

## Opening credits

LIZ: Underfoot: the Facility is a history of the lives and afterlives of Melbourne's Yarra Bend Insane Asylum, and all the institutions of social control that have stood on this site.

That means you'll hear some harrowing stories of institutional abuse, many kinds of violence, and suicide. There's offensive language from historical sources, and also we swear a lot.

QJH: Underfoot: The Facility was made on what is, always was, and forever will be Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung land.

It's mostly about the bit of Wurundjeri land where the Yarra River meets Merri Creek.

If you want the full immersive experience at the actual places we mention, you'll find maps, photos, transcripts and other material at [3cr.org.au/underfoot](https://3cr.org.au/underfoot).

QJH: I'm Jinghua Qian.

LIZ: I'm Liz Crash.

QJH: And you're listening to Underfoot: The Facility.

**[AUDIO: an audio montage followed by some music from "Let's take a trip to Melbourne", a jaunty 1934 tune written by Jack O'Hagan and sung by Clement Q Williams.]<sup>1</sup>**

## Track 2: Good breeding

LIZ: My big sister didn't exist for the first 20-odd years of her life. Officially speaking, that is.

I went in to register her and realised that the form was still using the terms illegitimate all through it. And I thought, oh, that's weird, because I knew that legislation had changed, to get rid of the terminology illegitimate, a year or so before.

LIZ: That's my mum, Sue. My sister Amber, her first child, was born in 1976. My parents, being kinda hippyish types, weren't married. But that wasn't supposed to matter. The legal distinction between legitimate and illegitimate children had been abolished and my dad acknowledged her as his daughter, anyway. But when Mum went down to register the birth, the old forms were still there.

This idiot who'd ordered all the extra forms said to me, look, what's your problem? It's only a word, illegitimate.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nfsa.gov.au/collection/curated/asset/96131-lets-take-trip-melbourne-clement-q-williams>

And I said, well, that's the whole purpose of this legislation that was passed, it was supposed to stop using this derogatory terminology that said some children were real and others weren't.

LIZ: This story goes on for quite a while and has so many twists and turns and layers of bureaucracy that even the people involved forgot what it was originally about until my sister was 21 and applying for an Australian passport and the passport office was like, sorry, do we know you?"

QJH: So... not to interrupt but what's this got to do with Yarra Bend Park?

LIZ: Well, the reason "illegitimate" was a box on the form in the first place is that there was a big moral panic around single motherhood in the late 19th century, which also really shaped the history of all the facilities that have been in Yarra Bend Park. From 1893, illegitimate infants had to be registered within 3 days of birth, while married parents had several weeks to register their kids.

And the reason for this was to make it easier for the state to monitor illegitimate children and if they felt it was necessary, take them away from their mothers. That's part of the function of the institutions at Yarra Bend – we see that in stories from both Yarra Bend Insane Asylum and the Fairhaven VD clinic, that a lot of the women patients had children, that these children were taken away from them because they were institutionalised, and that often the reason they were institutionalised in the first place was also tied to a lack of respectability and legitimacy.

So yeah, it has big consequences. How about you, Jinghua, are you legitimate?

QJH: Yeah, I am, and legitimacy was contingent on several things in China in the 80s. I was born in Shanghai, which was one of the strictest places for enforcing the one-child policy, so my parents could only register me because they were married and childless. In some other places, you were allowed to have a second child if your first was a girl, but not in Shanghai.

LIZ: What would happen if you broke the rules and had an illegitimate child?

QJH: You'd get fined and probably lose your job. There was a whole system of economic incentives and penalties upholding the one-child policy, and it was also pretty common for women's work units to take them to have IUDs put in or to pressure them into abortions.

But obviously a lot of people still had extra kids and they just found ways to make it work. And actually, from growing up Catholic, I knew a lot of Chinese Catholic families that had 4 or 5 kids. So they were like, legitimate in the eyes of God but not the state I guess.

LIZ: Yeah, I spose there's lots of different ways you can be legitimate or illegitimate, lots of different types of reproductive control, and they often get treated as separate, but I think they're connected. I think the expectations we have for parents, especially mothers, and children, the kind of things we say are legitimate or illegitimate, respectable or not, tell us something about the kind of society and nation, the kind of future we want.

[MUSIC: Road to Tokyo 1941]

## Convict era – the problem population

QJH: People sometimes have this idea that women used to be respectable back in the day and now no longer, and that's fucking nonsense. The notion of respectability has always been this aspirational thing that's used for social control.

