alcohol or an opiate. However, in the same edition of the paper, Freemantle's Chlorodyne was advertised as a 'specific for Enteric, Dysentery, Cholera and all Fevers - Invaluable for Coughs, Colds, Bronchitis and Asthma'. No mention was made of its contents. (*Natal Mercury*, Wednesday November 4 1903 p 10). In 1917 however, chlorodyne was included amongst the poisons listed in the medical, dental and pharmacy bill. (*Government Gazette* 1917 Vol. XXVII no 791.)
47. *Natal Mercury*, Tuesday September 24 1907 p 6.
48. *Ibid.*, Tuesday December 3 1907 p 9.
49. 'Viavi holds the highest and most extensive curative position in the world - that's something. Viavi has



in its employ 10 000 contented and prosperous women. That's business. Viavi patrons, are numbered by the millions, male and female - That's because it cures. Viavi has stood the crucial test of time for over 20 years - That's a record. (*Natal Mercury*, Friday January, 1909 p 3).

50. *Natal Mercury*, Saturday February 14 1914 p 15.
51. *Ibid.*, Saturday December 23 1916 p 3.
52. *Ibid.*, Saturday December 23 1916 p 3.
53. Lewis, *op cit.* p 12. The medical officer, P Murrison wrote in 1903 : 'The infantile mortality is usually expressed as a proportion of deaths of infants under 1 year to 1000 births during the year'. (*Mayor's Minutes*, 1903 p 52). The rate for 1904 was 100.3 per 1000 births. In 1905 it was 88; in 1906 100; in 1909 67.3; 1911 - 90.3; 1912 - 98.5; 1913 - 74.8; 1915 - 89.4; 1916 - 92.3; 1917 - 85.4. (*Mayor's Minutes*, 1904 p 72; 1905 p 89; 1906 p 100; 1909 - p 111; 1911 - p 175; 1912 p 120; 1913 p 134; 1916 p 84; 1917 p 90.
54. *Natal Mercury*, Saturday November 14 1902 p 14.
55. *Ibid.*, Tuesday August 15 1916 p 5.
56. *Ibid.*, Friday November 15 1918 p 1.
57. *Natal Mercury*, Monday May 2 1904 p 5.
58. *Ibid.*, Tuesday January 1 1901 p 5.
59. *Ibid.*, Saturday January 3 1910 p 8.
60. *Ibid.*, Saturday October 25 1919 p 12.
61. *Ibid.*, Saturday January 28 1905 p 19.
62. *Ibid.*, Saturday May 26 1906 p 13.
63. *Ibid.*, Monday October 22 p 5. This still meant though that women in difficulty at night, forced to call for a nurse or doctor, would have had to pay higher rates.
64. *Ibid.*, Friday January 19 1917 p 10.
65. *The City of Durban - Official Guide*, (1953) p 38.
66. In the *Mayor's Minutes* each year, deaths were reported as having occurred due to 'accidents of pregnancy', 'accidents of labour', puerperal septicaemia, puerperal albumenuria and convulsions, 'diseases of childbirth',

pueperal haemorrhage, pueperal phlegmesia, pueperal thrombosis, embolisms and miscarriages. Child-birth related deaths featured significantly in the Medical Officers' list of causes of deaths.

67. *Natal Mercury*, Saturday January 4 1913 p 14.
68. *Ibid.*, Tuesday October 6 1908 p 7.
69. *Ibid.*, Monday January 1 1900 p 3.
70. *Natal Mercury*, Monday January 29 1906; Monday October 8 1906 p 8; Thursday April 2 1908 p 11; Wednesday July 8 1908; Saturday March 27 1915; Wednesday April 14 1920 p 11.
71. *Natal Mercury*, Wednesday March 12 1902; Tuesday May 22 1906; Thursday April 2 1908.
72. *Natal Mercury*, Tuesday December 18 1906 p 8.
73. *Natal Mercury*, Friday December 21 1906 p 8.
74. *Ibid.*, Tuesday September 5 1907 p 7.
75. *Ibid.*, Thursday April 2 1908 p 11.
76. Lewis, J. *Women in England 1870-1950*(1984) pp 15, 16.
77. Braybon, G. and Summerfield, P., *Out of the Cage - Women's Experience in Two World Wars*.
78. Lewis, Jane (ed), *Labour and Love* (1986) p 159.
79. *Ibid.*
80. *Natal Mercury*, Wednesday March 18 1908.
81. *Ibid.*, Friday March 4 1904 p 7.
82. Jane Lewis feels that these were 'usually ineffectual' (Lewis, J., *Women in England 1870 - 1950* (1984) p 17) Often however, they were taken in large doses and in conjunction with herbs, hot baths, gin or salt. Induced miscarriages did result.
83. *Natal Mercury*, November Wednesday 4 1903 p 11
84. Bradford, Helen, 'Her Body Her Life: 150 years of abortion in South Africa'. Paper presented at the Women and Gender Conference at the University of Natal, Durban 1991, p 3.
85. *Natal Mercury*, Wednesday May 14 1900 p 1.
86. *Natal Mercury*, Tuesday May 15 1900 p 3.
87. Bradford, *op cit.* p 8.

88. It is interesting to note that in 1917, Senator Stanford gave notice of his intention to introduce an important amendment to the Medical, Dental and Pharmacy Bill which was before the senate. He asked that contra-conceptives (as they were called) be included among the poisons in the bill. (Once 'declared', a poison could be sold or disposed of only by a pharmacist, who was compelled to note the date of sale, the nature and quantity of the substance, the name and address of the purchaser and the purpose of the purchaser.) The editor of the *Natal Mercury* supported the Senators' stance, saying :

There are people who defend the practice stating that the fewer children born, the stronger they are, but this is, we consider, a dangerous doctrine, especially in a country situated like South Africa ... The Cape Medical Council now asks that contra-conceptives only be sold under a Doctor's orders. Their extensive sale is to be deprecated and we hope that the government will accept Senator Stanford's amendment. The whites in South Africa should adopt every legitimate means to augment the white population. We hope the amendments will have the support of all.

(*Natal Mercury*, Wednesday March 21 1917 p 7) These amendments were rather obscure. Pointed to, obviously, was the Medical, Dental and Pharmacy Bill no 791 of February 1917, which was read for a second time on Monday March 19, two days before the *Mercury's* report. What form of 'contra-conceptives' was being referred to is unknown. It seems unlikely that rubber or commonly-grown herbs could have been declared poisons. Scrutiny of this bill and subsequent bills revealed none of these substances. What was declared a poison however, was ergot. (*Government Gazette*, 1917 Vol XXVII). This was one of the most commonly used abortifacients of the period. It could prove effective but was highly dangerous not only to the foetus but also to the pregnant woman, causing convulsions and often death.

89. *Natal Mercury*, Friday December 10 1906 p 5; Tuesday  
December 14 1906 p 8; Wednesday December 15 1906 p 8;  
Thursday December 16 1906 p 7; Tuesday March 1 1907 p 9;  
March 2 1907 p 6.

## CHAPTER THREE

**WOMEN AND EMPLOYMENT IN DURBAN:** *Should a woman earn money?/ No, the fates ne'er intended it./ She was sent to comfort man below./ Not to earn the cash but spend it.*

A survey of the historical circumstances under which the stereotypical 'ideal' woman was created was dealt with in the introduction to the thesis. An important facet of that history was the effect capitalism had on the lives of women, and its broad implications have already been noted. This chapter highlights the specificity of the experiences of women in relation to employment in Durban within that larger historical context.

Contrary to popular wisdom, white women were employed in Durban in increasing numbers during the period under discussion. This assertion deserves further comment, as the position of white women in Durban can usefully be contextualised in relation to general trends in this period, for Natal as a whole.

Beall notes that the first occupational census to distinguish between male and female employment of the white and Indian population groups was conducted in 1891, and revealed an extremely low participation of white women in the labour

force. 'Only one out of every eleven white females was economically active in that year, as compared with three out of every five white males.'<sup>1</sup>

A census of 1904 however, reveals interesting changes. That white women were entering into employment in increasing numbers was a visible fact. By 1904, 13.7 % of the white female population worked in paid employment - one out every seven women, as opposed to one out of every eleven in 1891 - and this trend was to continue.<sup>2</sup> Of those white women employed, 66.7 % were, in 1904, involved in the service sector, which included, as has been discussed, such professions as teaching, nursing and domestic service - in which category were cooks, laundresses, housekeepers and maids, to name but a few. Women also became waitresses or barmaids, joined religious orders or were employed as matrons in boarding schools.

While only 13.3 % of women were revealed to be involved in commerce and finance, Beall argues that it was in this sector that white women had come to play an increasingly important economic role.<sup>3</sup> The number of women employed here had tripled, proportionately, between 1891 and 1904. Beall notes that by 1904 'white women were employed as shop assistants, typists, stenographers, secretaries, accountant, clerks and even managers in the commercial sector.'<sup>4</sup>

It is important to mention the racial division of labour

here. Walker makes the point that the rapid development of commerce and secondary industry followed in the wake of the mining industry and new occupations opened up for women in the towns, especially for young, unmarried white women with some education.<sup>5</sup> As was noted in chapter one however, this did not apply to black women. They were employed in Durban almost exclusively as domestic labourers, and in low numbers, as has been seen. Their presence as servants, as well as the presence of larger numbers of black male domestic servants, lessened the burden of reproductive work for white women, both for 'mistresses' of households and for white women employed in domestic capacities in Durban. Whereas in England during this period, white domestic servants were involved in hard physical labour, in Durban they supervised this, and acted as nursemaids or companions, their status raised. One can note the importance of the intersection of class, race and gender.

While white women, in comparison to blacks of both genders, were part of a ruling hegemony, ideology and circumstance did mean that women's employment possessed distinctive characteristics. Women were disadvantaged and their options circumscribed in the field of wage labour.

A glance at the *Natal Mercury's* employment section during this period revealed a multitude of 'positions vacant' for women, all reflecting the attributes discussed in the first chapter. The jobs offered low salaries and were of a

nurturing and supportive nature. A January 1900 edition of the tabloid advised that situations were available for travelling companions, housemaids, nurses and barmaids.<sup>6</sup> There was such a demand for white female domestic servants in Durban that those travelling from England to fill such positions were granted assisted passages.<sup>7</sup> Companies also desired female shop assistants and 'European' girls to learn cigarette making.<sup>8</sup>

Conditions under which women laboured were exacting. Nursing had become a 'woman's profession' and even the army, slow to change, was doing away with male orderlies. Though the idea of women at the front invariably conjured visions of 'feminine dress trunks stretching across the veld', a correspondent wrote that 'nature' never built men to serve as nurses.<sup>9</sup> Reference was being made to what was seen as the biological basis to so-called women's work. Nursing involved caring for and tending the sick, cleaning and nurturing. It fell therefore into a woman's sphere.

The ideology of the time was full of discrepancies which were generally ignored. It is ironic for example that a taxing, demanding and physically exhausting job such as nursing should have fallen to the 'gentler sex' - woman, who was regarded as mentally and physically weak and in need of delicate treatment and protection by men. Military nurses (such as those who served in the second Anglo-Boer War) in particular fell under a harsh regime. A disgruntled correspondent made this clear when she asked 'why embryo



nurses should give their services to the government gratuitously?' She alleged that immediately after arrival in South Africa nurses were given a routine of duties which they were expected to carry out though they had not been taught. She also complained that 'various menial offices which coolie servants often refused to perform' were relegated to nurses and said that any complaint resulted in instant dismissal, the women being deemed 'unsuited to the duties of a nurse'.<sup>10</sup>

Military nurses were also exposed to disease. Sister Margaret Cassellis Rose, who had been in Durban only a month, died of dysentery aboard the hospital ship Lismore Castle.<sup>11</sup> Though assigned to positions of danger and responsibility, these women were given virtually no freedom or control over their social lives. It was only in 1908 that the Army Council decided that nurses employed in military families' hospitals could, once granted special permission by the head nurse, occasionally attend operas, balls or dances.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps it was felt that the image of nurses as nurturing, caring and primarily asexual beings would have been damaged by their involvement in such activities. One can also note that nurses, like teachers, were expected to resign upon marriage. Perhaps such regulations were a ploy to prevent them meeting males in a social context.

Even non-military nurses worked extremely hard under strict authoratitive regimes. A correspondent pointed out that nurses' hours were fixed (incredibly) at 73 1/2 hours per

week, but that they worked any length of time beyond this. They were allowed only one day off per month and worked night duties for six months of the year. They were given four weeks annual leave (and must certainly have needed it). During the short hours away from hospital wards, nurses fell under strict rules and regulations and had to comply with oppressive codes of behaviour. They even had their rooms checked daily for signs of dirt or untidiness.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, wages were very low. A probationer's salary in 1917 was between two and three pounds per month.<sup>14</sup> A sister or a matron, after three years' training, earned between five pounds and a limit of twenty pounds (depending on length of service and experience) and an experienced private nurse 4-6 guineas per week.<sup>15</sup> Considering that in 1901 board and lodging (of a rudimentary nature) cost in the region of five pounds,<sup>16</sup> and that laundry, transport and any other expenses had to be covered, it is evident that nurses must have struggled financially.

In the circumstances the question of why women should have chosen to be nurses invites consideration. No definite conclusion can be reached, but tentative suggestions may be put forward: job opportunities for women were limited and constricted, and nursing did at least carry a certain status as well as performing a service to human-kind. Perhaps the notion of being able to serve was attractive to some women, for while entering employment, they were nevertheless

conforming to the ideal of womanhood. Moreover the achievements of Florence Nightingale ensured the high regard in which nurses were held.

It was not only the nurses who struggled. 'Pity', writing in the *Natal Mercury* described the conditions under which female shop assistants worked in Durban in 1901. She or he asserted that these women generally worked for eight or ten hours a day. Their manners and behaviour had to be exemplary - they were not allowed to sit, even when not attending a customer, for example. Even though they were paid between two and six pounds per month, they were expected to dress well at all times.<sup>17</sup> 'Shop-girl' corroborated these allegations, adding that wages were often stopped if even one day's sick leave was taken. 'Can you wonder that so many girls should go astray?' she asked (referring, it is probable, to prostitution, and asserting that employers were the cause of this).<sup>18</sup>

It was difficult for women to improve their working conditions. Complaints often resulted in dismissal. Women in employment had little or no representation (in the form of management liaison committees or trade unions and so on). It is true that in 1907 a Shop Hours Act was passed, laying down shop regulations and hours of opening. Male assistants and shop keepers were asked by the city council to vote for different options and were thereby able to indicate their preferences. Women were excluded. Mrs Behr ( a member of

the Durban Women's Enfranchisement League, which will be discussed) wrote a scathing letter concluding:

Is there any other body of wage earners who could be so ignored in a matter vitally concerning themselves as the working women of Natal? Perhaps now they will realise, women employers and employees, what it means to be classed with lunatics, paupers and children.<sup>19</sup>

She was referring, obviously to the restrictions on who was eligible to vote.

Another example of the way women in employment were discriminated against and ignored is illustrated below. During the second Anglo-Boer War a number of English businessmen and -women from the Transvaal sought refuge in Durban. A refugee Relief committee was set up. It raised funds for distribution to those needy who applied. By July 1900, the Relief Committee, or 'Uitlander Committee' as it was called, had made plans to aid the return of businessmen to the Transvaal. A letter from four businesswomen, however was printed by the *Natal Mercury*. They asked:

Can you tell us when anything is to be done facilitating the return of business women? There are many of us who, since we left our situations in the Transvaal, have been working in Durban for salaries that hardly find us a room and pay our washing, much less luxuries such as shoes and clothing; and for this we have had to work ele-

ven hours per day. As we have scorned money from the Relief Committee, leaving all the more to be spent on able-bodied men too nice to work for four shillings a day, we claim as much consideration as the men, and trust we shall be able to get back, as soon as railway facilities permit - without having to wait until the majority of men have returned. Can you not use your offices to get a list sent to the Governor containing the names of thirty businesswomen? We should be most grateful. We trust the Uitlander Committee will open a registry for women - business women - who have their own living to make, such list to be sent to those in authority at the same time, and for the same considerations, as that of men.<sup>20</sup>

It was clear, however, that these arguments and requests fell on deaf ears, for the following day, an announcement headed 'Uitlander Committee, Durban - Return to the Transvaal' was printed in the same newspaper. It ran: 'Male residents of the Transvaal, temporarily resident in Durban and district, desirous of returning when railway facilities permit, are invited to register their names, addresses and occupations etc, with the Commission in order that the Commission may be in a position to co-operate with the authorities as far as possible in facilitating matters'.<sup>21</sup> Transvaal businesswomen were not mentioned.

Women, though disadvantaged and discriminated against, were entrenched in Durban's job market even prior to World War One. As such, the stereotypical role accorded to women was clearly challenged. It was therefore perhaps not surprising

that there was even evidence of public disapproval at the employment of single women. Thus, for example, 'Only a Woman' professed to be shocked to find in 1908 that, despite male unemployment in Durban, positions were advertised specifically for women in the *Natal Mercury*. Speaking of the Friday edition of the newspaper she wrote:

To my utter astonishment I found no fewer than four advertisements to take situations which men ought to occupy - viz typist, book-keeper, barmaid, short hand writer etc. I think that in all these cases, men should be employed instead of women. Indeed, to my mind women are out of their proper sphere in life in such places.<sup>22</sup>

She said that she realised that employers could pay women less than men, but asked if they considered that 'in thus employing women. ... they foster the growing tendency of the present-day women to neglect womanly duties'.<sup>23</sup>

A second correspondent said that he realised that certain women were forced to work. His letter however was headed 'Not interfering with Men's Work' and this was his focus. He warned girls and women against 'encroaching on men's territory' and asserted that the only work really suitable for women was that which could be carried out in their homes. He ended his letter with the observation that '(T)here is probably no occupation that is of earlier and later interest in a female's life than knitting',<sup>24</sup> thereby neatly summarising popular prejudice.

If the position of single women in the labour market was tenuous, the position of married women was even more difficult. Working-class and even lower-middle-class married women were forced to work if a husband was unemployed, or if his salary was insufficient adequately to support the family. Public opinion was firmly against this however (particularly after the First World War, as will be shown) and especially if a woman had children, for it was felt that a woman's first duty was to her husband, and her children; it was she on whom these children's social and moral development depended. In addition, concern was expressed during the period under discussion at the high infant mortality rates in Durban (see end notes, chapter two). The *Natal Mercury* in 1906 quoted *The Outlook* which asserted: 'Where the married women go out to work, there the babies perish. It is as certain as the rising of the morrow's sun that a society which is founded upon or insists on exploiting the non-natural labours of mothers is doomed.'<sup>25</sup> As has been seen, the infant mortality rate in the first decade of the twentieth century averaged out in Durban at around one hundred deaths per thousand births and dropped only slightly in the second decade. (Once more, one can note the use of terminology implying that a women's biology - nature - determined her destiny and that labours which did not involve house, husband and children were unnatural.)

As a result of these sentiments and ideology, many women were

dismissed or forced to resign from their jobs once they married. It is no surprise that teachers and headmistresses of prominent schools all possessed the title 'Miss'. A Public Service regulation governed all female offices in the Administrative and Clerical division. It was stated that 'a female officer upon her marriage may be called upon to resign her appointment by giving her one months notice. A female officer shall, before or immediately after her marriage,<sup>26</sup> send written information to the head of her department of the proposed or actual date of her marriage'. A regulation also governed female workers in the Department of Post and Telecommunications. It read: 'A married woman shall not be appointed, and a female officer upon her marriage shall be required to resign her appointment unless the Postmaster General certifies or is satisfied that the special circumstances of the case deserve exceptional treatment.'<sup>27</sup>

Not only were women discriminated against as to the conditions under which they were employed and the kinds of jobs available, the rates of pay offered to them were also lower than those of men. Although compelled through economic necessity to work, they were portrayed as trespassers, and were suffered rather than welcomed in the work force. Nevertheless there is also evidence that this continued participation in the labour market was recognised as a 'fait accompli'. This is implied in the growth of certain facilities which catered for single working women in particular. These included the setting up of hostels and



restrooms and, to a limited degree, the provision of relief schemes. It is necessary however to analyse the motivation behind these facilities, the benefits that women gained, and to evaluate them in relation to facilities provided for men.

