

Article

'The Anti Laundress': Languages of Service in the Hunter Valley of New South Wales, Australia 1830–1860

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Abstract: Three languages of service in the Hunter Valley show the emotional impact of new labour systems on valuing and self-valuing in work. The newspaper advertisements present a self-image of the servant as a negotiator for wages and conditions, and servants read these advertisements and formed attitudes from them. Their language suggests they were significant players in the modernising of work. Wealthy employers sought the cheapest labour possible, and the new lower middle-class townsman added notions of respectability that servants adopted themselves. In conflict with this, the letters of a squatter family represent the servant as an object of humour, as sly, untrustworthy, and dangerously sexualised. This abject status derived from notions of servants as less than human, as stock, from slavery. In response, servants replied that they knew their work and emphasised a labour market perspective.

Keywords: colony; emotion; Hunter River; family; service

1. Introduction

How workers are positioned and self-positioned in western societies is of particular interest today when labour markets are impacted by casualisation and the gig economy (Sasaki 2019, p. 101). In the mid-nineteenth century, the colony of New South Wales was extricating itself from the bargains and negotiations of convict labour to be confronted with a new transient labour force and contractual system of labour hire, where both employer and servant agreed as to the terms of their employment (Shaw 1966; Nicholas 1989). Global concepts of what labour was and how it related to emotions came into play. The Hunter Valley was the centre of the colony's wealth, and examination of representations of the emotional meaning of labour show exactly how social change worked in a world still influenced by notions of bonded and slave labour.

To live in close proximity in a house or yarded homestead with a person one regarded as a lesser being was something that characterised the squatters of colonial New South Wales. The word 'squatter' applied to anyone who occupied land without permission of the government, but most squatters were wealthy young men from families who had been granted thousands of acres by the Governor of New South Wales or who arrived in the colony to seek their fortune. These men went further afield with First Nations guides and servants to mark out and occupy tracts of land. After a protracted struggle with Governor Gipps in the late 1830s, squatters obtained a license to occupy their land (Roberts 1964). They continued buying up, trading, and mortgaging land further and further afield, well into the 1860s (Waterson 1968). They named their runs with English, Indian, or Aboriginal names—*Dalwood*, *Bangheet*, or *Currabubulla* for example. This was the world into which Ann Rusden and her children arrived in 1834 on the Hunter River, 100 miles north of Sydney. It



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was Wonnarua country, and Wonnarua Aboriginal people have their own history of their region available on their website (<https://wonnarua.org.au/> accessed on 27 December 2021). Ann Rusden's husband, George Keylock Rusden, was an Anglican Minister given the parish of Maitland. His daughter Saranna married Helenus Scott of *Glendon*, a property granted by Governor Brisbane in 1824 that Scott owned with his brother, Robert, along with *Dalkieth* and *Glendon Brook*.¹ Saranna's brother Frank had *Lindsay*, and Richard Ottley had management of *Bangheet* and Thomas, George William and Henry managed stations.² Over 1000 of Ann's letters survived, and they give some idea of the family's relationship to servants. The papers of Helenus Scott, both before and after his bankruptcy, also contain letters to and from Saranna.³ Ann's youngest daughter Rose also wrote to her mother about servants.⁴

This paper explores the language related to servants to be found in those letters and in Hunter newspaper advertisements. The exploration of the words and phrases used is largely led by the sources, providing insight into their own thought worlds. This is a move away from discourse analysis and into more complex arenas of self-crafting by servant and master, as Durba Ghosh has shown in her study of interracial relationships and orphan schools in India (Ghosh 2006). It is not the realm of 'emotional communities' discussed by Jane Lydon but the arena Jerome Kagan recognises in looking for 'variations in frequency and intensity of emotion among different cultures.' He sees analysis of language related to emotion as central to such a recognition (Lydon 2020; Kagan 2007). Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* is also useful in that it moves to a more fluid reading of the creative reinvention of individuals in an economy and the consequent emergence of 'dispositions' that incorporate a wide range of cultural understandings (Bourdieu 1979, pp. 4–6). Work on language is particularly relevant to the 'gig economy', which Frances Flanagan has so neatly related to the lives of nineteenth century servants where work hours blur into personal life (Flanagan 2019, p. 58). Dispositions incorporate the language of service apparent in letters, descriptions, and recordings of servant speech and actions. William Sewell found that the words used by servants in France during the revolution related to the older understandings of pre-revolutionary times (Sewell 1980, pp. 1–10). Servants on the Hunter used the new language of the market to position themselves when looking for work. The women of the Rusden family drew from inter-colonial languages of slavery and abjection to describe their own relations to servants. This conflict formed what was lived as a servant in the colony of New South Wales.

Servants in New South Wales were obtained in several ways. Squatters used different words in their advertisements than the publicans and storekeepers of the Hunter. Servants themselves emphasised skills while employers were more interested in the 'general servant' who could be asked to undertake a wide range of tasks at any time the employer wished. For squatters, the advertisement was an entry point to a bargaining or negotiating period during which the servant stressed their skills and the employer attempted to limit wages. The language of 'respectability' did not concern squatters at all. It was the emotional terrain of the tradesman or shopkeeper, and 'respectable' was also used by servants to describe themselves. The language found in advertisements and among servants themselves was a push to a labour market perspective, and this makes worker language itself a part of the modernising of labour relations. The history of Aboriginal servants must be negotiated separately because of the use of fear as control of all Aboriginal people on runs.

Languages found in Hunter records show us something of the contradictory and global influences on the meaning of work in the mid-nineteenth century.

2. Historiography

Carolyn Steedman writes of William Godwin's description of the London house as inhabited by 'two classes of being, two distinct phases of barbarism and refinement.' Steedman relates the eighteenth-century perspective that feeling empathy for the 'barbaric' servant was one of the major means of educating children into civility. Children had to be taught to be kind to servants (Steedman 2007, pp. 36–77). In England then, employing was envisaged as *more* than labour; it included these ideas of barbarism and civilising. In India, servants, apart from *Ayahs*, were male and subjected to physical violence in the house of the late nineteenth century *memsahib*, long after such violence was unacceptable in English households. Violent acts were part of being an employer. Servants were also considered dirty and lazy, and Nupur Chaudhuri argues that *memsahib* letters and accounts were a powerful contribution to discourses of race (Chaudhuri 1994, pp. 549–62). Victoria Haskins has suggested that the 'white mistress is a transcolonial construction created in the Raj and reworked in other colonial contexts' (Haskins 2009, pp. 103–16). Claire Lowrie, in considering the tropics from the 1880s, finds similar transcolonial exchanges, the idea of the Chinese male servant as 'feminine' for example (Lowrie 2016). The Rusden and Scott households also show signs of an earlier transcolonial influence and indicate the mistress servant relationship in New South Wales, or indeed England, may have been a product of several colonial cultures in this period. When Amelia Gillman's Malay servants came with her to visit Ann Rusden in the early 1850s, her Ayah would according to Rose Selwyn 'stand fanning my sister till she fell asleep.'⁵ This intensely personal involvement was expected by both Amelia and her servant; it was not left behind when disembarking in Sydney.

Servants could also be seen, regarded, and treated in terms of emerging ideas of race. Meg Vivers, in discussing the Aboriginal servant of Lucy Grey, Moggie, a child brought to the house, locates the idea of 'training' without personal concern for the servant in Grey's letters home to her family in England. This was a new relationship forged from the language of service in England, but it was also shaped by ideas of Moggie as a permanent 'child', deriving from ideas of race and phrenology becoming popular in the colony. Vivers was able to locate the incorporation of entirely new scientific notions into an idea of the Aboriginal servant (Vivers 2008). Chaudhuri linked the language of Social Darwinism to descriptions of servants in India as 'monkeys' in the 1860s and 1870s (Chaudhuri 1994, p. 558). As a component in master servant relationships, new and intercolonial ideas came into play in the idea of what a servant was.

The history of servants as part of women's work in Australia was provided by Beverley Kingston in her work *My Wife My Daughter and Poor Mary Ann*. She identified a movement to negating the idea of specific skills in Australia through the description 'general servant', the absence of a concept of training, and the emergence of the notion of the 'stupid servant' and suggests this may have impacted women's identity (Kingston 1975). Helen Pfeil, in her discussion of the households of four late nineteenth century women, closely analysed the words used to describe 'work' and the space of the house differently inhabited by mistress and servant. Neither the house nor the descriptions of work are simple categories; there was a 'complex interplay of physical and conceptual space' (Pfeil 2001). Barry Higman in his history of domestic service in Australia to today could not in such an overview consider closely variations in both the description of or experience of domestic servants but sees domestic service as a part of emerging ideologies of the house and home, with the servant transforming as the idea of the home became associated with privacy (Higman 2002). Judy Giles discussed the emergence of the home as a space of consumption and safety in the twentieth century (Giles 2004). Twentieth century houses cannot be read back into the nineteenth century, but the notions of space, appropriate occupation of space, and ideas of self and other used by all of these writers may be applied to the mid-nineteenth century.

