PRODUCTION AND REPRODUCTION
WORK IN THE HOME
LIZA DALE

David Malouf’s short story “The Sun in Winter” captures the essence of what the Museum of Victoria is doing on the topic of ‘Work in the Home’, while also exposing the fundamental problems we face.

A village woman has shown her small historic town to a tourist. After pointing out the notable architecture, the intricate decorations and art work, she stops

To see what all this really was... you needed a passion for the everyday... And for that mere looking got you nowhere. “All you see then”, she told him, “is what catches the eye, the odd thing, the unusual. But to see what is common, that is the difficult thing, don’t you think? For that we need imagination, and there is never enough of it - never, never enough.”

To see what is common - that is the difficult thing. To study and make it a focus of academic and public interest is also difficult. The study of work in the home has three main handicaps:

1. It was, and still is, primarily done by women - and of course has been one of the many things sadly neglected by historians.

2. It is unpaid work, and therefore easily dismissed as not equivalent or economically vital as the “real” work of paid employment.

3. Everyone does it, everyday. So we all tend to take it for granted as just part of our daily existence. It is always there, we don’t question it; if anything we try to minimize it - brush it under the carpet.

So mixing a bit of imagination and passion for the common, for everyday lives and ordinary people, the Museum of Victoria and La Trobe University conducted a joint oral history project of women in South Melbourne - focusing on their production and reproduction in the home while exploring the links between home and community.

Using these transcripts as the basis this paper is about women’s work in the home - responsibilities, skills, produce, stress, tools, and the meaning and value to the women and to society. After a brief sketch of post-war South Melbourne, there will be time to take a more detailed look at the three significant features of these women’s working lives - their techniques and strategies for making ends meet; their responsibilities of motherhood; and their concern, and at times obsession, with cleanliness.

South Melbourne has had a strong industrial history. It was a suburb where the working classes and industry met. South Melbourne was convenient to work, shops, market, parks, the city, and beach; but its industrial dirt and activity and the overcrowding and inadequate housing gave it the stigma of the “slums of Melbourne”. It was a bit rough, one woman remembers how some “women used to go to the hotels and drink; you’d get the ones that did their vegetables, that would sit there peeling their potatoes and doing their beans and that and then they’d go home and get their husband’s tea.”

When Mrs Vogt moved to South Melbourne she was so embarrassed she told her friends and relatives that she was living in Emerald Hill. Another woman had to fight off her mother’s dismay at her decision to live in South Melbourne, knowing it was “the slums”.

In spite of its image, South Melbourne was very progressive with its community services and facilities. It was here that Mary Keheo first began Meals on Wheels, starting with a pram, then a tricycle and finally a car; it was an area where a strong network of Baby Health Centres and kindergartens developed; the Town Clerk, Mr Alexander, was also instrumental in pushing for library facilities in schools and supported many projects which benefited the poor and needy. South Melbourne, in its eagerness to flatten its slum housing, was the first Melbourne suburb to have high rise housing commission flats.

The suburb, its facilities and sense of community is just as vital as the physical setting of the home in the process of interpreting domestic work. The interaction and support between neighbours, the shopping and family facilities all impinged on the duties and responsibilities
of the home. There was mutual exchange between neighbours and between home and community. Not just in the form of purchasing goods but also friendly support, voluntary assistance and charity work. Many of the community services provided (like Meals on Wheels, home help, soup kitchens, fund raising) were done by women who extended their domestic concerns into the community.

Housing was hard to come by, especially after the Second World War, and was therefore often crowded. Some couples were compelled to share with their parents or relatives until they could find accommodation. The housing that these women had varied from balcony rooms to terrace houses, and later in the early 1960s to commission flats.

