‘Hidden under many bushels’

LADY VICTORIA PLUNKET AND THE NEW ZEALAND SOCIETY FOR THE HEALTH OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN*

Mittie wrote this morning & said V[ictoria]s name & words of wisdom on infants were being quoted in many journals; I’m glad as I’ve looked on for her name in many accounts of welfare meetings & not seen it & thought as usual she was being hidden under many bushels.¹

ON 14 MAY 1907 in Dunedin, Dr Truby King founded the New Zealand Society for the Health of Women and Children, now known as the Plunket Society. It was named in honour of Lady Victoria Plunket, wife of the unexceptional Sir William ‘Willie’ Plunket, Governor-General of New Zealand from 1904 to 1910.² Within 20 years, both King, the Society and its nurses had become international icons of infant welfare and enduring symbols of the strength and might of all things British.

The success of the Plunket Society is well known and the organization remains an influential and important New Zealand institution. At one time or another a large majority of New Zealand parents have accessed the Society’s child health services including the Plunket nurse. Its history has also been well served in recent times. Linda Bryder’s book A Voice for Mothers offers a comprehensive and readable history of the Plunket Society, and places it firmly within the history of the voluntary sector in the twentieth century.³ Indeed Bryder states that the Plunket Society is perhaps the ‘most successful voluntary organization’ in New Zealand.⁴ Philippa Mein Smith’s seminal 1997 monograph, Mothers and King Baby, focused on the decline of infant mortality and the rise of the infant welfare movement in the twentieth century, and featured the role and international influences of Truby King.⁵ Mein Smith examined why, and how, King and the concept of the ‘Truby King Baby’ became so important within New Zealand and across the British empire, especially in the period between 1920 and 1950.⁶

Both Mein Smith and Bryder mention the role played by Victoria Plunket in the vital early years of the Society. Bryder acknowledges that Victoria was not just a figurehead, but I believe that there is more to her involvement than these studies have hitherto noted.⁷ Information regarding Victoria Plunket’s sojourn in New Zealand generally is sparse and there are few records relating specifically to her contribution to the fledgling Society. Little correspondence remains, for example, between King and Victoria, either in New Zealand or elsewhere. Yet there is evidence to suggest that they communicated regularly over matters to do with the Society and its nurses.⁸ Victoria left no diaries, published or unpublished, and few personal letters have survived. Therefore her contribution to the Society’s early days in New Zealand, and her influence...
on child welfare generally, have been ‘hidden under many bushels’ as Victoria’s sister, Hermione Blackwood, expressed it. The general assumption is that whilst it was important that King secured vice-regal patronage for his nascent organization, Victoria Plunket’s role was otherwise minimal, apart from being King’s influential patron, lending her name to the Society and its nurses, and giving a few speeches.9 Along with efforts by Mary King, Truby King’s daughter, who, in her book Truby King — The Man, did so much to eulogise her father’s achievements and downplay other people’s roles, including her own and that of her mother, Victoria’s work has largely been passed over.10 But by using extensive family records held in the Dufferin collection in the Public Record Office in Belfast as well as various New Zealand archives, a reassessment of Victoria Plunket and her role in the establishment of the Society and its nursing guild can be made.

Victoria Plunket was much more than simply a vice-regal patron to the newly formed infant welfare society and an imperial figurehead for King’s ideas. Certainly Victoria was won over by his methods. As the mother of six children when she arrived in New Zealand in 1904, and with two more children born in 1907 and 1909, she was a most suitable candidate for his ideas. But it was Victoria’s idea to create a nursing guild — what became the Plunket nurse — which was a key to the success of King’s scheme. Whilst King originally employed Mrs McKinnon, not a registered nurse, to work and train in the Seaciff Mental Hospital that he ran, the suggestion to create a nursing system or guild to ‘professionalize’ the Society and its nurses was put forward by Victoria Plunket.

Secondly, and most importantly, it is crucial to understand where Victoria Plunket obtained her ideas from regarding the establishment of a specific nursing service to champion King’s methods. Whilst she was not involved in any way with professional nursing and was not an expert in nursing matters generally or nursing systems specifically, Victoria had two older sisters, Lady Helen Munro Ferguson in Scotland and Lady Hermione Blackwood in Ireland, both of whom were intimately involved in British nursing and nursing politics at precisely the same time as Victoria was in New Zealand.

This case study of Victoria Plunket, Truby King and the Plunket nurses in New Zealand is a pertinent example of a vice-regal woman whose actions were integral in the transference of ideas and institutions across the British empire. Many professional nurses and doctors in New Zealand already knew of developments in Britain concerning the nursing guilds such as the Queen Victoria nurses. The establishment of the New Zealand nursing journal Kai Tiaki was also important in disseminating new ideas. Trends in Britain and elsewhere in the empire were thus carefully observed and noted in New Zealand. But it was Victoria Plunket, through her position as vice-regal consort, along with her family connections and networks, who brought the knowledge and ideas together to form the Plunket nurses in New Zealand. This transference of ideas went both ways — not only outwards from the centre of empire to the far-flung dominions such as New Zealand, but later from the most distant dominion back to the epicentre of empire.

The Plunket nursing scheme has generally been examined by historians
within the context of the infant welfare movement, Truby King and the development of the voluntary sector, rather than in the context of nursing history and imperial feminism. In this article, therefore, the Plunket nursing scheme will be positioned as part of the development and professionalization of nursing across the British empire in the early twentieth century. By focusing on Victoria Plunket, the woman who suggested and implemented the nursing model, and by examining the origins of the Plunket nursing scheme in this way, it will be argued that the Plunket nursing scheme was part of the internationalization of women’s networks in the period from 1900, especially in the field of nursing.

