

# **“I’ll have no man”: female families in Melbourne’s criminal subcultures, 1860–1920**

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*Abstract:* In recent decades, historians have produced a wealth of scholarship demonstrating the importance of the exploration of domestic contexts and familial dynamics to the development of understandings of women’s historical experiences. However, the home lives of a particular group of women—those on the criminal margins of society—warrant further investigation. The study of such women challenges the hetero-orthodox assumption that women’s relationships with men have historically been more important than their relationships with one another. This article suggests that men were often fleeting figures in the families of criminal women. Male absence encouraged women from criminal subcultures, instead, to draw together to form female-centred households. Such living arrangements were further facilitated by the general instability in the home lives of criminal women caused by financial uncertainty, periodic incarceration, and crackdowns by authorities, as well as by separations from their natal families and a high degree of personal mobility. These issues are explored through archival material from late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Melbourne, and through the writings of prison poet Janet Dibben.

*Keywords:* gender; crime; single mothers; female friendship; poetry

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In 1888, Melbourne mother Janet Dibben was found guilty of the manslaughter of her month-old son, who died in an emaciated condition.<sup>1</sup> The child’s death was attributed by contemporaries to a lack of maternalism on Dibben’s part, considered characteristic of women from the lower orders. Little allowance was made for the difficulties Dibben faced in providing for her infant and older children. Like many women who appeared before late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century criminal courts, Dibben lacked the support of a male provider, living apart from her husband. As was also common, Dibben had called on another woman for aid. Shortly after her son’s birth, she transferred him to the care of so-called “baby-farmer” Ellen Gardiner, who was later imprisoned alongside Dibben.

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<sup>1</sup> *Argus* (Melbourne), 4 January 1888, 6.

In the 1860s, the term baby-farming covered a broad spectrum of child care systems from informal adoptions to temporary placements, but, by the late 1880s, it had become synonymous with shady women taking payments to adopt children only to kill them through violence or neglect.<sup>2</sup> Given the general uncertainty of infant survival in this period, historians have since suggested that many such deaths were simply a result of ignorance or poverty.<sup>3</sup> Although the outcomes were sometimes tragic, the practice of women placing their children with female neighbours while they earned money or sought more stable living arrangements points to a wider culture in which underclass women were able to negotiate support from one another.

During her four-year term at Melbourne Gaol, Dibben spent time with women who belonged more definitively to a criminal milieu of repeat offenders. Following her release, Dibben drew on these experiences to write poetry starring female thieves, prostitutes and other disorderly characters. As the bulk of these writings explored women's troubled home lives, the several tracts she published in the early 1900s present an invaluable source to explore the domestic relationships of criminal women.

Dibben's history, along with that of several other inmates of the Melbourne Gaol, is included in Diane Gardiner's essay "Felon Families".<sup>4</sup> Alongside examinations of domesticity among convict women, Gardiner's essay is one of only a few Australian studies dedicated solely to the family lives of women whose history of offending placed them outside the social mainstream.<sup>5</sup> While historians have challenged notions of "traditional" family life by uncovering a nineteenth-century underbelly of illegitimacy, domestic violence and marital separation, this has largely been divorced from a consideration of criminal subcultures.<sup>6</sup> Scholarship abounds on the public scrutiny of family life stimulated by nineteenth-century anxieties over the rise of the "criminal classes", but the targets of this surveillance have largely been

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel Grey, "'More Ignorant and Stupid Than Wilfully Cruel': Homicide Trials and 'Baby-Farming' in England and Wales in the Wake of the Children Act 1908," *Crimes and Misdemeanours* 3.2 (2009): 63.

<sup>3</sup> Jan Kociumbas, "Azaria's Antecedents: Stereotyping Infanticide in late Nineteenth-Century Australia," *Gender & History* 13.1 (2001): 149; Kathy Laster, "Infanticide: A Litmus Test for Feminist Criminological Theory," *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Criminology* 22 (1989): 157–58.

<sup>4</sup> Diane Gardiner, "Felon Families," in *The Australian Family: Images and Essays*, ed., Anna Epstein (Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 1998), 117–24.

<sup>5</sup> Alan Atkinson, "Convicts and Courtship," in *Families in Colonial Australia*, ed., Chris McConville, Patricia Grimshaw and Ellen McEwen (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1985), 19–31; Margaret M. Pawsey, "Annie Wilkins: Life on the Margins in Nineteenth-Century Collingwood," *Victorian Historical Journal* 66.1 (1995): 9.

<sup>6</sup> Tanya Evans, "Secrets and Lies: The Radical Potential of Family History," *History Workshop Journal* 71.1 (2011): 49.

found to be ordinary working men and women.<sup>7</sup> This finding has tended to preclude the investigation of the differences in domestic experiences among women who did embody the type of recidivism feared by contemporaries.

An important exception is Shurlee Swain and Renate Howe's history of single motherhood in Victoria. While their main focus is on single mothers who struggled to retain some degree of respectability, Swain and Howe acknowledge a minority who turned to illicit practices to provide for their children, speculating that such women may have actually enjoyed greater support by caring for their children "within a community of outcasts".<sup>8</sup> Other historians allude to prostitutes in particular receiving pseudo-familial support from one another, but there remains little analysis of such practices.<sup>9</sup> This article therefore follows Swain and Howe's lead by attempting to analyse not only the dysfunctional aspects of domestic situations among criminal women but also those features and relationships that allowed families to function within this dysfunctional environment.

Various snapshots of the dynamics of nineteenth-century underclass domesticity are available as a result of the period's enforcement of middle-class familial ideals on the working classes, which was achieved in part by making examples of disorderly families. This process began with the introduction of industrial schools legislation in Victoria in 1864.<sup>10</sup> In the 1870s, the establishment of free, compulsory education created additional opportunities to expose "problem" homes.<sup>11</sup> Scrutiny of family life further increased during the 1880s as a burgeoning number of charities worked with the courts to amass evidence against suspect families.<sup>12</sup> The reformer rhetoric and "slum" journalism that inspired this growing surveillance offers

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<sup>7</sup> Kerreen M. Reiger, *The Disenchantment of the Home: Modernizing the Australian Family 1880–1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 5; Lynette Finch, *The Classing Gaze: Sexuality, Class and Surveillance* (St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1993), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Shurlee Swain and Renate Howe, *Single Mothers and Their Children: Disposal, Punishment and Survival in Australia* (Cambridge; Oakleigh: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 172.

<sup>9</sup> Raelene Frances, *Selling Sex: A Hidden History of Prostitution* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2007), 175; Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 26–27; Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900–1918* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 104–5.

