

## The *Other* Story:

### CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF STATE HOUSING



IN A LITTLE HOUSE with brown tiled roof and coffee walls, Mrs Orakei is at home. So is Master Orakei. They are applying action to thought in the matter of the front garden. Mrs Orakei wears a red jumper and grey slacks, Master Orakei wears a crimson jersey suit which parts in the middle because he has grown taller. They both look very brown and well, the effect of the sun and the sea wind.

Mrs Orakei desists from her gardening. 'No', she says, 'I wasn't a bit thrilled when I heard we were to have a Government house; I wasn't thrilled till I saw it. I expected them to be like glorified railwaymen's cottages — all the same size, all the same colour and stuck in straight rows. But these are real homes, not just houses.'<sup>1</sup>

And Beth'd watch the kids; the scab-kneed, snot-nosed, ragamuffin-clothed kids of the area doing their various things out there. Beth wondering, all the time wondering. At them. The kids. The unkempt, ill-directioned, neglected kids. And her own kids. How were they going to fare? How were they faring now? If you could call living in this Pine Block state-housing area faring.

For hours at a time, sometimes, she'd watch the mirrors of her existence outside, down there below her and Jake's bedroom window. And feel like a spy. Spying on my own people. Them out there. Us. The going-nowhere nobodies who populate this state-owned, half of us state-fed, slum.<sup>2</sup>

Here we have two starkly contrasting representations of state house life:<sup>3</sup> a 1930s account in the *Standard* (the Labour Party newspaper), and an extract from Alan Duff's 1990s novel, *Once Were Warriors*. In the first a reporter visits the new state housing suburb of Orakei in Auckland. Strolling along the newly formed streets he comes across a mother and son working in their garden; we assume the father is at work. They are smartly dressed and healthy — the boy's bare midriff is a sign of his bonny growth, not poverty. These, the woman declares, are homes, not just houses. In contrast, Duff's portrayal some 50 years later is unremittingly bleak. Instead of doing the garden, the mother surveys her state house world from inside, as if in a prison. These children are anything but bonny, and dress in 'ragamuffin' clothes that *are* an overt sign of poverty. The husband is not at work, but at the pub. Whereas Mrs Orakei illustrates the promise and hope of starting life in a new home, Beth has lost all hope. Little seems promising when you live in a slum.

Duff's representation of state house life — as ghetto or slum — is closer to how the New Zealand public view state housing today than is the vision of 1930s Orakei. The contemporary media reports on state housing when there is a problem: gang violence in Highbury, a rape in Glen Innes, overcrowding in eastern Porirua. This has not always been the case. State housing began in 1905 with the Liberal government's mission to eradicate inner-city slums. Consistent market failure to deliver decent and affordable rental housing to

city workers convinced Richard Seddon's government to intervene and erect such housing itself. So adamant was Seddon that these 'workers' dwellings' would not become slums that he made sure they were very well constructed and indistinguishable from private dwellings. The Liberals' state housing scheme never lived up to its early promise. It was wound up by the succeeding Reform government in favour of private provision. But by 1936 continued demand for urban rental housing led the first Labour government to initiate a new (and very successful) state housing scheme. Like the Liberals, Labour wanted to avoid the creation of slums; such was the design and high quality of materials of their houses that the private sector had to copy them to compete.<sup>4</sup>

So what went wrong? Why did state housing areas become the slums — at least in the public mind — that the Liberals and Labour had so wanted to prevent? There is no single answer, but the evidence seems to suggest that it has less to do with the houses themselves than with public perceptions about the people who live in them.

Until the 1950s state housing had a very favourable public image. Press reports in the late 1930s focused on the high quality of their materials and workmanship. The *Southland Times* told its readers that 'the houses are built rather better than the average home in Invercargill', while the *Timaru Post* proclaimed them to be the 'embodiment, in every particular, of beauty and efficiency'.<sup>5</sup> Such stories raised the status of the houses and increased the competition for tenancies. Those who got into the first houses would often, to their great irritation, look up from their bowl of cereal or evening newspaper to see total strangers peering through their windows. For many town-dwellers, visiting new state housing areas became a favourite weekend leisure activity; a precursor to the 'Parade of Homes' exhibitions that swept the country in the 1950s and 1960s.

Many communities embraced state housing tenants. In 1948, Panmure's centennial history predicted that the new state housing settlements at Glen Innes and Point England 'will, for all time, be a monument to its State Housing plan . . . . The citizens of Panmure welcome their new neighbours and friends and trust through the coming century they will always be able to work together for the good of all.'<sup>6</sup>

State housing was never immune from criticism. In 1940 the National MP Walter Broadfoot declared it too flash for ordinary folk. He questioned whether the country could 'afford these luxuries — steel sinks, and so on. These houses are starting the young people off where we left off after a life of work.' Broadfoot claimed that 'State houses are equipped beautifully — far better than my own home', leading Walter Nash to quip that the 'honourable gentleman must have a very poor house'.<sup>7</sup> A few years later the postwar housing shortage brought criticism that the state was not doing enough to solve the problem. Still, despite grumbling that the government was ruining private builders and Labour Party hacks were getting houses before others did, the public perception of state housing remained largely favourable.

