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Public Health in Private

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ABSTRACT

Elite women seized the public health campaign during the 1900 plague outbreak to assert political influence and advocate for sanitation reform grounded in their domestic experiences. These women advocated for their inclusion in the political sphere by valuing their domestic experiences as knowledge relevant for public health initiatives. This reframing of experience positioned them as viable citizens in the imminent Federation. Applying Laura Zanotti's concept of relational ontology, this analysis frames their actions as not simply a battle against institutional authority but as careful and strategic interactions with their era's political context, exploiting aspects of it that were beneficial to them. Their ambivalent involvement in the public health campaign illustrates a complex chapter in Australian medical history. Women used the opportunity of plague to reevaluate their experience of the home as a form of knowledge relevant to public health. At the same time, they leveraged their growing status as political subjects to oppress others.

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Introduction: Housekeeper's Experiences

On 16th March 1900, the *Daily Telegraph* published a letter to the editor by Rose Scott, titled 'Housekeepers' Experiences', which suggested how women should manage household waste and contribute to sanitary reform (Scott 1900, 7). She emphasised how the practical perspective of housekeepers could benefit an ongoing public health campaign, asserting that it was primarily women who were responsible for the sanitary conditions in each home, which in turn affected every street. Specifically, she warned against the 'wooden dust box in vogue', claiming 'those frightful, sour, sickly smells that greet you from house to house as you walk up the street on dust-box night' were 'enough to breed a fever in themselves'. Scott had a better idea, adapted to Sydney's climate: to dispose of refuse daily rather than store it in trendy 'dust-boxes' (Scott 1900, 7).

Scott wanted others to accept her experience of running a household as a form of knowledge that could make a valuable contribution to the public health, essential for the successful containment of the epidemic of plague and the safe functioning of the city. Although household affairs might appear 'trivial', Scott argued, their improvement

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would lead to cost savings, better food quality, reduced fuel use, and effectively eliminate unpleasant odours around the home. This advocacy for improved household sanitation underscored how domestic practices, often overlooked, were pivotal to civic life. Her emphasis on the critical role of intimate activities like managing refuse aligns with Marres et al.'s insights on the political significance of everyday material actions (Marres and Lezaun 2011, 2). Importantly, Scott's letter concludes with a call to action. She recommended women be appointed as sanitary inspectors for their 'practical experience in dealing with small details, which go to make the huge sum of horrid smells, would be invaluable to the public' (Scott 1900, 7).

The 1900 plague was an important event in the history of health and medicine in Australia. In part this was due to the coincidence in time with the development of new medical knowledge and the preparations for the Federation of Australia in the following year. From patient zero on January 19th, to diagnosis of the final case on August 9th 1900, this initial outbreak was the first of a series of 10 epidemics lasting from 1900 until 1921 (Echenberg 2007, 266). Despite the relatively low mortality rate in the 1900 outbreak, with 101 deaths among 303 cases, the plague's emergence stirred significant societal anxiety and led to major public health reforms (Curson and McCracken 1989, 146). When plague was reported in Noumea in December 1899, the NSW Board of Health had already begun implementing measures to detect and exterminate rats on ships arriving at ports (Thearle, Jeffs, and Heagney 1994, 23). Empowered by the relatively recent 1896 Public Health Act, this new board led efforts to combat the plague. Their approach included rat extermination, quarantine measures at the North Head Maritime Quarantine Station, and extensive cleansing of urban areas (Curson and McCracken 1989, 146). However more action was demanded to contain the strong emotions provoked by the plague and to implement a program of sanitary reform (Barr 2024). Given the perceived threat of homes harbouring rats, fleas, microbes, noxious smells or even intense emotions, the NSW Board of Health needed to expand beyond public sphere. Their interventions were characterised by demolition and repair of residences as part of a broader sanitation campaign. Assumed boundaries between the public and private spheres became volatile due to endless anxiety about odours, immigrants and the kind of activities happening behind closed doors that may menace people in public. Disease did not appear respect ordinary boundaries, crisscrossing back and forth between homes, workplaces and city streets.

The main argument presented in this article is twofold: it recognises women's involvement in public health initiatives during the early twentieth century as a strategic form of political activism, establishing domestic practice as knowledge relevant to the public health; and it acknowledges this involvement as a kind of instrumentalist feminism particular to and compromised by its specific context. Scott and her contemporaries used this event to expand epistemological categories of public health knowledge to include the practices of the domestic sphere, and they did this to entitle themselves to a wider sphere of political participation. They framed themselves as experts in their own domain whose work was essential for the practice of public health (Zeiler and Käll 2014, 6). This represents a strategic use of their domestic skills to claim recognition as political subjects, at a time when women were attempting to broaden the field of political participation in more overt ways through the suffrage movement. Their actions resonate with the feminism of Nancy Daukas who advocates

for the significance of traditionally feminine practices in the production of knowledge (Daukas 2016, 64).

