

The Victorian Governess in colonial New Zealand

Exploring social class in nineteenth century New Zealand through the records of the Female Middle Class Emigration Society

By Katie Glover



Between 1862 -1886, approximately 48 young, single British women journeyed from Britain to New Zealand to seek employment as governesses with the assistance of the Female Middle Class Emigration Society (FMCES). Borne out of concern for the welfare of unmarried and unemployed middle-class women, and amidst debates about Britain's 'surplus woman' problem, the Society aimed to help women whom it considered 'superior in birth and attainments' secure respectable employment (or marriage) in New Zealand, Australia, Canada and South Africa.

Archival records connected to the FMCES shed light on some of the challenges that single, middle-class migrant women encountered in navigating the social fabric of these colonial settings.

Image: Kate Brind. Miss Brind participated in the FMCES' private migration scheme and arrived in New Zealand in 1873 to seek work as a governess.

Difficulty securing 'respectable' employment

Many of the governesses who travelled to New Zealand with the help of the FMCES expected to find their services in great demand upon their arrival. They were disappointed to learn that this was not the case.

New Zealand's growing settler society sought young, hardworking women who were prepared to undertake domestic duties and physical labour that most governesses felt unsuitable for women of their social class. In time, some of these women were successful in securing work as governesses within New Zealand families. Others risked their perceived gentility by taking up work as teachers, dressmakers, housemaids or barmaids.

Competition in the hunt for husbands

Governesses who sought marriage were also surprised to find themselves in competition with women of all social classes and backgrounds in New Zealand.

*"...all the eligible men have been picked up
by servant girls a few years ago."*

-Miss Cary in a letter to the FMCES, 2 October 1867

*"[New Zealand is] undoubtedly the
paradise of servants..."*

-Miss Long in a letter to the FMCES, May 1880

WANTED.

A N experienced Governess desires Situation in family. English, French, Music, Singing, and Dancing. —G., Box 185, Post-office.

A YOUNG lady, educated at Edinburgh, Germany, and Paris, wishes employment as teacher or governess. Reference, the Rev. Dr Stuart. Address, Miss Macpherson, care of R. Church, Maori Hill. 15j

WANTED.—A YOUNG LADY, experienced in teaching, desires a Re-engagement as Resident Governess. Acquirements: English, French, and Music. —Address J.A.B., P.O. Box No. 46, Oamaru. 22ja

*Above: Some governesses tried advertising their services in provincial newspapers.
(Otago Witness, 29 January 1881).*

Ultimately, the FMCES' private migration scheme was limited in its operation and in its success. But evidence of the challenges that class-conscious governesses faced in seeking employment and marriage in nineteenth century New Zealand is helpful for identifying some of the ways in which Victorian notions of class were stretched and recomposed in colonial settings.

References & sources

London School of Economics (LSE), Women's Library Archives, Records of the Female Middle Class Emigration Society, GB 106 1FME.

Portrait of Miss Brind: Miss Brind. Nelson Provincial Museum, Davis Collection: 289

Otago Witness, Issue 1525, 29 January 1881, Page 17

Kathrin Levitan, 'Redundancy, the "Surplus Woman" Problem, and the British Census, 1851-1861', Women's History Review, 17.3 (2008), 359-76.