A woman's 'Homestead' was opened in Durban in September 1900 under the auspices, it seems, of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). The Homestead was described as a 'Deserving Institution ... for the special benefit of young women who are earning their own livelihood'.<sup>28</sup> It was very busy from the time of its opening. Societies and individuals in England who wanted advice and information about the prospects of young women in Durban contacted its staff. Staff were also asked to meet and help those who travelled alone to Durban. In 1902, 137 women passed through the homestead. Details of these residents include some 13 who were listed as 'in business in town': there were 7 clerks and typists, 6 teachers, 24 missionaries, 19 nurses, 54 women visitors to Durban and 24 'seekers of situations'.<sup>29</sup> Many who wanted to enter the homestead were turned away. The building was also used by various women's organisations - meetings were held there as were Bible classes and social evenings.

The homestead was not a charitable establishment. Boarders were required to pay for their accommodation (though what sums this entailed are not disclosed). The Women's Residential Club in Madeleine Road off Florida Road was a

similar institution. In 1904 the ex-mayor, Mr Acutt, donated property valued at five thousand pounds to be used for the housing of women workers. It was vested in the names of the mayor, the town clerk and the treasurer (or successors in office), and a commission of 'ladies' was appointed to manage it.<sup>30</sup> The 'Ladies club' as it came to be known was presided over by a Matron. It was here that Alys Booth (a young woman from England who responded to an offer of employment in Durban, travelling to the town in 1908) first found accommodation.<sup>31</sup> In 1907 'Natalia' (a *Natal Mercury* correspondent) visited the establishment and pronounced it surprisingly large and airy. She found the terms to be moderate, four pounds ten shillings per month or three pounds 10 shillings sharing.<sup>32</sup> (However, if one considers the wages earned by nurses and shopgirls, to name but two professions, most working women must have had little money left over after paying for accommodation.) In 1908 the mayor asserted that the Ladies Club and the work that the committee was engaged in was 'a blessing to many single women in Durban'.<sup>33</sup>

It is not surprising that the Mayor considered the Ladies Club a 'blessing' to young working women. Accommodation for women was difficult to find. As early as 1902 'Durban Girl' expressed her consternation. She wrote (having arrived in Durban from England three months earlier), 'my experience here is that you "paddle you own canoe" and if you happen to be a woman you find the canoe pretty heavy.' She recounted her experiences - 'in every boarding house I went to get a

room I met with the same tale: "We do not take ladies". I tried the chambers in town with the same result and I have decided that if you want to live in Durban you must be a man.<sup>34</sup> Advertisements like this one were common: 'Six gentlemen can be accommodated in Double-Storied Brick House; verandah, one minute from beach, good table, no ladies or children'.<sup>35</sup>

Following the example of the Ladies Club, the Girls' Friendly Society (GFS) opened a 'lodge' in Smith Street in 1905. Mrs Webster was appointed matron-in-charge.<sup>36</sup> By 1909 the society rented two premises in Grey Street where girls and women earning their living were received as boarders.<sup>37</sup> In 1909, 122 girls and women passed through and 137 in 1910 - 54 en route for England, 18 while seeking employment. Provision was made for only six permanent boarders and more bedroom accommodation was called for.<sup>38</sup>

In 1906 a noon-day rest room was opened, under the auspices of the YWCA. This was intended to cater for the 'numerous young ladies employed in town'. It was situated above the Adams Book Shop in West Street, could be utilised between 11am and 2.30pm and was apparently open to all women and therefore not confined to YWCA members.<sup>39</sup> The YWCA also founded a scheme intended to help ladies in 'straitened circumstances'. Mrs Mackay at the YWCA centre took orders<sup>40</sup> for plain sewing and those struggling to survive were paid for completing such orders. In 1912 a YWCA hostel for women was established and described as designed to 'meet the needs

of the wage-earning girl'. It was well patronised. In 1916 388 women were accommodated.<sup>41</sup> One of these was described as a 'baby' of fourteen years.<sup>42</sup>

None of these facilities could be termed 'charitable' (and rent, if compared to wages, was rather high). Each hostel charged sufficient, if not to make a profit, at least to cover running expenses (although there were charitable organisations for men). From its inception it was made clear that the women's Residential club (which did have some ties to the municipality) was to be self-supporting. The Durban Men's Home (its closest male counterpart) on the other hand, provided free accommodation to those who could not afford to pay, and attempted to find work for unemployed boarders. If this was impossible, men were offered the choice of stone-breaking in exchange for food. Clothes were donated to the Home as were generous Christmas dinners. Superintendent Alexander was able to settle destitute men at the Home, but lamented that he had 'no place for destitute women with children, turned out of home for want of means to pay rent and who came ... for shelter'.<sup>43</sup>

The Salvation Army and various women's organisations (as will be shown in chapter five) involved themselves in charity work. Provision for unemployed and destitute women was however unofficial and not municipally funded. The services for working women - hostels and rest rooms - were well patronised and obviously appreciated, accommodation for women

being difficult to find. (This will be discussed below.)

The accommodation on offer however was intended not only to house women but to guard them. Organisations involved integrated their role to include the protection of the morals of the womenfolk residing there. Each hostel was presided over by a Matron. Strict codes of behaviour were enforced. Curfews were common. Bible classes and entertainment of a 'wholesome nature' were offered. The Girls Friendly Society or GFS (discussed in more detail in chapter five) held as its main objective the safeguarding of the purity of English womanhood. It was formed for this reason, and its hostels reflected that intention. The YWCA hostels aimed at reducing the 'dangers' to which young girls in service were exposed. (See discussion in chapter five). The YWCA stated very clearly that it was not a suffragist institution (thereby presumably putting paid to the idea that it would accommodate feminists).

Various residences offered to women, then, were intended not only to house their bodies but to guard their morals and contain their spirit. Although women were forced to work, an abiding concern was expressed over their purity and chastity. For, as single women, they were removed from the protective environment of the family, the family being that institution held to safeguard private morality. Women were securing their own economic livelihoods. They were nevertheless ultimately defined in terms of their sexuality.

Interestingly, similar concerns were being expressed about the chastity and purity of young black women. Having made Inanda seminary the object of research, Heather Hughes notes that African Christian parents were concerned that the abandonment of old practices and habits had left a cultural gap which Christianity had not yet filled. As white society worried over the chastity of women who had left the institution of the family, black Christian parents worried about the chastity of daughters who had been removed from traditional culture with its strong emphasis on the regulation of female sexuality - especially since the legal status of these parents' own Christian marriage was uncertain.<sup>44</sup>

Gaitskell also points to the struggle and concern black parents experienced over the sexuality of their teenage daughters 'in the very changed social and economic circumstances of the early twentieth century.'<sup>45</sup> This explains, in part, the low numbers of black female domestic labourers in Durban during this period. Though a 'native' women's hostel was opened in Durban in October 1911 in an attempt to reassure families that daughters would remain chaste and pure - their morality guarded, Mr Nicolson, mayor, noted that it was a 'difficult matter to prevent women of an undesirable class from gaining access to the hostel.'<sup>46</sup> Mrs McCard, in an address to a ladies meeting titled 'Some glimpses of native life', asserted that black women who were employed in Durban faced constant harassment and a barrage of

propositions from white men. She stated that many black churches had 'ruled that any girl who goes to town to work loses her church membership', and that her father often lost his membership too, as a result of having let her go.<sup>47</sup>

To return to a discussion of white women however, we see that women were becoming involved in the labour force in increasing numbers. Their involvement however was peripheral and disadvantaged. The ideology of womanhood was not fundamentally challenged for women were directed into 'suitable' occupations and their professional and social lives were closely supervised.

In 1912 an exciting development occurred. The newly-formed Woman Worker's Association of Natal submitted its constitution to the *Natal Mercury*. As a non-party and non-sectarian organisation its stated object was to 'bind all women workers together to strive for a just legislation for women'. The Association demanded fair conditions of work and a living wage. It also hoped that provisions could be made to help the needy and the fallen. These objectives were to be achieved through public meetings, distribution of literature, the formation of associations of workers and representatives to government bodies and the public press. Durban was to be the centre of the Association, whose executive was to consist of a president, a vice-president, a secretary, a treasurer and six committee members, all of whom were to be elected yearly by ballot.<sup>48</sup>

Had this Union succeeded, the working women of Natal may possibly have made gains. However, after this promising unveiling, the Association seems to have withered away to nothing.<sup>49</sup> Though many more women were employed during the First World War, creating what could have been a potential for expansion and power, it seems that like many other organisations, the Association either disbanded or gave itself over to war work in the patriotism and fervour inspired by the First World War, a war which was to bring about sweeping changes for Durban's women-folk.

Bruegel quotes Marx who argued that the process of capital accumulation sees as an inevitable outcome the expansion of a reserve army of labour. As industry becomes more capital - and technology - intensive, so competition for employment increases and considerable unemployment is generated. A pool of unemployed workers provides a flexible and disposable supply of labour in the form of an Industrial Reserve Army. Essentially, Marx held that this reserve army was drawn into the economy in times of need and expelled when the need had passed, Bruegel asserts.<sup>50</sup>

Bruegel notes that Marx did not attempt to identify any groups of workers as particularly vulnerable and argues: 'the extension of women's involvement in wage labour in all Western economies clearly fits the picture of the continued expansion of the reserve army drawn by Marx.'<sup>51</sup> She reasons



convincingly that women in Britain have constituted a reserve army and notes especially that the marginal position of married women in the labour force has made them, individual for individual, more vulnerable to redundancy than male workers.<sup>52</sup>

Historically the concept is demonstrated most clearly in relation to the two World Wars. Women were drawn into the labour force in a time of need and expelled when this period of crisis was over. The process is illustrated very clearly in Durban during the First World War.

By early 1914 tensions in the colony mounted as the outbreak of war seemed imminent. Settlers feared that war would break out but hoped that their anxieties were unfounded. July saw the publication of ominous headlines in the *Natal Mercury*. It was announced that 'Dark War Clouds' were gathering.<sup>53</sup> On 6 August enlarged black print announced that Britain was at war. His Majesty the King had declared war upon the German Emperor. The English public responded immediately in an upsurge of patriotic fervour. 'Conservatives and Radicals, Ulstermen and Nationalists, even Suffragists and anti-Suffragists have forgotten their disagreements at the call of patriotic duty.'<sup>54</sup> The next day Durban's Mayor telegraphed the Prime Minister in Pretoria, assuring him of Durban's desire to extend 'hearty co-operation in any measures deemed expedient during the present international crisis.'<sup>55</sup>

By the end of August Durban boys and men were 'rushing off to join their respective Volunteer regiments or the Defence force'. Questions about women and the labour force were soon raised. 'B.G.' author of 'At Home and Abroad' wrote: 'Women's place in economies is going to receive some consideration when things get back to normal.' ('B.G.' was correct but a trifle premature. The war was to continue for a further four years.) The writer continued: 'Perhaps the problem of women and labour will be one of the first to engage attention once the war is over. You have to remember that a vast number of girls who would have fulfilled their natural destiny in wifehood and motherhood are compelled to celibacy by the appalling slaughter of the young men of Europe. ... Many more women and girls will crowd the labour markets of the world.'<sup>56</sup> B.G.'s prime concern was that the war would affect adversely the 'natural' role of women and mothers.

1915 saw Durban firmly entrenched in the war. Increasing numbers of volunteers had been sent overseas or to German South West Africa. A number of letters were received by the *Natal Mercury* urging 'slackers' to join up. Attitudes towards women in the labour market began to change. In June an article appeared which applauded women workers:

... As this terrible Juggernaut of Battle rolls on, the opportunities of women develop on every hand. More and more men are wanted - who but women can release them? ... Not only do women

who have no homes to keep, no little lives to cherish for their country, come forward to take up men's work; we hear of busy housewives who have only an hour or two free the whole day; these they give willingly.<sup>57</sup>

To a large extent the necessity for drawing on women in the labour force during the war and the concomitant readjustment of ideology to accommodate that enlargement of their roles was also experienced in other western nations involved in that war. Thus for example, Anderson and Zinsser point out that in England the number of women engaged in white-collar work - the professions, commercial and clerical jobs, government and public service - roughly doubled during the war.<sup>58</sup> Many women took over small concerns left by brothers, husbands and fathers. They became shop-keepers, window-cleaners, gardeners and van-drivers.<sup>59</sup>

In August 1916 an article appeared in the *Natal Mercury* on 'the War and women in Britain'. The writer cited and indeed lauded women involved in welding and munitions, women busdrivers and women dock-workers. But while acknowledgement was accorded to Durban women, the writer claimed that their contribution to the war effort could not quite compare with the sacrifices demanded in Britain. This article produced a spate of letters from women who offered to take the jobs of men in Durban, thereby enabling them to enlist in the Army.<sup>60</sup>

'Shirkers' or 'slackers' were ridiculed in Durban. White

feathers were handed out and more and more men enlisted. The effect was to increase substantially the number of women employed in Durban in ever-widening fields. In May 1917 an admiring article was written about a woman taxi-driver who worked for a Smith Street rank. The column explained that she had taken up the work of taxi-driving so as to facilitate her husband's enlistment arrangements and to provide for herself and three children during his absence, concluding, 'such splendid spirit ought to be recognised by the Durban public.'<sup>61</sup>

In Durban, as in England, new freedoms were being experienced. More women became increasingly economically independent. They were welcomed into spheres of employment which had hitherto been barred to them (evidenced for example by the woman taxi-driver). Economic independence was translated into greater personal freedom. Corsets were discarded, skirts became shorter (for 'patriotic reasons' of course - material was being conserved in attempts to economise) and hair was bobbed, making it far easier to manage. 'Flappers' appeared in Durban<sup>62</sup> and women were observed casually strolling the streets of Durban, unchaperoned, cigarettes in mouths.

Something of an ideological shift took place. Advertisements now stated that women had to serve their country. Gossard, attempting to sell corsets (which were no longer rigid whale-bone structures) but far more elastic, ran the

following:

More Work for Women During the War

As the men join the colours - leaving their civilian tasks for others to take up - more women than ever before accept responsible arduous duties.

And More Women Wear Gossard, because Gossard corsets do so much more for the wearer in addition to improving the figure.

(The advertisement then went on to talk of the 'hygienic support' the corsets gave and how they actually safeguarded the health).<sup>63</sup>

A woman's home now included her country. In serving her country she could enter paid employment.

Women's active participation in the labour market does not necessarily challenge the belief that her biology is her destiny; the sexual division of labour has historically, been built on the assumption that women's work can exist. Women had, for example, filled temporary posts, with public approval, the assumption being that they would leave paid employment when marriage and motherhood intervened. The nature of what has been considered 'women's work' has showed enormous adaptability. Nursing, for example, was once a male profession.

In Durban during the war it was sometimes expedient to

underplay stereotypical women's roles as they were perceived, by the rhetoric of patriotism (evinced in the Gossard advertisement and in the article about the woman taxi-driver). However, it was feared that women's participation in unconventional and new areas of work might pose a threat to marriage and motherhood. Thus, the greater weight of public opinion reiterated the long-standing 'wisdom' about a woman's place.

Thus, the taboo against married women working still held firm and much disapproval was focused on those married women who did go out to work. 'Live and let live' - a rather unfitting pseudonym - was shocked at a young lady in a 'certain post office' who had come back from her honeymoon recently and was still working. (It seems that, in terms of the regulation governing married postal office staff, special circumstances must have prevailed.) The writer felt that there were many men who were unfit for service who could fill the post and that married women had no need of employment.<sup>64</sup>

A number of letters were written in a similar vein<sup>65</sup> 'A Housewife' recommended that employers refuse to employ women whose husbands were capable of supporting them. She noted with extreme disapproval that some wives and even mothers were taking employment for the sole reason of escaping the drudgery of housework.<sup>66</sup> (Perhaps then they would have been able to afford to employ domestic help - either a European maid or a black manservant. At this time as has been seen,

few black women were employed as domestic servants in Durban, but one can identify the movement of white women out of the most menial and lowest-paid, low-status jobs and their replacements by black women or men, as a trend.)

Although women's participation in the labour force should therefore have challenged the prevailing ideology which held that a woman's biology was her destiny - that she was to be wife, mother and homemaker - in reality this was not so. Braybon and Summerfield assert that the war did make men reconsider their views on the capabilities of women. However, women were seen as merely 'filling in' for men in a time of crisis. They were coping, but the public sphere was still not viewed as women's natural domain. 'It did not alter their belief that women alone were responsible for the home life of the nation'.<sup>67</sup>

Women were still not accepted as a permanent part of the labour force and were still discriminated against.

Working women's problems in finding accommodation were actually exacerbated during that period. Boarding houses that admitted men would not take women lodgers for fear of subverting public morals. Few boarding houses accepted women with children, lest other boarders be disturbed. Those residences which did accommodate single or married women with children, charged very high rentals. 'Man in the Moon', the columnist, deplored 'the case of landladies and landlords

charging extortionate rents for rooms, especially those let to single women who are striving to live honourable lives on the mere pittance so "generously" given by wealthy employers.<sup>68</sup>

A woman whose husband had enlisted and was at the front wrote a bitter letter to the press advising: 'Husbands, don't respond. Don't go'. She said that she had battled alone for over two years. She had five children and found it virtually impossible to gain accommodation. Houses that were available for rental were far too expensive for her budget and no boarding house or flat landlord would admit a lone woman with five children. She said that she had endured hardships 'too numerous and sad to relate'.<sup>69</sup>

On November 11 1918 the First World War (then called the 'Great War') ended. The following day, November 12, the *Natal Mercury* reported: 'Victory - The War is Over'.<sup>70</sup> The implications for women workers were to be monumental in Durban, as in other western countries. Women became increasingly unwanted in the labour force. They had been drawn into the production process in a time of chaos and crisis, having fulfilled the function of an Industrial Reserve Army. Now, efforts were made to expel as many women workers from the labour market as possible.

In 1917 Laura Ruxton (president of the Women's Enfranchisement League) had asked: 'What will happen to women workers when the war is over? Will they be content to return to their former spheres?'<sup>71</sup> By early 1919 Durban started



to face these questions. A correspondent noticed that men were returning from the front, and that the problem of making women workers redundant had begun and would continue. (Most employers had promised enlisting men that their jobs would be waiting for them on their return.) The writer felt that it was only just that soldiers who had 'so gallantly' fought for their country, should be re-employed, but was concerned about the fate of the 'girls' who could not survive without paid employment. The solution the writer advocated was that all married women and girls whose fathers were capable of supporting them, be barred from the labour market.<sup>72</sup> (Single women without means of support would, it seems be allowed to enter employment according to this writer's model.)

Nevertheless, bitterness was engendered amongst ex-servicemen. A soldier who returned to Durban wrote, 'women have kept the home fires burning only too well'. He returned to his firm after two years and was given a post, but found that the firm had taken on three female clerks and that he was expected to take on the duties of one of them. What really irked him was the fact that this meant that he would receive a low salary and a 'position generally filled by a lad of fourteen years, straight from school'. Women had to be content with this type of employment. It was beneath an ex-serviceman's dignity to accept such status or pay, however. The ex-soldier proposed that the female clerks be dismissed to make way for returning men. The second-in-command said that this was not possible however, as the women

would 'blubber'. (It is far more likely that he saw the women as cheap, efficient and malleable labour and, for these reasons, had no intention of firing them.) The ex-soldier, incensed, left the office.<sup>73</sup>

In 1919 the banks formally announced their intention to retain their girl clerks (probably for much the same reasons as the ex-serviceman's firm). The decision was not a popular one. Public opinion was turning against women workers in all fields. A host of letters demanding that women be expelled from the labour market expressed widely-held opinions.

'C.G.L.O' for example, suggested that all barmaids, with the exception of those who had lost a husband in the war, be dismissed to make way for demobilised soldiers.<sup>74</sup>

In the meantime the Women's Enfranchisement League, disturbed at what it saw, was a lone voice in the wilderness. It decided to send a resolution to the Wages Board, aimed at securing a decent living for women and girl tailoresses and asking for similar rates of pay for women doing the same work as a man, or occupying a man's position. (It seems that wages for women dropped substantially after the war. I have not been able to find figures to confirm this claim but the trend was mentioned in numerous letters and articles.<sup>75</sup>) The organisation also asked for housing reform to take place. It pointed out that accommodation for women, especially women with children, was scarce and expensive.<sup>76</sup>

It became increasingly unacceptable however, to employ women in what was termed 'men's work'. A person who termed herself a suffragette (and who most emphatically was not) asked if it had struck anyone that women were doing 'men's work and not their own'. The writer continued: 'Our soldiers have returned to find their billets taken by women and so are unable to find work and yet women's work is crying out for someone to do it'. 'Suffragette' asserted that women were doing work which un-fitted them for married life and the care of homes and children, and argued that women should return to their own sphere and leave men's work to men, quoting the rhyme:

Should a woman earn money?  
 No, the fates ne'er intended it.  
 She was sent to comfort men below,  
 Not to earn the cash but spend it.<sup>17</sup>

A number of interesting points are raised by this letter. One wonders firstly why the correspondent called herself (or himself, there being no guarantee that the writer was not merely masquerading as a woman) 'suffragette' when not the slightest concern for the furtherance of woman's rights was shown in the letter. One wonders also if it ever occurred to the writer that men were capable of 'women's work', as women had proved themselves capable of 'men's work' during the war. Why were men prepared to remain unemployed rather than take the available 'women's jobs'? The answer of course is that this type of work offered little remunerative reward and was

of lowly status.

