

Sarah. Often ahead of her time, in 1929 the never-married Van Waters adopted a young girl she met through her work with the Juvenile Court in California, another act that would resonate with current trends.

Freedman is quick to point out that Van Waters's maternal impulse to "save" those around her did not extend to saving herself. Thematically, Van Waters built her life around helping others, yet found it extremely difficult to stop and take care of herself—another postmodern theme in women's lives. Taking care of Van Waters often became the task of Geraldine Thompson, her lifelong friend, benefactor, and "Guardian Angel" (Freedman, 1996: 234).

The only troubling part of Freedman's biography, in fact, deals with the unfortunate lack of primary source material covering the forty-year Van Waters-Thompson relationship. Due to a 1949 political attack against Van Waters's suitability as Superintendent, Van Waters burned Thompson's letters, destroying a lifelong record of their devotion. Van Waters's motivation in burning the letters centered around her political opponents' allegations of institutionally-approved lesbianism at the Women's Reformatory. Freedman deals expertly with the gap in her sources and freely admits that her research into that particular area of Van Waters's life proved difficult.

Estelle Freedman deserves recognition for bringing Miriam Van Waters's life of maternalistic service to our attention. Put *Maternal Justice* on your reading list.

Single Mothers and their Children: Disposal, Punishment and Survival in Australia

Shurlee Swain with Renate Howe.
New York. Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Reviewed by Elizabeth Yeoman

Elizabeth Smart, celebrated poet and single mother of four, wrote of getting "twenty year's hard labour for a big begetting sin" (1978: 122). This book examines in detail the forms this hard labour took in Australia between 1850 and 1975—the earlier part of this period being a time when society was so harsh that abandonment and even infanticide often seemed like the only alternatives, and the latter date representing the abolition of the legal status of illegitimacy. The author describes this historical period as a "time when the survival of single mothers and their children depended on their silence" (1978: 5). The silencing took many forms, from denial of benefits and the refusal of accommodation, education and employment, to ostracism, to what amounted to imprisonment in 'homes' and the removal of babies for adoption by 'good' families.

The book is extensively researched. It draws on a variety of quantitative and qualitative data sources with an emphasis on enabling the women's (and to some extent the children's) own voices to be heard. Sources range from newspaper and magazine references (including 'problem pages' or advice columns), charity records, court transcripts, diaries and letters to oral interviews with fifty women. In addition to its focus on the actual experiences of single mothers and their families, the book also discusses related issues such as birth control and abortion, sex education, sexual mores and so on, thus providing a history of sexuality as well as single motherhood.

While it is a fascinating and informative source of facts, figures and quotations, the book is less successful in its attempt to provide a coherent narrative based on the stories of real women. It is difficult to follow at times, lumping information from different data sources into the same thematic sentences and paragraphs, and jumping back and forth from one historical period to another. For example, on page 56 the author discusses the situations or opinions of eleven different women, but only two dates are given, and little background information. While each example is footnoted, it is tedious to go back and forth from the text to the end notes so frequently; yet without doing so, the reader is left confused as to when the events occurred, what their context was and which data sources were used.

While the book is essentially a history of white women's experience, the author has included considerable documentation of the experiences of Koori mothers and their families. However, since Koori society was, especially in the earlier days of the period under discussion here, very different from white, and approached differently by those in power at the time, this information might deserve a book of its own rather than the "add-on" treatment given here.

Despite its shortcomings, *Single Mothers and Their Children* is a useful, and, at times, powerful and moving contribution to our knowledge of the history of sexuality, motherhood and family life. The book certainly counteracts the argument that oral history produces 'a cosy view of the past' (Hay, 1981: 41). The women's stories are, for the most part, ones of pain, bitterness and regret but also of survival and eventual social progress. More than anything, this book makes me reflect on how good it is to be living in the nineties. It is also a timely reminder that the recent trend of blaming single parent families for many of society's problems—from a perceived rise in crime to the deficit to and the conservative call for a return to "traditional family values"— may have chilling implications for those who do not or cannot fit into that repressive mold.

References

- Hay, C. 1981. "The Pangs of the Past." *Oral History* 9 (1) (Spring): 41.
Smart, Elizabeth. 1978. *The Assumption of the Rogues and Rascals*, London: Jonathan Cape and Polyantric Press, 1978.