

'These children have been born in an abyss'

Slum Photography in a Melbourne Suburb.

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This article is concerned with the role of photography as an agent of 'social truth', with a particular interest in the way that the technology was used by slum reformers in Melbourne from the 1930s into the postwar era. The article focuses its attention on the streets and people of the inner Melbourne suburb of Fitzroy and two 'crusaders', F.O. Barnett (founder of the Methodist Babies Home) and Father Gerard Tucker (of the Brotherhood of St. Laurence), who would use the propagandist value of the photograph to influence their social and moral interventions into the lives of Fitzroy's poor.

For much of the twentieth century the Melbourne suburb of Fitzroy was represented as an archetypical slum within a society staking claims to progress, particularly from the 1930s onward into the era of postwar reconstruction in Australia following World War Two. Fitzroy's notoriety was first established in the late nineteenth century in line with concerns about the rapid expanse of the metropolis and a more general critique of urban development apparent in Europe, North America and Australia.¹ The image of Fitzroy as a locus of social evil emerged in the decades following European occupation in the 1840s, with debate about the fall from grace of Melbourne's 'first suburb' initially formulated during the depression of the 1890s.² Historian Chris McConville has written that by the last decade of that century 'Fitzroy as a whole, not just certain Fitzroy streets, had come to epitomise all the evils of big city life' as a result of both the real poverty of the suburb and relentless civic and press attention that provided

¹ J. Freeman, *Lights and Shadows of Melbourne Life* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1888); Graeme Davison, David Dunstan and Chris McConville, eds, *The Outcasts of Melbourne: Essays in Social History*, (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1985); Alan Mayne, *The Imagined Slum: Newspaper Representations in Three Cities 1870-1914* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1993); Andrew Mearns, *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London*, ed., A. Wohl, (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1970, first published 1883); A. Fried and R. Elman, eds, *Charles Booth's London: A Portrait of the Poor at the Turn of the Century, drawn from his 'Life and Labour of the People in London'* (London: Hutchinson, 1969); P. Quennell, ed., *Mayhew's London: Being Selections from 'London Labour and the London Poor'* (London: William Kimber, 1951); J.A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Dover Publications, 1971, first published 1890); James Winter, *London's Teeming Streets 1830-1914* (London: Routledge, 1993).

² For a general history of the 'rise and fall' of Fitzroy see, *Fitzroy: Melbourne's First Suburb* (Cuttan History Committee of the Fitzroy History Society) (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1989).

a steady diet of stories of 'Fitzroy low life' for the wider community.³ This slum discourse surrounding Fitzroy became entrenched in the public imagination in the early decades of the twentieth century. Press headlines regularly exposed the ever-present dangers that supposedly lay within the recesses, lanes and narrow streets creating 'THE SHADOWS OF FITZROY'.⁴ The often melodramatic reportage that followed such headlines drew upon the 'bare facts' of the Fitzroy story and promised to expose the 'truth' about the district's apparently sordid culture.

Fitzroy was also the subject of extensive visual scrutiny through social and slum photography. This essay critically engages with some of these images and how they were 'translated into words', thus both commenting on and creating a history of Fitzroy.⁵ The reformist campaigns against the Fitzroy slum were led by two figures who would leave an indelible impression on the suburb. One of these men was F.O. (Oswald) Barnett, variously described as a 'genial middle-aged accountant', 'Methodist child saver', 'slum reformer', and the eventual founding father of the Victorian Housing Commission (VHC).⁶ The other was Father Gerard Tucker, an Anglican Church minister who co-founded the Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) in the city of Newcastle, New South Wales, in 1930, before being sent to Melbourne in an effort to establish a branch of the BSL in Fitzroy in 1933.⁷ Both men would claim authority in relation to their social investigations into and exposure to the wider community of the Fitzroy 'slum evil' by using photography as an essential forensic device, with the technology's claims to neutrality and objective representation becoming a potent weapon of the slum 'crusader'.

The myth of photographic truth

The slum images of Fitzroy adhere to the standard of the visual and descriptive language of the genre. The practice had its beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century, when the developing technology of photography came to the assistance of the literary slum genre, embedded in writings contained in risqué journalism and the burgeoning discipline of social science.⁸ The rise of the slum photography

³ Chris McConville, 'On the Street', in *Fitzroy: Melbourne's First Suburb*, 190. See also his 'From "Criminal" Class to "Underworld"', in *The Outcasts of Melbourne*, 69-90.

⁴ *Argus*, 21 September 1921.

⁵ Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), 21 and 34 for quotes.

⁶ Renate Howe discusses Barnett and refers to him as the 'genial middle-aged accountant' in 'Reform and Social Responsibility', in *New Houses For Old: Fifty Years of Public Housing in Victoria 1938-1988*, ed., Renate Howe (Melbourne: Ministry of Housing and Construction, Victoria, 1989), 20-44. See also Robert D. Phillips, 'The Origins of The Housing Commission of Victoria' (MA thesis, History Department, University of Melbourne, 1981); and E.W. Russell, *The Slum Abolition Movement in Victoria 1933-37* (Melbourne: Hornet Publications, 1972).