In addition, the rhyme the writer quoted was indicative of the ideology which was partly responsible for women being pushed into the role of consumer rather than producer. In chapter one it was pointed out that after the advent of capitalism, work came to be seen as labour produced for wages. Though reproduction of labour took place in the household, this was seen as a centre of consumption rather than production and women were held to be consumers rather than producers as they, ideally, were not to be involved in waged labour, as evinced by the rhyme.

The implications of the letter were clear. Women should vacate 'men's jobs', giving way to ex-servicemen. This was the first part of a two-fold message. It was further stated that women did not have to be unemployed because there were really plenty of jobs available to them.<sup>78</sup> One who called herself a 'sympathiser with unemployed girls' asserted, '(There is) no lack of work for our girls, if they are earnestly seeking it. Needlewomen, domestic helps and especially children's nurses are in a demand for which the supply is totally inadequate. I think most people will agree that there is no calling more suitable for our girls than the care of children ... (which is) above all, pre-eminently women's work'.

'Eve' complained that it had become almost an impossibility

to procure a clean, decent, fairly educated woman or girl with a modicum of refinement, to care for children, as they were all employed in banks and offices where the wage was higher. Though she noted that these were not as high as men's wages, she nevertheless talked of the danger of such women being able to indulge in gross extravagances, while swelling the excess profits of the employer and leaving children to the 'tender mercies of the Native'. (It was obviously unthinkable that she look after her child herself.) She bade employers to get rid of these girls at once 'thereby forcing them to take the honoured women's work, which can only be done by women'. She ended emotively: 'Employers of Durban Act now'.<sup>79</sup>

'Adamless Eve' replied to this letter asking how the thousands of women who were themselves breadwinners, supporting families, were supposed to exist on the sum of three or four pounds per month, the salary usually paid to nursemaids or general helps.<sup>80</sup> Her voice was ignored however, the only reply coming from 'Saint' who stated that as long as she entertained these 'queer notions in her head', she would never find an Adam.<sup>81</sup>

Faced with this type of opposition, it seems that many women were pressured into leaving their jobs and large numbers of employers were compelled by the weight of public opinion to retrench women from their firms and businesses. One must note that national figures showed a steady increase in female

employment, a trend which continued after the war.<sup>82</sup> The question of why Durban should have differed in this respect, between 1917 and 1920, must be asked. One possible explanation is that since Durban had experienced enlistment figures far higher than the national average (being a 'bastion of the empire') the town was also faced with providing employment for increased numbers of returned soldiers after the war, necessitating the retrenching of women employees. The editorial in the *Natal Mercury* of January 1920 asserted that 'as a rule the rank and file of our women war workers have gone back to civilian life'.<sup>83</sup> Thus by 1920 most women in Durban had been forced back into roles very similar to those they had held before 1914.

This chapter has been devoted to a study of women's participation in the labour force. What has not been discussed however, is what has been referred to as woman's 'oldest profession'. The following chapter will be given over to an enquiry into the nature of prostitution in Durban, a phenomenon which must be viewed or contextualised in relation to women's employment generally. As we will see, a number of 'push' and 'pull' factors existed which influenced women to become prostitutes. The 'push' factors incorporated trends with which we have already become familiar. Prostitution offered an alternative to 'respectable' employment that was nevertheless of a low-status, low-wage nature.

## END NOTES

1. Beall, J. *op cit.* p119.
2. *Ibid.* p 121.
3. *Ibid.* p 123.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Walker, C. (ed.), *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945* (1990) p 322.
6. *Natal Mercury*, January 4 1900 p 6.
7. *Durban and District Illustrated Almanac*, 1906 p 69.
8. *Natal Mercury*, January 1900 p 3.
9. *Ibid.*, Monday September 24 1900 p 7.
10. *Ibid.*, Thursday January 9 1900 p 6.
11. *Ibid.*, January 4 1900 p 6.
12. *Ibid.*, Friday December 17 1909 p 5.
13. *Ibid.*, Thursday March 2 1911 p 11.
14. *Ibid.*, Thursday June 12 1917 p 4.
15. *Ibid.*, Tuesday June 3 1917 p 10.
16. *Ibid.*, Saturday September 6 1901 p 7.
17. *Ibid.*, Thursday September 9 1901 p 7.
18. *Ibid.*, Saturday September 26 p 13.
19. *Ibid.*, Friday September 27 p 6.
20. *Ibid.*, Tuesday July 3 1900 p 8.
21. *Ibid.*, Wednesday July 4 1900 p 4.
22. *Ibid.*, Wednesday July 8 1908.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*, Wednesday October 28 1908 p 8.
25. *Natal Mercury*, Monday July 23 1906 p 3.
26. *Union of South Africa Regulations 1910 - 1916* p 5216
27. *Ibid.*, p 5318.
28. *Natal Mercury*, Friday September 14 1900 p 9.
29. *Ibid.*, Thursday November 20 1902 p 11.
30. *Mayors Minutes*, 1904 p 14.
31. Booth, A., *Memories* (19??) p 21.
32. *Natal Mercury*, Tuesday December 10 1907 p 6.
33. *Mayors Minutes*, 1908 p 20.

34. *Natal Mercury*, Thursday December 11 1902 p 7.
35. *Ibid.*, Saturday October 8 1910 p 5.
36. *Natal Mercury*, Friday January 6 1905 p 8.
37. *Ibid.*, Saturday July 17 p 7.
38. *Ibid.*, Saturday May 7 1910 p 10.
39. *Ibid.*, Friday May 4 1906 p 7.
40. *Ibid.*, Saturday January 16 1909 p 6.
41. *Ibid.*, October 27 1916 p 10.
42. *Ibid.*, Tuesday May 1 1906 p 8.
43. *Mayors Minutes*, 1906 p 133.
44. Walker, C., *op cit.* p 205.
45. *Ibid.*, p 72.
46. *Mayors Minutes*, 1916 p 21.
47. *Natal Mercury*, Thursday December 12 1912.
48. A summarised form of the constitution was revealed in the *Natal Mercury*, Monday December 23 1912.
49. Information regarding the Association is hard to come by.
50. Bruegel, I., 'Women as a Reserve Army of Labour; a note on recent British experience' in Whiteley, E., (ed.) *The Changing Experience of Women* (1984) p 106.
51. *Ibid.*
52. *Ibid.*, p 115.
53. *Natal Mercury*, Monday July 27 1914 p 7.
54. *Ibid.*, Thursday August 6 1914 p 6.
55. *Ibid.*, Friday August 7 1914 p 5.
56. *Ibid.*, Friday December 1918 p 11.
57. 'Women's Work and Play' in the *Natal Mercury*, Wednesday June 16 1915 p 11.
58. Anderson, B.S. and Zinsser, J.P., *op cit.* p 197.
59. Braybon, G. and Summerfield, P., *Out of the Cage: Women's experience in Two World Wars* (1987) p 34.
60. *Natal Mercury*, Thursday August 17 1916 p 4; Friday August 25 1916 p 6.
61. *Ibid.*, Friday December 20 1918; Wednesday August 8 1917.
62. *Ibid.*, Friday May 4 1917 p 6.
63. *Ibid.*, Tuesday August 20 1918 p 6.
64. *Ibid.*, Monday July 2 1917 p 5.



65. *Ibid.*, Wednesday August 20 1917 p 5.
66. *Ibid.*, Friday February 21 1917 p 4.
67. Braybon, G. and Summerfield, P., *op cit.* p 29.
68. *Natal Mercury*, Saturday September 8 1917 p 11.
69. *Ibid.*, Tuesday April 23 1918 p 8.
70. *Ibid.*, Tuesday November 12 1918 p 6.
71. *Ibid.*, Tuesday August 21 1917 p 10.
72. *Ibid.*, Thursday February 13 1919 p 3.
73. *Ibid.*, Friday June 13 1919 p 7.
74. *Ibid.*, Wednesday August 13 1919.
75. *Natal Mercury*, Saturday September 8 1917; Wednesday June 4 1919; Saturday August 16 1919.
76. *Natal Mercury*, Tuesday April 8 1919 p 5.
77. *Ibid.*, Monday June 2 1919 p 6.
78. Braybon and Summerfield, *op cit.* make a similar assertion pertaining to England. Once more the experiences of women in Durban paralleled those of English women.
79. *Natal Mercury*, Friday June 13 1919 p 15.
80. *Ibid.*, Thursday June 19 1919 p 15.
81. Walker, C., *Women and resistance in South Africa* (1982) p 16.
82. *Ibid.*, Wednesday June 25 1919 p 6.
83. *Natal Mercury*, Monday January 5 1920 p 8.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### PROSTITUTION IN DURBAN: 'ONE OF THE MOST DISGUSTING SPECTACLES OF A CIVILISED CITY'

Directly the electric light is turned on in the streets they emerge from their rooms in couples and singles from Albert, Victoria, Queen and Prince Edward Street and parade both sides of West Street, till the bait is taken and then the useful ricksha is utilised to take the fish back to the rooms to be scaled and drawn.<sup>1</sup>

White prostitution<sup>2</sup> had existed in Durban prior to 1900, but not to the extent thereafter witnessed.<sup>3</sup> The scale of local prostitution meant that, rather than being hidden or clandestine, prostitutes in certain years between 1900 and 1920 were very visible and the topic became a matter of public debate, a question that could not be ignored. The way in which prostitution was viewed was by no means unanimous and, as will be seen, whilst some accepted it as a necessary evil (if not too evident), others aimed at its total eradication. Over the years, then, different policies towards prostitution were adopted. Between 1900 and 1908 prostitution was a regularly publicised, much debated topic and it seems that the Durban authorities attempted to appease those violently opposed to the presence of prostitution by sporadic raids and arrests. After 1908 however, a deliberate

policy to make prostitution invisible lessened debate around the topic and by 1911, prostitution in Durban was so removed from the public eye as to seem non-existent. Up to 1917 the policies that existed can be summarised as essentially policies of control. On this point, fascinating parallels between Durban, as part of the Empire, and the British experience of prostitution can be drawn.

By 1900 a steady influx of continental (see endnote 9 for explanation of this term) women into Durban was occurring. Durban's public was not amused. The women were far too visible, and were perceived as a growing evil, as is evident by the introductory quote, written by a *Natal Mercury* columnist in 1900. From newspaper reports and police writings, one can glean certain information about the prostitutes of this time. They were centred not in the Point Road area (the infamous area of vice in contemporary Durban), but in Grey, Pine, Albert, Victoria, Prince Edward, Queen, Cross, Gale, Palmer, Beatrice and Bond Streets and Cemetery and College Lanes,<sup>4</sup> in houses rented mostly from Indian landlords (though Portuguese landlords were also reported). They paraded in rickshas and advertised their wares.

Shocked letters to the *Natal Mercury* were written by Durban's public. 'Neglected' felt that the prostitutes were 'one of the most disgusting spectacles of a civilised city'.<sup>5</sup> He referred to 'degraded women ... parading to attract the weak minded, an excuse for the drunkard, and a curse to

whoever prizes honour and virtue.' He soundly criticised the police and ended by suggesting that a 'coolie style' location for prostitutes would be fitting. Other letters in this vein were received, and the lack of police action was complained about (though the editor of the *Mercury* did comment that the evil was a 'difficult one', requiring 'absolute proof'.<sup>6</sup>)

Superintendent Alexander was peeved, pointing out that in the last seven months (the year at this time being 1900) 91 such persons had been arrested (only 14 were convicted - the rest either forfeited bail or were discharged from lack of evidence), but that the provisions of the law made it very difficult to prove guilt.<sup>7</sup> According to the Criminal Law Amendment Act No 22 of 1899, persons who knowingly lived wholly or in part on the earnings of prostitution, and persons who solicited or importuned for immoral purposes in a public place were deemed to be idle and disorderly in terms of Law No 15 of 1869. The law also made provision for the authorisation of search warrants for residences suspected of housing prostitutes. Maximum sentences were six months with hard labour or a fine of twenty pounds. However, at least two constables had to witness a street offence, and evidence that a house was being used as a brothel was not always easy to find. Superintendent Alexander maintained that the men who had been accosted by prostitutes normally refused to testify to this. He bewailed the difficulty also of proving men to be pimps.

Later in July, Superintendent Alexander reported that the exodus of continental women from the Transvaal and Orange River Colony to Durban was still occurring. This too, he said, was 'almost daily augmented by fresh importations from European ports'. He worried what effect this 'display' would have upon the native mind.<sup>8</sup>

We are again reminded that Durban's settler community was permeated by fears of miscegenation and the desire to uphold the purity of their womenfolk. Inspector Alexander was giving expression to a widely-held concern. Prostitutes were 'fallen women' and regarded, as will be seen, as a 'necessary evil'. They were excluded from the general category of white womanhood whose purity and virtue was to be protected. What worried Inspector Alexander and many of his contemporaries however, was the visibility of the prostitutes and the fact that through observation of their behaviour, black men might lose respect for white women in general. It was felt to be of paramount importance that this not happen for if white women lost the respect of black men, it was feared that their virtue would be difficult to protect. It was thought that the protection of the purity of white womenfolk meant the protection of the purity of the white race.

To continue however, the word 'display' was not ill-chosen or exaggerated. Prostitutes solicited openly in major thoroughfares. They advertised their wares by parading the borough in rickshas. They spoke loudly in foreign accents.<sup>9</sup>

Though the socially and morally accepted and 'correct' attitude to the prostitutes was one of scandalised horror, some members of the town were fascinated by the exotic spectacle of the 'fallen women'. A judge was horrified to find that two respectable women had actively sought out the prostitutes, driven by curiosity. Commenting about Mrs Lawes and Mrs Cheeseman, he remarked censoriously: 'What should have induced these, two married women, to go into Grey Street and see these French women, he could not say'.<sup>10</sup>

During the remainder of 1900 various fines, ranging from £3 to £7 were imposed on women found guilty of soliciting, or of keeping a brothel<sup>11</sup>. (Another difficulty for the police arose from the fact that one woman alone could not be found guilty of keeping a brothel.) Other prostitutes chose to avoid the court experience and simply forfeited their bail. Bail was generally set at approximately £10.

In 1901, numerous arrests were made against women soliciting or keeping brothels.<sup>12</sup> In addition, from then on, some attention was focused on landlords. Several landlords were charged with letting houses for illegal purposes. Writing about Johannesburg, Van Onselen held that 'rents in the central part of town climbed beyond the reach of those who earned more modest incomes'<sup>13</sup>. Rent structures in Durban were also transformed. The practice was lucrative. Ros Posel writes of Latif Osman, a notorious landlord who charged rents of £15 while issuing receipts for £8.<sup>14</sup> In 1903 headlines

agonised over 'Extortionate Indian landlords', using Latif Osman, who was once more up before the court, as an example. 'Evidence of the woman who occupied the house' the newspaper reported, 'was of a startling nature, and showed, if it be true, how the proprietors of these houses bleed these unfortunate creatures.'<sup>15</sup> The occupant stated that rent had gone from £12 to £15, and that she had lent the landlord £11. The newspaper considered that a fair rent was approximately £3 or £4. At around the same time, an Indian named Prashu Daju appeared in court, charged with letting a house knowingly to two prostitutes. The women stated that they had told him of their profession. They paid £17 for four rooms and £5 'key money'<sup>16</sup>.

Indian women were also involved. Berkeath Bee was found guilty of letting No 2 Cross Street for the purpose of prostitution and fined £10 with the option of one month imprisonment<sup>17</sup>. Also in 1902, a report appeared of an Indian landlady's apparent wealth. 'An elderly Indian woman, in attire more than usually gaudy was ... fined £10 or two months imprisonment' for having let a house to 'undesirables'. The report disapprovingly noted that on receiving her sentence, she unfolded a handkerchief, removed the required gold pieces and paid her fine<sup>18</sup>.

Landlords thus obtained substantial incomes renting houses to prostitutes. In addition it was difficult to prove that this was what they were doing. Moosa Hajee Adam, for example, was

charged with keeping 82 and 84 Prince Edward Street and 178 and 180, 182 and 184 Grey Street, as common bawdy houses. He was told by the police that his occupants were prostitutes and that he must evict them. In court, he swore that the houses had been re-let after the eviction notices were served, but that another group of prostitutes had taken them over. He could not be found guilty<sup>19</sup>.

The prostitutes proved to be a lucrative source of income, not only to landlords and landladies, but to the borough of Durban itself. In 1902 Superintendent Alexander reckoned that approximately fifty brothels existed. In his own defence, he stated that 132 women were charged with keeping disorderly houses, as were 33 Indian landlords. Approximately 100 women had been charged with soliciting on the streets. 'The amount of fines and bails accruing from this source amounts to £1300.'<sup>20</sup> An interesting article appeared in the *Natal Mercury* in response. The writer referred to this income as 'a point in the report that no citizen can read without a feeling of shame'<sup>21</sup>. In a letter, 'Fair Play' accused the borough of allowing the women to maintain the police force. Having studied the matter, 'Fair Play' noted that some £70 to £80 had been paid in by these women in the past week<sup>22</sup>. The article and letter stirred a great response. (A moral debate ensued which will be touched on later.) The subject of prostitution was brought to the fore and, because of this it seems, Alexander stepped up his fight against the 'evil'. In February 14 people were charged with keeping disorderly



houses and 55 with indecent conduct<sup>23</sup>. By April, Superintendent Alexander claimed that 40 of the women and 100 of the men who were living on their earnings had left town<sup>24</sup>. 'Unbiased', in a letter estimated that the women must have contributed at least £2000 to the revenue of the town. He added : 'I do not think there is any place in South Africa where these women are more persecuted than in Durban, but they still carry on their trade'<sup>25</sup>.

Landlords were benefiting financially from prostitutes in these early years. So was the borough. The prostitutes were exploited by a third group - their agents or pimps. It seems that not all, or even the majority of women operated under a pimp<sup>26</sup>. Pimps were in evidence though. In July 1901 Abraham Friedman, alias Napoleon, was charged with living on the earnings of prostitution. His behaviour towards two women, Sarah Shingle and Sarah Siegle, was apparently so unbearable that they complained to the police, and testified he demanded £5 a month from each of them as protection money<sup>27</sup>. James Stewart was charged with keeping a bawdy house<sup>28</sup>. Kolman Schneider was charged with knowingly living on the earnings of a prostitute<sup>29</sup>. Rosie Muller stated that she had given him £800.

Though this study deals essentially with white women, it should be mentioned that not all prostitutes in Durban could be termed 'continental' women. Information is sketchy, but coloured women were arrested for soliciting<sup>30</sup>. Public opinion

was inflamed when white men were found sleeping with black women. It was reported in an article that 'a disgusting story was told in court this morning when the Magistrate had to investigate charges preferred against five 'kafir' women for keeping houses of ill repute. In one, four soldiers were discovered, in another, at one of the main entrances to town, and kept by four of the prisoners, were 15 or 20, while police stopped eight others outside.<sup>31</sup> Each woman was fined £3 or six weeks imprisonment, to be sent afterwards to their kraals<sup>32</sup>.

A comment is necessary here. Miscegenation between white men and black women was not condoned. In fact, when cases were publicised, outrage was the result. This outrage quickly died down however, for men were seen as beings for whom sexual outlet was vital. Men who consorted with black women were pitied as weak sexual beings, rather than abhorred. Chrisholm, writing of industrial schools and reformatories for girls at this time however, notes that 'inter-racial sex featured prominently as a reason for committal<sup>33</sup>.' She points out that 'any sexual flouting of the racial code reinforced the association of lower class girls and women with degeneracy.<sup>34</sup> White women who consorted with black men were not branded weak but degenerate - another aspect of the sexual double standard.