Female convict servants on the Hunter River during this period have been discussed by Kristine McCabe. She notes frequent turnover of servants and the ‘ease with which a determined servant could escape her situation’ meant that the conditions of service were largely created by convicts themselves’ (McCabe 1999). This presents the convict servant as an important component in the making of a labour market. Though the rapid turnover was not related to offending and convicts were returned for many reasons, this work involves the idea of agency found also in histories of convict offending, a major component of the historiography (Byrne 1993; Heath 1978).

Emotional space, and the language associated with it, does not follow the architectural lines of a house or servants’ quarters. It pervades and sneaks into consciousness when the employer might be sitting in the drawing room quietly sewing and the servant is in the kitchen preparing the supper and getting ready to serve it by ‘waiting at table’. Lucy Delap, in her study of twentieth century English servants, writes of her study of emotions that ‘the relationship between servants and employers were complexly formed through the power play surrounding emotions of dependency, shame, guilt and intimacy yet ‘servant’ was also understood as a workplace identity’ (Delap 2011, p. 10). Alison Light explored the ‘loathing, anger and deep shame’ in the relationship between Virginia Woolf and her servants (Light 2008). These are twentieth century emotions expressed in English workplaces, but her work sees delineations of emotion in printed sources and memory work as central to understanding domestic service as does Paula Hamilton in her study of memories of domestic service where she explored the ‘unhomely’ alienating space of the twentieth century house (Hamilton 2017). This paper concerns the nineteenth century Hunter River. As Mark Dunn has shown, this is a region deriving from the convict system with its spatial markers and resistance (Dunn 2020). This paper is concerned with those who in the period Dunn discusses would have been termed ‘free.’ Firstly, it examines the market as delineated in local newspaper advertisements and then examines descriptions of servants from letters of the Rusdens and Scotts.

3. The Language of Obtaining Servants

Convict servants were obtained by application to the Government. (Shaw 1966). Male convict servants are to be found in the surviving Scott work diaries of 1828–1829 and have been discussed by Mark Dunn (Dunn 2020). Yet, convict household servants do not appear in the diaries or letters of either the Scotts or Rusdens as employees. There is one convict servant mentioned by Ann Rusden, but she was described as being ill and being nursed by a former servant, Mrs Burke. She had not been assigned to the Rusden household.⁶ Servants were also obtained from acquaintances. In 1851, Saranna obtained ‘Esther’ from Ann, for example. Esther was ‘taken in’ by Saranna, and in 1845, Ann said she could get a former servant of Mrs Day’s for GBP 12 per annum.⁷ Servants were also obtained from the Female Emigrant’s Home in West Maitland. This had opened in 1848, but despite Ann’s frequent visits, she could not find girls that were experienced and not too young.⁸ In the 1850s, numbers of German emigrants were sponsored by squatters, and many of these arrived on runs without knowing English and with their own ideas of farming and cooking. They were obtained from Emigration agents.⁹

The Maitland Mercury and Hunter River Advertiser, a local newspaper, began publication in 1843, and for a fee, it was possible to advertise for servants. There were 259 advertisements for servants from 1843–1860. Not all of these were listed by wealthy women. Housemaids were required by publicans and storekeepers also. Many advertisers were reluctant to give their name, and applicants were required to call at the ‘bank’ or go through Mr Dodd’s store for example.¹⁰ Both Ann and Saranna advertised for servants in the 1850s, and they both gave their own names to be contacted. Saranna’s advertisement requested

‘A MAN and his WIFE—the Man as Cook, and to make himself generally useful’. The wife was to be ‘Laundress and Housemaid’.¹¹ Ann required ‘a Housemaid’ in 1852.¹²

Advertisements from the 1840s were more fulsome, possibly reflecting the variety of workers available. The emergence of the goldfields and all of the work available around miners, such as washing and cooking, proved a major attraction for the workers of the Hunter Valley, and servants became hard to find from the early 1850s (Kingston 1975).

Brevity may also have been a result of higher advertising fees.

The first point to note in the language used by employers is the vagueness of description of the kind of work to be undertaken. According to Carolyn Steedman, this had long been a characteristic of domestic service employment in England, and housemaids were advised to learn the tasks of footmen, because if there was not a footman, those duties would be added to their own (Steedman 2009). It was far vaguer in New South Wales—as Beverley Kingston pointed out for Australia in the nineteenth century ‘the domestic servant was losing her claims to her professionalism and her dignity’ because specific roles were replaced by the idea of a ‘general’ servant (Kingston 1975, p. 30). ‘Housemaid’ does not refer to the duties expected and thus was open to interpretation by both employer and employee. To make oneself ‘generally useful’, common in advertisements, also was open to interpretation. There was little regard for a skills base in the advertisements when servant work involved skill in managing cloth and food and in milking a cow. The few mentions of skills make this point. In 1847, an advertisement requested a ‘Cook who thoroughly understands his business’, indicating there were some who did not but applied for positions anyway.¹³ In 1859, an advertisement for a gardener and a ‘Female servant as Cook’ stated bluntly ‘as the term ‘generally useful’ will not apply to either of the above situations it is requested that none but those fully competent in their respective capacities should apply’.¹⁴ The majority of advertisements, in their emphasis on ‘general servants’ opened up space for tension between master and servant—‘generally useful’ was open to interpretation. Employers could require a great deal, at all hours of the day and night and servants could balk at requests.

The advertisements also delineated male and female. Employers either wanted a male cook or a female cook. In the advertisements where the wealthy employer was named, requests were for ‘housemaids’, ‘a couple’ specifying the woman should be a housemaid and the man a cook and perform ‘generally useful’ tasks, and a ‘man and wife’. Squatters also advertised for Governesses and teachers.¹⁵ Ann and Saranna, in their advertisements, fitted the Hunter pattern. There were female cooks requested, and a Mrs Lewis advertised for a ‘female servant to Cook and Wash for a family’ in 1851.¹⁶ Cooks were generally male, and ‘laundresses’ always female. This is supported by the research of Prue Gonzalez, Dirk HR Spenneman, and Catherine Allen into itinerant workers in New South Wales in the late nineteenth century, drawing on Prue Gonzalez’s (nee Laidlaw) thesis. This work conflates cooks for servants on stations with domestic cooks but shows the profession was male and workers were ‘opportunistic’, that is they responded to demand, rather than seasons (Gonzalez et al. 2017; Laidlaw 2009). The kitchen of the squatter was sometimes an informal public house where travellers were entertained, which is perhaps why the profession favoured men.¹⁷ Kitchens were generally detached from the main house, and servants sometimes slept in kitchens. It is easy to see how the space could have multiple uses, possibly without the knowledge of the employer (Stapleton 2012).

A sale by auction of household furniture in 1851 gives some idea of what a kitchen contained:

Tables, Forms, Dresser, Tea Kettles, Iron Pots, Saucepans, Gridirons, Lamps, Tinware, Dish Covers, Tubs, Crockery, Knives and Forks, Tea Trays, Brass and other Candlesticks, Water Casks, etc.¹⁸

The tea trays indicate that food was taken from the kitchen to the squatter, and the dish covers were essential. The tinware reminds the reader of the importance of sweets to the English diet, traditionally consumed at the end of the meal rather than before (Mintz 1985, pp. 131–32).

The preference for clean clothes pre-dated any need for a clean body in English culture (Styles 2007, p. 80; Ward 2019). This created huge demand for washerwomen from the very early colony of New South Wales, and washing was an important component of the New South Wales 'makeshift economy' for colonial women (Byrne 1996, pp. 89–97). There were women who took in washing in Maitland that Ann availed herself of when she had clothes made or when she was without servants.¹⁹ The title 'laundress' and the regular advertisements for them attests to the importance of clean clothes to the squatter. Though squatting men dressed in the same colours as their servants, their own clothes were tailored working clothes. There was much humour about being mistaken for a labourer or bushranger, as having clean clothes was a marker of distinction (Byrne 2023).

Advertisements for a 'couple' or a 'husband and wife' usually mentioned that the couple be 'without encumbrances.' This referred to children, and if people wanted positions, they needed to find somewhere for any children they might have had. Ann Bailey placed an advertisement in the Mercury in 1851. She entitled it Andrew Bailey, her husband who 'went from Moreton Bay to the Rocky River diggings'. She was anxious to hear from him. At the end of her advertisement, she stated 'she was now living in Maitland and would be glad to take a SITUATION as LAUNDRESS or HOUSEMAID; three of her children can be provided for'.²⁰ This seems to indicate a sub-industry of looking after people's children who were employed 'without encumbrances' and would involve long periods of separation. Wet nurses, women who were breastfeeding, needed to find another woman to take their own baby while they fed the child of a squatter. The woman who fed the wet nurse's child would receive payment of some kind (Gershon 2015). Breast milk was open to such opportunity because it produces itself so easily, but the wet nurse was not to feed her own baby at all when she was engaged by the squatter family. The reason Ann could not obtain a wetnurse for Saranna's baby was because the woman had lost her opportunity to obtain a woman to feed her own baby.²¹

The emotional terrain expressed in these advertisements centres on a devaluing of precise servant skills as discussed by Beverley Kingston, a wish on the part of employers to obtain labour as cheaply as possible, and a disregard for the personal life of the servant with children. Squatters were markedly money oriented in their approach. The advertisements were an invitation or a call for negotiation and most of the hiring activity would have involved this mutual bargaining. Unintentionally, perhaps, this gave servants power and access to a level of self-regard. Another component was added by less wealthy employers and agencies who placed their own advertisements in local newspapers, giving another language of service.

