

## “REDISCOVERING” THE EVIDENCE OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES BIRTH RATE COMMISSION

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In 1903 the New South Wales Government established a Royal Commission to enquire into the decline of the birth rate. The subject was causing public anxiety in Australia, as in the United States of America, Britain and France. There were many who believed that the rapid decline of fertility in this country was a sign of national decadence, rampant immorality and even racial decay. The New South Wales Premier, Sir John See, may have appointed the Commission in a bid to counteract the growing organization of temperance moralists into a movement headed by the Leader of the Opposition, Joseph Carruthers. However Dr Charles Kinnaird Mackellar, whom See appointed President of the Commission, was probably moved by a genuine, if rather narrow, concern with what he saw as the moral implications of the spreading practice of family limitation.

The Commission met at least once every week from September, 1903 to March, 1904. Mackellar dominated the proceedings but members with important secondary roles included Sir Henry Normand MacLaurin, a close friend of Mackellar; Edmund Walcott Fosbery, the Commissioner of Police; John Brady Nash, a medical practitioner and Member of the Legislative Council; Octavius Charles Beale, a successful manufacturer and thorough-going moralizer; and Timothy Augustine Coghlan, the New South Wales Government Statistician. The tone of their deliberations is indicated by the following quotation from the Commissioners' *Report*:

In whatever way the waning birth rate of New South Wales is viewed, ... it is seen as a grave disorder sapping the vitals of a new people, dispelling its hopes, blighting its prospects, and threatening its continuance.

The *Report*, together with a transcript of the statistical evidence which the Commissioners had received, was printed and published in Parliamentary Papers and as a separate volume<sup>2</sup>. The social evidence they had taken was printed in a second volume but not published. Indeed a resolution of the Commission specifically indicated that the members desired the social evidence to be suppressed and files of the New South Wales Colonial Secretary's office for the years 1904

1. This article is based on work done while the author was a Research Scholar in the Department of Demography, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University.
2. Royal Commission on the Decline of the Birth Rate and the Mortality of Infants in New South Wales, Volume I, Report and Statistics. (New South Wales Government Printer, Sydney, 1904). Also published in New South Wales Parliamentary Papers (1904) Vol. IV p. 791.

to 1908 contain several minutes giving administrative effect to that suggestion<sup>3</sup>.

Historians had long regarded the Birth Rate Commission's *Report* as an important document but their attempts to recover the missing volume of social evidence had proved fruitless. However intriguing clues about the volume began to appear in 1967 when the author began investigating attitudes to the peopling of Australia at the turn of the century. A reference in O.C. Beale's *Racial Decay*<sup>4</sup>; (which has been described as "Quite the oddest book ever published against contraception, in a field where competition is heavy") made it clear that copies of Volume II of the Royal Commission were still available to Beale in 1908. Correspondence with Mr Edgar Beale of Wollongong, N.S.W., elicited the information that Beale senior had access to Volume II whenever he needed it. There were also hints in Beale's correspondence that he may have had his copy of the evidence from Mackellar but a search of Mackellar's papers in the home of his daughter, the late Dorothea Mackellar, failed to reveal any trace of the missing volume.

The trail would have ended in Mackellar's Darling Point home had it not been for a footnote in Norman E. Himes' *Medical History of Contraception*<sup>5</sup>. The note made it clear to anyone who had read Volume I carefully that Himes himself must have been reading Volume II at the time he made the reference. Fortunately he indicated that the copy he had seen was in the Surgeon-General's Library in Washington. A microfilm of Volume II was obtained from the National Library of Medicine (as the Surgeon-General's Library is now called) by the Australian National University Library. The most interesting feature of the American copy was a bookplate indicating that it had at one time been in the Library of the Prudential Assurance Company of New Jersey, Statistical Division.

The Archivist and Librarian of the Prudential were unable to say where their Company had obtained the Volume but they suggested that it could have formed part of the library of Dr Frederick Hoffmann, who was the Company's actuary for many years and donated his collection of books on medical statistics to the Surgeon-General's Library. Unfortunately the Prudential staff were not able to suggest how Hoffmann might have acquired the volume and once again the chain of enquiry appeared to be broken.

The missing link turned out to be a letter by T. A. Coghlan. In 1960 copies of Coghlan's papers were obtained from his grandson, then resident in South Africa, by Miss Joan Cordell of the University of New South Wales<sup>6</sup>. Buried

3. New South Wales Colonial Secretary's Correspondence, 1903-1910. (New South Wales Archives, Sydney, shelf No. 6993. Inward letter file no. 08/4795).
4. O. C. Beale: *Racial Decay*. A Compilation of Evidence from World Sources (Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1910).
5. Norman E. Himes: Medical History of Contraception (Gamut Press, New York, 1936/1963) p.326 n.145.
6. The microfilm of Coghlan's papers is now in the hands of Professor Noel Butlin of the Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, but is to be deposited in the Menzies Library of the University.

among the letters and newspaper cuttings was a letter Coghlan had written from London in 1909 when he was Agent-General for New South Wales. It was addressed to “My Dear Mr Hoffmann” and began:

“I have sent you a copy of the full report of the Birth Rate Commission in New South Wales. Only a very few copies of the report were allowed to get into circulation – not more than 20 in all I should say – so the one you have is a rarity.”

The copy of Volume II of the Birth Rate Commission’s report which Coghlan obtained, contrary to the direction of his political masters, and sent to Hoffmann, and thus to the Prudential Assurance Company and, thence, the National Library of Medicine, was not the only copy to survive. One other is now known to be in the hands of Coghlan’s grandson. By way of footnote and as yet another example of the kind of thing which makes archivists and librarians wring their hands, it should be said that 100 copies of Volume II were placed under seal in the basement of the Chief Secretary’s Office in Sydney whence they were removed in 1942 (and, presumably, destroyed) to make way for an air-raid shelter.