To unfold these arguments, the article is organised into several key sections. The article situates the Sydney experience within a global context, drawing parallels with similar feminist movements and public health campaigns across the British Empire and beyond. From this point, I undertake a broader analysis of the systemic changes prompted by the plague outbreak, including the formation of Citizens' Vigilance Committees and the appointment of women as sanitary inspectors, illustrating the evolving public perception of women's roles in health and governance. Following this, I apply Zanotti's concept of relational ontology to analyse women's actions, emphasising the strategic mobilisation of domestic expertise. The concept allows for interpretation of their actions as engaged responses to specific circumstances (Zanotti 2013, 290). I argue that this expression of political agency can be interpreted as a localised, modest action in the context of colonial Australia rather than a more grandiose campaign of defiance or compliance. This perspective resonates with Deborah M. Withers' argument that within contextual governmental and societal dynamics women are neither victims of oppression nor imperious subjects but rather opportunistic subjects, attempting to improve their position through whatever means they had available (Withers 2015). This framework provides for a more nuanced interpretation of the historical role of elite women in public health reform, who broadened the field of political participation for themselves while it oppressing others. To conclude I reflect on the way these women attempted to incorporate domestic practices and experiences into the epistemology of public health.

A Note on Sources

During the first plague outbreak, literate women advocated for their own experiences through frequently published and often syndicated letters to the editor. This practice not only amplified their perspectives on sanitation reform but allowed their opinions to reach a geographic audience that expanded beyond Sydney to regions of the colony not immediately impacted by the public health campaign. Scott's letter was republished in part on multiple occasions by different mastheads, such as the *Singleton Argus* on 17th March, and generated significant commentary (Singleton Argus 1900, 4). Indeed, on 20th March, Mary Sanger Evans wrote a letter to the Daily Telegraph to comment on Scott's letter, arguing that while dust-boxes were a danger that could 'breed fever with their smell' there was in fact a 'far greater danger from the exposure of scraps of food' (Sanger Evans 1900, 7). She contested Scott's authoritative position on household affairs, arguing that the use of a dust-box was a preferable form of food storage. By bringing their domestic experiences into the public sphere through letters to the editors of newspapers, women challenged the traditional epistemological boundaries that devalued 'private' or 'domestic' knowledge in favour of 'public' or 'professional' knowledge.

Yet their opinions did not go unchallenged. The formidable threat posed by the plague, the sanitation campaign and the transformation of social roles caused considerable social anxiety. Many people had an opinion on how women were involving themselves in the campaigns and their scope of work. Their published letters often sparked editorial comments and responses from both other women and men, creating an exchange of ideas and opinions in a public forum. These letters, articles, complaints,

and their rejoinders, are a particularly well documented and useful source of understanding the heterogenous perspectives of literate Anglophone men and women during the plague. Yet these sources are limited, as they exclude the voices of people were not literate and of women and men publishing in languages other than English, such as Chinese. For this reason, this research is limited to the actions of literate Anglophone women at the time and how they used the plague in 1900 as an opportunity to have their own experiences valued as a contribution to public health, thereby positioning themselves as active political subjects.

International Context

The third global pandemic was primarily a pandemic of empire. During the late nineteenth century, the third global pandemic of bubonic plague[1] spread from China to Hong Kong and around British colonial port cities. During the period of aggressive colonial expansion across the British Empire, emigration presented women with opportunities to assert their agency. The historian Lisa Chilton argues that this movement of women emigrating to colonies of New South Wales and elsewhere from Britain was mostly initiated by imperialist middle-and upper-class women. They considered the emigration of single British women as an opportunity to redefine their social roles and identity while, at the same time, domesticating the colonies (Chilton 2003, 36). For example, a magazine called *The Imperial Colonist* depicted colonial life as liberating women from their circumscribed roles in traditional British society (Chilton 2003, 37). As the European powers, particularly Britain, annexed territories in Africa and Asia, they not only exported their governance systems but also their culture and moral values. Women emigrants were empowered to proactively cultivate these values in their destination colonies (Delap 2021, 16–17). They enacted British sophistication and morality, which extended from household management to the education of children and providing intellectual companionship. In this sense, the emigration of these women embodied ambivalence; it was both a tool of empire – extending British influence and culture – and a personal strategy for women to renegotiate their social roles. Women emigrants to the colonies could become more involved in the public sphere, influence cultural and social behaviour, and use their social role as leverage to advocate for greater rights and recognition. This era of colonial expansion was also a precursor to various politicised gender struggles, highlighting the interconnection between empire and politics detailed by feminist historian Lucy Delap (Delap 2021, 17).