4. Agencies

Servants could also be obtained through agencies, and two agencies advertised their services in the 1850s. John Carroll advertised a Servant's Registry Office opposite Walker and Dickson's West Maitland in 1855. Servants were to be engaged by written agreements and were forwarded to 'all parts of the country on receipt of office fees, which are strictly moderate'.²² Most importantly, Carroll asked for 'Respectable Families' to apply for these servants. The servant's own respectability was not mentioned, so this was operating as an employment agency for servants rather than an office for employers. The Servants' Registry Office was at 188 Pitt Street, Sydney and was established in 1856. J.C Glue 'hires every description of male and female servants, for the country; and forwards the same

upon receipt of letter and instructions from employers. Immigrants hired from the ships and depots'.²³ Glue's advantage was that he could access migrant ships when they arrived at their first port of call. The servant-focussed nature of advertisements on the Hunter suggests a divergence from Barry Higman's finding that agencies informed servants and employers to stress 'character' rather than list their skills or the skills required (Higman 2002). There were also numbers of other industries created around the transporting of servants obtained through agencies. When Saranna obtained the German servants, she referred to 'Lumley's bill £2.6 being their fares by Mail on the 29th. Bed 2/- that night at his place and 4/- for breakfast in the morning'.²⁴ Lumley had thus included the transport and meals of servants in his carting business. She also referred to a Mr Hamburger, who was the Agent. There was a letter 'addressed to me', said Saranna but there was nothing in the envelope. She was unconcerned and concluded the address was for the servants to find her in case they were lost.²⁵ This, too, suggests a servant-focussed service rather than a concern for the feelings of gentlemen. Rather than dovetailing with squatter perspectives, the agencies supported the self-regard of the servant, and it was the employer who was to come up to the standards of the agency. This would have been encouraging for the servant reading the newspaper or having it read out to them; they had some status in the wording of advertisements. Different sections of the society also utilised distinct languages of service.

5. Townsmen and Respectability

New South Wales, though dominated by squatters, was also a place of considerable opportunity for those with an eye for business. The opposition to squatters came from the publicans and merchants of the colony, and public houses were a major centre of political opposition to the 'greedy squatter' (Thompson 2006; Atkinson 2006). However, it was this group that made most extensive use of the word 'respectable' in their own advertisements for servants.²⁶ Some of these may have been placed on behalf of squatters, but in their own advertisements, very few squatters use the word 'respectable', preferring 'steady', 'good', or 'industrious'.²⁷ The multiple meanings of the word 'respectable' in the early nineteenth century have been discussed by Iain McCalman. Not all people subscribed to the same meaning, and the word had its uses. Penny Russell noted different perspectives on respectability in nineteenth century New South Wales though she does not subject the term 'respectability' to analysis (McCalman 1988; Russell 1994). That this group of small tradesmen and innkeepers favoured the word in advertisements indicates that discrimination was one of the qualities they valued among themselves. They needed to distinguish themselves from others, and they were in the business of creating standards for the towns they lived in. Wesleyan Methodism and Presbyterianism were the province of this group, and they were most implicated in Michael Sturma's descriptions of the moral superiority the term 'respectable' implied. Combined with newspaper editors, government clerks, and teachers, they created a formidable power nexus in the colony (Sturma 1984). The term respectability, whether used strategically or genuinely felt, carried with it implications of hard work and adherence to the morality of the Bible as well as neatness and cleanliness. Refined and genteel conduct was also implied. Above all, it distinguished one from those deemed of lower or irreligious status (Williams 2010, p. 24). The word 'respectable' had considerable power in these circumstances, and it was a word that could be used by servants themselves. It was a mobile and powerful term.

6. Servants Using the Language of Respectability

It was this language of respectability that was used by servants who advertised on their own account for positions with both squatters and townsmen. In 1856, the following advertisement appeared in the Maitland Mercury:

Wanted by a respectable person and her daughter (English), SITUATIONS—the one as a parlourmaid and housemaid, the other as a housemaid or general servant, where the duties are light. Address, A.B. Post Office Morpeth.²⁸

There were no advertisements for specifically English servants or for parlourmaids in Maitland, and A.B. draws attention to the cultural diversity of servants in New South Wales. Servants came from India, China, Ireland, Scotland, and Germany, and within these groups were more specific regions, all with their own ways of preparing food and keeping a house. Aboriginal people were also employed. A.B. is implying a superiority. Requests for specific groups do not at all appear in the advertisements, and we only know of the cultural diversity of servants from references to their names. ‘Coachee and his wife’ worked at Glendon. Robert Scott had a personal servant, Bhahee. These servants had come from India, possibly via England, with the Scott family.²⁹ When Saranna employed a nursemaid, the maid had to get used to ‘clothing baby in the Indian style’,³⁰ so such diverse cultures may have influenced how squatters conducted their lives. However, ethnicity was never referred to as problematic, and so our modern interest in diversity and global communities may well have been second nature to a people who had been engaged in colonising for 500 years and who had employed servants and slaves from across the globe.

However, other servant advertisers make use of the same notions of superiority. A married couple in 1846 ‘had lived in families of the highest rank’ in England.³¹ A married couple were ‘open to engagement’ in 1855. They were of ‘long colonial experience’. The man was suited to the ‘management of stock, particularly horses’, and the woman was ‘capable of the management of a dairy or she could be a laundress.’ Both could ‘take charge of a station’, or they could work for a ‘respectable family in want of a groom, coachman and housemaid’.³² The onus was on the employer to be respectable enough to reply to the advertisement. A ‘MAN and WIFE’ went further in 1853—they wanted employment in ‘a Gentleman’s family’, he as ‘Professed Cook or Storekeeper’ and she as ‘Needlewoman or Housemaid’.³³ Another man required a position as a ‘Butler’; he had been employed by ‘first class’ families in Scotland and England.³⁴ As well as having requirements of employers, these advertisers emphasised their skills, something overlooked by employers with their idea of ‘generally useful’. Employees valued their skills in these accounts and were holding the colony to a different standard than those held by squatters themselves. One can see the generative power of the notion of respectability.

7. Governess and Teacher

Employees of status were Governesses and Teachers. As Patricia Clarke has shown, Governesses were signifiers of a particular kind of gentility (Clarke 1985). Advertisements for and by them were far more specific in their language. A Governess had to be ‘a competent and respectable person’.³⁵ In exchange for such skills, a ‘schoolmaster’ who would teach ‘three boys a plain English education’ was to be ‘treated as one of the family’.³⁶ At Happy Valley, Hanging Rock, a ‘SINGLE MAN’ was wanted as teacher; ‘he must have sober, steady habits and be able to teach a sound English education’.³⁷ A ‘plain Nursery Governess’ was wanted to ‘educate three children in a Gentleman’s Family’ a few miles from Maitland in 1858.³⁸ The word ‘English’ is thus found again among employers wanting teachers or governesses, but this word ‘plain’ may relate to wages. Teachers were sometimes proficient in Sanskrit, the language of the English administration in India,³⁹ Greek, and Latin, and such an education would be more expensive.

Governesses and Teachers mirrored the language of employers in their own advertisements for work. 'A Gentleman is disengaged' read an advertisement in 1856; he 'would be happy to impart a plain, sound, English EDUCATION to a Family on an out-station'.⁴⁰ In 1855, the following advertisement suggested a new mode of working:

A LADY of considerable experience in tuition, and capable of finishing her pupils in English, French, dancing, music and the rudiments of drawing, would be happy to make arrangements with two or three families, not too remote from each other, as VISITING GOVERNESS either in the vicinity of Maitland or Morpeth. Letters, stating terms etc. to be addressed to G.H. Post Office Morpeth.⁴¹

This was not a 'plain' education, and the governess would not be tied to one family and far freer in her profession. Like all servants who advertised, the emphasis for this woman was on her skills. A 'Young English lady' in 1855 wanted to 're-engage' as a residential governess. She wrote that she would teach 'the usual branches of a sound English education'. This would be 'plain' as expressed by employers but she added 'Music, French and the rudiments of Italian'. She wrote 'a Liberal salary required'.⁴² These kinds of servants were at the apex of the market, and it is suggested they well understood their superiority.

