

# Provenance 2010

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Issue 9, 2010 ISSN: 1832-2522





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# About Provenance

## The journal of Public Record Office Victoria

*Provenance* is a free journal published online by Public Record Office Victoria. The journal features peer-reviewed articles, as well as other written contributions, that contain research drawing on records in the state archives holdings.

*Provenance* is available online at [www.prov.vic.gov.au](http://www.prov.vic.gov.au)

The purpose of *Provenance* is to foster access to PROV's archival holdings and broaden its relevance to the wider Victorian community.

The records held by PROV contain a wealth of information regarding Victorian people, places, communities, events, policies, institutions, infrastructure, governance, and law. *Provenance* provides a forum for scholarly publication drawing on the full diversity of these records.

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Please direct any queries, comments and submissions regarding *Provenance* to the editor, who can be contacted by email at [provenance@prov.vic.gov.au](mailto:provenance@prov.vic.gov.au) or by telephone on (03) 9348 5600, or post to:

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*Provenance* journal publishes peer-reviewed articles, as well as other written contributions, that contain research drawing on records in PROV's holdings.

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- Public Record Office Victoria access services;
- the peak bodies of PROV's major user and stakeholder groups;
- and the archives, records and information management professions.

An editor is appointed to the board to co-ordinate production of the journal and the activities of the editorial board. All board members are appointed to the board by the PROV Director and Keeper of Public Records for a period of two years.

### Assessment of submitted articles

Assessment of all submitted articles is overseen by the editor in consultation with the editorial board. All articles intended for the peer-reviewed section of the journal undergo double-blind peer review by at least two referees with expertise relevant to the submitted article. The editorial board also makes recommendations regarding the publication of informal articles in the Forum Section. For guidelines and information for authors interested in submitting an article to *Provenance*, see the Author Guidelines.

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The name, PANDORA, is an acronym that encapsulates the web archive's mission: Preserving and Accessing Networked Documentary Resources of Australia.

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# Editorial

## Provenance 2010

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One of the notable features of the refereed articles and some of those in the Forum section in this year's *Provenance* is that many are based on substantial research into archives and collections in addition to those found here at Public Record Office Victoria. Kirsten Wright and Antonina Lewis combine research into records of Victoria University in Footscray with records created by the Department of Education. Beginning with burnt and damaged records they discovered in the Victoria University Archives, the authors researched both collections to weave a story about the lack of attention paid to fire prevention in Victorian public schools in the early twentieth century. In so doing, they introduce us to a range of social history surrounding the incidence of fire at the school in 1953, as well as the work of the school's founder Charles Hoadley.

Catharine Coleborne's article explores the administration of insanity in four colonial psychiatric institutions in Australia and New Zealand between 1860 and 1914. Her study reveals much about those in care as those who provided that care, and those who recorded the treatment of the 'insane' at these institutions.

Another article demonstrating the research possibilities available for those interested in the study of mental health records is Kath Ensor's article on Dolly Stainer, an inmate of Kew Cottages. The article brings together research into mental health records held at Public Record Office Victoria, the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, and a range of other sources to demonstrate the way in which family histories can be reclaimed through primary research.

Alison Wishart's research into Victorian Education Department records takes us into the world of renegade cookery educator Flora Pell, a capable woman who ran foul of the Education Department authorities by ignoring their outdated teaching texts to produce her own highly successful book on the subject, *Our cookery book*.

The lead article in this year's Forum section tells the journey of a woman rediscovering the facts of her own childhood through personal memorabilia and records found in shoebox, which eventually led her to an inquest file at Public Record Office Victoria. Janet Marles tells the story of her mother, Heather McDonald, who through this chance discovery was able to start answering many

of the questions she had been left with when she and her sisters became orphans in 1941.

Helen Harris explores the system introduced by the Victoria Police in 1893 to regulate 'baby farming', a practice used by single mothers to earn incomes while they paid other women to look after their infants. The *Infant Life Protection Act 1890* was the instrument for this attempt to ensure better care of infants and protect them from the excesses of a system geared more toward making money than keeping infants alive. The records examined in the article reveal a great deal of intimate detail about the lives of the working-class women who worked as 'nurses' as well as those who employed them.

In Christine Graunas's article we are taken on an excursion through the wonders of Melbourne's inner suburban high streets with their well-preserved shopping terraces, dating from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. The article is based on primary research on municipal records held at Public Record Office Victoria, as well as newspaper advertisements and commissioned histories of inner-city suburbs. Melburnians and visitors alike will see this aspect of the urban environment as one of Melbourne's great features.

On the occasion of the 150th centenary of the Burke and Wills expedition, Donna Bourke asks the question: 'What happened to the camels that survived?' Following the purchase of Longerenong Homestead in the Wimmera, she discovered that this property had a connection with the expedition, having been a place where the camels were kept for a period following their retrieval. Through her research into the records of the Royal Zoological and Acclimatisation Society, the untold story of the camels and their fate is finally revealed!

Finally, the sad life of crime of murderer George Blunderfield (alias Arthur Oldring), who was hanged in Melbourne in 1918. Based on research into records of the Western Australian and Victorian state archives, Kirstie Close's article takes us on the downward spiral of George's life that saw him become the perpetrator of horrific crimes.

Sebastian Gurciullo  
Editor

# Refereed articles



# The Turbulent History of Our Cookery Book

Alison Wishart

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'The Turbulent History of Our Cookery Book', *Provenance: The Journal of Public Record Office Victoria*, issue no. 9, 2010. ISSN 1832-2522. Copyright © Alison Wishart.

This is a peer reviewed article.

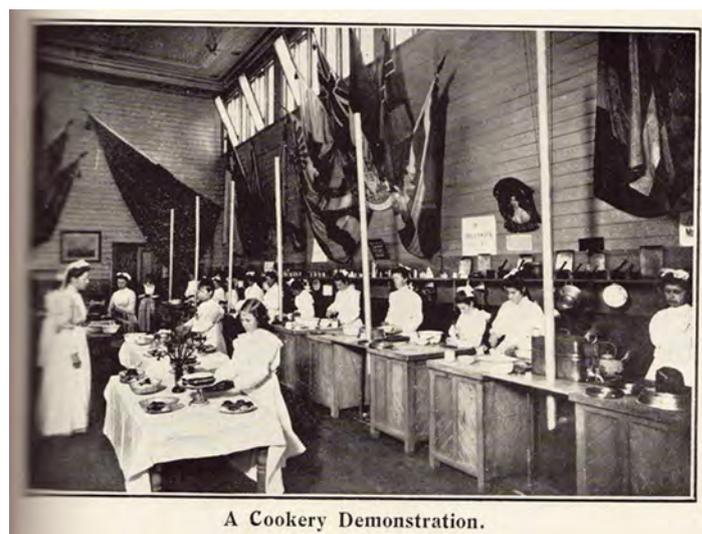
Alison Wishart has worked as a curator for the past seven years at the Museum of Tropical Queensland in Townsville, the State Library of Queensland in Brisbane and the National Museum of Australia (NMA) in Canberra. She has a BA (Hons) from the University of Queensland and a Masters in Museum Studies and Cultural Heritage from Deakin University. She has curated stories for the Eternity Gallery at the NMA, and a story about Flora Pell and her passion for cooking will be included in the gallery in late 2011.

## Abstract

In 1916, Melbourne's George Robertson published *Our cookery book* by Flora Pell. It was so popular that it remained in print until the 1950s and went into at least twenty-four editions. However its author, a long-serving employee of the Victorian Education Department, became a victim of departmental officiousness and was reprimanded and punished for showing initiative and skill. *Our cookery book* was also censured by the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) as it contained recipes with alcohol, even though its author shared the same social and moral goals as the WCTU. The vexed history of *Our cookery book*, which brought to an end the thirty-five-year teaching career of Miss Pell, is documented in the correspondence, memos and departmental marginalia of a Public Record Office Victoria (PROV) file that is deceptively named 'Red Cross Special case'.

## Miss Flora Pell, Teacher and Author

Flora Pell was born in Melbourne on 12 March 1874 and commenced work as a probationary teacher when she was only fifteen years old. She passed her teacher's exams and became an Instructor in Cookery at schools in Geelong, Bendigo and then Carlton. This prepared her to organise the cookery section at the State Schools Exhibition in 1906.[1]



A Cookery Demonstration.

A cookery demonstration at the State Schools Exhibition in Melbourne, 1906. From CR Long (ed.), *Record and review of the State Schools Exhibition ... 1906*, Government Printer, Melbourne, 1908, facing p. 68. Copy in National Library of Australia.

When Pell was appointed Supervisor of Cookery at the Melbourne Continuation School in 1908, her superiors stated that:

[Pell] has undertaken the training of the first cookery teachers. Exceedingly hard-working, capable, interested, reliable, enthusiastic, tactful. Miss Pell is a valuable public servant.[2]



Miss Flora Pell, Instructress in Cookery at the Melbourne Continuation School, 1906. From CR Long (ed.), *Souvenir book: the aims and work of the Education Department*, [Education Department], Melbourne, 1906, facing p. 24. Copy in National Library of Australia.

Pell continued to rise through the ranks of the Victorian Education Department, becoming headmistress of the Collingwood Domestic Arts School when it opened in 1915.



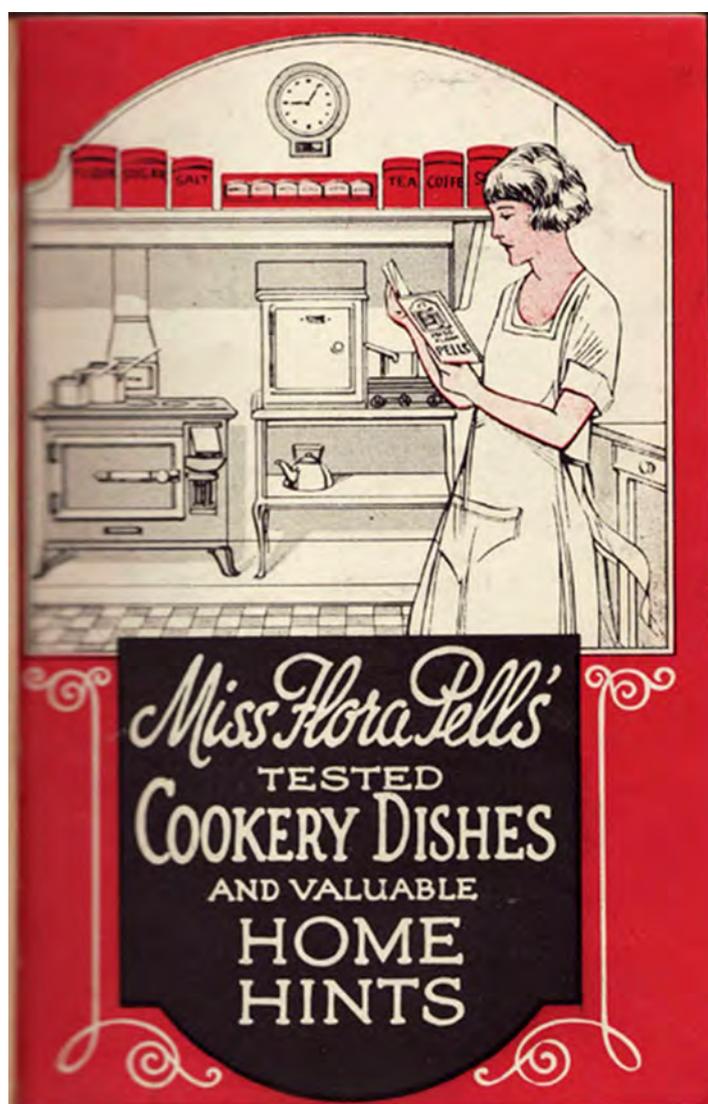
Collingwood Domestic Arts College, where Pell taught cookery and was headmistress from 1915 to 1924. Photograph courtesy John Young.

While she was in charge of this school, Pell seized the opportunity of a meeting in Melbourne in June 1918 of all the State Education Department directors and organised for her cookery students to prepare and serve a four-course luncheon. The Victorian Premier, Minister for Education, Director of Education, and Mayor of Collingwood also tasted the students' achievements and were most impressed.[3] Pell knew that good cooking could be persuasive and strategic.

Flora Pell's career followed the expansion of systematic instruction in cookery – one of the technical subjects that broadened the emphasis of schooling beyond basic literacy. Judging by the annual reports Pell submitted to the Director of Education, it appears that she oversaw the development of cookery and sloyd centres (woodwork was called sloyd then) in state schools around Victoria from 1912. In 1914 she reported that there were forty-seven centres in full working order and that sixteen new centres had opened in that year.[4] These centres were usually attached to the local high school. In 1924, Pell was appointed Inspectress of Domestic Arts Centres throughout Victoria, a position she held until her retirement due to 'ill-health' in 1929 at the age of 55 years.[5]

The domestic arts movement was actually a transnational one, and however isolated Australia may have seemed in a geographical sense, the movement was not removed from developments elsewhere. The United States as well as England provided inspiration and models, and the interplay between external influences and local experiences is apparent in Pell's own work. In 1923, she embarked on an 'extensive tour of America' to examine the domestic arts schools in that country. It is likely that Pell organised and funded the tour herself, as there is no information in the Education Department records to indicate otherwise. She concluded that while the equipment and facilities in American colleges were 'magnificent', schools in Melbourne had 'nothing to learn' from them. However, she did think that Australians would benefit from incorporating aspects of the American diet, which included salad with almost every meal, far less red meat, and 'dainty' breakfasts of 'grapefruit or oranges and freshly made rolls and coffee'. [6] As she toured the United States, she gave lectures about cooking and Australia.

In 1916, *Our cookery book* was published by George Robertson in Melbourne. By this time Pell had been teaching cookery in Victorian schools for nearly twenty-five years. She felt there was a need for a cookery textbook to replace the recipe cards that the students (all girls) invariably lost and to provide more recipes and information. *Our cookery book* became the informal cookery textbook and at least twenty-four editions were published between 1916 and the 1950s. New editions of the book continued to appear even after her death in 1943.[7]



Cover of *Miss Flora Pell's tested cookery dishes and valuable home hints*, Specialty Press, Melbourne, 1925. Copy in National Library of Australia.

By 1925, Flora Pell's reputation had grown to the extent that her publishers (now Specialty Press) thought it would be profitable to issue a book with her name in the title: *Miss Flora Pell's tested cookery dishes and valuable home hints*.

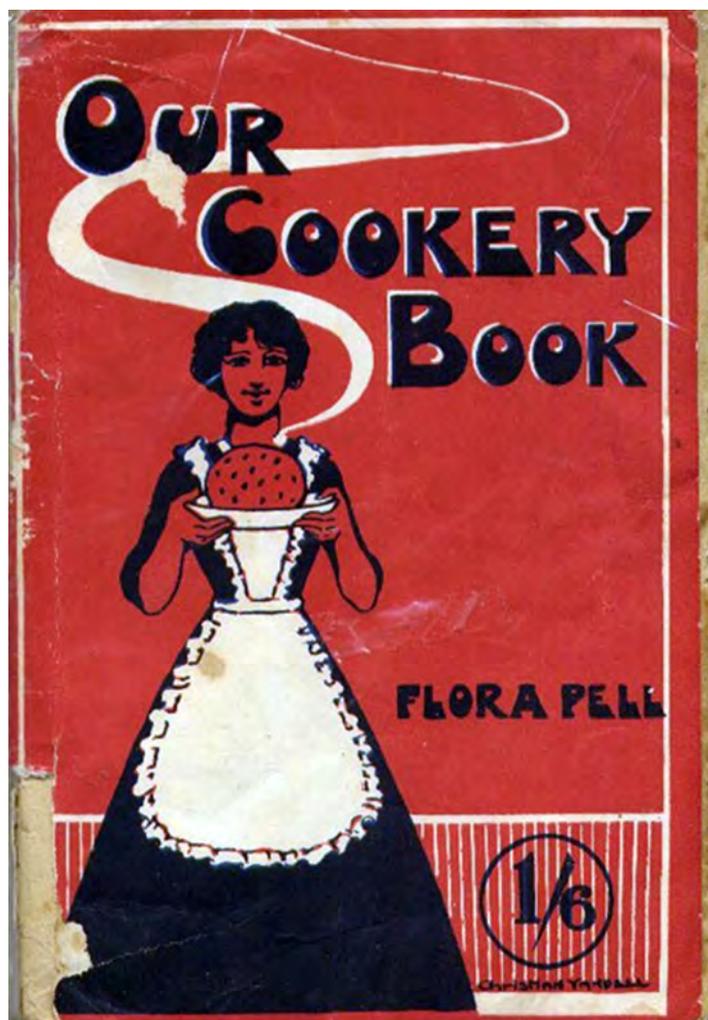
Pell's reputation as a cookbook author continued to grow and led to the Victorian State Dried Fruits Board asking her in 1926 to compile a recipe book with fifty recipes containing only dried fruits. The result was *A sunshine cookery book*.



F Pell, *A sunshine cookery book with 50 dried fruit recipes for the modern table*, State Dried Fruits Board, Victoria, c. 1926. Photograph by Alison Wishart.

This cookbook was distributed free of charge to encourage Australians to eat more dried fruits. Australians were only consuming about one-third of the fruit grown in the country, much of which was cultivated by returned soldiers. These two publications created more demand for Pell and she soon found herself being invited to speak to women's, business and charity groups.[8] From 1925 to 1928 she had a regular spot on Melbourne's 3LO radio where she discussed cooking tips and domestic economy. Her ideas were often aired in the press, particularly by her friend Mrs Stella Allan who used the pseudonym 'Vesta' to write the weekly 'Women to Women' column in the *Argus*. Pell was on the airwaves, in print and in the papers. She may have been Australia's first celebrity chef!

Through royalties and her career, Pell gained financial independence, something only a minority of women of her age and era experienced. She did not marry until she was sixty years old in 1935. It is uncertain whether she chose a career over marriage, though given her attitudes towards the importance of motherhood and a woman's duty to fulfil her 'heaven-appointed' mission to be a 'wife and home-maker', this seems unlikely.[9] Family circumstances meant that she was the bread-winner, as her father re-married following the death of her mother and had four more children before he died in 1893. [10] It is probable that as the only surviving child from her father's first marriage, Pell was actively involved in caring and providing for her four step-siblings. Their mother, Charlotte (née Jeffreson) did not re-marry.[11]



Cover of the 8th edition of *Our cookery book*, published about 1924, cover illustration attributed to Christian Waller (née Yandell). Photograph by Alison Wishart.



Cover of the 24th edition of *Our cookery book*, published c. 1950. Photograph by Alison Wishart.

## The Turbulent History of *Our Cookery Book*

*Our cookery book* was a source of both great pride and distress for its author. It stands as a significant historical resource because its very purpose was to teach the general principles and techniques of contemporary cookery – the basic preparations for meals that were common at the time. It was used by mothers and daughters alike. However, by including a few recipes with alcohol in *Our cookery book*, Flora Pell raised the ire of the temperance movement and witnessed their lobbying strength. Its popularity as an unofficial textbook in school cookery centres and domestic arts colleges also exposed her to the full force of the Education Department's wrath and power and led to her premature retirement in 1929.

The genesis of *Our cookery book* came from Pell's extensive experience as a cookery teacher in Victorian schools. The Education Department required cookery students to purchase a set of 30 recipe cards for 1 shilling per set, with replacement cards costing 1 pence each.[12] Pell saw the need for a cookery book with more recipes and information about nutrition, cuts of meat, economising with food and leftovers, cooking for invalids and general cooking tips. She wrote her cookbook, found a publisher and wrote to the director of the Education Department on 20 December 1915 seeking his permission to bring out a book to replace the recipe cards.[13] When director Frank Tate replied that he did not want students to have to purchase a book, Pell was undeterred. *Our cookery book* was published, and at a retail price of 1s 6d was quickly taken up by cookery teachers and students.

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Advertisement for *Our cookery book* that appeared in the *Argus* on 8 July 1916, p. 6. Image courtesy National Library of Australia.

Publicity for the cookbook in the newspapers proclaimed: 'this book is the new text-book for all cookery pupils in the Government high schools and must be in the possession of all!'.[14]

When the Education Department saw the press, Pell received a strongly worded letter from her employer demanding to know on whose authority she had issued a textbook. She replied that she had worked on the cookery book in her own time, did not authorise the use of the words 'text-book' in the advertising and then went on the offensive, quoting an independent reviewer who opined in the *Argus*: 'it is doubtful whether any cookery book has yet been issued which would make the work as easy as this does for young housekeepers'.[15] The department wrote back to Miss Pell on 26 August 1916 stating that *Our cookery book* was not approved by the minister and could not be recognised as a textbook. This was intended to close the matter.[16]



A cookery class at Warrnambool High School, c. 1915. Image courtesy National Library of Australia.

It is unclear whether Pell actively encouraged the use of her cookery book in schools or neglected to discourage it, but in any case *Our cookery book* gradually replaced the department's recipe cards. Its use may have gone unnoticed by the department if not for the vigilance of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). In 1926, ten years after *Our cookery book* was first published, the Victorian branch of the WCTU wrote to the Director of Education, concerned that school children were being taught to make trifle using sherry. The director asked Pell if any such recipes were in use in schools and she replied that wine was not used in any recipes that were taught in cookery classes.

Technically, this was true, as the recipes in Pell's book which do contain alcohol, 'namely rich fruit cakes and pudding with a little brandy which enables the sauce to be kept for a length of time ... take five hours to cook without allowing time to prepare so can not well be included in a day's cookery practice'.<sup>[17]</sup> However this was not good enough for the WCTU, who wrote to the director again on 21 May 1928 'respectfully requesting' and 'urging' him to make good his 'definite promise' made at a conference held at Bell Street Domestic Arts College in November 1927 to remove the cookbook 'which includes intoxicating liquor in recipes'.<sup>[18]</sup> Pell's popular cookbook, which was not approved for use in schools, was causing embarrassment to her employer. When asked to explain, Pell realised that she could not stand up to the might of the WCTU and promised to make arrangements with her publisher to have all the offending recipes removed from subsequent editions.<sup>[19]</sup> This victory was announced in the newsletter of the Victorian branch of the WCTU.<sup>[20]</sup>

The WCTU started in the United States in the 1870s and spread to Australia in 1882. It attracted middle-class women of modest education from Protestant Christian backgrounds whose churches generally opposed alcohol.<sup>[21]</sup> The motto of its newsletter, *The white ribbon signal*,<sup>[22]</sup> was 'For God, Home and Humanity', which showed its strong Christian roots. While prohibition of alcohol was its main goal, over the course of its history the WCTU also campaigned for women's suffrage, women's right to stand for political office and to work as Justices of the Peace, Aboriginal land rights, and peace, and opposed the vices of gambling and tobacco.<sup>[23]</sup> It was closely aligned with the National Council of Women and the Housewives Association, which also supported the temperance movement, and members sometimes belonged to all three organisations.<sup>[24]</sup> The membership of the Victorian branch of the WCTU nearly trebled during the 1920s from 3,118 members in 1920 to 9,776 in 1930, making it the largest state branch.<sup>[25]</sup> Their political power was evident after they successfully campaigned for the closure of Victorian hotels and public bars at 6 pm in 1916 and helped to convince 47% of adult Victorians to vote for the reduction or abolition of liquor licenses in a referendum in 1920.<sup>[26]</sup> When they agitated from 1926 to 1928 for the removal of recipes containing alcohol from Pell's cookery book, they had an expanding supporter base that politicians and bureaucrats would have been foolish to ignore.

Ironically, Flora Pell's reports for the Education Department and the preface or introduction to her cookery books indicate that she subscribed to the

ideals and principles of the WCTU and the Housewives Association. All three encouraged women to continue in their traditional domestic role and elevated the importance of the housewife. Pell realised that 'the housekeeper is in a position to wield a tremendous influence on the mind and body, hence upon the family, society, and the nation'.<sup>[27]</sup> Values of thrift, efficiency, stewardship of resources (for example fuel, cloth, food), fidelity, hard work and fair dealing were promoted by the Housewives Association and by Flora Pell.<sup>[28]</sup> Pell argued that women and girls did not have an innate knowledge of the skills required for their 'heaven-appointed' mission to be a 'wife and home-maker' and that they needed to be trained in the 'scientific and business principles needful for the organization of the modern household'.<sup>[29]</sup> This was becoming increasingly important as more girls moved out of domestic service and into factory work from the 1890s onwards.<sup>[30]</sup>

Both the WCTU and Pell were seeking to describe and empower women as 'nation builders'. In 1897, Elizabeth Nicholls, speaking at a WCTU convention, said that the members of the WCTU who were 'the representatives of the organised motherhood and sisterhood ... are equally entitled to the name of "Nation Builders"'.<sup>[31]</sup> Pell also believed that nation-building started in the kitchen and wrote in 1906: 'the teaching of domestic economy is to be the power that makes the happy home, and the happy home means a prosperous nation, because, from the home, we must recruit our citizens'.<sup>[32]</sup> Pell called on the government to protect 'the integrity and dignity of home life ... as a factor of national prosperity'.<sup>[33]</sup> This is precisely what the WCTU was seeking to do through the prohibition of alcohol.

Flora Pell, the WCTU and the Housewives Association were all proponents of 'domestic feminism' and upheld socially conservative gender roles. When Pell gave her farewell address at the Vere Street Domestic Arts Centre in June 1924 (she had been promoted to the position of Inspector of Domestic Arts Centres in Victoria), she stated that girls were 'the guardians of the future'. She believed there was a link between training girls to be wise mothers who ran efficient and effective households and who cared for the physical, mental and moral health of their children, and the prevention of juvenile crime.<sup>[34]</sup> Women might be allowed to work outside the home in a limited range of occupations but their most important work would take place in the home.

While Pell was espousing the moral steadfastness of a continuing education for girls in household economy and domestic science, community leaders in Melbourne and the WCTU were concerned about the return of soldiers from World War I with venereal diseases who drifted in and out of employment.[35] They feared that young girls, who finished school in their fourteenth year but were not allowed to start work in factories until they turned fifteen, and the returned soldiers would drift towards each other. Programs that trained girls in the principles and practices of motherhood were seen as one way of helping to control the spread of VD.[36] To prevent young girls from developing lazy, and possibly even immoral habits, Pell advocated that girls should be kept under the control of the Education Department and made to attend domestic arts centres for at least a couple of days a week.[37] However, as secondary education grew in the inter-war years, more girls chose to take up academic rather than domestic arts/science courses in senior years.[38] The WCTU was also concerned about the moral education of young girls and established the Frances Willard Club for girls and the daisy chain 'recruit a friend' campaign.[39] Pell and the WCTU thus shared the same moral values and Christian principles, but the latter was the more politically powerful and believed prohibition was the best way to achieve a society characterised by justice, peace and purity.

The popularity of *Our cookery book*, in schools as well as homes, was once a source of pride, pleasure and profit for Pell and her publisher. It now became a nightmare. It was the catalyst for the end of her forty-year teaching career. After the WCTU had alerted the Education Department to the continued use of *Our cookery book* in schools, the new director, Mr NP Hansen, questioned how the book came to supplant the recipe cards, and whether Pell had the right to receive royalties for a book that was published using her departmental title of 'Supervisor of Cookery, Education Department and Headmistress, Domestic Arts School' and later 'Inspector of Schools'. The department was annoyed that 1,900 sets of its recipe cards were sitting unused and unsold at the Government Printing Office, while Pell and her publisher were reaping rewards. Pell was called before the director and the two top bureaucrats in the Education Department on Saturday 14 July 1928 and informed of the 'undesirability of officers being interested financially in books of which they could officially influence the use, and advised to apply for permission to accept royalties'.[40]

The publisher, Specialty Press, feared that this profitable cookbook, which was in its 11th edition, could be banned and wrote to the department on

11 June 1928 requesting permission to continue to publish the book but with no recipes containing alcohol and no advertisements. They submitted a proof of the cookbook for approval in July. The department sent this copy to Miss RS Chisholm, headmistress of the Emily McPherson College of Domestic Economy, seeking her opinion on the suitability of *Our cookery book* as a school textbook. One month later Miss Chisholm submitted her confidential report. She cattishly stated in her cover letter: 'if I had not been selected for this post [of headmistress] I should probably have asked for your cooperation in some such scheme, as it is I am the more qualified to do it'. She planted a seed in the director's mind by suggesting that the cookbook could be re-written and expanded to include general household hints 'by a little group of whom I could be one'. In the body of her four-page report, Chisholm admitted that 'I have myself taught from it in Domestic Arts Schools and cookery schools and used it in home cookery, ... and sold many copies'. She concluded that 'until a better text book is written, or this is revised as indicated, *Our Cookery Book* is a fairly suitable text for girls of 12-15 [years]' (emphasis in original).[41]

Based on this advice, the Director of Education recommended that *Our cookery book* be used as a school text, provided it was published without any advertisements or recipes containing alcohol. He had already received the government's permission for Pell to receive royalties, although this was never communicated to Pell. However, the Minister for Education chose to go against the advice of his director and the confidential report prepared by Miss Chisholm and in September 1928 he ordered that schools revert to using recipe cards, which they had not used for thirteen years, until all the remaining 1,900 sets of cards were distributed. In the meantime, a committee of experts, including Miss Pell and Miss Chisholm, was to write a new textbook on 'cookery, laundry and dietetics, and housewifery' that the department would publish. The minister was presented with figures showing that, based on the current retail price of 1s 6d, and the demand for 10,000 books per annum, the department expected to make a profit of £311 5s each year.[42]

Pell was outraged by the minister's directive and wrote a strongly worded letter to the director on 9 October 1928 stating that it would be a retrograde step to use the cookery cards that were printed twenty-seven years ago. She was so keen that *Our cookery book* remain in schools that she was prepared to forgo some of her profits, writing that 'if it is a matter of royalties, perhaps some arrangement could be made'.