The early decades of the twentieth century were very important for the nursing profession within the British empire. It was a period of expansion, consolidation and professionalization.¹¹ The Order of Queen’s Nurses was inaugurated by Queen Victoria in 1887 to celebrate her jubilee. These nurses were established in districts across Britain and worked with those who were both poor and sick. Training consisted of two years’ hospital training and six months’ district training in the Queen’s Nurses’ Training Home. Often midwifery training was also undertaken. The annual cost of maintaining a Queen’s Nurse at the turn of the century was about £100, of which £35 was the salary.¹² In January 1904, there were 1144 Queen’s Nurses employed across Britain: 693 in England; 262 in Scotland; 99 in Ireland and 90 in Wales.¹³ Many of these nurses worked in rural, isolated communities. Later, in 1897, as a Diamond Jubilee Gift from the Queen, the ‘Victorian Order of Nurses for Canada’ was inaugurated. By 1904, there were 62 Victorian Order nurses working in 16 towns and 15 hospitals in Canada.¹⁴

Nursing, like other areas of women’s concern such as female suffrage, became internationalized at the beginning of the twentieth century. The International Council of Nurses (ICN), formed in 1889, was one of the early international women’s organizations. The ICN was a way for nurses all over the world to band together and support each other through such contentious issues as the state registration of nurses.¹⁵ World nursing congresses were held regularly and nursing services of varying kinds such as the Queen’s Nurse model were established across the British empire. Vice-regal women played an important role in facilitating this extension of various nursing systems.¹⁶ The establishment of a formal nursing guild and the inauguration of the Plunket system of nursing in 1908 is significant if placed within this context of ‘nursing for empire’ and the general expansion of nursing guilds that occurred at the time.

The period under examination also saw an emerging interest in all matters to do with ‘mother and child’. Infant mortality and maternal mortality became an issue across the British empire and elsewhere.¹⁷ Truby King’s methods and New Zealand’s Plunket nursing scheme reflect a general interest in babies, infant and maternal mortality, midwifery and breastfeeding and the nascent beginnings of mothers’ and babies’ organizations across the empire. This is evident from reading contemporary nursing journals such as the *British Journal of Nursing*, the *Queen’s Nurses Magazine* and the New Zealand nursing journal, *Kai Tiaki*, founded in January 1908 during Victoria Plunket’s time.
in New Zealand. Different theories and methodologies ‘To Help the Mothers & Save the Babies’ (the motto of the King society) were being developed by different doctors and health practitioners but none initiated a specific system of nursing to propagate and spread the ideas as Truby King did through the Plunket nurses. There was no comparable nursing scheme, such as the Plunket nurses, in Australia at the time, and neither was there a scheme for providing fresh, clean milk supplies as advocated by the King system.

In New South Wales, for example, in response to the Royal Commission in Births of 1903, the Sydney Municipal Council issued pamphlets and guidance for women and children. Whilst W.G. Armstrong, city health inspector, had established a rival scheme to his Australasian contemporary across the Tasman, he used health inspectors to carry out home visits. Armstrong did not initiate a specific nursing guild such as King’s Plunket nurses. By 1909, the Alice Rawson Schools for Mothers had established centres in central Sydney (Bourke Street, Woolloomooloo and Newtown) where nurses educated women in areas such as breastfeeding and babies’ development. The Ashfield Home for Infants was established, the Norland Institute for Training Children’s Nurses and Day Nurseries, and the Kindergarten Movement, which initiated kindergartens in working-class and poor areas of Sydney, had begun. In that year the secretary of the New Zealand Society, Mrs Carew, travelled to New South Wales to talk to the National Council of Women about the King scheme and the Plunket nurses. Miss Rawson (daughter of the Governor of New South Wales) was very interested in the establishment of Pure Milk Depots in Sydney. This later eventuated in the state of Victoria when Lady Talbot initiated the short-lived Lady Talbot Depot after reading of King’s scheme.

What set King apart from his contemporaries, and what ultimately made his scheme a dominant model across the British empire in the first half of the twentieth century, was having a specific nursing guild — the Plunket nursing scheme. Rather than relying on ordinary nurses or health inspectors, King’s infant welfare model included a specific nursing guild. King himself acknowledged the role played by Victoria Plunket and her husband, stating that ‘the Plunket scheme arose entirely with the Governor and Lady Plunket and we welcomed the proposal because it bid fair to do an immense amount of good’. As early as May 1909, it was recognized in New Zealand that the Plunket nursing scheme was an integral part of the King model, and that it was ‘impossible to overestimate the value of the work done by the Society’s nurses’. When examined in this light, the role played by Victoria Plunket in the suggestion and establishment of the Plunket nursing scheme in its vital early years becomes far more valuable than has hitherto been acknowledged.

Victoria Plunket’s idea to establish a specific nursing guild to promote the ideas of Truby King can also be viewed within a transnational perspective of imperial feminism, maternal citizenship and philanthropy. The term imperial feminism was first used by Valeria Amos and Pratibha Parmar in 1984. The fusion of imperial history and gender history came to the fore during the 1990s through the work of feminist historians such as Antoinette Burton, Nupur Chaudhuri, Margaret Strobel and, more recently, Julia Bush. Bush has noted, ‘insofar as female imperialism had an ideology of its own, it centred
on the value of British women’s family roles for the Empire as a whole’.  
There has been limited research on the roles played by, and influences of, ‘ladies of rank’, the wives of Governors and Governors-General in Australia and New Zealand during this ‘high point’ of British imperialism.  
But specific questions are raised when examining gender and imperialism and how these ‘ladies of rank’ contributed towards the shaping of imperial rhetoric and imperial ideologies at the time. Questions such as how important were these women in the transference of ideas from Britain to the sites of empire? What networks did they utilize and draw upon? What roles did individual families play in this imperial exchange, especially through relationships of mothers and daughters and between sisters and cousins? Much of the work of female imperialists was positioned around the carefully gendered notions of women’s work within the women’s sphere. In the public sphere, this generally revolved around philanthropy, social work and nursing.