Top floors of terrace houses were often converted into balcony rooms - it meant extra rent and another living space. The balcony served as a bedroom while the living room and kitchen were on the other side of the window. When the Stewarts and their two children lived on the top floor of his grandmother's house they considered themselves lucky because they had more than most balcony rooms, their's consisted of: a big balcony room, another bedroom and kitchen, with shared bathroom and laundry.9

When Norma Rae moved into her rented terrace house with her husband and five month old baby, she faced a kitchenette with a wooden stove and no running water. She had to use the water from the gully trap for cooking and washing for the first few months.7 There was no hot water. In terms of space, this standard two bedroom house eventually had to cater for Norma, her husband and their two children plus four male boarders. They "were all living in one another's pockets"; the lounge had to be converted into a bunk room while the kitchen became the focal point for food and relaxation.8

Mrs Mitchell's housing conditions were similar again. Her kitchen was just a lean-to with water only available from the gully trap; and she too had a fuel stove, which was located out in the side way.9 At one stage, when her husband's brother, wife and their two children couldn't find accommodation, her two bedroom house was stretched to holding two married couples, and four children.10

The internal spaces of a home are important in touching on the dynamics of work and family relationships. As a working environment it often had its own built-in stresses for the women who had to manage the often overcrowded rooms, the lack of hot water, working with fuel stoves, limited power supply (sometimes only one power point); and in some houses bathrooms didn't exist or were shared with the outside laundry, in one house the laundry and kitchen were one. The most notable thing about these homes and their features is the slow pace of change. Often they remained unchanged up to the 1960's.

Given their physical and financial constraints working class women had to develop imaginative and innovative ways of stretching everything beyond its original use; managing what money there was; and finding ways of earning extra cash. Their innovations and adaptations helped them cope better.

Those women who were widowed in the 1940s and 1950s were compelled to work full time to support their families: although one woman was able to raise her four children on the combination of her husband's superannuation and widows pension, child endowment, school scholarships, the Canteen Services Trust Fund, and the support of relatives, friends and Legacy.11

Raising a family on a pension or on women's wages, which were well below the level of the male family wage, required considerable resourcefulness. For those who did have husbands, the need to find cash supplements highlights the inadequacy of the so-called family wage, but more it questions the expected role of the male breadwinner. Women couldn't always rely on their husbands for regular financial support. Finding ways of earning cash was often simply a matter of survival, and for Norma Rae it meant having four male boarders because her husband wouldn't give her any money.12 When the opportunity rose for them to purchase their rented house, it was Norma who had to front up at the Gas Works and ask for a loan, her husband refused because it meant a £5 deduction from his wages.13

As she explained:

"there's all sorts of ways I've been cramped and getting over the hurdle. Because there was no money, like, you know; but you survived. As long as we had good food - I was a good manager of food."14

She was effectively a housewife for five men - cooking meals, making lunches, changing and making beds, washing linen, ironing clothes; and then looking after her two children as well.
Commenting on the hard work of keeping 5 men and 2 children, she said “I never let anything worry me like that, because I had to worry about him not giving me any money and these were just down-to-earth men.”

Mrs Mitchell claimed she worked 9/10s of her married life - her husband was a “shocking gambler.” At one stage all her furniture was repossessed because they couldn’t meet the repayments. When they were pulling up the lino she discovered some money which she had hidden - she had put it there so she had “something to go on”, if she needed it. She had a series of jobs including: welding belly tanks of planes during the war, filling glasses for Navaretti’s night club in the Hotel Australia, an aircraft inspector at Fisherman’s Bend, a tea lady for Coles New World, and she also worked for the Department of Trade and Industry and Buckley and Nunns.

She made an interesting comment about her paid work:

“The funny part was that when I worked I got more money off him because I think he used to think people would think I was keeping him. I think that’s what it was. He never ever got any of my money but I used to get more off him when I was working.”

Another method used by a woman to bring in extra money, and made possible by having acquired a Mixmaster, was the baking of cakes for sale to neighbours and working women. For several years Mrs Stewart made Christmas cakes. Selling each for £1 she was able to earn enough to do the whole Xmas shopping, both food and presents.

A second technique of making ends meet was improvisation. Perhaps the best example of making-do was in the many uses put to the pram. It is a marvellous symbol of production and reproduction, in most cases it was used as a vehicle for work, linking home and community, and often being passed on from one generation to the next.