Attitudes towards state housing began to harden after the election of the first National government. The first signs came in 1954 following accusations that dozens of adolescents were having 'sexual orgies' in homes and 'second-

rate' cinemas in the Hutt Valley.<sup>8</sup> Coupled with the rise of the teenage (male) bodgie and (female) widgie subculture and the Parker–Hulme murder, this latest sensation was for both church and state chilling evidence of society's moral collapse. Scrambling for answers, the government established a special committee on juvenile delinquency, headed by Oswald Mazengarb QC. Its report confirmed what everyone knew: some adolescents were indeed having under-age sex. Blame was apportioned to a multitude of factors, including teenage temptresses, muddled mothering and shonky sex education. The planning of state housing areas was also attacked: there were too many children, and not enough adults to control them; houses were overcrowded, forcing young people 'to seek their pleasures away from home'; and there was a lack of community leadership, facilities and amenities, provoking youths to find relief from their boredom in gangs and carnal knowledge. What was needed were community halls and sports clubs where teenage energies could be better managed and channelled into morally safer pursuits such as quots and basketball.<sup>9</sup>

Historians have viewed the Mazengarb Report as a moral panic against postwar modernity — rock and roll, pulp fiction, bodgies and widgies — that many saw as a threat to mainstream society. The level of delinquency was overstated, they say, and the scale of the official response over the top.<sup>10</sup> Heather — among several past and present state housing tenants whom I interviewed for my book on state housing — certainly thinks so.<sup>11</sup> She was a schoolgirl at the time: 'Most of us didn't know anything about it. We used to go to Elbe's Milkbar [one of the supposed venues for sexual encounters] just about every day and we never saw anything.' She knew 'one or two girls who were fast — one or two got pregnant', but thinks the so-called scandal was a 'media blow-up'. Even so, the area gained a salacious reputation which was to affect her when she visited Lincoln Agricultural College as a teachers' college student: 'The first night we arrived there were five of us girls from Lower Hutt. We sat down at a table with some young men and they asked where we came from and we said Lower Hutt. They got up and walked away, except for one or two who said, "Would you like to see the sights of Christchurch by night?" No, thank you!'<sup>12</sup> The Mazengarb Report was an over-reaction, but the report contained recommendations that, if acted upon, might have moderated future social problems in state housing areas.

Less than a decade after the Mazengarb Report was filed away to gather dust, the Anglican Church lambasted the state for ineptitude in the building of Porirua East. Its report on the project provided a list of problems in the area, including a lack of amenities; financially stressed households, which had over-committed themselves to hire-purchase agreements; children neglected by working mothers; an overworked district nurse; and a lack of community leadership. 'The Government', it concluded, 'has laid out an impressive paper plan for a housing area, but it seems to have forgotten the social needs of the people . . . [It] has done nothing to make Porirua a community'.<sup>13</sup>

Revealingly, academic social surveys in the 1960s and 1970s of state housing areas as diverse as Gisborne, Palmerston North and Dunedin found that most tenants were happy with their homes and communities.<sup>14</sup> Yet such findings did

not enter the public consciousness. Instead, people were led to believe that the state had created slums, not communities, in places like Porirua, Aranui and Otara.

By the mid-1960s the 'slum' label had stuck. Reports of 'tenants from hell' made good copy and helped cement negative stereotypes about state housing areas. For example, in 1969 the *Evening Post* ran the headline, 'Tons of Rubbish Left By Occupants of State House'. Following a fire in a Naenae state house, the tenant had 'done a runner', leaving six truckloads of rubbish behind him. 'In the lounge and an adjacent bedroom', the paper reported, 'there must have been at least a bucketful of cigarette butts about the floor. The walls were festooned with cobwebs blackened by smoke, and the venetian blinds did not appear ever to have enjoyed a cleaning cloth.' The accompanying photographs showed floors littered with broken furniture, soiled clothing and mountains of muck.<sup>15</sup> Seven years later the *Post* related a near-identical story: 'Missing State Tenants Driven Out By Own Filth and Litter'. This time the abandoned state house was in Cannons Creek. A worker sent to clean the house had discovered 'floors littered with dirty newspaper and other rubbish, [and] human faeces . . . stuck to the floorboards'. He estimated it would take him five days to clean the house.<sup>16</sup>

The idea that state housing tenants were a grubby group was raised again in 1992 by the National MP John Carter, who argued that state housing applicants should take a 'good living test' before they were given a tenancy. He had 'visited homes which were neglected and abused by occupants who bashed holes in walls and smashed windows . . . It is the sheer filth that sickens me.'<sup>17</sup> As far as he was concerned: 'Animals take better care of their bodies than some of these people. It is not uncommon to see these filthy bedraggled people wearing filthy clothes . . . that obviously have not been near a washing machine . . . that show signs of vomit and other human excreta. Filthy clothes on equally filthy bodies.'<sup>18</sup> Carter later went on prime-time television to deny that his comment was specifically directed at state housing tenants. (It came at a moment when his government was facing mounting public criticism over its decision to charge state housing tenants market rents and reduce state housing provision. He may have thought that attacking state housing tenants was an opportune way of deflecting this criticism.)<sup>19</sup> While his outburst was politically imprudent, he had given voice to what many people thought.