LIZ: Yeah, early colonial Australian sources are very blunt about wanting more nice white wives and mothers instead of wayward sluts. At the time, in the non-Indigenous population, there were about 5 times more men than women. There were several different proposals for how to get more marriageable women over – in 1825, The Australian suggested harsher sentencing for women in Britain to transport more convict women, offer them early release from their sentences if they got married, and stave off a demographic crisis in Australia. They wrote:

*Of what avail to the great mass of our population are churches and bibles, when nine tenths of them cannot possibly marry? ... Young women often prefer to be the concubines of persons in a superior rank, to being the wives of laborious settlers.*

QJH: Oh my god. That's absolutely the rhetoric about young women from Chinese state media these days too, that they'd rather be rich men's mistresses than poor men's wives. But I guess the British realised you don't need to make marriage appealing if you can just sentence women to it. Marriage is prison!

LIZ: Poverty is prison!

QJH: It's almost like this whole colony was a prison!

LIZ: Yeah, which is something we all know, right, but do we really? It's like the prison island thing has just been folded into national mythos of being a bunch of cheeky larrikins. It's never talked about in a way that's connected to today's prisons – even the word "convict" in Australia is never used except to talk about convict transportation.

Anyway this thing The Australian was saying about a lot of young women preferring a kind of sugar daddy, mistress type arrangement to marriage? That's actually completely true. And even as the ratio of men to women equalised somewhat in the Victorian era, sex work and mistressing were still good options – often better than marriage.

## Victorian era – working girls

QJH: So Melbourne really kicks off in the mid 19th century with the gold rush. It's the Marvellous Melbourne era, there's all that gold rush money pouring in, but it's pretty uneven.

And basically Melbourne at the time had lots of bored, lonely men with unpredictable incomes, so they couldn't support a wife, but they could afford to see sex workers. So it was sort of the golden age of sex work in the colony.

LIZ: And the sex industry was huge, Melbourne was known for it. In 1873, the undercover journalist known as The Vagabond wrote:

“This vice flourishes in Melbourne in most undue proportions... young women who should be the mothers of the Australian of the future, are neither physically nor morally adapted for the positions they should naturally fill.”

This is from an article where he's posing as a Christian social worker trying to talk sex workers out of their profession and into the Protestant Female Refuge in Carlton.

QJH: This guy! He's gotta be the most prolific undercover journalist ever. I just imagine him with a whole bag of stick-on moustaches and other disguises. How did the workers react?

LIZ: Well, here's what one woman had to say:

“Do you think I'm a fool? It's better to be as I am when you make lots of money off it. What have I got to repent of? I'm bad! All right! It pays, don't it?”

QJH: Yeah what other jobs even exist for women at this time? I guess there's factory work and stuff but I'm sure that paid less.

LIZ: The issue wasn't so much that other work for women wasn't available, it was more that as you say, it usually wasn't paid well, employers discriminated against women outside the bounds of respectability, and also there was a threat of sexual exploitation in just about any job. So for example another woman who the Vagabond talked to said:

“I might get a barmaid's place, perhaps, but in many houses that isn't much better than this, unless it was in a respectable house, and I couldn't get in there, known as I am.”

Another woman says that she went into sex work because she was a single mother and it was the only way she could keep her child with her – a lot of single mothers in this era sent their children away to what were called “baby farms”, a type of private residential foster care, so they could hide the child, appear more respectable to employers, get childcare (huge issue, then as now), get a job, and get the kid back later when they made some money. This was not a great option, though, because a lot of these places were dodgy, a lot of kids actually died of neglect. That's one of the things that led to the law requiring registration of illegitimate children within three days of their birth, a desire for closer state monitoring of these services.

Alternatively, you could go into the Protestant Female Refuge as the Vagabond suggested but then you'd have your child taken off you and put up for forced adoption, plus everyone would know you'd been there.

QJH: Right. Like if everyone's going to slut-shame you anyway, you may as well get paid and be relatively independent as a sex worker.

I guess also for a lot of people, this sort of respectability is unattainable whether or not you do sex work. Or, whether you're getting paid is not the distinguishing factor.

I'm thinking about relationships between working class white women and Chinese men in this era — when, for sure, there were Chinese men who were regular clients of white women sex workers, but there's also an assumption that all sex between Chinese men and white women was commercial, and that that was sinister and exploitative.

LIZ: Yeah, there's a lot, a lot of stories in the Melbourne papers of the time about wayward girls, and "hanging out with Chinese dudes" was treated as the same type of thing as drugs and illicit sex.

So for example in 1883, three girls of 17 or 18 crashed at a Chinese man, Hong Goon's, house in North Melbourne after smoking opium. Minnie Ferguson was a runaway from a middle-class home, Mary Ogden had no family to speak of, and Minnie Harrison's mother was dead, while her father was institutionalised in Yarra Bend.

The girls were given short prison sentences — 1-3 months — for the crime of vagrancy, being homeless, essentially. Hong Goon was jailed for a year on the charge of "keeping a disorderly house".

QJH: Right, so was that typical, these vague charges of vagrancy and disorderliness?