As with any social transformation, these processes of emigration and personal advocacy entailed anxieties and tensions. As Chilton argues, women's aspirations often clashed with the realities of colonial life (Chilton 2003, 52). They had to navigate complex social hierarchies which did not always reflect their idealised fantasies. Moreover, they were forced to reconcile their positions as imperial subjects and individuals seeking personal fulfilment. Every colony was different, and their methods or assumed roles sometimes stirred conflict by clashing with local or colonial practices (Chilton 2003, 44). The emergence of public health as an important institution in the early twentieth century reflected this pattern, where women's participation in sanitation reform was often linked to their struggle for political recognition in complex ways. For example, Nayan Shah's 'Contagious Divides' (2001) highlights how white middle-class women promoted

themselves as champions of cleanliness and morality in 19th century San Francisco, by contrast with the lifestyles of Chinese immigrants, which they mischaracterised as a foil to their own supposedly virtuous behaviours (Shah 2001, 108). To this effect, Dr. Mary Sawtelle, who edited a medical advice journal, demonised Chinese women as prostitutes who were infected with diseases, using her platform to advocate for greater hygienic and moral vigilance in the public sphere (Shah 2001, 107). Simultaneously, Shah argues, Presbyterian women missionaries aimed to reform Chinese women to conform to Christian and 'civilised' domestic standards. These efforts were part of a broader cultural movement which conflated the attributes of a constitutionally pure, ethically white and physically clean American subject (Shah 2001, 111).

This aligns with similar movements taking place elsewhere such as 'degeneration theory' in Argentina, which Kristin Ruggiero argues, tied health and criminal discourses to nationalist narratives which emerged as each country declared independence (Ruggiero 2004, 118–119). In Argentina, leaders and intellectuals aimed to cultivate a 'new race' – a *raza Argentina* – that would overcome perceived ethnic inferiorities and lead the nation towards progress and modernity. This goal often entailed suppressing or eliminating indigenous or non-European elements within the population of Argentina as unhealthy (Ruggiero 2004, 122). In this transformative period, Regina Markell Morantz argues, women advocated for better health practices and political rights, thus reshaping societal attitudes towards health as a formative aspect of the rights and entitlements of citizenship (Morantz 1977, 493). These developments highlight the impact of women's involvement in public health reforms and their influence on shaping national health policies and societal attitudes in settler-colonial contexts at the turn of the 20th century (Morantz 1977, 490; Ruggiero 2004, 122; Shah 2001, 107–108).

The efforts of Sydney's literate Anglophone women mirrored these global patterns. During the 1900 plague, they asserted moral and intellectual superiority over working class, urban poor, and Chinese immigrants under the guise of domestic hygiene and sanitation campaigns in which non-British immigrants were frequently subjected to invasive inspections and held to stricter sanitation standards (Town Clerk's Correspondence Folders 26th July 1900c; The Truth 1900, 7). Despite evidence that many plague cases among these groups originated from their workplaces, such as the city wharves, immigrant and poor communities were alleged to live in filthy 'rampantly repulsive' houses and were suspected of being physically and morally corrupt (Dansey 1870; Fitzgerald 1987, 77). One of the first acts passed by the federal government after the Federation of Australia in 1901 was the now notorious Immigration Restriction Act 1901. This act not only placed almost impossible restrictions on the immigration of non-British immigrants, but explicitly prohibited entry to Australia of 'any person suffering from an infectious or contagious disease of a loathsome or dangerous character' (Bashford 1998, 398).

'A Missionary of Cleanliness': Citizens' Vigilance Committees

Changing social roles and disruption during the first plague outbreak generated considerable emotion including fear, disgust, and anxiety. By March the Chief Medical Officer and President of the newly formed New South Wales Board of Health Dr. Ashburton-Thompson noted with concern that 'popular excitement had gradually increased until it had reached a pitch which threatened further serious interference with the Department's

practical management of the epidemic'. He called for a Special Plague Committee to support the government in the execution of its 'difficult and anxious duties' (Ashburton-Thompson 1900, 17). On March 28th a local sanitary committee was established in Woollahra at the house of local parliamentarian Hon. Edward Pulsford. The committee met every night at 8 pm. At one of their first meetings the Attorney-General Hon. R. Wise delivered a speech on the waywardness of Sydney's residents, particularly the 'indifference theretofore shown by the people in general to their civic duties' (Ashburton-Thompson 1900, 17).

The Woollahra Sanitary Committee was an important precursor to the Citizens' Vigilance Committee writ large. It paved the way for the involvement and collaboration of literate women of British origin. On 9th April, the Sydney Morning Herald reported that Miss Rose Scott had formed the 'Woollahra Ladies Committee' under the auspices of the Woollahra Sanitary Committee to ensure the collaboration of women residents in the enforcement of the requests of the Department of Health, to inform householders and to assist with the inspections of homes to be carried out by municipal officers (Sydney Morning Herald 1900d, 3). Scott was a trade unionist and suffragette who became a prominent advocate for the collaboration of householders in supporting public health measures during the plague outbreak.

