

## Philanthropy and the “management” of working-class women: the West Gate Bridge disaster

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*The West Gate Bridge collapse in 1970 is one of the worst industrial disasters in Australian history. Closely examined for the engineering lessons it provides, scholarly interest in its historical, social, and industrial import is far less extensive. This article examines the role of union leaders, employers, and a private welfare organisation called the Citizens Welfare Service (CWS) in the management of funds raised to support the victims and families of the disaster. More broadly, it reveals philanthropic attitudes and practices adopted to manage working families’ needs in the 1970s that were not altogether dissimilar from those of nineteenth-century philanthropists. Despite the families’ raw grief in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, “home visitors” from the CWS felt entitled to offer heavily gendered and class-based advice to widows about frugal budgeting, domestic order, and composed behaviour. The case management style employed by this welfare agency demonstrated a derivative commitment to capitalist mores that promoted hard work and thrift, while stigmatising welfare dependence.*

**Keywords:** West Gate Bridge collapse, widows and families, welfare distribution, workers compensation.

### Introduction

When a section of the West Gate Bridge collapsed during construction in 1970, and 35 employees were killed, the disaster had immediate family welfare consequences. Twenty-eight women were widowed, 88 children lost their father, and 18 men required significant periods of hospitalisation.<sup>1</sup> A Royal Commission investigation into the tragedy was quickly enacted by the Victorian state parliament and, for the most part, attribution of blame fell heavily on those responsible for the design and construction of the bridge.<sup>2</sup> The collapse was front-page news across Australia for several months, as newspaper reporters covered the Royal Commission and interviewed survivors, rescue workers and family members who had lost loved ones.<sup>3</sup> Public sympathy for the victims was profound and donations flooded into funds administered principally by the *Herald* newspaper, the Victorian Trades Hall Council (VTHC) and some municipal authorities. Indeed, VTHC records contain union subscription

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\* We thank *Labour History*'s anonymous referees for their helpful comments on this research. Special thanks go to Danny Gardiner and Tommy Watson, former West Gate workers, who were so generous with their time and knowledge.

<sup>1</sup> Citizens Welfare Service of Victoria (CWS), 2013.0122, West Gate Welfare Coordinating Committee (WWCC) minutes, 26 October 1970, Unit 3, 97/2170, University of Melbourne Archives [hereafter UMA].

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Gary Dean, “Two Engineering Firms Lose Their Jobs on West Gate Bridge,” *The Age* (Melbourne), 7 August 1971, 1; “Design Faults Finding Denied,” *The Age* (Melbourne), 4 August 1971, 11. The findings of the Royal Commission were published as Edward Barber, Frank Bull and Hubert Shirley-Smith, *Report of Royal Commission into the Failure of West Gate Bridge*, Report no. 7989, (Melbourne: Government Printer, 1971).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Alan Stewart, “Injured Covered in Oil, Blood,” *The Herald* (Melbourne), 16 October 1970, 2; “Funerals for 15 of Dead,” *The Sun* (Melbourne), 20 October 1970, 17; “I Must Return to the Bridge Says John,” *The Herald* (Melbourne), 19 October 1970, 7.

sheets filled out by thousands of workers from all over the country.<sup>4</sup> Most of the widows received meagre state widows' pensions almost immediately and, after engaging in individual litigation against the employers' insurer, workers compensation payments.<sup>5</sup> As Elliott notes, however, pensions in this period were insufficient to provide a bulwark against poverty; rather, for new pensioners, it was more commonly a descent into poverty.<sup>6</sup>

In the face of community criticism regarding the low level of workers compensation payments available to victims and families, which had been a campaign issue for unions for many years, the Victorian government hurriedly increased mandated payments.<sup>7</sup> Although the payments were backdated to cover those affected by the West Gate disaster, pursuit through the courts to secure entitlements was still a lengthy process. For a crucial period between the collapse and 1974 when the public fund collected for West Gate victims and families was wound up, therefore, many relied heavily on fund donations as a vital source of income. The principles adopted for disbursement of that fund are an important window into welfare philosophies in this period, suggesting that surviving records of fund administration can provide a hitherto unknown, albeit mediated, account of widows' treatment in the aftermath of the collapse. The records revealed evidence of traditional attitudes towards working-class victims and families that affected delivery of, and access to, income and social support. Despite the profound nature of the families' losses and the enormous funds collected for their benefit, the distribution principles that governed assistance to widows, injured workers and families were strongly imbued with conservative and gendered attitudes towards welfare dependence and working-class financial acumen. For grieving and distressed women, some caring for injured family members and traumatised children, domestic duties were intensified. At the same time, home visitors subjected them to advice on frugal budgeting, appropriate home management and composed behaviour, consistent with enduring middle-class mores that idealised respectable womanhood, hard work and thrift.

## Background

In early 1968, construction work began on a massive bridge across the Yarra River in Melbourne.<sup>8</sup> By mid-October 1970, the project was well advanced but there were many problems on site — numerous disagreements between contractors, frequent episodes of industrial conflict, safety concerns that were given insufficient attention, and inadequate expert engineering oversight.<sup>9</sup> On one occasion, after manoeuvring two half girders into place, workers found there was a significant difference in camber. A contentious decision was made to place “kentledge” — heavy concrete blocks — on one girder to force it into place,

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<sup>4</sup> VTHC, 2001.0020, Unit 378, UMA.

<sup>5</sup> Ken Stone from the VTHC noted that victims and dependants would engage legal counsel and initiate civil action compensation claims against the employers, but that payments would not be forthcoming for 2-3 years. CWS, 2013.0122 WWCC, 26 October 1970, Unit 3, 97/2170. A majority of workers killed and injured in the collapse had worked for John Holland Constructions.

<sup>6</sup> Grant Elliott, “Two Steps Forward, Two Steps Back: An Australian Welfare State?” in Adam Graycar, ed. *Perspectives in Australian Social Policy* (South Melbourne: Macmillan, 1978), 35.

<sup>7</sup> “Labor says Antiquated on Workers' Compo.,” *The Sun* (Melbourne), 21 October 1970, 44; “Union Ban on Bridge,” *The Herald*, 16 October 1970, 2; “Workers' Aid Bill Introduced: West Gate Victims Will Benefit,” *The Age* (Melbourne), 28 October 1970, np.

<sup>8</sup> Bill Hitchings, *West Gate* (Collingwood: Outback Press, 1979).

<sup>9</sup> Barber et al., *Report of Royal Commission*, 99, 102; Carmel Egan, “West Gate: 20 Years After the Tragedy,” *The Australian Magazine*, 13 October 1990, 8-14.

but this process put the structure under immense stress and a bulge appeared in the section. On the morning of 15 October 1970, engineer David Ward ordered the removal of 30 bolts in an attempt to flatten the bulge. At 11.50 am, the structure could no longer bear the stress — witnesses said the steel turned blue, bolts snapped like gunfire, and the entire span between piers 10–11 collapsed while men were working both on it and under it.<sup>10</sup> Rescue operations continued for some days; 33 men died at the scene and two died later in hospital. Some of the 18 injured were hospitalised for only a short period, while others sustained critical injuries that necessitated lengthy rehabilitation and/or permanent disability. The collapse site was cordoned off and family members were forced to wait into the night to hear news about their loved ones. The last two bodies were pulled out of the river on 23 October, eight days after the collapse.<sup>11</sup> Many surviving workmates who stayed on site to assist with the rescue efforts became rarely acknowledged victims, suffering significant emotional distress for years after the disaster.

In the aftermath of the collapse, the welfare of victims and families was an immediate concern. Two welfare committees were formed; the West Gate Fund Committee (WGFC) was responsible for administering disbursement of public donations and the West Gate Welfare Coordinating Committee (WWCC) undertook the home visiting required to assess family needs. All donations had been centralised under the control of the WGFC which comprised VTHC representatives and the secretaries of the seven affected unions,<sup>12</sup> with a Union-Fidelity Company representative providing trust advice.<sup>13</sup> This committee established all fund guidelines and authorised all distribution decisions made, but relied heavily on the information provided by the WWCC. The WWCC was formed when managers at John Holland Constructions (JHC), the principal employer of the dead and injured men, invited representatives from a number of welfare organisations to meet at the West Gate site office a few days after the collapse.<sup>14</sup> Managing director, John Holland, had personal connections with the CWS and he asked Elizabeth Sharpe, its executive director, to provide case management services for victims' families.<sup>15</sup> Sharpe was elected committee chair to lead the

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<sup>10</sup> Brian Coles and Trevor Gourley, *Collapse of the West Gate Bridge: A Case Study for Engineering Students* (Melbourne: Worksafe Victoria, 2002), 7-8.