⁷ *People*, 20 December 1950. For a history of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, see John Handfield, *Friends and Brothers: A Life of Gerard Kennedy Tucker, Founder of the Brotherhood of St Laurence and Community Aid Abroad* (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1980).

⁸ For the history of photography and its relationship to social science, see John Tagg, *The Burden*

genre also coincided with a scientific and melodramatic interest in the poor of Britain and in particular 'the residuum that so haunted the political imagination of the late-Victorian bourgeoisie'.⁹

The photograph as the ultimate form of realism and objectivity was linked also to the camera itself being described literally and metaphorically as both 'the pencil of nature'¹⁰ and 'the eye of history'.¹¹ This relatively new technology befitted the self-proclaimed 'sophisticated industrial society' that was nineteenth-century Britain, industrialised Europe and North America, as each experienced rapid technological change. The photograph was able to produce (rhetorically at least) 'the first exact representations of the contemporary scene' through the accuracy of a 'historical record [that] stands alone', with the photograph producing objectivity in the purest sense; becoming the 'eye [that] observes, but does not select'.¹² Such statements indicate the perceived power of the genre to fix the truth. Presented as evidence of the evil that was 'the other half', those captured by the camera lens had little chance to manoeuvre themselves. It was not possible to challenge this representation within a discourse where 'human agency was denied or overlooked in the interests of empowering the scientific "truth" of the photograph'.¹³

Optimistic claims for the ability of the camera to produce a social and cultural exactness within the photographic image were linked also to the contemporaneous development of positivism and sociology in the nineteenth century. The precision and nominal neutrality of the camera were able to compliment and support the prevailing positivist philosophy of the time, which claimed that 'observable quantifiable facts, recorded by scientists and experts, would one day offer man such a total knowledge about nature and society that

of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988); John Tagg, 'The Pencil of History' in *Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video*, ed., Patrice Petro (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 283-303; Jennifer Green-Lewis, *Framing the Victorians: Photography and the Culture of Realism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1996); Raphael Samuel, 'Scopophilia' and 'The Eye of History', in his *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 1994), 364-77, 315-36; G.H. Martin and David Francis, 'The Camera's Eye', in *The Victorian City: Images and Realities*, eds, H.J. Dyos and Michael Wolff (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), vol. 1, 227-46; Allan Sekula, 'On the Invention of Photographic Meaning', *Thinking Photography* in ed., Victor Burgin (London: Macmillan, 1982), 84-109; Allen Sekula, 'Reading an Archive: Photography between Labour and Capital', in eds P. Holland, J. Spence and S. Watney, *Photography/Politics: Two* (London: Comedia, 1986), 181-92; Allen Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive', *October* 39, (1986): 3-66; Simon Watney, 'On the Institutions of Photography', in *Photography/Politics: Two*, 141-60.

⁹ Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive', 50.

¹⁰ This was the title of William Henry Fox's *The Pencil of Nature* (1844-6).

¹¹ Mathew Brady, the American Civil War photographer, quoted in Samuel, 328. For a discussion of Brady and his work see 'Albums of War', in Trachtenberg, 71-118.

¹² For a discussion of the camera and the industrial city, see Martin and Francis, 227-46.

¹³ Green-Lewis, 189

he would be able to order them both'.¹⁴ The power of the photographic image was enhanced in its relationship to these disciplines, as both social scientists and urban reformers could use the photograph to 'preserve a moment of time and prevent it being effaced by the supersession of further moments',¹⁵ while also periodically recommissioning it to represent new social problems.

The scientific value of photography in the nineteenth century was utilised also by an expanding state and its growing 'constellation of institutions'; '[T]he hospital, the asylum, the school, the prison, [and] the police force' used and equipped photography as a tool 'to evoke truth'. This lent the photographic image not only 'the privilege attached to mechanical means in industrial societies, but also its mobilisation within the emerging apparatus of a new and more penetrating form of the state'.¹⁶ The history and genealogy of the institutional photograph can be also traced to the 'sciences' of physiognomy and phrenology and the embryonic development of the eugenics movement in late-nineteenth-century Britain and North America both.¹⁷ Such developments and practices would have an impact, consciously or otherwise, on twentieth-century reformers such as Oswald Barnett and organizations like the BSL, which utilised the language of the phrenologist in conjunction with more 'scientific' photographic evidence.

An acceptance of photographic truth and subsequent claims to neutrality and empirical objectivity ignores the external motivations and institutional controls which surrounded the relationship between the history of the documentary photograph (in particular), and its 'initial historical locus of production'.¹⁸ These conditions include the inherent prejudice contained within slum discourse and the 'culturally determined relationships' that inform a reading of the image. Additionally the self-interested motivations of those

¹⁴ John Berger 'Appearances', in *Another Way of Telling*, eds, John Berger and Jean Mohr (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 81-129.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 89.

¹⁶ John Tagg, 'Evidence, Truth and Order: Photographic Records and the Growth of the State', in *The Burden of Representation*, 60-5. For a discussion of slum photography, see also ch. 5, 'God's Sanitary Law: Slum Clearance and Photography in Late-Nineteenth-Century Leeds', 117-52.