In the 1850s and 1860s in England, many 'Ladies Sanitary Associations' contributed to urban sanitary reform with women representing themselves as 'domestic officers of health' (Bashford 1998, 15). In fact, the ambiguous and liminal status of women was crucial to the project of reform. As they had more social mobility, they could cross over boundaries constructed by class, behaviour and geography (Bashford 1998, 15). The committees also played an important role not only in facilitating the public health campaign but in promoting the moral and social value of housework for public health. In the colony of New South Wales, the committees attempted to regulate esoteric spaces that were less visible to government authorities: between the private household and the often-negligent local councils, between householders, and between the rules and initiatives of the Board of Health. They were particularly useful for policing and reviewing the work of the local councils, renowned for being corrupt and inefficient (Kelly 1981, 40). Despite not being contagious in the sense that it could be transmitted from person to person, plague generated significant social effects among the population in the form of emotional and affective responses, prompting demand for decentralised surveillance. While women played a key role in brokering these liminal spaces, their ambiguous status was often unsettling. Rumours of imposter inspectors illustrate these anxieties, with the commitment to advertising the status of official and unofficial inspectors an attempt to secure a private sphere and social identity that was in a process of flux, ensuring only the right types of people had control over and were entitled by these changes.

Educational Influence

The British Empire's 'civilizing mission' involved sending 'educated home helps' to its colonies to reinforce cultural standards and exert influence (Chilton 2003, 44 and 51). Primarily, these women were seen as bearers of the so-called 'civilizing mission' – a belief that British culture, values, and practices were superior and beneficial to the colonies. These middle and upper-class British women were expected to promote British values and domesticity,

contributing to the civilisation of colonial societies and rectifying gender imbalances due to the male settler dominance (Chilton 2003, 51). The influx of marriageable women was expected to rectify this imbalance, promote family life, and provide a stabilising social influence by instilling 'proper' British domestic and family values and setting standards for behaviour and social norms. This concept resonated in Sydney during the 1900 plague, as the Woollahra Sanitary Committee's initiative to distribute household management pamphlets reflected a similar strategy to influence domestic practices. This educational drive was seen in the distribution of pamphlets titled 'Instructions to householders' to over 100,000 properties, advising on household management to combat plague germs (Evening News 1900a, 3; Sunday Times 1900, 8; Sydney Morning Herald 1900a, 3).

On 30th March the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that the Woollahra Sanitary Committee had planned to distribute a pamphlet to around 100,000 properties advising householders on the care of their properties during plague. This decision resulted from Pulsford's suggestion that the Health Department's 'Instructions to Householders' poster should be printed in pamphlet form and delivered to every house in metropolitan and suburban districts, as few people had seen them. Ashburton-Thompson agreed and arranged to print and deliver the pamphlets (Sydney Morning Herald 1900a, 3). To support this educative influence, in April the Ladies Committee of the Woollahra Sanitary Committee issued a circular providing advice to women of the colony to manage their homes (Sydney Morning Herald 1900b, 8). This advice was republished verbatim in several leading dailies such as the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Daily Telegraph* (Daily Telegraph 1900a, 7; Sydney Morning Herald 1900b, 8). The appeal instructed all women to burn all animal and vegetable refuse in their kitchen fires daily, and to cut up small pieces of fat and boil them down to use instead of butter, ostensibly to reduce the storage of food scraps that might attract rats. They should boil down bones to make soup, and any unused scraps should be kept in a covered tin for fowls. The dust box should be kept free of bad smells ideally containing only clean ashes. Householders were also advised to open windows and let in air and sunshine to protect against plague germs. The circular exhorted women to burn dead rats and report any location renowned for rats or bad smells to their municipal authorities or the local sanitary committee (Sydney Morning Herald 1900b, 8).

On the 11th of April, the initial successes of the Woollahra Sanitary Committee were rolled out across the colony in the establishment of a series of Citizens' Vigilance Committees. The first was established under the chairmanship of Alderman James Graham, who later became mayor of Sydney (Echenberg 2007, 260). According to Ashburton-Thompson, the goal and watchword of the committees was to make households 'cooperate' (Sydney Morning Herald 1900c, 8). They should 'wield an educative influence … so that the public may be enabled to take an active interest in projects for the improvement of sanitary laws, and also for the improvement of sanitary conditions in all homes' (Sydney Morning Herald 1900c, 8). Their mandate was to take action to prevent the spread of the disease and improve the overall sanitary conditions in the city. The committees worked closely with the Government, the Board of Health, and the Sydney City Council to coordinate their efforts. Rose Scott drafted another pamphlet that she presented at a meeting of the Woollahra Sanitary Committee on 17th April. According to an article published two days later in the Sydney Morning Herald, the committee agreed to publish and distribute the letter (Sydney Morning Herald 1900b, 8).