As I have mentioned it was the first vehicle used to begin Meals on Wheels; it was also used for carrying and collecting wood, coke, ice, taking cakes to fetes, and of course for shopping. It was always used for shopping, so that on their return from the South Melbourne market mothers would typically be carrying the children and wheeling the shopping.

Making-do was also the art of revitalizing things and giving them extra life. The carpet which had worn out on one side was simply turned over and dyed: “We had another carpet didn’t we?” Slippers were made from old jumpers and blankets; boys pants and overalls were made from men’s trousers; “peaky bonnets” were made from cardigans; and sheets and collars were recycled when the worn parts were “turned”.

Some efforts at improvising were not so clever. One woman remembered “When we’d want to start the fire we’d pull a bit of paling fence off and use that to start the fire with, by the time we were finished there was no paling fence from here to the back gate!”

Women were also responsible for managing the home finances. For Norma Rae, keeping accounts wasn’t an issue because there was never anything left over. For some, there was a certain pride in being able to manage money so that they never owed anything, others relied on time-payment and hire purchase to set up their homes. While it was accepted that women would be responsible for home budgeting, this was sometimes a source of friction between spouses, especially the use of time-payment. Some of the women would put things aside on time-payment without their husband’s knowledge, while others confronted their husbands with purchases despite his disapproval. One memorable occasion was when Mrs McKenna purchased a doll for her daughter, Julie - it was a 5 Pound extravagance which she remembers as the only time her husband questioned her spending. Giving rare pleasure to her daughter was more important than the cost it involved.

The second area is possibly the greatest responsibility of work in the home - that is the business of raising a family. Motherhood was a logical follow-on from marriage. As Mrs Ford said “most people thought, well it was the usual thing - if you got married you had children” and staying home to look after them was again something that was assumed:

“there wasn’t the same attitude that there is now with married people going to work, when you had young then well you just had to look after them, there was no other way really. You just had to stay home and look after them and that was that.”

For Norma Rae, motherhood anchored her to the home - she couldn’t get out and make money, so she had to make do with the boarders.

In talking to these women about being mothers and raising a family the common thread linking them was the amazing lack of informa-
tion and advice on issues like contraception and family planning, preparation for child birth, looking after babies and raising a family. The interviews also reveal the stress of trying to meet the expectations of motherhood, both their own and those from other people.

Contraception was not talked about, and most women expressed ignorance of methods and types available to them. A proper generalization would require interviewers to consider the differences between Catholic and non-Catholic women. And of course there is always the problem of acquiring information on such intimate issues.

We were fortunate in gaining an insight into the private life of one of the women we had hoped to interview. She died before the project began, but we were invited to collect material from her home, and during our visit we found a series of marital guides, the titles included such things as:

- The Art of Marriage
- He and She
- Married Love: A New Contribution to the Solution of Sex Difficulties (both the Australian and British editions)
- Radiant Motherhood
- Enduring Passion
- Rennie MacAndrew on Sex Instruction
- The Guide to Virile Manhood (by Dr Marie Stopes)

Well, what a find! And yes, they were found at the back of her wardrobe. So information about sex, birth, marriage problems was available; but, would she have admitted to having had these books had we interviewed her? And only one of them dealt directly with contraception methods, and that was in an appendix.

Contraception did exist, but for the majority of the women interviewed it was something you just didn't talk about. There was no concept of family planning.

"Oh, it was just nature. You never thought anything of it. You just hoped you didn't have them too quick."

Another woman commented,

"I was only ever going to have two children, a boy and a girl. It was a bit of a shock. five!"

Mrs Mitchell knew of one woman who did illegal abortions, "Yes I knew a few who had gone to her but whatever she was doing wasn't dangerous as long as they went to her early." And their condition would just be passed off as a cold which had finally fixed itself.

Ignorance and inadequate preparation was even more obvious when it came to giving birth. Mrs Ford recalled that "I really didn't know what was going to happen because no one had explained it all to me”, "...there was no instruction. You went in sort of blind, you were going to have a baby, and that was it”.