<sup>11</sup> These were Barney Butters and his trades assistant, Des Gibson, the two men who had been ordered to pull out the bolts. *The Sun* (Melbourne), 24 October 1970.

<sup>12</sup> These were the Amalgamated Engineering Union, the Australasian Society of Engineers, the Boilermakers and Blacksmiths' Society of Australia, the Builders Labourers' Federation, the Building Workers' Industrial Union, the Federated Engine Drivers and Firemen's Association, and the Federated Iron Workers' Association of Australia.

<sup>13</sup> *Herald* management invited union trustees to administer distribution of its fund. VTHC, 2001.0020, Letter, Ken Stone, VTHC Secretary to Sir Phillip Jones, Chairman, *Herald and Weekly Times* (Melbourne), 8 October 1974, Unit 60, 48/1974, UMA.

<sup>14</sup> CWS, 2013.0122, WWCC minutes, 20 October, Unit 3, 97/2170, UMA.

<sup>15</sup> It is noteworthy that Holland, his senior engineers, Sharpe, and some executive members of the CWS, had existing employment and social ties formed via work histories in military command, rescue operations, medical services, and the police force. Sharpe, for example, had been an operations officer in the RAF during World War II. John Sorell, "Quite a Wonderful Woman," *The Herald* (Melbourne), 9 November 1970, 2. In addition, Oscar Meyer, chairman of the Lower Yarra Crossing Authority that hired bridge contractors, also served in World War II. Other attendees at the meeting were VTHC officials, and representatives from various public and private welfare organisations, including St Vincent de Paul, the Salvation Army, Birthright, and the Pensions and Social Services Department. It is worth noting at this point that Holland asked the CWS to provide services for which he did not commit to pay. Instead, responsibility for payment fell on reluctant WGFC trustees who were initially under the impression that home visiting work would be done on a voluntary basis.

welfare work and a plan of action was formulated — a “command post”<sup>16</sup> was to be established on site to: facilitate communication between various groups; prepare an information sheet about social service entitlements, workers compensation benefits, and contacts for legal and social welfare advice; develop a questionnaire for interviewing victims and families; and organise approaches to industry sources for financial support.<sup>17</sup> After CWS case workers had called at each family’s home, Sharpe reported to the WGFC about the level of financial support required in each case and this helped to determine both overall distribution policies and individual assistance required. As advocates for the dead workers, the union secretaries assumed responsibility for distributing monies to their members’ widows and families, a role perhaps familiar to union leaders with experience of “friendly society” welfare practices. To them, the scale of the West Gate disaster and the enormous fund to be dispersed required a high level of domestic intervention.<sup>18</sup> This forced the WGFC to recognise warily that it would need to rely on the WWCC’s welfare expertise, especially the staff of the CWS. Despite the WGFC’s reliance on Elizabeth Sharpe and her organisation, Sharpe had to press for inclusion on the fund committee (where financial power resided) and payment for services rendered (upon which the CWS relied to survive). Senior JHC staff were also placed in a subordinate role to both committees that they were in no position to challenge openly, due to public perceptions about the company’s partial responsibility for the disaster.<sup>19</sup> Engineer Tom Robinson complained that he had “spent several hours cross-checking all information in [employee] files” and entering the information on sheets for the CWS. “I can’t say I am very happy about the Unions disbursing cash,” he wrote peevishly. “[I] have just done all their donkey work for them and prepared a schedule of payments.”<sup>20</sup> Most notably, the JHC representatives insisted that their “humane action” must not be viewed by the courts as any admission of liability.<sup>21</sup>

The scholarly literature on Australian social welfare systems only fitfully describes the political and social context in which the West Gate disaster took place. After World War II, state delivery of social services expanded, while retaining a significant role for private agencies.<sup>22</sup> At the time of the collapse, both Federal and Victorian state politics were dominated by Liberal Party policies that embraced hard work, self-reliance and minimal state intervention. Welfare distribution operated on a hybrid model — government agencies administered universal statutory schemes like widow and invalid pensions, while non-government relief agencies offered “residual” support to those who needed more assistance than state-run systems offered. Private philanthropic organisations kept themselves afloat on

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<sup>16</sup> Note the military tone of the language adopted.

<sup>17</sup> CWS, 2013.0122, Memorandum on the coordination of welfare action following occasions of industrial calamity, WWCC minutes, West Gate Bridge site office, 20 October 1970, Unit 3, 97/2170, UMA.

<sup>18</sup> One West Gate survivor remembered that the union movement had insufficient resources to deal with the disaster. Attending funerals, visiting those hospitalised, facing unemployment, suffering trauma themselves, for surviving workmates, “It was just too big for us,” he said. Tommy Watson, interview with authors, 7 February 2018.

<sup>19</sup> This sentiment became more pronounced as media coverage of the Royal Commission proceedings reported witnesses’ evidence.

<sup>20</sup> CWS, 2013.0122, Note, Tom Robinson to Elizabeth Sharpe, 22 October 1970, Unit 3, 97/2170, UMA.

<sup>21</sup> CWS, 2013.0122, typescript, “Memorandum on the coordination of welfare action following occasions of industrial calamity,” undated, circa 20 October 1970, Unit 3, 97/2170, UMA.

<sup>22</sup> Erik Eklund, Melanie Oppenheimer and Joanne Scott, eds, *The State of Welfare: Comparative Studies of the Welfare State at the End of the Long Boom, 1965-1980* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2018), 86.

a mixture of public funding and private contributions.<sup>23</sup> As Roe put it, governments' role was to "subsidize existing providers and voluntary agencies, rather than extend State responsibility."<sup>24</sup> It was in this context that the CWS came to play a major role in the West Gate disaster. While Dickey does not mention the CWS explicitly in his history of social welfare in Australia, his description of "citizens advice bureaus" is apt — these agencies relied upon annual government grants, volunteer fundraising, and overworked professional social workers to generate operating capital. Profoundly conservative and committed to the maintenance of unequal social relations, he argued, these agencies nonetheless showed "a capacity to achieve local co-ordination and action usually beyond the scope of rule-bound, category dominated distributors of government cash payments and subsidies."<sup>25</sup>

For this research on welfare distribution in the aftermath of the West Gate disaster, we accessed Victorian Trades Hall Council (VTHC) and CWS records held in the University of Melbourne Archives that helped map these organisations' involvement in relief administration. In particular, the CWS's role in the work provided an opportunity to examine philanthropic practices in the 1970s, via a set of records pertaining to its dealings with the families. Even if the documents within this archival collection were written from social worker and fund trustee perspectives, they provide key insights about the longevity of COS influence beyond that so far recognised in previous Australian studies. Because many CWS records were destroyed when the organisation moved offices, any surviving sources are particularly significant.<sup>26</sup> In addition, the bridge's collapse and the subsequent Royal Commission were well covered by media outlets, whose coverage we were able to draw upon.<sup>27</sup> While news articles were principally focused on the royal commission evidence, occasional references to victims' families and their circumstances were revealing. Names of West Gate fund recipients and other potentially identifying details have been redacted. It was difficult to find evidence of widows' impressions and so some of our analysis relies heavily upon interpretation of CWS employees' impressions. We recognise this as a challenge with this kind of research — that workers' experiences are often not recorded by workers themselves but instead refracted through the records of organisations — state, media, welfare etc — with which they come into contact.<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, we consider the evidence we did find to be valuable for understanding class and gender-based attitudes to welfare recipients in the 1970s. Because the subject matter discussed in this article has never previously been explained, we have adopted a predominantly narrative framework to assist readers who will be unfamiliar with many of the events that transpired.

The article proceeds as follows — the next section considers the origins of Citizens Welfare Service philosophies and procedures in its predecessor, the Charity Organisation Society (COS). This section provides an appreciation of the historical foundations and contemporaneous guiding principles that influenced the CWS's work with the West Gate families. Then we examine the operation of the West Gate fund, highlighting evidence from meeting minutes, correspondence files, and policy documents that shed light on the decisions

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<sup>23</sup> Philip Mendes, *Australia's Welfare Wars Revisited: The Players, the Politics and the Ideologies*, (Kensington: UNSW Press, 2008), 21; Eklund, et al., *The State of Welfare*, 1.

<sup>24</sup> Jill Roe, ed., *Social Policy in Australia: Some Perspectives 1901-1975* (Stanmore: Cassell Australia, 1976), 314.