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She told the director that *Our cookery book* was used by students in Tasmania and that exchange teachers visiting from London and Leicester purchased extra copies to take home and use in their schools. She said that there was no need for another book, such as the one that was proposed by the department.

Pell's letter was acknowledged but ignored. So too was a letter from Miss Grace McLaren, headmistress of the domestic arts college at Geelong, who wrote on behalf of all headmistresses of domestic arts colleges urging the continued use of *Our cookery book*.<sup>[43]</sup> Pell was asked to attend a meeting with the co-authors of the new domestic arts textbook on 29 October 1928 and instructed by her superior, Miss Flynn, Chief Inspector of Secondary Schools, to work on the cookery chapters with another cookery supervisor, Miss Keiller.<sup>[44]</sup> This must have been quite humiliating for Pell to be told to work on the cookery section with another expert after she had written three successful cookery books herself. Sometime in the week following, Flora Pell went on three months' sick leave.

While on sick leave, this highly motivated and passionate teacher still felt obliged to answer correspondence and check over exam results. When asked by the departmental secretary if she would be able to fulfil her commitment to write her section of the new textbook, she replied that, given she had to continue working while on leave, she felt able to return to work on 14 December and planned to finish her section of the book before the new school year commenced in 1929.<sup>[45]</sup>

When Pell returned to work, she found that her good friend and colleague Miss Grace McLaren had been doing some lobbying on her behalf. She had sent a circular around to all the cookery centres and domestic arts colleges in Victoria which stated: 'I urgently request that the use of "Our Cookery Book" be continued in our Cookery Schools.' Senior staff were asked to sign the circular, add their own comments and send it back to Miss McLaren. Most of these circulars were included with McLaren's letter to the director in October, but sixteen were sent in late and were shown to Pell. One circular was signed by Miss Keiller, a fellow author on the new textbook. When a new Minister for Public Instruction was appointed with the change of government on 22 November 1928,<sup>[46]</sup> Pell seized the moment and wrote to the Director of Education on 22 December enclosing the circulars, asking that the matter be reconsidered and 'respectfully and strongly requesting' the continued use of *Our cookery book* in schools, now that all recipes containing alcohol and all advertisements had been excised.

Pell's campaign backfired. The director accepted the advice of his senior officers to adhere to the decision of the former minister and called Pell in for an interview with himself and the three most senior bureaucrats – a tactic he had used six months earlier. The typed notes of the meeting record that Pell defended herself admirably and denied any prior knowledge of Grace McLaren's actions in sending out the circulars, which were interpreted as undermining the department's authority. Pell was again reprimanded for allowing *Our cookery book* to be used in schools and accepting royalties without the department's permission. She was instructed to continue working on the new textbook.



Miss Flora Pell, 1922. From E Sweetman, Charles R Long and J Smyth, *History of state education in Victoria*, Education Department of Victoria, Melbourne, 1922, p. 260.

As an 'obedient servant' of the department, Pell worked with her co-authors and submitted her section outline of the new textbook on 12 February 1929. This proposed textbook was never published by the Education Department. On 19 February she arranged for the distribution of the remaining 1,900 sets of cookery cards to the ten metropolitan domestic arts colleges, at the bargain price recommended by the department of 6 pence per set. Ironically, or perhaps mischievously, two headmistresses wrote back to the department to say that they could not purchase their allocation of cookery cards as the students had already purchased *Our cookery book*.<sup>[47]</sup> Pell retired from teaching due to ill-health on 8 November 1929. It is not known how long she had been on sick leave before this date.<sup>[48]</sup> Her friends organised a party in her honour at the Berkeley tea rooms in Little Collins Street on 11 April 1930 to 'give friends of Miss Pell an opportunity to meet her'.<sup>[49]</sup> It is amazing to think that a seemingly innocuous cookbook could cause so much trouble and lead to the downfall of a competent and highly regarded teacher and administrator.

When Flora Pell was promoted to Inspectress of Domestic Arts Colleges in 1924, the *Argus* reported that 'probably no woman has had greater influence than her on the promotion of domestic happiness among the younger generation in Victoria', which by that time comprised 'the greater proportion of householders of today'.<sup>[50]</sup> Young girls' limited opportunities to learn the domestic arts provided a strong argument for their place in the curriculum, and the elevation of the home as a 'dignified activity of national importance' supported this. Beyond being a blueprint for meals, the turbulent history of *Our cookery book* attests to the political power of the temperance movement in the 1920s and the authoritarian rule of large government departments. One wonders if loyal, highly skilled teachers with passion and enthusiasm who rise through the ranks of the Education Department would be treated in the same way today.

## Endnotes

- [1] The Centennial Exhibition in Melbourne in 1888, for example, provided the occasion for the production of a small book, later used by students of the author. MJ Pearson, *Cookery recipes for the people*, 3rd edn, H Hearne, Melbourne, 1893.
- [2] PROV, VPRS 13719/P1 Database Index to Teacher Record Books, 1863-1959, Teacher Record Card 11684 (Flora Pell).
- [3] *Argus*, 7 June 1918, p. 8.
- [4] F Pell, 'Report of the supervisor of cookery', in *Report of the Minister for Public Instruction, 1913-14*, Appendix L, *Victorian Parliamentary Papers*, p. 80.
- [5] PROV, VPRS 13719/P1, Teacher Record Card 11684.
- [6] *Argus*, 17 November 1923, p. 21.
- [7] J Young, *The school on the flat: Collingwood College 1882-2007*, Collingwood College, Melbourne, 2007, p. 29. Flora Pell, *Our cookery book*, George Robertson, Melbourne, 1916. If any readers have used *Our cookery book*, or know of anyone who has used this book or other cookbooks written by Flora Pell, please contact the author.
- [8] *Argus*, 22 March 1927, p. 14 and 15 November 1928, p. 15.
- [9] F Pell, 'Cookery', in CR Long (ed.), *Record and review of the State Schools Exhibition ... 1906*, Government Printer, Melbourne, 1908, p. 69.
- [10] *Federation Index, Victoria 1889-1901: Indexes to births, deaths and marriages in Victoria*, Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, August 1997 (CD-ROM).
- [11] *Edwardian Index, Victoria 1902-1913; Great War Index, Victoria 1914-1920; Death Index, Victoria 1921-1985* (all published on CD-ROM).
- [12] PROV, VA 714 Education Department, VPRS 892/PO Special Case Files, Unit 105, Special Case Number 1213, letter from Pell dated 5 September 1928. I am indebted to Kerreen Reiger for a footnote on page 63 of her book *Disenchantment of the home: modernizing the Australian family, 1880-1940*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1985, which led me to this file.
- [13] *ibid.*, letter from Pell dated 20 December 1915.
- [14] *Argus*, 8 July 1916, p. 6. Additional publicity was in the *Argus* on 16 July 1916 and the *Herald* on 11 July 1916.
- [15] PROV, VPRS 892/PO, Unit 105, Special Case Number 1213, letter from Pell dated 28 July 1916; *Argus*, 16 July 1916.

- [16] *Our cookery book* was subject to the *Copyright Act 1911* which meant that if Pell did write the book in her own time, then she owned the intellectual property in the work and was entitled to receive royalties. The Education Department had no legal right to prevent her from receiving royalties. However, the way the book was promoted as a textbook written by an experienced and senior cookery teacher was a moral issue they were entitled to comment on.
- [17] PROV, VPRS 892/P, Unit 105, Special Case Number 1213, letter from WCTU dated 24 August 1926 and letter from Pell dated 24 August 1926.
- [18] *ibid.*, letter from WCTU dated 21 May 1928; *The white ribbon signal: official organ of the Women's Temperance Union of Victoria*, 8 June 1928, p. 85.
- [19] PROV, VPRS 892/P, Unit 105, Special Case File 1213, memo from Pell dated 24 May 1928.
- [20] *The white ribbon signal*, 8 September 1930, p. 136.
- [21] P Grimshaw, 'Gender, citizenship and race in the Women's Christian Temperance Union of Australia, 1890 to the 1930s', *Australian feminist studies*, vol. 13, no. 28, 1998, p. 201.
- [22] Supporters of prohibition were encouraged to wear a white ribbon, hence the name of the newsletter.
- [23] Many of these issues and more were discussed at the WCTU annual conventions: see *The white ribbon signal*, 8 December 1927, pp. 182-3.
- [24] P Grimshaw, 'Only the chains have changed', in V Burgmann & J Lee (eds), *Staining the wattle*, McPhee Gribble, Melbourne, 1988, p. 77.
- [25] J Smart, 'A mission to the home: the Housewives Association, the Women's Christian Temperance Union and Protestant Christianity, 1920-1940', *Australian feminist studies*, vol. 13, no. 28, 1998, p. 219.
- [26] 'Referendums and plebiscites held in Victoria', in *Victorian Parliamentary Handbook*, compiled by Victorian Parliamentary Library, 2001. About 43% of Victorians voted to abolish liquor licenses in Victoria in 1930.
- [27] F Pell, *Miss Flora Pell's tested cookery dishes and valuable home hints*, Specialty Press, Melbourne, 1925, p. 5.
- [28] The values of the Housewives Association are discussed in Smart, 'A mission to the home', p. 217.
- [29] Pell, 'Cookery', in Long, *Record and review of the State Schools Exhibition*, p. 69.
- [30] R Ward, *Concise history of Australia*, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane, 1992, p. 209.
- [31] 'Nation builders' is a term that was used to describe the men who attended the Convention on Federation. Nicholls quoted in Grimshaw, 'Gender, citizenship and race', p. 204.
- [32] Pell, 'Cookery', p. 69.
- [33] Pell, 'Report of the supervisor of cookery', p. 80.
- [34] *Argus*, 4 June 1924, p. 6, article by 'Vesta', 'Training of girls'.
- [35] Smart, 'A mission to the home', p. 220.
- [36] J Smart, 'The Great War and the "scarlet scourge": debates about venereal diseases in Melbourne during World War I', in J Smart & T Wood (eds), *ANZAC muster: war and society in Australia and New Zealand, 1914-1918 and 1939-1945*, Monash University Publications in History: 14, Clayton, Vic., 1992, p. 69.
- [37] Pell quoted by 'Vesta' in the *Argus*, 4 June 1924, p. 6.
- [38] Reiger, *Modernizing the home*, p. 63.
- [39] *The white ribbon signal*, 8 June 1928, pp. 85, 92.
- [40] PROV, VPRS 892/PO, Unit 105, File 1213, Education Department file note dated 14 July 1928.
- [41] *ibid.*, confidential report submitted 10 August 1928.
- [42] *ibid.*, departmental memo dated 5 September 1928.
- [43] *ibid.*, departmental memo dated 10 October 1928, letter from Miss McLaren dated 15 October 1928, and memo dated 17 October 1928.
- [44] *ibid.*, departmental memos dated 10 October 1928 and 29 October 1928.
- [45] *ibid.*, correspondence dated 30 November 1918 and from Pell dated 10 December 1928.
- [46] Victorian Premier Edmond Hogan resigned on 20 November 1928 after a no-confidence motion and a censure were carried in the Victorian Parliament. The Leader of the National Party, Sir William Murray McPherson was called to form government, which he did until the Legislative Assembly election of 30 November 1929.
- [47] *ibid.*, memo from Miss Flynn dated 18 February 1929; correspondence from Pell dated 19 February 1929, from Richmond Domestic Arts School dated 11 February 1929, and from Fitzroy Domestic Arts School dated 21 February 1929.
- [48] PROV, Teacher Record Card 11684.
- [49] The party was advertised in the *Argus* on 17 March 1930, p. 17.
- [50] *Argus*, 31 May 1924, p. 20.

# Family and Social History in Archives and Beyond

Kath Ensor

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'Family and Social History in Archives and Beyond', *Provenance: The Journal of Public Record Office Victoria*, issue no. 9, 2010. ISSN 1832-2522. Copyright © Kath Ensor.

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Kath Ensor is a genealogist and public historian, having completed her MA in public history at Monash University in 2008. For the past fifteen years Kath has worked as a probate genealogist, researching hundreds of family trees with branches all around the world. She is currently undertaking doctoral research into the effects of institutionalisation of the mentally ill or disabled on individuals, families and communities. With this research she has a particular interest in discovering lost family stories and retrospectively connecting long-term patients from the past with their families from whom they may have been estranged. Kath was the recent recipient of the inaugural award of the Public Advocate of Victoria for her work with vulnerable Victorians in tracing aspects of their life stories.

## Abstract

**In the past, patients in mental institutions or asylums were often estranged from their families. Next of kin were often listed as 'unknown'. In this paper I show how it is possible to reclaim lost family histories by using primary records in the public domain.**

**Dolly Stainer was a long-time resident of Kew Cottages. By drawing on archival records frequently used by genealogists to add facts to their own family histories, I was able to discover aspects of the lives of her parents, siblings and grandparents. Many hours were spent scouring government and other sources for references to her family, each discovery offering a clue to further resources. Finally, my searches led me to a published diary of one of her grandfathers, which offered insights into her family that would not be found in official documents.**

**This paper shows not only how names and dates can be discovered from careful research in the archives, but also how these lost family stories can illustrate aspects of the social history of the day.**

We all have a right to know our family history and to understand who we are. In recent decades there has been an explosion of interest in this quest, seen in biographical-style writing, television shows searching for lost family members,[1] and an increased use of archives and libraries. Historian Graeme Davison has argued that the post-1970s boom in family history stems from 'a widely felt need to reaffirm the importance of family relationships in a society where mobility, divorce and intergenerational conflict tend to dissolve them'.[2]

For many this search for identity is relatively easy. Most of us have at least an oral history and know the names of some of our ancestors. However, this is not so for those who have been separated from their families for many years, incarcerated in an institution. Is it possible to reconstruct their lost family stories, and if so what can these stories tell us about the broader social history of the times?

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## Dolly Stainer, Little Girl Lost

*Kew Cottages: the world of Dolly Stainer*[3] launched Dolly into the public domain, introducing her to an audience that previously did not know of her existence. Written by Cliff Judge and Fran van Brummelen, a medical officer and a social worker respectively at Kew Cottages, one of the major institutions for the mentally disabled in Victoria, they reflected on Dolly's seventy-five years living at the cottages by searching in-house archival material available to them together with oral histories that had been collected. One of the assertions that ran through this book was that Dolly's birth had not been registered.

What a challenge this presented to me as an historian and genealogist to locate Dolly's birth record and discover some of her family background. Who was Dolly and where had she come from? With few family details available I decided to see what I could discover from publicly available sources.

At the time of writing this paper any official records pertaining to Dolly's care and admission to Kew Cottages as well as any possible birth certificate are closed to the public under various Acts relating to access of information at both the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages as well as PROV.[4] My interest therefore turned to Dolly's mother, Mary, as her records fall outside these closed periods.

For many, the footprints they leave behind are restricted to their entries in the civil records of births, deaths and marriages. Here in Victoria we are very fortunate to have the system of civil registration, which began in 1853 and was devised by William Archer, the first Acting Registrar-General.[5] Each certificate may record extensive family details, and for researchers these details provide great clues as to what other sources should be sought out for information about the family's history. However, it must be remembered that the information recorded is only what the informant knew and in some cases is very scant or incorrect.

### Mary Stainer (née Vincent): Charged with Neglect

I started this research into the life of Mary with just a few pertinent statements gleaned from the previously mentioned biographical work. Firstly, that her name was recorded as Mary Cecelia Stainer (née Vincent). Secondly that she was a 'notorious prostitute' with an extensive police record, and finally that she had not registered Dolly's birth.[6]

The confusion over her daughter's birth registration was easily solved. Dolly was recorded on the indexes to births as Vic Doris (*sic*) Stainer in 1910 and at this time the mother's name was recorded as Mary Helena rather than Mary Cecelia.[7] I consulted the civil indexes once more to see if I could find any other references to Mary Stainer (née Vincent) but could find neither her birth nor a positive record of her death. Mary had married Maurice Stainer in 1891[8] and Dolly was their sixth child.[9] Three children died as infants[10] and on the occasions of recording the children's births and deaths Mary's name was recorded as Mary Ellen, Mary Hellena, Hellena or simply Mary.

The most informative civil record was the marriage certificate, which showed that Mary had married Maurice Stainer, twelve years her senior, on 22 September 1891 in Richmond, Victoria.[11] Mary was just seventeen years old and her place of birth was recorded as Aldershot, England. This explains why her birth could not be located on the Victorian indexes. However, consultation of the indexes to births recorded in the General Registry Office (GRO) in England for several years either side of her reputed birth date also failed to locate this record in either Aldershot or in any other part of England. So, it appears that although it had been alleged that Dolly's birth was not registered this was in fact incorrect. Instead there was no birth record of her mother Mary Vincent.

In true detective style I set about searching for any references to Mary outside of the civil records. Working from the details given on her marriage certificate I could deduce that she was the daughter of Millist and Margaret Vincent (née Smith) and, as already noted, she may have been born in Aldershot, England around 1874.

While I did not find any evidence that Mary was a 'notorious prostitute', the suggestion that she had an extensive police record could be confirmed by consulting the *Victoria Police gazette*; there were numerous entries relating to her release from custody, from her first recorded offence in 1903 until at least 1935. She used many aliases including Cecelia Stainer, Cecelia Staines and Mary Vincent, suggesting that the discrepancies in her name that I had noted previously were not accidental.[12] These entries listed not only her many names but also her physical appearance, age, crime and sentence.

Mary was not a hardened criminal; she was an alcoholic and frequently had difficulty supporting herself. After losing three of her children as infants, in 1901 her eldest two children, Maurice and Ethel, at the ages of eight and six both became wards of the state under the *Neglected Children's Act 1887* and were removed from Mary's care. [13] This Act was responsible for the care of all children in Victoria who were deemed to be neglected or in need of protection by the state. This included children who were begging, wandering at large or found to be living in a brothel.[14] For the first time children in need of care were separated from those who were deemed to be criminal.[15] The secretary of the newly formed Department for Neglected Children became their legal guardians and the children later became known as Wards of State.[16]

The entry in the ward register for Ethel and Maurice reads thus:

Mother: Mary Eleanor Stainer at present in the Salvation Army House. She is of drunken habits and unfit to have charge of the children.[17]

Mary had commenced a downward spiral and these children would never be returned to her. Her mothering skills had failed the community's, and more importantly the state's, expectations although she would have one more opportunity to succeed with this after the birth of Dolly (Vic Doris Stainer) in 1910.[18]

An online digitised index to female prisoners in Victoria confirmed her entry as 6951, as recorded in the *Victoria Police gazette*. [19]

There was a record of a death of a Mary Stainer in 1942 in Victoria[20] but initially there were not enough details to prove that this was the record that I was seeking. The age was correct and the place of birth was given simply as England but the person giving the information on the certificate did not know names of parents, children or spouse. Fortunately, as this Mary Stainer died as a result of an accident there was a coronial inquest into her death.[21]

In summing up, the coroner Arthur Coyte Tingate concluded that Mary Stainer, aged sixty, late of Regina Coeli Hostel, 149 Flemington Rd, North Melbourne,

... died from the effects of injuries received on the 18th day of April 1942 at Flemington Rd near Abbotsford Street North Melbourne in Victoria when she was accidentally knocked down by an electric tramcar.

Some of the evidence that he had heard included a comment from John Richard Barry, a passenger on the tram, who reported:

There was a faint smell of Methylated Spirits about the woman's person.

Constable Terence Stephen Bible, who was also a passenger on the tram and a witness to the accident, noted:

The deceased was dressed in dark clothing, and visibility was bad owing to brown-out conditions.

This comment suggests that Mary may have been an indirect casualty of the 'brownouts' that were common in Melbourne in the middle of World War II and were believed to be responsible for a dramatic increase in traffic accidents.[22] Kate Darian-Smith in her study of Melbourne during this period states that the brownout conditions were policed strictly, all windows were blocked out by curtains and blinds, neon and street lighting was turned off and public transport travelled in darkness.[23]



Mary/Cecelia Vincent. PROV, VPRS 516/P Central Register of Female Prisoners, Unit 13, p. 108

The voices of the witnesses to Mary's accident conjure up a picture of her and the circumstances under which she died that would not be found in the indexes of public records. Another clue to her condition is her place of abode, Regina Coeli Hostel. This was a hostel established in 1938 for homeless women.[24] It was Mary Keating, matron of this hostel who identified Mary Stainer's body.[25]



For Ethel it seems that after her short time boarded out with her brother she was then moved to another family for the next five years. At the age of fourteen she began her working life in service for various families. Over the next six years she worked in service in at least eleven situations, intermingled with several stays at the Royal Park Girls' Depot. There is just one comment in the remarks section where in 1912 the matron noted 'Girl not strong in the mind'.[34]

Ethel does not appear on the electoral roll, nor are there any entries for her in the postal directories. She died in 1927 at the Austin Hospital, Heidelberg, aged 33 years.[35] She was single and had no issue. An authorised agent was the informant and did not know Ethel's usual occupation nor her usual address. It was however recorded that she had suffered from pulmonary tuberculosis for five years. She was survived by both of her parents and younger sister Dolly, but we do not know if they were made aware of her fate. She was buried at Heidelberg Cemetery.[36]

As for Maurice junior, from becoming a ward of the state at the age of eight until his death his life is well documented in public records. After being separated from his sister Ethel, he returned briefly to the Boys' Depot and then was sent to live with another family for six months until in September 1904 at the age of eleven he was sent to Bayswater House,[37] a home run by the Salvation Army for Protestant boys.[38] This would be the main place that he would call home until he turned twenty.

In the 1908 report for this Salvation Army home it is noted that the boys were rewarded for good behaviour by being allowed home to their families on Sundays. Some boys were monitored in trial work situations while others were placed on probation with their parents. There would be no such rewards for Maurice. He was reported as absconding on several occasions and was returned to the Boys' Depot for short stays. He had several brushes with the law for fire lighting and on 4 March 1910 he appeared in the Children's Court in Lilydale accused of having set fire to some private property in Ringwood.[39] He was found guilty and committed to the reformatory school. However, most telling are the comments written in the remarks section of the register of convictions, orders and other proceedings in the children's court at Lilydale:

Is a bad boy and has developed cunning and has a propensity for fire raising. Has escaped from places several times.[40]

This misdemeanor and the court report would affect his life forever. Two years later, just before his wardship expired, his case was reassessed by the chief secretary's department. This earlier court report together with two medical reports formed the evidence that was considered in determining his future placement.

He has a congenitally deformed head, a foolish expression: says he burnt down a haystack because his master would not give him more wages, but admits he never asked for more. Cannot say what year this is, nor how much twice five is, altho' he is (and looks) about nineteen years old. Seems to have depraved sexual tendencies.

Medical certificate signed by J Sandison Yule MD, BS, FRCSE, of Royal Park.

He is a degenerate and has a silly vacant grin on his face and cannot add two and three together correctly though he has been a Ward of the State for several years. He admits writing a most disgusting letter to his sister but does not know why or when he did it.

Medical certificate signed by Dr Gerald Sheahen FRSSE of Brunswick.[41]

He was certified as insane and transferred to Sunbury Hospital for the Insane where his admission is recorded on 28 January 1913.[42] His mental disorder at this time was described as 'congenital mental deficiency sans epilepsy' with the supposed cause being alcoholic heredity. We are left wondering if this was a problem that all of Mary's children inherited and today would have been called foetal alcohol syndrome. Or could this have had a more sinister cause such as syphilis as reputedly suspected, but not proven, at Kew Cottages?[43] Maurice died on 8 December 1925 at the age of 32 years.[44]

By researching the Stainer family as a family historian might research their own family history I was able to unfold a previously unknown story of Mary Stainer (née Vincent) and her immediate family. Mary and Maurice had faced infant mortality on three occasions, and their surviving three children, including Dolly, all suffered from varying degrees of mental disability and were removed from their parents' care as neglected children. Mary was in and out of gaol frequently for minor offences and right up until the inquest into her death she left a trail of records in the public domain relating to her alcohol addiction.

.....

Similarly, owing to their mother's alcoholism and lack of mothering skills her children also left a trail of records that have been carefully preserved in the archives. There are detailed ward files containing brief, harsh comments which allow us to read between the lines to imagine some of the situations that the children faced during their childhood. Then there are the relevant records relating to Maurice junior's admission to the mental health system and his subsequent twelve years spent at Sunbury Mental Asylum. This documentation was created for recordkeeping purposes and only notes minimal observations of him through others' eyes; nowhere do we hear his voice.

Were the authorities who were charged with Dolly's care from 1915 to 1997 aware of this tale of a marginalised family, the one Dolly had been removed from? I imagine not. More importantly, what would this information have meant to Dolly herself? Given their history of lost connections, family breakdown and resulting lost family memory, I do not believe that any of Dolly's immediate family could have answered the question 'Who do you think you are?' with much certainty.

What further information could be discovered about the family that Mary married into and her own birth family?

### **The Stainer Family: Tragedy and Institutionalisation**

Gold was first discovered in Victoria in 1851, just months after the fledgling colony had officially separated from New South Wales. News of the potential fortunes to be made travelled fast and it was not long before many were fleeing the British Isles to make their fortunes in a land half way across the world.

Such was the case with the young couple James and Blanche Stainer of Cornwall, England. They had married in 1853 in Penzance[45] and the birth of their third child James[46] was either imminent or had just occurred when James Stainer senior set sail from Liverpool on 22 July 1856 as a paying passenger on the *Mermaid*. [47] While onboard he, together with many others, decided to disembark in Geelong. [48] Perhaps they had consulted a map showing routes to the goldfields and realised that this would speed up their journey. [49]

The young parents had spent twelve months apart when Blanche as a twenty-one year old, together with their three children under the age of four years set sail on the *Undaunted* in August 1857 as assisted migrants. [50] Presumably they were travelling under a scheme to reunite families and Blanche did not have to incur

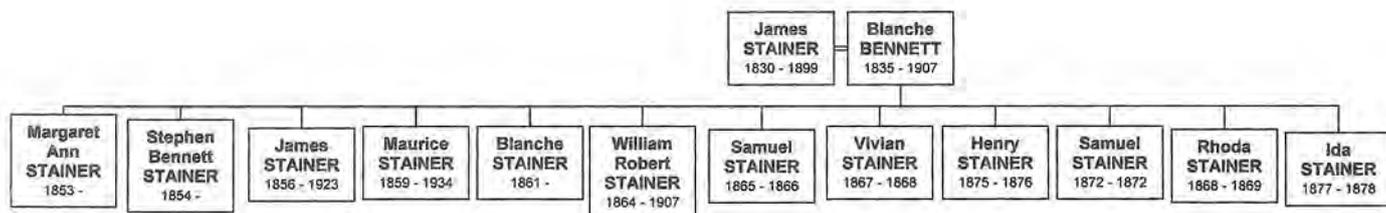
the full fare that James had paid. Perhaps they were covered by a short-lived immigration scheme that Broome refers to whereby settlers could nominate family and friends to join them for a nominal fee and the Victorian Government would pay the difference. This scheme led to huge migration figures over the years 1856 and 1857 but was discontinued because the workforce already in the colonies perceived there to be a work shortage. [51]

In January 1859, in Ballarat, Victoria, the birth of the next baby born to Blanche and James Stainer was recorded. [52] Maurice would be the first of their nine Australian babies born over the next eighteen years. However, consultation of the indexes shows that the last six of these children died in their first year of life. [53] For most of the twenty-six years from the time of her marriage in 1853 until the death of her last child in 1878, Blanche would have been either pregnant or breast-feeding. She would also have been grieving for her six babies who died – a fate that, sadly, was not uncommon for women in this period.