¹⁷ Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive'. For a discussion of the use of 'mug-shots' as 'an established part of forensic practice' in Britain by the 1850s see also Samuel, 315; and for a discussion of the use of photographs to support criminal court testimony in mid-nineteenth-century America see Green-Lewis, 'Signs of the Things Taken: Testimony, Subjectivity and the Nineteenth-Century Mug Shot', in her *Framing the Victorians*, 187-226. For a critical discussion of Sekula and Tagg's writings on the institutional use of photography in the nineteenth century see also Celia Lury, *Prosthetic Culture: Photography, Memory and Identity* (London: Routledge, 1998), and in particular ch. 3, 'The Family of Man', 41-75. For a discussion of the relationship between disciplines such as phrenology and the visual 'crime' of the body in nineteenth-century Europe, see Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c.1848-c.1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

¹⁸ Alec McHoul, 'Taking the Children: Some Reflections at a Distance on the Camera and Dr Barnardo', *Continuum* 5, no. 1 (1991): 34-5. For a brief history and personal reflection on Barnardo see Allan Moore, *Growing Up With Barnardo's*, (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1990).

producing the images strategically adhered to the 'myth of photographic truth'.¹⁹ Despite the highly subjective and polemical nature of 'social photography' it was accepted as both scientific and neutral, in conjunction with the growth and acceptance of a 'rationalised, and, most important, *professional* approach to social problems'.²⁰

The written slum genre of the nineteenth century was able to provide the slum photograph with a context. The written narrative or caption would assist viewers of the photograph, 'telling us what we are to see and how we are to see it'.²¹ Reformers used the resulting hybrid text effectively. The written and visual language informed and strengthened each other, utilised to titillate, frighten and inform. Writing created the external conditions that provided the slum photograph with an explicitly directed meaning. Initially, therefore, 'the photographic message [was] necessarily context-determined', dependent on 'some external matrix of conditions and presuppositions for its readability'.²² The written narrative provided this. But by the end of the nineteenth century, as visual literacy surrounding the genre grew, no words were necessary for the visual imagery of slum life to be understood. Slum photography was now a powerful literary device in its own right, and able 'to finally speak for itself'.²³ And by the 1930s, when photographic slum imagery began to proliferate in the depression years of Melbourne, photographic imagery of 'low life' worldwide was at its most powerful.²⁴

The strength of the images produced on behalf of the reformers, supported by the less than subtle written text or dramatic headline caption, lay in part in their ability to 'arrest daily life' and subject those caught in its lens to an 'unreturnable gaze'. Such images created within the boundaries of the frame a 'desirable space' comprising of 'docile and disciplined subjects' offering themselves for inspection.²⁵ The extensive archive of Fitzroy slum life is so relentlessly negative that members of its community appear forever as 'a living monument to defeat'.²⁶ Once subjected to the focus of the camera lens these people become malleable objects, props and artefacts *re*-performing in subsequent reports, newspaper articles, or the promotional literature of

¹⁹ Sekula, 'On the Invention of Photographic Meaning', 86.

²⁰ See Trachtenberg, 195. Here Trachtenberg is referring specifically to the work of American photographer, Lewis Hine, who in the early twentieth century was a member of the National Child Labor Committee in the United States and photographed for the social welfare journal *The Survey* during the same period.

²¹ Samuel, 365.

²² Sekula, 'On the Invention of Photographic Meaning', 85.

²³ *ibid.*, 90.

²⁴ Samuel, 325. See also Trachtenberg, 'A Book Nearly Anonymous', in *Reading American Photographs*, 164-230.

²⁵ Tagg, 64.

²⁶ Samuel, 367. Samuel is specifically discussing slum photography in Britain and comments that on viewing such images 'if one were asked what such families were doing one could only reply "being miserable"' (327).

institutions, thus further reinforcing the motivation and potency of the original 'negative'.²⁷ People appear in images to corroborate the existence of evil rather than question its presence. With the photograph acting as *the* evidence, the deviancy of the Fitzroy environment and negative physical 'type' is beyond question.

When crusaders such as Barnett presented images of the poor of Fitzroy at church gatherings to raise money for the Methodist Babies Home (discussed below), or Gerard Tucker paraded them through the pages of the BSL's periodical, *Brotherhood of St Laurence Quarterly Notes (BSLQN)*, the poor were utilised to represent a much wider agenda than the evils of the Fitzroy slum. Most often the use of the institutional slum image aided the growth of the institution itself, the authority of the reformers and particularly, in the postwar era, wider mechanisms of state intervention and control.

The home of inferior harlots

From the beginning of his journeys into Fitzroy, Oswald Barnett used photography to support his campaigns. When he first visited Fitzroy in the late 1920s Barnett took a photographer to produce the forensic images that would 'tell the truth about the slums'.²⁸ Barnett made use of photography in his influential 1931 Master of Commerce thesis: 'The Economics of the Slums'.²⁹ When raising money for the establishment of the Methodist Babies Home Barnett used photographs that were largely created in Fitzroy during lanternslide fundraising shows, drawing on the tradition of social reform publicists in Britain and North America in the late nineteenth century.³⁰ In addition to the power provided by the images themselves and the pre-existing historiography surrounding the discipline of slum photography (enabling the slum photograph to be read on its own terms), Barnett provided a supplementary written text in order to choreograph scenes of deprivation, to strengthen the image by directing the viewer to a particular focal point and to predetermine the character of those photographed.