Appointment of Women as Sanitary Inspectors

When education failed, committee activity escalated to surveillance and reporting, to observe and report to their local council 'every matter, or premises, which appeared to him to constitute a nuisance and a danger to health' (Ashburton-Thompson 1900, 17). In outraged tones the Citizens' Vigilance Committees reported cases of neglect, like a house on Harris Street near the Town Hall with a rotten roof and a yard littered with suspiciously lethargic rats, potentially signalling their illness with plague. In the area close to a house where about six people had been infected, they had discovered the premises, 'in a disgustingly insanitary state as regards drainage' that was also infested with diseased rats (Sydney Morning Herald 1900c, 8). Initial inspection revealed a 'shameful and scandalous' revelation of the 'conditions of filth' of the city at the onset of the outbreak (Sydney Morning Herald 1900c, 8).

The committees also policed the work being undertaken by McCredie's cleaning team. On the 16th May the Citizens' Vigilance Committee made a complaint to the Secretary of the Board of Health, which was later forwarded to the City of Sydney, claiming some houses that had been 'declared clean by sanitary inspectors when the furniture was infested by vermin'. They singled out for condemnation a notorious 'Bug Terrace'. Despite a local investigation they could not find a neighbour that was willing to report the owner, which prevented proper resolution (Town Clerk's Correspondence Folders 1900). This period underscored hygiene as a tenet of citizenship, with state interventions in domestic sanitation seen as a means to uphold public morality and order. *The Truth* underscored the importance of personal hygiene in safeguarding against epidemics, implying a tie between cleanliness, civic duty, and the right to self-governance (The Truth 1900, 5). Hygienic practices became a marker of moral and civic responsibility, with educational efforts underlining how material conditions of living spaces intertwined with notions of citizenship and social order (Marres and Lezaun 2011, 16).

On the 19th of May and the 23rd of May the *Evening News*, *Australian Star* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* respectively reported that Rose Scott and other women from the National Council of Women, such as Lady Darley and Miss Macdonald, had forwarded a letter to the Under-Secretary of Finance and Trade to ask the New South Wales Premier and Colonial Treasurer to request the employment of qualified women as sanitary inspectors. Their proposal copied a similar model from England first established in 1893 (Australian Star 1900a, 11; Evening News 1900b, 3; National Council of Women 1900, 10). The letter sought to bring to the Board of Health and municipal councils' notice the innovative contributions of Dr. Orme Dudfield from London, who distinguished himself as the first medical officer to advise his vestry on appointing women as sanitary inspectors (Evening News 1900b, 3). Women sanitary inspectors in England attended a course in sanitation and passed an exam, but their work was restricted to sites where women were already employed or occupied. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported their statement that the outcomes were highly successful, leading to the adoption of this 'innovation' by other vestries in London and the provinces, with these appointments being limited to places of work ordinarily dominated by women, such as laundries and workshops (National Council of Women 1900, 10).

Scott repeated her appeal for female sanitary inspectors in other correspondence. The best way to manage this crisis, she argued, was to appoint female inspectors to survey homes and call out any failure to maintain adequate standards in the home. She cited

the example of Marylebone where a Miss O'Kell had been appointed as a sanitary inspector, arguing that if there were a practical woman serving as a household inspector, she would at least be capable of assisting men in other departments by eliminating unpleasant odours related to household refuse (Scott 1900, 7).

The employment of women as sanitary inspectors were also touted by signatories of the National Council of Women as an important solution to respond to the 'existing unsanitary state of Sydney with its great danger to life and health, together with the proved disinclination of male inspectors to inquire minutely into the sanitary arrangements of private houses' (National Council of Women 1900, 10). The *Evening News* even quoted the duties of the women inspectors of the English vestries. They reported to the medical officer of health all nuisances including clogged or malodourous drains; unventilated or poorly lit cess pits or sanitary conveniences; dirty or uncovered cisterns; defective dustbins, and miscellaneous problems (Evening News 1900b, 3). That is to say, the responsibilities of women sanitary inspectors extended beyond the private sphere out into the streets, roads and drains that surrounded their homes, showing the extent to which these spheres overlapped or intruded upon one another.

At a meeting of the Citizens' Vigilance Committee at the Sydney Town Hall on the 26th of April 1900, the executive announced it had received the support of the government, the Board of Health, and the Sydney City Council to roll out a series of sub-committees (Sydney Morning Herald 1900e, 6). Several resolutions separated the city area into 11 divisions, appointed 5 volunteers from each electorate to call public meetings and establish local vigilance committees, and appointed both male and female sanitary inspectors to each committee. Importantly, both male and female sanitary inspectors would be endowed with authority under the Health Act (Singleton Argus 1900, 6).

