

# Poverty in Freeman's Bay 1886-1913

WITH SOME notable exceptions, the experience of poverty has been largely ignored by New Zealand historians.<sup>1</sup> Poverty does not even rate a listing in all but one of the indices of the country's current general histories.<sup>2</sup> While noting the exceptional conditions of the great depressions of the 1880s and 1930s,<sup>3</sup> and the more general impoverishment of the Maori,<sup>4</sup> most historians have been content to simply pass on contemporary reports celebrating the universal absence of want in a land of plenty.<sup>5</sup> Erik Olssen, for example, opens Chapter Twelve (entitled 'God's Own Country') of *The People and the Land* by quoting English socialist William Ranstead. New Zealand was a 'Socialist Canaan'. "There were none very rich and none very poor."<sup>6</sup> Ranstead 'had not seen one beggar, the most vivid symbol of poverty in Britain. Anybody who wanted to work could find a job and wages were high. More striking still, wherever he went he found only healthy and well-fed children.'<sup>7</sup> While certainly a dominant theme in its historiography, this naïve interpretation of New Zealand's past has not passed completely without challenge. In a book written for the 1940 centennial, but not published until the 1960s, W.B. Sutch argued that poverty in New Zealand had been a good deal more commonplace than was generally accepted.<sup>8</sup> More recently, Margaret Tennant's work on charitable aid in New Zealand has placed poverty — or at least the state's response to poverty — on to the historiographical

1 I would like to thank Raewyn Dalziel and Barry Reay who supervised my MA thesis, from which much of this article is taken. Thanks are also due to Fiona McKergow, Heather Bauchop, Barbara Batt and Diana Holmes who allowed me access to their Apple computers.

2 The exception is W.H. Oliver and B.R. Williams, eds, *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, Wellington, 1981. W.H. Oliver, *The Story of New Zealand*, London, 1960, pp.295-301. Keith Sinclair, *A History of New Zealand*, (3rd edition), Harmondsworth, 1980; Judith Binney, Judith Bassett and Erik Olssen, *The People and the Land, Te Tangata me Te Whenua: An Illustrated History of New Zealand 1820-1920*, Wellington, 1990; Keith Sinclair, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of New Zealand*, Auckland, 1990.

3 Raewyn Dalziel, 'Railways and Relief Centres', in Sinclair, *The Oxford Illustrated History*, p.152; Judith Bassett, 'Dark Satanic Mills, 1880-1890', in Binney, Bassett and Olssen, pp.183-201; Tom Brooking, 'Economic Transformation', in Oliver, *The Oxford History*, pp.247-8.

4 Judith Binney, 'Maungapohatu Revisited: or, How the Government Underdeveloped a Maori Community', *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 92 (September 1983), pp.353-92.

5 Sinclair, *A History of New Zealand*, p. 192.

6 Erik Olssen, 'God's Own Country, 1900-1906', in Binney, Bassett and Olssen, p.253.

7 *ibid.*

8 W.B. Sutch, *Poverty and Progress in New Zealand: A Re-assessment*, (revised edition), Wellington, 1969.

agenda.<sup>9</sup> As the title of her book on the charitable aid system in New Zealand suggests, Margaret Tennant has paid attention not only to the 'providers' of charitable aid but also to the 'paupers' who depended upon it for their subsistence. Impoverished women and children, the old, the sick and the unemployed all feature in her account of government-funded relief in pre-welfare state New Zealand. Yet despite such concessions towards social history, the primary focus of Tennant's work has been the institutions established to combat poverty, rather than poverty itself. No attempt has been made by Tennant, nor any other New Zealand historian for that matter, to study poverty systematically, as a subject in its own right.<sup>10</sup>

This article is the consequence of a systematic study of poverty and people's responses to poverty in Freeman's Bay between the years 1886 and 1913. An area of central Auckland, Freeman's Bay is of interest because it is typical of the industrial, predominantly working-class areas that were emerging in the hearts of New Zealand's larger cities during this period. Bounded on the east, south and west by the ridges of Hobson Street, Karangahape Road and Ponsonby Road and to the north by reclaimed waterfront land, late nineteenth-early-twentieth-century Freeman's Bay presented a varied picture.<sup>11</sup> The lower part of Freeman's Bay was arranged around the great foreshore timber mills of the Kauri Timber Company, Leyland O'Brien and Parker and Lamb and the sea craft that serviced them. Behind this industrial foreshore lay a twilight zone of run-down cottages, boarding-houses and workshops. Further back were hollows of closely-packed, box-shaped workers' cottages of uniform construction and design. Still further back, on the upper ridges, stood larger houses, often with commanding views of the harbour below. With its close proximity to the wharves and the city's industry, Freeman's Bay was an area where manual workers predominated. Overall, 60% of the area's male householders, as they appeared in the Auckland Street Directory of 1897,<sup>12</sup> had manual occupations; 23% were unskilled.<sup>13</sup> As the industrial foreshore encroached further inland and many non-manual householders fled the inner city, the proportion of householders with manual occupations increased. By the 1913 Directory<sup>14</sup> two-thirds of male householders had manual occupations, 31% were unskilled.<sup>15</sup>

A systematic study of poverty should, if possible, begin with a gauging of its extent in the area under study. Any attempt to measure poverty, however, is bound to be fraught with difficulties. This is because to a large extent measure-

9 Margaret Tennant, *Paupers and Providers: Charitable Aid in New Zealand*, Wellington, 1989.

10 Tennant, p. 4.

11 Paul Husbands, 'The People of Freeman's Bay: 1880-1914', MA Thesis, University of Auckland, 1992, pp. 23-28.

12 Arthur Cleave, ed., *Cleave's Auckland City, Suburban, Provincial, Municipal and General Directory 1897*, Auckland, 1897.

13 Husbands, p. 61.

14 Arthur Cleave, ed., *Cleave's Auckland Provincial, Commercial, Municipal and General Directory 1913*, Auckland, 1913.

15 Husbands, p.62. Amongst the non-householding population of Freeman's Bay the manually occupied in general and the unskilled in particular were almost certainly even more significant, see Husbands, pp.31-32.

ment is dependent on the definition.<sup>16</sup> Social scientists since Rowntree have tended to regard poverty in terms of the failure to meet a minimum acceptable standard of living, usually defined as a poverty line.<sup>17</sup> Those in authority, however, defined poverty in narrower terms. For the members of the Auckland Hospital Board poverty was a fiscal rather than a human issue and recipients of relief were expected to subsist on the most scanty of rations.<sup>18</sup> By embracing only the poorest and most desperate of cases the charitable aid records produced a picture that was only the tip of an iceberg. At a bare minimum 5% of Freeman's Bay's households in a bad year (1888) and 2% in a more typical year (1912) were liable to be faced with absolute destitution.<sup>19</sup> Although it is impossible to produce any realistic measurement of the extent of poverty in Freeman's Bay, it is possible to derive an idea of its causes. The causes of poverty were remarkably commonplace. According to Mother Mary Aubert, it was such ordinary occurrences as 'old age, infirmity, sickness, accidents, the loss or departure of the head and supporter of the family' that 'so often' led to destitution for an individual or household.<sup>20</sup> For some, the bare fact that they were working class — especially if they were also a woman, a child, or one of the unskilled — could be cause enough for poverty.