<sup>25</sup> Brian Dickey, *No Charity There: A Short History of Social Welfare in Australia* (Nelson: Melbourne, 1980), 203.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Kennedy, *Charity Warfare: The Charity Organisation Society in Colonial Melbourne* (South Yarra: Hyland House, 1985), viii-ix.

<sup>27</sup> Mainstream Melbourne dailies such as *The Age*, the *Sun News-Pictorial*, *Daily Mail* and *The Herald* were examined, as well as the Communist Party of Australia weekly newspaper, *Tribune* (Sydney).

<sup>28</sup> Paul Thompson with Joanne Bornat, *The Voice of the Past*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 4.

made and practices adopted to deliver social welfare services to families. Our conclusion argues that elements of West Gate fund administration reveal condescending attitudes towards victims and families that affected their access to relief.

### **The CWS: origins, philosophy and organisation**

Until 1947, the Melbourne CWS was known as the COS. Like its British exemplar founded in London in 1869, the Melbourne COS promoted “systematic” reform of philanthropic endeavours.<sup>29</sup> Beneath an energetic program of financial relief, social research, health care administration, family counselling and work placement, COS policies were riven with conservative attitudes towards poor people. Influential in the development of professional social work through case management, training and home visiting, the COS competed with other welfare agencies for ideological ascendancy. Although not without critics,<sup>30</sup> COS charity management philosophies were widespread.<sup>31</sup> In the late-Victorian period, COS leaders recommended vetting individual welfare requests to ascertain whether applicants were “deserving” or “undeserving” to prevent indiscriminate welfare distribution. Using reports from “lady visitors” who inspected claimants’ domestic circumstances, administrators controlled extensions of help “scientifically” on the basis of compliance with middle-class values such as respectability, hard work, thrift, sexual propriety, and cleanliness.<sup>32</sup>

To COS proselytisers, haphazard giving was more a *cause* of pauperism and social demoralisation than a response to it.<sup>33</sup> Mowat described the COS approach as “indiscriminate charity demoralized; it encouraged habits of laziness and dependence; it harmed under the guise of help. True charity was concerned to strengthen character and to preserve the family as the fundamental unit of society.”<sup>34</sup> As Woodroffe summarised, to COS evangelists, “character, and not circumstance, was the explanation of failure.”<sup>35</sup> Even in the post-World War II period, the data Musgrove gleaned from case files suggested that moralistic assessments were an enduring tool in the welfare workers’ toolkit. She also illustrates how welfare applicants found it difficult to exercise agency from a position of dependency and low social status.<sup>36</sup>

Peel’s focus on interactions between assessors and applicants suggests that women claimants’ attitudes during home visits might override negative assessments about the material circumstances in which a family lived. Most likely to get a kind hearing, he argued,

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<sup>29</sup> For interesting insights re the emergence of the COS, see Michael J.D. Roberts, “Charity Disestablished? The Origins of the Charity Organisation Society Revisited, 1868-1871,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 54, no. 1 (2003): 40-61.

<sup>30</sup> See a review of Charles L. Mowat, *The Charity Organization Society, 1869-1913: Its Ideas and Work* by Muriel W. Pumphrey, *Social Service Review* 36, no. 1 (1962): 95-6.

<sup>31</sup> Charles L. Mowat, “Charity and Casework in Late Victorian London: The Work of the Charity Organisation Society,” *Social Service Review* 31, no. 3 (1957): 260.

<sup>32</sup> For examples of grassroots studies, see Annie Skinner, “‘Voice of the Visitors’: An Exploration of the Work of the Charity Organisation Society in Oxford, 1878-1880,” *Midland History* 40, no. 1 (2015): 74-94; Sarah Gregson “Women and Children First? The Administration of the Titanic Relief Fund in Southampton, 1912-1959,” *English Historical Review* 127, no. 254 (2012): 83-109.

<sup>33</sup> Kathleen Woodroffe, “The Charity Organisation Society and the Origins of Social Casework,” *Australian Historical Studies* 9, no. 33 (1959): 19-29.

<sup>34</sup> Mowat, “Charity and Casework,” 260.

<sup>35</sup> Woodroffe, “The Charity Organisation Society,” 20.

<sup>36</sup> Nell Musgrove, “‘Filthy’ Homes and ‘Fast’ Women: Welfare Agencies’ Moral Surveillance in Post-second World War Melbourne,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 27, no. 80 (2003): 111-119.

were those who could “feel their position,” having found themselves in circumstances to which they were not normally accustomed.<sup>37</sup> Anger and pride were not pathways to assistance. As a case study of the 1970s, we wondered if our research would support or qualify the hopeful nature of Mark Peel’s assessment that the “haphazard science of impressions and judgements” that determined deservingness was not as common on the ground as it was encouraged in official policy prescriptions.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, as he noted, a lot more might be said about the COS’s “postwar shift to a different conception of its relationship to citizens and their welfare”: this case study, we argue, highlights the fractured nature of that transition.<sup>39</sup>

Like many private agencies, the CWS’s management structure was partly professional, partly voluntary.<sup>40</sup> It had an executive committee comprising volunteer well-to-do “citizens” and patrons, many from the military, the church, and politics. Former prime minister Robert Menzies was a patron, and society doyen and wife of an ex-Lord Mayor of Melbourne, Beryl Beaurepaire, occupied several senior roles. In a professional capacity, executive director Elizabeth Sharpe oversaw a team of salaried social workers, psychiatrists, auditors and legal advisors.<sup>41</sup> *The Herald* described Sharpe as “a quite wonderful woman” who ran the CWS efficiently, even though its work was “stifled” by lack of funds and public acknowledgement.<sup>42</sup>

The organisation was in a dire budget situation — allegedly \$18,000 “in the red,” the CWS received only \$5,000 annually from the Hospitals and Charities Commission and \$7,500 from the Commonwealth in 1970, relying on private philanthropic donations for additional funds.<sup>43</sup> “We can’t cope with the demands made on us,” said Sharpe. “Everybody vaguely realises that welfare is a commodity we’ll need, but nobody wants to pay for it.”<sup>44</sup> In the period under review, the CWS expanded, hiring more staff which put pressure on scarce financial resources; just two days before the West Gate collapse, administrators were discussing ways to reduce financial assistance to clients, operate on a more business-like basis, and “seek out areas where re-imburement for services rendered may be expected.”<sup>45</sup> Although the CWS was avowedly non-denominational, it was overwhelmingly Protestant. A point of distinction from Catholic-led benevolent societies and other church-run organisations, it lacked equivalent institutional support and was therefore mindful to avoid alienating any potential private donors.<sup>46</sup>

In the post-World War II period, the CWS’s primary focus was on family counselling, but there was occasional tension between the organisation’s espoused mission and public expectations of the CWS’s role. In 1969, Sharpe addressed an annual meeting of contributors

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<sup>37</sup> Mark Peel, “Charity, Casework and the Dramas of Class in Melbourne, 1920-1940: ‘Feeling Your Position,’” *History Australia* 2, no. 3 (2005): 83.3.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.11.

<sup>40</sup> CWS, 2013.0113, minutes of Board of Management meeting, 24 February 1971, Unit 70, 55/2031, UMA Brunswick [unless specifically indicated as located at the UMA Brunswick repository, all other CWS records were accessed at the Baillieu Library UMA].

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, CWS Annual Report, 1971.

<sup>42</sup> Sorell, “Quite a Wonderful Woman, 2.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> CWS typescript, 13 October 1970, 2013.0122, Unit 1, 78/1614, UMA. Anthony Birch, “Framing Fitzroy: Contesting and (De)constructing Place and Identity in a Melbourne Suburb” (PhD diss., University of Melbourne, 2002), 204-5.