Another increasingly popular stereotype was that state housing areas were riddled with crime, violence and gangs; a perception that had its roots in the bodgie and widge subculture of the 1950s. For instance, in 1985 the *Dominion* told its readers that 'Palmerston North was being held to ransom by a gang of juvenile glue-sniffing thugs. The gang, which gloatingly calls itself the Highbury Hoods, is made up of up to 40 children under the age of 17, some as young as four and five years old.' Highbury was the main state housing area in the city, and the gang was said to be responsible for a rise in burglaries and petty crime. According to the paper, 'The gang terrorises Highbury during the week and then moves its activities to the Square on Friday and Saturday nights'. In one incident, a 'glue-sniffing teenager intentionally vomited on the lap of an elderly bus passenger'. Because of their age the law was powerless to act, a fact the gang members used to goad the police.<sup>20</sup>

Public anxieties about state housing were boosted by the publication of *Once Were Warriors*, a novel set in a fictional state housing area called Pine Block, based on Duff's experience of Fordlands in Rotorua. The lead character, Jake 'the Muss', is a brutal drunk who terrorizes his family and lives in a community characterized by violence, broken relationships and loneliness. It would be hard to find a more damning indictment of state house life.

To what extent did (and do) the negative public stereotypes of state housing fit with the reality of tenants' lives? Only a few of the tenants interviewed for my research agreed that they rang true, although almost all agreed they existed and that they had been affected by them. For John, *Once Were Warriors* could have been set in Glen Innes in the 1970s. He recalled 'major riots between the Hells Angels and the cops, with molotovs being thrown, the full works. [There was] a sea of glass in the morning afterwards. [It was] very, very threatening.'<sup>21</sup> At such times John's family would huddle in an upstairs bedroom listening to the thud of fists on flesh and praying for the brawl to stop. Fights also regularly occurred outside the local tavern on a Saturday night. From a young age John found routes home that bypassed potential trouble spots: 'I learnt patterns of self-protection; of where to walk in patterns of light . . . [and not to] walk through bunches of guys drinking'. Still, he never felt people looked down on him for living in Glen Innes.<sup>22</sup>

The unceasing threat of violence also marred Bronwyn's life in her Star Flat in Strathmore during the 1980s. As she explained: 'Star Flats seemed like a dumping ground for everyone who was in the too-hard basket. [There were] patients from Porirua [psychiatric hospital] and people who'd got out of prison. [It was] an intimidating environment. [I] never felt safe, [I was] always uneasy. I hated it.'<sup>23</sup> Bronwyn was certain that negative public perceptions of state housing affected the way people treated her. She was accepted by other state house tenants but excluded by home-owners in her community. For example, her Plunket play group was split evenly between state house mums and home-owners. Power rested with the latter, and they exercised it by constantly 'talking about kitchen renovations' and other topics which the tenants could not make a contribution to. The state house mums found this insulting and in the end each faction kept pretty much to itself.<sup>24</sup>

Lindy was also a victim of snobbery. As a young girl in Taumarunui in the 1950s, she was teased mercilessly by the children of the town's 'nobs' (social elite): 'The nobs always slang off at kids from state houses . . . [They] almost consider you as being slum people'. Lindy could never understand why: 'we still all did the same things. We still all swam together, trained for swimming.' Her mother's situation as a solo parent added to her torment. One day she had had enough:

I beat up a girl at primary school and my brother beat up a boy at high school because there had obviously been table talk, and we didn't know what a bag was, and we went home and told mum that kids were saying that she was a bag and she told us that was supposed to be a naughty [promiscuous] lady. And I beat this girl up, and Martin beat a boy up at school for it . . . he went and said my mother isn't a bag; she works very hard. And it was the fact that she wasn't at home at night.

