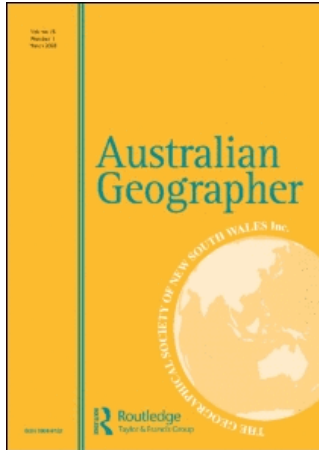


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A Biopolitics of Population Decline: the Australian Women's Sphere as a discourse of resistance

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ABSTRACT *Population decline at the last fin de siècle produced considerable debate among scholars, bureaucrats, and politicians. Material about this issue in the popular press of the day is also significant, allowing reflection on colonial attitudes toward the feminine, the home, and nature. Some commentators argued that these three were enduringly interconnected, and were critical to understanding both population decline and the decline of the population. Others challenged such positions. In this paper, I set out a preliminary exploration of such views by analysing excerpts from the Australian Women's Sphere for their treatment of the feminine, the home, and nature. I refer also to their differentially placed constitution in the urban and the rural, the private and the public, and the nation.*

KEY WORDS *Population debates; the feminine; the home; nature; biopolitics; place.*

Introduction

I would nevertheless only advocate the greatest number of children consistent with the maximum of health and strength, which the nation can produce without injury or injustice to its women, whose duties to themselves, as separate entities, must not be overlooked. I think that mankind has been given an intelligence superior to animals, so as to wisely control this as other laws in nature, especially when it can be done without moral or physical injury to anyone. (Parkes 1903, pp. 322–3)

The construction of the feminine, the home, and nature in population debates in Australia at the turn of the century was a complex process. Often, powerfully connected groups and individuals argued that women's natural place was in the home, and that their primary function was to raise children for the material well-being and moral tenor of the nation. Such views were entrenched, and there was a seeming stability and inevitability with which the feminine, the home, and nature were constituted and conflated. However, elements of the population debate in which women's domestic position was characterised as natural were also resisted.

These population debates yielded a wealth of written material in scholarly, policy, and popular texts. Such a storehouse is noteworthy. It allows us to access documents reflecting the various attitudes that certain Australians held on related social and spatial issues: gender roles and relations, race, nationalism and imperialism, the private and

public, the urban and rural, and the natural and cultural. It also permits us to examine how ideas and practices pertaining to the feminine, the home, and nature were mobilised.

Such matters form the primary focus of this paper, and not simply for their historical values. Indeed, recent Australian political debate, policy changes, and popular accounts on a range of population issues—fertility, mortality, and migration central to them—suggest one important point. The manner in which feminine, the home, and nature were discursively and socially produced 100 years ago has resurfaced, albeit in different ways. This subject, then, is far from anachronistic.

Australia's population decline ...

The early demographic history of white Australia is perhaps best comprehended in relation to the fertility, mortality, and migration patterns of European peoples more generally (Jackson 1988).¹ The transition from high to low fertility and mortality rates occurred over the period from the 1860s to the 1930s. It involved our 'grappling with environmental and infective diseases ... reducing fertility by moral restraint and mostly crude and ancient recipes, all without the benefit of state or religious support' (Borrie 1994, p. 154). Furthermore, the mass movement of Anglo and other Europeans to the antipodean colonies often created situations where the sex ratio (numbers of males to every 100 females) was as high as 150:100. This imbalance ensured the almost universal marriage of women, and high, though declining, birth rates. International migration to Australia, and especially to Melbourne and Sydney, varied because of government policy and economic trends, but was significant (Borrie 1994). Nevertheless, migrants comprised only 766 000 of the 2 656 000 increase in population between 1861 (when the total population was 1.168 million) and 1901 (when it had reached 3.773 million). Internal migration also resulted in differential patterns of growth, both in terms of the primacy of the colonial capital cities, and of the centrality of New South Wales (NSW), Victoria, and Queensland. Eighty per cent of Australia's population growth occurred in these colonies, with a further 10 per cent in South Australia. Western Australia's viability as a colony was restored by the discovery of gold in the 1890s, while Tasmania 'lost ground as a proportion of total population' (Borrie 1994, p. 139), gaining only (and unevenly) through natural increase.