The primary source for a profile of the causes of poverty in Freeman's Bay is the Auckland Hospital and Charitable Aid Board's Registers of Applications for Relief.<sup>21</sup> Established under the Hospitals and Charitable Institutions Act of 1885,<sup>22</sup> the Auckland Hospital and Charitable Aid Board was the main source of relief for the poor of Auckland.<sup>23</sup> It did not, however, hand out its largesse to anyone,<sup>24</sup> and in order to ensure that only the truly eligible, truly deserving poor received relief, the Board extracted from each applicant a comprehensive profile. Upon lodging their application for relief, each applicant was required to give his or her name, age and address as well as the name and age of any dependents. Applicants were also obliged to provide their marital status, their occupation, the length of time they had spent in the Colony/Dominion and district, the reason for their application, and the names and addresses of any relatives. This article is

16 Peter Wood, *Poverty and the Workhouse in Victorian Britain*, Phoenix Mill, 1991, p.5.

17 B. Seebohm Rowntree, *Poverty: A Study of Town Life*, (2nd. ed.), London, 1902; Peter Townsend, *Poverty in the United Kingdom: A Survey of Household Resources and Standards of Living*, Harmondsworth, 1979.

18 In 1899 a daily ration consisted of one pound of bread, one-quarter of an ounce of tea, three ounces of sugar, two ounces of rice and two ounces of oatmeal. The sick and those over 60 years of age also received half a pound of meat. Tennant, p.78.

19 These figures were calculated by dividing the number of applicants for charitable relief in Freeman's Bay in a particular year by the number of households listed in the Street Directory for the same year.

20 Olssen, 'Towards a New Society', in Oliver and Williams, p.276.

21 Auckland Hospital and Charitable Aid Board, Applications For Relief, National Archives Auckland: 1886-1894, A 493/65; 1894-1907, A 493/63; 1908-1919, A 493/127; 1920-1926, A 493/126.

22 Tennant, p.27.

23 Annual Report on Hospitals and Charitable Institutions, *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives* (AJHR), 1899, H-22, p.2. Tennant, p.29.

24 *ibid.*, pp.77-100.

based on a survey of 990 of these applications from people living in Freeman's Bay who registered between the latter months of 1886 and the end of 1913.<sup>25</sup>

### **Sex and Age**

The first point worth noting about the registers is that female applicants outnumbered male applicants by 587 to 403 — a ratio of three to two. This does not necessarily mean that women were more likely to be in poverty than men, but it does suggest that men and women experienced poverty in different ways. The difference between the sexes is even more pronounced if the applicant's age as well as sex is taken into account. The age distribution of applicants varied markedly between the sexes. The bulk of woman applicants were aged between fifteen and forty, while the majority of men were in their forties or older. Thus women were vulnerable to poverty at an earlier stage in their life-cycle than men. Poverty — as reflected in the applications for relief — was clearly gendered: women were most likely to face poverty in their reproductive prime — between puberty and menopause; while for the majority of men poverty came with old age, when they were past their productive peak.

An analysis based on applicants alone, however, tells less than half the story. Many of those who applied for relief did so on behalf of a family group. Between 1886 and 1913, 990 family heads applied for relief on behalf of 1844 family members. When dependents were included with applicants in the sex and age distribution a radically different image was produced. Of the 1844 non-applicant family members 178 were applicants' spouses; of whom 163 were wives. With the exception of several elderly and dependent parents and grandparents, the other 1666 dependents were children. These children transformed the sex age distribution. For both male and female, and in all three books, the ages zero to four and five to nine were easily the biggest cohorts in the population. If poverty — as recorded in the registers — was a disproportionately female predicament, it was also distinctly linked to childhood.

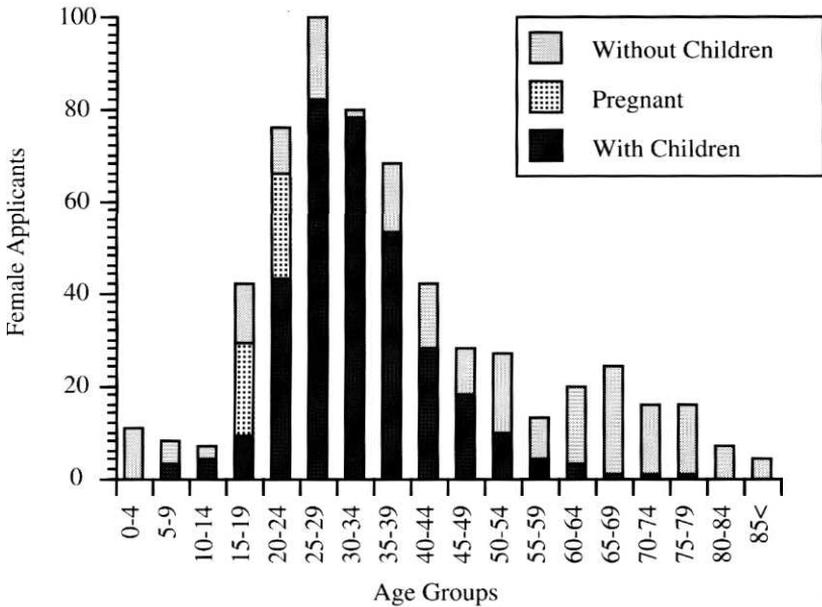
### **Children**

Children formed a very significant portion of the poor population of Freeman's Bay. They were also a major cause of poverty. This was particularly the case for women. Three hundred and thirty-eight or 58% of female applicants had dependent children. A further 43 were pregnant with their first child. The link between dependent children and destitution was illustrated most graphically when woman applicants with and without children were broken down according to age. Overall, 65% of women applicants sought relief for dependent children — born and unborn — as well as for themselves. Between the ages of 25 and 44, however, the percentage with children was eighty-five. The figure was higher still amongst women in the 30-34 age group — no less than 98%. The concentration of women with children in the age groups between 25 and 44 —

<sup>25</sup> The applications cover three books. The first book for 1886 to 1894, contains 351 applicants listed as living somewhere in Freeman's Bay. The second book spans the period from 1894 through to 1907 and contains 363 applications from Freeman's Bay. The survey was carried through to the close of 1913 in the third book, which has 276 applicants with Freeman's Bay addresses.

or 15 and 44 — if pregnant women are included — highlights the fact that female poverty was tied closely to the female life cycle.