Maurice's birth certificate is the first documentary evidence we have that his father James Stainer was a miner. By the time their youngest child Ida was born in 1877 the Stainer family had moved from Ballarat to St Arnaud and James was no longer a miner, the gold mining boom had passed and he was now described as a store keeper. [54]

To locate further information about James Stainer during these years I needed to look beyond the civil records. I discovered that he did not make his fortune on the goldfields nor as a shop keeper and was listed in the *Victoria Government gazette* as becoming insolvent on at least two occasions, in 1869 and 1875. [55] At these times he was described as a hawker. In 1881 he appears once more in the *Victoria Government gazette* as having applied for an auctioneer's license. [56]

Times must have become hard for James Stainer, as they did for many Victorians during the 1890s depression, and on 16 March 1898 he was committed to Melbourne Gaol for having 'no visible means [of support]'. [57] Four months later, at the age of sixty-eight, he was transferred to the Bendigo Benevolent Asylum. [58] This asylum, where he spent his last year, had originally been set up in the 1860s to care for destitute and distressed miners. [59] By the late nineteenth century the majority of the inmates were homeless unemployed rural workers. [60] The authorised agent who gave the information on James's death record did not know the names of his parents, wife or children. [61]



Descendants of James and Blanche Stainer (family tree prepared using Generations software)

As for his widow Blanche, we know little about her after her child-bearing days. She was obviously separated from her husband in his last years but we do not know if this was because of economic or health reasons. She died in South Yarra on 20 March 1907 at the age of seventy-two[62] and was buried at Oakleigh Cemetery,[63] survived by five adult children. The lives of some of Maurice's brothers and sisters can be partially tracked through the indexes of births, deaths and marriages in Victoria. However two branches disappear from the Victorian records; perhaps they were lured to another state in search of work.

This was not the case for James Stainer junior. He did not leave Victoria. His death certificate dated 3 October 1923[64] shows that he died aged sixty-seven at the Hospital for the Insane at Sunbury. This location gave the clue to tracing other public records relating to aspects of his life.

On 29 May 1884, at the age of twenty-eight, James had been admitted to Kew Asylum. The admission book notes that he was a grocer's assistant and had been born in Cornwall, England.[65] He would remain at this asylum for sixteen years until, on 19 December (just days before Federation), he was transferred to Sunbury. [66] Thirteen years later his nephew, Maurice Stainer was similarly transferred to this asylum. It seems that the information that accompanied James Stainer had not been updated since his original admission in 1884, as the places of residence given for his family members were out of date and he was still described as a grocer's assistant.

The next record of significance for James is twenty-three years later when an inquest was carried out to determine his cause of death. Here again he is described as single, a grocer's assistant, and his original diagnosis is noted as 'chronic mania'. [67] The coroner also noted that 'he had no known relatives'. Had he had any visitors during his thirty-nine years in asylums or had he been abandoned by his family? We cannot determine the answer to this question just as we cannot tell if his relationship with his nephew Maurice, who was a fellow patient, was ever acknowledged.

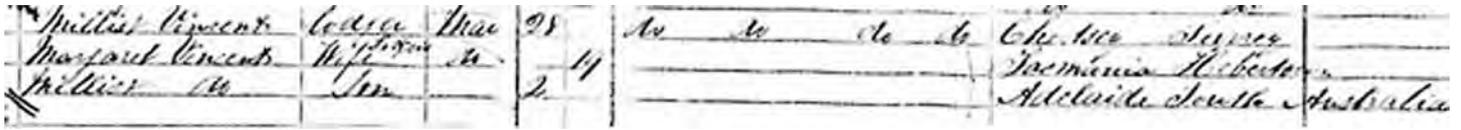
It seems that the fortunes, or rather misfortunes, of Dolly's immediate paternal family had not gone unnoticed and some aspects of their lives had been preserved in official records. The brief notes of their case workers, doctors and justice recordkeepers give us a glimpse of how others perceived them. These perceptions together with the entries in the civil records of births, deaths and marriages have enabled me to discover some of the dynamics of this marginalised family and place them before a backdrop of social history.

### Millist Vincent: Mary's Father Speaks for Himself

What of Mary's own birth family, the Vincents? I felt confident that I had located the death of Dolly's mother, Mary Stainer (née Vincent) in 1942.[68] I had also extracted information about her place of birth – Aldershot, England – and the names of her parents Millist and Mary Vincent (née Smith) that she had given at the time of her marriage in 1891.[69]

Mary's father was reputedly a soldier and had an unusual forename, Millist, which was also given to one Mary's sons, Edward Millist Stainer.[70] I decided to search some of the historic databases for this name and discovered two people called Millist Vincent in the 1871 census of England living at the same address in Sheffield, Yorkshire.[71] They were father and son. Millist Vincent was a soldier aged twenty-eight years who was born in Chertsey, Surrey. His nineteen-year-old wife Margaret was born in Tasmania while Millist Vincent junior was listed as a two-year-old son having been born in Adelaide, South Australia. With this unusual name, correct occupation of soldier and with an Australian connection circumstantial evidence was mounting that this was Mary's family.

The information contained on these three lines was a great find. Firstly, it explained the absence of Mary's birth registration in the indexes, as records relating to this family during their father's military career in the British army would most likely be found in the regimental returns rather than in civil records.[72] It also suggested that further research may be needed in Australia and England.



Census Return of England Wales, entry for Millist Vincent, courtesy of The National Archives of the United Kingdom.

I was hoping to discover aspects of Mary’s parents’ life stories to gain a deeper understanding of her family background before her marriage. Firstly, I would need more evidence before I could conclude that this family that I had discovered in the 1871 Census was the correct one. I checked for the birth of Millist junior in the indexes to South Australian births[73] without success and had similar negative results in the South Australian and Tasmanian indexes searching for the marriage of his parents. This lack of registration in the civil records for both of these events once again suggested I should look in the regimental returns. The birth of Millist Vincent senior was much easier to trace. His birth was recorded in the GRO indexes to births in England as having occurred in the first quarter of 1843 in Chertsey, Surrey.[74] I still needed to prove that this was Mary’s family that I was researching before I leapt back another generation.

Searching divergently I then located a published memoir of a Millist Vincent in the State Library of Victoria, *21 Years in the Queens Army*. [75] Could this be the clue that I was searching for? The discovery was invaluable. It not only confirmed that this was the family that I was seeking but also gave me the voice of Millist Vincent himself rather than someone else’s perception of him.

This book had been published in 2007 by one of Millist’s descendants and was a memoir he had written himself based on his diaries between 1860 and the 1880s and also included some personal details of his life before and after his time in the army. Of major relevance to me was where he was in 1874 when Mary was allegedly born. In his memoir he notes that on 12 September 1873 the regiment left by rail for Aldershot, mentioning that ‘all the women and children’s stores and sick left Chester the day before for Aldershot’ (p. 77). This not only placed Millist but his whole family in Aldershot, Mary’s reputed place of birth. There was no doubt that this was the correct family. What other clues to the family’s life story could I discover from this memoir?

When talking of his own birth the author confirms that he was an only child, born on 28 February 1843 in Chertsey, Surrey (p. 1). His father died two years later and his mother when he was ten years old

(p. 2). He comments about his mother, ‘I had a good kind and loving mother who was very fond of me’ (p. 2). This simple statement tells us more about his relationship with his mother than would be recorded on her death certificate.

After being orphaned Millist spent time living with various contacts of his extended family and worked as an apprentice groom. This was not a happy time for him and he was treated harshly. However life changed dramatically for him after he walked to London with a friend to join the 43rd Regiment (p. 14). Over the next two decades his service in the Imperial Army took him to places as diverse as Ireland, New Zealand, Australia, Afghanistan and India (pp. 16-57). He was involved in military service across the globe from the Maori Wars in New Zealand to the Afghan Wars and served alongside General Kitchener, who later gave him a reference (see introduction).

For a researcher interested in military history this memoir was clearly invaluable. However, my interest was in his family history and it was personal references for which I was searching.

A significant family event occurred in 1868 while Millist was posted in Hobart. Here he met Margaret Smith who was to become his wife. At the same time he was offered a contract to sign up to the regiment for twenty-one years in return for £10 and two weeks’ leave (p. 62). The young couple took advantage of this leave and they were married. Millist wrote in his memoir:

So on 28th February 1868 I got married to a young girl who has made me one of the best of wives and mothers a man could be blessed with. (p. 62)

Once again this personal comment says much more than an entry in an index or on a marriage certificate.

He notes briefly that their eldest son was born in Adelaide on 27 March 1869 (p. 67). This was Millist Vincent junior, who had appeared on the 1871 census in England. Family details such as children’s births were not meant for this memoir and do not feature. However, in summing up his memoir in an entry which appears to be dated around 1913, Millist writes: ‘We have had a family of 16 children three of whom are dead and 13 alive and as well we have 4 grandchildren’ (p. 114).

.....

Could these grandchildren be the children of Mary and Maurice Stainer living in poor conditions in Victoria or was he referring to other grandchildren?

Millist ends his memoir with a firm statement about their financial affairs:

Me and my wife has often found it very hard to make ends meet with our large family but we can say like the Village Blacksmith that we owe not any man for we don't owe a penny to anyone in Hobart and I hope that we never will. (p. 114)

### A Family History Discovered and Connected

My research into Mary's family and the family into which she married has revealed much. Mary Stainer is no longer just the mother who neglected her children. She is no longer just a homeless woman with a long criminal record who was knocked down by a tram while she was intoxicated. By researching her family tree she can be placed in the context of her family and the social times.

Mary had been born into a family that travelled the world with her father's regiment for many years. As a teenager she left the security of her family that had settled in Tasmania and made her way to Victoria where she married at the age of seventeen with the permission of a justice of the peace.[76] We do not know if she maintained any contact with her parents or large birth family, although it is noted on her certificate that a William Vincent was a witness to her marriage. She certainly would not receive much if any support from the Stainer family into which she had married.

Mary and Maurice saw three of their infant children die, the other three removed from their care, and two of these certified as insane. Alcohol dependence was Mary's downfall. This illness, together with the economic depression of the 1890s, saw her fall upon the mercy of the welfare and criminal systems. It is through these sources that we see others' perceptions of her. Similarly her two eldest children who were placed in care are recorded in the welfare books and her son then left a trail of records in the mental health system. We will have to wait for several years until the records of her youngest child Dolly are available for public scrutiny.

Without these welfare records our knowledge of the Stainer family would have been limited to the entries in the civil indexes to births, deaths and marriages. By thinking divergently I have been able to retrieve and retell some of this marginalised family's history.

However, in contrast to this the Vincent family is well documented through both military and personal records. By combining these with other resources I have been able to recreate an image of their history over three generations.

My interest in this family was initially sparked by trying to discover who Dolly Stainer was. Her biographers Cliff Judge and Fran van Brummelen had explored her life in an impressive piece of historiography against a backdrop of Kew Cottages from her admission date in 1915 until her death in 1997. The baton passed to me and I have shown how it was possible to trace aspects of the family story of her grandparents, parents and siblings. This not only gives Dolly a family history outside of the mental health system but also makes her ancestors players in scenes of migration to Australia, gold mining, military history, infant mortality, mental health services and much more.

### Endnotes

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[2] G Davison, *The use and abuse of Australian history*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 2000, p. 82.

[3] C Judge & F van Brummelen, *Kew Cottages: the world of Dolly Stainer*, Spectrum Publications, Melbourne, 2001.

[4] *Births, Deaths and Marriages Registration Act 1996, Public Records Act 1973*. Privacy laws restrict public access to birth certificates for 100 years or until the person has died, whichever is the greatest: see *Access policy* on the Births, Deaths and Marriages website, available at <<http://www.bdm.vic.gov.au/utility/about+us/legislation+and+policies/access+policy/>>, accessed 13 June 2013.

[5] See *History of the Registry*, on the Victorian Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages website, available at <<http://www.bdm.vic.gov.au/utility/about+us/history+of+the+registry/>>, accessed 13 June 2013.

[6] *Kew Cottages: the world of Dolly Stainer*, p. 7.

[7] *Victorian Edwardian Index 1902-1913 on CD-ROM*, Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Melbourne, 1997.

[8] *Federation Index, Victoria 1889-1901: Indexes to births, deaths and marriages in Victoria*, Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, August 1997 (CD-ROM).

[9] *ibid.* The births of Dolly's five elder siblings are listed as: 1893/16249, 1894/19692, 1897/14070, 1898/17153, 1899/16249.

[10] *ibid.* Deaths 1897/10344, 1898/18097, 1899/5052.

- [11] *ibid.* Marriage 1891/6373.
- [12] *Victoria Police gazette*, 1903 Supplement following p. 497; 1905 Supplement following p. 471; 1907 Supplement; 27 February 1909, p. 3 of Supplement; 23 August 1934, p. 880; 20 December 1934, p. 1315; 20 December 1935, p. 406.
- [13] PROV, VA 475 Chief Secretary's Department, VPRS 4527/P0 Ward Registers, Unit 62, Item 26743, and Unit 62, Item 26744.
- [14] D Jaggs, *Neglected and criminal: foundations of child welfare legislation in Victoria*, Phillip Institute of Technology, Melbourne, 1986, p. 25.
- [15] *ibid.*, p. 55.
- [16] *ibid.*, p. 57.
- [17] PROV, VPRS 4527/P, Unit 62, Item 26743.
- [18] *Victorian Edwardian Index, 1902-1913*, Birth 1910/1517.
- [19] PROV, VA 1464 Penal and Gaols Branch, Chief Secretary's Department, VPRS 10879/P0 Alphabetical Index To Central Register of Female Prisoners 1857-1948, Unit 2, p. 108. This index has been digitised and can be viewed on the PROV catalogue, available at <[www.access.prov.vic.gov.au/public/component/daPublicBaseContainer?component=daViewSeries&entityId=10879&consignment=P0000](http://www.access.prov.vic.gov.au/public/component/daPublicBaseContainer?component=daViewSeries&entityId=10879&consignment=P0000)>, accessed 11 June 2013.
- [20] Victorian Death Certificate 1942/4433.
- [21] PROV, VPRS 24/P Inquests into Deaths in Victoria, Unit 1444, File 1942/606. Further evidence discussed in the text is also from this inquest.
- [22] A Brown-May & S Swain (eds), *The encyclopedia of Melbourne*, Cambridge University Press, Port Melbourne, 2005, p. 92.
- [23] K Darian-Smith, *On the home front: Melbourne in wartime 1939-1945*, 2nd edn, Melbourne University Press, 2009, p. 19.
- [24] See A O'Brien, A call to mission: Catholic agencies and older homeless people, *Catholic Services Victoria*, 205, p. 21. This paper is available on the CSSV website, available at <<http://www.css.org.au/papers.html>>, accessed 22 October 2010.
- [25] PROV, VPRS 24/P, Unit 1444, File 1942/606.
- [26] Fawkner Memorial Park, Roman Catholic Compartment GA Grave 324. Details of deceased persons at Fawkner Memorial Park can now be searched online, available at <<http://www.fcmp.com.au/index.asp?page=deceasedstandard.asp>>, accessed 13 June 2013.
- [27] Victorian Birth Certificate 1859/2351.
- [28] Victorian Marriage Certificate 1891/6373.
- [29] Victorian Death Certificate 1934/4315.
- [30] Fawkner Memorial Park, Presbyterian Compartment C Grave 1226.
- [31] *Ballarat Hospital Admissions Register 1856-1913*, published by the Genealogical Society of Victoria, 2003.
- [32] *Sands & McDougall's Melbourne and suburban directory for 1901*, Sands & McDougall Ltd, Melbourne, 1901, p. 432.
- [33] PROV, VPRS 4527/P, Unit 62, Item 26743.
- [34] PROV, VPRS 4527/P, Unit 62, Item 26744.
- [35] Victorian Death Certificate 1927/5958.
- [36] *ibid.*
- [37] PROV, VPRS 4527/P, Unit 62, Item 26743.
- [38] PROV, VA 1467 Children's Welfare Department, VPRS 5690/P0 Annual Reports of the Secretary and Inspector of the Department for Neglected Children and Reformatory Schools, Report for 1908.
- [39] PROV, VPRS 4527/P, Unit 62, Item 26743.
- [40] PROV, VA 4099 Lilydale Courts, VPRS 1422 Children's Court Registers, Unit 1, Item 1/1910.
- [41] PROV, VA 2843 Sunbury Hospital for the Insane, VPRS 8259/P1 Admission Warrants – Male Patients, Unit 7, Item M 1532.
- [42] PROV, VA 2843 Sunbury Hospital for the Insane, VPRS 8236/P1, Register of Patients, Unit 3, Item 185.
- [43] Judge & van Brummelen, *Kew Cottages*, p. 24.
- [44] Victorian Death Certificate 1925/155225.
- [45] General Registry Office (UK), *Marriages*, Jul qu. 1853, vol. 5c, p. 573.
- [46] General Registry Office (UK), *Births*, Jul. qu. 1856, vol. 5c, p. 290 (these certificates from England were not obtained as the information contained on them would add little to the family story apart from giving a specific date for the events).
- [47] PROV, *Index to Unassisted Inward Passenger Lists to Victoria 1852-1923*, searchable online via the PROV website, available at <[http://www.prov.vic.gov.au/indexes/index\\_search.asp?searchid=23](http://www.prov.vic.gov.au/indexes/index_search.asp?searchid=23)>.
- [48] PROV, VPRS 7666 Inward Overseas Passenger Lists (British Ports) 1852-1923 (microfiche), Fiche 114, p. 002.
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[53] *ibid.*, Deaths 1866/181, 1868/2979, 1869/272, 1872/147, 1876/4251 and 1878/3553.

[54] Victorian Birth Certificate 1877/14235.

[55] *Victoria Government gazette*, 11 June 11 1869, p. 877 and 1 October 1875, p. 87.

[56] *ibid.*, 29 April 1881, p. 1149.

[57] PROV, VA 1464 Penal and Gaols Branch, Chief Secretary's Department, VPRS 515/P0, Central Register of Male Prisoners, Unit 51, p. 464. This page has been digitised and can be viewed on the PROV website, available at <[http://www.prov.vic.gov.au/indexes/index\\_search.asp?searchid=53](http://www.prov.vic.gov.au/indexes/index_search.asp?searchid=53)>.

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[59] *ibid.*

[60] C Fahey, 'Abusing the horses and exploiting the labourer', *Labour History*, no. 65, November 1993, p. 109.

[61] Victorian Death Certificate 1898/12364.

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[63] Oakleigh Cemetery Database, record 1949, plot 1652.

[64] Victorian Death Certificate 1923/16956.

[65] PROV, VA 2840 Kew Asylum, VPRS 7398/P1, Case Book of Male Patients 1871-1912, Unit 9.

[66] PROV, VPRS 8236/P1, Unit 2, p. 87v, no. 762. This record has been digitised and can be viewed through the PROV catalogue, available at <<http://www.access.prov.vic.gov.au/public/component/daPublicBaseContainer?component=daViewConsignment&breadcrumbPath=Home/Access%20the%20Collection/Browse%20The%20Collection/Consignment%20Details&entityId=8236&consignment=P0001>>.

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[68] See note 20 above.

[69] See note 11 above.

[70] Victorian Birth Certificate 1897/14070.

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# Reading Insanity's Archive

## Reflections from four archival sites

Catharine Coleborne

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'Reading Insanity's Archive: Reflections from four archival sites', *Provenance: The Journal of Public Record Office Victoria*, issue no. 9, 2010. ISSN 1832-2522. Copyright © Catharine Coleborne.

This is a peer reviewed article.

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### Abstract

**Researchers in the international field of insanity studies are familiar with the patient case files of psychiatric institutions – 'insanity's archive' – and use these in a variety of ways to discuss the illness from a range of viewpoints, including epidemiological studies and social histories of mental health. Their deep engagement with the contents has brought to light the richness of the resources and the possibilities they offer for further research. What has been less studied is the nature of the archive itself. Using the records from four colonial psychiatric institutions in Australia and New Zealand between 1860 and 1914, this article excites new questions about the very meanings of the archive and argues that research in the field has much to gain from both trans-archival and trans-colonial inquiry.**

### Introduction: Reading the Archive of Insanity

Public Record Office Victoria (PROV) is home to the patient casebooks of several nineteenth-century hospitals for the insane including the Yarra Bend Asylum/Hospital for the Insane (1848), Kew Hospital for the Insane (1872), and a number of other large and small institutions located across Victoria.[1] Researchers in the international field of insanity studies are familiar with the patient records of psychiatric institutions and use them in a variety of ways. Genealogists are also well acquainted with the stories of the insane contained in these books, and use them to find out more about the sometimes hidden histories of family members. Access to these patient records is not difficult under current laws. But outside the fields of history, genealogy or psychiatry, people sometimes express surprise at both their existence and their availability to researchers. Questions of ethics often arise at conference presentations, with puzzlement expressed at their provenance. Why were such records retained? What is their value?[2]

In an essay by the French philosopher and intellectual Michel Foucault, translated into English and published in the journal *Critical Inquiry* in 1995, around ten years after his death, the opening statement reads:

Perhaps some day we will no longer really know what madness was. Its face will have closed upon itself, no longer allowing us to decipher the traces it may have left behind. Will these traces themselves have become anything to the unknowing gaze but simple black marks?[3]

.....

Foucault goes on, again referring to the traces of insanity's history inscribed in the archive: 'Nothing will remain in the hands of cultural historians except the codified methods of confinement, the techniques of medicine'.<sup>[4]</sup> These remarks are useful as historians begin to interrogate and comment on the ways in which archives produce knowledge about the past.

The present article outlines how the remains of madness in insanity's vast archive have been used to explore various fields of inquiry. The term 'insanity's archive' is understood to refer generally to the large, folio-sized clinical casebooks filled with patient admission notes and observations, admission registers, medical books, records of patient seclusion, and sometimes correspondence, among other materials that remain from nineteenth-century psychiatric institutions. This paper archive in Western countries sometimes dates back to the eighteenth century, but is mostly extant for the nineteenth, and tends to be more accessible to researchers than twentieth-century records, many of which remain closed under privacy laws. The sources are usually housed in official archival collections, mostly state-run repositories, but they are also sometimes located in hospitals themselves. In rare, but instructive, examples, the archival material may be found rotting in the basements or cupboards of disused institutions and rescued by the researcher.<sup>[5]</sup>

Archives play a vital role in the lives of historians. Michael Moss outlines how official archives and repositories are bound up with the development of nations and national cultural identities, and how the collection and preservation of official information in documents has been paramount to formal government and modes of governance.<sup>[6]</sup> Moss also shows that while national, government-funded archives and their contents were once regarded as sound bodies of historical fact, this view has begun to shift over time, with historians, including those in the French intellectual sphere of the *Annales* group in the mid-twentieth century, questioning the nature of archives and their productions. In other words, the very nature of evidence is under review: what did the archive capture in its web of information, and what did it leave out? Among the new kinds of source materials investigated in the twentieth century were oral records, and materials not preserved by officials. As something of an anomaly, however, the 'asylum archive', coming under the state's purview, provided different challenges to historians in this period of archival assessment. Rather than a paucity of sources to describe mental illness, there are patient records in abundance, as these were historically required by law to be kept and maintained.

Owing in part to the extent and nature of these records, and also to the impetus of the social history of medicine in the 1970s and 1980s, historians have produced a large amount of scholarly literature about nineteenth-century mental institutions. The available primary source material for the study of insanity is more readily accessible and more often extant than the patient records of other kinds of hospitals for the sick. Therefore, it is something of an irony that the field of asylum studies can now tell us so much about groups of people who in their own time were hidden from view and away from the public gaze.

The case records for the insane are, as South African historian Sally Swartz reminds us, 'a complex discursive site'.<sup>[7]</sup> They provide more glimpses of these individuals than the circumscribed nature of their lives might at first suggest, and notwithstanding the power relations which frame their encounters with the institution. Despite their problems and limitations, the records offer the potential to 'give voice to previously silenced stories'.<sup>[8]</sup> Yet what remains, to quote Foucault again, is 'the speech of the excluded', disembodied from the speakers themselves.<sup>[9]</sup> The evidence is highly constructed and mediated through the asylum's own language.

In addition, historians are also beginning to question the illusion of 'completeness' of the official archive, an illusion which is disturbed by stories about where archival materials might be found. For example, Antoinette Burton notes that an archive might be a previously unexamined private collection of family histories.<sup>[10]</sup> Even where official records have been kept in a relatively meticulous fashion, there are 'gaps in the record'.

This article first broadly describes the ways in which historians have engaged with the 'asylum archive', a term used by Jim Mills in his work on the 'native-only' asylums for the insane in India.<sup>[11]</sup> Drawing on these studies and on examples from my own recent work, I then illustrate a potential new strategy for this field of inquiry. The current popular theoretical conceit of 'the archive' underpins my argument and shapes my understanding of how to interpret the materials I use. The archive, far from being a neutral or stable site for historical investigation, is, as Ann Laura Stoler argues, now both 'a place and a cultural space'.<sup>[12]</sup>

Archives house not just ‘found histories’, but histories which are themselves shaped by their files and boxes, by the very administration of paper, as Thomas Richards contends.[13] This leads to a discussion about how we might theorise our encounters with the asylum archive through specific themes – looking beyond national or local repositories and developing a trans-archival research mode for the histories of psychiatry, or exploring the meanings of fragments and marginal notes. I end with a reflection on the archive as a ‘contact zone’, including thinking about the emotions in the researcher’s encounter with archival sources. Overall, the article self-consciously explores the use of ‘the archive’ as a cultural space, with specific reference to the history of insanity as a field of study.

### **The ‘Asylum Archive’ and its Uses**

Historians of the asylum have often privileged a quantitative research mode. By using and sampling the voluminous patient case material, historians in many Western contexts have examined topics such as patient populations, gender relations, medical diagnosis, class, and patterns of committal and discharge. Other historians have found ways to represent the lives of patients, and sometimes their families, through closer, qualitative readings,[14] and have been more interested in the construction of patient identities, power relations, the nature of the clinical case note, and, more recently, emotions in the clinical notes. In the first, quantitative, approach, the temptation to see the archive as complete, full of useful facts about institutions, the regimes and practices operating within them, and those committed inside their walls, is overwhelming. However, historians using the second approach have subjected patient case material to interrogation and critique. For example, several studies have shown how case notes are better understood as representations of individuals, how certain identities for patients were proscribed, and how patients were gendered, raced and classed in different and varied locations.[15]

Historians have not only taken distinctly different approaches to the case materials, they have also put them to a wide variety of uses. The extensive work in this field can therefore tell us about much more than simply the hospitals for the insane or even insanity itself. For instance, historians have built convincing studies of the social contexts of the insane, constructions of mental breakdown, everyday life inside institutions, patterns of industrialisation as evidenced

through patient committal, the asylum as an institution of the welfare state, the role of families and their dealings with institutions, gender and social relations as expressed through the institutional regimes, among other topics.[16] Despite their obvious role as medical institutions, however, surprisingly little work has been done on bodily illnesses in the institutions, or on death rates – a point made by David Wright.[17] On the other hand, there is an emerging literature on ethnicity, and a new focus on Indigenous patients.[18]

Much of the recent scholarship has focused on colonialism and the archive, and on the way that the archive is ‘both the product of the uneven dialogics of the colonial encounter, and a space where the schema of colonialism [is] worked out’, as Tony Ballantyne suggests.[19] Ballantyne’s own explorations of archival practices have been presented to New Zealand archivists through their professional journal *Archifacts*. In ‘Rereading the archive’ he shows that a re-examination of the nature of archives can shed light on the actual colonial encounters of the past. In other words, the colonial archive was a mirror of social relations, and, far from being a complete and ‘true’ record of past events, it obscured some events and reified others.

These ideas are important because we can locate the nineteenth-century ‘asylum archive’ inside this discussion about colonialism: this period saw the dramatic rise of the institution in the West and its export to colonial settings, as the significant work now being produced on the broad field of the history of psychiatry in colonial settings attests. Indeed, Mills implicates the institutions for the ‘native’ insane in India in the very work of colonialism; it was through official colonial writing that non-white patient identities were produced. Historians writing about Aboriginal patients in British Columbia, Indian and African inmates in South African institutions, Māori inmates at Auckland Asylum, and the Chinese and ‘others’ in colonial Victoria, have all made similar claims.[20] We can also see how white, European patients were captured by colonial institutional frameworks and knowledge. In addition, the archive of materials produced by colonial asylums is like other, similar official archives in that it reproduces the power relations of the past.[21] Although now a fairly commonplace idea, this is an important point, given the reliance by historians in the field on these records, but the only too rare admission of their almost peculiar status as clinical notes taken by observers of persons who were relatively powerless.

