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# *Running to Freedom: The Flight of the Fathers of Illegitimate Children to the Colonies of the British Empire, 1875-1901*

*En quête de liberté : la fuite des pères d'enfants illégitimes vers les colonies de l'Empire Britannique, 1875-1901*

Florence Pellegry

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In America, the young man has gone west. In England, he is in the army, in the navy, in the Indian Civil service, in the Cape Mounted Rifles. He is sheep farming in New Zealand, ranching in Colorado, growing tea in Assam, planting coffee in Ceylon; he is a cowboy in Montana, or a wheat-farmer in Manitoba, or a diamond-digger at Kimberley, or a merchant at Melbourne; in short, he is everywhere and anywhere, except where he ought to be, making love to the pretty girls in England. (Allen 52)

- 1 In the late nineteenth century, mass migration became a common feature throughout Europe, a feature deemed by economists Hatton & Williamson as an 'unparalleled population transfer that had profound effects on the global distribution of population, income, and wealth' (Hatton & Williamson 2). Following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the availability of better, faster steamships, the distant colonies began to attract more British men and women in search of new horizons, far from what appeared to be a less than promising future at home after the 1880s depression in the industrial and agrarian sectors (Bridge & Fedorowich 4). Between 1871 and 1913, the number of migrants who left the United Kingdom was estimated at 5.6 million, with an average of 131,000 departures per year (Hatton 407). While middle and upper class men accounted for 26.5% of all emigrants from Britain by the 1890s, the vast majority of those who left were unskilled workers from the lower social strata of society (Tosh 176; Hatton & Williamson 536).
- 2 This research is based on original and unpublished primary sources found in the archives of the London Foundling Hospital (L.F.H.), a well-known British charitable institute dedicated to the reception of abandoned and illegitimate children. Established in 1739 by

Captain Thomas Coram at a time when the only refuges available for abandoned illegitimate children were the infamous workhouses, this philanthropic institute was solely dependent on the financial support of the higher social classes (Levene 2005, 5).<sup>1</sup> Following a period of a non-discriminatory 'first come first served' admission policy, in 1801, the L.F.H. limited access to illegitimate children less than a year old and war orphans provided that their mothers were deemed worthy of help. The testimonies of single mothers who mostly worked as servants and had little choice but to abandon their new born child were archived along with a significant amount of other documents provided as proof of the validity of their love relationships with men such as private correspondence, photographs, presents, sworn statements from third parties, etc.<sup>2</sup> The merit and prior respectability of these women became the main tool for selection (Brownlow 55).<sup>3</sup>

- 3 This research focuses on the private correspondence found in the admission files of the L.F.H. which increased significantly from almost none in the 1850s to about 30% of the files in the last decade of the century.<sup>4</sup> The corpus at hand is composed of 390 selected admission files dated from 1875 to 1901 containing a total of 600 private letters mainly written by the fathers of illegitimate children. In this intimate correspondence, the colonies of the British Empire are omnipresent through recurrent references to the attempted and often successful flight of these men who mostly hailed from the lower echelons of Victorian society.<sup>5</sup> I calculated that close to 40% of the presumed fathers of the children accepted in the L.F.H. were confirmed to have left for another country, migrating mainly to faraway British territories such as Australia, New Zealand, Southern Africa and India. The independent and yet untamed United States of America attracted about 10% (Galloway & Vedder 885–97). Through an examination of the correspondence between these men and the pregnant women they are abandoning, this paper will strive to better understand the conditions under which they chose to depart and the reasons why they did so in such an abrupt manner, ultimately focusing on male attitudes and behaviour regarding illegitimacy in late Victorian Britain.
- 4 At a time when the proportion of illegitimate births was undergoing a sustained decrease in the second half of the nineteenth century, ranging from 6% by mid century to 4% of all live births in 1900 (Thompson 77), a child's illegitimacy was nevertheless severely frowned upon in all sections of society, perceived as a sign of loose morals and adulterous sexual relations (Frost 2003, 295).<sup>6</sup> In the sources of the L.F.H., more than 80% of the men accused of being the father of the petitioner's illegitimate child were said to have disappeared or left the country, sometimes without even notifying their own family, or even directly before their own wedding celebration. If we look at, for example, the case of Emily S., her testimony states: 'He had arranged to marry me on the Saturday after but he went away I don't know where' (L.F.H.A. Emily S. 1896). Frances N. also saw her marriage prospects cut short a few weeks before the celebration as the father of her child, a money lender, disappeared on a September morning in order to evade justice (L.F.H.A. Frances N. 1894). In our sources, people describe these disappearances as sudden and unexpected. When Frieda E. S. was informed by her fiancé that he had to leave in order to organise everything and to earn more money, the young woman did not imagine that he would simply disappear as he later did: 'I had told him my condition. He said he had better leave, go home and tell his mother, get another place with more money so that he could help me. I never saw him again' (L.F.H.A. Frieda E. S. 1896). Emma J. R.'s fiancé also acted without any warning, enlisting in a regiment in India, notifying neither his family nor the