<sup>46</sup> Senior CWS social worker, Jill Williams, said being “non-everything” was a strength, because it enabled the Service to be “flexible” and so better meet the needs of community. Report of proceedings, meeting held 19 November 1969, CWS, 2013.0113, Unit 73, 55/2055, UMA Brunswick.

about the utility of the CWS's services for all Victorian residents. She felt it regrettable that "social work was still thought of as being needed by only the poor, deprived and uneducated;" more importantly, she felt, there was a need for the CWS's focus on the preservation of family life.<sup>47</sup> For Sharpe, the psychological elements of the organisation's counselling work were paramount; financial aid to meet the temporary exigencies of poverty-stricken lives was a necessary evil but, like her COS predecessors, she felt immediate relief was a mundane activity in comparison with the more urgent task of reforming the welfare system and delivering moral instruction to clients. In fact, Sharpe was adamant that the CWS was not a relief agency; rather, relief was only "an aid to counselling."<sup>48</sup> For her, it was "an instrument of reform of the whole structure of community institutions for relief and welfare and not merely another charitable agency among others." Despite this, the organisation did need significant capital to run its services. Home visiting remained an important element of CWS case work when dealing with families experiencing financial difficulties. One of its reports read, "Work with low-income families, who are often overwhelmed with financial problems, requires a considerable amount of home visiting, and we have one worker who specialises in this. We regard home visiting as an important part of our service, as it increases our accessibility to this group."<sup>49</sup> For case workers, counselling was used to promote hard work and conscientiousness among family members in pursuit of a peaceful, self-sufficient home life. Sharpe promised potential donors that "we help all without regard to race or creed, but our fundamental aim is to promote the well-being of the family as a whole, for a sound society is based upon a sound family life." Indeed, the organisation's motto was "Keep the Family Together."<sup>50</sup>

The professionalisation of social work was also central to the CWS's overall mission. Staff played an active role in the training and placement of social workers, believing the welfare sector's future depended on its influence — to this end, work experience was arranged for social work students within the CWS and it acted as a personnel agency for the sector. "Teaching of social work students who come here to gain experience in casework is regarded as part of our service to the community," one policy document read, particularly as there were case worker shortages.<sup>51</sup> Administrators promoted the longstanding links between the CWS and Melbourne University, arguing that valuable research projects could emerge from casework experiences.<sup>52</sup> Social work students received mentoring and hands-on experience, used the Service's library, and discussed cases with CWS staff in "an intelligent exchange of views and ideas."<sup>53</sup> This organisational network of welfare administrators, academia and industry is an interesting window into ways in which these interest groups might collaborate around a shared agenda.<sup>54</sup> In addition, despite competition for funds and influence, staff of various benevolent groups also got together to discuss current challenges

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<sup>47</sup> CWS minutes, 82<sup>nd</sup> Annual Meeting of contributors, 27 August 1969, Melbourne Town Hall, 2013.0113, Unit 57, 55/1609, UMA Brunswick.

<sup>48</sup> CWS, typescript, 13 October 1970, 2013.0122 Unit 1, 78/1614, UMA.

<sup>49</sup> Report of Proceedings, Working Day, 19 November 1969, CWS, 2013.0113, Unit 73, 55/2055, UMA Brunswick.

<sup>50</sup> "This Charity is Raising Quite a Stir," *The Herald* (Melbourne), 13 May 1971, 2.

<sup>51</sup> CWS typescript, 13 October 1970, 2013.0122, Unit 1, 78/1614, UMA.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> CWS, 2013.0122, typescript, John I Henning and Peter Daughtry, "The Role of the Social Worker in Relation to Industry," 26 August 1971, 78/1615, UMA.

<sup>54</sup> For further explication, see Ellen S. O'Connor, "The Politics of Management Thought: A Case Study of the Harvard Business School and the Human Relations School," *Academy of Management Review* 24, no. 1 (1999): 117-131.



in the sector.<sup>55</sup> Some CWS staff were cognisant of changing social welfare mores, where community demands and greater professionalisation might challenge private agency autonomy. In 1970, CWS researcher Connie Benn advised Victorian Opposition leader, Clyde Holding, that affluence gave more currency in the community to “democratic and humanistic philosophies” towards welfare recipients. Her research suggested that both social workers and consumers of services were wanting a greater say in policy making and leadership of voluntary agencies.<sup>56</sup>

Kennedy draws a vivid picture of Melbourne’s “charity web” in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, comprising a host of benevolent organisations operated by wealthy people as part philanthropy, part social network. Men’s work commonly involved controlling the finances, drawing on “old school tie” networks in business and politics to garner official support and funding. Women’s prestige, often correlated with a husband’s social position, was enhanced by effective fundraising at elite gatherings.<sup>57</sup> In the early 1970s, a newspaper article on Melbourne’s “charity circuit” highlighted the mechanics of fund-raising. The professional charity worker must host events wealthy people would want to be seen attending. A “typical” charity socialite living “not too far south” of the river Yarra dividing the city, “bounces from brunch to luncheon, to cocktail party ... to dinner dance, to supper party. If she decides to go to everything she is invited to in one week, she can spend \$280 — just on tickets. Then there are the hair-dos, taxis, clothes and baby-sitters.”<sup>58</sup> For wealthy or socially ambitious women, charity work helped to develop connections and community standing. Indeed, the Smith Family in Sydney became so bothered by status seekers that it instituted a ban on office bearers receiving publicity. “This is to ensure our organisation is not used as a vehicle for social climbing,” said its spokesperson.<sup>59</sup>

Without its social networks, the CWS would have struggled to survive, as government stipends were always contingent and insufficient. Highly systematic fundraising was an ever-present necessity and countless hours of staff and volunteer time were devoted to wringing the last possible dollar from donors. Bequests comprised a large component of the organisation’s funds in reserve; letters were sent to beneficiaries of significant estates to advise them of the Service’s work and request donations.<sup>60</sup> Corporate donors, too, were targeted by way of letters that detailed future projects, annual expenditure and any current deficit. Lists were formulated of companies to approach and any members of the management committee who had personal ties with a potential target were inveigled upon to soften the approach.<sup>61</sup> Annual meetings were held at the Melbourne Town Hall to report to contributors about the organisation’s work. At these meetings, a guest speaker would deliver a lecture. In 1971, the speaker was E. Angus Jones CMG, an oil company executive, who spoke on “The Importance of Social Work to Industry.”<sup>62</sup> The following year, the audience

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<sup>55</sup> On 19 November 1969, the CWS organised a “working day” to consider the future of the casework agency, at which the Red Cross, the Brotherhood of St Laurence, Jewish Family Welfare, Catholic Family Welfare, the Social Welfare Department and the University of Melbourne were represented. Report of Proceedings, Working Day, CWS, 2013.0113, Unit 73, 55/2055, UMA Brunswick.

<sup>56</sup> Connie Benn, CWS research officer, notes circa 1970, 2013.0113, Unit 80, 55/2142, UMA Brunswick.

<sup>57</sup> Kennedy, *Charity Warfare*, 34.

<sup>58</sup> “The Charity Circuit,” *The Herald* (Melbourne), 3 April 1971, 37.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> CWS, 2013.0113, Unit 76, 55/2093, UMA Brunswick.

<sup>61</sup> CWS, 2013.0113, Unit 57, 55/1585, UMA Brunswick.

<sup>62</sup> Jones studied management courses at Harvard University. *Northern Argus*, SA, 14 May 1952, 4. He was also a member of the Lower Yarra Crossing Authority and attended meetings of the WWCC. 84th Annual Meeting of

heard from Mr J. Knott, CBE Director-General Posts and Telegraphs (PMG), whose lecture was entitled “The Social Side of the Post Office” in which he made special mention of its welfare section. He stressed “the importance placed on the individual, his needs and problems in relation to his work” and described the many social functions organised by the PMG for workers and their families.<sup>63</sup> Therefore, although the CWS claimed non-denominational status regarding religion, they were not agnostic about their class affiliations. Their executive committee meetings were held at the Victorian Employers’ Federation boardroom, where the Federation also provided lunch to attendees.<sup>64</sup>

The CWS’s interest in social work and welfarism in the workplace was more than theoretical; it was keen to promote its counselling services to employers and maintained close links with managers who adopted welfarist policies in their workplaces. Welfarism has a long industrial history and, while frequently characterised as an amelioration of “scientific management” methods, there were strong elements of industrial psychology behind welfarist strategies as well. Balnave and Markey characterise welfarism as a management tactic — offering both more engaged employee participation and material benefits to workers, beyond those stipulated in formal industrial instruments, that might act as a bulwark against trade unionism. By offering welfare “benefits,” managers hoped to strengthen and legitimise corporate control and public reputation, as well as increase organisational efficiency.<sup>65</sup> The CWS’s promotion of individual responsibility, strong family ties and financial independence potentially made it a sympathetic ally in the development of a collaborative workforce. That said, welfarist schemes waxed and waned in popularity among both employers and employees. On the employer side, while engendering a sense of “family” within a firm might have all sorts of psycho-social benefits for the organisation, managers wanted a return on investment and worried that some welfare schemes were too costly to warrant the expenditure. Even counselling required the employment of psychologists and might interrupt work time. This meant that such concessions to labour were often unpopular with shareholders.<sup>66</sup> From employees’ perspectives, welfare benefits garnered varying responses from enthusiasm to disinterest to suspicion of the “insinuating manner of the Boss.”<sup>67</sup> Because housing schemes and libraries, counselling and recreational amenities were offered at the employers’ discretion, workers well knew that benefits could just as easily be withdrawn, especially as retribution if industrial conflict emerged.<sup>68</sup> Unfortunately for the CWS’s entrepreneurial endeavours, the organisation arguably embraced welfarism as a potential income stream just as it was being jettisoned elsewhere in favour of a different “cultural” turn towards human resource management. Nevertheless, the Service’s eagerness to bolster corporate employment strategies is important to note in regard to the promotion of “strong work ethic” ideals among the West Gate families.