<sup>10</sup> Christina Twomey, "Gender, Welfare and the Colonial State: Victoria's 1864 Neglected and Criminal Children's Act," *Labour History* 73 (1997): 169–86.

<sup>11</sup> Frances, *Selling Sex*, 148.

<sup>12</sup> Shurlee Swain, "The Poor People of Melbourne," in *The Outcasts of Melbourne: Essays in Social History*, ed., Graeme Davison, David Dunstan and Chris McConville (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1985), 91.

insights into underworld households, although clearly written to suit moralistic and voyeuristic tastes.<sup>13</sup>

These accusatorial perspectives are only occasionally leavened in extant sources by the voices of criminal women such as Dibben. Such material, as well as archival sources on the family lives of individual women, suggests that social commentators' observations on the substance of underclass life were not necessarily inaccurate; it was the constructions placed on these observations that were heavily weighted by the judgements of the writers' class backgrounds. However, a critical reading of both perspectives allows for the formation of some conclusions about how female offenders experienced and negotiated domesticity. This article thus draws on Dibben's poetry alongside archival material to suggest that men were transient figures within underclass families, and that this both encouraged women's descents into criminal subcultures and increased the importance of women's relationships with one another.

### **Men in the families of disorderly women**

Women dominated the imagery of the Victorian slum, which was peopled in popular rhetoric by female waifs, bleary-eyed prostitutes, gin-sodden mothers and indigent old women.<sup>14</sup> The underworld's feminine coding stemmed partly from its sentimental appeal, and partly from the metaphoric associations it invoked to danger and the "other".<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, the perception of underclass households as homosocial environments is often borne out by analysis of the background of criminal women, which suggests that men usually played only a transient role in their lives. The overlap between male absence and female crime was hardly coincidental; lack of stable male financial support frequently precipitated women's resort to illicit practices. Dibben reflects on this situation in her poem "The Widow", which describes a woman left "in a fix" with a baby to support after her husband dies.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Donella Jaggs, *Neglected and Criminal: Foundations of Child Welfare Legislation in Victoria* (Melbourne: Philip Institute of Technology Centre for Youth and Community Studies, 1986), 4.

<sup>14</sup> John Freeman, *Lights and Shadows of Melbourne Life* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1888), 19.

<sup>15</sup> Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 119.

<sup>16</sup> Janet Dibben, "The Widow," in *Shearer's Song* (Melbourne: Janet Dibben, n.d., ca.1902), 2.

In her influential article “Women Without Men”, Olwen Hufton suggests that nineteenth-century British and French women who made their livings from illegalities were largely widows and spinsters.<sup>17</sup> It is similarly asserted in Australian historiography that women who were unmarried, widowed or estranged from their husbands featured heavily among those who took to abortion, baby-farming, brothel-keeping or that most popular illicit endeavour, prostitution.<sup>18</sup> Historic areas of vice, such as Melbourne’s Little Lonsdale Street, were found to contain abnormally high numbers of female-headed households, consisting both of brothels and other dwellings inhabited by women “on their own” in the sense that they lacked a recognised male provider.<sup>19</sup>

Desertion and illegitimacy were considered growing problems in Victoria during the late nineteenth century, and viewed apprehensively as significant causes of female poverty.<sup>20</sup> To prevent the downward spiral of women brought about by the “ever-increasing evil” of male irresponsibility, the Victorian government encouraged women to seek court orders for maintenance from their children’s fathers.<sup>21</sup> Fears about fostering immorality meant that government and charitable agencies were reluctant to provide direct economic assistance to women or relieve their financial burdens by admitting their children to orphanages.<sup>22</sup> As Swain and Howe detail, unmarried mothers and deserted wives nevertheless had options other than the stereotypical descent into crime or prostitution.<sup>23</sup> However, the ability of single women to provide for their families was impeded not only by the limited and low-paying employment available to women but also by the social ostracism they faced. As the twentieth century progressed, the greater availability of divorce and increased

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<sup>17</sup> Olwen Hufton, “Women Without Men: Widows and Spinsters in Britain and France in the Eighteenth Century,” *Journal of Family History* 9.4 (1984): 355–56.

<sup>18</sup> Judith A. Allen, “The Trials of Abortion in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Australia,” *Australian Cultural History* 12 (1993): 90; Lucy Sussex, “‘God Help My Poor Baby!’: The Case of Frances Knorr,” in *The Thing She Loves: Why Women Kill*, ed., Kerry Greenwood (St. Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1996), 97; Hilary Golder and Judith Allen, “Prostitution in New South Wales 1870–1932: Re-Structuring an Industry,” *Refractory Girl* 18 (1979): 19; Frances, *Selling Sex*, 124.

<sup>19</sup> Philip Bentley, “‘Edifices of Venereal Renown and Gilded Palaces of Sin’: Madame Brussels, a Life on the Margins in Mid to Late Nineteenth Century Melbourne” (Honours thesis, Monash University, 1993), 37.

<sup>20</sup> Swain and Howe, *Single Mothers*, 10.

<sup>21</sup> Christina Twomey, “Identifying (with) a ‘Serious Social Evil’: Deserted Wives in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Victoria,” in *Forging Identities*, ed., Jane Long, Jan Gothard and Helen Brash (Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 1997), 76–87.

<sup>22</sup> Nell Musgrove, “‘Every Time I Think of Baby I Cry’: Dislocation and Survival in Victoria’s Child Welfare System,” *Australian Historical Studies* 39.2 (2008): 219.

<sup>23</sup> Swain and Howe, *Single Mothers*, 150.

employment opportunities for women lessened the danger of women being driven from respectable society by male abandonment.<sup>24</sup> From the 1920s, adoption—although reprehensibly forced upon some women—also decreased the number of single mothers left to raise children alone.<sup>25</sup> Yet the connection between male absence and female crime never entirely disappeared, as even today men are said to be “less consistently present” in underclass family life.<sup>26</sup>

Single women were thrust into a criminal lifestyle by more than just economic imperatives. In the Australian colonies, women without men were usually located in cities where opportunities for delinquency were greatest, abandoned by men in search of mining riches or bush-work, or themselves fleeing unhappy marriages.<sup>27</sup> Rather than the anonymity they perhaps hoped for, the reports of social welfare organisations reveal that women who lacked the respectability of male support often attracted the kind of intense scrutiny that left women vulnerable to criminalisation.<sup>28</sup> The increased surveillance suffered by women on their own was due not only to suspicions about how they supported themselves but also to the prevailing belief that a lack of patriarchal restraint was likely to lead to female misbehaviour, with neighbours, police and magistrates less tolerant of suspect activity where wives or daughters lacked a male preceptor.<sup>29</sup>

Conversely, the presence of male authority was able to avert the perception that women required legal restraint, with petitions for women’s releases from institutions often contingent on the re-emergence of fathers and husbands, or the appearance of new authority figures in the form of prospective stepfathers or bridegrooms. Endorsing such discharges rewarded returns to the traditional family structure, such as when Sarah Clifton was released from the Melbourne Gaol in 1891 after her husband, whose desertion had forced her into prostitution and led to her

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<sup>24</sup> Henry Finlay, *To Have But Not to Hold: A History of Attitudes to Marriage and Divorce in Australia 1858–1975* (Sydney: The Federation Press, 2005), 229–37.