woman he intended to marry: 'He said he would marry me May 13 1893 but he left his work April 4 1893 he had worked there 6 years, he enlisted' (L.F.H.A. Emma J. R. 1894).

- 5 Those who knew the men were generally shocked and had great difficulties understanding the reasons for their disappearance which often affected entire families and deprived the former of the precious work references essential for finding new employment. In some cases, the disappearance took place within an already painful and difficult situation. In a letter sent by the mother of a runaway man to his young deserted girlfriend, the reader can feel her dismay after the recent death of her daughter followed by the abrupt disappearance of her son: 'No doubt this is a great trouble to you I am very sorry for you. Look at my troubles too losing my darling daughter the light of our house and my son leaving home for a foreign land. As soon as I get a letter from my son concerning you I will communicate with you at once in the meantime any letter you choose to send I will answer yours respectfully' (L.F.H.A. Lizzie A. B. 1894). Charles C.'s mother, whose husband died just after her son's disappearance, is yet another tragic figure in the sources. She struggled, in vain, to warn her son before her husband's death: 'Mrs L.<sup>7</sup> did receive a letter from his mother asking if she knew his address as his father was very ill and wished to see him: she has no doubt he is keeping out of the way' (L.F.H.A. Alice B. 1899).
- 6 In spite of improvements in the national police system, by the late nineteenth century, people could still easily disappear and avoid detection sometimes without even leaving the country, finding shelter in more remote regions of Great Britain (Menefee 27). In 1879, when Louisa H. testified to the officers of the L.F.H., she was convinced that her fiancé had not left the country. She was however unable to locate him: '[He's] gone away into the country but cannot find out where' (L.F.H.A. Louisa H. 1879). If disappearing enabled the men to start over, it also gave them the chance to evade British justice at a time when affiliation proceedings had become much more common. The 1872 Bastardy Laws Amendment Act made it easier for women to prosecute men and resulted in a sharp increase in the proportion of presumed fathers being summoned to court (Gillis 958).<sup>8</sup> However, in spite of these advances, the sudden disappearance of the accused often invalidated all legal proceedings. In our sources, the judiciary system appears powerless when confronted with the flight of young men. This is exemplified in the following extract referring to one specific case written by an activist of the 'National Vigilance Association', an association which helped single mothers: 'When I afterwards made enquiries with the intention of taking bastardy proceedings I found that the man left England for the Transvaal very shortly after the case came before the magistrates and that nothing could be done' (L.F.H.A. Alice B. 1896). Enlisting in distant regiments was another solution to escape judiciary proceedings and avoid marriage. Such was the case of Isabella's fiancé. As she explains: 'When I told him my condition he only said he was sorry but that he was ordered to Africa and would marry me when he came back' (L.F.H.A. Isabella S. 1898).<sup>9</sup> The army provided a certain degree of impunity to the men accused of paternity.
- 7 In the archives, many farewell messages were sent by post just before embarking for an unknown and distant land. In these letters, feelings of remorse and culpability are often entwined. On his way to Australia, James H., formerly a butler and footman in a mansion in Surrey, wrote one last time to Alice H., the housemaid he had been seeing for eleven months:

My dear Alice, it causes me great sorrow to go away and desert you but I am compelled to do so. I have had dreadful bad luck and lost my money therefore have nothing I can send you. My brother does not know where you can go but I advise you to go to London and apply at the Lying in Hospital York road. say [*sic*] I wish you luck of course does not half express my thoughts and I am truly grieved at having to behave towards you in such a cruel harsh way. God bless you and bring you safe through all your troubles is the earnest wish of your S. I am just off on board the steamer. (L.F.H.A. Alice H. 1886)

- 8 A few months earlier, when she told him she was pregnant, he had offered to marry her straightaway. However, he clearly had second thoughts, hence the dramatic final letter. In our sources, the farewell messages depict tragic portraits where love seems unable to overcome a set of unfortunate circumstances. Debt, judicial problems, sensitive professional and personal situations are all mentioned as reasons that prevented the men from keeping their promises. There are many cases when the women's pregnancy only worsened the difficult situation in which the lovers already found themselves. Edith A. S.'s lover was for example already in extreme debt. He even asked her to be as discreet as possible on the matter: 'Do not mention my address to Will M. if you do go there, as I owe him 15/ which he must get from Park Lodge' (L.F.H.A. Edith A. S. 1899). As for those who attempted to provide financially for the child, these attempts appear to have been short-lived, such as that of Ellen W's former fiancé: 'The father paid 2/6 a week up to June 1894 when he got into some trouble and left his work and home he was a postman' (L.F.H.A. Ellen W. 1895).

- 9 Throughout the letters, men tend to present themselves as romantic figures with broken hearts, heading towards the unknown. The primary aim of the farewell messages was to inform loved ones, but they also gave their authors the opportunity to apologize and to sympathize with the abandoned women, in an attempt to preserve the happier memories of their romance. On the 30th of August 1892, two months after he disappeared, John E. H., a construction worker, wrote the following from Australia to the woman he left behind in England:

My Dear Girl, Of course you will be surprised and I expect disgusted at receiving a letter from me after what you will call my unkind treatment of you before I left England and since, in taking no notice of your letters, but although unexcusable [*sic*] entirely, my explanation I think may moderate what undoubtedly you have formed of me—a very bad opinion. My explanation is this: when I left London I knew that I had to go to Australia perhaps to remain there for ever according to my health and knowing you were so fond of me, no more so than I was of you, I knew also that if you knew I was coming out here you would upset yourself and it would probably have ended in me bringing you out here, which would have been what I should have liked; but extreme folly for these reasons. I did not know at all what the country was like; I hadn't a great deal of money; and I might have been unlucky in several ways and perhaps have found ourselves without money and friends and in a bad state. I thought all this well over and came to the conclusion that it would be better to let you for a time think badly of me rather than bring you out here to suffer perhaps hardships and for a time poverty, and so convinced was I that my idea was right (+ I have since found it to be so) that I didn't answer. (L.F.H.A. Alice R. 1893)

- 10 Professing that he had to emigrate for health reasons,<sup>10</sup> John also underlined how dangerous an enterprise emigrating was. In spite of the fact that some couples may have planned to elope together and start over prior to the unexpected pregnancy, a departure for the colonies remained a departure towards the unknown, towards new dangers and uncertain living conditions. Emigrating, at the time, was predominantly a male

endeavour. Following in the wake of the pioneers, who had discovered and begun to tame these new vast wild areas of land, the typical migrant remained a man younger than 25 years of age even at the close of the nineteenth century. In 1872, there were twice as many male migrants as female, and this phenomenon continued until the beginning of the twentieth century (Harper & Constantine 213).