Lady Victoria Plunket (née Blackwood) had a privileged, pampered upbringing similar to that of other aristocratic young ladies who were groomed for such imperial duties as being Governor’s wives in Britain’s far-flung dominions. She spent much of her childhood within the British diplomatic élite. She was the youngest daughter of Frederick Temple Blackwood, First Marquis of Dufferin and Ava, and Hariot Hamilton, distant cousins who were part of the Protestant landed aristocracy from northern Ireland. Her father owned ‘Clandeboye’, an estate in County Down, near Bangor on the Belfast Lough, to the north-east of Belfast. He had an illustrious and successful diplomatic career that has been well documented. Victoria was born on 17 May 1873 in Ottawa whilst her father was Governor-General of Canada (1872–1878). She was named after her godmother, Queen Victoria. When she was five years old, the family returned to Ireland, but their peripatetic lifestyle continued with her father accepting key diplomatic posts in St Petersberg and Constantinople, culminating in the ultimate prize, Viceroy of India, from 1884–1888. Later there were postings in Rome and Paris.

From an analysis of extensive family records, most of which are held in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, it is clear that the Dufferins were an exceptionally close and loving Anglo–Irish family. The bonds between the siblings (four surviving boys and three girls) and their parents were very strong and survived the sometimes long periods of separation abroad. The relationship between Hariot and her three daughters, and between the three sisters themselves, was also very warm. Like her older sisters, Victoria was taught by governesses but she also attended boarding school in England (Cheltenham Girls’ School) and spent some time in a boarding school in France with Hermione. Yet, typical of her gender, class and generation Victoria’s overall education was limited. As her mother wrote to her eldest sister, Helen, ‘It is extraordinary that with all the advantages she [Victoria] has had, and with her own quickness to help, should at 17, have to begin to learn everything/the 3 rs included/from the very beginning.’

But education mattered little to Victoria. As the second-youngest child of adoring parents, she was a fun-loving, happy young lady, who also happened to be exceptionally beautiful. In Rome in 1891, aged 18, Victoria met Willie
Plunket, an Honorary Attaché to Lord Dufferin. They were married three years later in Paris. The general consensus amongst the close-knit Dufferin family was that Willie Plunket, despite being the only son of the Archbishop of Dublin and Primate of Ireland, was not an ideal match for their daughter. They believed that Willie was not very bright and Victoria’s mother, Hariot, was concerned that he had no real occupation. Indeed Hariot saw him as a ‘Comic lead’. But as Victoria wrote to Helen (in the vein of Oscar Wilde): ‘He [Willie] is so gentlemanly and always so considerate for me — He isn’t clever which is a misfortune not a fault.’ As it was a love match, the marriage was allowed to proceed.

Willie Plunket continued to be attached to the diplomatic circuit. Before being appointed Governor of New Zealand in 1904 he had been Private Secretary to the Lord Lieutenants of Ireland, Lord Cadogan and Lord Dudley. However, money, or too little of it, was a constant theme in the asset rich but cash poor Plunket household. Her fecundity was another. Writing to Helen, his beloved eldest sister, from the Orange Free State, middle brother Basil Blackwood, on hearing of Victoria’s latest pregnancy in New Zealand, confessed, ‘I’m more than sorry to hear that another Plunket is expected. As Plunkets don’t eat weeds so many children seem to me to be a dreadful extravagence.’

When Truby King formed the Society for the Promotion of the Health of Women and Children in Dunedin in May 1907, Victoria Plunket was in England settling her two eldest daughters, Nelly and Eileen, into the prestigious Cheltenham Girls’ School. She had left New Zealand in January and sailed for a visit ‘Home’. Victoria was seven months pregnant (the probable reason for her trip home to be close to her family) and gave birth to her seventh child, Ethne, on 31 March 1907. She did not, therefore, hear about Truby King, his ‘radical’ methods for child survival and his hospital at Karitane near Dunedin until she attended the first meeting of the Wellington Branch of the Society for the Promotion of the Health of Women and Children on her return in October 1907.

When the association was first formed there was no mention of creating a special nursing scheme. Rather the aims of the Society were to encourage women to breastfeed their babies; to disseminate information to mothers on how to look after babies; to provide access to ‘humanized’ milk if necessary; to employ ordinary nurses to attend to those who readily sought assistance; to promote legislative reforms in all areas of women and children; to co-operate with other philanthropic organizations such as the St John Ambulance, church groups, the Salvation Army and the Free Kindergarten; and to investigate conditions under which waifs and strays were cared for, especially in the first 12 months of life. Truby King was also concerned with specific political and health issues affecting women and children, such as changing the registration of births from two months to 48 hours.

Victoria was ecstatic to hear of King’s infant welfare society. Finally she had a scheme that she could get her ‘teeth into’. Two years earlier on her arrival in New Zealand she had lamented to her sister Helen that ‘All the charities are so nursed by the government that there is very little out side notice taken of them’. Victoria wanted to become involved in some capacity
in the women’s sphere. Like her mother before her, and as part of the imperial
rhetoric surrounding vice-regal wives, Victoria believed that philanthropic
undertakings were expected of women in her position. But she did not know
where to begin. As she wrote again to Helen: ‘If only I had Mama’s & yr brains
& organization [sic] powers I might help a lot, as it is I am most hopeless
& don’t know how to start . . . . How I sigh for brains — I might be able to
do a lot if only I had them, its not from not wanting to.’