**Graph 1**  
**Female Applicants with and without Children**



This link can be seen clearly in Graph 1. There are few applicants younger than fifteen. The few females in this age group who did apply on behalf of themselves and other children had done so as a consequence of losing the support of their parents. The frequency of applications increases markedly over the next two age groups. While only 20% of applicants aged between 15 and 19 were listed with children, 49% were pregnant with their first child. Prospective first-time mothers also made a noticeable contribution to the 20-24 age group (30%). They were, however, easily outnumbered by women with children, who were 57% of the total age group. With the 25-29 group the graph reaches its peak. Applicants pregnant with their first child have disappeared and the group is dominated by women with children. After 25-29 the graph charts a decline in both overall applications and applications including children which continues through to 55-59. In the age groups that follow after 55-59 the relationship between applicants with children and total applicants is broken.

In his classic study on poverty at the turn of the century in York, England, B. Seebohm Rowntree noted 'that women are in poverty during the greater part of the period that they are bearing children'.<sup>26</sup> The link between child bearing and

26 Rowntree, p.137.

women's poverty was equally evident in Freeman's Bay. As applicants, women were first exposed to the charitable aid system in any numbers through pregnancy in their late teens or early twenties. Annie Ashby was a 17-year-old general servant when pregnancy drove her to seek relief.<sup>27</sup> Caught with two, three, four or even more young children — Nora Reilly aged 26 had three children all of whom were under five<sup>28</sup> — women in their twenties and early thirties were forced to apply for relief in the greatest numbers. As women and children aged, the absolute number of applications declined. While older mothers were less of a problem in terms of absolute numbers, their predicament was if anything worse than that faced by applicants who were younger. Instead of having two or three extra mouths to feed, as was the norm for applicants in their late twenties, these older women were likely to be responsible for four, five or six children. Thirty-seven-year-old Elizabeth Heath had eight dependent children aged between 13 years and six months.<sup>29</sup> The only consolation for such women was that with time even these children would be old enough to fend for themselves. Yet even this small hope could be in vain. Daughters who left home to work as servants could return home pregnant, throwing renewed strain on to the family and initiating a new cycle of female poverty.<sup>30</sup>

### Absent Men

Taken as a whole, men were far less likely to include dependent children on their applications than women. Only 37% of male applicants appeared in the registers with dependent children compared to 58% of female applicants (excluding those pregnant with their first child). More significantly, of the 149 men who applied for relief on behalf of themselves and their children, 128 (86%) included their wife in the application. The contrast with women could not have been starker. Three hundred and thirty-seven women included dependent children in their application, but only 32 were able to register a resident male partner — a mere nine per cent.

Where had these errant breadwinners gone? Sixty-six were dead; the rest were somewhere in the land of the living. Thanks to the relief authorities' obsession with securing contributions from liable relatives, many of these men were able to be located. In all, 210 women named their husbands as a liable relative. Of these, 68 could not or would not give their husbands' whereabouts. Sixty-six registered their husbands as being in or around Auckland city. Twenty-seven of these were in prison, 16 were in hospital, and two were in the asylum. Forty spouses were out of Auckland city but somewhere within the Auckland province, eleven were in the lower half of the North Island, and five were in the South Island. Another 12 had gone to Australia, three were on ships, two were in Fiji, and there was one each in Tonga, England and Ireland.

27 Register of Applications For Relief, 1886-1894, p.665.

28 Register of Applications For Relief, 1908-1913, p.169.

29 Register of Applications For Relief, 1886-1894, p.662.

30 See the case of Maria Pappa the nineteen-year-old daughter of Ellen Pappa of Sale Street. Ellen Pappa had six children, three at school and three working until the oldest, Maria, became pregnant, *ibid.*, p.806.

The footloose habits of the husbands of female applicants — in stark contrast to the behaviour of the wives of male applicants — illustrates the degree to which poverty was experienced differently by men and women. For men the corollary of poverty was mobility. For women it was immobility. As workers and breadwinners, men were expected to obey the laws of the labour market and move where work was to be found. In the depressed years of the late 1880s and early 1890s unemployed husbands tramped up to Northland or sailed across the Tasman to Sydney.<sup>31</sup> By the late 1890s depression in Australia had ruled out Sydney as a destination, but the development of dairying in the Waikato and construction of the main trunk line through the King Country offered new opportunities for unskilled job seekers.<sup>32</sup> For women burdened down with children, however, the opportunities for movement were severely circumscribed. The flexibility of the frontier economy did not extend to mothers with young children. While their men roamed the country, these women were fated to remain at home, facing alone the struggle of feeding and clothing a family that was young and often large. These women were reduced to applying for relief when food ran out or the rent needed paying. This gendering of poverty goes a long way towards explaining the preponderance of female applicants in the registers — particularly during the years 1886 to 1894. To a large extent the registers are a record of those who were unable to escape destitution by moving to greener pastures. This is why the registers are full of young women encumbered by children and — to a lesser extent — old men stricken by sickness.

### Women and Work

Another variable in the poverty equation was occupation. The overwhelming majority of applicants who registered an occupation were manual workers; most belonged to the 'distinct stratum' of the 'unskilled'.<sup>33</sup> As was the case with the distribution of children, the distribution of occupations varied markedly between the sexes. Only 273 of the 587 applications on the part of females (47%) listed a paid occupation. The rest appeared as a 'wife' or as 'married' or with no occupation at all. Men, on the other hand, were a good deal more likely to have an occupation. Of the 403 male applicants, 316 (78%) were so registered.

In addition to being more or less likely to have an occupation in the first place, men and women were also differentiated by the sorts of occupations they performed. While the occupations of male applicants ranged widely — from the ubiquitous labourer through tailor, shipwright and carpenter, to clerk, comedian and musician — women's work remained confined within the feminine sphere. In each of the three register books three-quarters — or thereabouts — of women with occupations were employed in domestic work. The other quarter was involved in areas such as the needle trades, factory work, and small business. Domestic work came in two forms. First of all there were regular full-time

31 R.C.J. Stone, *Makers of Fortune: A Colonial Business Community and its Fall*, Auckland, 1973, p.70.

32 See: P.J. Gibbons, 'Some New Zealand Navvies. Co-operative Workers, 1892-1912', *New Zealand Journal of History* (NZJH), 11, 1 (April 1977), pp.54-75.