Lindy's mother was not at home because she did not qualify for state income support so worked night shifts at the local hospital to make ends meet. As Lindy explained, it 'wasn't the done thing to divorce' in the 1950s, and small-town society was unforgiving. Even well-meant gestures could backfire. She remembered that the coalman used to drop off a 'bit of extra coal 'cos he knew she [Lindy's mum] was struggling'. But then 'rumours would spread that she just got visited by the coalman'.<sup>25</sup>

Some former state housing tenants believe that more recent generations of tenants have contributed to negative perceptions of state housing by not looking after, or even vandalizing, their homes. Such behaviour makes Pat 'wild'. These people think a state house is 'owed to them', she says. 'Like hello, we're losers so everybody owes us something — pathetic, pathetic. I'd just like to cut it all off [state assistance] and put them all to work sweeping the streets!'<sup>26</sup> Rex agreed. It used to be considered a privilege to live in a state house, but now 'people want one as of right and don't give a damn once they get into it'.<sup>27</sup> Heather also thought that things were better in the past. She recalled that in the 1940s and 1950s there was an expectation that if tenants did not keep their houses in good condition they would be 'spoken to' by housing officials or neighbours. But these days, so long as tenants pay their rent, the state will not intervene and make sure that rubbish is cleared and lawns mowed.<sup>28</sup>

Those who remain tenants have a different view. Bryan dismisses critics of state housing. He remembers feeling that people looked down on him for living in a state house when he was at high school, but he never took this to heart. He has the same attitude today: 'Talkback radio think we're all bludgers, but I couldn't give a stuff what they think. Bugger them!'<sup>29</sup> Tofa is equally philosophical. She feels that some people do look down on her for living in a state house, particularly as it is a multi-unit. She feels that single units have higher status: 'But who cares? At least me and my kids are warm in my house . . . I love this place.'<sup>30</sup>

Most tenants spoken to for this research had been adversely affected by the negative public images of state housing, with many considering them to be both unfair and untrue. While it is evident that there are and always have been bad tenants, it is also clear that public representations of state housing have often been one-sided. Take, for example, the 1985 gang violence in Highbury. Subsequent investigations discovered that the Highbury Hoods had not held Palmerston North to ransom: the trouble in the Square was being caused by others; there were no four-year-olds in the group; and no one had vomited over an elderly bus passenger.<sup>31</sup> An official working party found the so-called gang to be a group of mainly Maori teenagers with low self-esteem who had turned to drugs and petty crime 'as a means of relief from what they see as an exceptionally dull and boring existence'. Many felt that school had nothing to offer them, but could not get jobs. The report noted that these youths 'were quick to attend organised activities when they were arranged', but lived in a community that had few facilities to keep them off the streets.<sup>32</sup> The lessons of the Hutt Valley 30 years earlier had still not been learnt.

Some of the reasons for the negative public perception of state housing have already been identified. Foremost among them is inadequate spatial and social



planning. Whereas the state houses built under the first Labour government were of high quality and their tenants were selected to ensure balanced communities, later governments were more concerned with meeting housing targets and reducing costs than creating functioning communities. The National government's decision in 1950 to restrict state housing to poorer applicants exacerbated social problems by creating single-class neighbourhoods.<sup>33</sup> Then the Nash government pledged to limit urban sprawl by building more multi-unit housing, which was seen as inferior to single dwellings. The final ingredient in the slum soup was, as the 1963 Anglican Church report noted, a lack of facilities and services. The 1971 Commission of Inquiry into Housing reprimanded the state for building the likes of Porirua and Otara and recommended that such developments cease. Governments took note, and subsequent developments were smaller and integrated into, or at least near, private housing.<sup>34</sup> But by then it was too late. State housing had become synonymous with slum.

In the rush to build state houses, successive governments undoubtedly made mistakes. But the bad public image of state housing is not just the government's fault. We've already examined the role of the media. For Denise Wiki, a former state housing official, the 'media is probably the worst enemy of [state] housing. How many times do you see the media promoting housing in a positive way?'<sup>35</sup>

Another factor to consider is prejudice towards the poor, an attitude that has both personal and spatial dimensions. State housing has a low public image partly because some of New Zealand's poorest people live in state houses. It is important to remember that the period in which state housing had its most positive public image — the 1930s and 1940s — was also the time when few poor people could afford to rent one. In those days state houses were the domain of skilled workers and the middle class.<sup>36</sup> Joan was 'proud' to live in the state house she moved into in the early 1940s. No one looked down on her, she said. People more often envied her luck in getting a state house.<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile, those who could not afford state housing continued to live in inner-city slums.

It is revealing to examine representations of inner-city districts before state housing. Their residents were often portrayed in the media in the same pejorative terms as were the poor of nineteenth-century London. Charles Dickens described some of the city's poorest neighbourhoods around Westminster, Oxford Street and Covent Garden: 'There is more filth and squalid misery near these great thoroughfares than in any part of this mighty city.'<sup>38</sup> In these overcrowded and stench-filled districts, reported Andrew Mearns in 1883, thieves corrupted the honest and immorality was a way of life: 'Incest is common; and no form of vice or sensuality causes surprise or attracts attention'.<sup>39</sup> Others focused on the shiftlessness and scrounging habits of the poor. These qualities, they said, were encouraged by casual charity, which allowed loafers to grow rich on hand-outs and created a culture of dependency and indolence. The poor were also criticized for being hot-headed and prone to binge drinking and brawling. Such observations were not unique to London. As far back as 1821 officials in Boston had railed against the intemperance of their own city's poor, considering their 'universal' use of 'spiritous liquors' as the 'most powerful' cause of pauperism.<sup>40</sup> From this perspective, poverty was

a product of behavioural rather than structural elements. It was the debased morals of the poor that explained their plight, not low wages or other external factors.