Claims to neutrality for social camera work collapse when these modes of production are investigated further. The meaning contained within slum photography was created and informed by production values such as 'layout, caption, text, and site and mode of presentation'.³¹ Although it is clear that by the

²⁷ In addition to the 'Billy and Milly' series, see *What's Wrong With Victoria's Housing Programme?* (Melbourne: BSL, 1954), which reproduces two photographs from the 'In This Proud City Today' series.

²⁸ Oswald Barnett promotional slide, 'If you want to know the truth about the slums', (early 1930s), Photographic collection, Ministry of Housing and Construction Library, Melbourne.

²⁹ See F.O. Barnett, 'The Economics of the Slums', (Master of Commerce thesis, University of Melbourne, 1931).

³⁰ Trachtenberg discusses the work of Jacob Riis and Alfred Stieglitz, who both presented lantern slides of 'slum dwellers on the lower east side' of New York as the 'emotional disclosure of hidden social facts' in Trachtenberg, 170.

³¹ Sekula, 'Reading an Archive', 184.

1930s many of the stock visual images of the slum genre had produced their own form of literacy, this 'proto-narrative character of the photograph'³² was greatly enhanced by the pulpit sermon, supplementary press headlines, or a caption that would reinforce an image for a viewer in any doubts as to the meaning contained within the image. The outcome produced the legitimacy sought by the reformer: 'the photograph, irrefutable as evidence but weak in meaning, is given meaning by the words ... [T]ogether the two become very powerful'.³³

Barnett not only directed the attention of the viewer through the use of the caption. Again within a tradition of earlier reformers, he sometimes appeared in the photographs himself not only directing the lens, but also enhancing his own authority. This practice of appearing in the images, 'controlling onlookers ... setting the scale', enabled reformers to manufacture the 'correct' image.³⁴ With the reformer directing the action, both within and outside the frame, the 'hierarchical relationship' between the 'passive' subject and the 'authorial, authoritative, *professional gaze*' of those with the vested interest of producing specific, controllable outcomes are established beyond doubt.³⁵

In Barnett's social survey, his predetermination of the entrenched 'habits' of the slum-dweller also informed both his use of photography and his own interpretation of the images produced. The role of photography in Barnett's original thesis, 'The Economics of the Slums', is made clear immediately in the treatment of the first image contained in the thesis, 'Little George Street'.³⁶ The caption attached to this image informs the reader that this street scene shows 'the type of house typical of the slum area'. Central to Barnett's ideology and approach was that the condemnation of the physical environment was meaningless on its own. The degenerative physical environment provides the setting within which he is able to focus his moral condemnation on the people who appear as the face of deviance within the landscape, again importantly linking the growth of social science with a need to focus on the immoral aspects of a society striving to be modern.³⁷ A woman also appears in the 'Little George Street' image. She is in the distance, out of focus, and within the strict framework of the image alone, difficult to see, let alone 'read'. Nevertheless, the viewer is provided with both a visual and moral focal point through the attached narrative, which states that 'the woman in the picture was intoxicated by Fitzroy's famous "rot-gut" wine'.³⁸

³² Lena Jayyusi, 'Photo-practice and Natural History', *Continuum* 6, no. 2 (1993): 37.

³³ Berger, 92.

³⁴ Tagg, 142-4. An example of this is in Barnett's 'Carlton Place, Carlton', with Barnett the city accountant, dressed in a suit, tie and bowler hat, in the centre of the frame, providing a perspective of the narrowness of the street, Photographic collection, Ministry of Housing and Construction Library, Melbourne.

³⁵ Green-Lewis, 208.

³⁶ Barnett, 'The Economics of the Slums', 6.

³⁷ Watney, 152.

³⁸ Barnett, 'The Economics of the Slums', 6.

In another image, less common within Australian visual slum discourse, Barnett reproduces a photograph of a bowler-hatted 'criminal', leering into the camera, reminiscent of the police mug-shot.³⁹ Not only does Barnett pass sentence, stating that 'this is the man recently charged with having murdered a grocer in Fitzroy. No one seems to doubt it'; readers are also informed that this apparent murderer is 'typical of the slum type of criminal'.⁴⁰ In other street scene images, where the people of Fitzroy are either unavailable or unwilling to pose for the camera, the written text provided by Barnett is more explicitly directive, providing the reader with the narrative and context within which they can imagine the immoral lifestyle of those who lived in the houses presented in the frame. The Barnett text is indicative of his obsession with the supposed immorality of people living in designated slum areas rather than an interest in reforming the physical environment itself. He wants his reader to fear and condemn the people themselves, not the streets alone.