33 Olssen, 'Towards a New Society', p.267.

occupations such as servant and waitress. These occupations were the province of young, childless women — the majority of whom were in their late teens or early twenties. Casual domestic work, on the other hand, tended to be performed by older women with children. By definition such casual work was poorly paid. As a charwoman, Matilda Ritchie, mother of Beatrice Ritchie a pregnant servant, managed to earn 15s., half what a wharf labourer made, but apparently enough to enable her to support herself and her two children — though not Beatrice and her impending child.<sup>34</sup> Other women were not so lucky. Mother of six, Lucy McGregor, could make just 8s. a week from her ‘housework’ — barely enough to cover her 7s. a week rent.<sup>35</sup>

Low wages and under-employment plagued other women workers as well. Unable to support her four-child family on a 12s. a week laundress’s wage, Susan Barnes applied for assistance in getting her second daughter, nine-year-old Hilda Mary, adopted out.<sup>36</sup> Susan Barnes was not alone in having to make such an agonizing decision. Annie Courtenay asked to have her ten-year-old daughter placed in Saint Mary’s Industrial School.<sup>37</sup> The fact was that most working women were simply not capable of supporting a family of any size. Indeed, they were not intended to be. Supporting the family was the prerogative of the male breadwinner — it was his wage which was supposed to be crucial. Wages for women were regarded in much the same way as wages for boys or girls — as supplementary rather than central to the household’s income. A tailor’s income of 6s. a week may have been enough for Miriam Armstrong and her two children, when it was merely topping up the income of the breadwinner, but on its own, in the wake of that breadwinner’s desertion, it was completely inadequate.<sup>38</sup> Miriam Armstrong was not the only skilled woman worker forced into destitution by wage rates predicated on the notion of female dependence. Boot machinist Catherine Richardson,<sup>39</sup> dressmakers Clara Chatfield,<sup>40</sup> Sarah Jagger<sup>41</sup> and S.M. Gentry,<sup>42</sup> needlewoman Mary Coghlan,<sup>43</sup> machinist Mary Spain<sup>44</sup> and nurse Annie White<sup>45</sup> were all rendered destitute by a combination of dependent children, deserter husbands, and deficient wages.

Even if working women escaped the fate of these women they still encountered the perils faced by all low-income workers. Unemployment, injury, illness and old age conspired against male and female workers alike. In addition, women workers had the threat of pregnancy to contend with. For the young women from Freeman’s Bay who worked in the city’s many hotels, pregnancy was virtually

34 Register of Applications For Relief, 1894-1907, p.138.

35 *ibid.*, p.130.

36 *ibid.*, p.166.

37 *ibid.*, p.152.

38 *ibid.*, p.150.

39 Register of Applications For Relief, 1886-1894, p.335.

40 *ibid.*, p.86.

41 *ibid.*, p.213.

42 Register of Applications For Relief, 1894-1907, p.365.

43 Register of Applications For Relief, 1886-1894, p.636.

44 Register of Applications For Relief, 1894-1907, p.836.

45 Register of Applications For Relief, 1907-1913, p.109.

an occupational hazard. In the small hours of Saturday 26 May 1894, Violet Pierce, a 24-year-old barmaid, was found 'without lawful excuse in a stable' in Napier Street with John Kenney a 28-year-old butcher.<sup>46</sup> Violet and her lover escaped with a caution. Other women, however, were less fortunate. Liaisons in stables (and in other places) could lead to pregnancy, and while pregnancy could lead to marriage, it could also — as the registers testify — lead to destitution, or at the very least, the loss of the woman's job. Unwanted pregnancies also cut short the careers of women working outside the hotel industry. As numerous domestic servants,<sup>47</sup> a governess,<sup>48</sup> a dressmaker,<sup>49</sup> a machinist,<sup>50</sup> and a theatrical performer<sup>51</sup> all found to their expense.

### Men, Work, Sickness and Old Age

While men may not have had to worry about unwanted pregnancies, they were vulnerable to other disruptions to their working lives. The overwhelming majority of male applicants with occupations — 84% — were working class, 55% were unskilled. For these men sickness and injury were the primary causes of poverty. Such afflictions usually came later in life when the manual worker's body started to fail after years of hard, physical toil. Rheumatism, heart and lung disease, cataracts, hernias, ruptures and ulcers, all testified to bodies worn out through strenuous over-use. So did injuries — often carried for many years — to backs, arms, hands, hips, legs, ankles and feet. Not surprisingly, the bodies of unskilled labourers tended to wear out earlier than those of tradesmen. The average (median) unskilled applicant was aged between 45 and 49, the average skilled or semi-skilled applicant between 50 and 54. The outlook for sick and ageing workers was not good. Low and often sporadic incomes provided the unskilled worker with little scope or incentive for saving towards sickness and old age. The traditional response of such men to hard times was movement. Once that avenue was closed, poverty was often inescapable. For more respectable members of the working class, investment in a Friendly Society, deposits in the Auckland or Post Office Savings Bank, and property ownership could provide a limited buffer against destitution. Yet even these testimonies to providence and thrift could prove insufficient in the event of prolonged illness or a drawn out and debilitated old age. The plight of the elderly poor was supposedly alleviated by the introduction of old age pensions from 1898. As W.H. Oliver has noted, however, the payments 'were neither lavish nor indiscriminate'.<sup>52</sup> Numerous

46 Charge Book for Freeman's Bay lock-up, 1893-1896, National Archives, Auckland, A314/20.

47 Register of Applications For Relief, 1886-1894, pp.180, 250, 365, 395, 598, 665, 806; Register of Applications For Relief, 1894-1907, pp.83, 91, 92, 106, 112, 194, 204, 263, 267, 290, 352, 371, 410, 417, 423, 449; Register of Applications For Relief, 1907-1913, p.199.

48 Register of Applications For Relief, 1894-1907, p.73.

49 Register of Applications For Relief, 1886-1894, p.98.

50 *ibid.*, p.141.