Some observers, however, were more measured. Charles Booth, in his pioneering social survey of Victorian London, found that 30% of Londoners lived below the poverty line. He attributed this to intermittent work, sickness, widowhood, having too many children, or old age, rather than intemperate habits. These 'deserving poor' were entitled to charity and support. But even he believed that the bottom tenth of the poor were hopelessly degraded and beyond saving — the 'semi-criminal' class. Booth argued that these 'undeserving poor' should be removed from London and resettled in rural labour colonies. Others even suggested that they be sterilized.<sup>41</sup>

While further research is required, it is almost certain that middle-class immigrants to New Zealand brought these views of the poor with them. As early as 1864 the *New Zealand Herald* railed against the 'abominable nests of squalid filth' in Auckland's 'rookeries'. A decade later a reporter who ventured into Chancery Street in daylight found 'half-tipsy men . . . lolling over . . . broken fences . . . [and] girls of tender years, with dishevelled hair . . . bearing on their prematurely old faces the stamp of infamy.' An 1882 police raid on a Field's Lane brothel revealed a sight that 'baffles description'. The stench was so bad that the constables were forced to hold their noses; one of them poured a flask of brandy across the floor 'in a weak endeavour to disinfect the place'.<sup>42</sup>

In 1903 a woman reporter entered Auckland's slums, where she soon found a widow 'who three years ago was a respectable woman'. Introduced to drink by neighbours, she was now a drunkard: 'her children play neglected in the streets'. Not far away lived a 'reputable woman' whose slothful husband "'knocks her about" when there is no "tucker"'. Another woman with a large family had fallen victim to a canvasser and bought a new sewing machine on time payment — presumably to undertake piecework — an expense not justified 'by the amount of work turned out'. The reporter wondered about the 'strange apathy [that] possesses our labourers. They make no attempt to beautify their surroundings.' She also chided them for the sloppiness of their domestic economy: 'Bad cooking, or rather laziness to provide any meals that require thought, is also responsible for much poverty. Few poor housewives know anything of the value of a neck of mutton. They plod on with bread and butter, their sixpenny worths of scrap meat, their monotony of living. They keep their weekly store bills instead of paying cash; they send in a hurry for a tin of fish, which is expensive, and which is a very bare meal, and it is a case all the time of hand to mouth.'<sup>43</sup> Replace sixpenny with dollar, weekly store bill with credit card, and tin of fish with McDonald's hamburgers, and it would be easy to believe that you were reading a report from the end, not the beginning, of the twentieth century. In these passages New Zealand's poor are represented as filthy, licentious, easily corrupted and prone to drink, neglectful, indolent, violent, gullible, apathetic, oblivious to beauty, ignorant and reckless with money. Such images mirror those of London's poor.

And as in London, New Zealand's poor were divided into the undeserving and deserving. The undeserving were those who had given themselves



over to drink, violence and immorality; the deserving were those who were impoverished through misfortune or circumstance, but otherwise respectable. For example, the reporter found a wharf labourer's wife with nine children living in a three-bedroom dive:

She was nursing a six-months-old child, which, she said, was always cold and was delicate . . . . She pointed — there was no need — to great holes in the walls where years of decay were telling. There were four beds in the room we sat in, and the house was infested with bugs. Yet this women's children had refined manners, though they lived in an area frequented by the most questionable characters . . . . She seemed a most devoted mother, and the younger children, who were at home from school, evinced the strongest family attachment. Yet here they were — parents with ambitions for their children, shielding them from the immorality around them, always hoping to move away and never able to do it.<sup>44</sup>

The poverty of this family was not a result of intemperate habits but, as Booth identified in London, of irregular work and having too many children. They deserved help, the reporter argued, to prevent them from falling victim to their surroundings.

A common theme in these accounts is a belief in environmentalism: that slums corrupt their inhabitants. In 1943, in an essay entitled 'The Case Against Slums', the architect Bruce Orchiston described an inner-city slum area:

The dwellings are in a state of advanced dilapidation, the gardens are overgrown with weeds, and there is a general feeling of despondency in the neighbourhood. Even the children don't seem to be care-free and break into tears when the breadwinner arrives home under the influence of liquor from the local hostelry having squandered his meagre earnings. He is an example of one who has let his environment get the better of him . . . . It is indeed a pathetic sight to see the forlorn partner carrying out marriage vows virtually unaided; the unavoidable neglect of property and person results in a slovenly atmosphere where filth abounds and paint is unknown. More than anything else these conditions are brought about by the vicious 'hire-purchase' system — ambition causes unwise purchase, default follows, and then despair. A large family usually adds to the burden.<sup>45</sup>