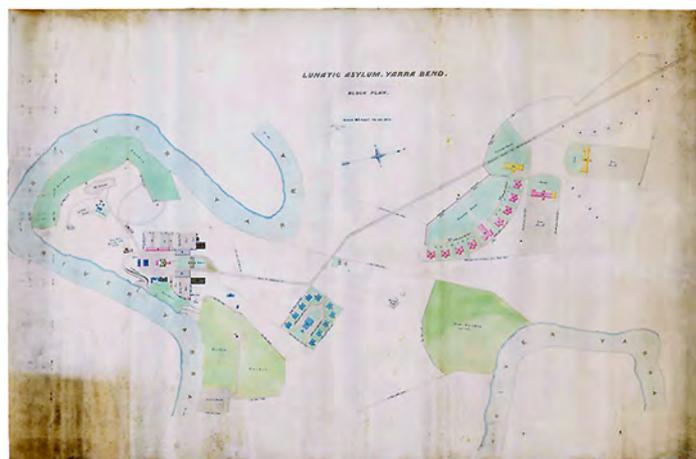
## Examining Australasian Asylum Archives

I now look at one specific case study of four psychiatric institutions in colonial Australia and New Zealand. My research in this field has developed over time. My doctoral work focused on gender and, primarily though not exclusively, on one colonial public hospital for the insane in Victoria – the Yarra Bend Asylum, later Hospital for the Insane, which, from the 1850s, was located on Melbourne's Yarra River. The records of the asylum are held at PROV (VA 2839). In my book *Reading madness* I focused on the ways in which textual representations of madness produced ideas about the illness, and specifically, how gender was used as a mode of asylum classification and organisation.[22] By the late nineteenth century the Yarra Bend Asylum was overcrowded, leading authorities to discuss the problems of a heterogeneous institution. In so doing they drew attention to racial and bodily differences in the asylum population. My study focused on the construction of clinical records and how these were used to shape patient identities.

My interest in the nature of patient case records then led me to explore the engagement of families with four different mental hospitals in Australia and New Zealand between 1860 and 1914. These public institutions were the Yarra Bend Asylum/Hospital for the Insane (established 1848), Gladesville Hospital for the Insane (1869), Goodna Mental Hospital (1865) and Auckland Hospital for the Insane (1853). Asylum archives – in particular, patient case records and ancillary materials – located at PROV, State Records New South Wales (Western Sydney Records Centre), Queensland State Archives (Brisbane) and National Archives of New Zealand (Auckland Branch) formed the basis of my study. Using a sample of 215 patients and their families, I was able to situate individuals and families in their time and place.[23]

I started my research by attempting to locate families in the archival records. Rather than taking a sample of patients and hoping to find their families, I began with source materials created through the engagement of families with institutions, as I hoped these would lead me to patient cases. I quickly faced a challenge, since each archival repository is arranged differently, though parallels between archives and their organisation of asylum materials also exist. In the entire qualitative selection of cases and families in my study, there is a concentration of cases from the 1880s to the 1900s, which in part reflects bureaucratic procedures in the four colonies, as well as subsequent archival practices. In fact, my study shows that utilising the

different archival systems of each site also throws light on asylum recordkeeping practices, and particularly, later notions of the relevance of specific records, which may have shaped collections and their survival. Recordkeeping in different jurisdictions is subject to changes over time. Different governments create policy surrounding the preservation of health institution records, for instance, and the closure of psychiatric institutions in the latter part of the twentieth century has occasioned some debate about such records and the ethical issue of researchers gaining access to these. As Moss shows, archivists have also had to contend, in their local contexts, with issues of funding for archives and repositories, as well as with pressures of space.[24] Some patient materials from former institutions were found to be damaged or lost during relocations. In addition, one suspects that some records were deemed less relevant by former archivists, who may have made selections based on their own notions of what would be pertinent to later research.



Lunatic Asylum Yarra Bend, Block Plan, showing the arrangement of buildings on the site (each building numbered), PROV, VPRS 7664/P1 Unregistered Maps and Plans, Unit 73. Reproduced with the permission of the Clerk of the Legislative Council, Victorian Parliament.

Differences between the four archival collections dominated my selection of sources and therefore the themes explored in the study. At the New South Wales State Archives in Western Sydney, I used two letter files for Gladesville Hospital, 'Letters from patients, 1864-1924' and 'Letters concerning patients, 1863-1914', to select sixty individuals for tracing.[25] The letter files provided more examples from later decades. Unlike the other archival collections, the New South Wales records offered extremely rich letter material. For Yarra Bend I selected sixty cases by choosing individuals mentioned in 'Maintenance Bonds (1851-1884)' and in 'Applications for Leave of Absence (1899-1923)'. [26]

*List of Buildings*  
erected, and proposed to be erected for the Lunatic Asylum, Yarra Bend.

No.	Description of the building	Estimated cost	Actual cost	Contractor	Remarks
1	Workshop, Yarra Bend	£400	£400	...	The building is not used at the Asylum, it is situated to the west of the main enclosure, & is a valuable property of 1860.
2	Workshop for the Asylum	£100	£100	...	The Asylum is not used at the Asylum, it is situated to the west of the main enclosure, & is a valuable property of 1860.
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List of buildings erected, or proposed to be erected for the Lunatic Asylum Yarra Bend (numbers correspond to those shown in preceding illustration), PROV, VPRS 7664/P1 Unregistered Maps and Plans, Unit 73. Reproduced with the permission of the Clerk of the Legislative Council, Victorian Parliament.

These records included less letter material, and, as with other institutions, cases of patients admitted in the 1860s were very sparse; in some cases, no patient case note detail at all was possible. At the Queensland State Archives I used patient casebooks from Wolston Park/Goodna Hospital to locate thirty-five patients and their families. Here, letters were contained inside casebooks at the front of each book, and not separated out as with other archival records in the study. At Goodna, the availability of adjunct records for searching was limited.

In New Zealand, the National Archives branch at Auckland houses a similar range of asylum archival materials to those already mentioned. However, there are some gaps in the run of casebooks in the period and the loose patient case files have been separated from the patient casebooks. There was not an obvious separate cache of letters, and no discharge or leave

register was useful enough to act as the basis of my selection. Instead, I used the 'Record Book of Maintenance Investigations, c.1890-99', which contains references to patients committed in an earlier period. Aside from its useful material about the families, friends and employers of women and men admitted to the asylum, it also provided a series of references to individual patient cases.

These selections proved serendipitous in several ways. My methodology of working across archival and institutional sites, with their different recordkeeping systems, informed my research, and highlighted how the archive produces research as much as it enables it. It also confirmed the importance of consulting ancillary and fragmentary materials. These findings, and how they contributed to the shaping of my study, are discussed further below.

**Trans-archival Inquiry for Histories of Psychiatry**

Among the many histories of asylums and their populations there has until recently been a strong tendency to dwell on one archival domain, with researchers more able to countenance using a robust and stable sample of patient cases and records from one institution. Nonetheless, these studies do model the possible connections between institutional sites. David Wright has recognised that the records of Western institutions have parallels across places and has called for greater record linkage between institutions, going beyond and outside their specific archives, in order to make sense of patterns of patient committal in social settings. Wright also argues for a closer examination of forms of admission certification in different places, suggesting that this approach would enable researchers to develop a deeper appreciation of the relationship between institutional worlds and families.[27] However, looking across institutional sites might also tell us more about both the archives and their practices. In my specific study of families and institutions in colonial Australia and New Zealand, this approach has enabled new insights into differing institutional practices and the values that were placed on them.

For example, it was really only possible to interpret maintenance payments and their collection in two of the archives mentioned, Auckland and Yarra Bend, owing to the paucity of available records. This was despite the fact that there was an ongoing official anxiety, expressed through parliamentary papers and reports, about the low returns, and the institutions' own attempts to retrieve monies owed.

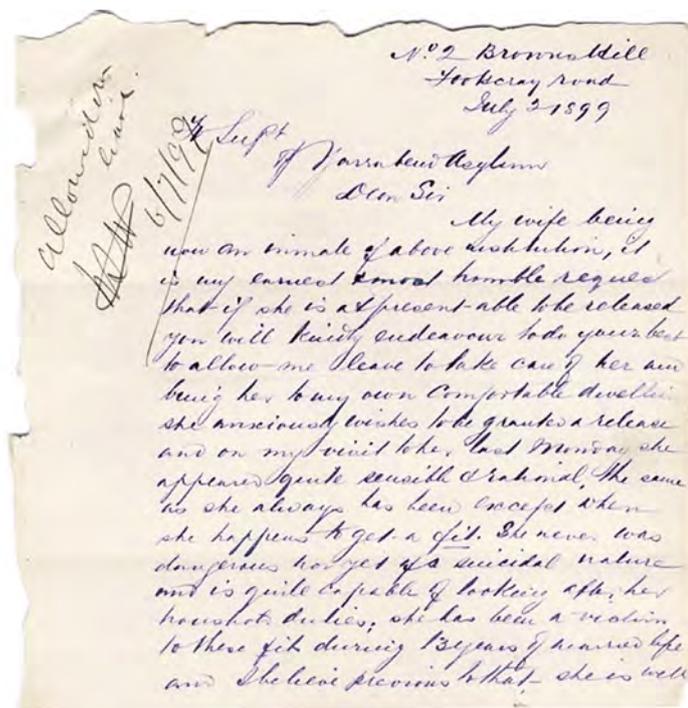
At Auckland, the records of maintenance payments were more detailed than elsewhere, and provided descriptions of families and police pursuit of unpaid fees. Here I found many stories of families that would have remained invisible had I not used the maintenance books to trace families and relied only on a random sample of patients from casebooks. However, while there is rich content for Auckland, in other archives maintenance books are either ledgers which provide lists rather than commentaries, or are non-existent. At PROV, the records of maintenance bonds provided me with a different view of families, in part due to the practices at Yarra Bend in the period. Any relative or friend of the committed person could apply to the Inspector-General of the Insane for care and control of a patient held at an asylum.[28]

We do know that each institution made attempts to collect maintenance, but many families were simply unable to meet these payments over longer periods of time.[29] Even when the historical record is limited, the asylum archives afford insights into poverty and wealth and the myriad reactions to asylum confinement, including avoidance of responsibility and family struggles over responsibility. They also tell us about the interactions between different agencies, including the role of the police in the matter of institutional committal.

Correspondence files also shed light on institutional differences. Families made their way into the asylum archive in letters and other fragments of communication with the authorities. These files can tell us a great deal about how families used an institution – and in some cases a family had more than one experience of it. Patients also wrote letters to family and friends outside the institution. The collection of patient and family letters at Gladesville Hospital provides an especially rich source of information about family dynamics; letters I located for Goodna patients and their families were similarly useful. Yet letters, although they can reveal much about family relationships, interactions with authorities, and the impact of institutionalisation, also present problems. The sizeable cache of letters suggests a great deal of ‘interaction’ that was largely symbolic.[30] Further, these letters were not always sent – a common aspect of legal, institutional practice. But it is clear that their contents were frequently communicated to family members and used in the processes of discharge and patient appraisal.

The patient case files reveal much about the varied practices across colonial institutions despite the similarity of laws regulating asylum confinement. For example, in some instances we can explore the intersections between family and clinical descriptions of mental breakdown. At Auckland, patient casebooks from the 1880s show that a specific section of the notes on the patient was set aside to detail family observations collated from the committal documents, as well as separate notes on the family history. The sister-in-law of May H described her in 1909: ‘says patient has always been of a melancholy morbid disposition’. May’s brother’s comments were set out in the asylum’s style, showing that he had responded to questions at her committal. May had been born in Auckland, and spent all of her life in New Zealand. She was ‘originally dull’, had a ‘good memory’ and a ‘strong will’, but was ‘placid, not affectionate nor energetic’. She had ‘no vices’ and ‘no cause for grief’ but she had been ‘absent minded for six months’. Her brother speculated the cause of her illness was a ‘solitary life’.[31]

In Sydney, Gladesville cases gathered similar details from family members, employers and friends. However, unlike the Auckland cases, these were transferred from separate committal papers and copied into patient case files as marginal notes, some more substantial than others. The shaping of Gladesville cases with marginal notes that form part of the clinical record provides an interesting point of comparison with the notes collected at Auckland.



Example of a letter from a patient requesting the release of a patient, in this case his wife, PROV, VPRS 7570/P1 Applications for Patients' Leave of Absence, Unit 1, Bundle 2.

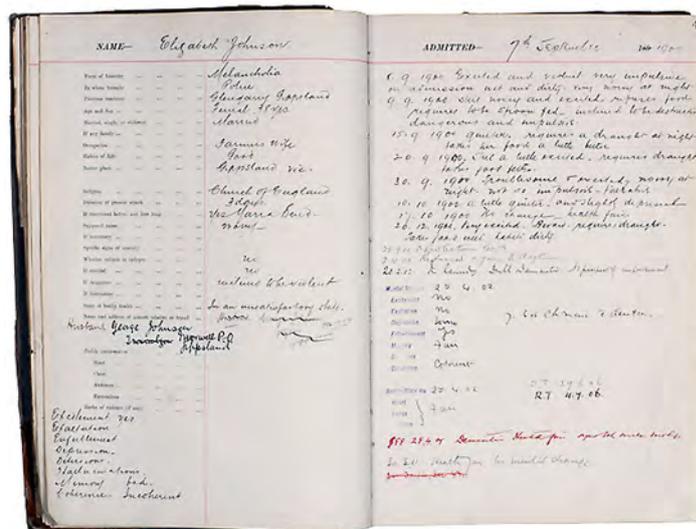
Here the family seeps into asylum practices and becomes part of the clinical observation, both intruding into it and also occupying a role in it, performing what historians have described as a dialogue between families, patients and institutional authorities.[32] Letters are sometimes separated from patient cases in archival collections, such as those for Gladesville. Others are stored inside patient case books but protected from deterioration by clear plastic, such as those in the Queensland records of Goodna Hospital. These archival interventions remind us of the very 'fleeting registers in the colonial record'.[33] How might researchers ever fully know or understand their meanings?

### Fragments of Families and Marginal Notes

Some scholars have argued convincingly that the gaps and absences in archival material are as significant as the material remains. Emma Spooner, also writing about families and asylum archives, has explored the way in which families appeared and disappeared in the records of the Auckland Asylum between 1870 and 1911. Families were dislocated, she shows, not only geographically and emotionally, but also through the later archival practices of separating their letters from patient casebooks. These dislocations are not problems that historians can ignore, or smooth over, in their attempts to construct narratives about families and institutions, however tempting this might be.[34] Overall, the fragmentary nature of the archival evidence is revealing. We only find out about patients and their families through their presence in the institutional record. When their lives were no longer defined through institutional protocols, or when they sought to evade these, the historical trail goes cold. Our knowledge about what happened to individuals who had been struggling to stay well during periods of trial leave is also limited, and highly mediated by the sources.

Historians suggest that nineteenth-century families or kin supported each other at times of bereavement and illness, partly because welfare and other forms of aid were more limited, particularly in the colonial context.[35] In a similar vein, a recent collection of historical essays about Canadian families argues that because 'institutional frameworks remained relatively weak well into the twentieth century', the family must be seen as a 'primary locus for the social construction of marginality and deviancy' and as a site for the regulation of behaviour.[36] Certainly Stephen Garton's study of New South Wales showed that there was a correlation between being 'single' and being admitted

to the asylum.[37] Similar findings in other contexts including New Zealand suggest to some historians that families could be useful in containing 'madness' or preventing institutionalisation.[38] Moreover, families took a range of forms and so did their relationships with colonial institutions.[39]



Patient entry for Elizabeth J, PROV, VPRS 7400/P1 Case Books of Female Patients, folio 4.

Yet the archives also reveal that families were fractured and damaged by the experience of mental breakdown. Married patients, adult children and those with extended family were among those admitted to asylums. Garton's study, my own research, and the findings of other historians all conclude that, in many instances, families at some point became unable to continue to care for sick relatives, either through economic pressures or because they feared violent or very disturbing behaviours.[40] Information gleaned from family members at committal shows that individuals were often tolerated in the household for long periods of time, as in the 1883 case of Margaret D, who was known to be violent, and had been suffering from what appeared to be a delusional state for around a year.[41] Margaret had been admitted to asylums on previous occasions, unlike Jane H whose husband waited only three days before taking her to Gladesville after she had made repeated attempts to commit suicide.[42] Edmund H had also been showing signs of mental disturbance for several months in 1893 when he was taken to the asylum, most likely by the police. He had threatened members of his family, and had not been able to work to provide for his wife and children.[43]

Some patients were released into the care of family members on trial, only to return very quickly when their presence at home became difficult, burdensome, or inappropriate. The asylum authorities kept a fairly close eye on family situations, and were required by law to monitor trial absences. In 1902, Elizabeth J's husband wanted her home, and made an application for her leave-of-absence from Yarra Bend, noting that he knew she was not 'recovered'. Elizabeth had several absences over a number of years but remained in the asylum, most likely suffering from dementia.[44]

While many colonial families were atomised, with individuals distant from kin, and while the experience of mental breakdown often exacerbated these patterns, exaggerating family discord, conflict and unease, there is still plenty of evidence of communication between families and asylums in all four colonies during the period under investigation. Sometimes there are fragmentary sources of information about patients' relatives living in other parts of the colonies. Elizabeth M was an inmate for some years at Auckland Asylum until her death in 1896. In 1889 Auckland police wrote to the asylum about Elizabeth's son who lived at Westport and worked as a labourer. The asylum had sought the assistance of the police to obtain maintenance payments. The police were able to confirm that the family was unable to make any contributions, but wrote that another of her sons lived in Melbourne, although the family had 'not heard from him for some years'.[45] John L, also an inmate at Auckland, had a brother named Henry contracted to the Colonial Sugar Company in Sydney. In 1898 Henry made contact with the institution and was 'ordered' to make a weekly payment.[46] Another Auckland inmate had been a Chief Justice in New Guinea; he had also lived in Melbourne, spending time in an inebriate institution there, and when discharged in 1904 was to 'go home to Australia'.[47] On a few occasions patients were taken home by family members who travelled from other colonies to collect them.[48]

### **Conclusions: The Archive as a 'Contact Zone'**

Without fully knowing or appreciating the past decisions of archivists who have worked hard to preserve these historical materials, or understanding the daily work of asylum and institutional administrators themselves, the historian is left with a sense of partiality about the past of the psychiatric institution and its recordkeeping. These fractured accounts and sometimes only fragmentary narratives of insanity also serve to remind us of our own

reactions and experiences with archival research. Antoinette Burton and Florencia Mallon both argue that the archive becomes a 'contact zone' when the researcher encounters the source materials it houses. [49] Researchers themselves become ethnographers in the archive, with their decisions about methodological practice intimately bound up with their own positions on archival research praxis and their subjective choices.[50] We too make choices based on what we wish to find out, or on what moves us, both explicable and inexplicable, among the many records we locate.

Researcher William Gibaud, based at the University of York, explored the archive of insanity as an emotional arena in his undergraduate dissertation work, conducting an email survey of international historians and users of archives as part of this process.[51] I responded to this questionnaire with some trepidation, realising that I too had emotional responses to this material in an academic context, and that I perhaps pursued some lines of inquiry based on my responses. This has occurred even though I have mostly worked hard to preserve a sense of distance from the source material, which can be challenging to read. As John Weaver comments, writing about the subject of suicide research, it can be virtually impossible to represent what really happened, given the way that archives are only glimpses of lives lived long ago.[52] Instead, I wrote about the emotions of the people in the past, preferring to explore 'emotion' as a category of analysis that we might use to evaluate how mental breakdown was a problem for those who encountered it.

For the researcher, finding a short letter to go with a longer series of clinical notes can evoke an excited sense of 'completeness', even while it tells only a little more about an individual's history. A robust series of letters, but a very brief patient case, on the other hand, can be frustrating. Historians endeavour to make sense of the sources in the archive, patching together these shards to tell stories in a narrative fashion. In the histories of psychiatry and insanity, the voices of the subjects are both already highly mediated by virtue of their status as patients in a clinical setting, but they also hold remarkable detail, some of it physical, and some of it emotional. In this way, asylum archival sources – insanity's archive – are rich with possibility in the telling of history.

This article has explored several ideas about archival research practices. I have been asking whether the provenance of sources can make a difference to their meanings and their utility. I have suggested that it is by looking across both institutional and archival sites

that we might generate some perceptive angles on this archive of insanity, and I have also argued that we must make use of the fragments and acknowledge their nature as elements of the research and writing process. It is in this field of study, the history of mental breakdown, that archives have been both core to historical praxis and also severely under-analysed as objects in their own right. Finally, historians enter into this world of illness inside the space of the archive, and sift through the sadness and pain of the past within the neutral and ordered context of the public records institution. It is in this disjuncture, or conjuncture, that we find the meaning of the archive – in the silence, rustling, sorting and adjusting of the decaying paper of the past to understand our present interventions in it.

## Endnotes

[1] See the holdings of Public Record Office Victoria (PROV) and *PROVguide* 59, 'Education, Health and Welfare – Mental Health Records'. This research has been funded by the Royal Society of New Zealand's Marsden Fund. The article was presented as a paper at the Australian Historical Association Conference, 'Locating History', University of Melbourne, July 2008; and was reworked for presentation as a seminar to the Department of History and Art History, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand in May 2009. I offer thanks to the participants at both events and to the excellent advice provided by two anonymous referees of this article.

[2] S Garton, 'Shut off from the source', *Australian*, 22 November 2000, p. 45.

[3] M Foucault, 'Madness, the absence of work', translated by P Stastny and D Sengel, *Critical inquiry*, vol. 21, 1995, p. 290.

[4] *ibid.*, p. 291.

[5] J Mills, *Madness, cannabis and colonialism: the 'native only' lunatic asylums of British India, 1857-1900*, Macmillan, Basingstoke; St Martin's Press, New York, 2000.

[6] M Moss, 'Archives, the historian, and the future', in M Bentley (ed.), *Companion to historiography*, Routledge, London, 1997, pp. 960-73.

[7] S Swartz, 'Lost lives: gender, history and mental illness in the Cape, 1891-1910', *Feminism and psychology*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1999, p. 157.

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[9] Foucault, 'Madness, the absence of work', p. 291.

[10] A Burton, *Dwelling in the archive: women writing house, home, and history in late colonial India*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003.

[11] Mills, *Madness, cannabis and colonialism*.

[12] AL Stoler, *Along the archival grain: epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense*, Princeton University Press, 2009, p. 49.

[13] T Richards, *The imperial archive: knowledge and the fantasy of empire*, Verso, London, 1993.

[14] See for example J Moran, D Wright & M Savelli, 'The lunatic fringe: families, madness, and institutional confinement in Victorian Ontario', in N Christie & M Gavreau (eds), *Mapping the margins: the family and social discipline in Canada, 1700-1975*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2004; J Vijselaar, 'Out and in: the family and the asylum: patterns of admission and discharge in three Dutch psychiatric hospitals 1890-1950', in M Gijswijt-Hofstra, H Oosterhuis, J Vijselaar & H Freeman (eds), *Psychiatric cultures compared: psychiatry and mental health care in the twentieth century: comparisons and approaches*, Amsterdam University Press, 2005; M-E Kelm, 'Women, families and the Provincial Hospital for the Insane, British Columbia, 1905-1915', *Journal of family history*, vol. 19, no. 2, 1994, pp. 177-93.

[15] See for example Swartz, 'Lost lives', pp. 152-8.

[16] See for instance G Reaume, *Remembrance of patients past: patient life at the Toronto Hospital for the Insane, 1870-1940*, Oxford University Press, Toronto, 2000; B Labrum, 'The boundaries of femininity: madness and gender in New Zealand, 1870-1910', in W Chan, DE Chun & R Menzies (eds), *Women, madness and the law: a feminist reader*, Glasshouse Press, London, 2005; C Coleborne, 'Challenging institutional hegemony: family visitors to hospitals for the insane in Australia and New Zealand, 1880s-1900s', in G Mooney & J Reinhartz (eds), *Permeable walls: historical perspectives on hospital and asylum visiting*, Rodopi, Amsterdam, 2009.

[17] D Wright, 'Getting out of the asylum: understanding the confinement of the insane in the nineteenth century', *Social history of medicine*, vol. 10, 1997, pp. 137-55.

[18] See A McCarthy, 'Ethnicity, migration and the mental hospital in early twentieth-century Auckland, New Zealand', *Social history of medicine*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2008, pp. 47-65.

[19] T Ballantyne, 'Rereading the archive and opening up the nation state: colonial knowledge in South Asia (and beyond)', in A Burton (ed.), *After the imperial turn: thinking with and through the nation*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2003, p. 106. See also T Ballantyne, 'Archives, empires and histories of colonialism', *Archifacts*, April 2004, pp. 21-36; AL Stoler, 'Colonial archives and the arts of governance: on the content in the form', in C Hamilton et al. (eds), *Refiguring the archive*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, 2002, pp. 83-100; and Stoler, *Along the archival grain*, pp. 46-51.

- [20] See for example R Menzies & T Palys, 'Turbulent spirits: Aboriginal patients in the British Columbia psychiatric system, 1879-1950'; in JE Moran and D Wright (eds), *Mental health and Canadian society: historical perspectives*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2006, pp. 149-75; L Barry & C Coleborne, 'Insanity and ethnicity in New Zealand: Māori encounters with the Auckland Mental Hospital, 1860-1900', *History of psychiatry*, forthcoming; S Swartz, 'The black insane in the Cape, 1891-1920', *Journal of Southern African studies*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1995, pp. 399-415.
- [21] See T Ballantyne, *Orientalism and race: Aryanism in the British Empire*, Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2002, p. 10.
- [22] C Coleborne, *Reading 'madness': gender and difference in the colonial asylum in Victoria, Australia, 1848-1888*, Network Books, Perth, 2007.
- [23] C Coleborne, *Madness in the family: insanity and institutions in the Australasian colonial world, 1860-1914*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2010.
- [24] Moss, 'Archives, the historian, and the future', p. 968.
- [25] State Records New South Wales, AGY-65 Gladesville Hospital, series 5035 and 5034.
- [26] PROV, VA 2839, VPRS 7568 Maintenance Bonds and VPRS 7570 Applications for Patients' Leave of Absence.
- [27] Wright, 'Getting out of the asylum', pp. 147-9.
- [28] PROV, VPRS 7570/P1, F99/1789, Bundle 2, Letter 2 July 1899.
- [29] See my article 'Pursuing families for maintenance payments to hospitals for the insane in Australia and New Zealand, 1860s-1914', *Australian historical studies*, vol. 40, no. 3, 2009, pp. 308-22.
- [30] I would like to thank Stephen Garton for reminding me about this more than once, and at important moments in my project.
- [31] National Archives New Zealand, Carrington Hospital, YCAA 1048/11, Patient case files, folio 95.
- [32] See CE Rosenberg & J Golden (eds), *Framing disease: studies in cultural history*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 1992, p. xvi; N Theriot, 'Women's voices in nineteenth-century medical discourse: a step toward deconstructing science', *Signs*, vol. 19, 1993, pp. 1-31.
- [33] T Banivanua-Mar, *Violence and colonial dialogue: the Australian-Pacific indentured labor trade*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 2007, p. 149.
- [34] E Spooner, 'Digging for the families of the 'mad': locating the family in the Auckland Asylum Archives, 1870-1911', unpublished Masters thesis in History, University of Waikato, 2006.
- [35] E McEwen, 'Family history in Australia: some observations', in P Grimshaw, C McConville & E McEwen (eds), *Families in colonial Australia*, G Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1985, pp. 195-6; see also E Olszen, 'Towards a new society', in GW Rice (ed.), *The Oxford history of New Zealand*, 2nd edition, Oxford University Press, Auckland, 1992.
- [36] N Christie & M Gauvreau (eds), *Mapping the margins: the family and social discipline in Canada, 1700-1975*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2004, p. 15.
- [37] S Garton, *Medicine and madness: a social history of insanity in New South Wales, 1880-1940*, New South Wales University Press, Kensington, 1988, pp. 102-3.
- [38] See B Labrum, 'The boundaries of femininity: madness and gender in New Zealand, 1870-1910', in W Chan, DE Chun & R Menzies (eds), *Women, madness and the law: a feminist reader*, Glasshouse Press, London, 2005, p. 77.
- [39] Historians of the family have been more interested in examining family fluidity in recent times. The few existing histories of families in the colonies (such as M Gilding, *The making and breaking of the Australian family*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1991, and P Grimshaw, C McConville & E McEwen (eds), *Families in colonial Australia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1985) indicate that families were indeed likely to be more 'fluid' than their old-world counterparts. Further, it is important to note that there were changes in the shape and nature of the family over the course of the nineteenth century. Class is also important to this discussion. Poorer families, members of which had to travel and separate for employment, were more likely to be fractured and geographically distant, and this has implications for this study.
- [40] See especially Labrum, 'The boundaries of femininity', and J Moran, 'The signal and the noise: the historical epidemiology of insanity in ante-bellum New Jersey', *History of psychiatry*, vol. 14, 2003, pp. 281-301.
- [41] State Records New South Wales, Gladesville Hospital, Medical casebooks, CGS 5031, 4/8172, folio 80.
- [42] State Records New South Wales, Gladesville Hospital, Medical casebooks, CGS 5031, 4/8176, folio 64.
- [43] State Records New South Wales, Gladesville Hospital, Medical casebooks, CGS 5031, 4/8181, folio 137.
- [44] PROV, VA 2839, VPRS 7570/P1, Application for Patients' Leave of Absence; VPRS 7400/P1, Case Books of Female Patients, Unit 13, folio 4.
- [45] National Archives New Zealand, Carrington Hospital, YCAA 1048/5, Patient case book, folio 68; YCAA 1026/7, Patient case files, no. 366.
- [46] National Archives New Zealand, YCAA 1044/1, Record Book, Maintenance Investigations, c. 1890-99, folio 259.