- 11 Last but not least, the desire to leave was of course shared by many women but the unexpected pregnancy often impeded their plans. Some couples must have succeeded in reuniting in a foreign land but they were the minority and the migration of the women was generally delayed or more often simply abandoned. Ada M. W. became pregnant after going out with one of the customers of the restaurant she worked for. This French man, a pipe turner who left for New York, however promised as she testified, 'to send for me as soon as he was able'. Once in New York, he expressed his desire for the woman to join him there. On the 12th of March 1889, he wrote:

You tell in your last that you was [*sic*] afraid I would find a young woman to marry. but [*sic*] you are very mistaken. I love you only, and my baby. I hope see him very soon. because [*sic*] if the work goes as I wish I will have you and baby come over to me [*sic*]. If not, I will go back to London and take you to my home in France. I ask you one thing: it is to take good care of my baby and to not commit yourself anything wrong [*sic*]. if [*sic*] you do, I will know it as I have a friend of mine who send me news and tells me every thing [*sic*]. Nothing else to tell you but to give a thousand kisses to my lovely baby. (L.F.H.A. Ada M. W. 1889)

- 12 She however never made it to New York. Her baby was born on the 8<sup>th</sup> of January and she found herself a new position as a general servant in March 1889. He continued to send her money until April 1889.
- 13 Despite the appearance of government funded emigration schemes and associations aiming at boosting immigration towards Australia, New Zealand and South Africa from the first half of the nineteenth century onwards,<sup>11</sup> the migration of the men from our sources appears to have been an individual choice and a privately funded endeavour (Hatton & Williamson 535; Harper & Constantine 54). The ideal scenario was to rejoin a relative already settled overseas. After being sentenced to pay child support, the presumed father of Ellen G.'s child fled to New Zealand where his brother lived (L.F.H.A. Ellen G. 1875). The desire to leave was often fuelled by word of mouth. Even though there were some significant information campaigns, first hand evidence from friends and relatives seems to have had a much stronger impact (Harper & Constantine 93). In the sources at hand, some extracts from correspondence describe the benefits of the host country and seek to entice other prospective migrants. Laura B.'s fiancé who emigrated to Wellington left an invitation for a friend: 'Tell him if he is not afraid of leaving home to come out here, Bricklayers get 14/- a day working hours 8 till 5' (L.F.H.A. Laura B. 1878). The impact of cultural and literary productions at the time, particularly the boy's adventure story, must also have played a decisive role in inciting migration as argued by Francis Martin in his article on British masculinity when he states that a whole generation of British men was 'enchanted by fantasies of the energetic life and homo-social camaraderie of the adventure hero' (Martin 640).<sup>12</sup>
- 14 Migrating to the colonies was never an easy decision and often a desperate one. Even though travelling had become more affordable, the enterprise was not without risk. Henry S. died shortly after he arrived in Cape Town from a fever he caught during the voyage. He had hoped to make a fortune there as a gold miner (L.F.H.A. Lizzie A. B. 1894).

Another example is the case of Lilian E. H.'s fiancé who fell ill with pneumonia after a short halt in Malta on his way to his new garrison in India:

My dearest Emma, Just a few lines to let you know that I have arrived in India all right but have had a very bad illness since I last wrote to you. After we left Malta I was taken very bad with an attack of pneumonia which you now [*sic*] is very bad but thank God I have recovered and am getting on very well but still very week [*sic*]. My dear Emma I can tell you I did not think I should ever live to get of [*sic*] that ship but I was spared to get through it all right. (L.F.H.A. Lilian E. H. 1893)

- 15 In the archives, some extracts recount the physical toll of the voyage to the colonies, for instance this extract which dates back to the 7th of September 1878, written from Wellington:

My dear Ted, Yours to hand this morning was pleased to hear from you. I landed here last Friday 30th August just nine weeks from London, a very quick passage considering it is 16000 miles, I will give you an account of it presently, I am now taking it quietly for a few days, I was very queer on the water had a month in the hospital am now better but very weak, am going to look for a job next week. (L.F.H.A. Laura B. 1878)