From 1788 to 1860, population growth in Australia was around 9 per cent per annum, so that the population doubled every eight years (Jackson 1988). The gold rushes of the 1850s ensured that the annual increase in population for that decade was 11 per cent. Thereafter, population growth was between 2 and 4 per cent per annum, falling to 1.8 per cent by 1901. Such growth rates infer a doubling of population every 50 years, although this growth was variously distributed from region to region.

The rate of population growth in Australia diminished throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, and fertility decline accounts for much of this fall. Between 1836 and 1841, marital fertility was 6.5 live births per married woman for existing marriages. Between 1906 and 1911, this rate fell to 2.4 live births per married woman (Jackson 1988). Infant and childhood mortality rates also declined dramatically during the second half of the century. In the 1870s and 1880s, infant mortality was between 104 and 140 deaths per 1000 live births, falling to below 100 in 1904 (Carmichael 1992, p. 133). In significant ways, this decline can be linked to positive changes in public health regimes and to the treatment of milk (see Figure 1), which directly affected the incidence of diarrhoeal diseases among children (Carmichael 1992).

THE WILLSMERE CERTIFIED MILK COMPANY, MELBOURNE.



FIGURE 1. The Willsmere Certified Milk Company.

Source: *Australian Women's Sphere* (1(2), October 1900, p. 19).

... and the decline of the population

During the 1890s, fertility and mortality declines coincided with both a prolonged economic depression and a reversal in the level of immigration to Australia. Migrant numbers fell from a net gain of 36 000 in some years in the 1880s, to a net loss of 10 000 in 1903 (Hicks 1978). The decline alarmed many prominent social commentators, clerics, politicians, and public figures. Indeed, in 1903 the Government of NSW instituted a Royal Commission into the Decline of the Birth Rate. Led by Charles Mackellar, a social conservative and pro-natalist (Hicks 1978), the Commission's business sparked widespread public debate. One writer, whose position has been supported by later demographic analysis, expresses the situation thus:

The feature of last month was the discussion caused by the publication of the report of the Birth Rate Commission. As usual in such cases, a tremendous amount of drivel has been published. The decreased rate is attributed by every newspaper correspondent to the particular 'ism' which he [*sic*] dislikes. One lady correspondent hates the labour party—hence the decrease was due to labour politics and socialism. The single taxer attributed it to 'monopoly in land'; the protectionist to free trade in imports; the freetrader to the federal tariff and so on. *As a matter of fact there is no particular birth rate problem in Australia. True, our birth rate is decreasing but not nearly so fast as that of other countries ...* (Anonymous 1904, no page, emphasis added)

Several explanations for the declining birth rate were offered at the time, and many of

these are still analysed and debated by contemporary commentators.² Such explanations include lower death rates, delayed marriage and greater (sexual) prudence, and the declining influence of religion. They also acknowledge the importance of the movement of women into the labour force; the growing social acceptance of smaller families; the requirement in some jobs that employees be without 'encumbrances'; and living conditions favouring fewer children.

Likely connections between the population debates in Australia and the works of such figures as Thomas Malthus (1798, first published 1798), Charles Darwin (1883), and Herbert Spencer (1852, first published 1852) cannot be explored here. Nevertheless, there was concern among disparate actors (and mostly among middle-class professionals) that the quality—and not simply the quantity—of the population was in decline. As quotations such as the one above exemplify, the potency of the race was being questioned and, in some ways, this seeming demise was attributed to the deleterious effects of both city living, and domesticated and feminised nature:

When one looks about the city, observes the hundreds of 'weedy' boys and girls growing up, one cannot but believe that nature is herself working to the extinction of a race which seems to be losing its stamina and vigour.
(Anonymous 1904, no page)

This statement is intriguing, because it touches on wider issues related to ideas about women, the domestic, and the natural (Stratford 1994, 1997). All three were constituted as problematic, as needing particular forms of intervention and management in order to stem both the population decline, and the decline of the population (Quiggan 1988). It is this aspect of the population debate that I now wish to pursue.

Resistance and representations of natural and domesticated femininity: through the biopolitical lens

How, then, might certain aspects of the population debate have influenced the constitution of the feminine, the home, and nature during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? The analysis of this question can progress in various ways. Here I am interested in how population came to be mobilised as a problem in Australian society, and how that came to be reflected in the popular press. For this task, Michel Foucault's approaches to discourse and power are particularly suitable. In works spanning the period from the early 1960s until his death in 1984 (Davidson 1986), Foucault 'continually investigates both how human beings constitute themselves as subjects and how they treat one another as objects' (Hoy 1986, p. 4). The population debate often hinges on just such technologies.