The Cape 'Morality' Act of 1902 and defensive legislation passed by the Orange River Colony in 1903 (see endnote 3)

had come into effect, 'with the result', reported the *Natal Mercury* 'that almost all the prostitutes and men living upon their earnings have left these colonies and made their way into Natal.' The writer asserted that 'during the past three weeks, over forty of these women have arrived in Durban by the overland route, notwithstanding the fact that ... the Immigration Department has a man stationed at Charlestown to restrict such persons from entering the town ... It is a great pity that this should be the case, as the evil was being so well kept in check and, until a few weeks ago was hardly noticeable in the streets of this borough ...<sup>35</sup>'.

To help curb immorality, on the fifteenth of September 1903, the Criminal Law Amendment Act No 31 was gazetted. Among other things, a tightened definition of who should be deemed to be a brothel keeper was introduced, as were harsher maximum penalties for 'fallen women' and their 'associates'. In October 1903, however an uproar was raised over whether or not Durban was a 'Modern Babylon'<sup>36</sup>, and whether prostitution could be eliminated. A host of contradictory opinions were expressed in letters to newspapers. The Reverend Weeks felt compelled to deliver a sermon (males only) on chastity, and *The Prince* asserted that some 200 brothels existed in Durban and that these were supported by some of the leading men in town.

Superintendent Alexander published a denial of all these allegations, stating that on the 30th September, only 13

houses existed in the borough which could be termed brothels, and that proceedings were pending against most of them. He was further pleased to say 'that only 32 European women could now in any way be prosecuted under the Morality Act.'<sup>37</sup>

After this, public outrage tended to die down. Some, though certainly not all, of the prostitutes returned to the Transvaal. As will be seen, some borough inhabitants were happy to let prostitution exist, as long as it was not too obvious. Publicized police efforts had made even the violently anti-prostitution faction content, at least for a time. In January of 1904, in an article headed 'A year's police work', Superintendent Alexander wrote that 179 persons had been convicted under the Morality Act, being 41 less than the previous year. This, he stated, 'has reduced the offence to a minimum ... We still have a few left, but they do not give much trouble, as I have received very few complaints against them'<sup>38</sup>.

His complacency must have been somewhat shattered by the needling of *The Prince* in September. In the article, Durban was referred to as 'the dumping ground of traders in vice, the new home of the Cape Town damned'. The author alleged, 'on the most excellent authority ... that the Superintendent has received numerous complaints on this matter and that within twenty minutes of a complaint being made the prostitutes know all about it and also the name of the complainer. These women are working hand in glove with certain members of the police'<sup>39</sup>.

Still, (perhaps by this time used to *The Prince's* virulent attacks) Alexander's public reaction was mild. In early October, an article was run, pointing out that a number of 'immoral characters', recently arrived from Cape Town, had been convicted of immorality. An obvious dig was made at *The Prince*: 'as soon as it is known that such characters are in the borough, they are at once arrested, convicted and put out of it ... there is little to complain of'<sup>40</sup>.

The Police Department Report listed forty-three European disorderly house charges, in the year prior to 31st July 1905<sup>41</sup>. There were 27 in 1906<sup>42</sup>, 20 in 1907<sup>43</sup>, 6 in 1908<sup>44</sup>, 2 in 1909<sup>45</sup> and 1 in 1910<sup>46</sup>. Charges against persons for indecent conduct decreased accordingly. The odd newspaper report about immorality convictions or charges occurred<sup>47</sup>, but public response was apathetic.

In 1910 Adjutant Williams of the Salvation Army (at a meeting called by a special Committee of the Women's Enfranchisement League, for women only, 'to consider the native domestic problem and other social matters concerning women in Natal') gave some details of her work among 'the erring and unfortunate white women'. She said that though her work was not pleasant, it could not be shunned. While the outside world in Durban knew little of the social evil, it did exist. Her work was divided usually into three classes - Prevention, Rescue and Maternity. Giving an example of her work,

Adjutant Williams told of a letter she had received from England, telling of a girl who was found to be missing when her mistress returned from Durban to the Rand. The girl was found, 'having fortunately escaped from the clutches of a woman who enticed her to stay behind'<sup>48</sup>. It is interesting to compare this report with the official statistics - only 1 person was charged with keeping a disorderly house and only 29 with indecent conduct<sup>49</sup> (a category which includes a number of offences apart from soliciting and prostitution). Nevertheless, public indignation went unaroused and, in 1911, there were no arrests made on charges of keeping disorderly houses, or of indecent conduct<sup>50</sup>.

A brief history of these years has been given, but the period needs to be further analysed. A comparison with the English example is useful, to aid in contextualisation, for it must be remembered that Durban was at this time a 'willing bastion' of the British empire. It was fashionable to talk longingly of 'Home' and to study British newspapers and journals. A conscious effort was made to turn Durban into a 'little England'. Leading borough citizens imbibed British ideas and attitudes. A brief history of British prostitution and reactions thereto can be outlined and analysed, shedding light on prostitution in Durban.

Weeks holds that 'the wide-spread toleration of prostitution was reflected in the absence of any serious legislative attack on the problem until the 1860's , with the passing of the



Contagious Disease Acts'<sup>51</sup>. As has already been discussed, prompted by the high incidence of venereal disease in Britain's armed forces, the Contagious Diseases Acts provided for the genital examination of any women suspected of being a 'common prostitute'. If she was found to have VD, she could be placed in a 'lock hospital' until a cure was effected. Men were not touched by these acts. The CD acts of 1864, 1866 and 1869 aimed obviously, at regulation, not prohibition of prostitution.

Feminists, social moralists and a large number of working class men and women (for it was working class women who were liable to be accused of prostitution and sent for examination) protested. Many called for one moral standard for both men and women. People were shocked by exposes of the white slave trade - reports of abduction of innocent young girls and of child rape. The CD acts were repealed in 1885. In addition, the Criminal Law Amendment Act was passed. This raised the age of consent to 16 for girls. Its legislation also provided for the suppression of brothels.

This brief outline does not do justice to the complexity of the issues surrounding prostitution in England at this time. What is made evident however is the desire on the part of the authorities to regulate rather than prohibit a 'necessary' evil. A campaign started by the likes of Josephine Butler was eventually able to generate enough moral pressure to change this. Prostitution, if invisible was tolerated. Once

it was pushed into the public eye however, the authorities were forced to take action.

The question of prostitution as a 'necessary evil' requires elucidation and must be explained in terms of the 'double standard'. To examine both these concepts and their ramifications for prostitution in Durban, it is necessary to analyse views on sexuality which prevailed during the Victorian and early Edwardian eras. In a Christian framework chastity was still the ideal. For those who could not follow this path though, marriage offered a poor but at least non-sinful alternative. Ostensibly, lust and carnal gratification were frowned on for both sexes, outside of rigidly defined parameters. In reality however, two moral standards existed - one for men and one for women. Sexually, men were seen as active and genital, women as passive - a sexual 'recipient'. Lucy Bland points out that man's sexual urge was viewed as 'biologically "natural"', and it was this that gave the rationale for the double standard: that unchastity was excusable and understandable for a man, but both unforgivable and unnatural in women'<sup>52</sup>. Problems and contradictions were consequent on this ideology. As Weeks notes, it 'enjoined chastity on the female while allowing a large degree of sexual freedom for the male'<sup>53</sup>. What of the man who married late? How was the 'purity' of his wife, daughter, mother, unmarried sisters, to be maintained?

Some form of solution to this dilemma was found in the



division of women into two classes - the pure and virtuous and the fallen. 'The pedestalled wife and mother depended for her purity on the degradation of the fallen women.'<sup>54</sup> From this ideology stemmed the view that prostitution was a 'necessary evil' - necessary both as a male outlet and for the preservation of female purity. Prostitutes were transformed into sexual objects, fulfilling a needed role. Thus the demand for the services of prostitutes<sup>55</sup> is explained in the context of the ways male and female sexuality were defined. The supply was ensured by the greater financial remuneration afforded to women through prostitution.

As has been seen, evident in England was a desire on the part of the authorities to regulate rather than prohibit this 'necessary evil'. Prostitution, if invisible, was tolerated. But, given Britain's huge empire, it became imperative to eliminate venereal disease from the armed forces. The attempts at regulation publicized prostitution as a moral issue.

Durban's authorities were dealing with the problem within a different context, a context altered by the impact of the racial order, as will be seen. Arrests were made in connection with prostitution, and legislation tightening controls was passed. Was this intended though to eradicate prostitution or to keep it under control, at a manageable level? At this time, the total elimination of prostitution was not desired. In the light of what was to come in 1917,

the City Council was by no means doing all in its power to rid the borough of prostitutes. The control of prostitution in these early years was left largely to the discretion of Superintendent Alexander, and while brothel-keepers were arrested in response to the complaints of neighbours, a total closure of all brothels was not ordered. As has been seen, many arrests for soliciting on the streets were made, but this can be explained in terms of the toleration of prostitution if invisible.

Statements made by Superintendent Alexander are also revealing. He wrote, in 1902 with regards to prostitution: 'I trust in time to stamp the evil out, that is to say, as a nuisance to the public and neighbours'<sup>56</sup>. In 1905 he wrote: 'The most serious matter to deal with is the immorality between the black and white races, in the case of European men, many of whom I find about the borough, living with native women ... there is another side of the question. If the Continental women are to be hounded about and out of the town, as they are by your police, we force the low class strangers and sailors whom you find at all seaport towns, into the society of the black women, thus bringing disgrace upon our own people and making our task in dealing with the natives more difficult.'<sup>57</sup> Mr J Stuart, magistrate, felt, like the superintendent, that the 'natives' would be difficult to control 'until we uproot these women from our midst or at least obtain absolute mastery over them.'<sup>58</sup>

In 1901 Mr R Renaud, defending three continental women against the charge of keeping a common bawdy house, said that what was complained of in Durban as the social evil was women parading the streets. He stated that the women had been quiet, had kept to the house and had carried on a trade which might almost be called a 'necessary evil in a large town'<sup>59</sup>. In November a correspondent deplored what he called a 'Sabbath Street Scene' - continental women soliciting openly in the streets, watched by little boys and girls. He urged the police to stop this, adding, 'if they cannot do it, then those gallant female figures, their marauding pimps and others of that ilk should be compelled to reside out of the city.'<sup>60</sup> In 1902, a columnist commenting on the report of the Superintendent of Police said, 'Open solicitation in the streets is, of course, a thing that cannot be permitted ...'<sup>61</sup>. He went on to qualify his statement however, saying 'more, we believe, can be done by regulation and seeing that the nuisance is not a nuisance to others, than by a system of punishing women by heavy fines, which only forces them to ply their calling with greater persistence'.

Other citizens of Durban agreed with this analysis. 'Fairplay' wrote 'As long as these women behave themselves and do not parade the streets at night, but remain in their respective abodes, I do not see that they should be interfered with. The social evil cannot, and will not, be done away with in any military town or seaport'.<sup>62</sup> 'Broad Minded'voiced agreement<sup>63</sup>. 'Pro Bono Publico' mentioned barracks and regular

examinations by a district surgeon<sup>64</sup>.

If, therefore, prostitution was seen as a necessary evil, it could not be eliminated. Regulation was thus essential. As in England, many felt that prostitution, if invisible should be allowed to exist under the control of the authorities. However, a major factor existed which altered the circumstances of prostitution in Durban from those in England, and exacerbated the idea of prostitution as a necessary evil. This factor, as has already been alluded to, was race. It must be remembered that there were fewer European women than men in the borough.<sup>65</sup> As has been stated by Superintendent Alexander, it was felt that if white men were unable to consort with continental women they would turn to black women. A man's natural urges were regrettable but excusable. If he indulged them with a black women however, he risked sullyng the purity of mankind, womankind and the white race. This was less excusable. It may therefore have been the fear of miscegenation that made the authorities in Durban even more reluctant to attempt to eradicate prostitution than their counterparts in England had been, while even more determined to render prostitution invisible - not only to the white inhabitants of the town, but especially to the black men who lived and worked in Durban and who it was feared, would, if aware of the 'immoral lives' prostitutes led, lose their respect for white women in general.

Though parallels between Victorian England and Durban can be

drawn during this period, it is once more evident that a study of white women in Durban is incomplete unless viewed in relation to the wider colonial context, and particularly the racial order. The way in which Durban's authorities dealt with white prostitution was, if compared to England, subtly altered in relation to this colonial context.

The period 1900 to approximately 1908 was one of public debate in the face of continued evidence of the existence of prostitution. That is not to say that 'crack-downs' to appease the morally outraged 'anti-prostitution in any form' factor did not occur. They did. In 1901, after a number of letters<sup>66</sup> deploring the 'slow ruin of male youth through temptation', and the 'corruption of innocent children', a heading in the *Natal Mercury* announced a 'crusade against immorality'<sup>67</sup>. In one week nine women were convicted of soliciting or brothel-keeping and two forfeited their bail. In 1902, after it was alleged that the police force of the borough was being financed by the proceeds accruing from prostitution, a huge debate ensued, and prostitution once more became the topic of the moment. Many agreed with the 'necessary evil' theory, but not all. Concerned citizens were shocked and horrified at the idea that the evil should continue, even invisibly. Writers asked for the imposition of harsher penalties. Others wanted rescue work done amongst their 'fallen sisters'. Some enlightened moralists felt that the evil could be stamped out with the imposition of equal penalties for men and women involved<sup>68</sup>. It has already been

shown that due to the publicising of the issue, Alexander increased his arrests. The outrage of October 1903, covered by Posel<sup>69</sup>, again led to a spate of arrests.

At this stage one might try to pull the strands together and generalise. During these years, there were those who found the existence of prostitution shocking, though it was widely regarded as a necessary evil. Some members of the populace became riled when prostitutes became too 'forward', though, when their visibility increased through open solicitation or raucous behaviour. At these times, arrests were increased and prostitutes forced back to the relative invisibility of brothels. The 'no to prostitution' group was appeased. Essentially therefore prostitution was controlled but not eliminated.

Between 1908 and 1911, prostitution was mentioned less often in the press. Few arrests were reported. Numbers of disorderly house arrests, always mentioned in the Police Report in the *Mayor's Minutes*, dropped from six to nought. In 1911, prostitution arrest categories were dropped completely from the *Mayor's Minutes*. In the *Natal Mercury* 'local and general' column, where previously hundreds of prostitution cases had been reported, the topic ceased to be mentioned.

For a researcher, this is puzzling. Could prostitution have been totally eliminated from a seaport town? If it had

been, surely this fact in itself was worthy of mention? After the Anglo-Boer War, a number of prostitutes had returned to Johannesburg and the Transvaal. However, certainly some remained. Moreover, when war broke out in 1914, and Durban became a troop base and transit station, the issue of prostitution still did not rear its head. Not one mention of prostitution appeared in the newspapers until 1915 when the Reverend E Nuttall (speaking at the opening of the native location) alleged that 'there are haunts of vice and immorality, and houses from which men of my own colour and blood are deriving profit today'<sup>70</sup>.

It is through investigation into events in late 1916, that matters become clearer. It was stated, then, that eight officially sanctioned brothels existed in Durban. The Chief Constable (then D Donovan), referring to this, said that 'the present arrangements were in accord with the policy approved by the Council some years ago'. He felt that conditions in Durban had improved since then, and were notably more satisfactory than in parts of the Union where prostitution was rigorously suppressed. The borough police ensured the 'proper conduct' of the houses. A list of women involved was available, and it seems that regular medical checks occurred.<sup>71</sup> Why this acknowledgement was made at this time is unclear, but one can postulate<sup>72</sup> that certain members of the Town Council were uncomfortable about their involvement in the issue. A discussion ensued amongst council members in the next few months. Councillor Askew pressed for the abolition

of prostitution and in April 1917, Councillor Payne expressed his intention of moving in the next meeting of the Council-in-Committee that the law relating to brothels be enforced.<sup>73</sup>

Three months later, the issue of prostitution once more became the focus of the borough. In July 1917 (after a meeting held on the 20th June), a delegation of the newly municipally enfranchised women of the borough, under the auspices of the League of Honour, was received by the Town Council<sup>74</sup>. The Mayoress, Mrs J H Nicolson addressed the Council on behalf of the deputation.<sup>75</sup> Speaking (she said) on behalf, not only of the local interests of the town, but also the well-being of the many soldiers associated with the town, she stated that 'they were credibly informed that there existed in the town several houses commonly known as houses of ill-fame. They were led to believe that these houses carried on their trade, and that the police, though well aware of their existence, took no steps to close them'. She added that it was understood that the existence of these houses and the carrying on of trade was contrary both to the laws of the land and the by-laws of the borough. They had been informed that the Town Councillors knew of the houses. It was incontestable that the houses existed and that the police did not close them<sup>76</sup>.

The statement went further: members of the deputation felt that 'the known existence and accessibility of the houses tended to foster immorality and to produce an attitude



towards it which was demoralising for both men and women ... If no steps were taken to close the houses it was only natural that the number of them would increase; this meant that immoral women would be drawn from other parts of the Union to Durban ... The consequences when the war was over would present a problem which would be difficult to solve'. It was added that the women of the borough, now possessing the municipal franchise, were taking a keen interest in the affairs of the town and were awakening to the fact of their responsibility in municipal matters.

The hornet's nest had been stirred. A debate ensued over whether the enforcement of the Criminal Law Amendment Act No 31 of 1903 be left as before to the discretion of the Chief Constable (which meant in effect that brothels were tacitly sanctioned) or whether the Chief Constable be instructed to enforce the law with regard to brothels.<sup>77</sup>

Mr Payne made an eloquent speech. Leaving the enforcement of the Criminal Law Amendment Act to the discretion of the Chief Constable was very sly, he argued. It suggested that the law was to be enforced, but the Council knew that the present policy of ignoring the law had been followed for years and would continue to be so, if allowed to. He felt that the Council had 'adopted a cause it could not justify' on the grounds that it was 'the lesser of two evils',<sup>78</sup> thereby relating back, obviously, to the idea that men would be men. (At least in this way the purity of wives, mothers

and sisters was assured, miscegenation would not occur, and the prostitutes would be kept off the streets.) He admitted that if the houses were closed the evil might be more apparent and would necessitate strict police activity, but to recognise houses of ill-fame, however inconspicuous they might be, would mean 'one dark blot on their fair sheet'. He alleged that there were actually ten houses, consigned to the portions of town occupied by 'natives' and Indians, containing 31 women. These he termed 'unfortunate victims' who 'often died young', and said that the Council ran the risk of encouraging the white slave trade in Durban.

Mr Burman, the deputy mayor felt that the Council's position was one of support for the lesser of two evils: 'The worse evil was the evil of soliciting', but the Council had not winked at the other. Mr Coleman said that the Council had. He referred to evidence that a 'house' had been in existence for twenty years, others for fifteen, fourteen, twelve and ten.

Eventually the matter was referred to the Council-in-Committee for further consideration. Meanwhile, the borough was in a state of uproar. Different views abounded and numerous letters to the press were written. 'A Mere Woman' wrote that the actions of the delegation had showed her plainly 'how our sex will act when allowed a vote and allowed to dabble in politics. They go too far without thought ... to protect our sisters and daughters these houses are necessary ... These

women perhaps forget that the Almighty made our men different in habit to us.'<sup>79</sup>

'Fiat Lux' disagreed however. The letter ran : 'Many of your readers stood aghast when, on opening their paper on Friday morning they read what was, to most of them a revelation, and a very sad one too, of a disgraceful state of affairs tolerated by the Town Council and Police in violation of the laws of the land ... All honour to the Durban ladies of all persuasions for taking their stand in this matter, even in the face of the sneers of some of the Council'<sup>80</sup>.

'Clod' wrote that houses of ill-fame were the result of poverty.<sup>81</sup> 'Nero' felt that the oldest profession would continue to exist, come what may and 'sane and decent steps' should be taken in the matter.<sup>82</sup> 'A Woman Voter' wrote that the solution to the problem of the houses was simple. 'It rests entirely with the men. If men refused to visit these places they would cease to exist'. She added, 'who cares for the souls of these unfortunates who are supposed to yield their bodies for the pleasure of the men who destroy them?'<sup>83</sup> 'Not one of the Petitioners' stated that 'the very sight of these houses and their inmates awakens slumbering passions'<sup>84</sup>.

Prostitution, and the action the Town Council was to take, were once again issues very much in the public eye. Meetings of the Council-in-Committee were held in August, and it was

advertised that burgesses desiring to submit views on the matter to the council could do so, in the strictest confidentiality. In August also, municipal elections were held and the subject of prostitution became the topic of the hour for the candidates. Mr Harry Norrie stated that the interests of the prostitutes, in common with the rest of the working class, should be scrutinised, and the inmates of brothels 'raised' (presumably from their fallen state). Letters to the press continued.