<sup>25</sup> Swain and Howe, *Single Mothers*, 10–11.

<sup>26</sup> Lydia Morris, *Dangerous Classes: The Underclass and Social Citizenship* (London: Routledge, 1994), 113.

<sup>27</sup> Frances, *Selling Sex*, 124.

<sup>28</sup> Melbourne Ladies’ Benevolent Society minute book, 31 May 1892, folio 32, MS 12414, State Library Victoria (hereafter SLV); Melbourne Ladies’ Benevolent Society minute book, 10 February 1903, folio 43, MS 12414, SLV.

<sup>29</sup> Marian H. A. C. Weevers, Margo De Koster and Catrien C. J. H. Bijleveld, “Swept Up From the Streets or Nowhere Else to Go? The Journeys of Dutch Female Beggars and Vagrants to the Oegstgeest State Labor Institution in the Late Nineteenth Century,” *Journal of Social History* 46.2 (2012): 420.

arrest for vagrancy, announced his intention to resume their marital relationship.<sup>30</sup> Male guarantees of female behaviour also helped women avoid institutionalisation in the first place. During World War I, adult sisters Minnie and Dorothy Lucas attracted the attention of police while living together in Fitzroy, where they gained a reputation as prostitutes and drunkards. Eventually brought before the court in 1916 for the theft of a suitcase, they were discharged after their brother declared his intention of including them in his household.<sup>31</sup> By being taken as a sign of likely criminality, male absence potentially created criminals by making authorities more willing to treat women as such.

Although male abandonment sometimes precipitated female involvement in crime, relationship impermanence was also normalised within criminal subcultures. While de facto relationships among the working classes often closely approximated marriage, such relationships among the disorderly classes did not.<sup>32</sup> Social investigator John Freeman, who, like his contemporaries, constructed the underclasses as “a race apart”,<sup>33</sup> portrayed the “wedding” of such couples as a perverse ritual that inverted the legitimate marriage ceremony by making two women, rather than the romantic couple, the focus of events. Within slum neighbourhoods, he suggested that new relationships were confirmed by the physical ousting of an old wife by the new “wife” from the household, betraying at the outset the lack of dependability to be placed on such partnerships.<sup>34</sup> Despite Freeman’s hyperbole, newspaper reports of confrontations that ended in the police court bore testimony to the real incidence of relationship breakdowns among female offenders.<sup>35</sup> The influence of such parental examples was believed to encourage living without male protection to become a family tradition. Cases in which successive generations of female offenders took part in temporary affairs certainly point to a normalisation of unorthodox relational values among underclass women.<sup>36</sup>

In place of committed partnerships, criminal women were likely to enjoy a string of romantic relationships. Janet Dibben describes such casual associations in

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<sup>30</sup> Recommending Immediate Discharge of Prisoner Sarah Clifton, 23 April 1866, Unit 233, VPRS 3991/P0, Public Records Office Victoria (hereafter PROV).

<sup>31</sup> Police Reports on Dorothy and Minnie Lucas, 8 May 1916, Unit 1412, VPRS 3992/P0, PROV.

<sup>32</sup> Swain and Howe, *Single Mothers*, 16.

<sup>33</sup> Jan Kociumbas, *Australian Childhood: A History* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1997), 112.

<sup>34</sup> Freeman, *Lights and Shadows*, 128–29.

<sup>35</sup> *Truth* (Melbourne), 18 April 1908, 5.

<sup>36</sup> Child of Violet Manning alias Wilson, 11 December 1915, Unit 529, VPRS 807/P0, PROV.

her poetry, detailing the arrest and imprisonment of men after fights broke out over girls who kept two or three lovers at a time.<sup>37</sup> Physical descriptions of female offenders sometimes demonstrate their variegated romantic history through the presence of several lovers' initials tattooed on their bodies.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, police correspondence reveals the involvement of wanted women with multiple partners by naming several men with whom they had been known to cohabit.<sup>39</sup> While not precisely falling under the definition of prostitution, some short-term associations were at least partly predicated on financial convenience.<sup>40</sup> Contemporaries assumed that instances of interracial couplings in particular were driven by economic necessity.<sup>41</sup>

Prejudices against miscegenation meant that any woman who consorted with men of other races during the Victorian and Edwardian eras was liable to be labelled a prostitute.<sup>42</sup> This assumption has been challenged by historical research revealing the existence of committed emotional relationships between Chinese men and Caucasian women from respectable working-class and even middle-class backgrounds.<sup>43</sup> Associations that transcended simple prostitution-like exchanges also developed between men of colour and women from the criminal milieu, who often inhabited the same seedy inner-city neighbourhoods as ethnic minorities.<sup>44</sup> For instance, in the early 1870s Melbourne brothel-keeper Margaret Buchan separated from her husband as a result of an affair with an African American, although this relationship, too, ended shortly before her arrest for keeping a disorderly house, in 1872.<sup>45</sup> Other criminal

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<sup>37</sup> Janet Dibben, "IXV," in *Songs and Recitations; Written and Composed from Experience by a Lady That Has Travelled* (St Kilda: Hubbard and McMichael, 1904), 10.

<sup>38</sup> Melissa Bellanta and Alana Piper, "'Looking Flash': Disreputable Women's Dress and Modernity, 1870–1910," *History Workshop Journal* 78.1 (2014): 69.

<sup>39</sup> Street Thief and Prostitute Named Maud Rouse or Corn-beef Maud, 25 July 1911, Unit 431, VPRS 807/P0, PROV.

<sup>40</sup> Frances, *Selling Sex*, 132; Oscar Comettant, *In the Land of Kangaroos and Gold Mines*, trans. Judith Armstrong (Adelaide: Rigby, 1980), 170.