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[47] National Archives New Zealand, YCAA 1048/10, Patient case book, folio 53.

[48] As in the case of William B whose brother came from Victoria for him. Members of his family had previously visited him in the lockup, prior to his asylum committal. State Records New South Wales, Gladesville Hospital, Medical casebooks, CGS 5031, 4/8182, folio 207.

[49] A Burton (ed.), *Archive stories: facts, fictions, and the writing of history*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2005, p. 25; F Mallon, 'The promise and the dilemma of subaltern studies: perspectives from Latin American history', *American historical review*, vol. 99, 1994, p 1539.

[50] See AR Bailey, C Brace and DC Harvey, 'Three geographers in an archive: positions, predilections and passing comment on transient lives', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, vol. 34, 2009, pp. 254-69.

[51] W Gibaud, 'The lunatic's cry: resistance through writing in the asylum 1850-1906', unpublished dissertation in History, University of York, 2008.

[52] J Weaver, *A sadly troubled history: the meanings of suicide in the modern age*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Toronto, 2009, pp. 356-7.

# ‘Where Fire Risks are Great’

## A Tale of Arson, Bureaucracy and the Schoolyard

Kirsten Wright and Dr Antonina Lewis

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“‘Where Fire Risks are Great’: A Tale of Arson, Bureaucracy and the Schoolyard’, *Provenance: The Journal of Public Record Office Victoria*, issue no. 9, 2010. ISSN 1832-2522. Copyright © Kirsten Wright and Antonina Lewis.

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### Abstract

**The discovery of damaged and burnt volumes in the Victoria University Archives led the authors on an investigation into the circumstances of a fire which occurred at the Footscray Technical School in 1953. Contemporary attitudes to fire protection in public schools, and life in Footscray, as revealed through records of the time, are also discussed with reference to the school.**

### The Changing Face of Footscray

Peaceful picket-fence environs of 1950s Australia have been well mythologised in our national culture, but this gladioli-tinted picture does not account for the totality of suburbia. Contemporary newspaper reports and archival documents, as well as the published histories these records support, substantiate a claim that in Melbourne’s inner-west cottage, roses and emerald lawns were sharing real estate with any number of less salubrious inhabitants: abattoirs, chemical plants, sly-grog stills and slumlords. The industrial profile of the area was not new – Footscray’s beginnings were in quarries, riverside slaughterhouses, and melting factories for the reduction of livestock to tallow – but where factory owners and local businessmen had once chosen to establish homes near to their capital interests, close physical proximity was becoming increasingly unnecessary for the conduct of business operations, just as the culminating effects of a

century of industrial pollution were rendering it more undesirable. Abetted by post-war immigration and early indicators of a shift away from heavy industry, the changing demographics of the area contributed to a community that was both optimistic and, at times, incendiary. Traditional battles between territorial ‘larrikin’ gangs of neighbouring suburbs were now augmented by battles with and between ‘New Australian’ youths. At the same time, a strong sense of civic pride is evidenced by the numerous municipal and community efforts that assisted with improvements to local schools and amenities, and to the establishment in 1947 of an Avenue of Honour in Geelong Road.

A survey of Footscray district newspapers of the period unfolds a catalogue of civic celebrations juxtaposed with stories of quarrels and altercations (on a scale ranging from comedic to criminal), surprisingly frequent arson attempts, and sporting pages regaling amateur boxing bouts alongside the rough and tumble exploits of Footscray Football Club, whose sole premiership in 1954 gave rise to much jubilation. Equipped with an underdog sensibility and a strong sense of civic pride, 1950s Footscray constituted itself through the public record as a habitat for battlers, with the reportage of both public and domestic, sanctioned and unsanctioned violence indicating an atmosphere where ‘mud and blood’ had not yet lapsed as paradigm colours for the region.

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## Mud and Blood

Brown and red (“mud and blood”) were, first, colours of the E company 7th battalion – roughly half of whom enlisted against a Footscray address,[1] and who counted among the Australians to see service in Gallipoli. Brown and red were subsequently chosen, in tribute, as school colours for the fledgling Footscray Technical School (FTS) when it opened its doors in 1916, only months after the conclusion of the Gallipoli campaign.[2] The first school magazine, published in 1919 – also named the *Brown and Red* – includes an FTS Honour Roll, listing the names of soldiers drawn from the ranks of staff and students. However, aspirations for Footscray’s youth to identify as more than cannon fodder or as cogs in an industrial machine was a fundamental underpinning to the educational philosophy of Charles Archibald Hoadley, first principal of FTS. With experience in teaching (he was employed as a lecturer at the Ballarat School of Mines at the time of his appointment to head FTS), but unproven as an administrator, Hoadley was considered by some to be a strange selection for the role – and indeed had not been first choice for the position.[3]



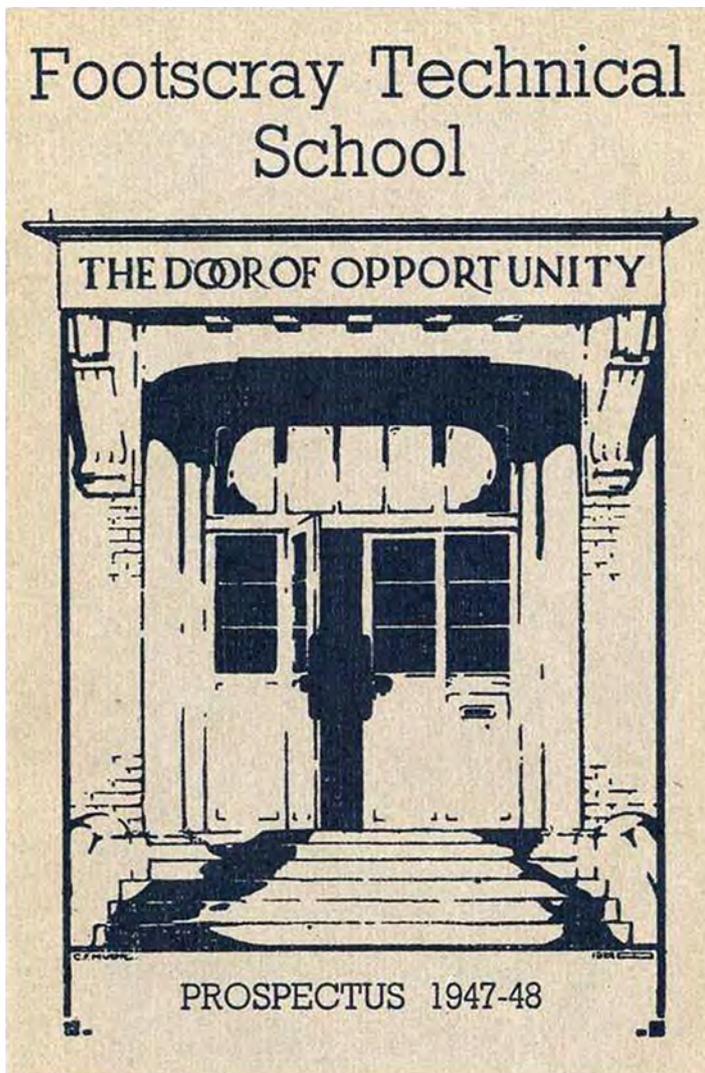
Foundation staff of Footscray Technical School, 1916. Charles Hoadley is pictured front row centre. Victoria University Archives, VUS 616.

A mining engineer, geologist, alumni of Mawson’s 1911 Antarctic expedition, and only 29 years of age when the new Footscray Technical School opened, Hoadley held comparatively limited experience in the educational arena. And yet, as it turned out, what the school had engaged was ‘not an administrator but an educationalist, and . . . the chance to create an important local institution rather than the narrow, limiting type that seemed almost inevitable at that time’.[4] Hoadley’s vision for FTS and its students was in stark contrast to the views of those such as Donald Clark, Chief Inspector

of Technical Schools, who in 1931 stated to the Board of Inquiry Regarding the Administration of the Education Department his position that ‘Since many boys would work in tin sheds ... [they could] learn to work in them too.’[5]

Like many endeavours in Footscray, the establishment of a technical school had been something of a battle. However, by the end of 1915, Footscray had at last managed to secure the land, finance, industry backing and government support required to open a new technical school in the area – more than five years after the idea was first proposed by James Jamieson in an editorial to his *Footscray advertiser*. [6] Despite having Council support,[7] the proposal had not proved straightforward to achieve. In order to move beyond the realm of rhetoric, a new technical school required the purchase or donation of land, procurement of funds to build and equip the establishment, and the support of local businesses in offering day release for their apprentices to attend classes. All this needed to occur in an environment where the Victorian State Government was reserved in its financial support for education, in preceding years having spent only one-third the amount per capita as that of the neighbouring state of New South Wales.[8] An early pledge from the state for £5,000 towards the cost of establishing the school was contingent on a suitable site being made available for this purpose, but the offer lapsed in 1912 after consensus on an appropriate location proved unattainable. The *Advertiser* later claimed: ‘Footscray’s attempt to secure a technical college for the youth of the district would provide humorous reading were it not [for] the bungling which took place in the early stages of negotiations...’[9]

In 1916, when Footscray Technical School finally opened its doors, Hoadley’s resolve to nurture characteristics of active citizenship in individuals whose opportunities might otherwise be circumscribed and quantified in purely functional terms was something of a radical perspective. Technical education was widely considered to be, at best, a means of developing artisans and tradesmen for the workforce, conveying students beyond the ranks of unskilled labour, but not above their station. Ahead of his time, principal Hoadley pushed the vocational boundaries further, emphasising that it was not enough for the school simply to turn out skilled tradesmen and well-trained labourers, but that its purpose should be ‘to educate workers for a life as well as a living’.[10]



The school prospectus highlighted the FTS philosophy of improvement through education for all. Victoria University Archives, VUS 21.

This attitude would endure throughout Hoadley's long tenure as head of FTS, with the 1947-48 prospectus elaborating his vision for technical school education as having a

comprehensive aim of promoting the development of responsible citizens, not merely as economic units destined to fall into a prepared place in the present industrial structure, but as the creative and self-reliant men of the future who will be competent to play a decisive part in directing, shaping and improving the industrial system.[11]

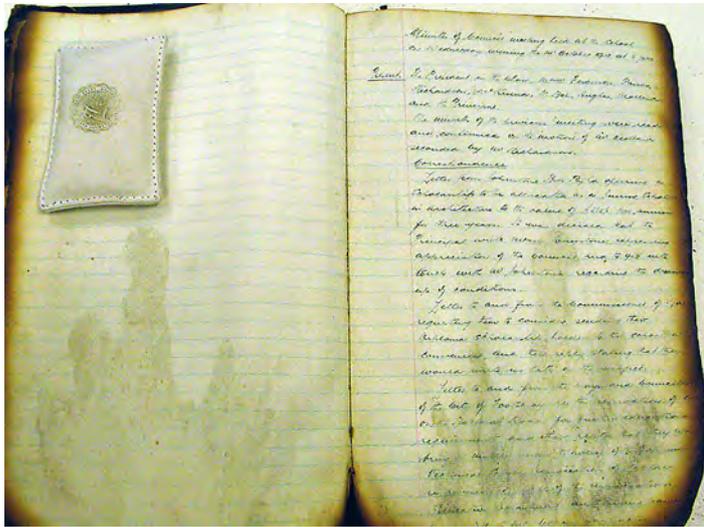
By the late 1930s, Footscray Technical School had weathered a series of funding cutbacks and the threat of closure of its Senior Section. The possibility that FTS might relinquish its senior classes to the Working Men's College (later RMIT) was canvassed during the 1930s as part of the government's Inquiry

Regarding...the Education Department (McPherson Report).[12] However, having survived this threat, the school was thriving under Hoadley's stewardship to the extent that demand for places had far outgrown the numbers that could be accommodated at the original Nicholson Street site. Extensions to the buildings were carried out in 1938 but were not sufficient to ease the pressure, and in 1941 close to 300 applicants hoping to attend FTS had to be turned away.[13] In September of the same year, the foundation stone was laid on Ballarat Road for new buildings – on a site Hoadley had first proposed be used to extend the school twenty years earlier.[14] By 1943, the new buildings were ready for occupancy, with expansion of both the Nicholson Street and Ballarat Road sites continuing throughout the 1940s, boosted significantly by the provision in 1947 of £120,000 in Commonwealth funds for additional buildings and equipment at Ballarat Road, including the construction of a new administrative block opposite the Geelong Road intersection.[15]

The grant was a bittersweet success, however, in light of the loss of Charles Hoadley, who died on 26 February 1947. Later that year Joseph Aberdeen was appointed as the new principal, but his untimely death in 1951 left the post vacant once again. Next to take on administration of the expanding institution was Howard Beanland, who provided another period of stable leadership (lasting until his retirement in 1967) and who engineered the rationalisation of FTS's increasingly sprawling operations, as well as overseeing the transition from Technical School to Technical College. Building on Hoadley's vision, Beanland consolidated the school's position at the apex of technical education in Melbourne's western region and brought it to the brink of a new era – the emergence of a new institution in July 1968, the Footscray Institute of Technology, predecessor to Victoria University (VU).

### A Mystery Uncovered

The rapid social change wrought by the effects of post-war immigration, mobilisation of women into the workforce and the first wave of globalisation created an environment that, while not unique to Footscray, was heightened by the industrial and working-class histories of the suburb. It was, in part, this rich vein of social history that encouraged Antonina Lewis to apply for the position of Archivist at VU, but on taking up the position in 2007 she found surprisingly few pre-1955 records surviving in the university's archives.



Early volume of FTS Council minutes, showing the effects of fire and water damage. Victoria University Archives, VUS 731.

Among those extant were several fire-damaged volumes, comprising four of the first five books of FTS Council minutes, however the collection documentation offered no insight into the cause of injury. The official history of the institution, Carolyn Rasumssen's *Poor man's university*, offered only a single footnote as a clue, noting that a fire had occurred in 1953 in which 'Many school records were destroyed'.<sup>[16]</sup>

As the sole Archives staff member, with the customary backlog of archival processing to contend with, Antonina contented herself with repackaging the volumes and shelving the mystery. However, when Kirsten Wright joined the Records Services department of VU in early 2009, the case was revisited after she discovered a newspaper article from the *Canberra times* through the Australian Newspapers Online database.<sup>[17]</sup> Intrigued by this glimpse into the previously unknown disaster which befell the school, and with little information present in the University Archives, Antonina and Kirsten set out to discover the circumstances of the fire, to better understand what had become of the records in 1953. In piecing together the puzzle of the fire, they discovered that the overall topic of fire protection in schools – let alone the specific fire which had left the VU Archives with few records pre-1953 – was not without controversy.

## SECOND ATTEMPT TO BURN SCHOOL AT FOOTSCRAY

MELBOURNE. Sunday.

For the second time in two weeks a deliberate attempt was made to set fire to Footscray Technical School.

Early to-day fire swept through the school's administrative block in Ballarat Road, totally destroying three offices, school records, a valuable amplifying system, and office furniture.

Damage is thought to exceed £1,000.

Footscray C.I.B. is investigating the outbreak.

Last week-end seven fires were lit in various parts of the senior branch in Nicholson Street. A firebug screwed up balls of newspaper and set fire to them, but the fire was extinguished before it had gained a hold.

Police think that both fires were started by the same person or persons. They believe that an ex-schoolboy with a grudge against the school may have started them.

Two local fire brigades had the outbreak to-day under control within 20 minutes of its discovery.

Police have not yet ascertained how the firebug entered the school, but they think a window may have been left unlocked over the week-end.

'Second attempt to burn school at Footscray', *Canberra times*, 29 June 1953.

## Fire Protection in Schools

For public (including technical) schools in the 1950s, it was the responsibility of the Department of Education to ensure adequate fire protection was provided. As with all building and related items for public schools, the Department of Education provided direction and authorised specific work, which was then carried out by the Public Works Department (PWD). While the Department of Education was obligated to ensure that public schools had escape routes for students and staff, the protection of property was seen as an unnecessary expense. In 1949, a file note neatly summarised the department's position on the topic:

The Assistant Chief Architect ... is of the opinion that these installations [automatic fire protection systems] do not appear to be necessary ... I am doubtful whether the risk of a fire starting in a school building while it is unoccupied is sufficient to warrant [the] expenditure ...  
[18]

.....

In practical terms, this meant that the department was willing to fund the provision of fire escape stairs and other physical escape routes for use by staff and students, but not the installation of fire hoses, alarms and automatic sprinkler systems. It was acknowledged that perhaps technical schools – such as FTS – may require additional fire protection, ‘where fire risks are great’; however, this did not translate into significant improvements for technical schools.

The issue of lack of fire protection in schools – both metropolitan and rural – did not go unnoticed by concerned groups. On 30 June 1952, the Victorian Federation of Mothers’ Clubs submitted a copy of the resolution passed at their annual conference for consideration by the Minister of Education, stating that, at a minimum, country schools should be equipped with proper fire-fighting equipment.[19] It was not just groups intimately associated with schools who thought that the fire protection facilities were inadequate. On 27 September 1952, the chief officer of the Metropolitan Fire Brigade (MBF), in an article appearing in the *Age*, stated that most fire-fighting equipment in schools was ‘deplorable’ and that schools – and the Department of Education – had been lulled into a false sense of security as there had been no deaths in school fires in the previous ten years.[20]

Despite the amount of publicity circulating about the lack of adequate fire protection, the Department of Education did not alter its policy. It was too expensive to install new fire equipment at each public school, they said – even if the Public Works Department did the installation and the schools paid for the maintenance and upkeep of the equipment. By 1954, the policy had relaxed slightly in that basic fire protection equipment (such as extinguishers and hoses) was available to any school that requested it, but it was still not compulsory – nor, when such equipment was installed, were staff trained in its use.[21] More expensive fire protection equipment, such as fire alarms and sprinklers, was still deemed an unnecessary expense – to the point where the Department of Education advised its staff that ‘there is no need to forward to the Public Works Department requests for the installation of thermostatic fire detectors in school buildings’.[22] By 1959, requests had been sent to the Department of Education from a variety of groups urging a change to the policy on fire protection that would mandate compulsory fire protection equipment in all public schools, however the department continued to maintain the policy of only providing basic fire-fighting equipment and ensuring that buildings had adequate escape routes for people to use.

Like many public and technical schools at this time, FTS had no fire-fighting equipment. In 1952, the School Council became concerned about the lack of fire protection at both the Ballarat Road and Nicholson Street campuses, and requested that the MFB inspect both campuses and submit a report and recommendations regarding fire protection. On 12 September 1952, Principal Beanland wrote to the Department of Education reporting the MFB recommendations.[23] For Nicholson Street, the MFB had recommended that automatic sprinklers be installed, that an additional escape stair be constructed on one building, and that a fire resisting store be provided. For Ballarat Road, it was recommended that an automatic fire detection system be installed so that the fire brigade was alerted immediately in the event of a fire, that fire hydrants be installed (for use by the fire brigade only), and, as for Nicholson Street, that a fire resisting store be provided.

The recommendations were forwarded to the PWD in late 1952/early 1953 for the PWD to assess how much the request would cost and whether the recommendations were feasible. By February 1953, permission had been granted for an escape stair to be installed at the Nicholson Street campus[24] – but there was no indication that construction began in 1953. There were also signs that the Department of Education was willing to fund the construction of further fire protection equipment both at Nicholson Street and Ballarat Road. A handwritten file note dated March 1953 authorised the requisition of £5,950 for the installation of an automatic sprinkler system at Nicholson Street. Further works were described (but not authorised), and the department noted that ‘the installation of automatic sprinklers is recommended as a protection of property, rather than as a safeguard to the lives of students and staff’.[25] The departmental concern about safeguarding students and staff also explains the (relative) speed with which the authorisation to build the escape stairs at Nicholson Street was given, compared to the lack of urgency with other fire protection measures.

By June 1953, no fire protection systems had been installed at FTS – on either campus. There were adequate escape routes for students and staff if a fire occurred during school hours, but nothing to protect the buildings outside of these times.

## Fire Breaks Out

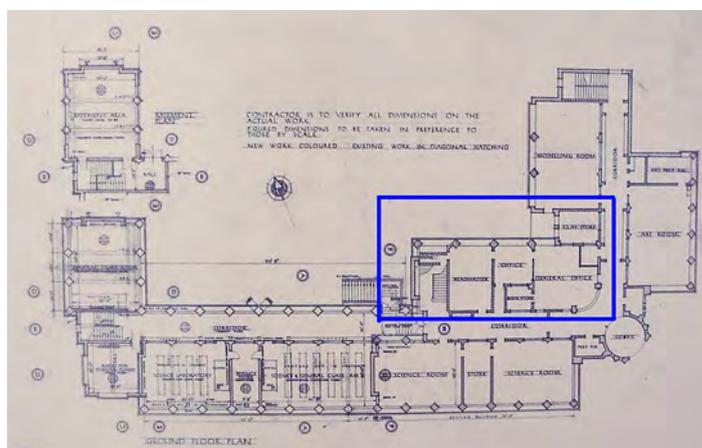
In the early hours of Sunday, 21 June 1953, the alarm was raised about a fire at the Nicholson Street campus. At approximately 1.30 am, an unknown passer-by alerted the Footscray police to a fire burning within the school area.[26] When the police and fire brigade gained entry to the school (according to one newspaper report, they were initially 'foiled by the iron grilles at the doors'[27]), they found seven small fires burning in the office area. The fire brigade quickly controlled the fires, and little damage was done except some minor damage to a switchboard. Investigating police found seven piles of torn-up paper and books, used to start the fires. The *Advertiser* speculated that the intruders had been frightened by the quick arrival of the police and fire brigade, who had thwarted their intention to do more damage.[28]

The arson attempt at the Nicholson Street campus was reported widely. The *Argus*, the *Age* and the *Sun* all ran stories on either page 1 or page 3 of their next editions, published on Monday 22 June. The local Footscray papers, the *Advertiser* and the *Mail*, provided some additional details about the fires. The School Council, already aware of the risk that fire posed to the school given the lack of fire protection, acknowledged their luck in serious damage being prevented. At their meeting on June 23 it was resolved that 'an expression of thanks, to the person unknown . . . be recorded per medium of the local press',[29] and a thank-you note was duly printed in the *Advertiser*.[30]

Unfortunately for FTS, its fire troubles were not over. The following weekend, on Sunday June 28 at about 3 am, a passing motorist alerted the fire brigade to another fire at the school.[31] This time the blaze was at the Ballarat Road campus, home to the Junior School. Units from the Footscray and Yarraville fire stations attended, and the fire was brought under control within twenty minutes, although it was another hour before the fire was completely extinguished.[32] Once again the actions of a concerned member of the community had minimised the impact of the blaze, but this time the damage suffered was severe.

When police entered the campus once the fire was out, they established that the fire had started in the administrative area, gutting the headmaster's office, book room, and general office. Property damage was extensive, and the school's records did not escape the flames, with the *Footscray mail* reporting that the 'main loss was the destruction of irreplaceable students' records, dating back to when the junior school was first set up . . . in 1916'.[33] In addition to infrastructure

damage and the loss of key records, text books and stationery supplies were also destroyed, and smoke damage meant that many walls and ceilings in the building needed to be repainted. The *Argus* noted that the heat from the fire was so severe that 'scores of windows in the office block were burst by the heat'.[34] While the police could not establish the cause of the fire, the damage was bad enough that the Minister for Education – and former FTS Council member[35] – Ern Shepherd, toured the site on Sunday June 28, and the school was closed to students on June 29.[36]



Footscray Technical School, plan of the new administrative and teaching block, c. 1943. The fire took hold in the area identified. PROV, VA 669 Public Works Department, VPRS 10516/P3 Photographs and Negatives of Government Buildings, Unit 10.

After visiting the fire-damaged site, Shepherd remarked that 'we were lucky to get out of it so lightly',[37] despite the damage bill being estimated in the thousands of pounds. This presents a contrast to the general attitude of the Department of Education, mentioned above, which continuously stated that fire protection equipment primarily for the protection of school property was not needed, and that the cost was too great.

The fire at Ballarat Road was reported widely in both the Melbourne-wide and local Footscray newspapers. On June 29, the Monday after the fire, the *Argus*, the *Age* and the *Sun* all ran stories on page 2 or 3. The fire also made the national papers, with the *Canberra times* running the story on its front page, as already noted. [38] All initial reports in the newspapers focused on a possible connection between the Nicholson Street and Ballarat Road fires, with some speculating that perhaps a disgruntled ex-student was behind the attacks.

## The Aftermath

Internally at FTS there were few formal mentions of the fire compared with the widespread and prominent external coverage. While the fire was noted in the FTS Council minutes many times, it was only in the context of procedural reporting about correspondence received and sent, and building works being undertaken as a result of the fire. The Principal's Report in the next published edition of the annual *Blue and Gold* magazine made no mention of the fire; the only reference to the event is a joking remark made by some students in the form reports:

Speaking of fires – and even if you weren't you undoubtedly will some time or another – we want to say here and now, for the record, that the ones we had earlier in the year were not ours at all, it was probably four other people ...[39]

It is interesting to consider the difference between the wide-scale reporting provided by the newspapers and the lack of internal discussion of the fire within the school. All reports and correspondence to the Department of Education highlight that this was a disruptive event, and that repairs were not completed for some time. While damage was not so extensive that the school could not operate, some of its activities were now made more difficult, particularly those to do with administration.

As soon as the fire occurred, Principal Beanland communicated to the Department of Education:

We wish to report that a fire occurred in the offices of our Ballarat Road Unit at approximately 3 am on Sunday, 28th inst. The furniture and contents of the General Office, Headmaster's Office, and Book Room have been completely destroyed. The matter has been reported to the state Accident Insurance Co.[40]

The department was quick to begin organising the repairs to the Ballarat Road campus. A request for the PWD to undertake repair work was given on 3 July 1953 and marked as 'urgent'.<sup>[41]</sup> Following estimates on the amount of work required, approval was provided for £4,553 worth of work to be undertaken. At the request of Beanland, this work was to include the provision of a strong room and fire-fighting equipment. Additionally, as Beanland's note to the Department of Education indicates, an insurance claim had been submitted immediately. The State Accident Insurance Office responded, and a cheque was received by 22 September 1953.<sup>[42]</sup> Unfortunately for FTS, the 'full settlement of claim' only came to £2,500.

While quotes and approval for the repair work were obtained relatively quickly, the actual repairs were slow to begin. By the end of September 1953, calls for

tenders to undertake the work had not yet occurred. FTS Council was concerned at the lack of action, and Beanland again wrote to the Department of Education, requesting (somewhat optimistically) that the work be completed before the start of the coming school year:

The School Council is perturbed that up to the present tenders have not been called for repairs to fire damage at our Ballarat Road Unit of the School.

I am directed to request that the matter be expedited and that a clause be inserted in the contract – 'That the work should be completed by the 31st January, 1954' ...[43]

Work did not begin on the repairs until 5 February 1954, with specific works undertaken as a result of the fire finally completed on 22 July 1955, more than two years after the blaze occurred. The final cost of the repairs came to £5,506,<sup>[44]</sup> an amount more than the original quote, and substantially over the insurance settlement received.

It is impossible to know how much the damage from the fire may have been limited if automatic fire detection equipment had been installed at Ballarat Road prior to the fire; however, it is likely that the damage would have been much less. In the absence of any such protection, school activities were significantly disrupted and the loss of irreplaceable records dating back to FTS's establishment in 1916 incurred a lasting impact on the social and corporate memory of the institution and its successors, including VU.