Despite Victoria’s
inexperience and her perceived inadequacies and self-doubt, here was a cause
that really suited her. As the mother of seven, soon to be eight, children,
Victoria could offer not only her patronage as the Governor-General’s wife,
but in the area of nursing she had access to significant expertise through her
family connections. Her mother, Hariot Dufferin, her eldest sister, Helen, and
in a different way, Hermione, were all wonderful role models. Hariot Dufferin
had been involved at committee level in a myriad of women’s philanthropic
organizations throughout her life, including the Girls’ Friendly Society and
district nursing in Ireland. Hariot’s most enduring legacy, however, was the
establishment of the Dufferin Fund in India in 1885 whilst she was Vicereine
of India. This fund was established to secure appropriate medical treatment
by Indian women for Indian women through the training of Indian female
doctors and nurses, and the opening of wards and hospitals dedicated to Indian
women. This organization has been described as the ‘centrepiece of colonial
philanthropic work into the twentieth century’.

Victoria’s eldest sister, the dynamic, sometimes controversial but highly
regarded Lady Helen Munro Ferguson, was involved in the politics of nursing
in England, Scotland and Ireland. Helen was especially active in the campaign
for the state registration of nursing, which was a very contentious issue in
the first decade of the twentieth century in Britain. Important and largely
overlooked in current discourse, the debate about the state registration of
nurses was played out alongside women’s suffrage in Britain from 1902. A
close friend of Lady Helen’s, Mrs Bedford Fenwick, formed the Society for
the State Registration of Trained Nurses in 1902. Helen was invited to join
the Society and became a vice-president because she was considered to be a
‘woman of influence’, a woman who could lobby politicians, and who had
distinct political skills herself. She was articulate, intelligent and clever. But
as she was not a nurse, she always represented the issues from the public’s
perspective. She left the specific nursing issues to the trained experts such as
Bedford Fenwick (herself a qualified matron) or other well-known nurses such
as Miss Isla Stewart.

From 1902 until 1910, when Helen turned her attention to the emerging
Scottish Branch of the British Red Cross Society, she spent much of her
time writing and delivering speeches, publishing articles in journals such
as Nineteenth Century, lobbying parliamentarians, chairing meetings and
conferences at the local London government headquarters of Caxton Hall
and the Midwives’ Institute, providing evidence at government inquiries, and
generally advocating the state registration of trained nurses. She even enlisted
the support of her husband, Liberal politician Ronald Munro Ferguson, who
put a number of (unsuccessful) private members’ bills to parliament during
this period.
Victoria Plunket’s unmarried middle sister, Lady Hermione Blackwood, trained as a Queen Victoria’s Nurse in London, and later worked as a district nurse around her home, Clandeboye, near Belfast in Ireland. She was a qualified midwife and president of the Ulster Branch of the Irish Nurses’ Association. Hermione also began the Queen’s Nurses Magazine, funding and editing the journal from 1904 until 1910. All these events coincided exactly with Victoria’s vice-regal period in New Zealand.

Victoria was also a close friend of Lady Rachel Dudley, who established her version of district nursing for the poor in the remote parts of Ireland because there was no infrastructure to support a district scheme that was generally funded by private subscription. Between 1903 and 1904, Rachel collected enough money to endow nine nurses who were then dispatched to the poorest and most isolated parts of Ireland where there were few doctors. Later, as the Governor’s wife in Victoria, Australia, Rachel established the Bush Nursing Scheme based on her earlier Irish model.

With these family and other connections, Victoria Plunket’s life-long association with the infant welfare movement both in New Zealand and later in Britain was assured. Victoria travelled home to Britain from New Zealand in 1905 and again in 1907 where she caught up with the all the latest nursing practices and politics from her sisters. Hermione delivered a paper on district nursing in Ireland to the hugely successful Paris Nursing Conference in June 1907. The problems in Ireland were unique, she argued, especially in the west where extremes of poverty existed, combined with isolation. Hermione referred to infant mortality and tuberculosis as two great problems confronting contemporary society. The district nurse could help through education and preventative measures to assist the local communities. This rhetoric sounds very similar to what Victoria later came up with in New Zealand after her return from Britain in mid-1907.

Victoria viewed the fledgling infant welfare society and especially her idea of a specific nurses’ guild as a patriotic imperial movement. Her idea was to form a ‘guild of district nurses’ that would work specifically in caring for babies and would assist mothers to look after their young children. The Plunket nurse was to be a nurse with a special mission: they would supply professional knowledge to mothers and babies. The nurses were to be installed across New Zealand. The cost of each nurse would be approximately £200, funded by subscriptions, donations and membership fees with assistance from governments at a local and national level.

In a speech to a public meeting in Wellington in March 1908, Victoria clarified how the Plunket nurses would be different from other nurses: ‘The district nurses mitigated the sufferings of the sick, the Society for the Protection of Women and Children fought the battle of wrongs done, the Government inspectors visited licensed homes and institutions, but it was not the business of any of these societies to educate mothers, or prospective mothers on their own health, or that of their babies. This was the special work of the Infants’ Life Preservation Society.’ Victoria saw the Society as having not only a charitable function but, through the Plunket nurses, an educational role as well. In her lectures, Victoria often used examples of women she had met, such as when she visited the home ‘of a forlorn infant in Dunedin dying..."
through neglect and ignorance on the part of the young mother’. Victoria was not chastising the mother, but rather arguing that most mothers made mistakes when they were ignorant about food, clean air and hygiene. Victoria also wrote to mothers she had met who had sick children offering her support. ‘We must all fight for yr [sic] baby as of course 8 and a half lbs at five months is most distressing’, she wrote to Mrs Harris from Palmerston North.