<sup>41</sup> Kathryn Cronin, "'Orientals, Leprous-Fitted/Blood-Diseased and Small-Pox Pitted': The Urban Anti-Chinese Movement," in *Race Relations in Colonial Queensland: A History of Exclusion, Exploitation and Extermination*, ed., Raymond Evans, Kay Saunders and Kathryn Cronin (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1975), 298.

<sup>42</sup> Jan Ryan, "'She Lives with a Chinaman': Orient-Ing 'White' Women in the Courts of Law," *Journal of Australian Studies* 60 (1999): 149–59.

<sup>43</sup> Kate Bagnall, "'He Would Be a Chinese Still': Negotiating Boundaries of Race, Culture and Identity in Late Nineteenth Century Australia," in *After the Rush: Regulation, Participation and Chinese Communities in Australia 1860–1940*, ed., Sophie Couchman, John Fitzgerald and Paul Macgregor (Kingsbury: Otherland Literary Journal, 2004), 153.

<sup>44</sup> Ryan, "'She Lives with a Chinaman'," 151.

<sup>45</sup> *Argus*, 27 August 1872, 7.



women were episodically involved in relationships with different lovers from other races. Women in and out of prison on petty charges used sporadic associations with Chinese men as a means of temporary accommodation.<sup>46</sup> Relationships between men of colour and female offenders thus seemingly followed such women's usual pattern of short-lived affairs.

Despite the stigma attached to female-headed households, it was recognised that men—even when they were present—did not necessarily raise a household's tone. Numerous examples of entire families “gone wrong” were regularly proffered by newspapers to confirm that criminal parents were passing on a legacy of lawlessness to their children. When Margaret Buchan was imprisoned in 1872, her eleven-year-old daughter was sentenced to an industrial school even though the girl's father—who was estranged from his wife—was willing to care for her. The Melbourne police vetoed his application for custody on the grounds that he was a known thief currently living at his older daughter's brothel.<sup>47</sup> A year later, the removal of seven-year-old Caroline Myers was similarly justified by the revelations that her mother was in gaol, her sister “on the town”, her father a drunkard and her brother a larrikin.<sup>48</sup> Male family members of female offenders were therefore often less than law-abiding themselves, acting as thieves, pimps, or menial workers still “known to police”.

Even when such men were included in the family circle, they may have remained obscure figures in the lives of their female partners and children. The troubled nature of underclass women's romantic relationships is displayed in Dibben's poetry, which often contained themes of marital disharmony. The male spouses featured in her poems were depicted as abusive, lazy and improvident, and the breakdown of domestic partnerships as little mourned by women. In one poem, the narrator therefore decides to remain single or be “married on the sly”, that is, live in a de facto relationship:

I'll have no man to knock me about,  
Nor butcher or baker to take it out.  
If you know what I do here,  
No wonder the men do clear.  
I know what some men do

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<sup>46</sup> Alana Piper, “‘A Growing Vice’: The *Truth* about Brisbane Girls and Drunkenness,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 34.4 (2010): 495–97.

<sup>47</sup> *Argus*, 27 August 1872, 7.

<sup>48</sup> *Argus*, 12 May 1873, 4.

When they are married—they are not true;  
They are out all hours at night,  
When they come home they want to fight.<sup>49</sup>

Violence, a frequent feature of late nineteenth-century gender relations in Australia in general, was especially common among men and women of the offending classes, fuelled by alcohol and a casual attitude to lawlessness.<sup>50</sup> Several of Janet Dibben's poems deal with domestic violence arising from poverty or drink, with Dibben condemning husbands who beat their wives as unmanly.<sup>51</sup> She advocates the dissolution of such partnerships, declaring "When man and wife start to fight, they should be apart, that is right".<sup>52</sup>

The transience of criminal women's domestic partnerships was enhanced by relational tensions specific to their circumstances, such as the separations induced by prison terms. Dibben's poetry records the misery experienced by female prisoners upon learning they had been replaced in men's affections.<sup>53</sup> This could be signalled by the decline of correspondence or visits while women were inside:

You lose your sweetheart, and that is no joke.  
You write him a letter to tell him to come in,  
He says: "No, my dear, it's a very bad thing."<sup>54</sup>

However, women themselves also moved on to new lovers while their partners were imprisoned. The estrangement between Jemima Buchan's mother and father occurred after Margaret Buchan began her affair while her husband was in prison.<sup>55</sup> Frances Knorr, hanged in 1894 after turning to baby-farming to support her child, similarly took up with another man while her husband was imprisoned for theft.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Dibben, "The Widow," in *Shearer's Song*, 2.

<sup>50</sup> Judith Allen, "The Invention of the Pathological Family: A Historical Study of Family Violence in NSW," in *Family Violence in Australia*, ed., Carol O'Donnell and Jan Craney (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1982), 1–27; Kay Saunders, "The Study of Domestic Violence in Colonial Queensland: Sources and Problems," *Historical Studies* 21.82 (1984): 68–84; Ruth McConnell and Steve Mullins, "'We Had Both Been Drinking Since Christmas,' – Battered Wives and Dead Abusive Husbands in Early Colonial Rockhampton," *Journal of Australian Colonial History* 5 (2004): 100–19.

<sup>51</sup> Dibben, "Broken-down Baker's Recitation," in *Songs and Recitations*, 1, 2, 19.

<sup>52</sup> Dibben, "II," in *Songs and Recitations*, 2.

<sup>53</sup> Dibben, "IX," in *Songs and Recitations*, 5.

<sup>54</sup> Dibben, "Victoria Gaol," in *Songs and Recitations*, 8–9.

<sup>55</sup> *Argus*, 27 August 1872, 7.

<sup>56</sup> Barbara Yazbeck, "Deviant Motherhood in the Late Nineteenth Century: A Case Study of the Trial and Execution of Frances Knorr and Emma Williams for Child Murder" (Master's thesis, University of Melbourne, 2002), 27–28.