'Catholicus' wrote that as social impurity sprang from lust, and that as this evil sprang forth from the heart, the state and municipal government could not be held solely responsible for curbing the evil.<sup>85</sup> 'Pity on fallen Women' asked if any would seek to 'reclaim the poor souls rather than stone them away from the city'. The writer added that 'the law is never very tender where women are concerned and sometimes it savors of harshness and injustice'<sup>86</sup>. 'Fiat Lux', opposing Mr Norrie, wrote that the women who engaged in immoral traffic 'do so from love of money and luxury ... These women are no amateurs, but professionals, trained to their trade, just as much as the dressmaker or Milliner'<sup>87</sup>. The writer stated that a midnight mission, to save the men who frequented the houses should be held.

Some held the view that it was not surprising that a number of girls in Durban turned to prostitution, as they were badly underpaid. 'Spies bona' reacted violently against this

allegation, saying that girls in Durban were known' to be wasting their money on betting and racehorses', learning racecourse slang and vulgarity. He referred to them as 'half damned already', and blamed mothers for not keeping their daughters innocent and pure. A pamphlet titled 'What Every Girl Should Know,' contained he said, everything a girl should not know.<sup>88</sup> In answer, 'Colleen' wrote that purity did not necessarily mean ignorance of evil.<sup>89</sup>

Opinions were many and varied. The council met to discuss the issue on September 6.<sup>90</sup> A number of recommendations were adopted - the Chief Constable was to enforce the provisions of the Criminal Law Amendment Act no 31 of 1903. The government was to be urged to take steps to enable sufferers from venereal diseases to be treated secretly and free of charge<sup>91</sup>. The recommendation enforcing that law was not passed without a struggle however. Councillor Gilbert felt that 'under the new conditions, the womanhood of the town was open to molestation.'<sup>92</sup> He submitted a memorial signed by 310 women and girls of Durban, petitioning that 'these houses of ill fame be tolerated under strict supervision and so secure for us proper protection to go to and from our daily employment'<sup>93</sup>. The instigator of the memorial was one Frances May Boon, who wrote that 'it was my proud boast that this was the only seaport town where public solicitation was not in vogue, owing to the tactful manner in which the police authorities had controlled houses of ill fame here'.

Councillor Gilbert, seconded by Councillor Johnson put forward an amendment to the effect that as the suppression of brothels must inevitably fail, legislation should ensure the removal of such houses to non-residential areas, the supervision of inmates and houses, and the improvement of female working conditions, notably by the introduction of a 'living' wage for females in industrial employ. Mr Hay, in support noted that the number of troops passing through Durban made the matter a difficult one. He added, in tribute to the existing system, that the incidence of venereal disease in said troops after leaving Durban was almost non-existent. Nevertheless, the Amendment was lost, six to eight.<sup>94</sup>

While the laws regarding prostitution were finally to be enforced, some concern was shown for the prostitutes themselves. The Mayor felt that it would be most unfortunate if they were turned out onto the streets from these houses, which 'owing to the laxity of the Town Council in administering the law, they had been allowed to occupy'. As a result, it was resolved that the Chief Constable be instructed to report to the Town Council at as early a date as possible the position in which each of the women would be placed, 'with a view to the Council taking such steps as may be necessary to extend relief'<sup>95</sup>. Indeed, after the Town Constable, from his own pocket, distributed the sum of 13.10 to enable prostitutes to return to their homes, the council-in committee resolved to recommend that he be reimbursed by the municipality<sup>96</sup>. 'Practical charity' was also



given to the women by various organisations.

On Friday 14 September, the first two 'guilty' verdicts on charges of brothel keeping were imposed. The women were fined 10 or given the option of one 1 month imprisonment.<sup>97</sup> 'Man in the Moon' was not amused. His columns in the next few weeks always broached the subject of prostitution. Now that the brothels were being closed, he said sarcastically, 'we shall all feel extremely virtuous, bury ourselves in sanctity and generally be as smug and comfortable as possible'<sup>98</sup>. He noted, 'Here we are involved in the most desperate conflict in the world's long and bloody history, occupied ... with such subjects as "The Suppression of Houses of Ill Fame". A pretty figure we cut before the world'<sup>99</sup>.

Those who had propounded the 'lesser of two evils' theory were pleased to note they had been right. Soliciting in the streets was becoming a problem even by the end of September. Prostitutes also now began to work from bars and hotels in ever-increasing numbers.<sup>100</sup> By March 1918, 'Man in the Moon' was gloating, 'hardly a street, and some of the principle thoroughfares is free from the evil they (the town council) vainly tried to suppress ... Some of the pleasantest resorts in town are now taboo from the Council's inane action.'<sup>101</sup>

To attempt to salvage the situation in the face of increasing public protest, in late March the Chief Constable persuaded

the Acting Chief Magistrate to pass an order, under the Public Welfare Act, prohibiting the supply of intoxicating liquor to women on licensed bar premises. It was hoped that this would discourage prostitutes plying their trade in bars, and do away with part of the bar-keeper's incentive for allowing them to be there (namely increased alcohol sales).

The order was promulgated on March 20, 1918, and elicited an approving response in the leading columns of the Nm. The order was referred to as 'a strong step of a wise and timely nature'. The writer asserted 'we have reason to believe that the extent to which the Durban bar premises were frequented by certain classes of our female population was a question that greatly exercised the mind of Mr Donovan ... A number of the barkeepers on whose premises this evil was most flagrantly allowed were individually given private warning on the subject ... some ... gave no heed ... the scandal (has) lately become a strong disgrace to the community ...' He felt that 'respectable women', suffering deprivation 'will cheerfully acquiesce for the sake of their weaker sisters'.<sup>102</sup>

The writer was wrong. Many women were disgusted that they could no longer enjoy a glass of beer or wine with friends or husbands. Strong letters were written to the press.<sup>103</sup>

Laura Ruxton, president of the Women's Enfranchisement League, wrote a scathing letter asking that the same treatment be meted out to men<sup>104</sup>. Owing to the protest, the Town Council



chose to review the matter. A heated debate arose. The action was eventually upheld, but due to dissention among the councillors (to the extent that Councillor Hooper withdrew from the meeting), it was amended that the Chief Constable acquaint the Council with the information on which he based his decision. Even this amendment was lost, however<sup>105</sup>.

In May, Councillor Johnston again tried to over-rule the order, calling for the suspension of the Chief Constable. His motion was rejected, with the order still in effect. Councillor Hooper retired again from the Council Chambers.

In June the council was once more faced with the issue of immorality. Street soliciting had continued, and a petition from a large number of burgesses and working women of the town was received. The petition ran: 'We, the undersigned, recognising as we do the evil results of the policy adopted by the Town Council, whereby prostitution has spread all over the Borough and its adjacent outskirts, more particularly in the public parks, and observing as we do the increasing competition of native and coloured prostitutes, hereby respectfully request that some measures may be taken whereby all houses of ill-fame may be placed under strict police supervision and thereby secure for us proper protection and also to the whole population, immunity from a contagion which, if not checked, will devastate the lives of countless numbers'.<sup>106</sup>

Once the council members had taken just such measures. Then they had done so secretly. They were now being requested to openly repeat their stance. This they could not do. Whether or not they believed prostitution confined, under supervision, to discreet brothels, to be the lesser of two evils, council members could not publicly be seen to subvert the laws of the land and Christian morality. They stated that they were unable to recommend that the Chief Constable depart from the provisions of the Criminal Law Amendment Act No 31 of 1903. Prostitution and allegations of 'havens of immorality'<sup>107</sup> continued.

Legislation thus, was enforced. The ladies of Durban however had not realised that the closure of the brothels, on its own could not eradicate prostitution. Economic and social 'push and pull' factors remained - sweated labour, low wages, poor working conditions, drudgery. By 1919 an exacerbating factor existed - the retrenchment of women workers as soldiers returned to their old jobs. Moreover the double standard still existed. There was thus still a demand from men for prostitutes, in the growing seaport of Durban. Prostitution from 1917 to 1920 was pushed onto the streets, its visibility increased. But it was by no means eradicated.

The delegation had not attained their intended goal. However, in achieving tangible results they had proved that women in Durban could be a force to be reckoned with, particularly when organised into groups. It is to a closer

examination of the role of such groups in the history of women in Durban that we now turn.

## END NOTES

1. *Natal Mercury*, Friday, 12 January 1900 - 'Round the Town' by 'Perambulator'
2. This study is part of a larger study on white women in Durban during a period of twenty years. The focus therefore is on white prostitution and further study should be undertaken on black prostitution, which most certainly existed in the borough at this time.
3. From the turn of the century, several factors combined to make Durban a favourable environment for prostitution, at least in comparison with the rest of South Africa. The Cape Contagious Diseases Act of 1885 made Cape Town and Port Elizabeth scheduled areas where prostitutes could be subjected to forcible examinations and cures for venereal disease. Legislation of 1897 aimed at the eradication of prostitution in Johannesburg. The outbreak of war in 1899 saw an influx of 'fallen women' into Durban from the Transvaal and Orange River Colony. The Cape 'Morality Bill' of 1902 set harsh penalties for prostitutes and pimps. In 1903 the Orange River Colony passed an ordinance providing for the suppression of brothels and immorality. It is no wonder that Natal was described as 'the territory ... now most vulnerable of all'. C Van Onselen, 'Prostitutes and Proletarians: 1886 - 1914' in *Studies in the Social and Economic History of the Witwatersrand 1886 - 1914* (1982), p 117. In addition, postulating a link, based on statistical evidence between prostitution, urbanisation and the growth of early industrial capitalism, markets for prostitution in South Africa, in Durban for example, were opening up as markets in Europe were closing. Importantly, there were more European men than European women resident in the borough, (a point that is discussed in the body of the chapter) a situation that was exacerbated by the first World War when Durban became a transit camp for troops. (see note 63).

At times hundreds and even thousands of soldiers were stationed in the borough.

4. *Natal Mercury*, Friday 12 January 1900; Monday 2 July 1900; Wednesday 6 March 1901; Saturday 23 March 1901 Monday 8 July 1901; Wednesday 10 July 1901; Monday 13 November 1901; Monday 6 January 1902.
5. *Natal Mercury*, Monday 2 July 1900.
6. *Ibid.*, Monday 2 July 1900.
7. Natal Archives, *Police Report Book* (PRB) 6, 6 July 1900.
8. PRB 6, 31 July 1900.
9. Van Onselen (*op cit.* p 103) looks at 'push' factors occurring overseas which persuaded a number of women from Europe to ply their trade in South Africa (the repression in Germany, Austria and Hungary, the Great Depression of 1873 - 96, the grape vine disease of the 1890's which affected France and Belgium, the repression of Russian Jews, and the Parkhurst/Lexon Commission in New York, a by-product of which was a clamp-down on prostitutes and pimps). The term 'continental women', used so often at the turn of the century becomes less puzzling. The majority of prostitutes were foreign. France had a widespread reputation of vice and immorality, and the term 'Des Parisiennes' was also coined.
10. *Natal Mercury*, Tuesday 6 November 1900.
11. *Natal Mercury*, Friday September 14 1901; Thursday 22 November 1901; Wednesday 28 1901.
12. *Ibid.*, Examples: Thursday 3 January 1901; Thursday 10 January 1901; Saturday 23 March 1901; Saturday 11 May 1901; Wednesday 22 May 1901; Monday 8 July 1901; Friday 10 July 1901.
13. Van Onselen, C., *op cit.* p 114.
14. Posel, R., "'A Modern Babylon": White prostitution in Durban at the turn of the century' (first draft presented at the ASSA conference, Durban, 1986), p 2.
15. *Natal Mercury*, Saturday 19 September 1903.

16. *Ibid.*, Friday 18 September 1903.
17. *Ibid.*, Thursday January 9 1902.
18. *Ibid.*, Saturday July 5 1902
19. *Ibid.*, Wednesday March 6.
20. PRB 6, 6 January 1902.
21. *Natal Mercury*, Saturday September 13, 1902.
22. *Ibid.*, Thursday, January 9 1902.
23. *Ibid.*, Monday March 10 1902.
24. PRB 6, 6 April 1902.
25. *Natal Mercury*, Saturday September 13 1902.
26. Prostitutes did operate singly. They also teamed up for safety's sake. Brothel keepers and madams also existed. Pat Moran, in his study on tokens (used instead of cash to pay the 'girls' and redeemed at the end of the day) writes of well-known brothels and well-known madams. Pat Moran, *The Tokens of Natal*, (1970) p 45 - 52.
27. *Natal Mercury*, Saturday July 20 1901.
28. *Ibid.*, Friday January 10 1902. This was rather an amusing case. James Harcourt Stewart, a 'journalist' was charged with keeping a bawdy house, at 39 College Lane. Witnesses and police watchers had observed numerous men enter the premises, stay for 30 minutes and leave. Sometimes as many as 7 men would visit in one night. The newspaper solemnly reported that a resident, Mrs Monro, had obtained the name 'Monkey Brand'. Like many others this disorderly house was set in a residential area. This could work against the occupants. A neighbour in College Lane apparently set the ball rolling. She complained about noise emitted from number 39 - screams, fights, swearing, singing, dancing, piano. She testified darkly that 'the songs were not classical'. She also stated that Mrs Monro had paraded the streets in costumes she would not have been seen in, 'not even at night'. Mr Stewart was eventually fined £10 or 1 month.
29. *Ibid.*, Friday January 10 1902.
30. *Ibid.*, Monday July 16 1900.
31. *Ibid.*, Saturday September 20 1902.

32. While evidence of intercourse between white males and black women was shocking, relations between white women and black men were unthinkable. In this regard, Posel notes that: 'given the fact that there were some 20 000 black men living among European women, the police understood the advantage of allowing 500 "very obliging young (black) girls" in the town' - R Posel *op cit.* p 5.
33. Walker, C. (ed.), *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945* (1990)p 307.
34. *Ibid.*, p 301.
35. *Natal Mercury*, Tuesday September 8 1903.
36. This uproar is covered more than adequately by Ros Posel in 'A Modern Babylon': White Prostitution in Durban at the Turn of the Century', p 6-9.
37. *Natal Mercury*, Wednesday November 11 1903.
38. *Ibid.*, Friday January 8 1904.
39. *The Prince*, September 23, 1904.
40. *Natal Mercury*, Saturday October 8 p 10.
41. *The Mayor's Minutes*, 1905 p 123.
42. *Ibid.*, 1906 p 137.
43. *Ibid.*, 1907 p 184.
44. *Ibid.*, 1908 p 164.
45. *Ibid.*, 1909 p 136.
46. *Ibid.*, 1910 p 163.
47. *The Natal Mercury*, Friday January 20 1905; Monday March 27 1905; Friday March 2 1906; Tuesday March 6 1906; Thursday April 2 1908; Friday April 3 1908.
48. *Natal Mercury*, Friday December 16 1910.
49. *The Mayor's Minutes*, 1910 p 163.
50. *Ibid.*, 1911 p 203.
51. Weeks, J., *Sex, Politics and Society* (1981) p 85.
52. Sue Cartledge and Joanna Ryan (eds.) *Sex and Love* (1983) p 10 and 11.
53. Weeks, J., *op cit.* p 22.
54. *Ibid.*, p 19.
55. Linked to the demand for the service of prostitutes was a set of conditions which pressed women to become



prostitutes and fill this demand. Women were marginalised economically. Men were perceived as breadwinners, able to withstand the buffets of the public sphere. Women were to inhabit the private sphere of home and family. When women's work did exist it was generally of a nurturing and family nature - nursing, childminding and housekeeping came to be seen as 'suitable' work for those women unfortunate enough to have to earn money. Other options did exist in Durban, as in England, and increased as the century wore on. Whether a woman was a nurse, a bookkeeper, a factory worker or a clerk however, she received little money. Shop-girls were reported to earn between £2 and £6 monthly, though these sums could hardly secure decent board and lodging (*Natal Mercury* September 9 and 26, 1901) Complaints continued throughout the years, but little was done. By 1919 probationer nurses asked readers to try to live on a salary of £2 - £3 per month, (*Natal Mercury*, Thursday June 12 1919) "Square Deal" protested that a typist's starting salary of between £5 and £6 per month was not a living wage. (Wednesday 4 June 1919) Nursemaids and general household helps received between £3 and £4 per month. (Thursday June 19 1919) and worked hard. Work for women was frowned upon and seen as temporary at best. Low wages were justified on the grounds that they were spent on ribbons and trinkets. Women were just waiting for marriage, embellishing their trousseaus. Nickie Roberts's contemporary views on prostitution can be applied to this period. She points out that the source of supply for prostitution is women from the working class 'whose only other "choice" would be a lifetime of drudgery and poverty. Unpaid drudgery in the home or low paid drudgery in the factory'. Nickie Roberts, *The Front Line* (1986) p 231. (These points are elaborated on in chapter 3)

56. PRB 6, 6 January 1902.



57. PRB 7, 3 July 1905.
58. PRB 6, Opposite entry. 26 May 1902. Mr J Stuart's army report in the Native Blue Book for 1901.
59. *Natal Mercury*, Saturday March 23 1901.
60. *Ibid.*, Monday November 4 1901.
61. *Ibid.*, Friday January 10 1902.
62. *Ibid.*, Thursday January 9 1902.
63. *Ibid.*, Friday January 10 1902.
64. *Ibid.*
65. In 1901 there were 10396 European men as opposed to 6733 women - a deficit of nearly 4000, *Mayor's Minutes* 1901, p 48. A census of April 1904 showed 18777 European males as opposed to 12525 females, 'an imbalance of over 6000, *Mayor's Minutes*, 1904, p 70. In 1913 a March census showed 17551 European males resident in the borough and 15877 females, an imbalance of nearly 2000, *Mayor's Minutes*, 1913, p 115. South Africa was described as a 'booming wide open frontier short of women'. E J Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice* (1982) p 206. This situation was exacerbated during the war. Durban was in part a transit camp for troops. Hospitals and rest and refreshment marquees were erected. At times hundreds and even thousands of troops were stationed in the borough. (vide note 3).
66. *Natal Mercury*, Saturday 13 July 1901; Monday November 4 1901; Tuesday November 5 1901.
67. *Ibid.*, Monday November 18 1901.
68. *Ibid.*, Thursday 16 January 1902; Monday 27 January 1902; Saturday 1 March 1902.
69. R Posel *op cit.* pp 6, 7, 8, 9.
70. *Natal Mercury*, Monday March 8 1915.
71. Minutes of the Native Affairs, Police and Fire Brigade Commission, (NAPFB), Book 1, 6 November 1916.
72. Evidence here is inconclusive.
73. Min NAPFB, Book 2, 12 April 1917.
74. Council Minutes, 5 July 1917 p 586.
75. The Delegation was made up of the following organisations: The Church Women's Society; The League

of Honour; The Durban Women's Patriotic League; The Young Women's Christian Association; The women's Enfranchisement League; The Mothers' Union; Girl's Friendly Society, Florida Road Women's Congregational Association; Women's Industrial Association; The Women's Nursing Home; The Civic Association; Women's Residential Club; The Presbyterian Women's Association; The Ladies' Hospital Society and the Women's Christian Temperance Union.

76. *Natal Mercury*, Friday July 6 1917.
77. *Council Minutes*, July 5, 1917 p 585-586.
78. *Natal Mercury*, Friday 6 July 1917.
79. *Ibid.*, Friday 13 July, 1917.
80. *Ibid.*
81. *Ibid.*, Friday 20 July 1917.
82. *Ibid.*
83. *Ibid.*
84. *Ibid.*
85. *Ibid.*, Thursday 2 August 1917.
86. *Ibid.*
87. *Ibid.*
88. *Ibid.*
89. *Ibid.*, Wednesday 8 August 1917.
90. *Council Minutes*, September 6, 1917, p 66-68.
91. *Natal Mercury*, Friday 7 September 1917.
92. *Ibid.*
93. *Ibid.*
94. *Council Minutes*, September 6, 1917, p 61.
95. *Council-in-Committee Minutes*, 27 September 1917.
96. *Natal Mercury*, Saturday September 22, 1917.
97. *Ibid.*, Saturday September 15, 1917.
98. *Ibid.*, Saturday September 8, 1917.
99. *Ibid.*, Saturday September 15, 1917.
100. Van Onselen, *op cit.* notes that a relationship exists between barmen and prostitutes: 'the presence of ... prostitutes tended to attract male customers to the establishment and increase liquor

consumption'. p 107.

