

Past Caring? Women, Work and Emotion

Edited by Barbara Brookes, Jane McCabe and Angela Wanhalla.

Otago University Press, Dunedin, 2019.

RRP: \$39.95 ISBN: 9781988531342

Reviewed by Meg Luxton

Past Caring? Women, Work and Emotion focuses on the history of women's care work in New Zealand and on how women's association with, and responsibility for, care shape their lives and social status. It presents a variety of historical case studies which collectively document shifting concepts and practices about care, unpaid and paid, familial and professional, over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The editors note that it "seeks to make care and care work in New Zealand's past visible," offering "different vantage points on women's history and its resonances now" in public debates about issues such as child poverty, pay equity, and parental leaves (7).

The main strength of the collection is that it shows the important continuity of women's care work over more than two centuries while also attending to the diversity of practices over time, in different communities (especially Māori and Pākehā), and in various circumstances (Brookes). It weaves together chapters that review feminist engagements with philosophical debates about ethics of care and justice (Devere), report on women's creative knitting and sewing crafts as expressions of their love and care for others (Brookes et al.), provide personal narratives (Williams, Anderson), explore family, institutional and professional carework (Tennant), and examine representations in film of solo mothers (Polaschek). Its central theme is that women's care work is socially necessary and essential, although the work is rarely valued, the contribution of those who do it is rarely recognised, and struggles to make the work visible and to socially value its contribution face formidable resistance. The book is a contribution to those struggles.

The book is also valuable for its focus on New Zealand. The politics of English language publishing mean that material from the USA and to a lesser extent Britain dominates; too often experiences from those countries are assumed to be universal and theories rooted in such locations are generalised uncritically.¹ This collection invites us to recognise the specificity of historical contexts and to develop more nuanced analyses of the general patterns of colonialism and capitalist development on gender regimes in specific settler and Indigenous societies.

Because care work is so taken for granted and so embedded in interpersonal relations, especially in private households, it is often difficult to research. It is more difficult when the people involved are low status. Several authors use innovative and impressive methods to reveal the contributions of such women. Three chapters illustrate the range of topics and approaches. McCabe writes about the rarely-acknowledged mixed race children in India of British tea planter men and lower status native women. These children were initially cared for by native ayahs, then, as young children, were sent away to residential school for 10–15 years where they were prepared to emigrate as teenagers to provide care to white settler families in New Zealand. McCabe combined the limited written records available with interviews to sketch out cross-cultural and transcolonial patterns of night-time care over generations, looking at an aspect of caring that was supposed to be removed by sending the children away—"namely a 'native' mode of caring—and speculating on the ways it may have persisted" (82). Her work explores the relationship between experiences of care as

children and practices of care provision as adults in the context of complex class, race and colonial relationships.

Using visual materials, Lubcke pays close attention to a photo album compiled by Helen Smaill, who was a missionary wife and fellow worker in the mission field in the New Hebrides between 1890 and 1906. By reading Smaill's correspondence in relation to a critical examination of the photos, Lubcke shows, first, that Smaill valued the unpaid care work she engaged in and worked to get it recognised, and, second, that for Smaill the boundaries between public mission work and private family care were blurred. In contrast, drawing on a combination of official institutional records, Wanhalla examines what happened to the women with children who were fathered by many of the more than 100,000 US servicemen stationed in New Zealand in the mid-1940s. By drawing on "divorce records, newspaper reports on marital breakdown, paternity claims from women and their families now held in US military records, US consular and legation archives and the records of the American Red Cross" (182), she examines both the informal shadow labour provided by families and the (limited) social support they were able to access. Each of these studies uses creative methods to reveal previously invisible aspects of women's care activities.

The book is careful to acknowledge that New Zealand is a colonial settler dominated society. Two chapters present a life history of a Māori woman: Tina (1910–1993) (Williams), and Takau Rio Love (1904–1947) (Anderson). Tina's life history records her on-going involvement as a recipient and giver of interpersonal care in the context of her extended kin and community networks. Takau's story records her efforts to protect the welfare and autonomy of her people in both New Zealand and the Cook Islands in the face of colonial assimilation policies. Both chapters provide insight into Māori culture as it changed with its encounters with European settler society. Most other contributors at least acknowledge Māori society, although most focus more on settler/Pākehā society (Cooper).

As a collection, the book provides an engaging and interesting picture of a history of women's caring work. However, for the most part, the chapters are descriptive and remarkably uncritical. The book would be much stronger if it offered a more rigorous and engaged analysis. Diversity among women is acknowledged—Māori/Pākehā/Asian, urban/rural, solo mothers/nuclear families/whanau—but there is very little discussion of what produces diversity and what its implications for different sectors of the population might be. There is little commentary about competing political interests. An analysis of class divisions is missing; most chapters take for granted a sex/gender binary of women and men and heteronormativity. I found the discussion of settler colonialism and the spread of capitalist social relations particularly weak. For example, there is no analysis of how settler society and its missionaries and government were able to transform Māori into subordinated peoples dependent on inadequate European food and wage labour by the 1920s (143–44). There is no investigation of the feminist argument that there is a fundamental contradiction between capital accumulation and social reproduction, a contradiction mediated by women's care labour at a cost to women. Instead, we are given assertions that New Zealand society is failing its most vulnerable (32) and needs to pay more attention to caring.

Finally, there are repeated assertions that "Understanding our history may make us aware of how we have come to this pass and better equip us to seek solutions" (32). The authors hope that this

project will help to address “the urgent issues facing our society” such as high rates of child abuse and child poverty and why caring for children has become a problem (14). They hope their work will inform important policy debates about how caring work is valued in issues such as gender pay equity and parental leave entitlements. Their focus on description is important, but their silence on the related politics hampers their interventions.

¹ This trend is reproduced in the international section of the Select Bibliography of this book (270). Almost all of the publications cited are US; the exceptions are British.