Streetscapes, which on their own appear to illustrate nothing that is obviously evil, are provided with the appropriate narrative. When introduced to a street scene that is 'Marion Street' the reader is informed that it is 'a typical slum street, narrow in width, and in filthy condition'. It is also, the reader is informed, 'the home of inferior harlots'.⁴¹ In another of many photographs that seek to demonise women in particular, the image of the absent occupier of a house in Ward's Lane is superimposed over the photograph within a written commentary. The woman who lives at the house is 'reputed to be the receiver of stolen goods'.⁴² Within these tales of immorality no confirmation or accuracy of the text is sought or desired. In an exercise of self-corroboration, visual and written texts together support and confirm a mutual proof.

In another explanatory narrative produced by Barnett the failure of Fitzroy women as mothers is presented to give social meaning to what might have been an otherwise mundane architectural image:

A de-licensed Hotel now used as three dwellings. In this house lives Mrs P. Six weeks ago this mother gave birth to a child ... [child was taken to hospital] ... the child died two days after admission. The cause, pure ignorance.⁴³

Photographs in 'The Economics of the Slums' that focus on children are produced by Barnett to provide evidence of the immoral physical and social setting that he enters in order to save these slum children. He then contrasts the Fitzroy images with those taken within the sanctuary of the Methodist Babies Home, where the reader is reintroduced to the same children following their rescue. With the

³⁹ See Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive', *passim*.

⁴⁰ Barnett, 'The Economics of the Slums', 27.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 23.

⁴² *ibid.*, 46.

⁴³ *ibid.*, 34.

Fitzroy slum presented as the antithesis of the decent family home environment, it is vital that mothers be presented as 'harlots', drunkards and criminals, unable or unwilling to maintain the family home and care for children, providing the reformer with the evidence of deviance that justifies removal of children. Barnett's photographs were used to highlight the debilitating effects of the slum environment on both the physical and moral character. While a group of children in a photograph were described as 'a dirty, filthy, rough little group' negatively affected by the slum,⁴⁴ once rescued and resident at the Babies Home a similar group of children are presented happily confined to play-pens and high-chairs. These children are proof of the unquestioned value of Barnett's child removal policy. The former slum children are now contented 'toddlers in the happy environment of the Methodist Babies Home ... rescued from the sordid surroundings and vicious influence of the slums'.⁴⁵

Another example of Barnett's use of environmental determinism to explain how it debilitated the lives of children occurs in his employment of contrasting 'before and after' shots of the 'rough little group' presented in the thesis. In 'The Economics of the Slums' Barnett produces a photograph of a young girl, who is apparently a member of a group of children 'taken nine years ago when the child was three years of age'. Despite describing the girl's father as 'a heavy drinker' and her mother as 'slovenly', whose childcare skills had been described to Barnett by a social worker as 'rotten', he directs the viewer's attention to the 'splendid physical heritage' of the child, as displayed in the image.⁴⁶ This at first appears contrary to Barnett's argument elsewhere in the thesis that both the hereditary and environmental influence on children over such a period is terminally debilitating, particularly when parents are so described. But we realise in a subsequent statement by Barnett that her 'splendid physical heritage' had subsequently become 'infected' as an outcome of an absence of any earlier rescue effort by welfare authorities:

She is now twelve years of age, and is described as 'A Notable Truant' from school, mixing with people of bad repute ... [T]his could have been avoided by removing her, when a baby, from these sordid surroundings to the healthy environment of the Babies Home.⁴⁷

Another photographic device used by Barnett and other reformers when producing 'after' shots that represented successful outcomes of particular campaigns was the use of a form of family portraiture. Such images were employed in an attempt to emphasise that the practice of removing children from their own environment to the institution, or in later decades relocating entire families and communities onto public housing estates, helped to establish

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 39.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 48.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 39.

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

'the cohesion of the family' as 'an instrument of togetherness' in modern western society.⁴⁸ In the Barnett photographs taken at his institution 'young men and women workers of the Home' (fund raisers), proudly display *their* children, sitting on the knee of a surrogate parent, or carried in their arms while celebrating events such as 'the birthday of the home' as one big happy family.⁴⁹

Barnett, as with other child-savers before him, was presenting society with the evidence of an alternative institutional structure to the autonomous family unit whereby children removed from their own family would have the opportunity to thrive in the institutional environment. A key to understanding Barnett's use of photography was this attempt to convince people that not only the physical environment but also the 'family as an institution'⁵⁰ was under threat within the Fitzroy slum. The sanctity and value of the family could be recreated and restored by removing children, placing them in *his* home and then producing the family 'snapshots' and portraits that evidenced the success of the venture.⁵¹ Fitzroy was *the antithesis* of the family home in Barnett's 1930s, while the Babies Home could provide a surrogate home for those children who might eventually be adopted into more respectable working-class and middle-class families. The head of the institutional family was the paternal Barnett, the patriarch who might name a child after himself, or produce 'after' photographs of working-class children in his publicity tracts that imitate bourgeois family portraiture. The slum literature and photographs of Fitzroy serve therefore to heighten a belief in the normalisation process which occurs in the child saving institution, and justifies what might otherwise be regarded as a drastic measure, removing children from their own home and community.