Discourses on population specifically concerned Foucault because, in their production and maintenance, he saw the strategic deployment of resources, practices of surveillance, and social engineering. He also argued that population discourses imposed particular ethical and moral beliefs that extolled certain prescriptive virtues about how to care for self and society (Foucault 1976, 1984a, b).

Foucault traced the emergence of two regimes that have relevance to the analysis of the feminine, the home, and nature in population discourses circulating in the Australian women's popular press of the 1890s and early 1900s:

In concrete terms, starting in the seventeenth century, this power over life evolved in two basic forms; these forms were not antithetical, however; they

constituted rather two poles of development linked together by a whole intermediary cluster of relations. One of these poles—the first to be formed, it seems—centered on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls, all this was ensured by the procedures of power that characterized the disciplines: *an anatomo-politics of the human body*. The second, formed somewhat later, focused on the species body, the body imbued with the mechanisms of life and serving as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary. Their supervision was effected through an entire series of interventions and regulatory controls: *a biopolitics of the population*. The disciplines of the body and the regulations of the population constituted the two poles around which the organization of power over life was deployed. (Foucault 1976, p. 139, original emphasis)

A biopolitical analysis of population debates based on Foucault's concerns with the production, circulation, and effects of statements, texts, discourses, and social practices allows us to question the *relations of power* that derive from them (see Foucault 1980). His genealogical methods are critically concerned with meaning. Rather than posing questions such as *Does woman exist? Is the home universal and essential? What is natural? Why are women having fewer children and seeking to move out of their natural sphere, the home?*, the person using genealogical methods asks *How do such concepts as the feminine, the home, nature, and population function in our society, and what are the effects of these concepts on people's material and symbolic cultures?*

In what follows, my reading of extracts from the *Australian Women's Sphere* is informed by these latter questions, with an additional concern for place. After elaborating on the challenges of analysing the women's popular press of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I focus on some of the contradictory and contested meanings embedded in certain statements from *this* one periodical. In effect, having earlier noted some of the material effects of population change, I now examine the textuality and symbolism of debates in the *Australian Women's Sphere*. The fruits of that task may serve to demonstrate that the feminine, the home, and nature were neither immutable nor naturalised.

Australian periodicals in the nineteenth century

Lurline Stuart (1979) and Alfred Pong (1985) have argued that white Australians were a reading population from the very earliest years of settlement. A vast array of local and international texts was made available in libraries, and through the publishing efforts of book societies, journals, and the proceedings of professional organisations. Indeed, the population's exposure to a diversity of historical and contemporary issues was extensive, given the isolation.

Little is known about the genealogy of nineteenth-century periodicals in circulation in Australia, despite the numbers produced here or imported from overseas. Pong's (1985) checklist is of limited help for the work outlined here, while Stuart's (1979) annotated bibliography of periodicals concentrates on literary publications. However, Stuart does establish that the lion's share of all Australian periodicals was published in

Sydney and in Melbourne. The popular press was present in other colonial capitals, but, with modest markets, the number of journals produced was below those in the dominant colonies.

In the larger body of research from which this work is drawn (Stratford 1995), I have examined several periodicals published by or for women during the period from 1875 to 1905. These are housed either in the Mitchell Library in the State Library of NSW in Sydney, or in the National Library of Australia in Canberra. My selection and analysis of periodicals often depended on how well material had been preserved prior to being lodged with these libraries. However, in a month of intense fieldwork, I was able to examine nearly 1000 pages of text.