LIZ: Yeah, when we talk about policing sex work, this is actually how it was done. It was hard to get proof of money changing hands, or sex happening, so it was criminalised by proxy — by criminalising poverty, or a suspiciously busy social life, or not having a documented, respectable source of income.

And, also, the authorities didn't necessarily even care if money changed hands or not. That's essential to the modern definition of sex work, but a lot of 19th and 20th century sources define that as professional prostitution, as opposed to the amateur variety.

QJH: Wait so what is amateur prostitution, is that just... fucking?

LIZ: Yeah, if it bothers your neighbours I guess? And Hong Goon's neighbours were very bothered. That's why the police came to his house in the first place — he made a complaint to the police about harassment from his neighbours, including some pretty serious stuff — stones thrown through windows, that kind of thing.

QJH: And they took the side of the neighbours? Far out. Like tag yourself, I definitely identify as Hong Goon in this story.

But I'm also conscious of the fact that there are probably heaps of sluts and queers and people in interracial relationships and whatever else, people like us, who had pretty okay

lives. They made it work and they're just hard to find in the historical record, because they weren't having as much contact with the state.

LIZ: Yeah, actually my great-great-grandma Kate Malloney was born in Melbourne in the 1850s to an unmarried mother. She claimed her husband died, that was the family story, but state records show she was never married. It's just no one checked.

QJH: And it was a lot easier to lie then, right? That's a big motivator for migrants coming to Australia, that they could invent a new life, or a new gender. It would actually have been much more difficult a century later, because by that time, bureaucracy was harder to escape. With World War I, the White Australia Policy, and increased paranoia about national security came a much more rigorous state surveillance system, including passports, visas, identity papers, and identity checks.

And we see even more policing of women's sexuality.

## Fairhaven

LIZ: After Yarra Bend Insane Asylum closed in 1927, the buildings were repurposed for the Fairhaven clinic. We've got an article here from 1928 describing the daily routine at Fairhaven.

QJH: Okay it says:

*'The day begins at 7 a.m., breakfast at 8. Then follow prayers in the Chapel, which is gradually being furnished, and finally, the round of daily duties. These latter are all undertaken by the girls themselves, with, for obvious reasons, the exception of those connected with the kitchen.'*<sup>2</sup>

This definitely sounds more like a reform school than a clinic.

LIZ: Yeah, Fairhaven was what's called a "lock hospital", a compulsory residential treatment facility for STIs, or VD, venereal disease, as it was usually known at the time. Hence the girls being excused from kitchen duty – it's almost impossible to transmit an STI via spag bol, but this was not about science, it was about stigma. That's why they were locked in, to prevent them escaping and polluting the park – literally, that was a concern local residents of Fairfield had about the facility.

QJH: Right, I remember reading about lock hospitals at the start of the pandemic, when evacuees from Wuhan were quarantined on Christmas Island. There's such a long history of medical incarceration in Australia – often on islands – whether it was lock hospitals, quarantine stations, or lazarets housing people with leprosy.

And it was really racialised, with quarantine being used as an instrument of dispossession. In Western Australia, hundreds of Aboriginal people were forcibly removed from their

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/ref/vic/biogs/E000085b.htm>

homelands to lock hospitals on Bernier and Dorre Islands and many never returned home. And many of them didn't even have leprosy in the first place.

LIZ: Actually, that's not that surprising. Especially in the days before we'd even identified the actual pathogens under a microscope, you often see vague, vibes-based diagnoses, and they're often being used to justify other political aims. So a lot of the patients at Fairhaven had very nonspecific genital symptoms with no clear cause, or even no symptoms at all.

QJH: But the lock hospitals I've heard of housed men, women and children. So why was Fairhaven only for women?

LIZ: National security. VD was enormously concerning to the military, because it was really common. In WWI, 10-15% of all Australian soldiers per year were treated for VD in military hospitals.<sup>3</sup>

QJH: Yeah I remember reading that in WWI, the Anzacs had the highest rates of VD of all the Allied troops.

LIZ: Yes, so men were being treated in military hospitals, but in the civilian world, authorities targeted women, instead — women who were suspected of being sex workers, or just seen as promiscuous. There'd been a few goes at this kind of lock hospital for bad girls,<sup>4</sup> but it was an unpopular idea, and it wasn't until WWI that the political mood of the country changed.

So there had been a VD ward at the Fairfield Infectious Diseases Hospital, at Yarra Bend, and then in 1927 it was replaced as the vacated Yarra Bend Insane Asylum site was turned into a residential facility for women only, Fairhaven.<sup>5</sup>

QJH: It's almost like, as the medical treatment improves, there's new categories of social contagion that come up..