8. Religion

The one complicating factor that appeared in a small number of advertisements was religion. An advertisement by a teacher specified that the family who employed him had to be 'a respectable Protestant family'.⁴³ However, this word covered a great deal of conflicting belief in Maitland. An 'advertiser' wanted a house full of servants in 1847. The advertiser stated he was a Presbyterian, 'holding it to be the duty of masters to see that their servants do not neglect the public worship of God will engage none who will not agree to go to the church with the family'.⁴⁴ This reflected more the diversity of religious belief in Maitland. Ann Rusden and Saranna Scott both rejected servant applications on the basis of their religion. A Roman Catholic was 'not wanted around your children'.⁴⁵ In 1846, Ann recommended 'Mary McDonald who is a Presbyterian—Eleanor Griffiths who is of our church—but either would attend our service'.⁴⁶ It is not clear if Saranna employed them. These ideas involving sectarianism were new to the colony because in the early nineteenth century mixed marriages were common, and ministers happily married persons of different religions to themselves (Gleeson 2025). In the Rusden family, dislike of other faiths came from debates over the establishment of the NSW Board of National Education in the 1840s, where Anglican control of education was considerably diminished in New South Wales. Anglican influence on the moral development of children was threatened (Jackson 2020, p. 141). However, that only a small number of advertisements reflected such concerns means the sectarianism of the late nineteenth century was not yet pervasive in the colony. There were other factors that would limit servants.

9. Wages

The major absence in all advertisements was any reference to an actual wage. One can detect in the squatter's use of 'generally useful' a wish to obtain as much skilled work as possible without having to pay too much. Squatter income was erratic, but, above all, they were businessmen and women who had numerable property interests, who loaned money at interest, and who owned public houses and boiling-down works (Byrne 2023). The main interest of a businessman was to profit, and employment of servants, though necessary, involved bargaining. One advertisement in this period mentions wages. John Johnston of *Clydesdale* advertised for 'a MAN and his WIFE' in 1857. The man was to be a 'general farm servant', and the woman 'a Laundress and House servant'. He also wanted A SINGLE

MAN to be a farm servant and to be able to 'drive a horse team'. He offered to 'a good sober industrious couple wages £60 per annum with a double ration; and to the single man £40 per annum, with a ration'.⁴⁷ A married couple was therefore estimated as cheaper than a single man. Again, the advertisement highlights marital status rather than skill. It seems, however, that most were expected to bargain for their wages. A 'liberal wage' was often promised, but the reader has no idea how much that might be.⁴⁸ The employee might walk miles to a station and then bargain for work, and terms might not be agreed to. Saranna recounts the visit of a husband and wife to Glendon in a letter in 1853:

His wife was a good laundress he said and undertook dairy work—but he himself was a Cook and a Baker and when at Mrs Gordon's he had been required to wait on tables also, a thing he had never been used to and complained as well of Mrs Gordon being a very, very particular woman—I therefore said I did not think he would suit us. . . the man would be required to wait at table and do farm work—of the last he knew nothing.⁴⁹

Even after moving to the cottage and fearing for the lack of flour, the Scotts still had to have a man to wait at table. This man and his wife would have to walk off *Glendon* and see if they could find work elsewhere. The combining of skills and stressing of skills can be seen in this comment.

In 1854, Ann wrote to her daughter Amelia that she had been 'running about the place in these hot days trying to get if at least not a regular servant, a charwoman'. Her daughters had been obliged to take up the 'culinary arts' because 'no wages would tempt a servant'. She wrote,

There is also a sort of combination which they scruple not to avow. Some really nice persons demand high wages (10 or 11 shillings per week and mechanics 10/- a day and men a further 30/-) and give as a reason that, altho they would be willing to take less, they cannot venture, because they are looked down on by other servants.⁵⁰

The double meaning in this passage where 'nice' servants were also not telling the truth about combining to keep wages high demonstrates how servants were imagined in terms of the market. For employers like Ann, the servant became part of a 'they', conspiring for high wages.

For squatters, wages became due on a particular date, meaning that employees were bound for a particular time. Saranna had to pay 'the coolies' by November 1 in 1846.⁵¹ Coolies were labourers contracted from Indian ports to work in New South Wales through several agents. The 'unfree' nature of all employment under the Master and Servant's Act has been extensively explored by Martin Sullivan ([Sullivan 1985](#), pp. 170–90). Advances on wages was one way of paying workers, and this money, in turn, could be used at the run's store unless the worker had permission to leave the property. At the end of the employee's term, they received the 'balance of wages.' Glendon's note of 6 July 1841 for 'John Baton or Bearer' was for GBP 18.11.6, and this was for 'balance of wages'. Stephen Reynolds received GBP 4 cash advanced on 22 July 1841. Richard Thomson in June 1841 had received an advance on wages of GBP 5.⁵² As work on convict, indentured (coolie) and free labour has shown servants persistently went to courts to enforce their own rights as employees under the *Master and Servant's Act*, though how they were responded to depended very much on the makeup of the Bench and what friendship network connected magistrates. Barry Higman writes that from 1845, servant actions against employers far eclipsed employer-initiated complaints ([Higman 2002](#), p. 244).

The language of advertisements gives the impression of a negotiating workforce, able to argue over wages and conditions. Servants reading the newspapers or having them read

out to them would have positioned themselves as negotiators over wages and conditions. This was tempered by the conditions of the *Master and Servant's Act*, but servants were also prepared to use the courts. If these advertisements give us the skeleton of the nature of household and yard work in the mid-nineteenth century, then it is important to note the devaluing of skills into general terms by employers on the Hunter and the attempt by workers to utilise ideas of respectability themselves in seeking employment. The wealthy employers this paper is concerned with were attempting to obtain workers cheaply, without respect for the skills they brought. Views servants had of themselves can be deduced from the language of agencies where it was the employer who had to be 'respectable' enough for the servant, and the word 'respectable' could be used by servants to describe themselves. This position of power was to be put to use in negotiation and bargaining where wages and conditions were to be decided upon. In examining the households of the Rusdens and Scotts, we see how such language was parsed by employers.

10. The Households

The houses inhabited by the Rusden family were *Rath Luba* in East Maitland, rented from the explorer Thomas Mitchell, and *Holmwood*, also in East Maitland, which was their own house specifically built for them. Both had detached kitchens and servants' quarters, though they were not described in any detail in the letters. The Scott family inhabited two houses. The first *Glendon* was a large house with detached kitchen and servant's quarters, as shown in a diagram sent in a letter to Patrick Scott in 1825. He wrote 'the kitchen is a separate building put up where the dotted lines are at the North West corner'.⁵³ After Helenus Scott's bankruptcy, the property belonged to Patrick Scott in India and was managed by Helenus, though not for a wage, and Helenus had to travel to take up a number of government positions, leaving Saranna to run *Glendon*. This was not at all unusual in the nineteenth century, and Helenus Scott senior had travelled extensively in India while his wife managed the entire plantation herself.⁵⁴ After bankruptcy in New South Wales in 1848, the family moved to a much smaller cottage near the river, formerly rented to the police magistrate Captain Forbes. They could no longer afford a governess, but servants were kept. Rather than a detached kitchen, there was 'a little cooking place', one suspects outdoors, but this, too, was not properly described.⁵⁵ This second house was also referred to as *Glendon*, and illustrations have created confusions, the cottage being presented as the larger house.⁵⁶ There are then two kinds of households examined: those of stability and those in crisis. Ann sought servants for Saranna both at times of stability and crisis, and Ann herself sought servants.

There are two descriptions that give some idea of where servants lived at *Rath Luba* and the second *Glendon*. A married couple could not live in the house. Grace Rusden described Mrs Burke's 'hut' in 1836. Mrs Burke gave Ann, a convict servant of another family who was dying, 'the only bed in the hut', and Mrs Burke was sleeping on the dirt floor.⁵⁷ When the German couple, Peter and Regina Habbisch, arrived at *Glendon*, Peter was to join John, the other German servant; 'both men will be busy repairing the hut first thing'.⁵⁸ These small separate huts appear in illustrations and maps of squatter houses, though there are references to single men sleeping in the kitchen and nursemaids in the same room as the children. The outbuildings at *Holmwood* can be seen in a photograph from Hunter Photo Bank ([Conway 2017](#)).

What makes research difficult is the lack of information regarding the names of servants so that their background may be tracked. Servants were referred to by their first name unless they were a governess, and then they were referred to as Miss Nihill, for example, rather than a whole name. Ann's servants were referred to as 'the couple' or 'the H.K.'s (Housekeepers) quite often and it is difficult to match first names of former servants

with the exact ‘couple’ she means.⁵⁹ There were frequent changes of servants, contracted as they were, and there was not the attachment of lifelong workers, though, as stated there were Indian servants brought by the Scott family to New South Wales. Saranna employed young girls as nursemaids and companions to the children, and these children moved into positions as housemaids. There was much discussion of them but no clear listing. The relationship of the family to servants is unquantifiable. Thus, a picture must be built up from what was written about servants, the language used, and the sentiment expressed.