Several periodicals were examined during this time, and some of these are worth noting in passing, because little analysis has yet been done of their content and form. *The Woman's Voice* was founded in 1894 in Sydney by Maybanke Susannah Wolstonholme (see Clarke 1988; Sheridan 1993). *Happy Homes: A Journal of Pure Literature for the Household* was printed by Edward Teer Radcliffe, and published for less than two years: *Happy Homes* was owned and edited by Florence Hope through part of 1891, and by Mrs W. Keep through the rest of 1891 and in 1892. For a short time, the paper then appeared as *Good Health: The Australian Domestic Journal*, but it ceased publication later that year. The other papers on which I focused were from the Australian Health Society, *The Australian Storekeepers' Journal*, *The Woman*, *The New Idea*, *The Home Queen*, *The Band of Mercy Advocate*, *The Band of Mercy and Humane Journal*, *Australian Farm and Home*, and the *Australian Woman's Sphere*. Some of these periodicals lasted for a matter of months, others for several years. Some were owned and edited by committed feminists holding leftist political views and broad interests in the protection of nature, supported by sympathetic and like-minded women and men. Some papers were administered by women and men whose politics were premised on an acceptance of more traditional and liberal understandings of the feminine and the home, and on utilitarian distinctions between society and environment. Nevertheless, in 'reformist' papers, there are articles that normalise; and in 'reactionary' papers, there are occasional heterodoxies that surprise the contemporary analyst, and disrupt conventional interpretations of the past.

The excerpts presented here are drawn from the *Australian Women's Sphere* because they create a space of resistance against prevailing masculinist orthodoxies about the feminine, the home, and nature. This periodical was edited by Vida Goldstein, a prominent socialist and feminist united with Wolstonholme for her interests in issues such as suffrage, temperance, women's employment protection and rights, the peace movement, girls' education, prostitution, sexual abuse, and sexually transmitted diseases. Perhaps coincidentally, her brother-in-law, Henry Hyde Champion, was the co-editor of *The Sun*, *The Society Courier*, and *A Journal for the Home and Society* from 1888 to 1899 (Clarke 1988). Of the various journals I examined in the larger research work from which this commentary is drawn, the issues published in the *Australian Women's Sphere* best demonstrate a concerted, articulate, and sustained resistance to prevailing ideas about the feminine, the home, and nature. This characteristic is important in relation to a biopolitical analysis, and to the genealogy of ideas. In particular, it is critical because discourses and social practices are codified in specific networks of power (Andersen 1988). Moreover, they privilege the author, the commentary, and the discipline as stable and unitary (Foucault 1972). Explicit resistance to normalising discourses and social practices was rare in the women's popular press, a challenge to the rise and entrenchment of modern forms of surveillance, governmental-

ity, and discipline. So, in a very clear sense, the *Australian Women's Sphere* captures a moment when certain Australians challenged the complex constitution of the feminine in relation to a range of other categories of being and meaning—the home, nature, and population among them.

The *Australian Women's Sphere*, population, and issues of place

In Australia, from around the 1860s to the early years of the twentieth century, a complex set of issues about population converged around the feminine, the home, and nature. These issues implicate place: the urban and rural, the private and public, and the idea of nation.

Expansion of white conquest and settlement into rural areas, for example, was underpinned by a widespread belief that migration was essential to national well-being and progress. To fill and subdue nature in a land as massive as Australia, a large population would be imperative. Women were needed as the mothers of men who were, in turn, required as indomitable breadwinners. A home provided by them for their wives signified the essence of bonded, fecund marriage and robust healthy nationhood in a land tamed for fruitful settlement (Blackburne, 1892; Butler, 1902). In Foucauldian terms, the home was a node of biopolitical activity.

This pro-natalist position relied on the idea that the home was a site crucial to national health and well-being. It was also one that surfaced again in the 1920s (Phillips & Wood 1928) and the 1940s (Wallace 1946). Interestingly, by the 1980s and 1990s, the tide has appeared to turn, as nature's potency as an icon was used to represent growing concerns about the relationship between population and sustainability (Birrell *et al.* 1984, National Population Committee 1991). During these years, women were also often positioned as the natural guardians of a gendered Mother Earth, through domestically oriented acts such as green consumerism (Stratford 1996).

To return to the nineteenth century, it appears that notions of place and of being-in-place reflect prescriptions about women's 'natural' roles and relations in life, reproductive behaviour included (see Mackinnon 1993). In the bush, women were few in number, and their lives in these circumstances were often extremely difficult and dangerous. In establishing the periodical *The Dawn* in the 1880s, for instance, Louisa Lawson also founded an outreach program for rural women. She had personally experienced many of the hardships of such life before separating from her husband and returning to city life (an interesting reversal of the idea of the city as alienating). Women living in cities were not the only ones portrayed as the feminine in metaphorical decline; rural women, too, were represented as giving birth to and raising disordered families in a wasteland. Lawson's son, the writer Henry Lawson, encapsulated such trials in *The drover's wife* (1892).