Sons, like lovers or husbands, emerge as passing figures in the lives of disorderly women. Boys were more likely than girls to be drawn away from their maternal home as they grew older and were able to support themselves. In 1909, a neighbour complaining to police about the conduct of Fitzroy brothel-keeper Minnie Foley opined that she was a disgrace to her son, who earned his living as a cabman and was “decent”.<sup>57</sup> Conversely, the presence of teenage or adult sons in their mothers’ houses of ill fame was liable to draw critical attention from authorities. Brothel-keeper Mrs Edgecombe and her son were the subject of police harassment and alleged assault in 1909 after the police heard rumours the youth and his friend were “queans [*sic*]” who went out on the Melbourne streets dressed as women.<sup>58</sup> More often, sons who remained in the households of disorderly women were stigmatised as bludgers. Jane Reid’s seventeen-year-old son was exposed to unflattering scrutiny in 1872 when it was reported that he was employed as a tout for her brothel and that of another woman; police advised him to seek employment elsewhere.<sup>59</sup> Investigations into similar claims found some sons distancing themselves from their mothers of their own accord. In 1905, police inquiries into allegations that a brothel-keeper’s sons were living off her prostitution not only revealed that all three sons were gainfully employed but that only one of them ever so much as visited their mother’s house.<sup>60</sup>

Women from the criminal margins were popularly believed to show an unnatural indifference towards their children, with policeman James Dalton declaring in 1878 that prostitutes grew “very cool” about their offspring as soon as they were old enough “to go from one place to another”.<sup>61</sup> While such perspectives can be attributed partly to the era’s general disdain towards the maternal instincts of the lower orders, Dibben also intimated that female offenders often came to resent their children. However, unlike middle-class commentators, Dibben drew attention to the hardships that contributed to such outlooks. In a poem entitled *The Brokenhearted Mother’s Recitation*, which perhaps most directly reflects Dibben’s own experiences as a mother whose child’s death was laid at her door, Dibben expressed sympathy for

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<sup>57</sup> Disorderly Conduct and Robberies By Prostitutes in Exhibition St, 25 October 1909, Unit 377, VPRS 807/P0, PROV.

<sup>58</sup> Mrs Edgecombe’s Brothel in Nicholson St, 28 August 1909, Unit 376, VPRS 807/P0, PROV.

<sup>59</sup> *Argus*, 13 July 1872, 7.

<sup>60</sup> Reports of Brothels in Burns Lane Melbourne, 8 May 1905, Unit 984, VPRS 3992/P0, PROV.

<sup>61</sup> “Report from the Select Committee upon a Bill for the Prevention of Contagious Diseases,” (hereafter Contagious Diseases Report) *Victoria Parliamentary Papers*, 1878, vol. 1, 18.

mothers left hungry, penurious and exhausted under the burden of providing for growing children.<sup>62</sup>

In the face of such struggles, criminal mothers—commonly believed to prefer their daughters because of the greater potential earning power that prostitution gave them—may have made little effort to keep boys with them. In her autobiography, nineteenth-century Melbourne temperance-worker Bessie Harrison Lee recounted a story of caring for a baby whose mother was a drunkard with three other children.<sup>63</sup> After the baby died, the mother precipitately departed with her two daughters, abandoning her adolescent son to care for himself. Swain and Howe record a similar case that occurred in 1870 when the father of nine-year-old John Mannix was sent to gaol, and his mother, a Melbourne brothel-keeper, retained control of her two daughters but willingly surrendered her son to the state.<sup>64</sup> Meanwhile, connections between criminal women and their daughters often continued into the daughters' adulthoods, working in their mothers' brothels or sharing in the management of such enterprises.<sup>65</sup> Greater significance may therefore have been attached to mother-daughter relationships, not only by middle-class commentators who feared the corruption engendered by such connections, but by criminal women themselves. Male absence in general meant that a variety of female relationships among underclass women assumed an added importance, instigating the creation of what might be referred to as female-centred homes.

### **Female-centred homes**

Janet Dibben portrays the tenuous nature of female criminals' relationships with men in a poem about two prostitutes, Duck and Nipsy, imprisoned in Melbourne Gaol for theft.<sup>66</sup> Duck does not know where her husband is living; Nipsy's husband has gone "up country", and it is implied that she means to pretend to be a widow in order to marry again upon her release. However, relationships with men were not the sole paradigm around which women structured their domestic arrangements. Grouping

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<sup>62</sup> Janet Dibben, "The Brokenhearted Mother's Recitation," in *The Brokenhearted Mother's Recitation* (St Kilda: Hubbard and McMichael, 1902), 1.

<sup>63</sup> Bessie Cowie, *One of Australia's Daughters: An Autobiography of Harrison Lee* (London: R. J. James, 1926), 86–91.

<sup>64</sup> Swain and Howe, *Single Mothers*, 177.

<sup>65</sup> Contagious Diseases Report, 12; *Argus*, 30 September 1873, 4.

<sup>66</sup> Dibben, "XXIII," in *Songs and Recitations*, 13–14.

together into common households to share expenses, referred to by Olwen Hufton as “spinster-clustering”, has historically been employed by a variety of women compelled to live outside traditional family structures.<sup>67</sup> As Hufton points out, while such females were “women without men”, the strength of their ties to one another meant that they could not truly be considered women who were “on their own”.<sup>68</sup> It is thus, ultimately, Duck and Nipsy’s relationship with each other, and their fellow female criminals, that forms the focal point of Dibben’s poem, and it is suggested, the women’s lives.

Although the establishment of female-centred homes can be seen as an act of empowerment by women abandoned by men, it was one often driven by dire economic need. The humble nature of the dwellings that women shared underlines the financial necessity of such arrangements. Community attention was frequently drawn to the clustering among disorderly women by the squalor in which they lived. Reports on cases of neglected children brought before the courts dwelt, in lurid detail, on the filthy conditions that allegedly prevailed in the “hovels” women occupied together with their children; the physical dirtiness clearly read as a symbol of moral uncleanliness.<sup>69</sup> Desire for protection as well as financial motivations encouraged women who practised prostitution to live together. Even when women were not living in squalor, the clustering of disorderly women into common households frequently attracted community attention due to the suspicions raised that the women were running brothels.<sup>70</sup>

Female offenders were further drawn together by the instability that characterised their domestic arrangements. Often living precariously close to poverty, women with histories of offending are found sheltering friends who had fallen ill or were otherwise “down on their luck”.<sup>71</sup> Moving frequently to avoid police scrutiny, criminal women also relied on female networks to provide them with leads on new homes or to be put up temporarily.<sup>72</sup> This support enabled women to respond to

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<sup>67</sup> Hufton, “Women Without Men,” 361.

<sup>68</sup> Hufton, “Women Without Men,” 356.

<sup>69</sup> *Mercury and Weekly Courier* (Melbourne), 9 May 1895, 2.

<sup>70</sup> Complaint re Mrs Peters, 14 December 1891, Unit 334, VPRS 937/P0, PROV; Proceedings Against Mag Gordon for Brothel-Keeping, 16 November 1911, Unit 561, VPRS 807/P0, PROV.