51 Register of Applications For Relief, 1894-1907, p.244.

52 W.H. Oliver, 'Social Policy in New Zealand: An Historical Overview', in 'The Report of the Royal Commission on Social Policy', *The April Report, Volume 1: New Zealand Today, Royal Commission on Social Policy*, Wellington, 1988, p.17.

individuals were forced to apply to the Charitable Aid Board for relief because life on the old age pension alone was impossible. Even when supplemented by earnings of seven shillings a week, the old age pension was insufficient to save John Gardener (a carter) from seeking relief on behalf of himself and his wife.<sup>53</sup> Other elderly people could not receive the pension at all. Elizabeth Patterson applied for charitable relief because she was 'unable to earn a living' and could not prove that she was 65 or older.<sup>54</sup> Eighty-year-old Antonio Divianni was rendered ineligible by a residential qualification stipulating that pensioners must have lived in New Zealand for an unbroken 25 years; Divianni had been in the country for a mere seventeen.<sup>55</sup> For many of the people of Freeman's Bay the coming of old age — or even middle age — meant the beginning of a descent into dependence and destitution. Few were able to look forward to a quiet, comfortable retirement. Most — if they were at all capable — continued to work, even if only for a few shillings a week. Failure to do so, be it through sickness or sheer old age, could mean the loss of independence and an application for relief.

### Unemployment

We have seen how children and pregnancy could force women onto relief, and how accident, old age and sickness could do the same to men. What about those without such disabilities? According to Miles Fairburn, what was remarkable about the state of poverty in New Zealand — particularly when contrasted with England and other western European countries — was the fact that 'there were so few able-bodied male paupers'.<sup>56</sup> One reason for their virtual absence was the fact that even in midst of the 'Long Depression' of the 1880s and 1890s male unemployment never became 'chronically bad'.<sup>57</sup> Rather than being the consequence of structural or cyclical disruptions to the provincial or national economy, unemployment was merely a symptom of 'friction' within an atomized job market.<sup>58</sup> Such friction was to a large degree absorbed by the high levels of property ownership working men were supposed to enjoy. Faced by a spell of unemployment, the able-bodied male was able to fall back on his land and enjoy the wholesome produce of his well-tilled plot.<sup>59</sup>

While not as completely insignificant as Fairburn suggests, able-bodied unemployed men constituted only a small minority of those applying for relief. The 56 unemployed men were 14% of male applicants, and 6% of the total applicants. Such figures, however, tell only part of the story. Of all groups of applicants, able-bodied men were considered the least deserving of charitable

53 Register of Applications For Relief, 1894-1907, p.264.

54 *ibid.*, p.192.

55 Register of Applications For Relief, 1908-1913, p.165.

56 Miles Fairburn, *The Ideal Society and its Enemies: The Foundations of Modern New Zealand Society 1850-1900*, Auckland, 1989, p.88.

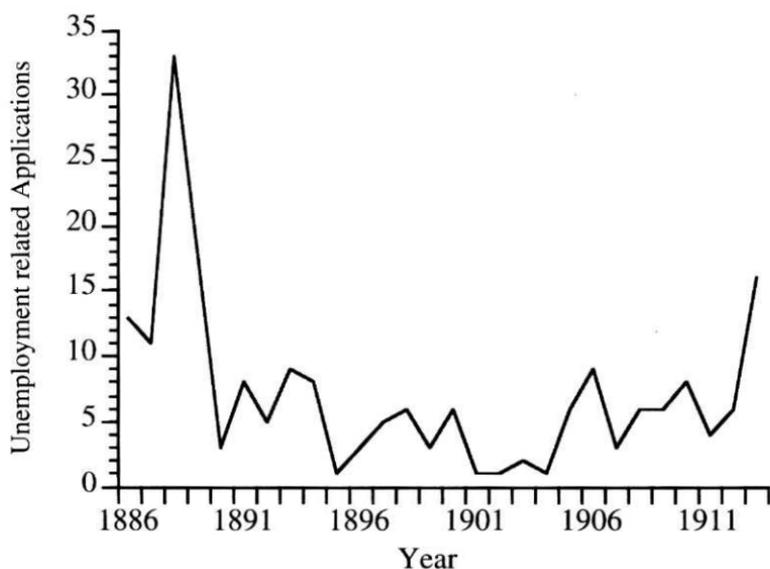
57 *ibid.*, p.110.

58 According to Fairburn 'frictional unemployment' occurs when 'work is available but people are jobless because e. g. they are in the process of changing jobs, there is bad work organization, inadequate information about the job market, inadequate physical access to the jobs, illness, etc.', Fairburn, p.110 and asterisked footnote running from that page to the next.

59 *ibid.*, pp.100-103.

aid.<sup>60</sup> On its own, 'want of work' was insufficient cause for relief. Applicants were expected to have a further excuse, such as a large family or a sick wife. Childless and single men were regarded as not being in need of relief, as a consequence most did not bother to apply. As a rule, able-bodied unemployment was only translated into an application for relief when dependent women and children were involved.<sup>61</sup> In most cases the unemployed husband was excluded from the application entirely. There are a number of examples of women applying for relief on behalf of themselves and their children while still continuing to live with their unemployed husbands. Obviously these women believed they had a better chance of obtaining aid if their case was unencumbered by an able-bodied male. In some cases men deserted their families — often with the collusion of their wives — thus allowing the 'dependent' wife and children to become eligible for relief.<sup>62</sup> Other women sought relief because their unemployed breadwinner had been forced to go to the country in order to look for work.<sup>63</sup> When these cases are taken into account the extent of able-bodied poverty becomes clearer: 201 (20%) of all applications were a direct or indirect consequence of unemployment.

**Graph 2**  
**Unemployment Related Applications for Relief 1886-1913**



60 Tennant, p.184.

61 *ibid*, p. 185.

62 Stone, p.70; Tennant, pp.110, 186.

63 Such a scenario could also end in desertion, with the husband choosing not to return from his job-seeking trip. Tennant, p.108.

As Graph 2 shows, the 201 cases were not spread evenly throughout the register books. Instead they reached a very marked peak in the late 1880s. In 1888 there were 33 cases and in 1889 there were 18. After 1890, unemployment related applications remained in single figures until 1913, when there were 16. The concentration of cases of unemployment related poverty in the late 1880s suggests that there was more to unemployment than friction in the labour market. 1888, 1889 and 1913 were years of crisis for the Auckland economy. The late 1880s saw Auckland languishing in depression,<sup>64</sup> while 1913 culminated in a two-week general strike followed by a month-long waterfront strike.<sup>65</sup>

### Surviving

Whatever the source of their misfortune, applicants for charitable relief were united by the fact that most were working class, and unskilled working class at that. Eighty-four per cent of male applicants with an occupation were manual workers and 55% were unskilled. Female occupations were even more predominantly manual. Ninety per cent of the women applicants with an occupation were manual workers and no less than 76% were involved in unskilled domestic labour. Women without an occupation were tied to the working class by marriage. One hundred and eleven women applicants furnished the occupations of their husbands. Of these 90 (81%) were working class and 63 (57%) were unskilled. These applicants for charitable relief were the least fortunate representatives of a class for whom the threat of destitution was never far away. For the unskilled, particularly, the margin between respectable independence and degrading dependence was narrow. As has been seen, illness, injury, unemployment, under-employment, or the birth of a child could easily cast an individual or family into penury. Even if these hazards were successfully negotiated there was still the spectre of old age to be confronted. The task of piloting the working-class family through these hazards fell to the women of the area. It was women who did the cooking and cleaning, scrimping and saving, borrowing and lending which kept a working-class household above water. In the course of the day to day struggle to stay afloat, women took in boarders and conscripted contributions from their children. When all else failed they sought help from neighbours and nearby relatives.