The debate about whether population decline was most drastic in rural or urban contexts sometimes took on an international scope. Note the following from 'Dr. Barrett's Bogey' (Anonymous 1901, p. 48):

Dr. J.W. Barrett, in his presidential address delivered at the annual meeting of the Medical Society of Victoria, shows himself to be a superficial observer of life and its problems. A considerable portion of his address dealt with the population question in the Australasian colonies. He stated that during the past fifteen years there has been a sudden and enormous decrease in the birth-rate, and attributes the decrease very largely to 'the movement eu-

phemistically termed "the emancipation of women". Dr. Barrett argues that educated women are so ambitious for 'careers' that they seek to avoid the inconveniences of maternity by artificial means, but he forgot to point out that in France, where the woman's movement is, comparatively speaking, new, the population question has for many years been of more serious import than in any other country. It is chiefly the women of the peasant class in France who resort to artificial methods, and they have never heard of the woman's movement.

Population 'problems' in urban landscapes actually may have provided the inspiration for metaphoric treatment of the rural as decayed (Rowley 1993). In fact, with desertion and destitution on the rise in cities and towns in the economically depressed 1890s, the dislocation of the Australian family unit became a matter of considerable social significance. Its exposure was an important part of the discourse on the health, psychology, and sociology of the family and society, which, while not confined to Australia, was certainly prominent here (Donzelot 1980; Finch 1993; see also the works of Charlotte Perkins Gilman 1970a, b, c—three works first published 1898, 1903 and 1911, respectively).

Moreover, pro-natalism was premised on concerns about racial preservation and the maintenance of class distinctions that were partly organised along ethnic divisions in any case. Low levels of natural increase were viewed as threatening to national security and to economic well-being. On the other hand, advocates of immigration were more concerned to ensure the racial purity of prospective settlers. Nevertheless, through the proliferation of statements about Social Darwinism and nascent forms of eugenics (Orgill 1902), and through assertions about the 'natural' superiority of the white race, the birth process, along with the bodies of mother and child, became contested (Bacchi 1980), the results of procreation problematised as peculiar. These various concerns are vividly illustrated in an article about the Prahran Creche from the *Australian Women's Sphere* (1(12), August 1901, p. 99). This excerpt also demonstrates—in the person of 'Matey'—the powerful conflation of the divine and maternal feminine and the natural in quasi-domestic settings:

The Creche proper consists of two large airy rooms in a most delightful state of confusion, full of weird-looking wooden animals in different stages of disease and decay, and children tumbling all over the place; one or two babies were asleep in cradles, and one youngster, little Phil, was in disgrace in the corner. It appeared that little Phil had been tied up in the yard by one leg three times that morning for kicking 'Matey', as the children called the Matron, but that form of punishment proved ineffectual; he had then been tied up by both legs, but vigorous youth asserting itself he again broke loose, and the corner under Matey's reproofing eye was found to be the only thing for Phil. Matey is one of those women who are simply born to mother a lot of children. Soft brown eyes, with the love of a Madonna shining out of them, and a perfect understanding of all young things. At times some queer little freaks of society find their way into this small haven. A tiny pair, brother and sister, were sitting hand in hand, one black, the other white. Black Bobbie's father was white, and white Mary's mother was black.

In other debates about population, such as treatises published by the Australian Health Society,³ the healthy body of a woman was thought to produce the healthy body of a

child only when protected in a home environment encased in a 'natural' environment relatively free of noxious earth, air, and water. These discourses on the healthy home and nation gave rise to complex representations of the feminine, the home, and nature, constituting the woman's body not simply as a site of biological procreation, but as the domesticated and natural kernel of healthy social reproduction as well (Springthorpe 1889).

Such moral prescriptions were fuelled by the gendered separation of public and private spheres. They emphasised the alleged chaste and moral superiority of femininity, and the unsuitability of the feminised body for the physical and intellectual rigours of public life. Many women founded discourses in opposition to this position, yet what is interesting about the excerpt below is that is written by a man (Hassell 1902, no page), demonstrating the support that some men lent to the women's movement, while still invoking other forms of discrimination. Note also the constitution of the woman's domestic role as care for animal comforts and of the home as a primitive site.