## Conclusion

The reason behind the missing records and charred volumes in the VU Archives has now been explained. Our investigation into the 1953 fire at Ballarat Road revealed many things. We uncovered specific information about the event itself, the inner workings of FTS, the concerns of the School Council, and the protocols and politics that surrounded all schools' dealings with the government of the time. Other primary sources offered a glimpse into life in 1950s Footscray, revealing that although arson attempts were not uncommon in the area – with local newspapers seeing fit to report when the frequency of fires reduced enough to be noteworthy – this behaviour was balanced against a strong sense of community, as evidenced by those who alerted authorities to the two fires at the school. The records document frustration at the damage done by the fires, but also optimism and the firm resolve to repair and improve: to shape from the ashes something better than what stood before.

## Endnotes

- [1] Australian War Memorial Roll number: 23/24/1, available online at <<http://www.aif.adfa.edu.au:8080/showUnit?unitCode=INF7CE>>, accessed 6 April 2010.
- [2] FW Meymott, editorial in *Brown and Red* magazine, 1919, Victoria University Archives, VUS 400.
- [3] *Footscray advertiser*, 18 December 1915.
- [4] C Rasmussen, *Poor man's university: 75 years of technical education in Footscray*, Footprint, the press of the Footscray Institute of Technology, 1989, p. 38. This official history was commissioned by the institute.
- [5] Evidence given by Donald Clark to the Board of Inquiry Regarding the Administration of the Education Department, 10 July 1931, p. 971. PROV, VA 714 Education Department, VPRS 2567.
- [6] *Footscray advertiser*, 19 June 1909.
- [7] Footscray City Council meeting May 1910, cited in J Lack, *A history of Footscray*, Hargreen Publishing in conjunction with the City of Footscray, 1991, pp. 201-2.
- [8] Rasmussen, *Poor man's university*, p. 18.
- [9] *Footscray advertiser*, 26 December 1914.
- [10] Footscray Technical School Prospectus, 1920-1921, Victoria University Archives, VUS 21.
- [11] Footscray Technical School Prospectus 1947-1948, Victoria University Archives, VUS 21.
- [12] Rasmussen, pp. 92-3.
- [13] *Footscray advertiser*, 8 February 1941.
- [14] Letter from C Hoadley to Department of Education, 14 June 1923, Victoria University Archives, VUA 2004/04.
- [15] Rasmussen, p. 97.
- [16] *ibid.*, p. 138.
- [17] *Canberra times*, 29 June 1953, p. 1, 'Second attempt to burn school at Footscray', available at <<http://newspapers.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/page/701267>>, accessed 22 October 2010.
- [18] PROV, VA 714, VPRS 8819/P1 School Building General Correspondence Files, Single Number System, Unit 16, File note 18 October 1949.
- [19] Letter from the Victorian Federation of Mothers' Clubs to the Minister of Education, received 30 June 1952, in *ibid.*
- [20] *Age*, 27 September 1952, p. 4.
- [21] Report by WG Finigan, Inspector of Works, 10 June 1954, PROV, VPRS 8819/P1, Unit 16.
- [22] Memo, 4 May 1953, in *ibid.*
- [23] Letter from H Beanland to Department of Education, 12 September 1952, PROV, VA 714, VPRS 9513/P1 Technical Schools Building Files, Unit 31.
- [24] Requisition of works, in *ibid.*
- [25] File note, 26 March 1953, in *ibid.*
- [26] *Age*, 22 June 1953, p. 3.
- [27] *Footscray advertiser*, 26 June 1953, p. 16.
- [28] *ibid.*
- [29] Footscray Technical School Council, Minutes of Council meeting 23 June 1953, Victoria University Archives, VUS 731.
- [30] *Footscray advertiser*, 3 July 1953, p. 6.
- [31] *Age*, 29 June 1953, p. 3.
- [32] *Footscray mail*, 4 July 1953, p. 4.
- [33] *ibid.*
- [34] *Argus*, 29 June 1953, p. 2.
- [35] Rasmussen, *Poor man's university*, p. 132.
- [36] *Footscray mail*, 4 July 1953, p. 4.
- [37] *Age*, 29 June 1953, p. 3.
- [38] See note 17 above.
- [39] Form 8C report, in *Blue and Gold*, 1953, p. 23, Victoria University Archives, VUS 42.
- [40] Letter from H Beanland to Department of Education, 29 June 1953, PROV, VPRS 9513/P1, Unit 31.
- [41] Requisition notice, Public Works Department, 7 July 1953, in *ibid.*
- [42] Footscray Technical School Council, Minutes of Council meeting 22 September 1953, Victoria University Archives, VUS 731.
- [43] Letter from H Beanland to Department of Education, 30 September 1953, PROV, VPRS 9513/P1, Unit 31; see also Footscray Technical School Council, Minutes of Council meeting 22 September 1953, Victoria University Archives, VUS 731.
- [44] PROV, VPRS 9513/P1, Unit 31, File note 22 July 1955.

# Forum articles



# The Demise of Bicycle George

## A Life of Crime

Kirstie Close

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The Demise of Bicycle George: A Life of Crime', *Provenance: The Journal of Public Record Office Victoria*, issue no. 9, 2010. ISSN 1832-2522. Copyright © Kirstie Close.

Kirstie Close completed her honours degree in history at La Trobe University in 2006. She went on to a Master of Arts at the University of Melbourne, which she completed by coursework and research in 2009. Kirstie is currently working on her PhD project at Deakin University, which looks at the independence of the Fijian Methodist Church. This piece was written for an undergraduate class at La Trobe and involved Kirstie's first archival experience, at PROV. She has since gone on to study in personal as well as other public archives, mainly the Queensland State archives for her Masters thesis on a mission in Northern Queensland. Kirstie is currently also on the Committee of Management of the Professional Historians Association, and tutors in history subjects at the Australian Catholic University.

### Abstract

**This short piece looks at the life of a murderer, George Blunderfield (alias Arthur Oldring), who was hanged in Melbourne in 1918. Melburnians, or visitors to the city, may have seen his image on the wall at the Old Melbourne Gaol. Blunderfield's life started out normally enough, and then descended into horrific crime. His story includes bicycle racing, escape from an island prison, and then recruitment for service with the Australian Imperial Forces in wartime Victoria. In the last years of his life, Blunderfield wreaked havoc from the western to the eastern coasts of Australia. This in turn had a dramatic effect on his immediate family, which is also detailed here. This story draws on the archives at PROV as well as on State Records Office of Western Australia material, with help from Ms Jean Bellamy, a distant relative of George Blunderfield.**

The man looked like a ferret. At least, that's what the *Age* printed on 23 February 1918. With bent head, he accepted his fate, and still the newspaper mocked him.[1]

Who was George Blunderfield, the man standing before the Supreme Court? What led him down the gruesome path of rape and murder? Forty-seven years of age when he swung from the gallows, George was one of Australia's most brutal criminals.

The Blunderfields – three sons (of which George was one), three daughters and their parents – migrated from England to South Africa when George was eleven years old. The journey across the Atlantic Ocean was rough and the family was keen to disembark and make their home in Cape Town. Soon after the family arrived, young George was struck down with enteric fever (typhoid). He writhed in a pool of sweat and agony for a number of days before recovering. This was the first in a number of incidents George later considered had affected his brain. At his trial for murder, he said: 'Ever since [the bout of typhoid] I have suffered from pains in the head and loss of memory, and I become eccentric at times, lasting for a fortnight or more'.[2] Most days, while George was still bedridden, his young sister Jessie would keep him company, entertaining him with stories she created or had heard, as sisters often do. He enjoyed her stories about bicycle races the most, and tales of her escapades around town. George longed to ride a bicycle of his own one day.

Once he had recuperated, the Blunderfields set off again, this time from the Cape to Australia.[3] On this voyage, George's father instilled in him the skills to survive in the wilderness, imparting his interest in constellations and navigation. George learnt that it was much easier to see at night if the moon was full. [4] These lunar cycles coincided with many of the major events in his life.



Photograph of George Blunderfield taken in Western Australia circa 1900, from PROV, VPRS 264/P1 Capital Case Files, Unit 7, George Blunderfield/Arthur Oldring, December 1917.

The Blunderfields arrived in Adelaide around 1885. George was aged fourteen. Five years later, in 1890, the dazzling tales of the goldfields drew him and two of his three sisters to Kalgoorlie in Western Australia.[5]

It was not long before George discovered the bicycle club in Kalgoorlie, which became his delight.[6] Bicycles were very popular, as they were the most convenient mode of transport for miners in outback towns such as Kalgoorlie and Coolgardie.[7] George was swept up in the craze, competing for prize money in races from Perth to Queensland. Miners from the surrounding districts entrusted him with the care and repair of their bicycles.[8] Thus George surrounded himself with bicycle parts – gears, spokes, bolts and chains.

Sadly, George's happiness in the bicycle business did not last long, with a severe accident meaning he had to retire from racing. It was while racing that George had his accident. He had flown straight over the handlebars, landing on his head. He suffered a fractured skull.[9] This only exacerbated ongoing problems George had had with his head since suffering typhoid many years before.

This was when George's life took a dramatic turn; he spiralled downward and took others with him. His first crime was not terribly serious, as he was caught on 22 September 1899 riding a stolen bicycle. He had pulled up beside his friend on said bicycle and grinned broadly, telling about the thrilling ride he had just had. He boasted that he had beaten the train coming from Coolgardie to Kalgoorlie.[10] George could never keep his exploits to himself. The friend he bragged to

reported him to the police after hearing that a bicycle had been stolen. George's response reveals much about him. He was agitated, blaming everyone but himself. His head was buzzing. He set out to coerce the witnesses into meeting with him and devising an alibi. Many of them were friends George had known for some years and with whom he lived in close quarters. They agreed to meet with him, and, as the group gathered, it was getting dark. The night brought a chill; the moon was slim, offering little light. George's close friend, Campbell, decided to light a fire. Terrified that this fire would alert the police to their meeting, George panicked, even though they were well out of sight of the police station. Self-preservation was his one desire; but fear and paranoia contorted his reasoning of how to obtain it.

As Campbell knelt to light the fire, he felt a heavy blow to the back of his head. Then came another. He recovered his balance, and staggered away from George, who had suddenly set himself into a rage. 'Murder!' the stunned Campbell screamed as he lurched down the hill.[11]

George was left atop the hill, watching his friend scuttle to safety, scrambling away from him. Somehow, George was acquitted of assault charges. However, he was found guilty of stealing the bicycle, and fined five pounds after a hearing at the Kalgoorlie Police Court.[12] After this incident, although George was far less popular around the town, he continued to live in Kalgoorlie.

His next crime was far more despicable: the rape of six-year-old Lucy Chalmer. Lucy's mother, Sarah, had often seen George loitering around their home. He had even offered his services as a babysitter.[13] This responsibility was instead given to Mrs Harriet Kirkwood, the Chalmers' next-door neighbour. Feeling rejected and resentful, George snuck in the back door of the Chalmers' house and raped Lucy after offering her jujube lollies. When Sarah returned from the shops, she saw George emerging from her house. Sarah went directly to bed, and did not realise anything was wrong with Lucy until her brother asked for a glass of water at 3 am the next morning. Sarah saw the blood on Lucy's bedclothes.

When the police questioned George about the rape, they reported that 'he appeared very nervous and excited'. [14] He twitched and scratched himself irritably, giving the police the impression of an insecure man, but one who was also not necessarily aggressive. He attributed his actions to the head injuries he had suffered.

George appeared in court on 24 March 1900. The *West Australian* newspaper reported that George was 'not affected in the slightest degree by the verdict'. The Blunderfield family was dismayed. His sister fainted when the conviction was announced.[15] But George, said to be feeling relieved, walked jauntily as he was taken from the courtroom directly to his cell at Fremantle Gaol.

He was released seven years later, on 14 August 1907. George could not return to Kalgoorlie. He travelled to Hopetoun, a fishing town on the south coast of Western Australia. There he moved into Peter Durrand's boarding house and worked on the docks. George developed an interest in firearms and ammunition during his time in Hopetoun. Not aware of his past, many of the locals opened their hearts and homes to him, including the Effords, who lived and worked in the Hopetoun Post Office. This was the scene of his next crime.

It had been a fairly average evening; George was in his usual high spirits whilst down at the local pub. [16] After a few drinks, George ambled along a Hopetoun street, bathed in moonlight. He entered his friend's home. He pulled a gun from his pocket and the darkness opened with a crack. The bullet grazed Mr Efford's cheek and pierced his pillow. Mrs Efford jumped out of bed in a state of panic. George beat her with an iron bar. Recoiling, he then watched from the corner as Mr Efford, bleeding profusely from his face, hauled his bewildered wife out of the window.

Mr and Mrs Efford could not make out their attacker in the dark. He was just a shadowy figure. But their children, Ivy and Sam, caught sight of George as they fled outside with their parents. Ivy paused and saw George peer out through her parents' bedroom window with wide staring eyes. Ivy recognised him; she and Sam had played with him several times. The full moon illuminated George's face. Sam started running after Ivy, and George followed them out of the window.[17]

George told the police that it was not until he was outside that he realised what he was doing. Then he said he thanked God that he had 'controlled his feelings in time'. It was 3.30 am.[18]

George's defence, when he appeared in court, was that he had suffered a skull fracture twelve years prior, and that he still felt its effects. George was prodded and poked by medical practitioners in the lead up to the trial, but they concluded that there was nothing physically wrong with him. The doctor said of George:

The eyes were wildly dilated and could see movement of small muscles of the face. He was rational. He answered hardly any questions. No evident loss of memory. A great fright could have produced this effect.[19]

George said that his previous doctor, who knew he was mentally incapacitated, had passed away, so he could not provide evidence. Clearly, George was conscious enough of his actions to be aware that they were wrong. It would not be surprising if the doctor he had seen previously was actually still alive at the time, but would only have confirmed his patient's psychopathic state.

George was found guilty of attempted murder. He went to the prison on Wadjemup (now called Rottnest Island). Wadjemup had long been a place where the colonial government sent Indigenous prisoners from the west coast of Australia.[20] George was one of only a few white inmates there. He arrived by boat at Wadjemup, thoroughly flea ridden and unkempt. The island offered nothing but isolation and a lonely death. At night while he watched the cycles of the moon, he dreamed of escape.

George was prison cook in 1914.[21] What happened on 6 April of that year has been told in many ways. His sister Jessie believed George set his prison cell alight, and as his wardens extinguished the flames, he escaped from Wadjemup.[22] The wardens on duty at the time of his disappearance reported a story even more enigmatic. They said that George had gone fishing with two other prisoners in the morning. He left them at Porpoise Bay and said he was returning to the prison compound. He never made it back. The two men arrived back at the prison and were surprised not to find him there preparing the evening meal. Search parties were set up. Aboriginal trackers were sent out. Hours later, the trackers found George's clothing on the beach, with footprints leading to the water's edge. It was incomprehensible that he could have swum to the safety and freedom of the mainland, which is twenty kilometres away. The guards concluded that George had drowned, or more likely had been eaten by the sharks that traverse the West Australian coast, as no body was found. They did not think it possible that he could have swum to the mainland.[23]

But George was lucky, and he escaped. His getaway was premeditated. The evidence of his scheming was not only in the daylight deception, but also in his use of the full moon. Some sort of boat met him to deliver him to the mainland. Perhaps he managed to charm or con his way onto the ferry. Either way, upon reaching the mainland, George must have used the moonlight to travel at night, making his way further from the coast. His ability to do this demonstrates that he was not as ill as he would have the magistrates believe, and he was likely to commit another horrendous act.

George next emerges in the historical records in Adelaide in 1916, where his family was still based. When his sister Jessie opened the door, she could not believe her eyes. George had been a disgrace to the family for decades. Their father had been so destroyed by George's behaviour that he had set himself in the path of a train, ending his life. Jessie threw whatever she could find at George: a pot plant, a gardening hoe. She did not stop until he was out of sight. Then she collapsed on the footpath with exhaustion, pummelling her face with her hands.

Realising that he could not keep his name after escaping Wadjemup, George changed his name to Arthur Geoffrey Oldring.[24] No doubt his sister disowning him contributed to the decision to change his name. George clung to the hope that his other siblings would not be so harsh. He discovered that his brothers were fighting overseas with the Australian Imperial Forces. He longed to find his brothers and have a second chance. They would always back him up, he reckoned. George concocted another plan. He enlisted in Adelaide as a member of the Australian Imperial Forces. Shortly after, he went to Mitcham in Victoria to have his medical exam. Despite his supposed head injuries, he was cleared.[25] This further cements the argument that his head injuries were not a sufficient explanation for his actions, but that he tried to use them to his advantage to avoid imprisonment.

George then proceeded to military training in Seymour, Victoria. Walking down a street in North Melbourne, during some time off, he noticed a woman trying to catch his eye. Margaret Taylor was a widow with a twelve-year-old daughter, Rosie. George was soon acquainted with Margaret in every way. However, he was just having a fling. She was good company for him, but George was never going to let Margaret stall his plans for Europe. Margaret welcomed him into her home, unaware of his sordid past in Western Australia.

Margaret was keen to woo this handsome rogue. She created elaborate schemes in order to follow him up to the Seymour training camp. She would say she was visiting a sister in nearby Kerrisdale so that she would have an excuse to be near him. She beseeched George a number of times to desert the army and marry her. He always refused. George just wanted to get to Europe, to be with his brothers. Going to the frontline, he felt he would be able to wipe out the past.[26] Yet, Margaret persisted.

On Sunday 11 November 1917, Margaret and Rosie met with George at Trawool Bridge on the Goulburn River.



Photograph of Margaret Taylor, from PROV, VPRS 264/P1 Capital Case Files, Unit 7, George Blunderfield/Arthur Oldring, December 1917.

The police found Rosie Taylor's body the following Sunday, 17 November, bobbing listlessly in the river, her body snagged on an overhanging branch. Margaret's body was found three days later. Both had had their skulls smashed in by heavy blows, and they were dead before they were thrown into the flooded waters. The murder weapon was Margaret's own tomahawk, found at the bridge where George was seen meeting with them not a week before.[27]

There was little doubt that George was the murderer. He had stayed that weekend at the Meyer Hotel in Trawool.

In addition to the murders, the autopsy of young Rosie also found that she had been 'interfered with'. It can be guessed that George was responsible.[28]



Photograph of Trawool Bridge circa 1917, from PROV, VPRS 264/P1 Capital Case Files, Unit 7, George Blunderfield/Arthur Oldring, December 1917.

After committing the murder George had returned to the army camp. His battalion was due to embark within the week. On Monday 18 November, an army mate mentioned the murders, alerting him to the recovery of Rosie's body. With haste, George exchanged his uniform for civilian garb, and deserted. But this time, he did not have time to plan his escape by the sequence of the moon. He stumbled blindly through the scrub.

George stayed the night at a hotel before applying for a job at a Lancaster fruit farm on Saturday 23 November. Labour was short in these times of war. The farm owner employed the bedraggled George. But watching his new employee carefully from his kitchen window during the week, the farmer finally asked his wife on 27 November to ride into Tatura to get the police. The police were on the lookout for a man fitting this fellow's description. The farmer was not prepared to take any chances.[29]

There was a brief hearing at the Seymour Courthouse. It was too small to seat all those who came to hear the proceedings.[30] Arraigned for murder, George was then sent to the watch house in Melbourne, where he awaited his Supreme Court hearing.[31]

George claimed that he could not remember killing Rosie and Margaret. He blamed the typhoid he had experienced as a boy, as well as the other head injuries he had suffered throughout his life. On trial at the Supreme Court in Melbourne, he also mentioned being struck in the head with a limb while logging in the forest some years before.[32] George's representatives in court suggested he had epilepsy.[33] But the doctors could not find evidence of any physical abnormalities.

The police visited George's sister Jessie one night to get a statement. She had moved to Melbourne with her husband and young family. She said George became an alcoholic and was aggressive after his bicycle accident back in Kalgoorlie.[34] And Margaret's surviving daughters, Violet and Elizabeth, had thought him to be a drunkard when they had met him previously.

George pleaded 'mental derangement' at his trial. It did not help him. He was convicted and sentenced to hang.

George was kept in prison cell 10, 'the condemned cell', at Melbourne Gaol until the day of his execution, on 14 April 1918. He was ostracised from his family and friends, a long way from the days when he had friends and the freedom of bicycles, although they had been the start of his troubles. How he must have longed to be back among the bicycle parts and bulldust of Kalgoorlie. Instead, he found himself in the cramped, stuffy bluestone cell.

As George sat in his lonely cell, his sister also examined the moonlight filtering into her bedroom. She fingered the delicate embroidery on her bedspread, but she did not feel it. All her senses could identify was George. He was not there but she could see, smell and hear him. He pervaded her every thought. She re-read the letter that he had sent her most recently, which showed that he was still fooling himself and trying to fool her, claiming that he had 'run a straight game since arriving in Victoria'.[35] Her thoughts were muffled by intense resentment and despair. She took the pills from her bedside table and took more than enough, one after the other. She was found dead the next morning.[36]

George's executioner was elderly, hard of hearing and his sight was not very keen.[37] George felt the man's bony hands against his neck as the noose was tightened. But the doddering hangman failed to compensate for the rope stretching during George's fall. The rope lengthened further than anticipated. George suffered horrific damage, a near decapitation. He dropped knowing he had caused his family immense trauma. On this day a madman was executed.

## Endnotes

[1] 'The Trawool tragedy. Trial of Oldring concluded. Statement by accused. Verdict of guilty. Death sentence passed', *Age*, 23 February 1918, p. 12h-i; 'The Trawool tragedy. What was the motive? Trial of Oldring', *Age*, 20 February 1918, p. 11a.

[2] 'Trawool tragedy. Inquest concluded. Remarkable statement. Oldring committed for trial', *Argus*, 15 December 1917, p. 20f.

[3] PROV, VA 2825 Attorney-General's Department, VPRS 264/P1 Capital Case Files, Unit 7, George Blunderfield/Arthur Oldring, December 1917 (hereafter cited as PROV, Blunderfield/Oldring case file).

[4] G Blainey, *Black kettle and full moon: daily life in a vanished Australia*, Penguin, Camberwell, Victoria, 2003, *passim*.

[5] PROV, Blunderfield/Oldring case file.

[6] Jessie Brown's statement to Victorian Police, in PROV, Blunderfield/Oldring case file.

[7] B Carroll, 'Beasts of burden', in Sheena Coupe (ed.), *Frontier country: Australian outback heritage*, 2 vols, Weldon Russell Publishing, Willoughby, NSW, 1989, vol. 2, p. 30.

[8] State Records Office of Western Australia (SROWA), Police Court Minute Book 18 September 1899 – 11 January 1900, Cons/Acc No. 1340, Item No. 11, 7 October 1899, statement of John Campbell.

[9] SROWA, Criminal Court 20 April 1909 – 4 March 1910, Cons/Acc No. 4459, Item No. 543, 8 December 1909.

[10] SROWA, Police Court Minute Book, 7 October 1899, statement of John Campbell.

[11] *ibid.*, 30 October 1899, statement of John Campbell.

[12] *ibid.*, 30 September 1899.

[13] SROWA, Supreme Court Criminal Sittings, No. 29 of 1900, 6 March 1900 (statement of Sarah Jane 'Chalmer'). 'Chalmer' is a pseudonym that has been used only in this article to protect the real identities of the victims which can be found unaltered in the original records held at SROWA.

[14] *ibid.* (statement of James Porter).

[15] 'The Blunderfield case. Prisoner convicted. Sentenced to twelve years' penal servitude', *West Australian*, 29 March 1900, p. 3c.

[16] SROWA, Criminal Court, 8 December 1909, statement of David Patterson.

[17] *ibid.*, statement of Ivy Efford.

[18] *ibid.*, statement of George Blunderfield, alias George Farrow.

[19] SROWA, Criminal Court, 8 December 1909, statement of Thomas Wilson.

[20] B Kwaymullina, 'Wadjemup: holiday paradise or prison hell-hole', *Studies in Western Australian history*, No. 22, 2001, p. 109.

[21] 'The missing prisoner. Supposed case of drowning', *West Australian*, 8 April 1914, p. 8c.

[22] PROV, Blunderfield/Oldring case file, statement of Jessie Brown.

[23] SROWA, WAA-219 Rottnest Gaol, Item No. 269/14, 6 April 1914, report of Warden Buckmaster.

[24] Arthur Geoffrey Oldring is listed in the First Australian Imperial Force Personnel Dossiers 1914-920 (National Archives of Australia, Series no. B2455/1, Item 11545213).

[25] *ibid.*

[26] 'Verdict of guilty. Death sentence passed', *Age*, 23 February 1918.

[27] 'The Trawool tragedy. Police inquiries', *Argus*, 21 November 1917, p. 8g; 'Trawool tragedy. Mystery deepens. Woman's body found. Military kit in river', *Argus*, 22 November 1917, p. 7a; *Victoria Police gazette*, 22 November 1917, No. 47, p. 607.

[28] PROV, Blunderfield/Oldring case file, autopsy report on Rosie Taylor.

[29] Newspaper excerpt (n.d.), accessed at Old Melbourne Gaol.

[30] 'Trawool tragedy. Inquest opened', *Argus*, 14 December 1917, p. 8e.

[31] Newspaper excerpt (n.d.), accessed at Old Melbourne Gaol.

[32] 'The Trawool tragedy. Trial of Oldring. Case for the defence. A plea of mental derangement', *Age*, 22 February 1918, p. 9e.

[33] *ibid.*

[34] PROV, Blunderfield/Oldring case file, statement of Jessie Brown; *Victoria Police gazette*, 22 November 1917, p. 607.

[35] PROV, Blunderfield/Oldring case file, statement of Jessie Brown.

[36] 'The Trawool traged. Oldring's sister dies', *Adelaide advertiser*, 27 November 1917, p. 6g.

[37] K Morgan, *The particulars of executions 1894-1967: the hidden truth about capital punishment at the Old Melbourne Gaol and Pentridge Prison*, Old Melbourne Gaol, National Trust of Australia (Victoria), Melbourne, 2004, p. 22.

# What Happened to the Camels of the Burke and Wills Expedition?

Donna Bourke

‘What Happened to the Camels of the Burke and Wills Expedition?’, *Provenance: The Journal of Public Record Office Victoria*, issue no. 9, 2010. ISSN 1832-2522. Copyright © Donna Bourke.

Donna Bourke was raised on a property near Nathalia, in Northern Victoria. She completed a Bachelor of Education/Librarianship degree and embarked on a career teaching secondary school boys in Melbourne and Canada. Then, at a time of life when many are consolidating their careers, Donna and her partner left their jobs and began restoring historic homesteads. Longerenong Homestead in the Wimmera was one of their purchases and inspired Donna to undertake the detective work that brought to light the fate of the camels that survived Burke and Wills’ expedition to the Gulf

## Abstract

**The story of the camels that survived the expeditions of Burke and Wills is not well known. What happened to these surviving camels? Donna Bourke became intrigued by the story after discovering there was a link to the Longerenong Homestead in the Wimmera that she had purchased with Ian Pausacker.**

Robert O’Hara Burke and his party set off from Royal Park in 1860 on an ill-fated expedition of discovery that took them through Australia’s interior to the northern coast at the Gulf of Carpentaria. When they failed to return in 1861, a relief expedition led by Alfred William Howitt found what was left of the party, and in 1862 Howitt set out with Alexander Aitken on a second expedition to bring the remains of Burke and William John Wills home for burial. They also brought back with them what was left of the twenty-six camels that had accompanied the expedition – those that had not been shot, left bogged or eaten for food along the way. Aitken took the camels to Samuel Wilson’s property in the Wimmera.



William Strutt’s sketch of Burke leaving Royal Park on the Exploring Expedition. Courtesy of the Dixson Library, State Library of NSW.

Not all of the camels imported from Afghanistan and northern India were taken on Burke’s expedition. On 7 May 1861, Edward Wilson, President of the Acclimatisation Society, reported that an offer had been made by Samuel Wilson (no relation) ‘for the use of one of [his] paddocks in the Wimmera for the camels ... now in Royal Park.’[1] The society recognised the offer ten days later: ‘I have the honour to acknowledge the receipt of your favour dated the 8 inst and by directions of the Council to thank you for your kind offer’,[2] but took no further action until September.



Sir Samuel Wilson (1832-95), c. 1861. Reproduced with the permission of the Parliamentary Library, Parliament of Victoria.

### Why Did the Camels Leave Royal Park?

The small herd of camels left behind at Royal Park increased to nine when Sampson, one of Howitt's men, brought 'one male [Nero] and four female camels'[3] to the park in March 1862. The report of Royal Park's superintendent, delivered to the Acclimatisation Society on 8 July, records the 'great expense of the camels' and notes that these new arrivals had 'increased the food bills alarmingly'.[4] The superintendent spoke at this meeting of 'the difficulty of trying to keep them free from scab',[5] a skin disease that afflicts woolly animals kept in damp conditions. The necessity of finding a suitable location for the camels grew more desperate as the cold, wet winter continued and the challenge of keeping these desert animals in reasonable health increased.