Victoria Plunket put her idea of a nursing guild to a receptive Truby King in early 1908 as a way of not only disseminating King’s ideas to the wider public but as a way of unifying the different branches of the Society which had been established in both islands. Victoria also proposed that the Karitane Home in Dunedin should become a teaching centre for the Plunket nurses. Following on from her godmother’s interest in the uniforms of the Queen Victoria’s Nurses almost 20 years before, Victoria was also directly involved in the Plunket nurses’ uniform and accessories. Her nurses were to wear a dark grey uniform, suitable for cycling, with a long military style coat piped with dark green on cuffs, belt and collar. The Plunket nurse also wore a silver locket with the letters VP in relief on one side and the inscription ‘Love, pity and sympathy for God’s sake and His little ones’ on the other. This was almost identical to Rachel Dudley’s Irish scheme in which the nurse’s badge was shaped like a heart with a shamrock leaf in the centre surrounded by the words ‘By love serve one another’. Victoria also stressed that it would be useful for the Plunket nurses to wear an armband or something that would distinguish them publicly from other nurses. King later related that this was ‘so that any mother seeing her [Plunket nurse] going along the street would know that was a woman who knew about babies, and so forth’. It was also important that the Plunket nurse was as ‘free as air to the people of all classes’.

During the early months of 1908, Victoria Plunket travelled around the North Island holding meetings to establish branches of the Society. She called a meeting in Auckland in February 1908 to create a society modelled on the branches in Dunedin, Christchurch and Wellington. The aim was to also establish nurses in all the larger towns and to employ two roving nurses who would attend to women and children in the ‘back blocs’ or rural and isolated areas. At a large meeting in New Plymouth, between 300 and 400 women attended to hear Lady Victoria, and others, talk about the Society and the nursing guild.

Victoria threw herself into the fledgling organization and became adept at running her own meetings. In the second half of 1908, when five months pregnant with her eighth child, she went on a lecture tour around New Zealand on behalf of the Society. Her lecture topic, ‘The Proper Care and Feeding of the Baby’, was well received and included a demonstration of how to make King’s humanized milk. In Christchurch on 24 and 25 September 1908, for example, Victoria gave two lectures each day, at 2.30pm and 8pm. Not surprisingly, she attracted large crowds, with newspaper reports estimating at least 200 attended her afternoon lecture with 350 in the evening. Victoria talked about the importance of women breastfeeding their babies, that it was the ‘first duty of the mother’ to do so if at all possible. She then discussed the situation when artificial feeding was necessary and rejected patent foods, stating that the best
substitute was King’s humanized milk formula in which the hard curd of cow’s milk was added to sugar of milk, cream and limewater in correct proportions. Victoria also mentioned that leather hoods on prams were problematic as they prevented the flow of air to the child; she warned against the use of prams at night as they restricted the growth and movement of babies; and she finished off by warning against the use of dummies since they were unhealthy and unnecessary. The content of her lecture was backed up by charts, models and a practical demonstration of how to make humanized milk.66

Victoria was also something of an inventor, having patented a special hood for baby prams. She gave C.J. Williamson in Christchurch sole rights in New Zealand to manufacture the ‘Hygienic Hood for Perambulators and Go-Carts’. It was agreed that Williamson would pay one shilling for every completed new hood and sixpence for repairs in fitting the new hood.67 So as not to miss a marketing opportunity, Victoria’s patented pram hoods were also on display during her lecture tour. It is unknown if Victoria made any money from her patent but with the Plunket family’s continual money worries it would have been welcome.

The Plunkets also assisted the fledgling organization in its first year by writing and funding the publication of a small pamphlet outlining the main aims and strategies of the Society. Having this strong vice-regal support gave the Society necessary kudos and assisted Truby King in consolidating his ideas in print. The pamphlet attempted to place the New Zealand Society and its Plunket nurses in an international perspective, stating that this type of work was being carried out in Britain and other European countries simultaneously. The main purpose of the pamphlet was to encourage fundraising for the Plunket nurses scheme, for whilst the government was involved in its funding, the Plunkets clearly thought that the nursing scheme would work best if the government was not too closely involved.68 The Dunedin newspaper the Otago Witness also had a regular column that helped to profile the new organization. The column ‘Our Babies’ was written by Mrs King under her pen name ‘Hygeia’. The column began in 1907 with general information on children but quickly became a mouthpiece of the Society. By September 1908, it had a sub-heading stating that it ‘is published under the auspices of the Society for the Promotion of the Health of Women and Children’.69

Two important areas of concern for the fledgling organization revolved around the artificial feeding of infants and the training of Plunket nurses. A view developed very early on that Plunket nurses were merely proponents for the artificial feeding of babies and that they specifically advocated Truby King’s method of ‘humanizing milk’. This process involved using cow’s milk with the curd removed and included a ‘digestible soluble albumen and milk sugar’.70 This was instead of focusing on why mothers were not breastfeeding or were not encouraged to breastfeed.71 Criticism was voiced, by Dr Hendry, Medical Superintendent of the Southland Hospital and later published in the New Zealand Medical Journal, who stated that the Society was championing humanized milk.72 Victoria alluded to this ‘vague but distressing notion’ in her address to the Society’s first conference in Wellington in 1908.73 At the turn of the century, there were many patents available and different artificial feeding
methods used which contributed to the illness and death of babies.74 (This was the beginning of a long decline in breastfeeding that continued for much of the twentieth century.) Yet it is very clear from the early records of the Society at least that it was the original intention of King to pursue breastfeeding as the optimal way to feed a baby, with artificial feeding methods a last resort. ‘No effort has been spared in the direction of insisting that breast feeding is the birth right of the baby, that the mother’s milk belongs to her offspring and not to herself, and that it is the duty of the prospective mother to insure by foresight and attention that a due supply shall if possible be forthcoming’, stated King in a letter to Victoria Plunket in 1908.75