We have much pleasure in publishing the following letter on 'The Decay of Domesticity' which appeared in a recent number of the London 'Daily Chronicle'. Mr. Hassell has grasped the situation clearly. It is a 'divine discontent' that compels the thinking woman of to-day to rebel against the average man's conception of the womanly woman, the woman who is neither a household drudge or a useless drawing-room ornament:

To the Editor of 'The Daily Chronicle'

Sir,—That domesticity is decaying as regards the Englishwoman there is no denying. For my part, I am glad to see it. It is a welcome sign of woman's evolution ...

What is the cause of the mental impotency of the East? A school boy will tell you: the subjection of women. Domesticity is subjection. What hope can there be for the physical improvement in woman when she is a mere administrator of animal comfort and sympathy to her 'lord' in his unlabouring hours? Oh the primitive sentiment of hearth and home! ...

Yours etc.,

Henry Hassell

37 Lamb's Conduit-street, W.C.,

September 17th, 1901

In contrast, in its report to the NSW State Parliament in 1904, the Mackellar Commission argued that the fall in the birth rate—and the attendant liberation of women—could threaten the young nation. Among other things, these trends might lead to an under-utilisation of natural resources, and thus to a decline in material and moral progress. These issues are concerned with the biopolitics of modern society.⁴ So the decline came to be viewed as being the result of the 'selfishness' of people of procreative age. These people were seen to be unwilling to deal with the strains and worries of raising children; as disliking the inconvenience of child bearing and child rearing; as wanting to avoid the difficulties of pregnancy, parturition and lactation; and as hoping to indulge in a 'love of luxury and social pleasures' (Hicks 1978, p. 23). In effect, such people were undisciplined, and had failed to account for their place within the mechanisms and systems of a rational and progressive society. In response to these 'symptoms', the Commission called for a crackdown on the availability of contraception



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FIGURE 2. The Marvel Whirling Spray.

Source: *The New Idea* (6 July 1903, p. 89).

and abortion (see Figure 2), for the improvement of medical and hospital practices, and of the working conditions of women. Moreover, its members suggested that the NSW Government should encourage the increased use of more land for closer settlement.

In the work of the Commission, there is a demonstrable link between certain social reforms and the constitution of the city as a place in which the feminine especially came to be removed from nature, and from what were considered to be natural urges. Married women had been barred from the NSW public service in 1895, as part of what was called 'the protection of women's procreative well-being'. Desley Deacon (1993, p. 58) refers to the legislation as something quite different, labelling it part of 'the process of masculinist reorganisation during the 1890s' that led to the reassertion of paternalism in the face of diverse feminist claims for equality. In combination with the Harvester judgment on the family wage in 1907, laws such as the *Public Service Act* 1895, and discourses such as the Mackellar Commission, may have contributed to a rise in the birth rate from something under 2.5 in the mid-1890s to 3.78 per cent by 1912 (Hicks 1978).

Population issues also figure in 'The degeneration of the race', an article in the *Australian Woman's Sphere* (2(21), May 1902, Supplement). Asserting that the Commonwealth's fate is to be found in the 'common-wellness' of its population, Orgill suggests that the vigour of the race has declined over two generations. Numerous causes are suggested for such degeneration, especially the declining birth rate, and the rise in incidence of cancer and tuberculosis. Other evidence supporting this assertion

includes the rise in demand for services from hospitals, asylums, and charitable institutions, the increase in the use of surgery for minor ailments, and the decrease in numbers of men fit for active service. Finally, Orgill argues that there was an increase in the rise of 'imbeciles, cripples, deaf, dumb, blind and deformed creatures', which ought to 'be checked'.

This proto-eugenics is founded on concerns about sameness and normalcy, which form part of a wider concern with ethical conformity. It is underpinned by adherence to particular moral prescriptions about the sanctity of marriage, family, and home as natural and good, population growth as essential. Deviations from the norm should be checked, although how remains ominously unstated. There is an insistence that women's bodies *should* give birth to children and, with femininity such a contested terrain in the late nineteenth century, there is an implicit understanding that the decline in the birth rate and the rise of feminism represent an unhealthy and unnatural state.

The population question also splits along class lines. The new woman and her male sympathisers came to be seen as anti-nationalist because they advocated birth control, the 'blissful unwedded state', and other emancipatory strategies. The traditional man and woman were concerned with the values of marriage, family, home, and state, yet these generalised positions hid many contested terrains.