LIZ: Yup, if medicine treats the infection then we better create a new moral punishment for the sin, right? So in 1943, Social Hygiene Director Dr Cooper Booth suggested that women who came in for treatment at Fairhaven for the first time should be warned that if they were so careless as to contract VD a second time, their heads would be shaved as punishment. I don't think that actually happened. But women definitely were punished in other ways. If you were pregnant – and a lot of the women at Fairhaven were – your baby would be put up for forced adoption.

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<https://jmvh.org/article/the-australian-armys-two-traditional-diseases-gonorrhoea-and-syphilis-a-military-medical-history-during-the-twentieth-century/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://search.informit.org/doi/pdf/10.3316/ielapa.591229882839272>

<sup>5</sup> Management given to Church by establishment in 1927:

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/243974508>

Link between Fairhaven and Fairfield Hospital: VD patients were first treated at hospital, then government felt there was a need for a long term residential clinic outside hospital/acute care.

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/155778701>

QJH: Yeah from the daily routine, it sounds similar to other institutions for forced adoption. And Fairhaven was run by the church too, wasn't it? It was under the auspices of the Mission of St James and St John, and Canon George Edwin Lambie. And that Mission ran a whole chain of homes for women and children, and their own adoption agency.

LIZ: Yeah, at this time there was no social welfare support for unmarried single mothers. So what there was instead was a whole network of non-government institutions for unmarried women: Magdalene laundries like the one at Abbotsford Convent, and the Girls Memorial Home in Fairfield, just up the road from Yarra Bend. One woman at the Girls Memorial Home said she knew she was there to be punished. In her words:

*'It was the way we were treated,'  
'Like we had committed a dreadful crime...*

*Your names were changed for a start – so nobody would know who you were... at first I thought it was rather funny and then I realised it wasn't funny at all... You were rostered onto doing duties and it seemed that some of the duties were the cruellest when you were feeling the worst.<sup>6</sup>*

## Modern day

LIZ: In the years following World War II, fast-acting antibiotics became widely available to civilians, and as a result, long-term residential clinics like Fairhaven became obsolete. So in 1954, Fairhaven was shut down, and the old Yarra Bend Asylum buildings were transformed again – this time, into Fairlea women's prison, the first dedicated women's prison in Victoria.

QJH: *Or was it?*

LIZ: Well, what do you think?

QJH: I mean it wasn't even the first women's prison in the building!

LIZ: But at no point, ever, has it been illegal to be an unmarried mother in Victoria, to leave your husband, to keep and raise your child, to have sex outside marriage, or with other women.

QJH: But you don't need to make it illegal, do you? You just need to make it unworkable.

LIZ: Yeah, and obviously even now, when you look at the things that women are being incarcerated for today – they're often crimes of poverty, and they're often losing custody of their children over even very short sentences. And of course single mothers are more likely to be poor.

You know, my mum said that in 1975 when she first realised she was pregnant, she wasn't sure if my dad would want to be involved or not. But the major social change that made her feel like yes, I can do this, even if I have to do it alone, wasn't really anything to do with "will

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<sup>6</sup> <https://blackpepperpublishing.com/wilsonsbooksample.html>



people accept me, will they judge me". It was the introduction of the Supporting Mother's Benefit in 1973.<sup>7</sup>

Previously, there'd been a Widows Pension, but this was the first welfare payment accessible by never-married, non-respectable single mothers. And it's been under attack ever since.

QJH: It's much less money in real terms than it used to be, right?

LIZ: Yup, 70% of parents in Australia who are receiving a sole parenting payment – mostly women – are living in poverty. Like I'd love to have kids but I can't afford it as a single person.

QJH: And even if you do have a partner, you don't want to be in a situation where you can't afford to leave the relationship.

LIZ: Totally. You know, my parents have been together for a long time, and they seem really happy. But I think a big part of that is that they weren't forced to be together. They did end up getting married, but only after they were done having kids – they didn't want any distinction of legitimacy between us.

There were three of us, in the end – my sister, and also my brother, and me. I was born in 1988, and by that time, the birth registration form had no mention of marriage or legitimacy.

## Closing credits

LIZ: Underfoot: The Facility was produced with support from 3CR Community Radio, the City of Yarra, and the Public Records Office Victoria, on Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung land. We pay our respects to their elders past and present.

You can find out more about Underfoot at [3cr.org.au/underfoot](https://3cr.org.au/underfoot).

**[AUDIO: "Where the lazy river goes by", recorded with Mario 'Harp' Lorenzi and His Rhythmics in January 1937 whilst Melbourne-born singer Marjorie Stedeford was living and working in London.<sup>8</sup>]**

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<sup>7</sup> <https://guides.dss.gov.au/social-security-guide/5/2/3/10>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.nfsa.gov.au/collection/curated/asset/82579-where-lazy-river-goes-marjorie-stedeford>