101. *Natal Mercury* Saturday March 28, 1918.
102. *Ibid.*, Thursday March 21 1918.
103. *Ibid.*, Wednesday April 3 1918 (Correspondence was closed on April 10, numerous letters going unpublished, the editor feeling that 'no useful end would be served, the order being in force').
104. *Ibid.*, Thursday April 4, 1918.
105. *Council Minutes*, April 5 1918, p 550-551.
106. *Ibid.*, June 7, 1918.
107. *Natal Mercury*, Tuesday June 24, 1919.

## CHAPTER FIVE

*WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR THE FRANCHISE: 'WILL THE DEAR CREATURE KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH THE FRANCHISE WHEN SHE GETS IT?'*

Organisations provide an indication of conditions and issues which are of concern within a society. In Durban, during the period under investigation, there were a number of diverse societies and organisations which illustrate the orientations and concerns of different women. It is possible to generalise and slot these organisations into a number of spheres: sporting groups had been formed as had religious, charitable, supportive and moralistic societies. Issue-orientated and politically motivated societies were also in evidence.

It should be noted however that office-bearers were, in the main, middle-class women. Thus, even where organisations were set up to aid the working-classes, middle-class values tended to be reflected. It is also important to stress that although the organisations to be discussed were all women's organisations, they were not all feminist.

It is arguable that underlying the various strands of

contemporary feminism are certain shared fundamental tenets. These include a belief in the equal worth of all human beings irrespective of gender, a belief in the importance of distributing rights and opportunities equally (feminism being essentially a humanist philosophy), and a belief that all forms of oppression should be opposed. Where the various strands diverge is in the way they analyze the origins of that oppression and hence what strategies are advocated for change.

During the period covered in this study there certainly were those who might count as feminists in that they accepted in part the fundamental tenets above. While they stressed that women and men were very different, they did recognise that, importantly, white women had been and were discriminated against, and they wanted to end that discrimination by gaining rights for women. Their argument was that women had to participate in the public sphere if this was to be achieved, although they did not also challenge the fundamental role of women as wives and mothers. Of all the women's organisations that existed in Durban between 1900 and 1920, only one may, however, be considered explicitly feminist in this sense, namely the Women's Enfranchisement League.

An important qualification must be made, however, and explored in more detail later in the chapter. White suffragists in Durban generally believed in the equal worth of all white human beings. Blacks were deemed uncivilised

and inferior and at no time did the Durban, or even South African franchise movement, share common cause with black women. Suffragists struggled to enfranchise white women only.

There were, within the other groups, elements which if explored fully, might have also been seen to constitute challenges to that ideal. For example, a number of groups centered around sports and hobbies. There were sewing circles, the Malvern Ladies' Rifle Club, book clubs and, in 1908, a ladies golfing circle<sup>1</sup>. (Though in England, a woman with a rifle may have been regarded as veering somewhat from the stereotypical ideal, South Africa's colonial and racial context made the formation of this type of club far more acceptable. It was felt that white women should be able to defend themselves, given fears of the 'black peril' mentioned in chapter one.) Religious organisations were also evident. There was, for example, a Durban Bible Society. Most churches incorporated women's groups. Here women met not only to discuss religious issues but to aid in Church fund raising, bake cakes and arrange flowers for the Church.

One of the most influential of the non-political groups was the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). Meetings, often at the 'Homestead' (discussed in chapter three) were held regularly. Entertainment programmes for young women were advertised, generally on a weekly basis, in the Press.

The entertainment was, of course, of a 'healthy and wholesome' nature, including Bible readings, lecture sessions, guided tours of places of interest and sports (group swimming sessions were offered as was the chance to play tennis and 'ping-pong').

As has been noted in the chapter on women's employment, the YWCA was concerned to help young women who had immigrated to Durban to take up employment. In 1912 the Mayor (a Mr F.C. Hollander), welcoming Miss Spencer, the travelling secretary of the YWCA, said that the organisation:

was of great value for young women, for it could offer them a home, advice and assistance just at a time when they needed it most, and he gathered from those who employed a considerable number of young women in commercial and industrial houses that they much appreciated the work that the Association was doing.<sup>2</sup>

Miss Spencer, it was reported, then related how the YWCA was meeting the challenge of women immigrating alone and of increasing levels of education for women. She felt that while these women did achieve a certain degree of self-reliance, they were exposed to many dangers. (The nature of these 'dangers' was not specified. However one can note that in a society concerned to keep its women chaste, pure and innocent, it was generally regarded as dangerous for women to come into contact, unchaperoned, with strangers who might in some way corrupt them. They might be corrupted physically by

sexual relations out of wedlock, or mentally by alcohol or 'fast company' resulting in the loss of their innocence. If women were to retain freshness and purity it was deemed best that they did not gain too much knowledge of worldly matters.) Miss Spencer felt that it was the job of the YWCA to attempt to lessen this exposure.<sup>3</sup>

The YWCA did not conceive its role as questioning or exploring the nature of women and the potentially expanding part they could play in the world, but as upholding and entrenching society's values pertaining to women. Thus, in a world where many women were alone and employed - under the guardianship of neither husband nor father - the YWCA sought to provide this guardianship and keep women and young girls protected and unsullied despite worldly contamination, in line with the ideal. The fact that the YWCA was regarded as having no revolutionary intent was stated very clearly by a dignitary at the opening of the association's hostel in December 1912. He said that the YWCA was not a suffragist institution but did claim the rights of women - 'that was women's highest rights'. Though he did not elaborate further he was obviously talking about the same kinds of 'rights'<sup>4</sup> that Mister Merriman discussed (Chapter 2), including the 'right' to become dutiful wives and homemakers.

The YWCA's activities were doubled in Durban during the First World War. In addition to all the normal 'dangers' that young women faced, Durban was now a troop base. The YWCA's



report of 1916 stated that the organisation was needed as never before, 'particularly in military centres and important seaport towns such as Durban'. During the past year, 388 girls and women had been accommodated at the hostel. At the time of the report, 51 permanent boarders were in residence. It was noted that the majority of these lodgers were under 21. There was even a 'baby' of 14. The report stated that at this time the 'extraordinary temptations and dangers for girl life were unparalleled' and that '(t)he hostel on the Esplanade with its happy, refining, homely influences especially arranged to meet the needs of the wage-earning girl, had never been of greater benefit ...'.<sup>5</sup>

The Girls' Friendly Society (GFS), though not primarily a religious organisation, did seek to uphold 'Christian Values', being an offshoot of the Church of England, and had many of the same aims as the YWCA. It came into being in Durban in 1901. It was reportedly the 'Largest Women's Society in the World' and had the Queen at its head as patron. The 1905 report of the Durban GFS made use of the ideas of the Bishop of Pietermaritzburg. He had made it his duty to get to know a large group of 'girls' employed in the city and was struck by their loneliness. 'Unable, like men, to go out at nights, they had no resource but to shut themselves up in their bedroom at their boarding house.'<sup>6</sup> The Bishop noted that organisations such as the GFS were desperately needed for girls and women such as these.

The report listed a number of the objects of the society. These included the befriending of girls, the purifying and cleansing of society and the holding up of a high example before girls. The society was concerned also to teach young girls the 'sacredness of marriage'. It felt that a great deal of modern literature and plays were corrupting morality and that unless girls got a 'true Christian view of marriage, great grief lay before them in their married life'. The report noted that the society had been formed so that the women of England could bond together to protect their purity. This was needed in Durban too. Amy Hammick, president of the GFS for the whole of Natal, made public the fact that a lodge for girls had been opened by the organisation. A Matron was in charge<sup>7</sup>. It must have been popular for a new lodge was opened in 1906 in Grey Street, as has been noted in a previous chapter. The GFS was concerned, like the YWCA, with upholding the ideal of pure, innocent womanhood, and was very restrictive in nature. Ray Strachey argued that the GFS contained 'some of the most bitter anti-feminists ...'<sup>8</sup>. (She was writing of the organisation in Britain, but it was there that the nature of the society and its policy was formed, and from where Durban took its lead.)

As we have seen, (especially before and after the First World War), though many women did enter employment, this was not given a positive value by society. Middle class women generally avoided paid employment if they could. With little to do, many women had reserves of unused energy. Some found

an outlet for this energy in philanthropic work which, if it was voluntary and unpaid, was viewed with approbation by society (it being in line with the idea of women as naturally caring and sympathetic). Lewis makes a number of points on this topic which seem relevant to Durban. She argues that while philanthropic work was, for some women, integral to feminist beliefs, their involvement was, for the majority 'a diversion from household cares, a sublimation of other desires ... a socially acceptable way for both married women and their daughters to engage in purposeful work'.<sup>9</sup> She adds also (and this certainly seemed to hold true for Durban) that women who engaged in charitable work 'tended to confine themselves to particular activities, principally fund raising and visiting the homes of the sick, and institutions. Men continued to run the executive committees of charitable societies and to fill the paid positions'.<sup>10</sup>

Organisations such as the Jewish Ladies' Helping Hand Society centred not only around religion, but on philanthropic or charitable work. In the absence generally of state welfare policies, private organisations filled a valuable need by providing such services. At the same time (as will be seen), their existence meant that the state, province or municipality involved could shrug off welfare responsibilities, arguing that welfare was already being provided.

There were a number of other charitable organisations. The Benevolent Society was a notable example. 1905 saw the

delivery of its 49th annual report by the Honourable Secretary, Mrs J. Alexander.<sup>11</sup> She noted that an average of 117 destitute women, widows and children had applied for assistance. She admitted that the society could not profess to provide entirely for any applicant. It could, at best, 'only assist in times of distress or sickness'<sup>12</sup>. The society did support eight aged women however, having given them a comfortable home in the institute in Victoria Street. Mr Charlie Henwood, Mayor, stated that: 'the ladies that had this work in hand had done it in a way it could not be done by a public officer. They visited the homes and found out for themselves the circumstances in which the people were who applied for assistance'<sup>13</sup>. An annual review in 1909 showed that the society had come to the aid of some 2316 families, had supported 46 widowed mothers and 25 women (with young children) whose husbands had deserted them. Nine aged women were given a home in Victoria Street.<sup>14</sup> By 1920 the society was in the process of building another home for 'indigent old ladies', Victoria Street having become 'noisy, Indian-ridden and unpleasant'.<sup>15</sup>

Mr Henwood was right in saying that the work the ladies did could not be done in the same way by a public officer. The work was voluntary, but a public officer would have been an employee paid by the borough. Additional funds would have been needed. Importantly too, the society raised its own funds, financing any relief given itself. Charlie Henwood, mayor once more in 1909, admitted that this was of

great benefit to the municipality. He stated: 'There can be no question that the Durban Benevolent Society has been the means of saving the borough from the imposition of a heavy burden in the form of a poor rate'<sup>16</sup>. The municipality was spared the responsibility of having to provide welfare benefits.

There were other organisations of a charitable or philanthropic nature, in addition to the Benevolent Society. A Ladies' Mutual Help Society had existed since the 1890's. It seems that its main function was to help needy 'gentlewomen' by organising sales of their needlework. There was a hospital society (members of which provided fresh fruit and flowers to hospitals and visited the sick), a Prisoners' Aid Society and a Society which made it its aim to aid Nazareth House, a home for infants run by nuns.

Two other organisations also engaged in philanthropic work. These were the Women's Patriotic League and the Guild of Loyal Women. Both societies were intensely conservative. In addition to hospital work and contributions they supported a convalescent home, made contribution to a statue commemorating Queen Victoria and, in the case of the Guild of Loyal Women, organised a competition for under 21's which consisted of an examination covering the period of English history 1773 - 1815. Both organisations were active during the Anglo-Boer War and the First World War, in a supportive role. (Supportive that is of the English war effort and of

the English troops.) They made up packages to send to soldiers, collected war fund contributions and organised fresh fruit and wholesome entertainment for troops garrisoned in Durban. A society called the Durban Bachelor Girls' Club was formed in 1918 but this seems also to have focused primarily on a war fund.

A constant during the period under discussion was the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) of Durban. This was an offshoot of the British organisation which in turn stemmed from the social purity movement of the second half of the nineteenth century, which had demanded a single moral standard for both women and men. Social purity organisations devoted themselves to the eradication of what they saw as male vice, and focused on prostitution, the Contagious Diseases Acts, child abuse and the general victimization of women in these areas. Philippa Levine points out that:

(t)he rise in women's involvement in the temperance movement from the 1870's coincides with the beginning of feminist agitation about moral issues. The connection between drink and violence was one of the chief worries ... Alcoholism led not only to violence, of course, but to other forms of family disruption which signalled the moral dissolution so feared in Victorian England. A drinking husband would be likely to expend those wages which would otherwise represent the family budget on his

habit, and it was also assumed that both alcohol and the venues in which it was consumed were part of a chain of moral slippage leading its victims to further misconducts.<sup>17</sup>

The women of Durban who made up the Union saw that the reality of many women's lives did not conform to the rosy 'ideal' and that their suffering was often compounded by the male consumption of alcohol. Throughout this twenty year period the Women's Christian Temperance Union was active in campaigning for the prohibition of liquor sales. It was also, states Walker, 'an important component of the suffrage movement, in parting its particular flavour of Christian reformism and sobriety to the subsequent campaign.'<sup>18</sup> It established its own franchise department in 1895 and, having expressed solidarity with the Women's Enfranchisement League at the end of February 1905, it adopted the cause of women's suffrage as a platform in July.<sup>19</sup>

The organisations discussed above took an essentially supportive role towards women without explicitly challenging views held by society or the ideology surrounding the nature of women. However, those women, through their efforts in the public sphere were, in effect, challenging their stereotypical roles. But perhaps the absence of a strong feminist movement in Durban comparable to the first wave in Britain gave little incentive for such implicit challenges to be explored.

The Women's Enfranchisement League, which was formed on the 21st of January 1903 at Anchor Lodge, Melbourne Road<sup>20</sup>, Durban, was the first of its kind in South Africa, owing largely to the energy and reformist nature of the Ancketills, a couple to be mentioned later. It may be regarded as feminist in that it did challenge the exclusion of women from the public sphere of political power. That challenge was however issued on terms which, in the case of the Durban Suffrage League at least, ultimately were to undermine its position.

Walker, speaking of the South African suffrage movement as a whole, states: 'It was never a dynamic movement, especially when compared with the suffrage movement in England'<sup>21</sup>. This is certainly true of the Durban movement. The League could not be described as dynamic. The women of Durban were careful to dissociate themselves from the radical suffragettes in England. They made use of constitutional strategies only and, in the face of strong public disapproval, put forward their demands generally in a tentative manner, justifying them by using as framework the already-existing ideology of women as wife, mother and homemaker.

One of the goals of first wave feminism was the greater and indeed equal participation of women in the so-called public sphere of political power claimed by men. The main goal was the vote which was seen as crucial in order to effect legislation to counter discrimination against women. At the



same time however, not all the members of the suffrage movement rejected the widely-held view which, invoking biological arguments, located the place of women in the private domestic sphere.

As Walker points out, the suffrage organisation never represented a basic challenge to the prevailing organisation of gender relations in the country. Most suffragists and anti-suffragists were in basic agreement that they did not want to upset the existing division of labour between the sexes.<sup>22</sup>

Jane Lewis believes that first-wave feminism comprised two basic positions or standpoints. The first rejected the idea of innate sexual difference and demanded that women be allowed to enter the public sphere on the same terms as men<sup>23</sup>. It is true that Suffragettes such as Christabel Pankhurst did challenge that equation of a woman's biology with her destiny, but these women represented a minority view. The second standpoint, she claims, was one which 'accepted the idea of women as the natural guardians of the moral order. It stressed the importance of women's domestic role and sought to expand it'<sup>24</sup>. Suffragists tended to justify their desire for the vote within an acceptance of the qualities of women as wives and mothers - that is without challenging the basic public / private sphere dichotomy.

The Durban League adopted this second position even as it

campaigned for women to enter the public sphere. Women deserved the franchise, its members argued, not because they were equal to or the same as men but precisely because they were different. Durban suffragists did not demand freedom from the roles of wife, mother or home-maker, and agreed that women naturally possessed qualities that equipped them for these roles - qualities of sensitivity, gentleness, maternal love and a heightened moral sense.

If women gained the franchise, members of the League argued, these qualities could be used to complement those that men brought to politics (namely qualities of intellectual strength and vigour, energy and forcefulness). The basic argument then was that women could bring to the realm of politics moral values that were lacking.

The vote for white women over 21 years of age was obtained in South Africa only in 1930, whereas women in England gained the vote shortly after the end of World War 1, in 1918. (The age qualification was thirty years of age and over however.) Whilst the tactics of the suffragettes were deplored, they could not be ignored. They were blatant, provocative, generally illegal and highly visible. The Suffrage Society of Durban did not attract that kind of notice and tended to wax and wane in strength. Nevertheless the movement cannot simply be written off. It did manage to bring many women's issues as well as, obviously, the issue of the franchise for women, into Durban's public eye. It met and faced strong

disapproval and even ridicule. Bravery and strength of character is evident in the twenty years of the movement's history investigated for this thesis. Gains were achieved.

It must be re-iterated however, that the League was not a non-racial organisation. It agitated only for the white female franchise and was like the national movement in this respect. Though the labour of black domestic servants freed most middle-class women in Durban from many domestic chores, thus giving them the time and freedom to become involved in organisations such as the WEL, Walker makes a number of important points in this regard, saying: 'while relationships between white mistresses and black servants were characterised by a certain enforced intimacy, the social gulf between the two was enormous. In the home whites learned that blacks were the 'other'. The racial attitudes reproduced daily in a domestic setting white women took into the world with them, an into movements such as the suffrage campaign.'<sup>25</sup> Thus white women were bitter at the inclusion of black males in the Cape (based on property qualifications) into the voter's roll, feeling it to be (in Walker's words) a 'subversion of the proper racial hierarchy.'<sup>26</sup>

To return to an outline of the history of the Durban Movement however, it seems that the foundation of the Durban League was owed mainly to Mr and Mrs Ancketill who arrived in Natal in 1896, having emigrated from England. Walker states that they brought with them 'a number of politically advanced

ideas which included labour legislation and the enfranchisement of women'.<sup>27</sup> Mr Ancketill was a member of the Natal Legislature and had links with the labour movement. The League was formed in 1903. Mrs Ancketill was one of an executive committee of five women. It was decided that monthly meetings would be held to educate, attract new members, clarify aims and objectives and methods of achieving these.

By December of the same year the organisation was obviously having some impact - it was attracting negative attention. An article entitled 'Should the Franchise be extended to Women? Decidedly Not' expressed many commonly held prejudices and viewpoints. The writer asked:

Is it really desirable that women ... enter the political arena? ... that lovely, gentle, chaste woman should enter the rough and tumble incidental to a parliamentary election, either as a voter or candidate? Surely not. Is not her mission different and higher than that? ... Is man such a monster that he cannot be trusted to guard the interests of his weak sister? ... The fact is that a woman's place is in her home where she is a queen ... Woman was given certain qualities of a refined sort - qualities to soothe and charm and captivate - as well as to bear and forbear, and the home is the domain where she is to exercise these qualities.<sup>28</sup>

He (for the writer is surely a he) argued that men had been given bodily and mental strength. It was these that enabled

them to properly use the franchise. He felt that arguments over the vote would destroy the harmony of the home and divorce would be rife. Defying logic, he also expressed fears that most women would vote as their husbands told them to. The writer then asserted that women could not be educated to vote, saying: '(will) the dear creature know what to do with the franchise when she gets it?' He concluded that the franchise would degrade woman, distracting her from her home duties against the best interests of society.

The writer's views obviously stemmed from the prevailing ideology of the time - women were naturally designed to be wives and mothers. They were delicate beings, mentally and physically, and did not possess the resources to stand the pressures imposed by the public sphere. These negative sentiments did not remain unchallenged. The league had some supporters, for Flora Gaythorne addressed a letter to the women of Natal rejecting the arguments of 'Decidedly Not' and demanding the franchise. She based these demands on grounds already discussed. Having accepted the doctrine which espoused that women were the natural guardians of the moral order, she argued that there were many issues within this sphere that required speedy legislative action, and that 'the power granted to women by enfranchisement would exert moral pressure in this direction and would be practically irresistible'.<sup>29</sup>

She asserted that women should regard the gain of the vote not as a favour or a privilege but as a basic right. She also cautioned that the franchise would not be granted without hard work. She refuted many of 'Decidedly Not's' arguments, pointing out that if women were by nature lovely, gentle and chaste, a mere change in the constitution would have little effect. In answer to the assertion that men could look after the interests of women she asked, looking at history, for a single proof that women's rights and interests had been protected, pointing to the injustice that women had suffered at the hands of men through the ages. Having made this militant point, she ended by saying that she did not want to do away with womanliness. Instead she wanted 'to see the domestic and womanly side of things weigh more'<sup>30</sup>.