Again this was a subject not talked about, not even mothers helped. It was, as Norma Rae describes, a "pretty horrendous" experience, made even worse by her ignorance. Even in the pre-natal visits to the doctor there was no help, advice or information, the doctor (usually male) expected that women knew all about it. For those who didn't have the experience of helping their mothers with younger siblings, bringing their new born baby home proved to be a "terrifying" experience.

When one of the women experienced post-natal depression, there was no medical support, advice, or help. And again, when one woman had a premature baby, she was literally left to cope alone with only her own common sense to guide her. Except in this last example, the periods of pregnancy, birth, and post-natal care seemed to be focused more on the child than on the mother.

Some of the mothers experienced great stress, which was only accentuated by their lack of information and advice. Often it manifested itself into feelings of guilt: the guilt of miscarriage, how and why did it happen; the anger and frustration of not being able to feed a baby, not realizing it was ill; the guilt of post-natal depression, and an unsympathetic doctor.

There seems to have been an imbalance within the new scientific approach to mothercraft and child-care where mothers were being advised of the feeding formulas, methods of care, and proper parenting techniques, but were not receiving the same confident advice and support in terms of pregnancy, birth, and handling the stress of parenting. Perhaps there was still an overlap between the scientific experts and what was traditionally passed on by the generations of experienced mothers.

This overlap is also visible with the variation amongst the women between those who used the new Baby Health Centres, visiting them religiously, and those who relied more on their own mothers for advice and support. It is interesting that on one visit by a health centre
sister, on noticing the presence of the woman's mother, she didn't consider herself needed, and didn't visit again, clearly deferring to the more experienced mother.

Following on from the physical demands of child birth, is the third theme that emerged from these interviews, that is, the process, time and arduousness of cleaning. It seems that the pride that these women expressed in their homes was linked strongly with the physical nature of their work.

One of the major advancements made in the home is in the development of the washing machine, a luxury which many of the women weren't able to afford until the 1960s.

When you consider the time and effort involved in washing with a boiling copper, you can easily understand why it was done on a Monday. Monday, the day after the obligatory roast dinner, was always a scratch tea of either cold meat from Sunday's leftovers, or a Shepherd's pie.

Usually the clothes were soaked the night before; in the morning you chopped the kindling if it was a wood copper; sorted the washing into its separate washes of whites, colours, dirty; you may need to do some hand scrubbing; make a soap gel from the ends of soap or grate soap; give it a "good boil" for 40-50 minutes, all the while poking, prodding and moving it around with a copper stick; then you would carefully, because remember it is boiling water, lift it from the copper to one of the double troughs, trying not to lose too much water for the next wash; you need to put aside those things that need starching and do them separately later, you can't avoid getting slightly scalded, there are no plastic gloves; then you rinse each item, wring it out using a hand mangle clamped in the middle of the trough, and let each piece slip into the other trough for blueing, to get them nice and white; then wring them again; finally you lug the trough, and let each piece slip into the other basket to the line for hanging. And don't forget those things that were to be separately starched.

After the 40-50 minute boil, it would take another hour to rinse and wring ready for hanging. The same cycle was repeated through the different types of clothing, until the dirtiest was done. For someone like Mrs Stewart who had to do it regularly, each week, it is easy to see how she was left "leaning over the trough, by the time [she] had finished, ... almost too exhausted to even find the stairs".

But of course, all that hot water couldn't be wasted, it was used to wash out the laundry, and toilet; and sometimes if it wasn't too dirty it would be used for bathing.

And what was the result: an exhausted woman, plus freshly smelling, clean, white washing, proudly spanning the backyard. Mrs Ford said "you were very proud of the fact that it was whiter than white, you know as the saying goes, your sheets had to look nice when they were on the line". And when she made the mistake of mixing something pink in with her sheets, what a job it was trying to convince her husband that they were a new style!