<sup>71</sup> Rex v. Catherine Smith, 1909/214, Unit 1509, VPRS 30/P0, PROV; Frances, *Selling Sex*, 137.

<sup>72</sup> Regina v. Catherine Gorman and Julia Davis, 1863/7, Unit 270, VPRS 30/P0, PROV; Regina v. Sarah Harris and Elizabeth Wilson, 1871/10, Unit 397, VPRS 30/P0, PROV; Regina v. Celia Crawley and Nellie Raymond, 1895/420, Unit 1034, VPRS 30/P0, PROV; Leslie Page Moch and Rachel G.

interventions by authorities that would have further destabilised their living situations, such as the issuing of “move on” orders to brothel-keepers or schemes for the clearance of slum areas instigated from the 1880s onwards.<sup>73</sup> When police cautioned Minnie Foley to abandon the brothel she was running in South Melbourne in 1909 or risk prosecution, she found employment in friend Sal Reddan’s establishment as a “spotter” engaged to report on police activities.<sup>74</sup>

Incarceration in prison or other institutions likewise created domestic impermanence.<sup>75</sup> At the same time, it facilitated connections between recidivist women, whose frequent periods of institutionalisation meant they regularly encountered one another again and again.<sup>76</sup> Dibben notes this in a poem on the Newington Home, observing “The dormitory I was in was number four, Ada – was there, I’ve seen her before”.<sup>77</sup> In another poem, Dibben describes how female inmates relied on one another to ameliorate the monotony of prison life by “telling yarns and singing a song”.<sup>78</sup> Fear that women were likely to continue these connections outside by availing themselves of one another’s hospitality was instrumental in the establishment of charitable institutions offering accommodation to those recently released from gaol.<sup>79</sup> Dibben, however, points out that it was seldom easy for women to escape their criminal past following incarceration as “[t]he bobbies are watching you everywhere”.<sup>80</sup>

Faced with ongoing social censure, women may have found relief in solidarity, the succour they provided to one another suggesting that their joint living arrangements were used to fulfil their need for emotional, as well as economic, support. Contemporary criminological research reveals that a primary motivation for involvement in criminal networks, particularly among women, is the sense of family

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Fuchs, “Getting Along: Poor Women’s Networks in Nineteenth-Century Paris,” *French Historical Studies* 18.1 (1993): 34–35.

<sup>73</sup> Chris McConville, “The Location of Melbourne’s Prostitutes, 1870–1920,” *Australian Historical Studies* 19.74 (1980): 89–90.

<sup>74</sup> Disorderly Conduct and Robberies by Prostitutes in Exhibition St, 25 October 1909, Unit 377, VPRS 807/P0, PROV.

<sup>75</sup> Jill Harsin, *Policing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 173.

<sup>76</sup> Alana Piper, “‘I Go Out Worse Every Time’: Connections and Corruption in a Female Prison,” *History Australia* 9.3 (2012): 129–50.

<sup>77</sup> Janet Dibben, “Newington Home,” in *Newington Home, December 26th, 1903 and Other Poems* (Melbourne: Janet Dibben, 1904), 1.

<sup>78</sup> Dibben, “Victoria Gaol,” in *Songs and Recitations*, 8–9.

<sup>79</sup> John Buckley Castieau, *The Difficulties of My Position: The Diaries of Prison Governor John Buckley Castieau, 1855–1884*, ed., Mark Finnane (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2004), 194.

<sup>80</sup> Dibben, “Victoria Gaol,” in *Songs and Recitations*, 8–9.

perpetuated by belonging to a gang or criminal organisation.<sup>81</sup> Nineteenth-century criminal subcultures likely created a similar sense of familial belonging among women that was only augmented by women living together.

Criminal women were perhaps encouraged to look upon one another as substitute family members, not only by male absence, but due to estrangement from other relatives. While Judith Walkowitz and others have shown that the exclusion of prostitutes from respectable working-class communities and families was never as complete as middle-class contemporaries depicted, their level of social ostracism had increased by the late Victorian period as a result of the outcast status thrust upon them by the contagious diseases acts and anti-prostitution campaigns.<sup>82</sup> Dibben portrays women being shunned by their natal families due to the way they earned their living:

I have got friends and relations;  
They are all disgusted with me.  
I have a pound when I want it,  
As well as them, don't you see.  
Often times I do meet them;  
They look at me with surprise.  
I am too proud for to speak,  
And them I won't recognise.<sup>83</sup>

Other poems displayed particularly bitter feelings towards mothers who disowned their daughters.<sup>84</sup> Salvation Army workers, whose success as reformers was itself predicated upon the Army's presentation as an alternative family grouping, similarly declared that family estrangement meant the fallen women of Bourke Street became upset by the mere mention of the word "mother".<sup>85</sup>

Many female offenders also lacked family contact due to the high immigration levels of the late nineteenth century, including the arrival of large numbers of single women to Australia to act as domestic servants. The prevalence of women born overseas among those annually imprisoned was a scandal that dogged assisted

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<sup>81</sup> Meda Chesney-Lind and Randall G. Shelden, *Girls, Delinquency, and Juvenile Justice*, 3rd ed. (Belmont: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2004), 112–15.

<sup>82</sup> Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, 25–26; Judith Allen, "The Making of a Prostitute Proletariat in Early Twentieth-Century New South Wales," in *So Much Hard Work: Women and Prostitution in Australian History*, ed., Kay Daniels (Sydney: Fontana Books, 1984), 193–194.

<sup>83</sup> Dibben, "The Brokenhearted Mother's Recitation," 1.

<sup>84</sup> Dibben, "Young Girl's Misfortune," in *Newington Home*, 4; Dibben, "VII," in *Songs and Recitations*, 4.

<sup>85</sup> *War Cry* (Melbourne), 7 July 1883, 3.

immigration schemes from the 1860s.<sup>86</sup> According to contemporaries, “corrupted” women were sent out by families or authorities eager to be rid of them.<sup>87</sup> For others, it was said that “without the restraints of home, friends, and early associations, [they] are too weak to stand against the gauds and glitter which, in this land of gold, vice has so readily at command”.<sup>88</sup> Historical research suggests alternatively that lack of family ties left immigrant women, particularly Irish women, more susceptible to being branded with a criminal identity due to an inability to find work or pay the fines to avoid imprisonment.<sup>89</sup> However, isolation potentially also made them more eager to embrace a criminal identity as a means of creating a makeshift family.