- 16 Shortly after his arrival in New Zealand, this twenty-year old salesman spent a month in hospital. One can presume that this happened frequently and must have represented a significant extra physical and financial cost for the migrants.
- 17 Many of the writers who had to abandon everything depict the break-up as liberation. A letter by George T. addressed to Florence B. expresses for instance a clear sense of relief: 'When I have left Eastbourne, I said to all my friends that I was going to Germany, but it is not true, I am always in England, but never you will find me, because nobody in Eastbourne know (*sic*) where I am' (L.F.H.A. Florence B. 1896). The baker who went out with Amelia C., a cook in Woolwich, declared openly to one of his friends his desire to escape his situation: 'He had seen him a month ago when he said: "I shall get off out of this"' (L.F.H.A. Amelia C. 1898). Clearly, the concept of freedom, of liberty to choose must have had a tremendous significance for the men in our sources at a time when, after massive rural migration and the slow break up of traditional communities, a whole set of 'modern values' emerged which, according to the historian Edward Shorter, 'sanction[ed] individualism over community allegiance and self realization over collective solidarity' (Shorter 18, Benson 119). While in rural communities, the unmarried fathers-to-be were usually forced to marry the women they had impregnated, the failed relationships recorded in the archives of the L.F.H. testify to the collapse of these traditional practices in the fast-growing urban centers of the country where many young women migrated for work (Arnot 58, Ross 577, Ramsbottom 2018). In the correspondence at hand, men's decisions appear to have been taken alone, with individualistic motives. The possibility of disappearing and evading the law, their responsibilities and the consequences of their actions affected men in their treatment of their families, friends and lovers. Indeed, the presumed fathers often used their freedom to escape in order to manipulate their supposed bride-to-be. The baker who was the father of Clarence B.'s child is thus reported to have tried to buy the second cook's silence: 'He said it was no use for me to summon him. He should go away, but if I kept quiet he would look after me' (L.F.H.A. Clarence B. 1898). In the same vein, the correspondence written by Bessie H.'s fiancé in 1895 clearly shows the possible outcome of judiciary proceedings: 'You can't expect to get money where there is none for if I have to appear at Court it will come out in Stachenam and I'm bound to lose my situation. In that case I should have to seek work

further afield, for it will be impossible for me to return home. You may look for me then. Yours sincerely Bert' (L.F.H.A. Bessie H. 1896).

- 18 Emigration is often discussed as a statistic with the conditions of that migration and the impact on the people left behind generally left to the imagination. The correspondence of the L.F.H. however gives us personal testimonies on the traumatizing effect on many families and individuals of these abrupt departures in late Victorian society. What happened to these men once they had migrated is rarely made clear. In the eyes of late nineteenth century society they were runaways who had abandoned their responsibilities and consequently they rarely returned to tell their tale. In our sources, leaving one's pregnant girlfriend behind appears predominantly as a desperate decision for men who found themselves in a tenuous situation, men who had not intended to father a child so soon and who did not have the support of their families and were unable to face the shame and financial cost of legal proceedings. However, the possibility of starting over, of evading justice and other problems such as debt and unemployment also rendered the colonies an attractive escape in spite of the many dangers involved, the inevitable losses to be endured, and the emotional and physical uncertainties of their journey's end. In the new urban society, but also in the faraway lands which carried the promise of a better future, independence and freedom of choice appear to have been determining elements affecting male behaviour towards women and illegitimate children in the British working class. The portraits in the private letters which were archived generally convey an independent and proud version of manliness<sup>13</sup> even as responsibility and justice toward the abandoned women and children are relinquished.

