

Fallen Men and Women

English is a complex language and the same words can convey quite different meanings, depending on context. For example: “There, there”, said the woman comforting a toddler who had grazed his knee when he fell. “Sit over there in that chair so I can clean your knee and put on a band aid”. There is used as a word of comfort or to indicate a specific place.

Recently CCHG has been recording material on men who died in war, the ‘Fallen’ who made the ‘ultimate sacrifice’. However, when the word ‘fallen’ is applied to women the implication is not of death but the disgrace of illegitimate birth, poverty, destitution or desertion. This article explores one of the people who set out to help the women ‘who had fallen on life’s highway.’ Margaret Goldspink was the second wife of Charles Goldspink, part of whose story has already appeared on our web site. She was born Margaret Fitzsimons (Fitzsimmons) in Collingwood in 1858. In 1882, at the age of 24, she married Charles Goldspink and from 1883 to 1896 she bore 7 children, as well as caring for Leopold, the child of her husband’s deceased first wife. This should have kept her thoroughly occupied, yet she managed to find the time and the energy to work extremely hard for charitable organizations - the Carlton Committee for Boarding Out Children, the St Vincent de Paul Society, the Melbourne Ladies Benevolent Society and the District Nursing Society. Her experiences confirmed her concerns.^{1,2}

The family lived at Goldspink Terrace, now roughly 285-289 Rathdowne Street Carlton, a suburb which became one of the poorest areas in the city, having been gradually deserted by the more affluent middle classes in the late 19th century, leaving behind the poorer working class. Once-large houses became lodging houses or pubs and the poor crowded together in narrow lanes and alleyways. Poor families relied on charitable organizations not only for food, clothing and furniture but also places which were safe, where their children could be cared for. Distinctions were often made between the ‘deserving’ and the ‘undeserving’ poor and single mothers or deserted women were often seen as undeserving, not only because some resorted to baby farming or infanticide but because they did not live up to an idealized picture of women.

Margaret Goldspink, like all women, was excluded by the men-only St Vincent de Paul Society, in its early years, so she and others formed the Ladies’ Benevolent Society in 1887, to look after women and children. She was the first secretary of that organisation, which offered care for destitute children until places could be found for them in respectable families or institutions. The Ladies’ Benevolent Society set up a temporary home for single women and their children and even took children into their own homes in cases of emergency, as Margaret did. Their services were desperately needed and were therefore well used. By 1901 she realised that a facility for expectant mothers, close to the Royal Women’s Hospital in Carlton was needed, for many single women left their families and came to the area so their pregnancy would not be obvious. Some men also found the idea expedient. By January 1902 she had secured funding for St Joseph’s Receiving Home in Barkly Street Carlton. A two storey house was set up with 10 furnished rooms and between December 1902 and April 1903, more than 84 women and 140 children found refuge there. Margaret believed it was essential that expectant mothers had a safe place to stay during their last months of pregnancy and that after birth babies should be able to stay with their mothers, to ensure their survival until they were adopted or institutionalised.

It is worth remembering that only some unwanted children were illegitimate while others were cast into poverty because their fathers had to leave home to work or look for work, or deserted their wives. Other men, whether of good or bad character, had died, were drunkards, were in jail, in hospital or a lunatic

asylum or were classed as imbeciles or invalids. The Neglected Childrens' Act of 1887 had lumped together children who committed crimes with others who, through no fault of their own, were found to be orphans, neglected or abandoned. Once assessed these children were sent to foster homes, reformatories, industrial schools or orphanages. Some mothers resorted to baby farmers to take care of their children, but they were often unreliable and/or dangerous. Thousands of children were boarded out in the country, away from the perceived evils of city life. These neglected children were also to be trained in agricultural or trade skills, if boys, and domestic skills, if girls.

Margaret Goldspink, who became a probation officer in 1901, and worked as such for the rest of her life, was authorised to assess such children, apprehend them and become their guardian until they turned 18 or they were placed in respectable children's institutions or with foster families. It was an enormous responsibility and one she took very seriously, fronting a variety of reactions from 'infuriated inmates of an opium den' to magistrates who considered she had exceeded her authority and had her escorted from courts by police.

Margaret experienced at first hand the fact that middle class women, neither rich nor poor, were the major providers of care for other women and children, while committees of men 'provided the necessary financial support to keep the services going'. These same men were happy for women to undertake the heavy responsibilities involved, as men could 'not touch these cases'. Men made the rules and women applied them. Women obviously knew more about the problem, as they dealt with it regularly, but were excluded from public debate. Each gender was confined to its own social sphere, either public for men or private for women, although in this case women were working in the public sphere, however at caring activities, which were seen to be within their realm. It was a dichotomy which also applied in the payment of women workers, most obviously in areas like education, where men and women could fill the same roles but receive lower pay.

It was not until women gained the right to vote in Victoria in 1908, and particularly after they could stand for parliament in 1924, that women could actually participate in the framing of legislation about how this issue could be dealt with. However, this article is not about suffrage but the care of women and children and Margaret Goldspink undoubtedly made an enormous contribution, giving 'relief, comfort and hope to women and children who were easily ignored or overlooked by other welfare societies'.

References:

¹ *Fallen - The ultimate heroes : Footballers who never returned from the war*, Jim Main and David Allen, Crown Content, Melbourne, 2002

² CCHG acknowledges the work of Fiona Poulton, in *They are but women : The road to female suffrage*, for drawing our attention to Margaret Goldspink's contribution to this important issue.

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