Allusions to the pseudo-familial connections between underworld women permeated the language used in reference to them during the nineteenth century.<sup>90</sup> Brothel-keepers were given the title of “Mother”, and prostitutes were described as belonging to the “sisterhood of the pavement”.<sup>91</sup> While this familial terminology was usually employed derisively or for euphemistic purposes, it nevertheless underlines the role criminal women played as one another’s auxiliary family members. Women from the criminal milieu often performed the same rites and functions towards one another that are common in kin relationships. Women’s entries into criminal subcultures were even commemorated by their “rechristening”, as indicated by the popularity of nicknames such as “Clever Mary”, “Corn-beef Maud” and, of course, Duck and Nipsy. Although the adoption of nicknames probably reflects attempts among women to preserve their anonymity or distinguish between those who shared the same name, it can also be seen as an embracing of a new identity and family.<sup>92</sup> According to policeman David O’Donnell, nicknames were invariably bestowed upon

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<sup>86</sup> Jan Gothard, *Blue China: Single Female Migration to Colonial Australia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2001), 29.

<sup>87</sup> Helen R. Woolcock, *Rights of Passage: Emigration to Australia in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1986), 9.

<sup>88</sup> Frank Fowler, *Southern Lights and Shadows: Being Brief Notes of Three Years’ Experience of Social, Literary, and Political Life in Australia* (London: Sampson Low, Son and Co., 1859), 40–41.

<sup>89</sup> Trevor McClaughlin, “‘I Was Nowhere Else’: Casualties of Colonisation in Eastern Australia in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century,” in *Irish Women in Colonial Australia*, ed., Trevor McClaughlin, (St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1998), 149; Ciara Breathnach, “Even ‘Wilder Workhouse Girls’: The Problem of Institutionalisation among Irish Immigrants to New Zealand 1874,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 39.5 (2011): 772.

<sup>90</sup> This is evidenced not only in English-speaking countries, but across many cultures: Donna J. Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family, and Nation in Argentina* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 46; Victoria Harris, *Selling Sex in the Reich: Prostitutes in German Society, 1914–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 85; James Francis Warren, *Ah Ku and Karayuki-San: Prostitution in Singapore 1870–1940* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1993), 76–77.

<sup>91</sup> Comettant, *In the Land of Kangaroos*, 171.

<sup>92</sup> Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood*, 102–3.



women by other inmates within brothels or prisons, and thereafter remained their constant identifier while the use of their other *aliases* fluxed.<sup>93</sup> Like family members, criminal women shared one another's milestones: tending to one another during illnesses or childbirth, clubbing together for the funerals of fallen comrades, and celebrating holidays together.<sup>94</sup>

Women also sometimes became family in a more literal sense by intermarriage. In 1902, Melbourne society was scandalised when the son of brothel-keeper Julia Norton was married to one of his mother's prostitutes in a lavish ceremony at St Patrick's Cathedral, with the other women of the house acting as bridesmaids.<sup>95</sup> The strong relationships that operated among the tenants of brothels became apparent in other instances by the support they provided one another following the breakdown of their relationships with men. For example, in 1860, after Annie Ward's former partner Gong Gan ended their relationship, he was violently attacked by several of her friends, the leader of whom, Harriet Bishop, claimed they had been trying to extract money Gan owed to Ward.<sup>96</sup> In another poem contrasting the transience of criminal women's relationships with men to those they had with one another, Dibben described two prostitutes taking advantage of their fleeting encounters with men to rob them, before taking their "haul" to a hotel to drink with each other.<sup>97</sup> While brothels were often posited as the ultimate anti-familial environment, they thus potentially provided women with the economic and emotional support ideally expected of kin.<sup>98</sup>

Some women even deliberately cast off unhappy family situations in favour of the substitute families that criminal subcultures provided. Women who deserted their husbands sometimes sought refuge in brothels or the homes of disorderly women, resulting in violent scenes when men tried to reclaim their truanting wives by force.<sup>99</sup> The subversiveness of women choosing to live with prostitutes rather than their husbands was enhanced by suggestions that it was their friendships with low women

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<sup>93</sup> D. G. O'Donnell, "Reminiscences of a Victorian Detective," *Gisborne Gazette*, 11 September 1925, 8.

<sup>94</sup> F. W. L. Adams, *Australian Essays* (London: Griffin, Farkan and Co., 1886), 44; Alana Piper, "In Bad Company: Female Criminal Subcultures in Brisbane and Melbourne, 1860–1920" (PhD thesis, University of Queensland, 2014).

<sup>95</sup> *Truth*, 1 June 1902, 4.

<sup>96</sup> Regina v. Harriet Bishop, 1860/3, Unit 295, VPRS 30/P0, PROV.

<sup>97</sup> Dibben, "Songs," in *Songs and Recitations*, 15.

<sup>98</sup> Frances, *Selling Sex*, 175.

<sup>99</sup> *Argus*, 2 May 1867, 7.

that had contributed to the ultimate marital breakdown. A frequent complaint voiced by husbands within the police court was that their wives had neglected their homes after forming friendships with women to whose immorality or drunkenness the men objected.<sup>100</sup> Strong female friendships also encouraged unmarried females to flee home, with adolescent girls leaving their families to live with prostitute companions, or running away in pairs before eventually seeking shelter in brothels.<sup>101</sup> In 1892, Melbourne police recounted how teenagers Maud Simeon, whose mother “never took any notice or trouble with her”, and Jessy Whiting, whose parents let their children “roam at pleasure”, became part of a “larrikiness” crowd that included Whiting’s two older sisters, both reputed prostitutes. Emboldened by their experiences with the gang, the girls took to living on the streets together, from where they were recruited to a local brothel.<sup>102</sup> In cases where girls lacked family care, such settings may have proved alluring not only as a source of accommodation but also companionship.

That more than a simple desire for shelter drove the practice of women grouping together is evident from the fact that even homeless women formed makeshift families. Of course, living together, which in general acted as a form of protection against male violence, was a particularly important safety measure on the streets where female vagrants were liable to physical or sexual assaults.<sup>103</sup> However, while the practice of sleeping out in locations shared by other women answered a practical purpose, the organisation of these groupings along generational lines suggests they were also prompted by a desire for sociality. John Stanley James maintained that the women who slept out by the Yarra River were largely elderly prostitutes whose “faded attractions prevent them from plying their trade”.<sup>104</sup> Young girls living on the streets similarly gravitated towards one another.<sup>105</sup> Women were often arrested for vagrancy as members of pairs who were known to “go about” together.<sup>106</sup> Pairing off

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<sup>100</sup> *Lee’s Pictorial Weekly Budget*, 15 April 1876, 3.