Keeping body and soul, let alone home and family, together in Freeman's Bay was never easy. Without the assistance of modern appliances, women spent much of their time in domestic labour. Maintaining a household would have been hard enough in the villas that occupied the area's upper ridges; in the cottages and shacks populating the lower slopes it must have been next to impossible. Along with their 'nice harbour views' the villas came complete with hot and cold water, gas and a cooking range, copper and tubs, bathroom (or rooms), a wash house, and a patent water closet.<sup>66</sup> The houses lower down enjoyed none of these

64 Stone, pp.69-71.

65 E. Olssen, *The Red Feds: Revolutionary Industrial Unionism and the New Zealand Federation of Labour 1908-1913*, Auckland, 1988, pp.190-209.

66 For examples see the classified advertisements for houses in Collingwood Street. *New Zealand Herald* (NZH), 6 April 1912, p.10, c.3, 16 April 1912, p.2, c.3. 20 April 1912, p.2, c.7.

'conveniences'. Water often came from a solitary tap, shared in some cases by eight or nine houses.<sup>67</sup> Instead of gas and a range there was an open fire or a 'tiny' colonial oven — an 'iron box with a hinged door, over which the cooking fire was built'.<sup>68</sup> Baths, wash-tubs and coppers were generally notable only through their complete absence,<sup>69</sup> and in lieu of washrooms, women were obliged to do their washing on the verandah.<sup>70</sup> Water closets were also a rare luxury. In Vernon Street 'two dirty and old pan-closets' were expected to serve three houses.<sup>71</sup> In such environments even the most simple of chores became a task of almost Herculean proportions. Cleaning was no mean task when 'to get water, one has to come right through the front of the house, down the verandah steps, across a muddy lane, and then carry back the water and the gathered mud into the house'.<sup>72</sup>

Keeping house in these conditions would have been hard enough without the presence of children. As the registers have shown, large families were the lot of many women — and the responsibility of clothing, cleaning and feeding a young and growing family could only have added to the strain on the housewife. Certainly, it added to the strain on the old and inadequate houses in which they lived. After the turn of the century, overcrowding in Freeman's Bay began to be identified as a chronic problem. There were reports of 'eleven, ten and eight persons, comprising one family in each case, occupying average six-roomed and four-roomed houses, with no conveniences'.<sup>73</sup> During the influenza epidemic 'a man and his wife and 7 children' were found to be living in 'a small 4 roomed house' in Sale Street.<sup>74</sup> Elsewhere, 'three and four children' were discovered 'sleeping in the same room with the mother and father'.<sup>75</sup> The problem was compounded by high rents — often as much as half a labourer's regular wage — which forced families into sharing houses.<sup>76</sup>

Given the hardships they faced, most women coped remarkably well. Against all odds, most houses were kept clean.<sup>77</sup> It was claimed that 'you could not find a speck of dirt' in 80% of the houses in Baker Street, a notorious slum area running off Nelson Street.<sup>78</sup> Most families were respectably dressed and had food

67 'The Homes of Our Workers, No. IV: Evidences of Unthriftness', NZH, 17 October 1903, Supplement, p.1.

68 Jeremy Salmond, *Old New Zealand Houses 1800-1940*, Auckland, 1986, p.68. 'The Homes of Our Workers, No. II: The Struggle to be Respectable', NZH, 2 October 1903, Supplement, p.1; 'The Homes of Our Workers', IV.

69 Report by an officer of the Labour Department, 8 August 1910, quoted by the Chairman of the Royal Commission on Cost of Living in New Zealand during the cross examination of Frederick William Arns, 'Report and Evidence of the Royal Commission on Cost of Living in New Zealand', AJHR, 1912, Session II, H-18, p.351.

70 'The Homes of Our Workers', II.

71 Cost of Living, p.351.

72 'The Homes of Our Workers', IV.

73 Cost of Living, p.351.

74 Evidence of George Thomas Jones to the Commission of Inquiry into the Influenza Epidemic, National Archives, Wellington, E53b, Series 31, acc 1125, pp.269-70.

75 Evidence of Blanche Butler to the Commission of Inquiry into the Influenza Epidemic, p.346.

76 Cost of Living, p.350.

77 See 'The Homes of Our Workers', II and IV, also 'The Homes of Our Workers, No. V: Poverty, Drink and Families', NZH, 24 October 1903, Supplement, p.1.

78 Evidence of George Thomas Jones, Cost of Living, p.273.

on their tables. This was in spite of the fact that by the turn of the century the cost of living in Auckland — for working class families at least — was said to compare unfavourably with Britain.<sup>79</sup>

While the task of running a household was a 'struggle' on a regular male worker's wage, it could become a tribulation when that wage was halved or removed altogether. Faced by such an eventuality women responded in a number of ways. They could economize. Instead of regular cuts of meat they could purchase sixpenny worth of scrap meat.<sup>80</sup> Or they could go without meat altogether and partake of such delicacies as fish heads or maybe even a whole fish caught from the harbour.<sup>81</sup> Failing that, the children's stomachs could be reinforced by further rounds of bread and butter.<sup>82</sup> Second-hand clothes — particularly for children — were another avenue for economies. 'Left off' boots and clothing could be bought from or sold to second-hand dealers.<sup>83</sup> Decent children's clothes could also be obtained from the cast off clothes sale run by the Church Sisters.<sup>84</sup> If such steps were insufficient women could go without or go into debt.<sup>85</sup> Going into debt could take several forms. Most commonly it meant running up a weekly bill at the grocer.<sup>86</sup> In other instances it might mean owing rent or depositing clothes and household effects with a pawnbroker.<sup>87</sup>

Women could also attempt to improve their situation by earning some money of their own. The predicament of the under-employed and under-paid working women has already been discussed. Charring, laundering and sewing were certainly sources of desperately needed cash but they were not the only ones. The most common source of alternative income came from letting out one or more rooms to lodgers. A woman with a dying husband 'kept home together by boarding her brother, a fisherman'.<sup>88</sup> Another family increased their income of about £1 per week by letting the cellar to an elderly man.<sup>89</sup> While most cases of boarding were small scale and informal, involving a single boarder who was more or less part of the household, it could also take on more substantial forms. For some women, boarders were their sole source of income. On being forced to leave her work as a domestic because of failing eyesight, one 'really worthy woman' turned to letting out her bedrooms as 'a means of sustenance'.<sup>90</sup> Boarding-house keeping was a woman's occupation par excellence,<sup>91</sup> but, while

79 'The Homes of Our Workers, No. I: Municipal Responsibilities', NZH, 26 September 1903, Supplement, p.1.