11. A Different People

There is a generational difference between Ann and her daughters Saranna, Georgiana, Grace, and Rose. Ann’s letters were written to be read in company, and she sought to amuse. Helenus stressed to Saranna that their letters were ‘private’ and not to be read aloud.⁶⁰ Servants were included in the task of being humorous by Ann and also her daughter, Rose. Saranna and Grace, however, were more likely to give detail about servants’ conditions and lives. There are thus several sides to the language of emotional connection to servants.

Keith Thomas has written of early nineteenth century readings of the ‘lower classes’ by the elite that there was considerable romanticism involved. The poor were thought to be primitive examples of what everyone had once been before they were civilised. They were not regarded as disgusting or dirty but were objects of fascination (Thomas 2018, p. 80). That they were objects of pity was stressed by the eighteenth-century writer William Godwin, and cultivation of such pity was part of socialising children (Steedman 2009, p. 38). They were, above all, different humans.

There is an element of this in Ann’s descriptions of servants. She referred in 1835 to a servant whose mistress had died, ‘Mrs C told me that she understood the affliction of Theresa was so excessive that she shut herself up in the room with the coffin and could not for a long time be got away! Poor things, they must feel it deeply’.⁶¹ Thus, Theresa becomes ‘they’ who feel things differently and who express their emotions differently. But she is a ‘poor thing’, one has to commiserate. This is a distancing that Ann expressed in relation to her own servants. In 1837, she wrote of rabbits sent to the H.K.’s ‘our feelings of tenderness do not pervade their breasts you will say—for when I said “are they to be kept or killed” the emphatic answer was “oh killed to be sure”!’⁶² Servants did not share the same emotional landscape as their employers. They were more blood thirsty.

Rose’s humorous recounting of the maid Susan’s conversation with Georgiana mocks speech as well as sentiment:

Dear me Miss, how pretty all that lot about Mr Ottley was in the paper. Mr Murphy read it to me twice Miss (some friend of hers) and I wanted to ask him to read it to me again but I was ashamed. And how pretty that was about Mr Ottley’s relation, the squire on the Gwydir there and all!⁶³

Richard Ottley was about to marry Emily Rusden, and the announcement had been made in the *Maitland Mercury*, giving his background—his family was from Antigua in the West Indies and Richard was described as a landholder on the Gwydir River.⁶⁴ Susan could not read herself and had her friend read it out to her, marvelling at the wealth Emily was marrying into and how Richard Ottley was described as esquire. Servants in England were also objects of fun, according to Carolyn Steedman (Steedman 2009, p. 20).

Laura Ann Stoler’s work on memory and domestic servants would warn us against assuming that employer’s readings of their servants’ regard reflected servant sentiments (Stoler 1995, p. 111). However, these perspectives of Ann and her daughter do locate servants as different kinds of humans and the object of some humour.

Saranna in her discussion of the German servants in 1853 wrote to her husband of the excitement they exhibited when they found another German couple already in place ‘there

is an immense chattering and laughing in the kitchen—I suppose talking over Paterland together’. They had on arrival:

went through the German salutation which is a universal shaking of hands—I suppose when the master comes home it will be extended to you—they do not offer a repetition of this after the first arrival, to go through is a matter of course, believing it to be the custom in Deutschland and one that makes them feel you receive a welcome from them as part of their family.⁶⁵

This is the same kind of humour as is the term ‘paterland’ that we find in Ann and Rose’s discussion of their servants. Rose described her sister Amelia Gillman’s servants coming from Singapore to stay at Holmwood in the early 1850s. The ‘Ayah was a strange woman’.

I found her one day crouched in a corner looking ill—I asked her what was the matter—me very sick Missie she said—I said I would see what I could do for her—She brightened up and said Missie I want big cup castor oil, very eagerly—I told my sister she was ill and wanted a strong dose of castor oil—my sister said I might give her a wineglass full, and that they were so fond of it that it had to be locked up more carefully than wine’.⁶⁶

Rose’s humorous recounting extends to her Aboriginal servants and is thus combined with squatter humour concerning Aboriginal people (Byrne 2023).

12. Bodies

Servants were closely examined on their application to be servants, and these descriptions give some idea of how servants were understood. Ann wrote of Mrs Day’s servant:

Mrs Day has got a little emigrant whom I should steal for Emily, she is a sturdy, stumpy little thing with an honest and good-humoured face—but I think she will grow uneven for she carries the baby who is now large and heavy up and down the hills with unwearied assiduity—leading pretty little Justina.⁶⁷

All people were subject to analysis of the ‘countenance’, particularly Ann’s sons and the new squatters’ wives she meets, but it is only servants’ bodies that are subject to discussion.⁶⁸ The words ‘sturdy’ and ‘stumpy’ are those also applied to animals, and one can see here a link to slave sales and appraisals where the body was examined for strength (Johnson 1999). Of her German servants Saranna wrote:

They have no children and number several more years I should think than John and Margaret—and seem (from first appearances) to have been more inured to labouring work thus...I am not dissatisfied with their appearance by any means—the man seems much stouter than John, rather a heavy built man.⁶⁹

This perusal of physique moves us further from the idea of contractual labour, with two persons coming to agreement over the work to be done. Physique does not determine capacity to work, and the practice seems invasive rather than something one would naturally expect. That it was limited to servants means there was a specific gaze related to them. This is something that did not appear in advertisements, as physical fitness for the work wanted was never referred to. It is another way of separating the servant from the self and relegating the servant to the status of a lesser human. This does not easily combine with the word ‘intimate’, so commonly used in descriptions of colonial domestic service. The word both implies physical closeness and some kind of emotional link. However, in these accounts, there is no such sentiment; the servant is inhabitant of a different form of humanity. It is difficult to tell if this has a colonial origin. The Scotts had lived in India for many years, and Richard Ottley’s family ran a slave plantation in Antigua and received

compensation for loss of slaves (Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/search/> (accessed on 28 December 2021). The Rusdens, however, had no such connections until they married into these families. This mode of seeing servants as a kind of stock may have come into England from colonial ventures, an earlier origin. It is clearly present among the Rusden women.

‘Thing’ is the word used by Ann to describe the ‘stumpy little servant’ of Mrs Day’s. She also uses the word ‘thing’ in her harshest criticism of her laundress in 1851.

The thing miscalled a housemaid laundress is a housedawdle and a sort of antilaundress—still if she would try, but though she acquiesces in all we say, she perseveres in her own doings and not-doings, so I am seeking a substitute.⁷⁰

The ‘thing’ was not named, and her inability to perform as Ann wanted results in vitriol and spite. She did acquiesce in the tasks requested of her but had her own way of working that did not meet Ann’s standards. Beverley Kingston has noted the time involved in the duties of the house, the employment of general servants, and the unwillingness of women to train servants (Kingston 1975). There was no-one to show the ‘thing’ how to launder, and it is possible that Ann did not know herself.

A ‘thing’, poor or not, is not a human being and combined with perusal of the body separates the servant further from the employer. This is an abject status one cannot escape from, and the difficulty is it is hard to see if servants internalised such status and felt themselves to be lesser beings than their employer. Another point concerning such abject status is that one can work the abject very hard; there was no concern for health and welfare.

The absence of training is also shown in an undated pencil note included in Helenus letters. It can be dated to the time around the removal to the cottage in 1847–8 where Saranna had to divest herself of her governess and a number of servants. Saranna had also been instructed by Helenus to pack books, paintings, and furniture to send down to Lyons, a Sydney auctioneer.⁷¹ The disintegration of wealth was apparent to all, and the servants reacted badly. The pencil note refers to a servant and reads as follows:

[She is] untidy, neglectful, will not get a meal or dinner, she will not answer a bell, she appears not to clean a thing until wanted, knives, forks, spoons, plates, candlesticks remain dirty, we were obliged to wait for breakfast until she cleaned the few things required, same with every meal, tea is ½ hour and dinner ¾ hour behind time. [She] went to sleep again after I called her this morning. Today she had not the dinner ready till 7 min to 3 o’clock, as soon as the bread was cooked she began to eat it up and cram in one of the loaves leaving us with damper. The duck at dinner was overdone and burnt in some places. There is no water ready to wash the children this evening, she was told of it during the day. She scalded the milk. She said ‘will you let me alone I know my business.’⁷²

The servant, Ann, said that it was very difficult without Elizabeth, her fellow servant who had left. Saranna had replaced two servants with one, and the labour was extensive it seems, all of the cooking and cleaning and the care of the children’s baths. It may have been that Ann was also underfed and hungry as around this time Helenus Scott had refused to buy the flour for the run and Saranna feared her children would starve. In addition to all of the work Ann was required to do, she had to answer bells. All of this was work that, formerly, she had not been expected to do. Yet, Saranna still worked the household by bells and specific times; she could conceive of doing it otherwise. One can see the servant Ann’s actions as a form of protest against her employers. It could also be that she had entirely different ideas of how housework should be performed, or no belief in the need for plates, knives, and forks to be cleaned after use rather than before, a cultural notion of cleaning. Ann may have been attempting to train her employer.