<sup>101</sup> Dora McGrath, 23 July 1886, Unit 318, VPRS 937/P0, PROV; *Argus*, 19 November 1886, 10; *Victoria Police Gazette* (hereafter *VPG*), 1916, 544.

<sup>102</sup> *Regina v. Amy Cramer*, 1892/548a, Unit 905, VPRS 30/P0, PROV.

<sup>103</sup> Susanne Davies, “‘Ragged, Dirty...Infamous and Obscene’: The Vagrant in Late-Nineteenth-Century Melbourne,” in *A Nation of Rogues: Crime, Law and Punishment in Colonial Australia*, ed., David Philips and Susanne Davies (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1994), 147.

<sup>104</sup> John Stanley James, *The Vagabond Papers*, ed., Michael Cannon, (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1969), 34.

<sup>105</sup> Complaint of Larrikinism in Victoria Street, 22 December 1888, Unit 326, VPRS 937/P0, PROV.

<sup>106</sup> Julie Kimber, “‘A Nuisance to the Community’: Policing the Vagrant Woman,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 34.3 (2010): 287; *VPG*, 1874, 112; *VPG*, 1885, 115; *VPG*, 1909, 405.

among female vagrants suggests living together was not simply a matter of convenience, but indicated close bonds between particular women.

The Victorian demonisation of relationships between criminal women—illustrated by the hysteria surrounding figures such as the procuress—was perhaps partly due to the implicit threat to traditional family life that these close bonds represented. Criminologists of the period believed that partnerships between criminal women challenged heterosexual norms, with male brutality said to encourage lesbianism among prostitutes.<sup>107</sup> Proof of female attachments being sexual in nature is limited to occasional anecdotal evidence from female prisons that perhaps embodied instances of institutional homosexuality.<sup>108</sup> Dibben obliquely alludes to efforts to eradicate such “unhealthy” practices:

There are three in the cell the first night you will see,  
The next night you are in the cell by yourself;  
If you ask for a cell-mate, they say it [sic] not good for your health.<sup>109</sup>

Outside the prison environment, shared housing and sleeping arrangements provided a potential cover for homosexual attachments among underclass women, just as they did among the “romantic friendships” of middle-class women.<sup>110</sup> Irrespective of their sexual content, the close nature of the connections between criminal women undermined the role of marital relations as the dominating force in such women’s domestic lives.

This assumption of the features of domestic partnerships even extended to negative elements. Many violent altercations between criminal women during this period embodied domestic disputes between female housemates.<sup>111</sup> On the other hand, women also assumed spousal roles towards each other in relation to child rearing. It was female relatives or companions, rather than husbands, who many women relied

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<sup>107</sup> Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, trans. Franklin S. Klaf (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1965), 406; Havelock Ellis, *The Criminal*, 3rd ed. (London: Walter Scott, 1901), 170; Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero, *Criminal Woman, the Prostitute and the Normal Woman*, trans. Nicole Hahn Rafter and Mary Gibson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 152.

<sup>108</sup> Regina Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

<sup>109</sup> Dibben, “Victoria Gaol,” in *Songs and Recitations*, 6–7.

<sup>110</sup> Lisa Moore, “Something More Tender Still than Friendship: Romantic Friendship in Early-Nineteenth-Century England,” in *Lesbian Subjects: A Feminist Studies Reader*, ed., Martha Vicinus (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 34–35.

<sup>111</sup> *Argus*, 23 August 1872, 1; Freeman, *Lights and Shadows*, 48–49; Michael Cannon, *The Woman as Murderer: Five Who Paid with Their Lives* (Mornington: Today’s Australia Publishing Company, 1994), 42.

on to care for their children while they themselves were imprisoned.<sup>112</sup> Women who were left with children to support also combined their households with others in the same position, leading to the creation of blended families. In 1917, the *Melbourne Truth* was particularly incensed by reports of two women, whose husbands were fighting overseas, living with their five children at a Fitzroy house that was kept in “a filthy state” while the two women drank and carried on with men.<sup>113</sup> Charity workers deplored the presence of additional women in the households of suspect mothers, believing it placed children at increased risk by exposing them to additional bad examples.<sup>114</sup> For women themselves, however, such companionships offered a possible source of assistance in caring for their children, as well as financial and psychological support in the absence of other ties.

## Conclusion

As Lynette Finch points out, the absence of the traditional family unit was one of the key features used by Victorians to differentiate between the respectable and disorderly lower classes.<sup>115</sup> Within the latter group, male absence, estrangement from natal families, and general instability in their home lives encouraged women to draw together to form female-centred households. These alternative family units perhaps constituted an important part of the appeal of criminal subcultures themselves as a source of physical and emotional security. By investigating the domestic relationships of female offenders, I have thus tried to elucidate how criminal identities influenced women’s home lives; and the various ways women’s family situations might have contributed to such identities.

In another poem by Janet Dibben, a deserted wife turned prostitute who was obliged to move frequently between boarding houses declares that women like her have “no home”, and travel through “this world alone”.<sup>116</sup> Contrary to the solitary image this raises, women from the criminal milieu often confronted their precarious circumstances by drawing on relationships with other women. This was elsewhere acknowledged in Dibben’s poetry, with another female narrator declaring that her

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<sup>112</sup> Melbourne Ladies’ Benevolent Society minute book, 23 February 1892, folio 31, MS 12414, SLV.

<sup>113</sup> *Truth*, 19 May 1917, 2.

<sup>114</sup> Report re Mrs Trew, 3 November 1911, Unit 350, VPRS 807/P0, PROV.

<sup>115</sup> Finch, *Classing Gaze*, 37.

<sup>116</sup> Dibben, “The Landlord,” in *Newington Home*, 4.

friend Bridget “is better than any old man”.<sup>117</sup> Dibben’s writings, and the lives of women offenders more generally, thus challenge the hetero-orthodox worldview that women’s lives can only, or best, be understood via their relationships with men, rather than with one another.<sup>118</sup>

*Acknowledgements:* I would like to acknowledge Dr Kate Matthew and Dr Cath Bishop for organising the 2013 Women Without Men conference, sponsored by the ANU Gender Institute, where I presented an early version of this work. My sincere thanks also to Dr Melissa Bellanta, Professor Clive Moore and Dr Sarah Pinto for their helpful feedback on initial drafts.

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<sup>117</sup> Dibben, “Newington Home,” in *Newington Home*, 1.

<sup>118</sup> Janice G. Raymond, *A Passion for Friends: Toward a Philosophy of Female Affection* (Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 2001), 151.