Such images were by now very familiar. They also filtered through to official representations of the poor. In 1951, Dr Marjorie Young, the school medical officer for Auckland, was asked to investigate dirty and neglected schoolchildren attending three primary schools in Freeman's Bay, the city's worst slum and home to a large Maori community. The teachers were asked to 'compile a list of all children with dirty clothes, dirty bodies, head lice, scabies and unattended sores. One hundred and nine names were submitted.'<sup>46</sup> She visited each child's home and discovered that many were filthy, lacked washing or bathing facilities, and had inadequate means of storing perishable food or laundering clothes and bed linen: 'Thinking that poverty might be one reason why the children were ragged and dirty, the financial position was ascertained approximately. This was quite satisfactory in the homes of eighty percent of the children. The rest came from poorer homes, but there was no real poverty. There was always sufficient money for tobacco and alcohol.'<sup>47</sup> Young identified other reasons for the children's condition and the sordidness of their home life.

Nearly 40% of their mothers worked. After returning home to finish preparing dinner — or buying fish and chips — they ‘were too tired to care whether the children bathed or not’. Alcohol was another factor. Some of the children’s fathers ‘came home drunk on pay night and would thrash or knock them about, so they used to hide until their fathers went to sleep’. The homes of many of the mothers who drank were ‘very dirty’. Lack of intelligence — ‘not one of the children was at all brilliant’ — also explained the slack personal hygiene.<sup>48</sup> But the most significant cause was overcrowding. It was not uncommon to see three or four beds in one room, and two-thirds of the children shared their bed with at least one other person: ‘Sharing beds, particularly children in with parents or grandparents, or brothers with sisters, is to be condemned on both hygienic and moral grounds’, Young declared.<sup>49</sup> Most of those living in overcrowded homes were Maori. The Maori tradition of hospitality ‘has resulted in many houses having one family, and sometimes two, in every room’. Young recommended that Maori be scattered among Europeans, or else urged to ‘remain in the country and not crowd into the main towns’.<sup>50</sup>

Despite Young’s claim that these families were not impoverished, their incomes were low enough for them to qualify for a state house under the National government’s new allocation criteria. Many Freeman’s Bay residents, along with other inner-city poor in cities like Wellington and Christchurch, moved to modern homes in the burgeoning state housing suburbs of Glen Innes, Otara, Porirua and Aranui, on the urban periphery. They made a new start in new surroundings, and it might have been expected that they would finally leave behind their slum image. Yet this followed them like a faithful hound. These state housing tenants were quickly represented in the same vein as previous generations of New Zealand’s poor. If these areas were not slums when the first tenants moved in, they soon came to be seen as such.

This long-standing prejudice against the poor is central in explaining the negative public perception of state housing. We need only compare the image of Freeman’s Bay in 1950 and 2000 to see that the social fabric is just as important in guiding public perceptions of communities as the physical one. In 1950 the suburb was condemned as a slum and plans were afoot to clear it. By 2000 the area had become desirable. Many of the houses from 1950 were still standing, albeit highly modified. The main thing that had changed was that the poor had moved out and the gentrifiers had moved in.

There are three principal explanations for these negative representations of the poor. First, they serve to distinguish middle-class culture from that of the poor. Middle-class culture is presented as mainstream, while that of the poor is seen as *other* (outside the mainstream). From this perspective, the deserving poor are those who adopt middle-class values: they cultivate their gardens, temper their habits, balance their budgets. The rejection of these values by the undeserving poor threatens the mainstream, which acts to maintain its dominance by regulation and by emphasizing the dissident group’s otherness, often by denigrating its ways.<sup>51</sup>

The political commentator Bruce Jesson recognized this point in 1991. He was struck by how some welfare professionals blamed the poor for their plight. They told him that beneficiaries: ‘smoke, drink and gamble; they neglect and

abuse their kids and feed them junk food; solo mothers sleep around; they can't expect the rest of us to support them indefinitely . . . . It was at moments like these that I had the strongest impression that we were developing an underclass that is rejected and despised by a censorious middle class.<sup>52</sup> It might have surprised Jesson to learn that the images had been well rehearsed and the underclass was already established.

The 'otherness' of state housing tenants is reinforced by the nature of their tenure. As the architect Gerald Melling noted in 1975: 'Home *ownership* is the common denominator which binds us all together, and the average citizens, whilst accepting the need for state houses (as a measure of progress up the social/economic ladder, the state house and its tenant is a positive reassurance to him) fails to come to terms with the reality of the people who inhabit them. The state tenant *is not one of us*.'<sup>53</sup> It is a point that resonates in other New World societies. For instance, Allan Heskin writes: 'Tenancy has never been a desirable position for residents of the United States. The drive to own has obsessed the people from the yeoman farmer to the modern suburbanite. Being a tenant had never been part of the "American Dream", and the status of tenants in this society has never been secure or comfortable. Tenants have been, in an essential way, the unpropertied in a society in which property is central.'<sup>54</sup> Within this mentality, a deserving tenant works hard to save a deposit on a house and join the mainstream. An undeserving tenant does not work, receives a benefit from the state, and has no intention of buying a house. In other words he or she is a bludger, worthy only of society's contempt.