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contributors, 19 August 1971, Melbourne Town Hall, CWS, 2013.0113, Minutes, Unit 57, 55/1611, UMA Brunswick.

<sup>63</sup> 85th Annual Meeting of contributors, 16 August 1972, Melbourne Town Hall, CWS, 2013.0113, Minutes, Unit 57, 55/1610, UMA, Brunswick.

<sup>64</sup> CWS Board of Management minutes, 24 February 1971, 2013.0113, Unit 70, 55/2031, UMA Brunswick.

<sup>65</sup> Nikola Balnave and Raymond Markey, “Employee Participation and Industrial Welfarism in Australia, 1890-1965,” *Labour History*, no. 112 (May 2017): 137-8.

<sup>66</sup> Sarah Gregson, “Defending Internationalism in Interwar Broken Hill,” *Labour History*, no. 86 (May 2004): 133.

<sup>67</sup> Erik Eklund, “‘Intelligently Directed Welfare Work’?: Labour Management Strategies in Local Context: Port Pirie, 1915-1929,” *Labour History*, no. 76 (May 1999): 132.

<sup>68</sup> Margaret Gardner and Gill Palmer, *Employment Relations: Industrial Relations and Human Resource Management* (South Melbourne: Macmillan, 1992), 45.

In the early 1970s, the CWS explored opportunities to commodify its services by establishing a dedicated “industrial wing” that offered bulk services to employers on a fee basis. Sharpe’s notes in preparation of the 1972 CWS Annual Report revealed her approach:

Within the concept of the Industrial Wing lies a growing concern by the employer for his employee, and an understanding of those factors which cause poor work incentive, absenteeism and general work sluggishness. By the provision of a skilled service to assist with personal problems, CWS is convinced that production will increase, the economy will benefit and the quality of work satisfaction be enhanced. Given the necessary resources CWS will vigorously pursue this avenue of special service to the benefit of the Community work force.<sup>69</sup>

An expert sociologist arrived from the US to take up a position as the wing’s first director. Sharpe sought funds for this project through approaches to the Victorian government; in a meeting with conservative Premier Henry Bolte, \$20,000 was pledged with a recommendation that the CWS seek a matching contribution from the federal government.<sup>70</sup> The Industrial Wing recruited several customers including two municipal councils, the Victorian Railways, Olympic Consolidated Industries, Myer, and Carlton United Breweries. However, some companies thought its services too expensive and were reluctant to commit to more than a trial arrangement.<sup>71</sup> Policy drafts in CWS’s files decried the “relative ignorance” on both sides of the employment relationship about the benefits of social work in industrial settings.<sup>72</sup> These documents maintained that the workplace presence of a social worker would signify a firm’s reputation as a “good employer.” Likewise, information placed on noticeboards about counselling services might reduce turnover and improve troubled employees’ performance.<sup>73</sup> In this way, CWS expertise offered a cheaper, more effective option than hiring in-house industrial psychologists; workers may prefer an external intermediary if internal counsellors were potentially management “stooges.”<sup>74</sup> Foremen too, it was contended, were unsuited for welfare work, as training could never resolve the fundamental conflict of interest that arises between counselling workers with personal problems and meeting production schedules. “It is unsound to expect the worker to regard the foreman in the role of confidante — the foreman’s job is to produce and to apply his work force to the job of production.”<sup>75</sup> Given the CWS’s long history of information-gathering from neighbours, doctors, and teachers, and general working-class mistrust of “the welfare,” it is questionable whether workers would have viewed its counsellors in the workplace as benign.<sup>76</sup> By the mid-1970s, all mention of the Industrial Wing had disappeared from annual reports, however, suggesting the CWS’s entrepreneurialism in this arena had not been successful.

The CWS’s work with adolescents also had a labour discipline focus, on the basis that early intervention with youth who avoided study and/or paid work was vital. In the 1970s, an

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<sup>69</sup> 86th Annual Meeting of contributors, 20 August 1973, Melbourne Town Hall, CWS, 2013.0113, Minutes, Unit 57, 55/1611, UMA, Brunswick.

<sup>70</sup> CWS, 2013.0113, Letter, Elizabeth Sharpe to Henry Bolte, 28 September 1970, Unit 42/1183, UMA Brunswick.

<sup>71</sup> CWS, 2013.0122, Board of Management minutes, 20 September 1972, Unit 3, 96/2168, UMA.

<sup>72</sup> Henning and Daughtry, “The Role of the Social Worker.”

<sup>73</sup> CWS, typescript, undated, 2013.0122, Unit 1, 78/1615, UMA.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Birch, “Framing Fitzroy,” 195, 201, 221.

era often characterised by rock music, communes, hippies and recreational drugs, CWS leaders felt that full employment had created a troubling independence among young people who no longer showed steadfastness towards their employer: “Their ability to flit from job to job at will and their disinclination to achieve skilled artisan status makes them a particularly difficult problem.”<sup>77</sup> In marriage guidance counselling work, too, CWS social workers were a boon to industry — if workers were happy at home, multiple sources of improvement in their work performance might accrue, both individually and collectively. In short, it was argued, “Our experience indicates that if management cares, the worker cares.”<sup>78</sup> Demonstrating an even greater commitment to management goals than management themselves, the CWS extolled their services thus:

By injecting an interest on the part of management in the emotional well-being of the work force, the result must be the elimination of poor work incentive, the reduction of absenteeism and the reduction or elimination of the accident rate. The benefit which accrues to industry is the maintenance of a more stable and efficient work force, with better production rates and standards.<sup>79</sup>

With ideas so aligned with the business community, it is hardly surprising that the CWS was seen by John Holland as a suitable organisation to oversee West Gate relief. With a staff of ten social workers who were assigned geographically, it worked in tandem with JHC staff to make “professional assessments” of those affected by the West Gate tragedy, assisting “53 units of people” divided into six zones.<sup>80</sup>

### **The administration of the West Gate funds**

Public sympathy for the West Gate victims was widespread. The VTHC sent out circulars, encouraging union members to contribute; in this way, thousands of dollars were raised from workplace collections.<sup>81</sup> Donations were often accompanied by a message of sympathy — for example, with a cheque for \$18, a note from Cullen Bullen miners read “this collection was taken up at our Colliery, which is only very small but we do hope it will help in some small way.”<sup>82</sup> Although the West Gate fund was an enormous exercise, doing a “whip around” for a worker or family experiencing hard times was common practice in the union movement — Pat Preston, a crane driver shop steward on the site, estimated that West Gate workers had contributed \$122,000 to various funds over the life of the project.<sup>83</sup> Neighbourhoods were active too. In Altona, for example, a suburb deeply affected by the death toll, the council waived its prohibition on door-to-door fundraising and hundreds of locals joined a collection drive.<sup>84</sup> By late October, the mayor advised that approximately

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<sup>77</sup> CWS, 2013.0122, typescript, undated, Unit 1, 78/1615, UMA.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> Sorell, “Quite a Wonderful Woman”, 2.

<sup>81</sup> VTHC records include an entire archive box filled with foolscap sheets of signatures from all over the country. VTHC, 2001.0020, Business Sheet, 22 October 1970, Unit 13, 78/1972; VTHC, 2001.0020, Unit 378, UMA.

<sup>82</sup> VTHC, 2001.0020, Letter, Lodge Secretary Invincible Colliery, Cullen Bullen to VTHC, undated, Unit 378, UMA.

<sup>83</sup> “The Bridge Workers: Men of Blood, Sweat, Muscle – Hope,” *The Mail West Gate Special* (Melbourne), 9 November 1978, 2.

<sup>84</sup> Susan Priestley, *Altona, A Long View*, (North Melbourne: Hargreen Publishing and City of Altona, 1988), 283.