Saranna also misjudged John, the German servant. She asked him to be overseer, and he agreed. This was indeed a status position as most overseers during this period were gentlemen, ‘black hats’ who were in training to gain management skills for their own runs (Byrne 2023). After agreeing, John took the pony and went into town. He did not return till very late. Saranna told him she did not want him going to town without permission, and she did not think the pony should be out so late. John was insulted and barely answered her. Saranna again had tried to obtain labour without due regard for the status she should have given to John. Both of these incidents show little regard for the need to manage the emotions of servants at a time of crisis and to recognise categories of work. Saranna had never experienced bankruptcy before. She could only continue to act in the manner she always had, but there was no thought of the feelings of the servants. Servants could rankle employers in other ways.

13. Sex and Dismissal

It was possible for servants to bring shame upon the household, as if they were part of the image of everyone in it. This applies to the letters related to female servants, and it concerns their sexuality. Thus, one could go from being a good servant to dismissal, all because of what one did with one’s body. This seems to contradict the idea of fascination with the ways of the servant and the idea of the ‘thing’. Keith Thomas notes that premarital sex was common in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries among the lower orders and not a great deal of importance was attached to it⁸¹. (Thomas 2018, p. 104). The policing of sexuality has been a powerful component of the criminalisation of girls, as Judith Allen, Kerry Carrington, Margaret Pereira, Adrian Howe, and a substantial body of scholarship related to convict women have shown (Allen 1990; Carrington and Pereira 2009; Howe 2008; Alford 1984; Frost 2012).

Ann Rusden wrote of Mrs Scott, Helenus’ mother asking ‘whether Mrs Scott recovered from the shock she must have suffered from the servant’s shameful behaviour’. The letter, referring to another household demonstrates the importance of ‘talk’ to the self-image of squatter women. The word used is ‘shock’ as if it were a physical blow when one’s servants demonstrated their sexuality. Ann was particularly harsh and wrote of Esther, who she had dismissed, ‘I hope that poor girl will not be lost, but she seems to have run a tremendous risk and to have thrown away her chance of happiness, still if the Smiths can be of use to her, she may in part retrace her steps [sic]’. Saranna had taken Esther in and found her further work with the Smith’s, another squatting family. Esther could try and retrace her steps. Grace Rusden, Ann’s daughter, was also more forgiving. Marion, the Rusden’s servant had left.

I suppose you would like to know how we manage without poor Marion, much better than we ever could have expected—poor Mrs Burke comes up every morning after breakfast—and works away truly with all her heart—whatever the poor woman’s faults may be, she has, very, very good qualities and a grateful heart is one—nothing would have grieved me so much as Mama’s refusal to accept of her services.⁷³

The ‘poor’ is an indication of pity, and Grace was most uniform in her Christianity. Ann accepted Mrs Burke’s services possibly because no-one else could be found, which suggests that compromises could be made. The shortage of servants thus altered attitudes.

Cultural fascination with servants, or barbarity, may have applied more to ‘gentlemen’, as squatters were termed. There is no account of disgrace in the Scott family or on the part of the sons of the Rusden family, but Ann was cautious—she refused to send a young girl to Saranna because the servant was too close in age to Saranna’s eleven-year-old son.⁷⁴ The fascination concerning the lower orders seems to have incorporated Aboriginal girls and

women. There was no discussion of this in the letters, but mention is made of Aboriginal women in the biography of George Rusden (Nicholls 2018, p. 20). George William Rusden went to stay with Saranna shortly after her marriage to Helenus Scott, and he spent some time with Patrick Scott. They entertained themselves with Aboriginal people on Glendon and wrote each other comic poems in pidgin with some language of the Wonnarua, and there was reference to an Aboriginal girl in them (Nicholls 2018, p. 22). This is nothing like the information we have of fellow squatter William Ogilvie who had an Aboriginal 'wife' who confronted both of his white wives on their separate arrivals on the run, (Farwell 1974). but it is indication of a sexual interest in Aboriginal women. Ann herself wrote of the 'passions' of young men that had to be exerted for their development.⁷⁵ Such a need to expend passions possibly made young gentlemen a threat for the family servants, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, something Ann clearly recognised when she wrote of Saranna's son.

Because of the danger to reputation, governesses were treated with particular care. Governesses were thus always sexualised. Saranna had to dispense with the services of her governess Miss Nihill in 1848 due to the bankruptcy. Anxious letters to Helenus attempted to make sure he would meet her at the wharf in Sydney so that she would not be unaccompanied. She still experienced difficulties obtaining work, and Helenus wrote to Saranna:

It is difficult to understand Miss Nihill and what she is aiming at. There can be but one answer to her letter—I have not seen anyone who knows where to ask how she gets on at the schools—but it is improbable that she can do so satisfactorily for any length of time.⁷⁶

Helenus does not seem to think Miss Nihill is being direct and that she must have had ulterior motives. The quote shows the enormous gulf between the world of a gentleman, who could not bother with schools, and the financial and social requirements of a governess, whose desperation to obtain a suitable position is apparent. Her reputation as well as her income depended on it.

To have sexual relations with the boys of the family was perhaps one way into obtaining the status of human as it cut across the abject. Relationships with the master or the young men of the family may have given the female servant some dignity in her own eyes. For female employers, one can see the disruption such events caused—the 'thing' began to speak back. Servants could also be subject to considerable distrust.

14. Lies

Notable in both Saranna and Ann's discussion of servants at the time of application to the families was distrust of anything the servant said about their skills, and this is similar to the contradictory nature of advertising where servants emphasised their skill set and employers ignored it. Of the German couple, Regina and Peter Habisch, Saranna wrote 'the woman says she washed for the Captain and all the ship coming out'.⁷⁷ She 'says' does not mean she actually did do so. When a 'Roman Catholic' contacted Ann about working as governess for Saranna in 1845, Ann and her daughter Georgiana were 'so pleased with her appearance we thought it a pity not to tell you of her'. But Ann would not press it 'appearances are so often deceitful'.⁷⁸ Ann was reluctant to recommend her own servant Grace's children. 'Engage Grace's daughter at your own discretion. . . if I recollect rightly I thought well of the girl some years ago when I gave her a little work to do'.⁷⁹ Ann did not want to be responsible for the failure of a servant.

'I suspect' she wrote early in Saranna's marriage, 'McDonald is rather sly and knew how to make gingerbread before!'⁸⁰ It was perhaps in the context of the 'sly servant'

that Ann began to recommend the employment of young girls by Saranna, not only as nursemaids but also as 'general servants'. In November 1837 she wrote:

I rejoice your maids go on well—I dare say Ann gets stronger every day—I think her youth is in your favour—she will be more likely to glide into your habits— and you will be able to prevent her from teaching baby to beat floor, table, chair etc. when they happen to annoy her—a very common practice among older nursemaids.⁸¹

The phrase 'glide into your habits' does not imply close supervision and training, and this may well have been the Ann who some years later was made general servant. The notion that she would 'get stronger' suggests a very young girl indeed. In 1844, the Scott household was still quite wealthy, and Saranna was able to order 'a servant's gown' from Maitland, indicating that Saranna dressed her servants in particular clothing.⁸² Girls obtained from the Emigrant's Home in 1848 were also very young, yet these were also accompanied with warnings 'the orphan is out of the question—the eldest of the two sisters ditto—the second one whose appearance I liked, I doubt about because she cannot be, I fear quite unimplicated [sic] in the follies of her sisters'.⁸³ By December 1849, Ann was thinking many of the girls in the Emigrants Home were too young for Saranna and 'they had never been in service'.⁸⁴

Distrust came from social distance. Young girls could also have been influenced by their wayward older sisters, and one best not employ them. This is indeed an interest in servants related to character rather than skill or even training. Beverley Kingston has noted the disjunction between proper training and critiques in the idea of the 'stupid servant', which she argues may well have had a lasting influence on the way women have been regarded in Australian history (Kingston 1975, pp. 37–38). We may well add to that the sly and sexualised servant, one could not trust anything they said, and theirs was a culture of lies. This perspective of lower-class women may have had influence well beyond the decline of domestic servant. Abusive terms were also applied to servants.

15. Stupid Servants

The idea of the stupid servant was very familiar to the Rusden family. The anti-laundress did not properly understand the methods of the laundry. Negative terms applied to servants were vitriolic and seem to have arisen from real hatred. 'Wretched',⁸⁵ 'nasty things',⁸⁶ 'troublesome',⁸⁷ and 'unpleasant' were terms applied to unsatisfactory servants. These did not relate to work but to the whole person, deeply personal in their intent. Positive terms were still as emotive, 'worthy jewel',⁸⁸ 'a comfort',⁸⁹ 'so desirable',⁹⁰ and 'handy'.⁹¹ These were poles and indicative of the outrage Ann felt when things were going wrong and her exuberance at the smooth operation of both households.