These are our Fitzroy children

In 1933 Barnett, supported by the Herald and Weekly Times newspaper empire, published *The Unsuspected Slums*, a popularised version of 'The Economics of the Slums'.⁵² Along with several photographs that had appeared in Barnett's original thesis (and subsequently in the *Herald* daily newspaper), readers of *The Unsuspected Slums* were introduced to two young children presented before the camera in classic slummer pose, standing barefoot before a pool of stagnant water in a bluestone back-lane under the heading 'Where are the slum children

⁴⁸ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997) 1-13. See also Judith Williamson, 'Family, Education, Photography', in *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*, eds, Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry B. Ortner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 236-44.

⁴⁹ Barnett, 'The Economics of the Slums', 30, 32.

⁵⁰ Judith Williamson discusses the relationship between the family, photography and the state in 'Family, Education, Photography', 236.

⁵¹ For a discussion of the 'familial ideology' that is produced through family photography and the 'family album', see Patricia Holland, 'History, Memory and the Family Album', in *Family Snaps: The Meanings of Domestic Photography*, eds, P. Holland and J. Spence (London: Virago, 1991), 1-15

⁵² See F.O. Barnett, *The Unsuspected Slums* (Melbourne: Herald Press, 1933).

born?' Barnett juxtaposed this image with one displaying a group of 'Children in the happy environment of the Methodist Babies Home', with children pictured in the care of nursing staff, content and safe in the environmentally purifying open air and manicured lawns of the institution.⁵³

The image of the two young children of the Carlton slum was typical of the body of photographic images that provided Barnett with the suitable visual evidence to support and legitimate his programme of rescuing children from inner-suburban streets and lanes. The images provided the social scientist in Barnett with the necessary proof of the evil of the slum. The two children in the 'Carlton slum' photograph are archetypal slum kids, replicating images from both the late nineteenth century and subsequent decades. While the photographs presented in *The Unsuspected Slums* refer to specific locations (in this instance), the personal/biographical identities of the children are of no relevance beyond their currency as representation, within a discipline that increasingly used photography to 'rationally catalogue and distinguish between all that contributes to moral "order", which is seen as "healthy", and that which is disintegrative and seen as "pathological" and corrupt'.⁵⁴

The value of images such as that presented in the 'Carlton slum children' photograph is evidenced in the transportability and subsequent institutional history of this one image, highlighting its currency value within the practice of 'the traffic in [institutional] photographs'.⁵⁵ Following their appearance in the Barnett text the 'Carlton slum children' were given names, with this original image replicated over many years, representing further examples and evidence of the deprivation of slum life. The children also took a geographical journey, relocating to the neighbouring suburb of Fitzroy, with the image now in the 'care' of the Brotherhood of St Laurence. 'Billy and Milly', as the previously anonymous children were subsequently named by the BSL appeared regularly in BSL anti-slum material under the banner 'These are our Fitzroy Children' in the decade following 1945. 'Billy and Milly' made regular appearances in the *BSLQN*, as Peter Pan-like slum children, ironically never debilitated by the slum environment, never growing old, petrified within the frame and becoming actors, 'inseparable from' either 'the history they show [or] the history they enact'.⁵⁶

While it has been historically correct that technically 'each photograph represents a non-repeatable event',⁵⁷ the original 'event' becomes a generic template for subsequent appearances as the trafficable photograph increases its commodity value. This does not translate to an absence of history within the

⁵³ *ibid.*, 11. For a discussion of family portraiture, both professional and amateur see Holland, 1-15; Hirsch *passim*; and Anne-Marie Willis, *Picturing Australia: A History of Photography*, (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1988).

⁵⁴ Watney, 150.

⁵⁵ Quoting Sekula, commenting on his photographic work, in Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), 9.

⁵⁶ Trachtenberg in Green-Lewis, 19.

⁵⁷ Trachtenberg, 5.

image, but the privileging of a rhetorical and ideologically driven history above that with any claim to specificity.⁵⁸ 'Billy and Milly' would play a vital role in supporting the legitimacy of the BSL's programmes and fundraising efforts, rendering their actual identity or any bibliographical information surrounding the photograph irrelevant. 'Billy and Milly' were present in 1945, barefoot in the back-lanes of 'Fitzroy', tugging at subscribers' hearts by asking: 'you won't forget "Billy and Milly" at Christmas will you?'⁵⁹ They were there again two years later, stuck in the same back lane, when the Brotherhood reminded its readers to support its holiday programme: 'what a thrill a day in the country or the seaside would be for these youngsters' (if they could only get out of the photograph).⁶⁰ And they were there still in subsequent campaigns supporting slum clearance and housing reform programmes.⁶¹

The shift of two anonymous children of 1930s Carlton to the streets of Fitzroy, endlessly performing as 'Billy and Milly', is illustrative of the historical relationship between the technology of photography and its claims to accuracy and truth. Although it may be claimed that 'photographs are a way of imprisoning reality',⁶² the relationship between the photograph and reality (or truth) is more complex because 'a photograph has an unusual relationship with the idea of truthfulness'.⁶³ In Jennifer Green-Lewis's *Framing the Victorians* she argues that photography has been able to 'provide [the] confirmation' of truth that realism desires. Although the subject within the frame may well be 'imprisoned', the ability of both the photograph and its 'author' to 'diminish the significance of human agency' ensured that the photograph 'became useful as the metaphorical substance in which wider representational topics with both ethical and practical imperatives could be argued', thus shifting and manipulating original intent and meaning.⁶⁴