\$3,000 had been raised and local industries had been solicited with positive results.<sup>85</sup> In total, approximately \$266,000 was raised and interest dividends increased that figure to \$273,000.<sup>86</sup>

The rules of the fund emerged through an accretion of Committee decisions. The fund's objectives were "aiding and assisting the widows and children of deceased victims and allow[ing] for education and general maintenance of children."<sup>87</sup> The WGFC decided that payments to families would take three forms: firstly, a weekly payment "to those who could not be relied upon to manage their own budgeting satisfactorily;" secondly, supplementary amounts for irregular bills like dental work or household repairs; and, lastly, large grants that might, for example, settle significant debts or pay a deposit on a property.<sup>88</sup> VTHC secretary, Ken Stone, wanted payments distributed to the families quickly so that household income was not disturbed. As most applications for widow's pensions had been granted,<sup>89</sup> he argued that any further amounts from the fund "should not be divided into equal amounts to claimants," but instead determined on an individual "needs" basis.<sup>90</sup> While this decision potentially gave more to larger families, it also exacerbated inequality. For example, it was unanimously agreed that the six families of senior supervisors who had been killed could access the fund and because, in the view of the WGFC, "families in the higher income group were possibly affected most by income and outgoing commitments,"<sup>91</sup> a flat rate of \$100 per week was allocated to them.<sup>92</sup> Their situations, the trustees decided, "were not much different from others affected."<sup>93</sup> Some workers' families, however, received as little as \$36 per week. Although these payments were bolstered by lump sums paid over for special purposes, such requests were subject to the committee's approval.<sup>94</sup> WGFC members discussed the potential "dangers" involved in raising families' living standards by paying them lump sums.<sup>95</sup> They expressed a unanimous preference "to preserve the take-home pay situation [and not] lift people out of their usual environment."<sup>96</sup> This was an extraordinary stance for union officials to take and speaks volumes about their moderate class politics; essentially, these decisions amplified the autonomy of wives of supervisory staff while restraining the economic prospects of union members' wives and families.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> CWS, 2013.0122, photocopy of unidentified local paper dated 28 October 1970 (vol. 18, no. 30), Unit 1, 78/1614, UMA.

<sup>86</sup> "Where Appeal Money Has Gone," *The Herald* (Melbourne), 4 August 1971, 10.

<sup>87</sup> CWS, 2013.0122, WWCC minutes, 23 November 1970, Unit 3, 97/2170, UMA.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Four widows did not apply for pensions and two applications were rejected on eligibility grounds. CWS, 2013.0122, WWCC minutes, 26 October 1970, Unit 3, 97/2170, UMA.

<sup>90</sup> VTHC, 2001.0020, WGFC minutes, 25 January 1971, Unit 13, 78/1972, UMA.

<sup>91</sup> CWS, 2013.0122, WWCC minutes, 23 November 1970, Unit 3, 97/2170, UMA.

<sup>92</sup> In Australia in 1970, the average annual wage was approximately \$6,000. Australian Bureau of Statistics, 6302.0, Average Weekly Earnings, March 1970.

<sup>93</sup> CWS, 2013.0122, WWCC minutes, 26 October 1970, Unit 3, 97/2170, UMA.

<sup>94</sup> VTHC, 2001.0020, WWCC report, 5 April 1971, Unit 13, 78/1972. These were initially offered as loans, but many were written off in the wind up of the fund.

<sup>95</sup> CWS, 2013.0122, WWCC minutes, 26 October 1970, Unit 3, 97/2170, UMA.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> See Birch, "Framing Fitzroy," 227. Birch notes the influence of the Henderson Report and New Left critiques of social work, especially case work. He notes that, despite hours spent on visiting, there was often little discernible difference in families' circumstances. See also Ronald F. Henderson, *Poverty in Australia* (Canberra: Commission of Inquiry into Poverty and AGPS, April 1975).

While JHC employment records were necessary to establish victims' and families' eligibility for assistance, the company's influence on distribution appeared to go beyond the performance of simple administrative tasks. JHC staff had prepared lists for the WWCC, detailing the personal and financial situation of each affected family.<sup>98</sup> Subjective impressions of injured and deceased workers' employment histories were noted in welfare files, suggesting that loyal service was a factor in the treatment of widows and families and that the husband's reputation as a "good worker" in life was considered when assessing assistance his widow might receive after his death. While most names attracted no comment, against several names were annotations about victims' character and work record: one was described as an "excellent type — recently from UK;" another had a "good reputation;" and, yet another was "a fine type of man." One victim who was in hospital was described as "v. good type & reliable." Reflective of longstanding welfare practices that judged women's character by the cleanliness of their homes and children,<sup>99</sup> wives, too, were assessed. The condition of one widow's home was noted as "House run down, not painted for years." Another had been in a *de facto* relationship with a deceased worker; it was recorded that this was still "a genuine relationship" because the wife was a divorced Catholic who had been rejected by her husband's family. Notes revealed that she had "built up a nice home," had capacity for low-skilled work and was a "genuine citizen." It was also documented when a dependant exhibited "resentment" regarding their situation.<sup>100</sup> The precise effect of these impressions is unknown, but the making of notations alone suggests a potential for bias. Because many fund decisions were made on an *ad hoc* basis, it was impossible to fully ascertain their net effects, but some decisions contained perceptible detriments for workers' families. Welfare payments were calculated on base wages, for example, negatively impacting upon those families where the deceased worker had earned substantial overtime pay and penalty rates prior to the collapse. Miss Sharpe noted that mortgage and hire purchase payments were a source of considerable worry for some widows without that extra income.<sup>101</sup>

Impatience with some of the more impoverished widows surfaced in CWS visitors' notes. For example, one widow's capacity for independence was deemed low; although she had a job with a small wage, she was described judgementally as "[l]ow IQ, uncertain future."<sup>102</sup> In another case, a migrant widow's anxieties frustrated her social worker. Shortly after the collapse, the widow's house was burgled of valuable possessions. In addition, her son had been "acting out" after the death of his father, threatening his mother with violence. Understandably, the widow called family overseas regularly for emotional support and to arrange for her son's repatriation but, subsequently, received a large telephone bill she was unable to pay. Her lawyers advised the trustees that she spoke "very little English," her health had "deteriorated" recently, and the telephone was, she felt, a "necessity, rather than a luxury." Nonetheless, she was "warned...to keep the account within her means."<sup>103</sup> Social worker notes about this case show clear signs of condescension — that this widow was "coping inadequately," that she was excessively anxious about her problems, and was unable

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<sup>98</sup> CWS, 2013.0122, John Holland Construction Group, Summary Information, Dependants of West Gate Disaster Victims, 23 November 1970, Unit 3, 97/2170, UMA.

<sup>99</sup> Musgrove, "'Filthy' homes," 115-119.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> Sorell, "Quite a Wonderful Woman, 2.

<sup>102</sup> VTHC, 2001.0020, typescript, Confidential: Citizens Welfare Service of Victoria, West Gate, Information for Trustees, circa early 1971, Unit 13, 78/1972, UMA.

<sup>103</sup> VTHC, 2001.0020, Letter, Widow's lawyers to WGFC, 15 March 1972, WGFC sub-committee minutes, 29 March 1972, Unit 13, 78/1972, UMA.

to “tackle any of them effectively.” To address this, a CWS social worker was helping her “to learn to budget.”<sup>104</sup> Here, different standards were clearly applied to middle-class and working-class widows’ needs. The former could expect maintenance of the decent living standards they had enjoyed pre-collapse, while workers’ wives were expected to tighten belts and live within more modest means, despite having greater financial need. Encouraging widows and children to become independent from income support was also a priority. Less than a month after the collapse, CWS social workers were asked to pass on information to widows about a training scheme they could join.<sup>105</sup>

CWS intercessions on behalf of West Gate families provide insights about the nature of the families’ treatment. In June 1972, for example, Miss Sharpe requested that an injured worker receive a loan of \$200. His visitor’s report detailed clothing, dental and car bills that exceeded his \$36 weekly stipend.<sup>106</sup> To emphasise his “deservingness,” she advised that he had undertaken a book-keeping course and was hoping to find a job soon.<sup>107</sup> This exchange reveals several aspects of West Gate victims’ position vis-à-vis the fund — that CWS representation was necessary to receive “extra” money, that victims’ income support was insufficient for basic needs, and that character assessments based on willingness to work influenced decision-making. In another example, a widow wrote to Miss Sharpe about her children’s schooling and listed a range of overdue household and car expenses she could not pay. Feeling the need to justify her request for money, she wrote, “If I could do without the car, I wouldn’t care so much, but there is always somewhere the children want to go and they have always been used to a car, plus it’s always handy for emergencies. Hoping you can oblige me.”<sup>108</sup> Despite having had a car before the collapse, this widow felt compelled to characterise the car as a “non-luxury item” for the children, not herself. The exchange also reflected Miss Sharpe’s position of power in relation to the widow — that the latter was cast in the role of mendicant, that it was not guaranteed that her former lifestyle be maintained (unlike the support offered the widows of supervisory staff), and that she had no automatic claim on the money collected in families’ names. Discernible class partialities also shaped the way trustees and welfare workers viewed certain expenditures. Ballet lessons, artist materials, deposits for property purchases etc were not begrudged, while requests to cover everyday bills for health care and transport were viewed as evidence of a families’ failure to budget sensibly.<sup>109</sup>

A CWS review of its West Gate work described the difficulties its social workers encountered.<sup>110</sup> Some felt unprepared for dealing with mass grief and the complications involved in “nurturing the distressed client” while eliciting factual information about each family’s situation. Talking to unwelcome strangers allegedly made some widows anxious and

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<sup>104</sup> VTHC, 2001.0020, WGFC minutes, 29 March 1972, case notes attached to file, 27 March 1972, Unit 13, 78/1972, UMA.