Anxious Work

There was however considerable controversy and heterogeneity of opinion about the authority of women adopting these roles in public committees and the kind of work they were doing. The shift towards involving private households and women in public health efforts disrupted conventional perceptions of domestic and civic responsibilities. This led to uncertainty and apprehension about the changing dynamics of societal participation and governance. On Wednesday 24th October, the *Evening News* reported that an unidentified lady had been asking to inspect homes across Paddington. She arrived often before 10 o'clock in the morning, impersonating the New South Wales Board of Health and the local group of volunteers that supported their work, the Citizens' Vigilance Committee (Evening News 1900b, 7). The story was picked up and joked about far beyond Sydney. In Newcastle, the local newspaper accused the imposter of making house calls just after breakfast, claiming the authority of the health department, and asking to inspect the rooms. She apparently commented on the conditions of the furniture, bedrooms, kitchen, and even the layout of the home. The author mocked that local women suffered greatly from these visits, 'some being caught with their hair down, some in last year's print dress, and some, it is alleged, with their teeth out' (Newcastle Morning Herald 1900, 3). An inspector's report tabled at the Paddington Council claimed 'serious complaints are made of her domineering and offensive attitude towards the residents, and the frequently frivolous nature of her complaints' (Newcastle

Morning Herald 1900, 3). In the council meeting, the inspector disclaimed responsibility for the lady and assured the public that she had no authority from the Board of Health. Eventually, the meeting decided to place an advertisement advising residents to beware the imposter, 'which means that if she calls before breakfast on anyone again, the insulted lady of the house may tear the hussy's eyes out with impunity' (Evening News 1900c, 7; Newcastle Morning Herald 1900, 3).

In Victoria, a motion was presented to the city council of Melbourne to appoint a permanent female sanitary inspector with a salary of £100 and a bicycle (The Age 1900, 7). As Lucy Delap claims, this period also witnessed a burgeoning of women's education globally, an increase in women's paid employment, and the rise of the bicycle, symbolising new freedoms and fears personified by the 'new woman' cyclist (Delap 2021, 2). It was agreed, however, after a long debate that the position should be a fixed term contract of 12 months rather than permanent (The Age 1900, 7). For some, their work to contain further outbreaks was considered a temporary exigency, rather like the way women's incorporation into the public sphere was conceived during periods of war, rather than a permanent change. In April, an article in the *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miner's Advocate* commenting on this decision specifically opposed the appointment of women as sanitary inspectors because they would be invasive and lacking authority. In part, this conflict was a result of arguments about women's participation in the workforce, with some claiming that a self-appointed committee was undemocratic and should not be able to claim for itself power best vested in the government. In this view, women were by nature inimical to the affairs of state. Their authority to perform roles on behalf of the public health was considered an a priori form of posturing, an imposition, not unlike the wayward lady inspector inviting herself into the homes of confused residents for fake inspections. The coordinated efforts required for sanitary reform were too important for committees run by private citizens and women, 'the work of cleansing the city is not of the kind that should be relegated to any private person, no matter how devoted'. For this author, women were useful for their educational influence, but they could not adopt the kind of policing, intrusive, coercive role of inspectors. Instead, he praised the more subtle efforts of the women's sanitary committee through publications and circulars, 'which doesn't insult people by talking to them at the front door but reaches them surely by means of the press' (Newcastle Morning Herald and Miner's Advocate 1900, 3). And yet it is this more active political role that women were attempting to claim for themselves.

By integrating private domestic knowledge into broader health strategies, the proactive involvement of women in the Citizens' Vigilance Committees marked a significant evolution in public health policy. This integration aligns with Marres and Lezaun's 2011 argument for the significance of the public participation through material conditions, objects, and settings (Marres and Lezaun 2011, 2). They focus on the material aspects of life, such as household management, to challenge traditional views of political action that separate it from everyday material concerns. Women's use of their domestic knowledge to influence public health policy demonstrates how 'object-dependent qualities of their everyday lives' were integral to their political engagement (Marres and Lezaun 2011, 2). In this sense, the case of the Citizens' Vigilance Committee demonstrates the way in which the seemingly insignificant material practices of our home lives can have a significant impact not only on public discourse but on the public sphere itself. The appointment of women as sanitary inspectors embodied this approach, transforming

private domestic spaces into sites of active public health intervention. This transition highlights the tangible impact of their everyday practices, like washing the floors and emptying dust bins, in reshaping public participation and civic engagement (Koller 2010, 269; Marres and Lezaun 2011, 2).

Strategic Domesticity

With its focus on the material practices of everyday life in the home, the history of women's involvement in sanitation reform in early twentieth century Sydney would appear to represent a complex chapter in Australian feminist history. Women's engagement with sanitation was clearly opportunistic, leveraging a historical moment to assert their experience as knowledge relevant to the public health and position themselves as public political subjects. This ontological shift opened new avenues for their involvement in civic life (Lake 2007, 180). In 1902, less than two years after the first plague outbreak, women achieved suffrage with the passing of the Commonwealth Franchise Act, which granted the vote to male and female adults over 21 years of age, regardless of whether they were married. Within the state government of the region of New South Wales, women were also granted suffrage in August 1902. However certain classes of people continued to be excluded from the category of citizen, such as Indigenous people and non-British subjects. Thus while Scott and her contemporaries advanced women's rights and the importance of conventionally domestic activities as forms of knowledge, it is arguable that their work did not enact an explicitly feminist epistemology as defined by Daukas, because their empowerment involved devaluing the knowledge and status of other groups, particularly minorities and lower-class communities, whose households they judged as inadequate or dirty, and worthy of intervention (Daukas 2016, 64).