The pride in cleanliness extended to the ironing; some of the women ironed everything, others hated it and tried to hide it instead. Scrubbing floors, dusting and polishing were also part of the work of maintaining a clean home. Some jobs within the home could be compromised, but cleaning was a necessity.

One of the women said she thought cleanliness is always next to godliness, meaning if you were a clean person you would canter through life. It is also next to respectability, and a very visual measure of a "good housewife and mother": "You may be poor, but soap doesn't cost very much". The most frequent complement given to young mothers wheeling their babies was a note on how beautiful and clean they were. One woman made the comment that women of today are not encouraged to take pride in their washing - it was the detergents that did all the work. And that clothes were cleaner then than with today's washing machine, because then you took more trouble.

So what was the meaning and value of these roles and responsibilities to these South Melbourne women?

For Mrs McKenna "It was definitely the physical effort of the women who maintained the standard of living". So what about her husband's wage? Clearly she saw her work as not just equal to her husband's but even more crucial to the quality of their home life.

Mrs Ford gave up her career when she married because her husband didn't want her to work. Housework didn't worry her because she did it in her own time and when she wanted to do it. She maintained that it was important for women to have interests and activities outside their home; for her, voluntary work took the place of paid work, and so her unpaid career fitted in nicely with (didn't threaten) her breadwinner's pride.
When asked what a good housewife was Mrs Fielder answered: "Well, as long as you had meals ready and kept the house clean that was fair enough." She didn't consider housework a full-time job, but in her efforts at describing what it involved: ironing, washing, sweeping, cleaning the kitchen, making beds, dusting, cleaning the bathroom, cooking, child minding and mending at night. It was clear that indeed the time spent on housework was considerably more than an ordinary full-time job. The eight hour day had by-passed work in the home.

Work in the home was a chore, it was hard work, and there was often a strong sense of duty, responsibility and expectations on what and how it should be done. The women interviewed each experienced work in the home differently, their working class backgrounds gave them a common link. It gave many women an immense sense of pride, for others the necessity of earning a wage left them with feelings of guilt about not having lived up to the ideal of a good housewife and mother, i.e., being able to do and give everything all the time. None of the women believed their lives were worthy of the interest and attention we gave them; it took some convincing before they could seriously consider and detail their many roles and responsibilities.

The women we interviewed spent all their lives working in the home: being mother, wife, washerwoman, cook, dressmaker, innovator, teacher, nurse, cleaner, community worker, friend, hostess, electrician, plumber, carpenter, accountant, and a good and imaginative manager of time, energy, money and scarce resources.

Yet, what really hits me, given numerous and varied contributions, is that these women saw themselves as "just housewives and mothers" as if their work counted for nothing.

Like everyone else, they too had learnt to dismiss the value of their work (or should I call it industry?) in the home. And coming back to Malouf, there is a difficulty in seeing, analyzing and appreciating what is common - especially, it seems, when it is unpaid and performed by women.

Unfortunately this is not just history, it represents our present too.

The most moving and valuable result of the South Melbourne oral history project was that by the end of the interviews the women had started to reconsider and realize the value of their lives and their work achievements.

Work in the home is a significant and essential industry. In terms of goods and services produced and reproduced in Australian homes, this unpaid work is estimated at being worth $140 billion per annum. That is greater than half of our recognized economy!

We need to recognize its place in our present lives before we can truly assess its past.

END NOTES

5. Alexander, p. 3.
8. Ibid., p. 74.
10. Ibid., p. 34.
12. Norma Rae, p. 11.
13. Ibid., p. 20.
15. Ibid., p. 53.
17. Ibid., p. 4.
18. Ibid., pp. 7-8.


29. Fielder, p. 71.


31. The Aldred Collection, History Department, Museum of Victoria.

32. Vogt, p. 87.


35. Ford, pp. 76-77.

36. Norma Rae, p. 22.

37. Ford, p. 77.


40. Ibid., p. 8.


42. Ford, pp. 29-30.

43. Ibid., p. 2.

44. McKenna, p. 23.

45. Ford, p. 91.

46. Fielder, p. 19.

47. Ibid., p. 65.