For those who struggle to save the deposit for a house, the sight of a (perceived) bludger living in a state house equal to or better than their own can be galling. As one middle-class woman told the media recently on discovering that the street in which she had bought a house also had state houses: 'It's just not fair that we work really hard to get a nice place like this and these people [living over the road in state houses of similar design] get given four-bedroom houses and they don't even go out to work. They're home all day.'<sup>55</sup> So strong is the public sentiment against state housing that the woman believed she had lost thousands of dollars on the purchase. As far as she was concerned, she had bought into a future slum. She is not alone in this belief. Asked in July 2004 what she thought of government plans to build 100 state houses amidst 300 private houses on the former Papakura army base, one woman responded: 'State housing? Good God, I don't want to have the whole place covered in rusty cars.' A local real estate agent expected that the scheme would 'pull down' house prices in the area. As she explained: 'Having Housing Corporation [sic] in an area always takes something away from the area. It's the type of tenants they get in there . . . they don't care as much about their property as a private tenant would.'<sup>56</sup>

The second reason for negative images of the poor is more straightforward: they are entertaining. Much of the nineteenth-century writing on London's impoverished was aimed at the middle classes. Historians have suggested numerous reasons for this, notably reformist goals such as generating support for rehousing the poor in more salubrious surroundings. But they also recognize that one purpose of these writings was diversion and amusement. Stories about

the exotic 'otherworld' where vicious vagabonds spoke nothing but vulgarities and bare-breasted women brawled in the streets found a ready audience among the middle classes, who took pleasure in being both shocked and titillated.<sup>57</sup> The vivid descriptions of working-class girls prostituting themselves in Auckland in the 1870s and engaging in orgies in Hutt Valley in the 1950s suggest that similar impulses drove representations of New Zealand's poor. (It is significant that *Once Were Warriors* was not only a hugely popular book but also became a hit film and a musical.) In other words, many representations of the poor were, and are, deliberately designed to exploit middle-class appetites for the sensational. Bruce Orchiston, who penned 'The Case Against Slums', later admitted that he wrote the essay partly in order to get himself known. Its publication thrust this recently graduated architect into the limelight.<sup>58</sup>

The final reason for representing the poor negatively is that there is some truth in such images. Some of New Zealand's poor were — and are — dirty, indolent, bludgers, licentious, drunkards, violent, tenants from hell, and so on. But as with all stereotyping, the actions of a few are applied to the wider group. The deserving poor are tarred with the same brush as the undeserving. This is not lost on either state housing tenants or their landlord. They constantly have to point out that a few bad apples do not ruin the whole barrel. For instance, a few days after the 1976 report of a Porirua tenant driven out by his own filth, the *Evening Post* ran the headline, 'Poor Image Of Porirua Tenants Not Deserved',<sup>59</sup> under which housing officials noted that Porirua tenants' standards were no different from those anywhere else in the country. An officer explained that 'you only hear about the very few who are bad tenants and retain low standards. No one wants to know about the good ones, those who have helped themselves and look after their properties.' This point is not lost on state housing tenants. Letters to the editor and callers to talkback radio denigrating state housing tenants as 'lazy-no-hopers-living-in-luxury-at-my-expense' are quickly countered by the tenants and their supporters.<sup>60</sup>

The fall in the social status of state housing and its tenants is not unique to New Zealand. Historians have shown how public housing provision in twentieth-century America and Europe was also initially directed toward low-income, working families: the deserving poor. The undeserving poor — the unemployed and welfare dependent — were left to fend for themselves. As in New Zealand, things changed from the 1950s when the needs of the very poor could no longer be ignored. In the United States, these included urbanizing Blacks who faced discrimination in the private housing sector. As they moved into public housing projects, many Whites moved out or chose not to apply. The status of public housing fell, not only among the middle classes, but with working people as well. Physical decline followed social decline. Many of the large high-rise housing projects of the 1950s and 1960s quickly became squalid and slum-like, further stigmatizing their occupants.<sup>61</sup> At the same time in Europe, rising prosperity increased opportunities for homeownership. Consequently, the demand for public housing shifted away from skilled blue- and white-collar workers towards low-income workers and beneficiaries, lowering its status among the middle class.<sup>62</sup>

New Zealand, to some extent, mirrored overseas trends. Yet there are also

differences. Much of the loss of status of public housing overseas related not only to the social class of tenants but the inferior condition of their dwellings. (From the 1970s many high-rise housing projects in America and Europe were demolished.) This was rarely the case in New Zealand, where the standard of state housing has nearly always been equal to, and often better than, comparative private housing.