<sup>105</sup> CWS, 2013.0122, WWCC minutes, 9 November 1970, Unit 3, 97/2170, UMA.

<sup>106</sup> CWS, 2013.0122, Letter, Elizabeth Sharpe to Union-Fidelity, 29 June 1972, Unit 1, 78/1614, UMA.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> VTHC records, 2001.0020, Letter, Widow to Miss Sharpe, circa early 1972, Unit 13, 78/1972, UMA.

<sup>109</sup> For example, one badly injured worker who was extended \$400 for art equipment was understood to have been depressed about his health. It was noted in the minutes that he was “an artist of some ability” and that art took his mind off his troubles. CWS, 2013.0122, WWCC minutes, 23 November 1970, Unit 3, 97/2170. Another child was afforded \$5 per month for ballet lessons and, for some, large house payments were forthcoming. VTHC, 2001.0020, Unit 13, 78/1972. This is not to suggest that these claims were unworthy.

<sup>110</sup> CWS, 2013.0122, typescript, Impact of work with West Gate Families on the social workers and on Citizens Welfare Service as a whole, Unit 3, 97/2170, UMA.

irritable; they were described variously as dazed, in pain, confused, and unable to make routine decisions. Welfare workers reported widows' outbursts about the injustice of their situation and lost independence, while others were overwhelmed, apathetic or lethargic.<sup>111</sup> Another document noted the media's encroachment on the families' lives which intruded on their mourning.<sup>112</sup> In a particularly uncertain position were the wives of severely injured men, who felt both grief and anger because their husbands faced long-term disability. CWS workers had "few formulated ideas about the lifestyles of construction workers" and expressed frustration at dealing with clients whose English was difficult to understand. Some resented not being the clients' central focus,<sup>113</sup> which is an interesting addendum to Musgrove's identification of most welfare agency "clients" as "politically and socially disempowered."<sup>114</sup> Clearly used to dealing with individual "cases," CWS workers were unprepared for the collective nature of family and community responses to disaster welfare. The families recognised the CWS staff as sources of financial assistance, the review maintained, but often only on their own terms. For many widows, the disaster made them welfare recipients for the first time and so the relationship between them and their visitors was not underscored by habitual forms of behaviour: deference and shame had no place, instead resentment, grief, even reluctance to engage, were more common. Some "clients" determined in what form relief would be received — financial and administrative help was accepted but any emotional counselling social workers offered was refused; it was suspected that some widows were even "dodging" CWS visits. Feeling their skills were wasted, case workers expressed resentment about the level of financial assistance available to the West Gate families in comparison with other needy families. The review posited that "indignation on behalf of the less fortunate people may have inhibited their readiness to add to this inequality by spending an unusually large amount of time and energy on these clients."<sup>115</sup> There was a mix of responses from neighbours and friends; the potential for community and union support among workmates' families was fragmented by the sheer number of victims. That said, widows "kept close counsel with each other," watching what everyone was getting, reinforcing their anger against various organisations and protecting each other against "the jealous hostility of outsiders" and, in some cases, upsetting the customary power relationship between social worker and client.<sup>116</sup>

Broader sources of financial support for the families were also canvassed by the WGFC. As mentioned earlier, the workers' compensation scheme in Victoria had been the subject of considerable union movement criticism. Two weeks after the collapse, the state government hurriedly introduced a bill to increase workers' compensation entitlements and backdated eligibility so that West Gate families would eventually receive the increased benefits. Payments rose from \$8,000 to \$11,834 for the death of a worker and from \$200 to \$263 for each child dependant. Injured workers and family members' entitlements were also increased. Most significantly, deceased workers' dependants could now claim workers compensation without waiving the right to pursue civil damages, as had formerly been the case.<sup>117</sup> The old system had discriminated against poorer dependants who needed immediate

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<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> CWS, 2013.0122, typescript, Thoughts re Impact of West Gate work on Social Workers at CWS – for staff meeting, 15 November 1972, Unit 3, 97/2170, UMA.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> Musgrove, "'Filthy' homes," 115.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> "Workers' Aid Bill Introduced," *The Age* (Melbourne), 28 October 1970, np.



financial relief and could not wait for a court determination. That said, even under the new system, compensation payments reduced any damages judgements made. When the widows began to engage lawyers to pursue civil action against JHC and others, the fund was asked to provide statements regarding the monies families had received in order to mitigate payouts.<sup>118</sup> Under these circumstances, generous public donations, while providing immediate financial relief to the families, also had the effect of reducing corporate and state liabilities. Nonetheless, modest legislative improvements in workers compensation policies and benefits were impelled by the West Gate tragedy, providing support for Quinlan's view that, when there are multiple workplace fatalities, increased media coverage and public attention can impel regulatory reform.<sup>119</sup>

Until compensation cases were heard, families' lives were uncertain, emotionally and financially, and the vulnerability of living from week to week was exposed. In a housing commission flat, one widow was raising four children on a \$35 per week pension, a one-third cut to the family's income. Forced to give up her job at a tannery to care for her children, she reported feeling "desperately lonely" in the evenings. Until her court case was heard, the fund's support was all she had, but she was sanguine. "Apart from penny-pinching a bit, and missing [her husband] a great deal, we don't have any real problems."<sup>120</sup> Initially, JHC staff reported she had financial difficulties, especially as the couple had bought a car on hire purchase prior to the collapse. However, as the fund was being wound up, reports were more positive: she had received her workers' compensation payment and was managing quite well.<sup>121</sup> Over time, it would appear, closely controlled fund support had been insufficient, but a lump sum workers' compensation payment this widow could manage independently greatly improved the family's situation.

For all the CWS's focus on systems, the relationship between the financial and social welfare arms of West Gate relief was remarkably ill-defined because the Service's initial involvement came at the behest of the employer, not the WGFC. Social workers completed time sheets to account for their work with West Gate families and this information was used to substantiate accounts that were sent to the fund trustees.<sup>122</sup> Initially, however, the WGFC refused to honour the CWS's account for December 1970, offering one third of the total instead.<sup>123</sup> By mid-1971, Mrs Beaurepaire was having to chase payments and, after several fruitless discussions, threatened media exposure if the money was not forthcoming. Although Mr North from Union-Fidelity was not happy about "being threatened," he invited CWS representatives to explain the organisation's work to the trustees. Although no contract had been signed, the CWS explained, the employer had pledged reimbursement for its welfare services, an assurance the company was not actually entitled to give. If the account was not paid, Sharpe advised, the CWS would withdraw from fund administration, although it would continue to support those cases it had already undertaken.<sup>124</sup> VTHC official Peter Nolan responded that the CWS leaders had not indicated formally that they expected payment and

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<sup>118</sup> VTHC, 2001.0020, WGFC minutes, Unit 60, 48/1974, UMA.

<sup>119</sup> Michael Quinlan, *Ten Pathways to Death and Disaster: Learning from Fatal Incidents in Mines and Other High Hazard Workplaces* (Federation Press: Annandale, 2014).

<sup>120</sup> "Bridge Widow Isn't Forgotten," *Sun News-Pictorial* (Melbourne), 24 October 1970, 2; "...It's Harder and Lonely," *The Herald* (Melbourne), 12 May 1971, 5.

<sup>121</sup> VTHC, 2001.0020, JHC typescript, West Gate Families, circa 1972, Unit 60, UMA.

<sup>122</sup> CWS, 2013.0122, Unit 1, 78/1614, UMA.