A number of other letters were sparked by this argument, and Belinda came out in support of women's suffrage in her column.

In May of 1904 a petition demanding the franchise was circulated and presented to the Natal legislature. Again the argument used in support of this cause was that mothers should have the power to make laws for the benefit of their children, 'for it is an admitted fact that mothers are in most cases more fit and better able to guide the young than the father ... As nature arranged for women to be mothers so it has arranged for women to have the natural instinct to make laws for their instruction'.<sup>31</sup>

In January 1905 the second annual meeting of the Women's Suffrage League (it seems that the official name of the organisation was the Women's Enfranchisement League. The *Natal Mercury* however used 'suffrage' and 'enfranchisement' interchangeably.) was held under the chairmanship of Mr. W.R. Dunlop. (It seems revealing that in an organisation attempting to prove that women were worthy of the franchise, the chairman should be a man, indicative of the power of patriarchy and male authority. It is true however that Mr Ancketill had been a champion of the cause and an initiator of action. Perhaps also (although there is no evidence to support this claim) the presence of a male chairman was a tactic to counter anti-male prejudice by showing that the organisation had achieved male support.) Mrs Behr was elected to take over as president from Mrs Ancketill.

It is more positive that the president, a member of the organisation and executive therein, was a woman. It is difficult to assess the extent of Mr Dunlop's involvement in the organisation, for a chairman can be an outside arbitrator. The annual report was couched in a positive tone<sup>32</sup>. The first petition demanding that the parliamentary franchise be granted to women had been presented to the Natal parliament in 1904 by Mr Ancketill. Not so positive however, it was related at the meeting, was the fact that the petition had contained only 542 signatures and that through some 'misunderstanding', the petition was presented at the time

when the House was involved with 'other pressing matters'. Little discussion had ensued and the petition failed. Despite this setback, the presentation of the petition was regarded as a first step as it was emphasised at the meeting that a new petition had been formulated.

Also presented positively was the fact that, again at the instigation of Mr Ancketill, a Durban Parliament Debate had ended with a resolution to grant the municipal franchise to women. (How much influence the resolution carried, though, is uncertain.) In addition, Mrs Martel, an Australian suffragist, (in the formation of the commonwealth in 1901, Australian women obtained the vote based on certain qualifications) had been enthusiastically hosted by the League which now had sixty members.

The chairman (Mr Dunlop's) speech however struck a very cautionary note. He reportedly said that

He believed the fear of men was that participation by women in politics would interfere with their natural attention to domestic work. If that would be the result then the privilege would be a costly one. He did not go to the length of advocating women members to Parliament, but no doubt intelligent interest in politics would not detract from their qualities in the home.<sup>33</sup>

Could the organisation hope to succeed, its members having elected as chairman a man whose lack of commitment and ambiguous attitude towards the cause he was chosen to uphold



were strikingly obvious?

Nevertheless, a few days later Belinda wrote admiringly of the League, saying that they were approaching the cause of women's suffrage in the correct way: 'Through their persistence and steady endeavours, success will eventually attend their efforts'<sup>34</sup>. It is true that regular monthly meetings were held and membership increased gradually.<sup>35</sup> In July as has been mentioned, the Women's Christian Temperance Union of Natal decided to adopt the issue of women's suffrage as one of their platforms (having long past come to the conclusion that the vote was essential in its campaign against the trade in alcohol). Mrs Behr noted with satisfaction that 'we now have two distinct associations of women working for the same end which materially strengthens the cause'.<sup>36</sup>

The League did work hard to try to convert their opponents and convince those who were doubtful. They held public meetings and staged lectures and debates. (They did not however adopt the militant tactics of the suffragettes which provoked such hostility in the United Kingdom.) So successful were they that even the Catholic Young Men's Society became involved in the cause, setting up a debate as to whether women should be granted the franchise. (A vote taken afterwards showed a majority of one in favour of the proposal.<sup>37</sup>)

In November an article appeared in the *Natal Mercury* (previously rather scornful of the movement) which ran:

By dint of steady and determined perseverance the Women's Suffrage League in Durban is making marked progress ... the movement has now become so strong that a wave of enthusiasm on the part of the women of Durban at any rate, if not the colony, generally promises to bring about the enfranchisement of the white female population in the near future, without any genuine opposition.<sup>38</sup>

The third annual report of the League was very hopeful. Despite expressing a sense of loss at the resignation of Henry Ancketill (and some doubt over the support of Mr Maurice Evans, his successor, whose aid was dependent on the condition that the women of Natal showed 'that they wanted to vote'), members of the League wrote 'that instead of being a subject discussed merely by a few, womens suffrage has become, we might almost say, the topic of the hour.'<sup>39</sup> The report also recorded with pleasure the inclusion of suffrage for women in the Municipal Consolidation Bill which was to come into operation in 1906, making women burgesses of Natal. (It was noted however that as the franchise for women was to be granted on the same terms as for men, many members of the League, including most of the office-bearers, would be disqualified on the grounds of property holdings.<sup>40</sup>) Mrs Behr was re-elected president, Mrs T.L. Ayres vice-president, Mrs Ancketill secretary and Mrs Henochsberg treasurer. Committee members were mesdames Floyd, Newham, Kerr Cross, while Mr C.P. Robinson was to act as legal advisor.

The quiet euphoria of 1905 did not continue long into 1906, however. Royal assent to the passing of the Municipal Consolidation Bill was withheld, pending amendments. (It was reported though that this had to do with 'clauses connected with the Indians ... and was in no way connected with the clause relating to women voters'<sup>41</sup>). A petition sent to the Minister of Justice, requesting that the age of consent be raised from fourteen to seventeen, failed. (In line with the doctrine that upheld women as guardians of the moral order, the Durban Women's Enfranchisement League also became involved in issues of this sort. Other examples can be cited: as has been seen, representatives were sent to the Durban Council deploring their covert sanction of prostitution. In addition, a letter of protest over the Cape Contagious Diseases Act was sent to the Minister of Justice in 1917.)

Members of the League began to become bitter, and their speeches less conciliatory. Though reiterating that they could not approve of the methods used by the suffragettes in Britain, the League's attitude towards them began to soften. In March 1906 the League was reported as having said that it sympathized with the suffragettes, and understood their indignation at having their demands ignored<sup>42</sup>. In December, Mrs Behr, president, made a rather biting speech. She noted that 'taxation without representation was tyranny when it referred to men; yet thousands of women paid rates and

taxes, and were ignored - worse than ignored, classed with kafirs and criminals ...<sup>43</sup> (One cannot make the mistake, given comments like this, of assuming that because the League wanted to extend the franchise, it was a non-racist society. It was not. It agitated specifically for the white female franchise.)

In December a letter was received from a Natal woman in London, comparing suffragettes and suffragists. The suffragist, she wrote, 'believes in sweet reason. Her methods are moral suasion, a lady-like influence, feminine pleadings, and ... (they) ... are strictly constitutional.' The writer noted that these methods had been used for 60 years and, bred out of frustration, a 'new creature' had been born - the suffragette. About the latter she wrote: 'Though her soul yearns for the aesthetic and ideal as much as the suffragist, she has grasped the practical side of the situation, grappled with it (and) become a politician.'<sup>44</sup> The letter concluded that, of the two species of women's suffrage reformers, 'one persuades and does not believe in fighting, and the other fights, as an only means of persuading. Still, they both want the same thing and build unconsciously on one another's successes.'<sup>45</sup> The writer herself however admitted to being a law-abiding suffragist and asserted that the movement in Natal would never produce any other variety of feminine reformer (an assumption which was proved correct), for the Natal suffragist could be happy in knowing herself, with Natal conditions, to be effective to the movement with her

legitimate means of work (an assumption which was not proved correct). Quite what the writer meant by 'Natal conditions' is unknown. Perhaps she was referring to the elevated status (as compared to England) of white women in Natal, making, to her way of thinking, revolutionary tactics unnecessary.

In response to this letter, Belinda noted that her views were also changing. Previously scornful of the suffragettes, while she still disliked their methods, she had come to respect their courage and conviction. She wrote: 'You cannot touch pitch without being defiled, and men have made of politics such a dirty business that it follows that, if women are to fight men with the latter's own weapons, they must not be particular about soiling their own hands'<sup>46</sup>.

On July 4, 1907 in Capetown, Mr Viljoen introduced a motion to the Legislative Assembly in favour of women's suffrage<sup>47</sup>. Mr Merriman (whose views have already been touched upon) declared that there was no demand for women's suffrage and that a woman's sphere was in the home. The Woman's Suffrage motion was rejected by 66 to 24 votes. While this defeat was of no direct significance to the Durban League (the Union of South Africa only being achieved in 1910) it was nevertheless a disappointment. In response to Mr Merriman's comments, the League stated that while it agreed that home and family was women's special concern it reiterated that members desired the franchise. Though a certain degree of sympathy for the British suffragettes had been expressed, as failure to

achieve goals disappointed Durban League members, they were still very careful not to identify too closely with the 'wild women' (a term coined from Billington's article) and were at pains to couch their demands in tones of moderation.

A paper by Mary Rose Cooper (former principal of the Durban Ladies College) was read by Mrs Kerr Cross at a monthly meeting of the Durban League. Miss Cooper attempted to allay the fear that women aspiring to seats in parliament was the logical conclusion to the extension of the franchise. She suggested that an act prohibiting this might be obtained but was unnecessary, 'for I feel very sure I represent a majority of women who have no such ambitions, who would reject that any such position should be occupied by any one of them that would detract from their claim to womanliness'<sup>48</sup>. Mrs Henwood delivered a paper two months later. While she felt that for women, there was much room for activity in 'good and useful work for the world, she re-iterated the view that women's first duty was to home life and family.<sup>49</sup>

At the end of 1907 the League's annual report revealed that the King's consent was still delaying the municipal franchise for women in Natal. As both the municipal and the School Board vote (and in the latter, right of election) had already been granted to women in the Transvaal and the Orange River Colony, the report stated that 'women of Natal stand now far behind their compatriots in political power, a position hardly conducive to self-respect'<sup>50</sup>. Vice President Mrs Ayres

said that members of the League sometimes feared that their cause suffered locally from the 'extraordinary behaviour of that fearless class of women known at Home as "suffragettes"'<sup>51</sup>. She emphasised that Durban had no suffragettes but merely a band of orderly women (she did express the reservation that they were 'perhaps a little too quiet'), united to educate themselves and others of the rights due to them as citizens of the Colony.

1908 saw much attention given by borough inhabitants to the 'suffragette question'. Belinda, though cautioning that Australian women gained the suffrage 'by dint of steady work and perseverance', expressed further admiration for the suffragettes who, she said, had the courage of their convictions. She noted that many of these women, believing that only militant tactics would convince the world that they were in earnest, were forced to adopt methods which Belinda felt must be 'heartily obnoxious to any women of taste and refinement'. She wrote of the prison conditions suffragettes had had to endure for the sake of their convictions and shuddered at what some of these 'delicately nurtured women' must have undergone. She felt that the term 'martyr' when applied to these women was no misnomer. (She then went on to fashion and recipes<sup>52</sup>.)

In early April a by-election took place in Durban. The *Natal Mercury* noted (with some surprise it seems) that 'one of the most outstanding features of the elections was the

keen interest taken by ladies'. Though they were not eligible to vote, they apparently lined up outside the Town Hall to watch proceedings and to hear the first results, as if to prove Mr Merriman wrong and show that there was a demand for women's enfranchisement<sup>53</sup>. (It was in this same month that Mr Merriman gave his patronising speech, already mentioned, about his being an advocate for womens rights - the 'proper kind of rights'. As long as women didn't 'fiddle about with the vote' but tried to beautify and improve their homes, they had his support.)

An anonymous letter to the *Natal Mercury* was provoked by the focus on women's enfranchisement. The writer advertised a book he had written, which could be had for only one shilling. In his work, 'The serpent's mask removed' he

endeavoured to evince by the clearest of reasoning that the movement among women for the franchise and equality of the sexes is one of the most pernicious, in its consequences, immediate and remote, that the women could devise to inflict injury on the human race, for it strikes at the very root of our social, political and industrial institutions.<sup>54</sup>

On the same day however, a letter by T.D. Benson pointed out that 'when men wanted the franchise they did not behave in the unruly manner of our feminine friends. They were perfectly constitutional in their agitation ...' He



mentioned that in Bristol the Custom House, a mansion house, three prisons, forty-two private dwellings and so on had been burnt, 'all in a perfectly respectable and constitutional manner'. He pointed out that numerous constitutional fires occurred at Bedford; that four men were 'respectably hanged at Bristol; that a general strike was proposed and nine men condemned to death'. He concluded:

In this way the males set a splendid example of constitutional methods in agitating for the franchise. I think we are well qualified to advise the Suffragettes to follow our example, to be respectable and peaceful in their methods like we were, and they will have our sympathy and support.<sup>55</sup>

Benson pointed ironically to the double standard of behaviour that meant that suffragettes who adopted militant tactics were denounced in a way that their male compatriots had not been. (Billington has pointed out that as women were 'naturally' passive and gentle, their association with militancy and law-breaking was seen as far more threatening than male involvement, as noted in chapter one.)

Later in 1908 the Women's Suffrage League of Durban began to prepare for an important event. A National Convention (at which the Union of South Africa was to be established) was to sit in Durban in October. A letter was sent by the Durban League to the Natal democratic League (a labour party which included a commitment to fight for women's franchise in its

manifesto. This organisation is not to be confused with the South African Labour Party in which it and numerous other small labour organisations were incorporated in 1910). The Durban Enfranchisement League asked that the democratic league co-operate in presenting a petition to the convention asking for the granting of the vote to white women on the same grounds as the law in force regarding men.<sup>56</sup> (This meant whites-only in every province but the Cape where a minority of black men qualified.)

The letter stated that the Natal democratic League had been approached for the League felt that the Party, having laid down the principle of justice and equality for all and having rejected class privileges, should consistently support the claims for women's enfranchisement, in line with its manifesto. A few days later it was reported that this petition was to become a joint petition, worked on by suffrage movements in the various colonies. It should be noted that by 1908, suffrage organisations had been formed in Port Elizabeth, Cape Town, Johannesburg, Pretoria and Bloemfontein. The joint petition campaign was the first major campaign in which all of these organisations participated. A petition committee was formed in Durban and women were urged to join.<sup>57</sup>

At this point the *Natal Mercury* revealed its obvious bias in the articles it chose to print<sup>58</sup>. In Finland, women had the right to vote and to sit in Parliament. The *Natal Mercury*

claimed that Dr Granholme, a 'leading Finland physician' had proved statistically that lunacy had increased to a great extent since suffrage had been granted to women<sup>59</sup>. Oona Ancketill (once more president of the league) immediately countered this argument and asked that the paper publish a denial of the claim. She asserted that the doctor had studied the growth of lunacy between 1900 and 1906 in Finland. It was only in 1906 that women's suffrage was granted. Her answer was duly published.<sup>60</sup>

A few days later however an account of a 'Suffragist race at Bristol' was reported with some amusement. In a gymkhana held, competitors had to ride to a bell, ring it, thus releasing 'dummy' suffragettes chained to railings and carry them to the police station. The first competitor to place his suffragette in prison was the winner.<sup>61</sup>

A host of anti-women's suffrage letters were sparked. One ran:

I, as a woman, have to inform each one of you, that it is not the woman's duty to vote, to sit in Parliament or to write and read novels. You suffragists will do more good to our homes and our countries by studying the life of our noble Queen Victoria and try your best to follow in her footsteps, for it is the duty of us women to be queens of our homes, true wives to our husbands, and true, loving mothers to our children. I am one who deeply - yes deeply - regrets to say that I am ashamed of the majority

of my sex.<sup>62</sup>

A letter from Mrs S.E. Griffiths ran along the same lines :

... their minds have developed so much they have forgotten they are women, and it is nothing more than right that they should keep to the limit of womenly duties ... The responsibility and privilege of voting belongs to men, who faced death in fighting for their country; give them the honour that is their due. They have governed and voted from the beginning of the world; why can't they do it now, without female interference?<sup>63</sup>

In the midst of this negativity, signatures for the Natal petition were collected by the Combined Petition Committee, which included representatives from the Women's Suffrage League, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the Natal Labour Party, and prominent legal and political gentlemen. The effort was in vain. In early November 1908 two petitions were placed before the convention. These stood for, and against, the extension of the parliamentary franchise to women. 2733 signatures, from both men and women had been collected in favour of the extension of the franchise. 7256 signatures however, had been collected from women only, in support of the petition against women's suffrage.<sup>64</sup>

In the meantime public opinion was further alienated by activities of suffragettes in England who reportedly violated

the sanctity of a church.<sup>65</sup>

On December 16 1908, Moor the Prime Minister of Natal moved that provision be made for the extension of the franchise to women of 'European descent'. A discussion ensued, but Walker asserts that women's suffrage received scant attention. 'The preoccupation was with the eligibility or otherwise of blacks to vote, not of women.'<sup>66</sup> Ultimately the terms of the franchise in the constitution ignored the women of South Africa and blacks in general, with limited exceptions in the Cape, where black men who qualified in terms of property-holdings and education, retained the franchise.

Despite this huge setback, at the eighth winter session meeting of the Women's Suffrage League of Durban, Mrs Ancketill (once more president) did find some cause to be hopeful. Of the signatures obtained in support of the extension of the suffrage, over half (1415) came from Natal. She noted that the petition had been met with support from various quarters - delegates from Natal and the Chief Justice of the Cape (Sir Henry Villiers). She said that it was 'a matter of great interest to us to know that in the draft constitution drawn up by the Natal delegates for submission to the conference, the enfranchisement of the women of Natal was advocated'.<sup>67</sup> She reminded the League also that they were being represented at the fifth meeting of the International Women's Suffrage Alliance by Mrs W.J. Mirrlees.<sup>68</sup>

By the end of 1909 the Women's Suffrage League of Durban was established in permanent central offices, 7 Mutual Buildings (an indication of its enlarged support base). It, and suffrage leagues and societies country-wide, had agreed to unite under a National Committee. Walker notes that the 'establishment of the Union of South Africa paved the way for the local enfranchisement leagues scattered across the country to form the national body.'<sup>69</sup> In addition, another event had occurred which the league saw as significant. On November 1, a women's suffrage Bill had been introduced into the Natal Legislative Assembly. Though the bill was defeated 19 to 12, it was felt that 'the attitude of the House was much more friendly than it was in 1904'<sup>70</sup>.

Regular meetings were held throughout 1910. The franchise was not the only issue discussed. The society chaired talks about the 'servant problem', education in America and children. Some meetings were well attended, others were not (at one meeting it was reported that twelve ladies and a boy were present).

Walker asserts that in one respect the history of the South African suffrage movement was unique: 'The issue of race permeated the whole movement as in no other country'<sup>71</sup>. As has been seen, the Durban league was incensed that their voteless state was no better than 'that of the kaffir'. The issue of race in fact, was used as a platform. Trevor Fletcher, addressing the league in July 1910 stated that

(i)n a community where the white population was so scattered and in so small a minority, the importance of every white vote could not be over-estimated'<sup>72</sup>. Mr Ancketill (chairman) agreed. (Though by the act of Union only those black men in the Cape who met certain property and educational qualifications were enfranchised, South African whites were nevertheless concerned over their lack of numbers in comparison to the black population.)

In December the issue of race was raised once more. A circular was sent to municipal election candidates by the League, asking whether they would support the extension of the franchise to white women. If the answer was no, the circular then asked whether, in view of the denial of the franchise to white women under the present constitution, the candidates would oppose any extension of the franchise to the coloured races. (It was reported that few replies were received, however.<sup>73</sup>)

The Durban League continued to steer very firmly clear of any militant (or even, it can be argued, assertive) action<sup>74</sup>. 1911 saw a number of brief visits to Durban by some involved in the overseas suffrage movement. (Mrs C. Chapman Catt, president of the International Woman's Suffrage Alliance and Dr Jacobs, for example.<sup>75</sup>) A petition requesting the granting of the municipal franchise once more circulated Natal. Membership of the League had risen to 130, but a number of meetings were simply tea-parties in effect. For example, an



'At Home' was held at the Kerr Cross residence. Mrs Ayres, the President was reported as having made a rousing comment: 'it was often hinted that suffragists were rather incapable and impractical, but she thought the cakes and sweets, all the work of members and sympathisers refuted that statement.'<sup>76</sup>

It must be admitted however that while the League may have exaggerated the presentation of their 'lady-like' image, the publicity given them by the *Natal Mercury* was still not of a very favourable kind. Reports on the league's activities were often preceded by articles on the 'excesses' of the suffragettes overseas. Poor attendance was always pointed to. Articles on suffrage for women were presented negatively. For example an editorial asking whether the majority of women did desire the vote (and which did not come to any conclusion) was headed, provocatively, 'Women Do Not Want Votes'.<sup>77</sup> At the 'at home' spoken of, numerous topics were reportedly discussed but Mrs Ayre's vacuous statement was the only one quoted and the article then went on to discuss the dresses that the ladies wore.