For instance, in the July 1903 issue of the *Australian Woman's Sphere*, there is a letter entitled 'A man's view' (p. 323). 'H.B.' argues that the *Sphere* is a valuable vessel for conveying women's issues, but suggests that women will not further the cause of birth control 'by levelling all your guns at mere man'. 'H.B.' proposes that not all men exhibit 'selfishness and bestiality ... [or an] objectionable attitude towards women in general and wives in particular'. He argues that robust women have natural urges, and that sexual restraint thus needs to be two-sided. At one point, 'robust' appears to slip into a category of meaning that equates with the working classes, further removed than the affluent from the civilising forces of culture:

Many women in humbler walks of life make matrimony an excuse to gratify their lowest nature, without reckoning upon the consequences, either to themselves or to the unfortunate offspring they beget so ruthlessly. My observations and knowledge tell me that women are just as often to blame as men in this indulgence ... ('H.B.' 1903, emphasis added)

Yet, in this final sentence, 'H.B.' returns to a generalised category of woman, rather than to women of the working classes. While not new, his disclosure that women have libidinal desires is telling in a woman's periodical. It gestures toward the existence of more open dialogue on sex and the body, and on the natural cycles of reproduction—what Foucault (1976) calls a proliferation of discourses on sexuality within biopolitical regimes. 'H.B.' also notes that the generation of unwanted children by unrestrained women results from a lack of information that should be provided by doctors.

Finally, links between population and a feminised nature are part of a biopolitics of population that also begins with Malthus (1970, first published 1798). 'H.B.' says that whatever we do, whatever our actions, 'we have to settle the bill with Mother Nature ... she is an inexorable creditor, and must be satisfied sooner or later'. This kind of environmental determinism forms an important stream in the discourses on population. Here, though, nature is the reckoner, the subject that gazes at the actions of society, and the force that disciplines society. This reversal of the gaze makes the population debate resonate with contested meaning.

Conclusions

Debates about the feminine, the home, and nature constituted a complex biopolitics in Australia during the last *fin de siècle*. Concerns about fertility and mortality, migration, marriage, child-rearing practices, family values, and social norms are manifest in these other discussions. They are a crucial, though partial, element of a complicated genealogy of social and cultural change in Australian society. Place is deeply implicated in this constellation of discourses and social practices. Indeed, differential concepts of the urban and the rural, of the private and the public, and of notions of the nation characterise the ways in which the population debate was mobilised and took shape.

Many of the changes which appear to be part of the demographic transition in Australia at this time were wrought on the bodies of women as feminine subjects, on the home as their primary sites of power and interaction, and on a nature with which they were made equivalent. Many of these changes occurred around the feminine body, which was viewed as a tool of national expansion and cohesion, requiring specific forms of discipline because of its natural unruly state, and needing particular sites in which to be contained. The operation of statements and social practices that protected the vested interests and tacit—indeed unconscious—prejudices of some groups was nevertheless constantly challenged by an equally complex set of discourses and social practices. An analysis of these discourses and social practices troubles ideas about the stability of the feminine, the home, and nature as categories of meaning and material sites.

Now, again, discourses on population issues have altered. During the last years of the 1990s, for example, there have been numerous debates in Australian political circles about the critical role of the so-called traditional family, the home, and the state, in which women's 'natural' place continues to be raised. These debates have often been circulated in conjunction with changes to policies on child-care, youth affairs, or unemployment rates, and in connection with popular accounts about the different effects of fertility, mortality and migration. Thus, while the form and substance of conflicts about population and place have changed over time, it is obvious that, even now, they have not been resolved.

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NOTES

- [1] It is widely accepted that the Aboriginal peoples were being decimated by the effects of white conquest and colonial practices, but the statistics pertaining to their demography at this time are equivocal (Jackson 1988).
- [2] See, for example, Garner (1980); Burnley (1982); Hugo (1986); Larson (1988); Santow *et al.* (1988a, b); Allen *et al.* (1989); Reiger and James (1990); Borrie (1994); Grimshaw *et al.* (1994).
- [3] The Australian Health Society was founded in Melbourne in August 1875 at a meeting in the Melbourne Town Hall. Three objectives steered the functions of the Society, broadly based around

the banners of educating the public about sanitation; creating inducements by which the populace might come to adhere to the principles and practices of hygiene; and seeking to mitigate or remove activities deleterious to the public health.

- [4] Neville Hicks (1978) provides evidence to suggest that many of the Commission's findings were overt manipulations of the statements of witnesses appearing before it, the Commission report reflecting in particular what Mackellar wanted.

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