<sup>123</sup> CWS 2013.0113, Board of Management minutes, 24 February 1971, Unit 70, 55/2031, UMA Brunswick.

<sup>124</sup> VTHC, 2001.0020, WGFC minutes, 21 June 1971, Unit 13, 78/1972, UMA.

that any fees would necessarily reduce support extended to the West Gate families.<sup>125</sup> He had understood that all fund committee members were volunteering, failing to distinguish between WGFC trustees who had secure incomes and the CWS, which operated on uncertain funding arrangements. Nolan's comments also suggest disregard for the monetary and professional value of welfare interventions, thought of as "women's work."<sup>126</sup> In May 1972, nonetheless, the Trustees thanked the CWS for its efforts and made a qualified "ex-gratia payment" of \$6,000. They wrote:

Consideration will be given to increasing this ex-gratia payment when the objects of the Fund have been determined but this indication is not to be taken as any undertaking by the Trustees that any further payment can or will be made by the Trustees or that they are under any obligation to make any additional payment.<sup>127</sup>

Again, the West Gate Fund, amassed through the generous public donations, helped to defray costs JHC, insurance companies, and the Victorian government might have owed.

Apart from payments for the West Gate work, however, other benefits accrued to the CWS from its involvement in the disaster — raising its community profile and promoting its work in the event of future disasters. In December 1970, Miss Sharpe oversaw the final programme for a West Gate children's party to be held at the Melbourne Zoo on 19 December. Although there were no doubt altruistic reasons for the party, Sharpe acknowledged that the children's excursion would be "a source of further publicity for the CWS."<sup>128</sup> Successful strategic positioning also required warding off competition from other agencies; Sharpe recommended that the committee adopt "positive planning" to protect the West Gate families from "over-exposure...[t]oo many organisations were not necessary as families...become confused."<sup>129</sup> Seeing disasters as potential "earners" and wanting to be first port of call when they struck, CWS leaders used the experience gained in the West Gate collapse to impress government departments and employers who might be inveigled to pay for services rendered. Wanting their position formalised within the State Disaster Plan, a proposal to this effect was sent to the Premier's Department, but advice was returned that any post-disaster relief operation would fall under the Director-General of Social Welfare's jurisdiction. Private philanthropic organisations might still be involved, but coordination would be a government responsibility. Anxious not to cause offence, however, a Premier's Department official wrote, "This decision in no way reflects adversely on the preparedness or competency of your Committee to undertake the many duties entailed, and the cooperation of your Committee in future disasters will be welcomed, and will significantly add to the efficiency of the plan."<sup>130</sup>

The West Gate appeal officially closed on 31 October 1970 and public calls were issued for donors to stop giving, although donations arrived for several more weeks.<sup>131</sup> As early as 1971, the committee was discussing how the fund balance might be fully expended,

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<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> CWS, 2013.0122, Letter, O. Miller, State Manager Union-Fidelity Trustee Company to Elizabeth Sharpe, 12 May 1972, Unit 1, 78/1614, UMA.

<sup>128</sup> CWS, 2013.0113, Minutes of the Public Relations and Publicity Committee, 15 December 1970, Unit 70, 55/2031, UMA Brunswick.

<sup>129</sup> CWS, 2013.0122, WWCC minutes, 20 October 1970, Unit 3, 97/2170, UMA.

<sup>130</sup> CWS, 2013.0122, Letter, A.G. Coulthard, Premiers Department to Miss Sharpe, 4 June 1971, Unit 3, 97/2170.

<sup>131</sup> *The Herald* (Melbourne), 31 October 1970, 21.

since some families' Workers Compensation cases had been resolved. Of the \$273,000 to be distributed, the balance remaining was still a substantial \$189,443, suggesting allocation had been frugally administered to that point.<sup>132</sup> This financial situation did, however, allow the WGFC to prioritise long-term provisions for the children's education to tertiary level if required. Other sums were set aside for housing, unexpected bills, emergencies, and family holidays. Finally, in September 1974, the WGFC determined that the residual would be equally divided among the widows and injured workers. Whether married or single, with or without dependents, all were allocated \$607.76.<sup>133</sup>

## Conclusion

The West Gate collapse affected families in different ways. Most were supported financially by public donations until other income streams became available, but levels of sustenance varied. As widows tried to reshape their lives around absent husbands and breadwinners, they were encouraged to work and become financially independent. For many, the ability to use relief funds and compensation money to clear debt or begin new ventures meant greater financial security. Remarriage, retraining and new work opportunities also promised significant opportunities. For those widows who remained on state support, however, the future was less optimistic.

Didactic stances towards welfare recipients have waxed and waned over time,<sup>134</sup> and have proven particularly susceptible to political context. Despite social and political tensions between the two committees, the middle-class proclivities of union leaders involved in relief fund distribution were remarkably consistent with the CWS's relief practices and attitudes. CWS and JHC personnel were not decision-makers regarding the level of support extended to each family, but they were influential in providing the informational basis upon which union leader determinations were made; certainly, there was little evidence of disagreement about distribution policies. Like the CWS's nineteenth-century predecessor, judgements were made about each deceased man's workplace character and the widows' domestic arrangements. For those in charge of philanthropic endeavours, a traditional division of labour operated — men overseeing management committees, financial decisions and actuarial forecasts, while women predominated on the "social" side of fundraising and home visiting.<sup>135</sup> Their patronising attitudes were somewhat limited by the context — employer responsibility for the terrible disaster that precipitated the families' plight, and the enormous fund at their disposal. That said, the commitment to maintaining families' existing social standing exhibited class-bound philosophical limitations with longstanding resonance in the welfare sector. All parties involved in the fund's administration appeared unwilling to accept that working-class women, even those with little experience of the welfare system, could manage money independently, placing them in the invidious position of appellants, while the living standards of managers' wives were maintained. Indeed, Peel's finding that working-class women of the 1930s Depression era were often painted as "stupid," or unable to comprehend the true nature of their predicament, was also discernible in the 1970s.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> CWS, 2013.0122, WWCC minutes, 1 March 1971, Unit 3, 97/2170, UMA.

<sup>133</sup> VTHC, 2001.0020, WGFC minutes, 27 September 1974, Unit 60, 48/1974, UMA.

<sup>134</sup> See, for example, Musgrove, "'Filthy' homes."

<sup>135</sup> Anne O'Brien "Charity and Philanthropy," *Sydney Journal* 1, no. 3 (2008): 21.

<sup>136</sup> Peel, "Charity, casework," 83.8.

After promoting counselling as their speciality, the families' suffering proved too much for some CWS staff. In turn, several widows refused passive consumption of CWS services and, moreover, were critical of their treatment. At first glance, the West Gate widows might have been treated as one "social type"<sup>137</sup> — automatically "deserving" — by virtue of their position as disaster victims. However, employer and welfare worker assessments were influenced by a range of other subjectivities — the family's level of self-sufficiency pre- and post- disaster; domestic circumstances; and the nature of widows' interaction with case workers. Social workers became uncomfortable with any signs of widow's departure from acceptable standards of behaviour, for example, assertiveness, irritation or listlessness were not viewed favourably. To an extent, the tragedy that had befallen the widows protected them from the kind of stigma often assigned to welfare recipients; nonetheless, case workers' notes reveal annoyance with some migrant widows and frustration that these "clients" were not suitably deferential and grateful. West Gate widows were clearly less prepared to "feel their position" because of the source and magnitude of their losses. That said, the West Gate tragedy provided evidence of enduring class-, gender- and ethnicity-based social attitudes that accepted and buttressed inequality. CWS managers observed staff mirroring a perception that West Gate widows received "so much" in comparison to other welfare recipients.

Disasters often inspire altruism, and public donations to assist those suffering can be considerable. While JHC management was proactive in organising the post-disaster relief effort with like-minded CWS staff, a significant proportion of the aid victims' families received came from various segments of the public purse and thereby reduced demands on state, corporate and insurance company coffers. Indeed, when asked in retrospect how the collapse had affected the company, John Holland said he had received a lot of sympathy letters and that the Department of Main Roads in Sydney, for whom JHC had done work previously, assisted it to get another major contract. Of the company's fortunes after the collapse, he said, "I don't think it had any deleterious effect at all."<sup>138</sup> For those who lost loved ones, however, life would never be the same. Indeed, fifty years on, many relatives, friends and workmates of West Gate victims still come together at the site of the collapse to mourn the dead.

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<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.4.

<sup>138</sup> John Holland, interviewed by Frank Heimans, 3 October 2003, ORAL TRC 5027/2, National Library of Australia, Canberra.