When the bishops came for lunch in November 1850, it was to be a 'cold lunch' as they had been invited on a whim of Reverend Rusden. The 'stupid' servants were a source of annoyance. Georgiana Rusden rose to the occasion.

We had been busy the day before making pastry custards etc.—I was H.K but they [her sisters] would help me, and with our stupid servants it was necessary, I would not have left them.⁹²

Ann wrote later that week that 'our servants, though stupid cannot happily be any cause for delaying your visit'.⁹³ 'Stupid servants' were so common that they appeared in advertisements.⁹⁴ Georgiana and her sisters were capable of supervising a kitchen in this instance, and one wonders how many other mistresses felt the need to spend 'all day in the kitchen' as one of Ann's letters claimed.⁹⁵ The daughters never took the place of servants, however. There was only one week in all of the letters when Ann was 'without servants',

and the family ‘managed’ and sent the washing out.⁹⁶ The perceived need to supervise, however, decreased the possibility for the housekeepers to own the space of the kitchen and to work there with confidence they would not be interrupted. Georgiana was certain she knew exactly the right way to make pastry custards.

The limitations discussed so far refer to non-Aboriginal servants. To discuss Aboriginal servants, we must locate ourselves in violent terrain.

16. Aboriginal Servants

Aboriginal domestic servants were never advertised for nor did they place advertisements in the newspapers, so they are outside the scope of what is understood as domestic service so far. Their existence was constantly threatened by fear of death of their families or themselves, and such pain must override any incorporation of them into western categories of master/servant. There were few references to the numbers of Aboriginal people that inhabited Maitland and *Glenbrook*. There is only one reference to an Aboriginal servant in Saranna’s household, and this was in 1837 to Fairy who had been brought up from the dairy to play with Saranna’s young children. Fairy was also the name of a horse, and Ann joked that she thought Saranna was referring to the horse and perhaps that was rather a dangerous companion for a baby.⁹⁷ Squatters often named servants after favourite horses, but this name was also an approximation of the servants’ Aboriginal name as well.⁹⁸ While one might think that Fairy being ordered to come up and play with the baby is an example of intimacy and close connection, it is necessary to look at the wider relationship of the Scott’s to Aboriginal people on their station, some of whom were Wonnarua and others who were from further afield. In 1829, Helenus wrote to his mother and about Aboriginal people ‘when they don’t fear you they are apt to be treacherous’ and had to be kept ‘in check’.⁹⁹ If Fairy was Wonnarua, she would have been subject to this ‘keeping in check.’ If she was not, she would have been brought from further north and west, sites of considerable frontier violence. Ann wrote of her son Frank’s relationship to ‘China men and blacks’ at *Lindsay* to the north west, ‘Frank shews them he is firm and will be obeyed’.¹⁰⁰ The way squatters kept Aboriginal people who lived on runs ‘in fear’ was night raiding on camps. This was conducted in the early hours of the morning. While there are no accounts at all of such raids on *Glendon*, Mark Dunn has made the point in his shared histories blog that all letters relating to Myall Creek that mention Aboriginal people were culled at some point from the Mitchell Library’s holdings of the Scott papers, that is all of the letters from late 1838 to 1844 are missing (<https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/> accessed 28 December 2021). There are references to Patrick Scott and George William Rusden pretending to raid Captain Forbes’ cottage in the early hours of the morning in 1835, such activity mimicked the raid on Aboriginal camps.¹⁰¹

When we read of Fairy walking up from the dairy to play with the baby, we must be aware of the world she walked in—one where Aboriginal people were meant to be kept ‘in fear’. It is impossible to locate her simply in the realm of domestic or yard servant. The atmosphere of fear did not appear to gnarl the sensibility of Saranna or Helenus Scott. It was ever present and ignored (Schlunke 2005).

17. Conclusions

For domestic and yard servants in colonial New South Wales, there was, as has been identified by Beverley Kingston, a de-skilling of work formerly labelled with a number of professional terms. The rise of the ‘general servant’ is expressed in the newspaper advertisements of the period, but there was also a push back against this by servants who referred to their own skills and their respectability. However, while advertisements imply negotiated situations with bargaining on both sides, there is in the letters of one squatter

family a whole different perimeter of relations. Servants were lesser beings, people to be found humorous in their antics and their ways of speaking. They lied and misrepresented themselves and were capable of being very stupid. They could disrupt everything by their sex and bring shame upon the family as if they were a member of it, when they were not.

Lesser humans had their own perspectives, but they would not be quoted or listened to.

At best, they were ‘poor things’; at worst, ‘things.’ As well as being inside the commercial description of themselves as negotiators, servants also inhabited this disposition where they were regarded as less than human, sly and sexualised. How much this was internalised, following Beverley Kingston’s work, is open to conjecture. Both Ann and Saranna employed very young, growing girls, and the impact of the disposition they inhabited may have been very long lasting in Australian culture. In their own defence, girls emphasised that they knew their work and their skills, so the efficient, ‘handy’ woman may have obtained status in wider society. But, those skills had to be recognised, and there is every indication, in advertisements and in letters, that they were not.

There are many antecedents to this perspective of the servant. The Rusdens had come directly from England, though the families they married into had spent time in India, Singapore, and the West Indies. The attitude of servants as lying and dissembling, no matter how respectable or ‘nice’ they seemed, may have derived from the New South Wales experience of the convict. However, there are other components to the disposition that do seem to predate Chaudhari’s memsahib, the idea of the servant as less than human, for instance. The gaze at the bodies of servants and a comment on them is part of the weighing and measuring of the owner of slaves. We might further say that the servant of nineteenth century New South Wales was an imagined amalgam of several colonies. Servants’ own attitudes stress a labour market perspective, and a picture of themselves as ‘knowing their work’ was central to the answers they gave the family and the way they were represented in agencies and advertisements. Household servants in their ‘combination’ form an important part of the emergence of workers organisations in Australia.

The disjunctions in the idea of what a servant was are not only a result of newer notions of labour measurement and cash value confronting older notions of the servant as an object of humour and pity. There are elements of this conflict, but the idea of what a servant was physically derived also from transcolonial environments of slavery or indentured labour. What confronted this were the new dissenting faiths favoured by the storekeepers and publicans of New South Wales, as well as the mobility of the idea of ‘respectability’—a word that could be used by anyone to apply to themselves or their employer.

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Notes

¹ Scott Family Papers, Mitchell Library (ML), State Library of New South Wales.

² Helenus Scott to Saranna Scott, 10 September 1846. Scott Family Papers, ML A2264.

³ Ann Rusden to Saranna Scott, 9 July 1843, 22 May 1850, Scott Family Papers, ML A2688. All letters are from this volume unless specified.

⁴ Scott Family papers ML 38/77.

⁵ Rose Selwyn Memoirs, ML A1616.

⁶ Grace Rusden to Saranna Scott, 16 April 1851; Ann Rusden to Saranna Scott, undated, December 1845.