Lucy Delap's analysis of women's roles in colonial settings argues that their actions, whether complicit or resistant to the social order, require an appreciation of their contextual circumstances (Delap 2021, 22). Delap's global history of feminism provides a framework to acknowledge the occasionally uncomfortable aspects of what she refers to as 'feminisms'. Her optimistic approach is open to critique but does not entirely judge past actions based on today's standards (Delap 2021, 22). The actions of these women must therefore be understood within a broader context of feminist history, where the plague was instrumentalised quite self-consciously as an opportunity for empowerment of specific groups at the expense of others.

I argue that actions of women in turn of the century Sydney thus embody a kind of ambivalence. While advocating for the value of their experiences as public health, they were also loosely entangled in a strategy through their work as educators spreading British cultural norms across the colonies of the Empire. To comprehend this complexity, Laura Zanotti's concept of 'relational ontology' provides insight into agency and power dynamics in compromised contexts like colonial settings and the relationship between individuals and power (Zanotti 2013, 297). Instead of perceiving women as oppressed victims, she argues, it is crucial to recognise the subtle ways in which they interacted with, were influenced by, and contributed to government policies and societal norms through their daily actions (Zanotti 2013, 290). For Zanotti, political action should be seen as engagement with existing circumstances, rather than a total rejection of them. In this sense the women's actions were indeed political, as they opportunistically used

available material resources and local institutions to empower themselves. Zanotti's perspective suggests that political agency consists of small-scale and localised efforts in response to sometimes ambiguous power dynamics. Power is not a unitary force proscribing behaviour, she argues, but a combination of various influences and factors. Women actively participated in this system by responding to and engaging with the challenges they encountered. Zanotti is attentive to what she describes as 'pragmatist humility', which involves adapting to and gradually transforming situated conditions (Zanotti 2013, 299). This approach emphasises the importance of a more incremental participation and adaptability over time, rather than as one singular movement that strives to rid the world of all forms of oppression.

Zanotti's approach aligns with Deborah M. Withers' concept of 'strategic affinities' (Withers 2015, 140). Withers suggests directing attention towards material culture and how everyday experiences become politicised (Withers 2015, 140). She argues for a nuanced perspective that recognises the strategies women may have employed to navigate their circumstances and exert influence during the plague (Withers 2015, 132). The concept of relational ontologies promotes a view of political agency by focusing on practical actions in specific situations rather than pursuing idealised 'totalities' of perfect conditions (Zanotti 2013, 290). It highlights the importance of small-scale interactions and considers the outcomes and impacts of decisions in their particular circumstances instead of relying on idealised ambitions. This concept thus accounts for contingency, the inherent uncertainty in power and politics, and how things come to be valued and devalued (Zanotti 2013, 290). When applied to women's roles during the plague, this concept suggests that their actions should be viewed not as responses to the crisis but as part of an interactive relationship with political and societal structures which leveraged the opportunity of the plague to gain value as political subjects in their relational context. This approach illuminates the complexity of women's involvement in public health and their struggle for political recognition, framing their efforts as a delicate balance between advocacy for social change and entanglement within imperial power structures. What is interesting here is how they deliberately used this historical opportunity of public health reform to promote their own expertise and leverage power.

Conclusion: The Lasting Role of Women in Public Life

In late November, the *Australian Star* published an article titled 'Feeding the Rats' (Australian Star 1900b, 2). A report presented by the inspector of the Citizens' Vigilance Committee to the Sydney City Council claimed that some citizens were careless in disposing of food waste. It stated, 'I beg to report that in the course of my rounds of inspection during the last two weeks I have come across many serious instances of thoughtlessness on the part of householders in throwing food into lanes and other places near or adjoining residences. This is a direct encouragement to the rats' (Australian Star 1900b, 2). The committee had attempted to educate the public and now was appealing to the City Council to prosecute offenders and 'stop a practice fraught with so much danger to the public health'. The author of the letter endorsed Rose Scott's 'common-sense' and 'economical' recommendations which any ordinary citizen should follow. 'If the householders would but take a few simple precautions of this kind the rats would receive very much less encouragement than they now get' (Australian Star 1900b, 2).