By 1910, however, despite initial support from the medical profession, doctors and nurses in New Zealand were increasingly apprehensive over the role and place of Plunket nurses, especially in terms of training. The nursing and medical fraternities were, initially at least, rather suspicious of the Plunket nursing scheme. Some of the early Plunket nurses (and indeed the first official one, Nurse McKinnon) were not fully qualified. This concerned Hester Maclean, the Assistant Inspector and Deputy Registrar of Nurses. In a letter to Mrs Kathleen Hosking, president of the Dunedin branch, in April 1908, Maclean warned against employing any nurses who were not fully qualified and trained and advised that all Plunket nurses should be eligible for state registration (which came into operation in 1902). She went on to state that the question of proper qualifications had been a continuous problem in Britain’s district nursing fraternity. In ‘societies which hold a good status in the profession, such as the Queen Victoria Jubilee Nurses and the Lady Dudley District Nurses’, she argued, ‘they are staffed entirely by fully trained nurses. Surely, it would be a very false step to associate the name of Lady Plunket with an inferior grade.’76 In 1910, the Chief Health Officer, Dr Valintine, suggested that the Plunket nurse should be a fully trained hospital nurse (three years’ duration) who also had midwifery qualifications.77 Victoria fully concurred with these sentiments.

Victoria does allude, however, to the problems of finding and retaining trained nurses, noting that they were always in short supply: ‘You know the great difficulty here about nurses is there are none for society — once their training is done, they marry — and it’s a great difficulty at present what to do. I believe Gov. means to step in and pay huge sums to fully trained nurses & the public have only to send for them with out fees — I don’t think it sounds as if it would work.’78 Whether this was due to the salaries offered is unclear. Whilst Victoria had envisaged that the cost of a Plunket nurse would be up to £200 per annum, in 1913 the average salary was £150, which included some government support.79 In August 1908, a meeting of the Society discussed the salaries of Plunket nurses and decided that they could not be less than £100 per year.80 This was, though, a wage far in excess of nurses’ wages in Britain where three-year-trained hospital nurses were paid between £30 and £60 per year. This compared with trained female teachers in Britain who earned about £80 per year.81

One of the other important legacies left by Victoria Plunket was her encouragement to link the various branches of the Society together into one organization based in Dunedin.82 ‘The chief work of the Society has been to place in the centres “Plunket nurses” . . . Lady P. proposes to establish several
new branches of the Society before she leaves NZ, and probationers are at present training in the Karitane Home who will later on be employed teaching mothers how to feed and tend their little ones. The idea of establishing the original Dunedin committee as the central council for the Society throughout New Zealand was both pragmatic and practical. It gave the organization and its nurses a national focus that was integral to the success of the Society. One of Victoria’s last duties before leaving New Zealand was to organize a national conference in Wellington in October 1909. At this conference the name of the Society was changed to the Society for the Health of Women and Children. In her speech Victoria outlined the success of establishing nine centres across New Zealand in two years. She once again stressed the necessary qualities of the Plunket nurse: she must be ‘a particularly superior woman’ and needed to be paid a good wage.

The connections between Victoria Plunket and Truby King did not end when the Plunkets left New Zealand in 1910. On her return to Ireland Victoria spoke at length about the new and ‘radical’ New Zealand infant welfare experience and about Truby King’s methods and the Plunket nurses scheme at a conference on Infantile Mortality, held in Dublin under the auspices of the Dublin Branch of the Women’s National Health Association of Ireland in August 1910. Victoria later re-acquainted herself with Truby King during the Great War. She was instrumental in inviting him to Britain to assist in the establishment of a system of infant welfare in London based on the New Zealand model. It was this continued appreciation of King’s work by the Plunkets that assured King’s specific model gained international ascendancy from late 1917. The infant welfare movement in Britain was disjointed and lacked cohesion. War changed all that. A National Baby Week was held from 1–7 July 1917, and it was after this event that Victoria wrote to King asking him to join with her in creating the Babies of the Empire Society. He accepted her offer. By 1919, when Truby King returned to New Zealand, the Society was affiliated with St Thomas’ Hospital. Later in 1925, the Mothercraft Training School (Babies of the Empire) as it was then known, based along the lines of the Karitane Hospital in Dunedin, was moved to Cromwell House at Highgate. Both Victoria and her mother, Lady Dufferin, were on the committee.

In 1919, Victoria’s sister, Lady Helen Munro Ferguson, now wife of the Australian Governor-General, invited Truby King to Australia in an attempt to invigorate the infant welfare movement and advocate King’s ideas in that dominion. This gesture, whilst limited in its overall success, reinforces the notion of imperial women’s international networks and further illustrates how King’s ideas were transferred beyond New Zealand by this coterie of ‘ladies of rank’.

The first decade of the twentieth century saw the nursing fraternity develop international connections that assisted in the expansion and professionalization of nursing. Truby King and his Society benefitted from this internationalization through the connections and networks of Victoria Plunket and her sisters. Largely propelled by the institution of Plunket nurses, the Society was one of the earliest structured infant welfare movements, not only in New Zealand but later across much of the British empire.

Victoria Plunket, as an imperial ‘lady of rank’, played an important role in
these early yet vital years. As the young wife of the Governor-General of New Zealand, and as a mother of eight children under 14, Victoria Plunket supported Truby King and his radical infant welfare ideas wholeheartedly. She was very willing to become his patron and assist in all the typical vice-regal ways. Yet she did so much more. With the support of her experienced and talented sisters and friends, who were intimately involved in contemporary nursing practices, nursing politics and nursing systems in Britain, Victoria was able to establish a nursing system that helped to spread King’s message across New Zealand and ultimately across a significant portion of the British empire. The Plunket nursing scheme represents one example of the internationalization of women’s organizations and women’s networks in the early twentieth century. In this case study, however, not only are the ideas transferred from Britain to the dominions through a specific nursing guild, but the institution of an infant welfare system was propelled from the most distant dominion of New Zealand back to London and the epicentre of empire.