There were other problems too. On 12 August, there was trouble with the horses when 'one of the camels had been driven into town ... and there was a danger ... of horses taking fright'.[6] Safety concerns also arose with Nero, who had mauled a sepoy named Batton near Menindee on 3 January. The camel was described as 'vicious and ill tempered' and had 'frequently hunted everybody out of camp or up into trees'.[7] One Saturday night 'lads' were torturing the new arrivals, as reported in the minute book of the society, especially 'the camel which had mauled its black attendant'. Nero's torturer, George Fletcher, was sentenced to a week in prison or the payment of two shillings for abusing the camel.[8]

The Council of the Acclimatisation Society eventually accepted the offer from Samuel Wilson, five months after it had originally been made, observing that there was 'no immediate use for the camels ... as the climate is ... too damp and cold for their permanent health'. The Council only needed 'to confirm the arrangement' at the meeting of 30 September 1862 'with the receipt of Mr. Samuel Wilson's letter'.[9]



Camels at Royal Park before Burke's expedition. Note the large, black camel. Could this be Nero? Courtesy of the Dixson Library, State Library of NSW.



A sketch of Longerenong Homestead by Eugene von Guerard, c. 1868. Courtesy of the Dixson Galleries, State Library of NSW.

### Samuel Wilson's Interest in the Royal Park Camels

In the early 1860s, the seasons were bountiful. There was no shortage of pasture and it was a bumper year for the price of wool. At this time, Samuel Wilson had an income of '£20,000 per annum'[10] and the land, pasture and discretionary income for experimenting with camels. Indeed, his land holdings were extensive: Longerenong Station was 153,000 acres (in conjunction with his brothers Charles and Alexander, who lived on adjoining stations, and another brother John, his pastoral holdings in Wilson Brothers included 742,000 acres in the Wimmera alone)[11] and provided plenty of space in a dry climate for a paddock for the camels.

Samuel's homestead was being built nearby at Longerenong when the camels first arrived in September 1862. His brother Charles, based at Walmer Station, received the valuable animals and organised their care until Samuel was ready for them at Longerenong. The Wilson brothers provided free agistment for the camels. Charles wrote in a letter to the Council in October 1862 that 'we are only too happy to forward [the Society's] laudable schemes'[12]

From 1861, Samuel Wilson proved himself a committed member of the Acclimatisation Society with a donation of 10 pounds and 10 shillings. He obtained life membership in 1862 with another sizeable donation[13] and was elected a member of the Council in November 1862. In July the next year he refused the nomination for vice-president as Longerenong Homestead had just been completed and he was 'intending to reside for some time up the country'[14] He worked with the society as it experimented with pineapples, palm tree oil, vines, flocks of ostriches, herds of angora goats and axis deer at Longerenong.

The camels joined other exotics on Wilson's property such as peacocks, white swans, Ceylon peafowl, cassava, Bunya-Bunya pines, Moreton Bay figs, Osage oranges and Norfolk Island pines.[15]

### Departure and Journey

A note was placed in the *Argus* on 13 September 1862 to inform the people of Melbourne that their 'guests' were leaving:

The Camels

To the Editor of the *Argus*

Sir, – These distinguished guests are about to move (on Monday morning next) from the Royal Park to the Wimmera. As many persons may desire to see them before they finally leave Melbourne, or to show them to their children, I beg to send you this note.

Faithfully yours,

Camel.[16]

The man in charge of transporting the camels to their new home was Alexander Thomson. He had a letter for Charles Wilson which read,

Thomson has in his charge nine camels the property of the Acclimatisation Society ... Mr. Samuel Wilson has kindly offered to accommodate in a paddock on the Walmer station. As soon as they are settled Thomson will leave them in the permanent charge of the sepoy, Esau Khan ... The wages will be sent up monthly ... made payable to yourself.[17]

On 11 September 1862, nine camels made up the caravan that left Royal Park on the route recommended by Samuel Wilson.[18] They passed through Ballarat and 'caused quite a commotion amongst the persons in the town; some hundreds followed these explorers of the desert'[19]

Even though the camels from Royal Park had been stabled, they 'did not appear to be in very good condition' when they passed through Ballarat.[20] The Acclimatisation Society recorded that the 'camels in consequence of the severe weather ... have suffered very much'[21] yet when they had first arrived in Melbourne in June 1860 they had been described as being 'remarkably fine animals ... in good health'[22]





William Strutt's sketch of Belooche. Courtesy of the Dixson Library, State Library of NSW.

### The Condition of the Expedition Camels

The expedition camels had travelled vast distances with Burke, and those that survived at the end of Howitt's first expedition were in a poor state. 'Of the thirteen camels here very few are in a fit state to travel, suffering severely from itch', Edwin Welch wrote in his diary on 6 August 1861.[32] The health of the camels had been poor even before they travelled over 1,500 kilometres to Adelaide with Howitt and then with Aitken to Wilson's property in the Wimmera. The *Argus* recorded: 'Mr. Aitkin, who was detached from Howitt's exploration party at Adelaide to take the camels to ... Mr. Wilson's station on the Wimmera, arrived ... He left Adelaide on the 10th day of December, and arrived at the Wimmera upon the 16th inst. There are now at Mr. Wilson's, seventeen camels'.[33] A group of school children in Horsham witnessed the arrival. William Candy recalled 'being let out one day to see camels going through to Walmur. Those camels were the same as used by the Burke and Wills exploring expedition'. [34]

Charles Wilson indirectly commented on the camels' poor condition when the exhausted animals arrived at Walmer. At the Council meeting on 20 January 1863, 'A letter was read from Mr. Charles Wilson, reporting the safe arrival of the eight camels from Mr. Howitt's party ... and stating that ... it would be desirable to keep them in a paddock apart from the others, which Mr. Wilson kindly promises to have done'.[35] Charles quarantined them, protecting the earlier arrivals from any infectious diseases carried by those that had just arrived from Howitt's expeditions. He wrote to the

Council to tell them too of the 'death of one of the animals which had returned from Mr. Howitt's party the animal having been in a very feeble state and nearly blind ever since it arrived at the Wimmera'.[36]

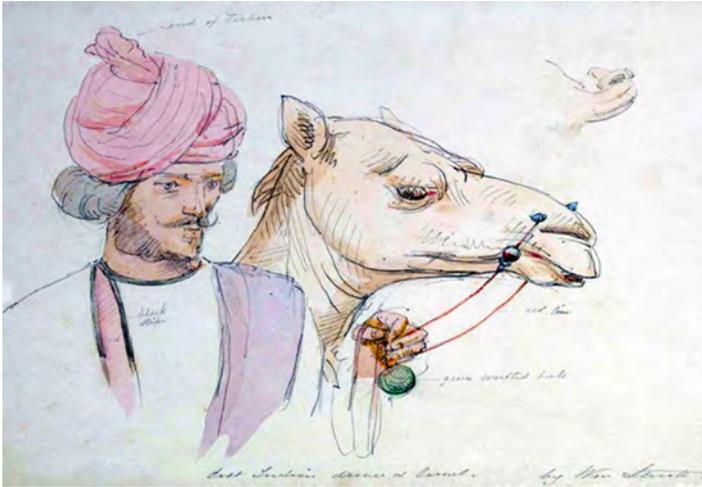
Esau Khan was at Walmer when the eight weary camels with Alexander Aitken limped in. The poor condition of the camels was too much for Khan alone to manage. In a letter to Charles, dated 21 January 1863, the Council offered the services of Belooche, the sepoy on Burke's expedition.[37] Charles accepted the offer and Belooche's wages were confirmed three months later: 'enclosed an account of £13 being Belooche's wages for one quarter'.[38] Thus Belooche was engaged at about £1 per week soon after the camels arrived, to support Esau Khan.

As noted above, the agistment of the camels at the properties of the Wilson brothers provided savings to the Acclimatisation Society. 'The cost of the rations of attendants need not be mentioned by the Society', Charles Wilson had written.[39] The society did not need to pay for the accommodation of Esau Khan or Belooche or for the agistment of the camels but it was expected to supply the wages of the two sepoy.

### Restoring the Camels to Good Health

The sepoy expressed their concern about the condition of the camels and made several requests to the Acclimatisation Society for goods to assist with their recuperation. In November 1862 Esau Khan asked for oil for the camels that had come from Royal Park; oil was helpful to treat scab.[40] However, his request was refused. Similarly, when the other camels arrived with Aitken, 'Esau Khan's opinion was that the camels required wheat and that some of them would require covering for the winter', but the Council's view was that 'No wheat is required ... and that in such a climate no artificial covering needs to be provided'.[41]

Towards the end of the year, Esau Khan again requested wheat to build the camels' strength for the coming winter.[42] At first he was unsuccessful, but '10 gallons of oil for the camels' was sent by train to Ballarat a couple of months later,[43] and again in June 1864.[44] This indicates that some of the camels were still recovering. However the fledgling society did not want additional expenses. The reply to Esau's request for wheat and oil for the camels was tainted by prejudice and the suspicion that 'Esau only wanted a trip to Melbourne ... Mr. Landells [stated] ... these black fellows want very strict management'.[45]



Esau Khan by William Strutt. Courtesy of the Dixon Library, State Library of NSW.

Wages were a topic that often appeared in the letters between Charles Wilson and the Council. The sepoys were discontented with their pay of a little over £1 per week. They would make a request for a rise in pay and Charles Wilson would forward the request to the Council. Esau Khan asked for a raise in November 1863 but 'the Council decided not to increase the wages of Esau at present'.<sup>[46]</sup> A month later, Esau Khan was reported to be 'content to remain at his present rate of wages', but in January 1864 he 'had again applied for an increase in wages'.<sup>[47]</sup> By 19 January 1864 'Esau wished to be relieved of his charge'. Belooche had already left. He had arrived by February but was gone by September 1863 – a period of eight months.<sup>[48]</sup> Esau Khan had arrived in September 1862 and left in March 1864 – a stay of eighteen months.

In January 1864, the Council asked Charles Wilson 'if there were any person in his employ to whom he could confide the care of these animals'.<sup>[49]</sup> Two weeks later, on 2 February, Charles announced 'that a man named Barnes has an affinity for the camels and takes charge of them', and in March he wrote 'that one of his men was getting on very well with the camels and would he thought be ultimately able to manage them'.<sup>[50]</sup> When he offered the position to Barnes, Charles reported to the Council that 'Barnes felt himself equal to taking charge of the camels', they 'were delighted with Barnes' and 'Esau could be dispensed with'.<sup>[51]</sup> Barnes took charge of the enlarged herd of camels in the Wimmera from February 1864 until July 1865 – a period of seventeen months.

The Council monitored its valuable animals carefully even if it rejected most of the requests for expenditure. Charles was asked not only to give the Council an account of how many camels had foals, their sexes

and breed, but also 'the council hoped that a correct register was being kept of the ages of the camel foals'.<sup>[52]</sup> It also requested the branding of the camels, including the young ones.<sup>[53]</sup> This was done and the brand was drawn as a triangle with the letters ASV inside the triangle.<sup>[54]</sup> The camels recovered their health and thus reduced calls on the purse of the Acclimatisation Society for oil and wheat.

### Problems Arise at Longerenong Station

On 13 August 1862, before the camels arrived, the Wilson brothers sought permission for the fencing of Longerenong – a wire fence, a novelty in the district and necessary not just for sheep but also for camels. 'The Wilsons could afford to do things with more polish, and their five wire fences criss-crossing the Horsham plains became famous'.<sup>[55]</sup> 'The manager, Mr. Weir, who at one time managed Longerenong Station for [Sir] Samuel Wilson, spoke of camels arriving there and the result was panic amongst the horses, who rushed and broke fences in a mad stampede, and he was left with nothing but the stable hack, nearly mad with terror in a loose box'.<sup>[56]</sup> The stables had twenty-four horses at the time, including the Cobb and Co horses at the Longerenong Homestead changeover.



Sketch by Eugene von Guerard, c. 1868 showing the fences at Longerenong Station. The mansion is shown in the background with Samuel Wilson on horseback. Courtesy of the Dixon Galleries, State Library of NSW.

The manager of Longerenong Station did not appreciate the camels' ability to scatter horses and to break the only wire fences in the district. This aversion to the camels by the working horses made the camels difficult to use, reducing their usefulness to the Wilsons. Charles Wilson 'feared the camels would have to be removed in consequence of the many horses taking fright at them'.<sup>[57]</sup> Some time later, Weir 'insisted on the camels going to Vectis, Alexander Wilson's station'.<sup>[58]</sup>



Eugene von Guerard's sketch of Longerenong Homestead on the banks of the Yarriambiack Creek, c. 1868. Note the size and height of the creek. Courtesy of the Dixon Galleries, State Library of NSW.

When the camels arrived in the Wimmera, there were lush pastures, abundant rainfall and brimming rivers. The camels prospered and multiplied. 'A foal was born in August and another in September of 1863 and another six by December.'<sup>[59]</sup> The camel herd was growing. Seventeen camels had been brought to the district and eight foals were born, making a total of twenty-five camels.

Not all of the camels survived, however. One camel died from the rigours of the expeditions, arriving feeble and almost blind; another two also died. Nonetheless, on 28 April 1863 Charles notified the Council that 'the camels were doing well!'<sup>[60]</sup> Certainly the camels' humps were full; however if a camel's hump is full and heavy, it tends to overbalance. Camels' slippery footpads do not permit them to get a good grip on clay banks, and so they can get bogged, or drown. They are also difficult to lift out of the mud and camels are not built for swimming.

The river crossings were made more difficult in June 1863 by the heavy rains that burst river banks;<sup>[61]</sup> '800-900 sheep were swept down the Wimmera [River]' in the flood.<sup>[62]</sup> Charles notified the Council 'that one of the male Egyptian camels had been drowned in attempting to cross a river'.<sup>[63]</sup> The Egyptian reference suggests that it was one of Coppin's camels from Aden, Egypt, which were reported to have 'bad habits', were undersized, older and more difficult to handle.<sup>[64]</sup>

## Drought Arrives in the Wimmera

As the camels recovered, they were said to be useful on the properties 'as beasts of burden',<sup>[65]</sup> but the size of the herd was now twenty-one. It was also the beginning of a drought. The year 1865 'was a very dry season ... equally as bad as the 1902 drought ... and so severe that sheep were dying in hundreds'.<sup>[66]</sup> In August 1864, Charles Wilson first suggested to the Council 'that in consequence of the want of suitable pasture he should be glad to be released of the charge of the camels early in the ensuing year'<sup>[67]</sup> but the Council decided to leave this request and 'bring it forward at another time'.<sup>[68]</sup> The old question of what to do with the camels had re-emerged. The Acclimatisation Society had nowhere to keep them, as Royal Park was full, with ostriches and alpacas arriving imminently. The food bill for the camels would have been high, and there was no current task for them. Their future continued to be debated by the Council until October 1865.

In January 1865, Charles wrote to the Council 'announcing the death of a female camel'. In reply, the Council noted this news briefly and explained the reason for their communication, which was the intended dispersal of some of the camels to the South Australian Government.<sup>[69]</sup> By now the Council was more interested in giving the camels away than news of their survival.

## Later Expeditions

After receiving the request from Charles Wilson to remove the camels, the Council had to decide what to do with them. Some of the solutions proposed by Council members were creative: 'write to Dr. Mueller and ask whether ... to allow these animals to be located at one of the Police stations'.<sup>[70]</sup> In fact, the Council had already decided to send four pairs to 'Mr. Panton's Pastoral Company and the remainder on terms to ... the South Australian Government'.<sup>[71]</sup> Within seven months, however, Mueller would launch a new expedition, disappoint two wealthy pastoralists, persuade the Council to make all of the camels available to the new expedition, and disappoint the South Australian Government later in May.<sup>[72]</sup> By July 1865 a letter from Charles Wilson to Council confirmed the arrangement: 'fourteen camels had been delivered over to the Leichardt Search party'.<sup>[73]</sup>

Even Mueller could not persuade the Council to keep the remaining herd for other expeditions. He was absent from the meeting of the Acclimatisation Society on 10 October 1865 at which 'a letter was read from Mr JA Panton offering the sum of 50 pounds [each] for the purchase of the camels now in the Wimmera ... to become the absolute property of Mr. Panton'. [74] The Council acted decisively and sold the camels. It did not require any debate on the matter, and the topic was not referred to the agenda of the next meeting. Instead, the camels were sold to Mr Panton 'to go to the northern districts' to 'pastoral holdings between the Murray and Menindee'. [75] Mueller was very disappointed. At the next meeting he 'directed the Secretary to record in the minutes: "Dr Mueller expressed his regret that the camels had been disposed of on the terms stated ... and that he had been prevented to record his dissent by no notice of the final disposal of these animals having appeared in the notice paper"'. [76]

Camels were still reported at Longerenong until Samuel Wilson sold the station in 1874. There was also a story that 'A camel that had been left by Burke on the north bank of the Murray River fourteen years before was captured on Murray Downs Station and taken to Longerenong'. [77]

Duncan McIntyre led the Ladies' Leichardt Expedition of 1865 organised by Dr Mueller. On the published list of members of the expedition were Belooche, the Indian camel driver, and John Barnes, who had taken over the care of the camels on the Wilsons' property. [78] Sadly, by this time there were only twelve camels remaining. [79] Duncan McIntyre died of Gulf fever on 4 June 1866, leaving the camels at Dalgongelly Station.

## Conclusion

When Burke and Wills's state funeral was underway in Melbourne on 23 January 1863, the pastures of the Wimmera were restoring the surviving camels to health. They were valuable animals and were not abandoned after Burke's and Howitt's expeditions. Many returned to the Riverina and Menindee on Panton's pastoral holdings, while fourteen others left on the Leichardt Expedition. But their fate, and that of their sepoy, is another story.

## Endnotes

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- [3] *Argus*, 13 March 1862, p. 4g.
- [4] The issue was raised again at a meeting a month later. See PROV, VPRS 2223/P0, Unit 1, Minute Book, 5 August 1862.
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- [6] *ibid.*, 12 August 1862.
- [7] EJ Welch, *Journal of Victorian Exploring Party, 1861-1862*, State Library of Victoria, MS 13071, Box 2087/7, Item (a). Welch was surveyor on Howitt's relief expeditions.
- [8] PROV, VPRS 2223/P0, Unit 1, Minute Book, 5 August 1862.
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- [10] R Kingston, *Good country for a grant: a history of the Stawell Shire*, Shire of Stawell, 1989, p. 131.
- [11] Thomas Young in *Dennys, Lascelles Ltd., Annual*, 1926, p. 55.
- [12] *Argus*, 16 October 1862, p. 4g.
- [13] PROV, VA 3123, VPRS 8850/P1, Unit 227, Acclimatisation Society Annual Report, 1862-1863.
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- [15] *Australasian*, 27 January 1877.
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- [21] PROV, VPRS 2225/P0, Unit 1, Letter Books Outwards, 6 August 1862, p. 363.
- [22] *Argus*, 11 June 1860, p. 4b.
- [23] *Argus*, 16 October 1862, p. 4g.
- [24] *ibid.*
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- [26] *Argus*, 23 September 1862, p. 5a.
- [27] *ibid.*
- [28] PROV, VPRS 2225/P0, Unit 1, Letter Books Outwards, 30 September 1862, p. 487.

- [29] PROV, VPRS 2223/P0, Unit 1, Minute Book, 5 August 1862.
- [30] See 'McKinlay's Camels', Burke and Wills Web, available at <[http://www.burkeandwills.net.au/Camels/Mckinlays\\_Camels.htm](http://www.burkeandwills.net.au/Camels/Mckinlays_Camels.htm)>, accessed 22 October 2010
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- [33] *Argus*, 20 January 1863, p. 5b.
- [34] W Candy, *Reminiscences of the early Mallee and Wimmera* Warracknabeal Herald Print, 1927, p. 2.
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- [36] PROV, VPRS 2223/P0, Unit 1, Minute Book, 10 February 1863.
- [37] PROV, VPRS 2225/P0, Unit 2, Letter Books Outwards, p. 537.
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- [69] PROV, VPRS 2225/P0, Unit 4, Letter Books Outwards 1864-1868, 19 January 1865, p. 207.
- [70] PROV, VPRS 2223/P0, Unit 3, Minute Book No. 2, 31 January 1865.
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# Stucco and Shopping

## Melbourne's Nineteenth Century Commercial Terraces

Christine Graunas

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'Stucco and Shopping: Melbourne's Nineteenth Century Commercial Terraces', *Provenance: The Journal of Public Record Office Victoria*, issue no. 9, 2010. ISSN 1832-2522. Copyright © Christine Graunas.

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### Abstract

**Melbourne is one of the world's best-preserved Victorian cities, with a wide variety of nineteenth-century buildings. Common but frequently ignored in architectural surveys are the two-storey commercial terraces that line the shopping strips, particularly of the inner suburbs. These buildings, which contribute a great deal to the character of the city, well repay investigation.**

**The present article discusses the structure and decoration of a range of commercial terraces, from the earliest examples in the 1850s with a Georgian character to those of the Boom period of the 1880s that feature extravagant stuccoed façades. Original records at PROV, newspaper advertisements, commissioned histories of inner-city suburbs, and secondary sources have all been drawn on to help identify who the builders and tenants were, and whether the premises were financially viable. The brief overview presented here is intended to raise awareness about this interesting, often neglected feature of our city, and offers suggestions for further areas of research.**

Many factors – historic, geographic, economic – make individual cities unique. Melbourne is no exception, and its oft-noted liveability is due to many things, not least of which is the large number of attractive nineteenth-century buildings that survive. While much has been written about Melbourne's grand public buildings and residences, a modest type of building is surprisingly ignored, yet it is among the most common on our high streets. This is the commercial or 'shopping' terrace – multiple shopfronts with residences over the shops. Such buildings appear in country towns and in the centre of the city, but are most numerous in the early suburbs, which grew at breathtaking speed as Melbourne developed throughout the second half of the century.

This brief survey is not meant to be authoritative. The author simply became interested in these buildings, which are such an important part of our streetscape, but was unable to find answers to questions about them in any one source, although they are mentioned in many references. This may be because the commercial terraces are somewhat taken for granted – they are so common, and they are generally not major public buildings. It is hoped that the information assembled here on their origins, features and some of the people associated with them will spark further interest and bring them more into the awareness of readers.

The holdings of Public Record Office Victoria (PROV) were essential to this article in illuminating the occupants of the buildings, the identities of their builders, and changes in economic conditions; the general collection was also invaluable. A further study, locating and dating individual buildings and mapping the streetscapes, would additionally use the resources of the collection.

## Origins and Style

The Melbourne nineteenth-century commercial terrace is, if not unique, emblematic of Melbourne and has many features not found elsewhere. It owes its development to a number of varied sources.

The terrace structure is more generally associated with houses, but a 'terrace' is simply a row of identical homes (or shops) built with adjoining walls. Usually the term 'terrace' requires three or more units, although 'free standing terrace' is used for single buildings in the terrace form.[1] (The use of the term 'terrace' for small buildings such as two-unit houses or shops seems to be peculiarly Australian.) The obvious advantage of the terrace is that it saves space.

The terrace as we know it developed in England and came to its full glory in the grand terraces of John Nash in the early nineteenth century. There are famous examples of the form in Bath and Edinburgh. These Georgian buildings show a wonderful unity and create an impressive streetscape.

Translated to Australian cities, the terrace was more modest, but showed its British origins; the early architects had generally trained in Britain. In Melbourne, the Royal Terrace in Nicholson Street, Fitzroy (1854-56, attributed to John Gill[2]) is one of the earliest, with simple classical design, but adding the Australian veranda. A more modest example, claimed to be the oldest surviving residential terrace in Melbourne, is the Georgian style Glass Terrace at 64-78 Gertrude Street, Fitzroy, built for Hugh Glass, and generally thought to be designed by David Ross and Charles Webb between 1853 and 1856. The very first terrace houses, mostly in Sydney, were usually single-storey houses joined together, but the two-storey versions developed quickly.



Glass Terrace, Gertrude Street, Fitzroy. Photograph by Edward Terrell.



Crossley's Building, Bourke Street. Photograph by Edward Terrell.

City shopfronts with residences attached for their owners have been around for centuries; they were common in ancient Rome. In the Renaissance, the Italian architect Donato Bramante designed a building known as the House of Raphael (now destroyed) with a row of shops on the ground floor and living quarters above, based on a classical prototype.[3] In Georgian London, rebuilt after the Great Fire, high street shops included rows of three-storey houses with shops on the ground floor; it was a 'cramped mosaic of commercial domesticity, where merchants lived above their counting houses'.[4]

The earliest Australian commercial premises were very modest, business generally being carried out from tents or small weatherboard structures. However, as Sydney, Hobart, and then Melbourne developed, the desire and need for more impressive and durable structures arose. The first commercial terrace in Sydney appears to have been James Underwood's terrace in George Street (1826).[5] This was a classic Georgian terrace with shops, only two storeys tall, like Bramante's, rather than three or more like English residential terraces or most commercial premises.

In Melbourne, some very early commercial terraces survive. One is Crossley's Building (1848-49), on Bourke Street.[6] The builder is not known, although the first occupier of Crossley's was the butcher William Crossley. The building shows the standard form that was to be common throughout the city – a row of shops with residential premises above, in a basically simple brick terrace building.

While other retail structures such as the department store and arcade developed throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century, the commercial terrace would become extraordinarily popular, occupying the primary positions for retail premises on the developing high streets of Melbourne's growing suburbs.

Stylistically, the commercial terrace follows the development of other buildings, although it is useful to note, as scholars have pointed out, that the use of historic styles was so widely and freely applied in the nineteenth century that it is very risky to try to date a building by its style, and also that trends in commercial building architecture changed with even more rapidity than those of domestic dwellings.[7] Of course, many of the comments below in regard to style and construction apply to many buildings of the period, not just to the shops, which are distinguished from terrace houses primarily by their interior structure and façade; but the intent is simply to describe the elements that did go into the making of these buildings.

Nineteenth-century architecture is characterised by its eclecticism as well as its references to earlier periods; and Australian architecture tended to follow the trends in Britain, although frequently a few steps behind. There were, however, also American and other influences, and Australian architects and builders added their own touches, particularly towards the end of the century in the period of 'Marvellous Melbourne' and heading towards Federation. The veranda appears to be an Australian addition, but based on intercolonial exchange.[8]

While commercial terraces can be classified by style, and the trend is towards more ornate styles as the century progresses, no distinct lines can be drawn. One type merges gradually into another, and earlier types appear synchronously with later ones. Simply for descriptive purposes, it is possible to identify three general styles or periods: Early, Standard or 'Classical', and Late ('Boom'). One source refers to Regency, Early Victorian and Boom; various conservation studies to Early Victorian or Victorian; and other writers use the terms 'free classical' and 'Victorian filigree'.[9] However, in terms of commercial terraces it is simplest to refer to the Early terraces of the 1850s; the various Standard examples which range through the 1860s, 1870s and early 1880s; and the Late or Boom period of the later 1880s until the economic crash of 1892. Georgian terraces exist, but primarily in New South Wales and Tasmania prior to 1850, and therefore are not relevant to this article, although there are some Georgian warehouses, such as those on Queen Street; and the Georgian influence does persist (see below).

(At this point it should be mentioned that in the majority of commercial terraces, the ground-floor shopfronts are not original. Most have been 'renovated' several times; verandas have been removed. Therefore it is difficult to discuss them stylistically, and the discussion here will be primarily regarding the first-storey façades of the buildings. However, shopfronts will be discussed to some degree further on.)

Early commercial terraces are basically simple buildings without much ornamentation – symmetrical brick or stone buildings of a Georgian style, although of a later date, with the addition of some mouldings, lintels, and possibly classical orders and/or rustication on the ground floor. There may be simple parapets but no large pediments, and verandas may exist. There are generally simple glazed double-hung windows on the first storey, two to a bay. The earliest Melbourne commercial terraces are of this type, such as Crossley's, discussed above. Another example is the building at 61-67 Errol Street, North Melbourne, which appears to have been built in 1852-54. According to the present owner, it holds the longest established pharmacy in Victoria, and once housed a fish and chips shop as well. Charles Atkins, chemist, held the premises in 1854. The building has a simple parapet, rusticated pilasters, window mouldings and small urns, with no other decoration; the parapet may have been added later. The small plaque reading 'Established 1853' is off-centre, probably referring to the pharmacy in that portion of the building.[10]

In the *Standard* or *Classical* period, various additional features start to appear to add interest to the basic façade, such as larger parapets, small pediments, string courses, console brackets, some modillions, and more ornate urns and window mouldings. The familiar shopfront with a veranda decorated by iron lace occurs. Building surfaces are rendered. The effect of better examples is of a quiet classicism.[11]

A number of examples exist in Smith Street shops in Fitzroy from the 1860s and 1870s: the 'W LAND' (Welland?) Buildings (1875) with pediments and details on its pilasters; a two-bay terrace from 1867 with vermiculated quoins, brackets supporting a small parapet and square lintels; and a four-bay building from 1869 with a simple small pediment with the date and square window mouldings. While these buildings are very modest and rather battered, they do show a tendency for more decoration than in the earliest Georgian style terraces.



