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MATRONS WITH A MISSION:

WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS IN NEW ZEALAND

1893 - 1915

A thesis presented in fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of  
Arts in History at Massey University.

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April, 1976.

For the cause that lacks assistance  
For the wrong that needs resistance,  
For the future in the distance  
And the good that we can do.

- Motto of the Gisborne Women's Political  
Association.

## PREFACE

There have consistently been two aspects to the development of a generalised feminist consciousness. One has involved the personal drive toward autonomy and self determination - the expression of which resulted mainly in individual onslaughts on male-oriented systems of education and employment - the other, the combination of forces for the attainment of a more comprehensive system of social, economic and legal rights. However they went about it, feminists always sought to have women determine for themselves their own sphere in life, and to have them develop their talents and faculties to the fullest without the restraints of sexually-circumscribed notions of what was permissible or proper.

In this country the organised aspect of feminist effort was manifest in the campaign for women's suffrage, which finally resulted in New Zealand becoming the first national state to enfranchise its women on the same terms as its men. The franchise campaign has received thorough coverage in Patricia Grimshaw's book Women's Suffrage in New Zealand, which argues for the independent role played by the Women's Christian Temperance Union in the agitation, and for the genuine feminist motivation behind the Union's activities. Following the acquisition of the vote, several commentators in overseas journals remarked on the proliferation of women's societies in New Zealand that were devoted to political organisation and social reform, and in 1896 the National Council of Women came into being to co-ordinate the activities of these bodies. And yet, in 1910 Mrs Kate Sheppard, the leader of the franchise movement wrote that women's societies in New Zealand were few and, where they did exist, worked largely in isolation. Something had obviously happened to undermine the sense of purpose and enthusiasm which had inspired so many women in the previous decade.

The aim of this thesis is to examine four of the larger women's organisations in existence during the years after 1893, to examine the principles for which they were working and the social

framework which influenced the course of their development. The years 1893 to 1915 are particularly focussed upon, since the earlier period has been covered by Grimshaw, and the events of the war years form a topic in their own right. Clearly, my choice of organisations was influenced in part by the completeness or availability of extant records, but the Women's Christian Temperance Union, as the major women's organisation of the late 1880's and the instigator of the women's suffrage agitation, was an obvious subject for this study. Since by no means all women formed into association from a personal sense of sexual oppression, but rather to help from a "privileged" position less fortunate members of their own sex, the Society for the Protection of Women and Children, first formed in Auckland in 1893, is also dealt with as an example of the "social service" type of organisation to which women have always been attached. The National Council of Women to which were affiliated many of the smaller women's political associations of the 1890's also required examination since its history tells us much about the difficulties experienced by the politically motivated women, and also indicates the inconsistencies arising from their remarkably extensive range of interests. The Plunket Society forms a final focus of this study to illustrate the narrower domestic orientation which for some women took the place of the Councillors' more catholic social concern.

Obviously the study of women's organisations has its limitations as a reflection of the general condition of women at any one time. Those who were attracted to such organisations, particularly to organisations of a political or reformist nature, were those sufficiently motivated by their vision of an improved society to do so; usually they were the more articulate of their sex; certainly they were as a group out of the ordinary. It must be recognised at the same time that their ideas were more likely to reflect the ideal than the currently attainable, and they were not above overstating their case or overestimating the extent of their support.

In pursuing the historical roots of the present day women's movement there is also a danger of attributing to the early feminists

motives which they themselves might have disowned. This is particularly the case in New Zealand where the comparative ease with which women were enfranchised appears to have undermined radical feeling. By 1894 New Zealand women were past the stage of heroics - they sought consolidation and adopted "evolution not revolution" as their unofficial catchcry. It is not therefore our task to draw our predecessors larger than they actually were, nor to reproach them for their timidity. To do either is as much a distortion of history as their virtual exclusion from historical commentaries until recent times.

During my research for this thesis I attempted wherever possible to examine the records of the respective societies, but since I did not intend the thesis as a detailed history of any one of these bodies, and since I was restricted by the demands of time, there may have been sources of information which I overlooked. The Auckland Branch of the Society for the Protection of Home and Family had detailed records of its foundation period which proved invaluable, and although I would have liked to study similar material relating to the Wellington Branch, which was controlled by a committee of women alone, I was unable to verify the existence of such records. Other important primary sources included the Sheppard Papers in Christchurch, the Lady Anna Stout Collection, the Women's Christian Temperance Collection, and correspondence from the National Council of Women (Auckland Branch) Collection.

Finally, I would like to record my sincere thanks to a number of people who have helped me during my preparation of this thesis, especially Mrs B. Holt, to Mrs C. Polglase and Mrs Toomer of the WCTU, to Mrs C. de Vries and the Committee of the Auckland Branch of the Society for the Protection of Home and Family, to Miss Jane Tucker of National Archives, to the staff of the Alexander Turnbull Library, to the Plunket Society, to my supervisor Professor W.H. Oliver and to Mrs Steffert for typing this thesis.

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Seated, from left: Mrs G.T. Smith, Mrs A. Daldy, Mrs  
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ABBREVIATIONS

AJHR	Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives
JHR	Journals to the House of Representatives
JLC	Journals and Appendices to the Journals of Legislative Council
LT	Lyttelton Times
NCW	National Council of Women of New Zealand
NZH	New Zealand Herald
NZPD	New Zealand Parliamentary Debates
ODT	Otago Daily Times
SPWC	Society for the Protection of Women and Children
WCTU	Women's Christian Temperance Union
WR	White Ribbon