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NOTES

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1 Hermione Blackwood to her mother Hariot Dufferin, undated c.1917, Dufferin Papers, D1231/G/7/173, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), Belfast.

2 Sir William Lee Plunket, 5th Baron (1864–1920) was Governor-General of New Zealand from 1904 until 1910. Previously he had been in the diplomatic service and became Private Secretary to successive Lord Lieutenants of Ireland. See G.H. Scholefield, *A Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, Wellington, 1940. I would like to thank Gavin McLean, who is currently writing a book on New Zealand governors-general for his kind assistance on vice-regal matters in New Zealand. Willie was accompanied to New Zealand by Victoria, their six children (four girls and two boys) and his sister Hon. Kathleen Plunket. A seventh child, Ethne, was born on 31 March 1907 when Victoria was in England; Ethne died tragically in 1919 of meningitis. Dennis Kiwa, the last Plunket child, was born in New Zealand on 6 February 1909. This research forms part of a larger biographical study of Lady Victoria, her two sisters — Lady Helen Munro Ferguson and Lady Hermione Blackwood — and ‘Ladies of Rank’ across the British empire, 1880–1920.


4 ibid., p.ix.


6 ibid., p.87.

7 Bryder, pp.17–19.

8 For example, in a letter to Miss Cook from Truby King, 3 May 1908, concerning ‘Lady Plunket’s scheme’, King writes that ‘Lady Plunket had had some correspondence with me’ about the nurses’ uniforms etc. Miscellaneous King Papers, 1907–1930, AG 7 5-1, Plunket Society Records, Hocken Library (HL), Dunedin.

9 Mein Smith, p.112.


12 *Queen’s Nurses Magazine* (QNM), 1, 1 (1 May 1904), pp.3–4.

13 ibid., p.4.