80 'The Homes of Our Workers', V.

81 'The Homes of Our Workers', IV.

82 'The Homes of Our Workers', V.

83 NZH, 13 April 1912, p.2, c.2.

84 'The Homes of Our Workers', I.

85 'The Homes of Our Workers', II.

86 'The Homes of Our Workers', V.

87 'The Homes of Our Workers', III and IV.

88 'The Homes of Our Workers, No. III: When Sickness Comes', NZH, 10 October 1903, Supplement, p.1.

89 *ibid.*

90 'The Homes of Our Workers', II.

91 Husbands, p.43.

lucrative for some, it provided little more than a bare subsistence for others. Sometimes it did not even do that. The earnings of Lilly Loman, a widowed boarding-house keeper in Hobson Street were insufficient to feed her four young children.<sup>92</sup>

A permutation of taking in boarders was the practice of receiving the infant children of mothers who were unable to look after them. The poor women of Freeman's Bay who provided this primeval form of child care were part of a tradition which stretched back to the fourteenth century and beyond.<sup>93</sup> The relationship between the nurses and their clients epitomized the ties of mutuality which not only linked poor women together but also went a long way towards defining the distinct community culture of Freeman's Bay. On one hand, the provision of services such as nursing and child-care gave single unsupported mothers the opportunity to support themselves and their children by working (usually as domestic servants), while on the other, they provided a livelihood for some of the neighbourhood's poorest women.<sup>94</sup> According to the 'Journal of Visits to Children's Homes', most of the women who took in infants did so on a casual basis.<sup>95</sup> More than half were nurses for eight months or less. Only three of 21 were still boarding children after three years. Moreover, during their time as nurses most women were responsible for only one or two children. Most of these children did not stay with the nurses for long. The average stay was no more than two months, and all but three had been returned to their mothers within a year. While most cases of infant nursing were small scale and informal, there were exceptions. For a few women, the taking in of infants was a full-time and permanent business. Between January 1902 and May 1907, Mrs Lorange of Spring Street took in no less than 19 children.<sup>96</sup> Mrs Lena Godley of Wellesley Street had the care of 12 infants between January 1903 and April 1905.<sup>97</sup>

Like infant nursing, prostitution often grew out of the more mundane practice of taking in boarders. As a port area, Freeman's Bay had always had more than its fair share of prostitutes, and many a boarding-house in Freeman's Bay doubled as a brothel at one time or another. Mary Allan, for example, was charged with keeping a brothel in her Nelson Street boarding-house.<sup>98</sup> Private houses were also used in much the same way. Florrie Chadwick was caught keeping a brothel in Sale Street.<sup>99</sup> Sale Street, in the 'twilight zone' at the bottom of Freeman's Bay, and the streets like Vernon and Centre that ran off it, appear

92 Register of Applications for Relief, 1886-1894, p.939.

93 Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: Cathars and Catholics in a French Village*, (translated by Barbara Bray), London, 1980, p.44.

94 Ellen Ross, 'Survival Networks: Women's Neighbourhood Sharing in London Before World War I', *History Workshop*, 15 (1983), p. 19.

95 'Journal of Visits to Children's Homes, 1901-1910', National Archives, Auckland, CW-A6, A22, Item 29.

96 *ibid.*, pp.233-35.

97 *ibid.*, p.336.

98 Charge Book for Freeman's Bay lock-up, April 1894 to September 1906, National Archives, Auckland, A 314/20, pp. 215-16.

99 Charge Book, pp. 233-4.

to have been the focal point for prostitution, but there were also brothels on the main thoroughfares like Hobson, Nelson, Cook and Union Streets as well as some of the less salubrious side streets like Pratt, Wolf and Ireland.<sup>100</sup> No brothels were recorded on the upper ridges around Picton, Anglesea and Wood Streets.

Business of a different kind was plied by a plethora of small retailers. Small retailing was typically an occupation for the elderly poor. The people who followed this trade were the very smallest of the small business people. Some worked from a small shop. Others did not even have that — hawkers and peddlers sold their wares from the side of the street. Either way, the takings were small. John Corbay, a bootmaker, and his wife Sarah rented a shop in Hobson Street for 14s. a week. According to Sarah, 'what we make goes out as fast as it comes'. John had no tools and no insurance, and the shop's stock was worth no more than two or three pounds.<sup>101</sup>

In the struggle to make ends meet children could often make a crucial contribution to the family economy. Older children, working in factories or service, could bring in much needed additional wages. Between them Annie Davies' two oldest daughters 17-year-old Annie — a tailoress — and 16-year-old Lizzie — a machinist — brought 14s. into the family.<sup>102</sup> Children's contributions, however, extended far beyond the narrow confines of wage labour. If man's sphere was the workplace and woman's the home, then the children's sphere was the street. Driven out of the house by chronic overcrowding, the street became the playground and workplace for the children of all but the most respectable families.<sup>103</sup> Children became used to life on the streets from an early age. They were sent on errands to collect small items from the grocer.<sup>104</sup> One girl was accustomed to being despatched to the hotel for beer.<sup>105</sup> Another girl — under the age of 12 — was sent by her mother on to a scow anchored in the harbour to collect some money owed by a sailor.<sup>106</sup> If they were not running messages, children could be on the streets selling newspapers or flowers.<sup>107</sup> Or they could be out scavenging. The wharves, timber-yards, building sites, the backs of factories, and the streets themselves could render up all sorts of valuables that could either be carried home or sold for cash. The vacant lots and gullies which doubled as rubbish dumps provided another source of plunder. The *Herald's* 'Special Lady Commissioner', noted that 'one street I have seen owns a rubbish tip sliding into the gully and children find it a happy hunting ground'.<sup>108</sup> However it looked to outsiders, scavenging could prove a lucrative

100 Charge Book.

101 Deposition Book, Old Age Pension Court, 1899, National Archives, Auckland, A 21/8, pp.375-6.

102 Register of Applications For Relief, 1894-1907, p.253.

103 'The Homes of Our Workers', I and III.