It was the first outbreak of the plague that produced the strongest emotive, social and institutional responses, which included the formation of the Citizens' Vigilance Committees and their moralising social improvement campaigns. A hive of short-lived activity, the committees lobbied the Water and Sewerage Board to fumigate drainage systems, requested the Department of Public Instruction connect all schools to sewerage, pressed the Railway Department to prohibit passengers taking their cache of dead rats on trains, and lobbied the Board of Health to inspect each house occupied by Chinese people, concerned by the rather preposterous contention that they may have hidden their dead relatives inside (Curson and McCracken 1989, 172–173; Sydney Morning Herald 1900e, 8). Many lamented their demise and called for ongoing participation of the public in the task of combating the nuisances of odour, street refuse, and anything that could support the local colony of rats. In December the *Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser* published the Citizens' Vigilance Committee inspector's report referring to people throwing food scraps into lanes or 'other places near or adjoining residences'. The author emphasised the ongoing need for the collaboration of householders in making sure the streets were free of refuse, appealing to 'the women of the community to interest themselves in the matter' (Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser 1900, 1321).

But over the course of the plague outbreak, as emotions abated, the activities of the Citizens' Vigilance Committees gradually wound down. On the 12th of October the Citizens' Vigilance Committee of the City of Sydney was amalgamated with another organisation, the Municipal Reform Association (Daily Telegraph 1900b, 10). A report in the Daily Telegraph on 17th December talks of the Citizens' Vigilance Committee established in April of that year deciding to enter a state of 'suspended animation', while a Municipal Reform Association completely disbanded, having dealt with 1863 complaints regarding 2178 premises (Daily Telegraph 1900c, 4). Subsequent outbreaks did not compel reformation of the committees, though this was occasionally called for. According to Trove, a catalogue of the National Library of Australia, in 1900 there were 557 mentions of the Citizen's Vigilance Committee in newspapers in the colony of New South Wales. In 1901, however, there were only 13 mentions in the same newspapers, and in 1902 there were 12 mentions. By 1904 the only mentions of the Citizen's Vigilance Committee in the local papers were referring to their activities during the first outbreak of the plague in 1900 (Daily Telegraph 1904, 11), or to call for their reformation, for example, to launch a discriminatory campaign against the presence of Afghan migrants in Broken Hill, to 'minimise, if not abolish, the evils resulting from the presence and competition of coloured aliens' (Evening News 1904, 4).

During the 1900 Sydney plague outbreak, Australia was preparing for Federation. Women proactively participated in public heath campaigns and sanitation reform to empower themselves as subjects within a transforming political context. In a way this was also oppressive rather than liberating, as educated Anglophone women drew upon their expertise and knowledge to assert authority over household management. Their involvement encompassed activities such as writing articles and letters regarding domestic affairs, participating in public forums, and writing complaints. In doing so, they aligned their fight for suffrage with their perceived expertise in matters of health and home. Prominent individuals like Rose Scott exemplified this application of knowledge by offering practical advice on managing household waste – a clear demonstration of how such expertise could influence both public health policies and women's rights movements (National Council of Women 1900, 2). Rose Scott and her

colleagues tactically transformed tangible aspects of housekeeping into a form of public knowledge. By leveraging their expertise in affairs, these women redefined the boundaries of political participation, effectively using their understanding of managing households as a powerful tool for reforming public health and also advocating for their own importance. Yet this shift in women's roles was not without its complexities. I have argued in this article that women embodied a kind of ambivalence during this time, both making contributions to health, and reshaping the relationship between public and private spheres, while also promoting British culture at the expense of immigrants from other places. Adopting Laura Zanotti's concept of relational ontology sheds light on the nature of these actions – it reveals that their endeavours were not simply opposition to oppressive systems but rather complex and opportunistic engagements with the socio-political context of their time that reinforced whatever aspects of that system worked to their advantage. This perspective underscores both their role in advancing health and women's rights. At the same time it also acknowledges that they played a part in perpetuating certain power dynamics. The engagement of educated Anglophone women in public health, rooted in the material practices of everyday life, forms a distinctive and somewhat complex chapter in Australian feminist history. This chapter is marked by significant transformation in the importance of public health, the valuation of women's experiences and political subjectivity - a transformation that was realised by deliberately and instrumentally oppressing others.

Note

1. Bubonic plague, predominant in Sydney's 1900 outbreak, mainly affects the lymphatic system, marked by swollen lymph nodes or 'buboes' (Yang and Anisimov 2016, 296). The causative bacterium, Yersinia pestis, was identified by Alexandre Yersin in 1894, but uncertainties persisted in 1900 about its transmission, particularly the roles of rats and insects (Engelmann and Lynteris 2020, 47; Yang and Anisimov 2016, 304). Only in 1905 was it established that rats and fleas were key vectors (Ashburton-Thompson 1907, 1104). This uncertainty significantly influenced public health responses during the plague (Barr 2024, 42–44). Today, it's known that bubonic plague spreads through flea bites from infected rats and can lead to severe infection without timely antibiotic treatment (Yang and Anisimov 2016, 14–16).

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