One of the skills of reformers such as Barnett and Tucker was that they understood the value of the slum photograph both as propaganda and 'truth-telling'. They realised the capacity of the slum photograph to represent urban and social decay through its photo-literacy, and each utilised this knowledge to effect. Both Barnett and Tucker understood that the authority of the slum image lay in its ability to 'construct an imaginary world and pass it off as reality'.⁶⁵ Indeed within the discourse of social science more generally, the value of the

⁵⁸ Victor Burgin, 'Art, Common Sense and Photography', in *Photography/Politics: Two*, 41-50. Drawing on Burgin's discussion of rhetoric as a 'the use of language in order to persuade ... in order to attract and retain the attention of the listener or reader' (46), slum photography, including the 'Billy and Milly' images, privileges a sensationalist and rhetorical history of 'slum evil' above any recognition of the children or an actual past.

⁵⁹ *BSLQN* no. 51 (May 1945): 2.

⁶⁰ *BSLQN* no. 62 (February 1947): 3.

⁶¹ *BSLQN* no. 71 (August 1948): 3.

⁶² Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), 158.

⁶³ Green-Lewis, 20.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ Sekula, 'Reading an Archive', 181.

photograph lies just in this capacity to construct evidence of truth, a truth functioning through visual literacy, and relocatable within time, place or context. The power of the photographic genre lies within its ideological and cultural value and, most importantly, in the hands of those who control the image. The value of the 'Billy and Milly' image does not lie in the moment of its production, or (in this and many instances) with the anonymous photographer. It lies instead with those who control the life and use of the image, be they the news proprietor or the benevolent institution, because they are 'the voice of authority' that has 'control and ownership of archives'.⁶⁶ In relationship to the institutional use and control of such images, their value comes 'not from the camera but the filing cabinet'.⁶⁷

'In this proud city today'

While Oswald Barnett shifted his attention to planning working-class 'homes in the sun' in immediate pre and post-World War Two Victoria, the BSL's Gerard Tucker increasingly sought the support of the state government to clear Fitzroy and other areas of inner-Melbourne of its slums. He, like Barnett before him, relied heavily on photography to support his polemic. In addition to a series of propaganda films commissioned by Tucker in the mid-1940s he continued to use photography and the daily press to campaign against the Fitzroy slum. In July 1952, the Melbourne *Herald* published a pictorial series of seven feature articles under the headline 'IN THIS PROUD CITY TODAY'. The photographs were 'directed at exposing once again—to the public, the State Government and municipal councils—the housing conditions in which people are still living in the proud city of Melbourne'.⁶⁸ And 'once again' it was the suburb of Fitzroy ('where 34,000 people live in 934 acres'), which was chosen to illustrate the conditions of 'Melbourne's slum dwellings'.⁶⁹ The articles were presented primarily as photo-journalism accompanied with illuminating written text. The newspaper claimed that it would be the camera alone which would be capable of disclosing how the poor of Fitzroy lived, with each picture 'presenting the bald facts'.⁷⁰

The subjects of the 'In This Proud City' series are children, mothers and the elderly of Fitzroy, all appearing as victims of both their environment and, in this collection at least, neglectful landlords and property owners (who are thus shamed in the articles).⁷¹ The captured images of rotting floorboards and damp plaster walls of the houses form the backdrop for young children strategically

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, 182.

⁶⁷ Sekula, 'The Body and the Archive' 16.

⁶⁸ *Herald*, 12-19 July 1952. This quote is from 12 July.

⁶⁹ *Herald*, 12 July 1952.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

⁷¹ This practice had been a staple of the nineteenth-century slum genre, with the occasional exposure of the archetypal 'slumlord'. See Mayne, *The Imagined Slum*, in particular ch. 9, 'Faces of Degeneracy', 188-205.

placed in the centre of the photographs.⁷² Although the images and text clearly attempt to evoke pity and support for these ‘victims of the slums’ and the physical decay of dwellings, the dominance of an existing discourse that focussed on the deviance of people themselves within the photographs did more to reinforce the tradition of a stigmatisation and fear of those living in ‘their unseen abyss which nurtured sin and disorder’.⁷³ The images are ‘set-pieces’ of the slum genre and closely resemble those of earlier decades, which also strove to ensure their reception was unambiguous. While the use of ‘old photos’ of working-class life can be an exercise in nostalgia,⁷⁴ or the promotion of social-minded virtue, the use of standard images of the genre in the ‘In This Proud City’ series ensures that the dominant negative image of the Fitzroy community is reinforced.