14 QNM, 1, 2 (1 September 1904), p.32.


18 Featherstone, p.293.
19 Educating Mothers, Australian Woman’s Weekly, 6 September 1913, p.7.
21 Letter from Truby King to Miss Cook, 3 May 1908, Miscellaneous King Papers, 1907–1930, AG 7 5-1, Plunket Society Records, HL.
22 Society for Promotion of the Health of Women and Children, Second Annual Report, Wednesday 9 May 1909, p.3, ATL.
24 There is significant scholarship on aspects of imperial feminism. Some of the most useful work for this article includes Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel, Western Women and Imperialism, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1992; Vron Ware, Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History, London, 1992; Antoinette Burton, Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women and Imperial Culture, Chapel Hill and London, 1994; Clare Midley, ed., Gender and Imperialism, Manchester, 1998. Julia Bush’s, Edwardian Ladies and Imperial Power, London and New York, 2000, is particularly useful for examining networks of imperial feminism within Britain.
25 Bush, p.32.
26 Another example is Victoria’s eldest sister, Lady Helen Munro Ferguson, who established the Australian branch of the British Red Cross Society on the outbreak of war in 1914. See Melanie Oppenheimer, “The Best PM for the Empire in War?” Lady Helen Munro Ferguson and the Australian Red Cross Society, 1914–1920, Australian Historical Studies, 33, 119 (2002), pp.108–24.
29 All three sisters (and their mother) outlived the four brothers, two of whom died in war. The heir and eldest son, Archibald, Earl of Ava, died of wounds at Ladysmith during the Boer War. The third son, Basil Blackwood, was killed in action in 1917 on the western front. Second son Terence Blackwood, who assumed the title on the death of Lord Dufferin in 1902, died of pneumonia in 1918; and the youngest son, Frederick, died in an aeroplane accident in 1930.
30 In 1885, Hermione and Victoria were at a small school (16 girls) in Boulogne-sur-Mer in France while Basil was at Harrow. The girls were escorted to the French school by Hallie, their nanny, who stayed with the family throughout their lives.
31 Hariot to Helen, 17 February 1890, Dufferin Papers, D1071KG/2/2/18, PRONI.
32 Hariot to Helen, 22 January 1892, Dufferin Papers, D1071KG/2/3/7, PRONI.
33 Victoria to Helen, undated c.1894, Dufferin Papers, D1071KG/8/14, PRONI.
34 This lack of funds is discussed by Gavin McLean in his history of the Governors of New Zealand project. McLean states that Plunket lost about £2000 a year during his governorship. See Gavin McLean, ‘Knights of the Round Table? —Plunket, Islington and Liverpool, 1904–1920’, ch.7, unpublished draft.
35 Basil Blackwood to Helen Munro Ferguson, 14 January 1905, Dufferin Papers, D1071/ KG/5/2/3. Victoria did not have her seventh child until March 1907 so it is highly likely that she had a miscarriage. Basil, the third brother, was a talented artist and book illustrator. He was very close to Helen. He became a barrister and served in government positions in South Africa, Barbados and in 1916 as private secretary to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland after being severely wounded in 1914. Despite the misgivings of his family, Basil was desperate to return to active service. As mentioned earlier, he died in July 1917.
36 New Zealand Freelance, 5 January 1907, p.1.
37 ibid.
38 Plunket Society Records, AG 7 6-40, Newspaper clippings, 1907–1908, HL.
39 Victoria to Helen, 25 August 1904, Dufferin Papers, D1071KG/8/18, PRONI.
40 Victoria to Helen, 18 March [190-], Dufferin Papers, D1071KG/8/30, PRONI.
41 The full name of the organization was the Countess of Dufferin’s Fund for supplying Female Medical Aid to the Women of India. Hariot described her rationale for the establishment of the organization in her published journal, Our Vice-Regal Life in India, London, 1890.
43 Lady Helen Munro Ferguson’s husband, Sir Ronald Munro Ferguson, was Australia’s sixth Governor-General (from 1914 to 1920). Lady Helen founded the Australian branch of the British Red Cross Society at the outbreak of the Great War. See Oppenheimer, ‘The Best PM’.
44 For a study of the debates of the state registration of nurses, see McGann.
45 In 1904, the Society became affiliated with the National Union of Women Workers in Great Britain and Ireland. This was considered strategically important as it gave the Society direct representation on the National Council of Women and brought it into contact with women workers internationally through the International Council of Women. See British Journal of Nursing (BJN), 32, 842 (21 May 1904), pp.410–414. See also Rupp, Worlds of Women, especially pp.13–48.
46 McGann, especially chs 2, 3.
47 See, for example, BJN, 34, 881 (18 February 1905), p.129. A year earlier, Lady Helen published an article in BJN entitled ‘State Registration’, arguing that New Zealand had enacted state registration for its nurses in 1902 and that the experience had been very positive. See BJN, 23, 856 (27 August 1904), pp.169–70.
48 Hermione’s Queen’s Nursing Institute certificate states that she became a Queen’s nurse on 1 July 1901. Her registration number was 1666. Dufferin Papers, D1071KH/11/6/16, PRONI. This information is important because the early registration records of the Queen’s nurses have been lost. I would like to thank Sarah Perry at the Queen’s Nursing Institute, London, and Susan McGann from the Royal College of Nursing Library, Edinburgh, for their assistance with my general enquiries.
49 QNM, 1, 1 (1 May 1904), p.6.
51 BJN, 39, 1005 (6 July 1907), pp.6–7.
52 Editorial, New Zealand Medical Journal (NZMJ), May 1908, p.42.
53 Pamphlet issued by Lord and Lady Plunket, ‘The Society for Promoting the Health of Women and Children. Lady Plunket Nurses’, 1908, Plunket Society Records, AG 7-8/19/2, HL.
54 Otago Daily Times (ODT), 28 March 1908, Plunket Society Records, Clippings, 1907–1909, AG 7 6/40, Series 11 — Plunket Miscellaneous, HL.
55 Our Babies column, Otago Witness (OW), 11 November 1908, p.66.
56 This is one of the few letters of Victoria’s that has survived. Letter from Victoria Plunket to Mrs Harris, 1908. Plunket Society Records, Series Eleven — Plunket Miscellaneous, AG 7 11-48, HL.
57 Our Babies column, OW, 25 March 1908, p.58.
58 Baly, History of Queen’s Nursing Institute, p.36.
59 Plunket uniforms, pre-1920s, nd, Plunket Society Records, AG 7 11-35, Series 11 — Plunket Miscellaneous, HL.
60 ODT, July 1909. Clippings, 1907–1909, Plunket Society Records, AG 7 6-41, Series 11 — Plunket Miscellaneous, HL.
62 In an undated 44-page transcript (c.1910) of a meeting between Dr Valintine, Chief Health Officer, and Dr Truby King, King detailed Victoria’s ideas regarding the Plunket nurses. See Plunket Society Records, AG 7 5-27, HL.
63 Our Babies column, ODT, 28 March 1908, Plunket Society Records, Series 11 — Plunket Miscellaneous, AG 7 11-48, HL.
64 ibid.
65 Press, 25 September 1908, Plunket Society Records, AG 7 6-41 Clippings, 1907–1909, HL. The day before in Timaru Victoria had opened the Seddon Memorial Children’s Ward with eight cots provided by both government money and private subscriptions. She had then given an address on a topic for which she was most suited, ‘Motherhood’.
66 Press, 25 September 1908, Plunket Society Records, AG 7 6-41, Clippings, 1907–1909, HL.
67 Plunket Society Records, AG 7 11-28, Miscellaneous, HL.
68 See pamphlet, pp.3–4.
70 The Society for Promoting the Health of Women and Children, pamphlet issued by the Plunkets, 1908. Plunket Society Records, AG 7-8/19/2, HL.
71 Letter to the editor, NZMJ, August 1908, pp.35–39.
72 Our Babies column, OW, 30 September 1908, p.66.
73 *New Zealand Times* (NZT), 15 October 1909, Plunket Society Records, AG 7 6-41, Clippings, 1907–1909, HL.
75 14 March 1908, Plunket Society Records, AG 7 5-27, Early Plunket papers, 1904–1912, HL.
76 1 April 1908, Plunket Society Records, AG 7 11-13, General Correspondence, Series 11 — Plunket Miscellaneous, HL.
77 Undated (c.1910) transcript of meeting between Dr Valintine and Dr King, Plunket Society Records, AG 7 5-27, HL. Indeed two types of nurses emanated from the scheme — the Plunket nurse and the Karitane nurse. The Plunket nurse or infant welfare nurse was based on the British district nurse who was a trained midwife or trained general nurse who generally assisted the poor. The Karitane nurse or mothercraft nurse cared for well babies in private homes and was not required to be a state registered nurse.
78 Victoria to Helen, Wellington, 25 August 1904, Dufferin Papers, D1071KG/8/18, PRONI.
79 The government provided 24s. for each £1 raised by voluntary subscriptions. See F. Truby King, *The New Zealand Scheme for the Promotion of the Health of Women and Children*, Manchester, 1913. This was a reprint of an address King made to a conference on infant welfare in London, August 1913, Plunket Society Records, AG 7 8-12-2, Society Pamphlets, HL.
80 Our Babies column, OW, 19 August 1908, p.70.
82 The headquarters of the Plunket Society relocated to Wellington in 1999.
83 *Lyttelton Times*, 3 June 1908, Plunket Society Records, AG 7 6-40, Newspaper clippings 1907–1908, HL.
84 NZT, 15 October 1909, Plunket Society Records, AG 7 6-41, Clippings 1907–1909, HL.
86 Mein Smith, ch.5.