- 7 Ann Rusden to Saranna Scott, 16 April 1851, undated in December 1845.
- 8 Ann Rusden to Saranna Scott, 1 September 1848, 15 September 1848, 26 December 1848.
- 9 Saranna Scott to Helenus Scott, 30 September 1848, ML A2265.
- 10 *Maitland Mercury and Hunter River General Advertiser*, (hereafter *Maitland Mercury*) 13 March 1852; 23 April 1857; 24 March 1857; 14 January 1858.
- 11 *Maitland Mercury*, 29 April 1854.
- 12 *Maitland Mercury*, 4 February 1852.
- 13 *Maitland Mercury*, 8 May 1847.
- 14 *Maitland Mercury*, 12 February 1859.
- 15 W.F Gordon Esq Tangarin, 10 November 1847; George Wyndham, Dalwood, 10 and 17 November 1847; T. B. Cox, East Maitland, 18 March 1847; J.M Davis, Currabubulla, 10 February 1859; Evans, Bellevue, 12 February 1859; Mrs Doyle, Lochinvar House, 31 December 1859; John Johnston, Clydesdale, 24 March 1857; W.J. Dangar, Neotsfield, 7 October 1858; James Young, Oakhampton, 7 October 1858; W Mcilvern, Hanging Rock, 30 January 1858; Charles Boydeell, Gresford, 15 December 1855; Edward Sumner, Wondoobar, 7 July 1855; Oswald Bloxsome Esq, Ranger's Valley, 15 June 1853; Mr Howe, Morpeth, 2 October 1852; Mrs Jones A Smith, Clifdon, 14 May 1859; James Smith, Scone, 2 February 1858; James Taylor, Marlborough House, Morpeth, 15 February 1859; Mrs Johnston, Clydesdale, 13 April 1858; All from *Maitland Mercury*.
- 16 *Maitland Mercury* 26 February 1851.
- 17 R vs Billy Cuppy, Supreme Court of Criminal Jurisdiction, 1858, 9/6358 Archives Office of New South Wales.
- 18 *Maitland Mercury*, 15 June 1853.
- 19 Ann Rusden to Saranna Scott, 5 November 1837.
- 20 *Maitland Mercury*, 18 December 1856.
- 21 Ann to Saranna, 26 December 1846.
- 22 *Maitland Mercury*, 20 October 1855.
- 23 *Maitland Mercury*, 5 October 1858.
- 24 Saranna Scott to Helenus Scott, 30 September 1853.
- 25 See note 24 above.
- 26 For example: 'character of the utmost importance and some experience in attendance upon respectable families', George Yeomans, 6 May 1848; 'testimonials from his last employer as to his character and ability will be required', Mr Nicholson, Maitland Inn, 3 October 1846; A nursemaid 'good character' by Mrs Morris Cohen, 29 December 1859; 'Two respectable persons' Mrs W.C Thompson, Commerce House Singleton, 8 March 1859; 'a good character required' Mrs M Lewis or at Mr W.H. Whyte's Stores, 26 February 1851; 'good references required', Mrs Dodds, 7 October 1858; 'a respectable female servant' Mrs McCartney, 15 December 1855; 'none but persons of moral character and quiet habits will be treated with', 15 June 1853; 'Testimonials will be required', James Solomon, 5 October 1850; 'must produce good characters' Mrs James Brackenburg, Australia Inn, 2 February 1858. 'sober, honest and respectable characters', Mrs White, Hannan Street, 16 January 1858; All dates from *Maitland Mercury*.
- 27 E.g., 'good' Mrs Doyle, Lochinvar House, 29 December 1859; 'steady married man', W.J Dangar, 7 October 1858; 'a steady man', E. Franks, 13 March 1852; 'good, sober, industrious couple', John Johnston, 24 March 1857.
- 28 *Maitland Mercury*, 8 May 1856.
- 29 Ann Rusden to Saranna Scott, 1 January 1836 (Bhahee); Ann Rusden to Saranna Scott, 23 March 1837 (Coachee).
- 30 Ann Rusden to Saranna Scott, 26 December 1846.
- 31 *Maitland Mercury*, 9 May 1846.
- 32 *Maitland Mercury*, 7 July 1855.
- 33 See note 18 above.
- 34 *Maitland Mercury*, 23 October 1858.
- 35 J.B Robertson, Moore Park House, *Maitland Mercury* 28 December 1858.
- 36 John M. Ireland, near Seaham, Williams River, *Maitland Mercury*, 25 April 1857.
- 37 W. McIlvern, Hanging Rock, *Maitland Mercury*, 30 January 1858.
- 38 Apply at the Office of this paper, *Maitland Mercury*, 28 January 1858.
- 39 Correspondence of Dr and Mrs Helena Scott, ML A2260.
- 40 J.C.B Fitzroy Hotel, West Maitland, *Maitland Mercury*, 25 December 1856.
- 41 *Maitland Mercury*, 28 March 1855.
- 42 A.G care of Sands and Kenny, Booksellers, 231 George St. Sydney, *Maitland Mercury*, 29 April 1858.
- 43 X.Y.Z *Maitland Mercury*, 16 January 1858.
- 44 *Maitland Mercury*, 27 March 1847.
- 45 Ann Rusden to Saranna Scott, 27 April 1845.
- 46 Ann Rusden to Saranna Scott, undated, December 1845.

- 47 *Maitland Mercury*, 24 March 1857.
- 48 For example: *Maitland Mercury*, 14 February 1846; 3 October 1846; 30 June 1847, 8 May 1847; 14 January 1858; 29 April 1858; 12 May 1857; 28 December 1858; 15 January 1859; 'good wages' 21 July 1847; 'the work will be light and the wages liberal' 18 March 1848.
- 49 Saranna Scott to Helenus Scott, 3 June 1853, ML A2265
- 50 Ann Rusden to Amelia Gillman, 10 April 1854, ML A2269.
- 51 Saranna Scott to Helenus Scott, 11 September 1846, ML A 2265.
- 52 Account Book of Robert and Helenus Scott, ML A2267.
- 53 Helenus Scott to Patrick Scott, 26 December 1825. ML A2265.
- 54 Letters of Dr and Mrs Helenus Scott, ML A2262.
- 55 Ann Rusden to Saranna Scott, fragment, ML MSS 38/19.
- 56 'Glendon' 1837 A.E.R is in fact a watercolour of the cottage. A.E.R is Amelia Rusden.
- 57 Grace Rusden to Saranna Scott, 3 March 1836.
- 58 See note 24 above.
- 59 Servant names mentioned in Ann's Household—'Mrs Burke' 3 March 1836; 'Marion' 3 March 1836, 'the H.Ks' 'Elizabeth Cooper' 2 November 1837; 'Mary [who died]' 25 December 1850; 'Maria' 'your old servant Ann' 29 March 1853; 'the H.K's' fragment, 1851 [ML MSS 38/19]; Saranna's Household, 'Bhahee' 1 January 1836; 'Coachee and his wife' 23 March 1837; 'McDonald' 17 September 1837; 'Fairy' 7 February 1838; 'Rebecca' 23 July 1844; 9 September 1844; 'James' 16 February 1845; 'Miss Nihill' December 1845; 'Susan' 9 August 1846; 'Grace's daughter' 4 Jan 1848; 'Esther' 16 April 1851; 'Margaret Reid' undated scrap 38/19.
- 60 Helenus Scott to Saranna Scott, undated, ML A2265.
- 61 Ann Rusden to Saranna Scott, 17 September 1835.
- 62 Ann Rusden to Saranna Scott, see note 59 'the H.K's' above.
- 63 Rose Rusden to Saranna Scott, 9 August 1846.
- 64 *Maitland Mercury*, 8 August 1846.
- 65 See note 24 above.
- 66 Rose Selwyn Memoirs, ML 1616.
- 67 Ann Rusden to Saranna Scott, undated, though early 1850s because Emily Ottley (nee Rusden) has children.
- 68 Ann discusses the countenances of Henry Rusden, undated, MLMSS 2688; Nene Scott 16 April 1851; Mr Wyndham, 27 October 1837.
- 69 See note 24 above.
- 70 Ann Rusden to Saranna Scott, 7 January 1851.
- 71 Helenus Scott to Saranna Scott, 19 December 1847.
- 72 Undated note, papers of Helenus Scott, ML A 2264.
- 73 See note 57 above.
- 74 Helenus Scott to Saranna Scott, 5 January 1848. Ann Rusden to Saranna Scott, 11 May 1848.
- 75 Ann Rusden to Saranna Scott, 27 October 1836.
- 76 Helenus Scott to Saranna Scott, 5 January 1848.
- 77 See note 24 above.
- 78 Ann Rusden to Saranna Scott, 15 September 1848.
- 79 Ann Rusden to Saranna Scott, 27 February 1845.
- 80 See note 59 'McDonald' above.
- 81 See note 19 above.
- 82 Ann Rusden to Saranna Scott, 7 August 1844.
- 83 See note 78 above.
- 84 Ann Rusden to Saranna Scott, 1 December 1849.
- 85 Ann Rusden to Saranna Scott, 26 December 1848.
- 86 Ann Rusden to Saranna Scott, 23 December 1835.
- 87 Ann Rusden to Saranna Scott, 18 January 1851.
- 88 See note 59 above.
- 89 Ann Rusden to Saranna Scott, 30 May 1848.
- 90 Ann Rusden to Saranna Scott, undated scrap, ML MSS 38/19.
- 91 Ann Rusden to Saranna Scott, 17 September 1837.
- 92 Georgiana Rusden to Saranna Scott, 11 November in 1850.
- 93 Ann Rusden to Saranna Scott, 18 November 1850.

- ⁹⁴ Maitland Mercury, 28 February 1857, advertisement for an English Cooking Range that could be managed by any servant, 'however stupid'.
- ⁹⁵ Ann Rusden to Saranna Scott, 27 December 1848.
- ⁹⁶ Ann Rusden to Saranna Scott, 11 November 1850.
- ⁹⁷ Ann Rusden to Saranna Scott, 7 February 1838.
- ⁹⁸ 'Merrydool a traditional name became 'Merrylegs' at Wallambin on the Tweed River. Merrylegs was the name of a horse. See Joshua Bray Diaries ML MSS 1929. Helenus Scott to Augusta Scott, 16 April 1827.
- ⁹⁹ Helenus Scott to Augusta Scott, 16 April 1829.
- ¹⁰⁰ Ann Rusden to Amelia Gillman, 13 February 1854, ML2269.
- ¹⁰¹ Ann Rusden to George William Rusden, 4 December 1835.

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