104 'The Recent Fire at Wellington-Street', NZH, 15 October 1887, p.3, c.5.

105 'The Homes of Our Workers', III.

106 NZH, 29 August 1893, p.3, c.3.

107 Jan M. Beagle, 'Children of the State: A Study of the New Zealand Industrial School System 1880-1925', MA Thesis, Auckland, 1974, p.222.

108 'The Homes of Our Workers', I.

occupation.<sup>109</sup> Old sacks, used bottles, loose pieces of timber, and various sorts of scrap metal all brought a good return. With the rewards high, many children were tempted into crossing the hazy line that lay between scavenging and theft. Twelve-year-old George Kennel, for example, was caught with a piece of kauri timber, worth 2s.6d., stolen from the Parker and Lamb timber yards;<sup>110</sup> while 14-year-old James Ridgling was apprehended with 15 sacks, valued at 7s.6d.<sup>111</sup> Scavenging or stealing, children hunted not as individuals, but as a part of a pack. Of the 31 children under 18 years of age recorded in the the Charge Book for the Freeman's Bay lock-up for crimes of theft, 21 (68%) were arrested with one or more accomplice. This figure stands in stark contrast to Miles Fairburn's findings for adult offenders before the Wellington Magistrate's Court, where only 10 of 106 cases of theft for the years 1865-67 consisted of joint or group offenders.<sup>112</sup>

When all else failed, poor women fell back on the same values of co-operation and collaboration displayed by their children. In times of trouble, help could be expected to come from neighbours and nearby relatives. Neighbours could send over food<sup>113</sup> or look after children while the mother was at work,<sup>114</sup> (they could also be expected to take sides in neighbourhood disputes).<sup>115</sup> Relatives could offer support of a more permanent nature. The overcrowding in the Sale Street house mentioned above was ameliorated by three children being sent across the street to live with their grandmother.<sup>116</sup> With her husband William out of work and gone to Hukuranui, Catherine Anne Basham and her six children moved in with her mother and father.<sup>117</sup> Margaret Brown's seven children were sent to live with her sister in Hobson Street after she was admitted to hospital and her husband was charged with incest.<sup>118</sup> Occasionally friends could take the place of relatives. Mrs Fawcett of Baker Street told the Old Age Pension Court that she was being supported by 'a friend of mine John Caddel'.<sup>119</sup>

As the above examples suggest, neighbourhood ties were expressed most tangibly through kinship. Thirty-one per cent of the 568 applicants for relief who listed a liable relative (other than their spouse) had at least one living in Freeman's Bay.<sup>120</sup> Another 23% had a liable relative residing somewhere else in

109 Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860*, Urbana, 1987, pp.50-51.

110 Charge Book, p.137.

111 *ibid.*, p.92.

112 Fairburn, *The Ideal Society*, p.143.

113 'The Homes of Our Workers', V.

114 'The Homes of Our Workers', II.

115 NZH, April 10 1884, p.3, c.5.

116 Evidence of Thomas Haynes to the Commission of Inquiry into the Influenza Epidemic, n.p.

117 Register of Applications for Relief, 1908-1913, p. 23.

118 *ibid.*, p.36.

119 Deposition Book, Old Age Pension Court, p.203.

120 This is comparable to the figures cited by Don Harrison Doyle as evidence for 'the strength of kinship in a mobile society': *The Social Order of a Frontier Community: Jacksonville, Illinois, 1825-70*, Urbana, 1978, pp.115-18, cited in Clyde Griffen, 'Fairburn's New Zealand: From a Vantage of North American Studies', NZJH, 25, 2 (October 1991), p.101.

Auckland city. The closest relatives of the other applicants were to be found mostly in Auckland's suburbs (10%) or in Auckland province (19%). The surprisingly high proportion of applicants with relatives either in Freeman's Bay or elsewhere in Auckland city suggests that there was the potential, at least, for the development of meaningful community ties based on kinship, even within a sample population that was biased towards rootlessness.<sup>121</sup>

These signs of neighbourhood based kinship ties help to explain why most of the people of Freeman's Bay who suffered poverty-causing upsets at some stage of their lives managed to avoid ending up on the registers for relief. In her study of neighbourhood sharing amongst women in working-class London prior to World War I, Ellen Ross noted that: 'In the absence of any substantial state support during most of this period [1870-1914] for the home relief of illness, old age, unemployment, or desertion, the 'safety net' for most families was the neighbourhood itself.'<sup>122</sup> The same could probably be said for working-class Freeman's Bay where, if anything, the provision of state-funded charitable aid was even more parsimonious than in England.<sup>123</sup> While community self-help could not protect everyone from destitution, it must have saved many families from the Charitable Aid Board and everything it implied, including a humiliating loss of respectability, not to mention a bare subsistence on the most meagre of rations.

Poverty may or may not have been an aberration in late nineteenth-early twentieth-century New Zealand. Yet if poverty was exceptional, its causes were anything but. Young children, pregnancy, the absence of a male breadwinner, sickness, injury, old age and unemployment, were all part of an equation which drove 990 residents of Freeman's Bay to apply for charitable relief on behalf of themselves and their families. For the working-class people (especially unskilled working-class) who inhabited the crowded inner-city areas of New Zealand's main centres at the turn of the century the margin between comfort and destitution was narrow indeed. In the battle to make ends meet poor women scrimped, saved and sought out alternative sources of income. Their children scavenged and sometimes stole. When all else failed, women called upon neighbours and nearby relatives for help. In *Paupers and Providers* Margaret Tennant argued that charitable aid cases 'were often poorly integrated into their communities'.<sup>124</sup> In Freeman's Bay, however, the available evidence suggests that the opposite may well have been the case. Poor women provided the community with essential services, taking in boarders and caring for the infant children of single mothers, while also fostering ties of mutual aid between friends, neighbours and particularly relatives. At the same time the children on the streets developed their own communal links, scavenging and stealing in groups rather than as individuals. Instead of being at odds with their neighbour-

121 Forty-percent of applicants had been living within the Auckland Charitable Aid district for three years or less.

122 Ross, p.8.

123 Tennant, p.78.

124 *ibid.*, p.93.

hoods, poor women and their children appear, in fact, to have contributed to the development of a distinct community and culture in Freeman's Bay: a community based around the life of the household and the street; and a culture grounded in the structures of class and gender, rather than the unique virtues of a new society.

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