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## NOTES

1. Many high profile personalities and artists were involved in the enterprise such as William Hogarth, Thomas Gainsborough, Allan Ramsay and George Frederic Handel.
2. In 1979, John Gillis was the first to work on the archives of the L.F.H. as a precious source of information on illegitimacy in nineteenth century Britain, but also on the social condition of servants (as the majority of women petitioning for the admission of their child at the L.F.H. were servants) and on marriage. It then attracted a small number of researchers amongst which Bernd Weisbrod, Ana Clark, Françoise Barret Ducrocq, and more recently Jessica A. Sheetz-Nguyen, Alysa Levene, Samantha Williams, Pamela Horn and Ginger Frost. My own doctoral dissertation was also the study of these archives in the last quarter of the nineteenth century (see selected bibliography).
3. Admitted before the age of one, the babies were baptized and sent to nurse mothers until the age of five or six. They would then be sent back to the L.F.H. to be educated and then trained to a job from eleven years of age onwards.
4. Following major educational reforms in 1870 and 1880.
5. They were butchers, craftsmen, waiters, butlers, postmen, etc. Only 5% came from the middle classes. About 20% however were skilled artisans, believed to have been reasonably well-off.
6. The English Common Law was one of the harshest in Europe regarding illegitimacy, making it impossible for illegitimate children to become legitimate, after the wedding of their parents.
7. Her son's former employer.
8. In 1872, the period during which women could file complaints was increased from only one year after the birth of the child to three.
9. We calculated that only about 5% of the presumed fathers enlisted.
10. Doctors advised people suffering from consumption to migrate to warmer climates, such as Australia or South Africa.
11. These programs and associations such as the National Emigration Aid Society could for instance provide enough funds to pay for the passage of certain migrants after they were selected, and could even guarantee them a job on arrival.
12. Literary works including H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) and R. L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) tell of adventures in exotic locales and British male superiority.
13. Comparable in many ways to that mentioned in scholarly articles on the subject by John BENSON, John ARCHER, John TOSH, Francis MARTIN, MANGAN & WALVIN, ROPER & TOSH.

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## ABSTRACTS

Through the close study of private correspondence extracts and first-hand testimonies found in the London Foundling Hospital archives, this paper will analyse the phenomenon of the flight towards the colonies of the British Empire in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In the archives of this charitable institute dedicated to the reception of abandoned and illegitimate children since 1739, distant southern colonies such as Australia, New Zealand, Southern Africa, but also India are omnipresent through recurrent references to the attempted flight of the fathers of illegitimate children. These remote places came to represent the possibility of starting over, of erasing one's mistakes but also and most especially, in our case study, of distancing oneself from the mother of one's illegitimate child and the related unwanted responsibilities. Through an examination of the correspondence between the men and the pregnant women they are abandoning, this paper will strive to better understand the conditions under which they chose to depart and the reasons why they did so in such an abrupt manner, ultimately focusing on male attitudes and behaviour regarding illegitimacy in late Victorian Britain.

À travers l'étude d'extraits de correspondances intimes et de témoignages retrouvés dans les archives du *London Foundling Hospital*, cet article consiste en une analyse du phénomène de fuite vers les colonies de l'Empire Britannique dans le dernier quart du dix-neuvième siècle. Dans les archives de cette organisation caritative dédiée à l'accueil des enfants abandonnés et illégitimes depuis 1769, les colonies lointaines au sud du Royaume-Uni comme par exemple l'Australie, la Nouvelle-Zélande, ou encore l'Afrique du Sud, sont omniprésentes à travers les nombreuses références aux tentatives de fuite des pères des enfants illégitimes. Ces endroits reculés offrent la possibilité de tout recommencer, d'effacer ses erreurs, mais aussi et surtout, dans notre étude de cas, de s'éloigner de la mère de son enfant et de ses responsabilités de père. A travers l'analyse des correspondances des jeunes couples concernés, il sera question de détailler les conditions du départ des hommes et de mieux en comprendre le caractère abrupt. On s'intéressera finalement à l'attitude de ces hommes face à l'illégitimité à la fin de l'ère victorienne.

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**Mots-clés:** colonies, émigration, illégitimité, réputation, relations sexuelles prémaritales, mères célibataires, correspondances, mariage, London Foundling Hospital

**Keywords:** illegitimacy, premarital sex, single mothers, correspondence, marriage

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