Another difference concerns the importance of race. With the proportion of Maori and Pacific people living in state housing communities rising from the 1960s, I expected that race would begin to loom large in public perceptions of state housing. Dr Marjorie Young's criticism of the hospitality of Freeman's Bay Maori and her call for them to become more like Pakeha hinted that this might be the case. But I found little archival evidence to support this. There are hundreds of letters and newspaper cuttings in official files demeaning state housing tenants for being bludgers, unkempt, or good-for-nothings, but race is rarely mentioned. The most overt example of racism I discovered was a 1976 remit from the Hawke's Bay electorate of the National Party calling for limits to be placed on the number of Maori state housing tenants in Taradale; it was rejected as racist.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, in interviews with tenants race was not given as a reason for the negative public perception of state housing. Lindy, for instance, felt she was not looked down upon for being Maori, but for being poor. Of course this does not mean that racism has not influenced public perceptions of state housing communities. But if it was an important factor it appears that it was something that was more often spoken about than written down.

In trying to explain why perceptions of state housing transposed between 'Mrs Orakei' and 'Jake the Muss' I have suggested that it had less to do with the houses and more with the people who lived in them. Initially most state housing tenants were skilled workers or middle class, but as governments moved to restrict state housing provision tenants were increasingly unskilled and poor. With this shift the social status of state housing plunged. While scholars have advanced several convincing reasons for this, one factor not given due consideration is longstanding cultural prejudice toward the poor. While this argument requires further research and testing, it offers considerable explanatory power. It suggests that, despite the cherished myth of New Zealand as a classless society, understandings of class were instrumental in framing public perceptions of state housing communities. Ironically, as mainstream society eroded the myth by accentuating its difference from state housing tenants, many tenants bolstered it by emphasizing commonality. As Lindy recalls, Taumarunui's state house kids and private house kids swam together and trained together. She saw herself not as *other*, but as *one of us*.

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## NOTES

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- 2 Alan Duff, *Once Were Warriors*, Auckland, 1991, p.7.
- 3 State housing is defined here as a dwelling built by the New Zealand government for members of the general public, and a tenant as anyone who has lived in such a house while it was being rented from the government. This excludes people who lived in pool houses: those built by the Railways and other government departments. For more on state housing see Ben Schrader, *We Call It Home: A History of State Housing*, Reed, Auckland, 2005.
- 4 For further information on the origins of New Zealand state housing policy see Schrader, pp.20–38; Gael Ferguson, *Building the New Zealand Dream*, Palmerston North, 1994, pp.59–68, 121–49.
- 5 *Southland Times*, 21 January 1938; *Timaru Post*, 29 January 1938, clippings in HD, W1552, 1/4/7, ANZ.
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- 7 *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates* (NZPD), 1940, 257, p.507.
- 8 *New Zealand Truth*, 14 July 1954, p.6.
- 9 ‘Report of the Special Committee on Moral Delinquency in Children and Adolescents’, *Appendices of the Journal of the House of Representatives* (AJHR), 1954, H-47, pp.18, 33–36, 39, 41–422; *Truth*, 14 July 1954, p.9.
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- 11 The tenants are among 16 whom I interviewed for *We Call It Home*. They were selected from over 60 who responded to a Ministry for Culture and Heritage request for informants in December 2002. The criteria for selection included age, ethnicity, sex, willingness to be interviewed in depth, and place of residence. Tapes and transcripts of the interviews are held in the Oral History Centre, Alexander Turnbull Library (ATL), Wellington.
- 12 Cass interview, 27 May 2003, tape 2, side 1, Alexander Turnbull Library (ATL), Wellington.
- 13 *Church and People*, 18, 2 (March 1963), pp.1, 7.
- 14 J.H. Robb and Margaret A. Carr, *The City of Porirua: The Results of a Social Survey*, Wellington, 1969, pp.70, 182, 252; T.M. Zinyandu, ‘State Housing in Dunedin’, MA thesis, University of Otago, 1978, p.128; Lawrence McCallum, ‘Planning and State Housing’, MA thesis, Massey University, 1975, p.52; Royce Hunt, ‘Takaro: Demographic and Social Characteristics of a State Housing Suburb’, MA thesis, Massey University, 1970, p.72.
- 15 *Evening Post* (EP), 9 September 1969, p.36.
- 16 EP, 8 June 1976, p.14.
- 17 EP, 4 April 1992, p.2.
- 18 *Dominion*, 6 April 1992, p.1.
- 19 This policy is more fully discussed in Schrader, pp.65–73.
- 20 *Dominion*, 19 June 1985, pp.1, 5.
- 21 Wren interview, 29 May 2003, tape 1, side 2, ATL.
- 22 *ibid.*, tape 2, side 2; tape 3, side 1, ATL.
- 23 McGovern interview, 18 June 2003, tape 1, side 1, ATL.
- 24 *ibid.*, tape 2, side 1, ATL.
- 25 Purvis interview, 20 May 2003, tape 2, side 2, ATL.
- 26 Northey interview, 5 May 2003, tape 2, side 1, ATL.
- 27 Holswich interview, 29 July 2003, tape 1, side 2, ATL.



- 28 Cass interview, 27 May 2003, tape 2, side 2, ATL.
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