In 'Women's Work and Play', the *Natal Mercury* ladies' column, eighteen points against women's suffrage, seen as a 'danger to the Empire', were given. The extension of the franchise would remove women from the home, divide households and make ladies more aggressive. It was argued further that the majority of the existing electorate disapproved of the proposal and that most women did not want the franchise



anyway. The old argument that women were by nature more impulsive than men and that their emotions would take precedence over their judgement, was reiterated. It was claimed that women would aspire to Parliament, to the ruin of the House of Commons; that women would be eligible for a seat in the cabinet and that they, horror-of-horrors, might attempt to become judges: 'a female judge is an impossible being who would introduce confusion into the procedure of our law courts, and might even prevent the administration of justice'. Britain's relationship with foreign countries would be endangered; the Indian Empire, for example, being predicted to react with 'shocked abhorrence'. How could women deal wisely with naval, military or diplomatic questions it was asked, when they know nothing about the subjects?. Chivalry would die. Importantly, women would no longer involve themselves in philanthropic work or in aiding the community, if they were allowed into the field of politics.<sup>78</sup> These were generally-held views and were quoted at the time.

Despite these negative attitudes the league was active in 1912. Perhaps a sense of purpose had been engendered by their inclusion into the Women's Enfranchisement Association of the Union, (W.E.A.U) set up in 1911. (It was affiliated to both the International Alliance of Women's Suffrage Societies and the British Dominions Women's Suffrage Union.)

Durban was the host town for the 1911 inaugural conference of

the Women's Enfranchisement Association of the Union (WEAU). Walker cites another example of the *Mercury's* bias in relation to this, noting that the newspaper 'commented sourly in an editorial: "We hope the women suffragists here enjoyed their picnic in Durban, but we do not think the political effects of their visit could have rewarded their endeavours, and we cannot pretend that we have any regrets at their non-success" (20.10.1911)'.<sup>79</sup>

The WEAU, Walker notes, 'was to remain throughout its life-time, exclusively white, predominantly English-speaking and urban and thoroughly middle-class.'<sup>80</sup> Like the Durban Women's Enfranchisement League, the WEAU was determinedly non-confrontational. It expressed disapproval at the actions of the English suffragettes, thereby distancing itself from them. It claimed that, inspired by the reason and rationality of its members, men would be forced to grant white women the vote, being convinced that they deserved it.

Walker notes, importantly, that making 'common political cause with black women was inconceivable to most members and no attempt was made to recruit black members or propagate suffrage ideas outside the white community.'<sup>81</sup> Between 1911 and 1918 the WEAU directed its campaign at attempting to convince parliament that white women who met the same property requirements as men, should be granted the vote. It wooed individual legislators, hoping to widen its support base, for only the South African Labour Party (which was not

a political force to be reckoned with) officially supported the ideal of women's suffrage.

Like the WEL, as will be seen, the WEAU devoted itself largely to war work during World War I and was not an especially significant force between 1917 and 1920. It is easy to see why, as has been mentioned, Walker stresses the lack of dynamism of the South African suffrage movement as a whole.

To return to the history of the Durban WEL, however, we see that in 1912 a countrywide petition was organised and 12 000 signatures supporting the extension of the franchise to women collected. In Durban itself, the WEL held fifty meetings centred around the franchise. It sent representatives to various meetings and to sit on committees involved with issues that pertained to women.

In 1912 and 1913 the municipal vote was focused on, and petitions and delegations to the Mayor were organised. In February 1914, partly as a result of this pressure, Mr Holmes and Mr Hollander of Durban moved at a meeting of the Natal Municipal Association, that women be given the municipal franchise. The motion met with opposition, as it entailed the extension of the franchise to Indian widows. Ultimately a motion by Mr Cochrane of Ladysmith, seconded by Mr Head of Durban, that the association oppose the introduction of any measure having for its object the extension of the municipal

franchise to women, was carried.

Despite the setback, Ordinance No 11 of 1914, 'to extend the Municipal Franchise to Women', was assented to by the Governor-General - in Council on the 20th May 1914. Laws relating to the qualification, enrolment and rights of voters for boroughs were extended to women on the same grounds as men.<sup>82</sup> The Durban WEL was jubilant and pressed the authorities to instruct police officers compiling a new municipal roll to include as burgesses all duly qualified female voters. Ordinance No 3 of 1915 was promulgated in April<sup>83</sup>. (Why in the midst of such opposition the ordinance was passed is difficult to ascertain.) An important change was made relating to property qualifications. In terms of Ordinance 11, a woman qualified for the franchise only if sufficient property was registered in her name or if she shared joint ownership or occupation with her husband. Now, regardless of joint ownership, in the case of property owned or rented by a husband or wife, the qualification extended upon one, extended to the other, provided the value or rental was sufficient to qualify two persons. However, the wife of any town clerk or other officer of the corporation, or the wife of any person in any contact with the Corporation was disqualified for election as councillor.<sup>84</sup>

1914 saw the advent of war. In England this essentially ended the suffrage struggle. Millicent Fawcett committed the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS) to war

work. Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst urged their followers to help England in this time of crisis. They became fanatically patriotic and changed the name of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) journal from 'The Suffragette' to 'Britannia'. The war was also of great concern to all the enfranchisement Leagues of South Africa and was discussed at the annual conference of the WEAU. Motions to the effect that active suffrage propaganda work be suspended during the war and that suffrage societies devote all their activities to relief and war work were defeated, but there was dissension.<sup>85</sup>

In Durban, although fortnightly meetings continued to be held, attendance rates dropped and enthusiasm lagged. In December 1915, at the League's Annual General meeting, an important step was taken. A proposal that the activities of the League be suspended for twelve months (only a committee of officers carrying out essential work being left) was carried by 10 votes to 4. Mrs Kerr Cross said that Durban had become a great military centre and that so many women were engaged in war work that there was little time for anything else<sup>86</sup>.

Little was heard from the League in 1916. Energies were diverted to war work. In 1917 representatives from the Enfranchisement League were amongst the deputation for the Town Council, protesting against its recognition of immoral houses. Mrs Ruxton was elected acting president at the end of 1917. Her message was that the League should prepare for

action. She stated that 'the time was coming with the end of war when social reconstruction would demand the rights of women'.<sup>87</sup>

After the war ended, 'agitation' for the franchise resumed once more. A number of letters to the press were written.<sup>88</sup> Mrs Kerr Cross, acting president of the League delivered an address at the Annual meeting. She talked of the sacrifices that had been made:

Fully two years ago Durban became a large military centre for the Union and this being so, we thought it advisable to curtail the work of the League as much as possible, most of our members being engaged in war work ... Two well-known members gave up everything, took the VAD qualification and nursed for two years at the Base Hospital ...<sup>89</sup>

Hopes were raised when in England, women over thirty were granted the vote. (Anderson and Zinsser note that 'Women between 21 - the age at which men could vote - and 30 were considered too "flighty" and had to wait until 1928 for the suffrage'.<sup>90</sup>) It seems that public opinion had been swayed in favour of women's suffrage because women's conduct during the war had been exemplary. They had kept England functioning in the absence of able-bodied men. They had worked in factories, nursed and driven ambulances and buses. The feminist cause won support. In Durban, women had also involved themselves in war work and a large number had been employed in jobs previously held by men. The time had now come though when

the League could once more concentrate on obtaining the vote.

However, the women of South Africa were not to be granted the same rights as their sisters in England. The Durban League did not seem to gain any impetus after the war. It limped along holding meetings for the same small group of supporters, sending letters to the press and holding lectures to which few came. The passing of Mr Wyndham's resolution<sup>91</sup> in favour of women's franchise in South Africa was applauded, but this was to come to nothing. In 1920 Mrs Phyllis Bell, vice-president of the League, called for the women of Durban to refuse to support or work for a candidate 'not pledged to support a measure of women's suffrage in the New Parliament'<sup>92</sup>, but this was not pressure enough. Another ten years were to pass before the franchise was granted to white women in South Africa.

The Durban League and ultimately the South African Women's suffrage movement was unsuccessful during this period. Confident assertions made shortly after the founding of the organisation, putting forward the view that Durban and Natal women were soon to gain the vote, were proved wrong. One can point to tentative but noticeable growth and strengthening in the League from 1903 to 1914 (culminating in the granting of the municipal franchise to Natal women), but this was followed by setbacks in the form of the First World War and the failure of the government to take the suffrage question seriously. The League had still not gained pre-war strength

by 1920.

Of all the women's organisations that existed in Durban at this time, the Women's Enfranchisement League was certainly the most controversial. It challenged the status quo in its opposition to women's exclusion from the public sphere of political power. However, the challenge was not taken far enough - while adherents of the organisation demanded the vote on the same terms as men, they did not reject the conception of women as biologically and inherently different to men.

The arguments they offered in favour of being granted the franchise sprang from a central base: that women could bring moral standards to parliament, and that women should have some say in the laws which affected their children (being designed by nature to protect these small lives). This was a position which many men and women dismissed, arguing that women could use their 'heightened moral sense' in directions other than politics (as was already the case) or asserting that the municipal franchise was more than adequate for the purpose.

Their acceptance therefore of the sexual stereotypes of the period weakened their position. Their demand for the vote was presented less in terms of a right than as a privilege, and lacked the force to achieve its goal.



## END NOTES

1. The issue of lady golfers caused a degree of furore. A reporter criticized this, saying: 'Her enemies talk about a golfing girl as being too mannish and awfully independent (but) a becoming attire for the golfing girl need not possess the mannish style and she will study the time when to talk golf and of her performance on the links. (*Natal Mercury*, Friday April 17 1908 p 7.)
2. *Natal Mercury*, Wednesday February 14 1912.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Mr Souter, in the *Natal Mercury*, Monday December 16 1912 p 10.
5. The Annual Report of the Durban YWCA (published in the *Natal Mercury*, Friday October 27 1905 p 10.)
6. *Ibid.*, Friday January 6 1905 p 8.
7. *Ibid.*, The whereabouts and morals of the inhabitants would have been closely guarded.
8. Hammerton, A.J., *Emigrant Gentlewomen* (1979) p 149.
9. Lewis, Jane, *Women in England 1870 - 1950* (1984) p 92.
10. *Ibid.*, p 93.
11. *Natal Mercury*, Wednesday September 6 1905 p 7.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, Thursday September 9 1909 p 6.
15. *Ibid.*, Friday June 11 1920 p 13.
16. *Mayor's Minutes*, 1909 p 14.
17. Levine, Philippa, *Victorian Feminism 1850 - 1900* (1987) p 149.
18. Walker, C. (ed.), *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945* (1990) p 324.
19. Walker, C. 'The Women's Enfranchisement Movement in South Africa' in xx 2 (1979) p 22.
20. *Ibid.*, Saturday January 24 1903 p 11.
21. Walker, Cherryl, 'The Women's Suffrage Movement in South Africa' in xx no 2 (1979) p 104.

22. Walker, C. (ed.), *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945* p 337.
23. Lewis, J., *op cit* p 88.
24. *Ibid.*, p 89.
25. Walker, C. *op cit* p 321.
26. *Ibid.*, p 324
27. Walker, C., *op cit* p 25.
28. *Natal Mercury*, Thursday December 22 1903, p 15.

Interestingly the writer singled out suffrage campaigners 'who would not marry under any circumstances', asserting that they were 'monstrosities'. Rosamund Billington sheds some light on this attitude. The basic thrust to her argument was that '(i)deological opposition to feminism in general and the womens' movement in particular operated on the basis of ideas of 'natural' womanhood against which feminist activity was frequently viewed as a deviance.

This was so because 'any social and ideological deviation from the monogamous pattern where woman was the nurturant stabilizing and socializing influence and man the dominant member concerned with the productive world, was seen as a threat to the family and the organisation of social life'. In addition, Billington argues that as women were seen as pacific by nature, feminists militancy was perceived as serious and hostile - far more so than if those involved had been men. It implied deviancy. Both suffragettes and suffragists were labelled unfeminine. Billington asserts that this labelling had a corollary in the view that because of their unfeminine nature many were unmarried and had failed in their natural role. Thus they were monstrosities - unwomanly women. (Billington, R., 'Ideology and Feminism: Why the suffragettes were "Wild Women",' in *Reassessments of First Wave Feminism* (1982) pp 663, 666, 667.

29. *Natal Mercury*, Thursday January 12 1904.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*, Monday May 12 1904.

32. *Ibid.*, Thursday January 5 1905 p 13.
33. *Ibid.*
34. 'Belinda's Diary' in the *Natal Mercury*, Thursday January 17 1905 p 13.
35. For example, in May it was reported that six new members enrolled.
36. *Natal Mercury*, Wednesday July 26 1905 p 11.
37. *Ibid.*, Saturday September 9 1905 p 9.
38. *Ibid.*, Saturday November 25 1905 p 11.
39. *Ibid.*, Tuesday December 12 1905 p 9.
40. In the United Kingdom the Reform Bill of 1832 increased male suffrage after public turmoil - burnings, demonstrations, and threatening levels of discontent. Suffrage was based on property qualifications. Some 800 000 men of substance were now able to vote, and it is estimated that approximately one British male in thirty possessed the franchise. (Eugene Rice, advisory editor, *The Western Experience* (1987) p 803). In South Africa the franchise was also linked to property qualifications and it is for this reason that many members of the Durban League would have been unable to vote even if the franchise were granted on the same terms as for men. They did not own fixed property or pay sufficient rent to qualify for the vote.
41. *Natal Mercury*, Friday December 14 1906 p 9.
42. *Ibid.*, Thursday March 15 1906 p 9.
43. *Natal Mercury*, Thursday December 21 1906 p 9.
44. *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.*
46. 'Belinda's Diary' The *Natal Mercury*, Tuesday January 8 1907 p 11.
47. *Natal Mercury*, Friday July 5 1907 p 1.
48. *Ibid.*, Thursday July 11 1907 p 1.
49. *Ibid.*, Friday September 13 p 5.
50. *Ibid.*, Tuesday December 17 1907 p 8.
51. *Ibid.*
52. 'Belinda's Diary' The *Natal Mercury*, Thursday March 24

1908 p 11.

53. *Natal Mercury*, Monday April 6 p 5.
54. *Ibid.*, Saturday May 16 1908 p 11.
55. *Ibid.*
56. *Ibid.*, Wednesday August 12 1908.
57. *Ibid.*, Saturday August 15 1908 p 11.
58. In 1905 the League in its annual report had noted that the *Natal Mercury* was a 'dissident voice', seeing no reason why women should want the vote. The League found this attitude 'impossible to explain' (noted in the *Natal Mercury* itself, Thursday January 5 1905 p 3).
59. *Natal Mercury*, Saturday August 15 1908 p 15.
60. *Ibid.*, Tuesday August 25 1908 p 8.
61. *Ibid.*, Saturday September 5 1908.
62. *Ibid.*, p 15.
63. *Ibid.*, Saturday October 3 1908 p 15.
64. Walker, C., *op cit.* p 30; *Natal Mercury* Wednesday November 4 1908 p 7.
65. Militant activity included heckling at public meetings, police-slapping and destruction of property - window breaking and so on.
66. Walker, C. 'The Women's Enfranchisement Movement in South Africa'. p 27
67. *Natal Mercury*, Thursday May 6 1909 p 6.
68. Also at this winter session, Mrs Auerback reacted rather acidly to Mr Merriman's comment (see chapter dealing with marriage) that cookery was more important to a woman than knowledge of chemistry. She pointed out that the greatest invention of chemistry, radium, had been discovered by a woman. 'Had Marie Curie been a cook, instead of a chemist, radium might have remained undiscovered.' *Natal Mercury*, Thursday May 6 1909 p 6.
69. Walker, C. (ed.), *Women and Gender in Southern Africa to 1945* p 326.
70. *Natal Mercury*, Saturday December 11 1909.
71. Walker, C., *op cit.* p 3.

72. *Natal Mercury*, Friday July 29 1910.
73. *Ibid.*, Thursday December 22 1910 p 7.
74. Miss Murchie, a committee member did say, however that the publicity gained by English militants 'had done more to further the cause than years of quieter work' (*Natal Mercury*, Monday August 7 1911 p 11).
75. *Natal Mercury*, Thursday December 14 1911.
76. *Natal Mercury*, Tuesday August 1 1911 p 13.
77. *Natal Mercury*, Wednesday July 13 p 7.
78. *Ibid.*, Wednesday December 13 1911 p 15.
79. Walker, C. *op cit.* p 327
80. *Ibid.*
81. *Ibid.*, p 329
82. npog, 1914 p 386.
83. npog, 1915 p 206.
84. Women exercised their new rights in the Town Council elections of August 1914. Although no female candidate was put forward, 68% of those women empowered to vote did so, and the theory which held that even if women were given the franchise they would not use it, was proved wrong.
85. *Natal Mercury*, Friday January 15 1915 p 3.
86. *Ibid.*, Wednesday December 6 1915 p 9. 'Man in the Moon' commented that the Leagues' decision to 'hang up the agitation for a time' was a wise one. (*Natal Mercury*, Saturday December 9 1915 p 15.)
87. *Ibid.*, Monday December 10 1917 p 7.
88. *Ibid.*, Friday December 20 1918 p 14.
89. *Natal Mercury*, Friday December 20 1918.
90. Anderson, B.S. and Zinsser, J.P., *op cit.* p 366.
91. *Natal Mercury*, Thursday April 3 1919 p 6.
92. *Ibid.*, Thursday January 29 1920 p 13.

## CONCLUSION

As was indicated in the preface, this thesis represents an incomplete study of women over the period covered in that it excludes black and Indian women. Furthermore, even in focusing on white women, the history reflected is essentially a history of the middle class. Nevertheless, it is hoped that this study will stimulate a larger study of women in Durban.

It has been argued that Durban society mirrored the British model particularly with regard to women. Ideology and circumstance there produced an ideal of womanhood which was transferred to Durban. Although the ideal was not realised in practice, it exercised a powerful influence on the way women were regarded and indeed on women's perceptions of themselves. It was arguably the basis of the discrimination they suffered.

Although the women of this society were white and therefore not subject to racial oppression, their secondary position in society was never seriously challenged. The equation of a woman's biology with her ultimate destiny as wife and mother underlaid her subservient position in marriage, her inability to control her fertility, paucity of her education, the discrimination experienced in the work place, and the disapprobation given to those who separated sex and procreation in their work as prostitutes. That equation also underlaid and undermined both struggles of women themselves for the vote and the way those campaigns were perceived.

Nevertheless a history of white women in Durban in the period covered is not exhausted by accounts of that discrimination. There were those who challenged the conception of women as naturally passive, submissive, nurturing beings, and who opposed the restrictions placed upon their lives. There were women who either implicitly in their political involvement or in explicit campaigns, espoused a feminist creed.

Their demands and their fight to have these met brought them squarely into the public sphere, out of the private sphere to which women had been relegated. The First World War provided additional impetus for the challenge of the ideology of womanhood. In many ways women were, to use Braybon and Summerfield's phrase, 'let out of the cage'.

Yet women's protests in Durban did not develop into a movement comparable to the first wave of feminism in Britain. While no definite conclusions can be drawn as to why this was so, possible suggestions can be advanced. The population of Durban was small and parochial. Under such circumstances it is arguable that women might well have been reluctant to break out of traditional prescribed roles lest they incur public censure. In Britain, by way of contrast, the size of the population, especially in metropolitan areas, provided a greater degree of anonymity. Moreover, it is also arguable that the British Victorian 'ideal' of womanhood was amplified by nostalgia and insecurities inherent in a patriotic colonial situation. It has also been noted that in Britain, a strong tradition of political campaigning existed

in the nineteenth century which was absent in Durban.

Clearly however, additional research into the period prior to 1900 might provide the necessary information to account for the lower profile adopted by women who chose to stand in the public eye. Nevertheless even though their campaigns were relatively low-key, this does not diminish their contribution to the cause of the liberation of women in Durban, and indeed women in general.



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