The three young children we see crowded into a single bed in one of the 1952 photographs,⁷⁵ for example, replicates a scene in a 1936 image in a *Herald* series of slum photographs entitled ‘Why Melbourne needs better houses’,⁷⁶ with the same questions about sub-standard housing being asked by the newspaper in 1952. The tradition of ‘the contaminating touch of the slum and sewer’⁷⁷ is evoked in the image of a Cremorne Street tenant standing before an overflowing open drain that has formed outside his home.⁷⁸ A St Georges Road mother of eight, whose toilet overflows into the backyard each time it is flushed, is shown bathing a child in a laundry trough,⁷⁹ also reproducing similar images of ‘toil’ from earlier slum exposes. Similarly the ‘clutter’ of the backyard clothesline, which had appeared in nineteenth century slum photography often as a ‘back-drop’ to the central piece,⁸⁰ is given its own focus, highlighting the overcrowded, chaotic and disorderly environment that is shamefully a ‘playground for five children’.⁸¹ A close-up of a single dripping tap highlights the ability of the image

⁷² *Herald*, 12 July 1952 and 19 July 1952.

⁷³ Tagg, 131.

⁷⁴ See Samuel’s discussion of the marketability of Gorbals (Glasgow) slum photographs in Samuel, 365.

⁷⁵ *Herald*, 14 July 1952.

⁷⁶ *Herald*, 26 May 1936.

⁷⁷ For a discussion of the nineteenth-century discourse of sanitation see Peter Stallybrass and Allon White *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), in particular ch. 3, ‘The City: The Sewer, the Gaze and the Contaminating Touch’, 125-48.

⁷⁸ *Herald*, 15 July 1952.

⁷⁹ *Herald*, 14 July 1952. For examples of earlier and similar images, see the 1936 *Herald* series ‘Why Melbourne needs better homes’, 21, 22, and 29 May 1936.

⁸⁰ In Jacob Riis’ work on New York’s streets and tenements, for instance, the laundry often appears within the frame, and in some instances is obviously given central attention. See for example, ‘Typical tenement fire-escape serving as an extension of the flat: Allen Street’ and ‘An old rear tenement in Roosevelt Street’, in Jacob A. Riis, *How The Other Half Lives: Studies Among The Tenements of New York* (New York: Dover Publications, 1971), 15, 37.

⁸¹ *Herald*, 18 July 1952. Both earlier and later examples of this type of image, ‘Why Melbourne needs better houses’ (*Herald*, 26 May 1936) and ‘Slum Talks Amid The Wash’ (*Herald*, 8 April 1954) are so similar they could have been taken in the same yard.

to contain its own photo-literacy, to 'speak for itself', with bad plumbing understood as representative not only of poor housing, but bad living.⁸²

In a concluding article written for the *Herald* two weeks following the 'In This Proud City' series, Tucker paid tribute to the accuracy of the camera's eye, but at the same time cautiously reminded readers that even this technology could not expose the worst of the slum horrors or 'the overall atmosphere of dirt and shabbiness' contained within the slum.⁸³ While Tucker was pleased that the camera had been able to uncover the fact that 'tens of thousands of Melbourne citizens were living in wretched conditions', he emphasised that evils that no camera could reproduce were still existent in Fitzroy. Tucker warned readers that the lens 'could not explain to you that generations of slum living can breed hopelessness and frustration that find expression in drunkenness, crime and broken family life'.⁸⁴

Without acknowledging that the camera had never moved beyond the boundaries of Fitzroy, Tucker also asked readers: 'What did you think of the *Herald* pictures of "this proud city?"'⁸⁵ Clearly both the historical content and context of slum journalism, which had again utilised Fitzroy as its 'test-tube', was seen to be at its most forceful if it operated in terrain familiar to readers. Fitzroy provided this familiarity. But in so doing the 'In This Proud City Today' series added yet another layer of notoriety and despair to the suburb of Fitzroy, with images repetitively and relentlessly negative. Both the camera and the discourse silenced and stripped people of agency, with no response possible. Those captured by the lens in this series become little or 'nothing more than objects capable only of offering themselves up to a benevolent, transcendent gaze – the gaze of the camera and the gaze of the paternal state'.⁸⁶

* * *

Negative images of Fitzroy reverberated throughout the immediate postwar decades and into the 1960s. In 1965 the Australian Broadcasting Commission's *Four Corners* current affairs programme produced a story investigating the levels of poverty in Australia. In the story a car mounted camera pans down Atherton Street, Fitzroy. Such streets had begun to take on the appearance of razed bombsites, with some houses already bulldozed as part of the Victorian Housing Commission's slum clearance programme that would see the eventual construction of the high-rise Atherton Garden estate. The camera then focuses on a group of children playing on a vacant allotment where houses had previously stood. To this scene of children playing at cooking, the narrator underlines what he sees as the pitifulness of this domestic scene by describing it

⁸² *Herald*, 16 July 1852.

⁸³ *Herald*, 5 August 1952.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

⁸⁵ *ibid.*

⁸⁶ Tagg, 12.

in an appropriately forlorn and doom-laden manner. Continuing the rhetoric of previous decades, he states:

[T]hese children have been born in an abyss. Unless they have extraordinary drive and intelligence to get out they'll bring up their own children in the same environment.⁸⁷

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⁸⁷ 'Four Corners', Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1965, reproduced (in part) in 'The Unfair Go', (Film Australia, 1989). It was ironic of course, that quite soon, everyone 'would get out' of this area of Fitzroy as it would be completely bulldozed for the public housing scheme.

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