Welland Buildings, Smith Street, Fitzroy. Photograph by Edward Terrell.

A later example and a common type is the building at 360-368 Chapel Street, South Yarra, which has a balustraded parapet, string course, pilasters with console brackets, and window mouldings with keystones; one original shopfront remains. The building is on the site of Prahran's first church, which was demolished in 1883, logically the date of the building's construction.[12] This building shows the Victorian classical influences of the time, but not the exuberant decoration of the Boom period, which was to follow in a very few years.



Detail of 360 Chapel Street. The paintwork is unfortunate. Photograph by Edward Terrell.

Finally we see the *Boom* style, influenced by developments in Europe such as Charles Garnier's opera house in Paris. This is of course the period of 'Marvellous Melbourne', when the city was flush with funds and civic pride. Two international exhibitions were held, in 1880 and 1888, demonstrating Melbourne's confidence in itself. The population had risen to nearly half a million, the suburbs were developing rapidly, and a building boom unlike anything seen before or since was in progress. In 1895-90, nine or ten buildings were completed each week.[13] The architects and builders of the time wished to embody the current spirit in their buildings; style and decoration should demonstrate the glory, success and grandness of the city. The chosen method was, quite literally, to throw everything they had into their work. The developing high streets of the new suburbs were a perfect place to construct new commercial premises, and these are where most examples of this period are still to be found.

The closest parallel to the Boom style is Mannerism, in which architects broke down and made free with the prevalent classical forms. The influence of the Italian Renaissance architect Palladio is present, but Melbourne's builders and architects used any element they liked on their façades without much concern as to balance – architraves, columns, pilasters, balustrades, pediments, loggias, plus decorative masks, swags, ornamental keystones, consoles, string courses, urns, balls and various textures such as vermiculation. Sometimes there are also impressed designs, and toothed detailing around windows appears in some buildings; for instance, North Melbourne has quite a few examples. Many other ornaments are possible. A building on Victoria Street in North Melbourne has console brackets upside down over the veranda location, as do others around the city. The effects are sometimes wonderful and sometimes rather terrifying, but overall the Boom buildings are very characteristic of the Melbourne of the time, and we are fortunate that as many remain as do. The decorative features could be purchased wholesale from their manufacturers, and builders could ornament their basic buildings however their fancy took them (see below).

Boom terraces appear on all the major high streets of the period: for example, the Bleasby Buildings (1885) on Bridge Road, Richmond; Kinnaird's Buildings (1891) on Johnston Street, Collingwood; the Gladstone Buildings on St George's Road, North Fitzroy (1889); Conway's Buildings on Chapel Street, Prahran (1890). There are many others. All include features such as elaborate window design, detailed string courses, elaborate pediments and various other decorative elements.

The Gladstone Buildings include, logically, a sculpture of Gladstone.[14] The buildings become more and more elaborate as the end of the decade approaches; then, with the economic crash beginning in 1892, building slows and then nearly ceases altogether.



Kinnaird's Buildings, Johnston Street, Collingwood. Photograph by Edward Terrell.

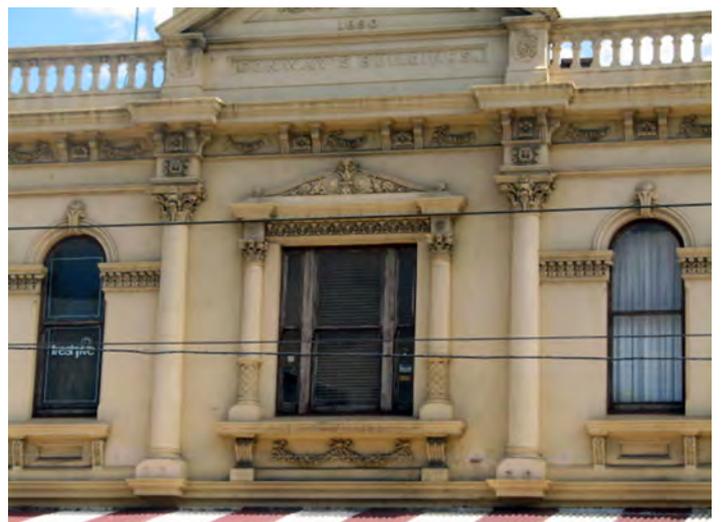


Detail of Kinnaird's Buildings. Photograph by Edward Terrell.



Conway's Buildings, Chapel Street, Prahran. Photograph by Edward Terrell.

After 1900, and with Federation, things improved and building began again. The commercial terrace reappeared, with new features such as exposed brick rather than the ubiquitous stucco facing that characterised the earlier periods; the Stanford Block on Bridge Road, Richmond is an example of this. [15] Construction of commercial terraces continued throughout the Art Deco period of the twenties and thirties, and the basic principle is of course still in use today. The nineteenth century, however, was the heyday of this style of building.



Detail of Conway's Buildings. Photograph by Edward Terrell.



Stanford Block, Bridge Road, Richmond. Photograph by Edward Terrell.

## The Builders and the Buildings

The first fifty years or so of Melbourne's building history have many interesting features. In an incredibly short time the settlement grew from nothing to a major city; this in spite of shortages of skilled workers and difficulties in obtaining materials. The builders of Melbourne were determined to create a city to awe and inspire, and largely succeeded. Shortcuts were taken where possible, though, and when it came to small commercial premises builders certainly took advantage of these.

Most qualified architects had been born and trained in Britain, and generally worked on the larger civic projects. Graeme Davison describes the structure of the building industry in the more speculative sectors as either:

Architect-builder -> Subcontractor -> 'Improver'  
 or  
 Speculator-builder -> Architect-draftsman ->  
 Subcontractor -> 'Improver'.

According to Davison, in 1891 there were 470 architects in Melbourne, and 1041 builders (as well as 654 plasterers), but 'architects' could vary widely in their qualifications.[16]

Many designers and builders, therefore, probably had little training in architecture, and very likely would have relied on manuals and instruction books. One compilation of sources available to early Australian builders lists guides to carpentry, brickwork, concrete manufacturing and use, chimneys, foundations, glass, iron work, gas fitting, plumbing, and all manner of

building skills.[17] For example, *The builder's jewel*, by Batty and Thomas Langley, first published in 1741 and reprinted throughout the nineteenth century, includes plates of doorways, urns, Greek orders, and similar details.[18] Patterns for most features can be found in the builders' and architects' guides, especially those of the Classical period, including balustrades, urns, arches, and of course columns and pilasters.

Work was put out to tender, sometimes for the entire project or for certain aspects only. Large numbers of advertisements appeared in the *Age* and the *Argus* as well as in other publications such as the *Australian builder and contractor's news*. For example, in the *Age* in January 1888, CJ Polain (the name appears in variant spellings in some sources when handwritten), architect of Footscray, 'invites tenders for the erection of two and three story brick shops'. There are also tender offers for carpenters, masons, plasterers and plumbers, for various buildings.

Some builders became very successful. Thomas Cockram, for instance, arrived in Australia in the 1850s and worked as a bricklayer. By 1867 he is listed in the directories as 'Thomas Cockram, builder'. He established premises on Peel Street in Hotham (North Melbourne) and later in O'Connell Street. As a builder he tendered for schools and railway stations. His son followed him into the business, and by the 1880s Cockram and Co. was responsible for some of the major buildings in Melbourne, such as the Princess Theatre and the Lygon Buildings in Carlton. The firm still continues today.[19]

While some actual architects seem to have been responsible for only a building or two, others were hugely successful. E Twentyman or his firm Twentyman & Askew is listed on 76 applications to build for houses, shops and other buildings between 1878 and 1914 (although only four of them are after 1890).[20] Since many applications to build do not list architects, however, it is difficult to trace the success or lack of it of various architect-builders, although this would be an interesting project.

The commercial buildings themselves were basic in their construction.[21] They would be based on a foundation of bluestone and aggregate, sand and/or cement, dug by hand. The basic building material was brick; in 1885 there were 227 brickyards in greater Melbourne, according to the *Victorian year-book*. While early bricks had often been soft, good quality bricks were being made by the 1880s, and by the end of the decade the Hoffman Patent Steam Brick Co. was turning out more than forty million bricks a year.[22]

Some buildings had a cavity wall, but most terraces were solid brick, possibly three layers thick on the bottom storey, two on the top. Lime mortar was used, with the lime brought in on drays, dumped at the site, mixed, and then left for a week to cool. This type of mortar set well, and cement was not used. Portland cement appeared only later, and was initially imported.

Early roofs were generally of slate. Iron was used for verandas (see below) and for later roofs, especially after the 1870s when it became more widely available.[23] Interiors were render and set (plaster), sometimes with a dado, and floors were generally of wood. The basic structure was simple; but this was countered by the ornament on the exterior.

The poor quality of early bricks, plus the desire of the builders to make the buildings look impressive, that is, look like stone, meant that until very late in the nineteenth century nearly all commercial buildings were faced with render: stucco of lime and sand. (On some buildings, the stucco was lined to simulate stone.) Decoration was used freely, as mentioned above, although only on the façades; sides were left undecorated, unless the building was on a corner and sometimes not even then. While decoration could have been carved or cast by craftsmen (some from Italy, according to somewhat unsubstantiated legend), the increased desire for ornament gave birth to a new trade – the ‘architectural modeller’, who cast decorative ornaments in a factory for both interior and exterior use. The exterior ornament was generally of ‘artificial stone’, or pressed cement. The use of modellers meant a drop in price, which probably made such ornamentation even more popular. Stucco was not universally loved, however; ‘N.B.’, in the *Argus* of 29 July 1880, refers to ‘Melbourne’s greatest architectural curse – stucco’.[24]

Modellers’ advertisements appear frequently in the papers of the time; the *Victorian contractors’ and builders’ pricebook* as early as 1859 lists:

J Sullivan, Architectural Modeller

Soffits, Centre Flowers, Corinthian & Ionic Plaster Capitals, Vases, Balusters, Scrolls, Wreaths, Swags of Fruit, Chimney Pots, etc.

‘Improved artificial stone’[25]

The present-day firm of Picton Hopkins had its origins in 1857; John Hopkins, a Welsh plasterer, came to Melbourne in 1854. The *Sands & McDougall’s Melbourne and suburban directory* for 1888 lists ‘Hopkins, Morgan & Co.’ under ‘modellers, moulders, figure makers and ornamental workers’, and M Hopkins under ‘plasterers’. The firm is still owned and run by the same family. Much of Melbourne’s ornamental interior plaster work and

exterior decorative work of the Victorian period (and later) came from this company. The firm had a catalogue known as ‘the Green Book’. A copy from the 1920s in the collection of the State Library of Victoria lists the company’s work as including the Princess and Regent Theatres and the Melbourne Athenaeum.[26] Ornaments that could be ordered included urns, brackets, masks, and acanthus mouldings. The ornaments were generally cast in the factory (although some work was done on site), and then attached to the buildings with metal dowels and a slurry of sand and cement.[27] The



relatively small number of firms supplying such ornaments may explain why we see the same figures on so many buildings.

Typical keystone mask (Ann’s Terraces, Greville Street, Prahran). Photograph by Edward Terrell.

The *Victorian year-book for 1885-86* lists, in addition to 43 stone and marble carvers, one ‘artificial stone’ manufacturer, two statuary works, and ten architectural modellers. Sands & McDougall list fifteen names under ‘modellers, moulders, ornamental metal workers and figure makers’ in 1885, some of whom also designated themselves as architects. A builder could simply decide on the ornaments desired, and order them from one of these suppliers.

Prices were fairly standard. Mayes’s *Australian builders’ price-book* of 1886 lists the following:

Stone			
<i>Ionic capital for</i>	£	s	d
6-inch column	1	14	0
9-inch column	2	10	0
12-inch column	3	10	0
<i>Corinthian capital for</i>			
6-inch column	3	0	0
9-inch column	5	0	0
12-inch column	8	0	0
Mask			
4 inch		6	
6 inch		12	
9 inch		16	

Modelling and casting	Modelling in clay (s)	Plaster casting (s)
Ionic capital 12"	80	40
Corinthian capital 12"	100	60
Modillion, enriched 4"	20	2
Rosette	8	1
Head on keystone 12"	18	10
Portland cement stucco pilasters, friezes and pedestals, per foot – labour 9d, materials 9d[28]		

Other prices are also listed. Plaster casting was less expensive than stone or clay; and cement castings were even cheaper. The popularity of cast cement continued to increase due to the low cost and the ever greater desire for ornament.

The decoration of the façades of commercial terraces is of course primarily on the upper storeys. The ground floor is occupied by the shopfront. Many of these, as mentioned previously, have been completely destroyed. Fortunately, however, a number have been preserved, which we can still enjoy.

The early shopfront made a great use of glass, to display goods and to bring light into the shop. Italian glass was imported for early shops, and plate glass soon became widely available.[29] The glass was set in timber mullions. The door was frequently set back, with perhaps a tiled entry floor. Around and between the glass fronts we find cement pillars; sometimes decorative tiles or mirrors were added. Over doors and at the tops of the windows decorative glass was used. In earlier shopfronts this would be etched glass; in later examples, into the early 1900s, when timber mullions were replaced by metal, leaded stained glass began to appear. The shopfronts themselves are an area of great interest, beyond the scope of this article; the above simply touches on some of their features.

The vast majority of shops would have had a veranda. Unfortunately, many of these were removed in the 1950s or earlier; a few have been restored. However, a number of original verandas remain – Rathdowne Street in Carlton, for example, has some fine ones, as does the Queen Victoria Market. The classic veranda had metal supports with the crest of the city of Melbourne on them and an ironwork frieze, although wooden supports were also used. The veranda was covered with a corrugated iron roof, sometimes striped to resemble the original canvas awnings.



Shopfronts, Ann's Terrace, Greville Street, Prahran. Original verandas are missing. Photograph by Edward Terrell.



Shopfronts, Gladstone Buildings, St George's Road, North Fitzroy. Photograph by Edward Terrell.

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The shopfronts were designed, as shopfronts will always be, to entice the passerby to the wonders of the goods inside. The nineteenth-century Melburnian, especially in the later decades, was anxious to acquire the latest thing to demonstrate sophistication and success; and the merchants and builders were happy to oblige.

### **The Owners, the Merchants and the Community**

Who were the men behind Melbourne's commercial terraces? Each building required an architect of some sort, a builder, and someone to pay the bills. As we have seen, the line between builder and architect was at times very thin; similarly, builders could be contractors or could be building for themselves. The goal could be either an investment, with hoped-for returns from rents, or the building could be resold.

For example, in the 1880s the *Age* carried advertisements such as 'Splendid shops, Chapel-St. Grand Dwellings. From 45s. to 50s. ... S. Yarra', and 'Three two-story brick shops and dwellings [in Flemington Road, North Melbourne], each containing shop and five rooms; let at 51s. per week'.<sup>[30]</sup> Whatever the case, the owner/financier of the project would have expected a good return for his money.

Alexander Kemp, for example, who came to Victoria from Scotland in 1857,<sup>[31]</sup> was a builder and contractor who is shown in the records as the builder for several shops in Carlton in the 1880s, although he was not the owner. He is listed, however, as owner and builder of a shop in Rathdowne Street, as are William Perry, G Ford, and several others.<sup>[32]</sup>

Builders such as Kemp could specialise in a certain area of town; the owners also had their favourite districts. In Prahran, Francis Conway owned a number of buildings in Chapel Street.<sup>[33]</sup> Thomas Kilpatrick owned buildings in Greville Street, and 'Ann's Terrace' is named after his wife.<sup>[34]</sup>

While we can assume that in the boom years ownership of commercial buildings was a profitable undertaking, especially in the expanding suburbs, after the crash of 1892 many owners must have found their income severely reduced. The Prahran Rate Books from 1893-94 show a number of shops and residences listed as 'empty'.<sup>[35]</sup> The National Bank manager in East Collingwood stated even in late 1891, as economic troubles started to appear, that 'Empty houses and shops were to be seen on all sides'.<sup>[36]</sup>

In better days, however, the commercial terrace shops and residences were filled with the suppliers of all of Melbourne's needs. Conway's shops in Prahran included drapers, tailors, caterers, jewellers, hatters and bootmakers.<sup>[37]</sup> Agents of various sorts, printers, photographers, booksellers, furniture dealers, tobacconists and tearooms were common. An *Argus* advertisement from 1888 lists 'A Grand Opportunity for drapers, boot dealers, grocers, ironmongers, chemists, and others'.<sup>[38]</sup> There were few types of retailer or tradesman who did not occupy such shops. One study lists 30 per cent of households as 'commercial' in 1891.<sup>[39]</sup> This would have meant hundreds of small shops and shopkeepers.

The shopkeepers were hard-working. Shops were generally open from 8 am to 6 pm on weekdays and 8 am to 1 pm on Saturdays by the end of the century, and had been open even longer hours previously.<sup>[40]</sup> Probably few shopkeepers could afford assistants; most businesses were run by a single proprietor or were family concerns. RN Twopeny in *Town life in Australia* estimated a shopkeeper's income in the late 1800s (presumably after business expenses) to be in the range of 300-400 pounds per year,<sup>[41]</sup> or roughly six to eight pounds per week. Graeme Davison estimates that this places the shopkeeper below the professional but above the artisan in terms of income.<sup>[42]</sup>

The newspaper advertisements for shops to let tell us the costs of renting premises. In 1888, these range from the Melrose shops mentioned above at 51 shillings per week, which must have been quite grand, to 'Shop, Richmond, near Burnley station; dwelling, 3 rooms; 12s'. Another lists 'Shop, Richmond, suitable general store; 4 rooms, bath, gas, copper; 17s. 6d'.<sup>[43]</sup> A five-room shop was going for 30 shillings. If Twopeny's estimate of income is correct, the expense of a shop to the shopkeeper, particularly considering that it included housing as well as the shop, was not excessive. Obviously, of course, income and cost would vary depending on the type of shop and its location. Some trades were more profitable than others. Not surprisingly, women's trades, such as that of dressmaker, were less lucrative, even though many women were in trade: on one North Melbourne street in 1885, one-third of the shops were run by women, including groceries, a general store, and fancy goods merchants.<sup>[44]</sup>

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The premises themselves were comfortable. Plans in the collection of the State Library of Victoria for one two-unit shop and residence, for example,[45] show a dining room to the rear of the shop with the kitchen and scullery behind on the ground floor, and three bedrooms plus drawing room on the upper floor. The toilet (on the pan system) would of course be separate at the back. Upstairs there was also a bathroom – tin baths were common.[46] The terraces had gas light and water, as the advertisements indicate, with a woodstove for cooking. While the lack of windows on the sides tends to make terraces dark, the ‘tailback’ design lets more light enter the rear of the home. An interior wooden stairway, often quite elegant, led from the ground to the first floor.

Nevertheless, life could be a struggle for shopkeepers. According to one writer, ‘the small shopkeepers who rented or built the stucco buildings which still line many suburban streets were a type all their own, whose limited horizons and extreme miserliness were essential to their survival’. The same source also claims that the small shopkeeper was ‘regarded as working with his hands and therefore not eligible to the ranks of social leadership’,[47] although if a shopkeeper managed to purchase premises through hard work, as some did, this could be a step up.

However, although shopkeepers may have struggled and were not regarded as of the upper crust, keeping a shop in a high street terrace, at least prior to the depression of the 1890s, seems to have been a decent living. It is also hard to believe that in the Melbourne of the day at least some shopkeepers were not welcomed and valued members of the communities they served.

## Today

Some of Melbourne’s nineteenth-century commercial terraces are now gone and some are in a sad state of repair, but many are still in full use. Shopkeepers, however, less frequently live over their shops; and since most shops had and still have internal stairways, the upstairs living premises are often unused. In a city with an acute housing shortage, this seems a terrible waste. Perhaps a program could be devised to aid in converting these upper levels into flats, providing more living space plus income for the owners of the buildings.

In any case, Melbourne’s nineteenth-century commercial terraces continue to be a vital part of our city. They provide space for the huge number of small independent retail outlets, restaurants and cafes that help to make life in Melbourne so pleasant. Their loss would greatly change the city’s appearance and character. It is hoped that this brief overview will encourage awareness and appreciation of these buildings, so that they will be maintained and preserved for the future. Much more work could be done.

## Endnotes

[1] Definition from B Turner, *The Australian terrace house*, Angus & Robertson, Pymble, NSW, 1995, p. 12.

[2] R Apperly, R Irving & P Reynolds, *Pictorial guide to identifying Australian architecture*, Angus & Robertson, Pymble, NSW, 1994, p. 47.

[3] See P Murray, *Architecture of the Italian Renaissance*, new revised edn, Thames & Hudson, London, 1986, p. 128.

[4] J Summerson, *Georgian London*, Barrie & Jenkins, London, 1988, pp. 37, 41.

[5] Turner, p. 19.

[6] P Goad, *Melbourne architecture*, Watermark Press, Sydney, 1999, p. 19.

[7] T Howells & C Morris, *Terrace houses in Australia*, Lansdowne, The Rocks, NSW, 1999, p. 85.

[8] *Sir Banister Fletcher’s A History of Architecture*, ed. D Cruickshank, 20th edn, Architectural Press, London, 1996, p. 1278.

[9] See for instance Howell & Morris, and Apperley et al.

[10] M de Lacy Lowe, *See Melbourne by tram*, New Holland, Frenchs Forest, NSW, 2001, p. 149; G Butler, *North and West Melbourne Conservation Study*, Melbourne City Council, 1983.

[11] Modillions and console brackets are types of decorative supports for various elements. Vermiculation means that the feature is textured so that it appears ‘eaten by worms’.

[12] See under ‘History’ in Wikipedia article ‘Chapel Street, Melbourne’, available at <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chapel\\_Street,\\_Melbourne](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chapel_Street,_Melbourne)>, accessed 22 October 2010

[13] M Lewis, *Melbourne: the city’s history and development*, 2nd edn, City of Melbourne, 1995, p. 80.

[14] William Ewart Gladstone, British Prime Minister on four occasions between 1868 and 1894.

- [15] This building appears in a 1908 photo in John O'Connor et al., *Richmond Conservation Study*, 2 vols, City of Richmond, 1985, vol. 1, p. 100 (Fig. 4.70). This study is available on the City of Yarra website, available at <<http://www.yarracity.vic.gov.au/Planning-Building/Studies-Strategies-and-Guidelines/Heritage-Studies/Richmond-Vol-1/>>, accessed 22 October 2010.
- [16] G Davison, *The rise and fall of Marvellous Melbourne*, 2nd edn, Melbourne University Press, 2004, pp. 89, 86.
- [17] S Bathgate, *Information sources available to early Australian builders*, the author, Bungwahl, NSW, 1986.
- [18] B & T Langley, *The builder's jewel; or, the youth's instructor, and workman's remembrancer*, printed for R Ware, London, 1741.
- [19] See M Turner Shaw, *Builders of Melbourne, the Cockrams and their contemporaries, 1853-1972*, Cypress Books, Melbourne, 1972.
- [20] PROV, VA 511 Melbourne, VPRS 9462/P3, Index to architects named in notices of intention to build (Burchett index, microfiche), Units 24 and 25.
- [21] Special thanks are due for this section to Mr Tom Carson of Heritage Restoration Company; and also to Mr David Cook, builder. See also JM Freeland, *Architecture in Australia: a history*, FW Cheshire, Melbourne, 1968, chapters on Victorian architecture, particularly pp. 143, 146.
- [22] Davison, *The rise and fall of Marvellous Melbourne*, p. 59.
- [23] See Lewis et al., p. 79.
- [24] Quoted in J Grant & G Serle, *The Melbourne scene 1803-1956*, Melbourne University Press, 1957, p. 177.
- [25] C Mayes, *The Victorian contractors' and builders' pricebook*, the author, Melbourne, 1859.
- [26] Picton Hopkins & Son, *General catalogue of decorative plaster designs*, Picton Hopkins, Richmond, Vic., [c. 1920].
- [27] Information obtained from the Picton Hopkins website, available at <<http://www.pictonhopkins.com.au/about/index.htm>>, accessed 22 October 2010, and from a personal telephone interview with Mr Picton Andrew Hopkins of Picton Hopkins, July 2010, to whom thanks are due for his assistance. See also A Sutherland, *Victoria and its metropolis: past and present*, 2 vols, McCarron, Bird, Melbourne, 1888, p. 643.
- [28] C Mayes, *The Australian builders' price-book*, 5th edn, G Robertson, Melbourne, 1886.
- [29] W Bate, 'How did people live in Victoria a century ago – life in 19th century Victoria', six talks on ABC radio; Talk 5, Marvellous Melbourne, broadcast 17 October 1966 (transcript in State Library of Victoria).
- [30] *Age*, 2 April 1888, p. 2b and 19 October 1889, p. 6h.
- [31] Sutherland, *Victoria and its metropolis*, p. 644.
- [32] PROV, VA 511 Melbourne, VPRS 9463/P3 Notices of intention to build (Burchett Index, microfiche), Unit 129, 1881; Units 146 to 149, 1886.
- [33] PROV, VA 2491 Prahran II, VPRS 2344/P Prahran Rate Books (microfilm), Units 24 & 25, 1887-88.
- [34] Nigel Lewis & Associates, *Prahran conservation study: identification of buildings and areas of major significance*, [1983], p. DC-26.
- [35] PROV, VPRS 2344/P, Units 34 & 35, 1893-94.
- [36] Quoted in B Carroll, *Melbourne: an illustrated history*, Lansdowne, Melbourne, 1972, p. 74.
- [37] PROV, VPRS 2344/P, Units 24 & 25.
- [38] *Argus*, 12 March 1888, p. 10d.
- [39] A Larson, *Growing up in Melbourne: family life in the late nineteenth century*, Australian National University, Canberra, Demography Program, 1994, p. 210.
- [40] M Cannon, *Life in the cities*, Australia in the Victorian age: 3, Thomas Nelson (Australia), West Melbourne, 1975, p. 283.
- [41] Cited in Davison, p. 174.
- [42] *ibid.*, p. 253.
- [43] *Age*, 4 January 1888, p. 3i.
- [44] W Roberts, *Molesworth Street: a North Melbourne neighbourhood*, Annals of Hotham: 3, Hotham History Project, North Melbourne, 2002.
- [45] Picture collection of the State Library of Victoria, WD SHO 40-1, 'Two-storied shops for R Walters, Cnr Glenferrie Road & Liddiard Street, Hawthorn' (exhibited in 'Til you drop: Shopping, a Melbourne history', State Library of Victoria, December 2009 – October 2010).
- [46] Freeland, *Architecture in Australia*, p. 131.
- [47] Cannon, pp. 200, 211.

# Victoria Police Involvement in the Infant Life Protection Act 1893-1908

Helen D Harris OAM

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'Victoria Police Involvement in the Infant Life Protection Act 1893-1908', *Provenance: The Journal of Public Record Office Victoria*, issue no. 9, 2010. ISSN 1832-2522. Copyright © Helen Harris.

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## Abstract

**This paper looks at the involvement of Victoria Police, from 1893 to 1908, in registering and supervising women who came under the control of the *Infant Life Protection Act of 1890*. The Act was established to regulate 'baby farming', a system in which single mothers would pay other women to look after their infants, while they themselves went back to work to earn enough income for both to live on. It points the researcher to a collection of relatively unknown and previously untapped sources, which provide intimate detail of the lives of working-class women who became 'nurses' and of the mothers who used their services.**

Legislation enacted in nineteenth-century Victoria, in attempts to both assist and monitor the destitute, reflect the local situation of a colony of immigrants. In the United Kingdom destitute people were assisted to return to the parish of their birth, where local officials would provide shelter and food, more often than not in the shape of admittance to a workhouse.[1] This practice did not exist in Victoria, and so a variety of actions were taken by the colonial government, particularly with reference to destitute children. A good description of the various Acts passed in this regard can be found in *Neglected and criminal: foundations of child welfare legislation in Victoria*,[2] while *Single mothers and their children: disposal, punishment and survival in Australia*[3] is the most comprehensive work on the subject. This paper is an attempt to bring to the notice of researchers a vast collection of relatively unknown material that can be used to learn more about the lives of working-class women and their children, and, incidentally, the attitudes of law enforcers of the day.

The *Public Health Amendment Act* of 1883[4] was the first attempt by the Victorian government to regulate 'baby farming', the system where mothers of (mainly illegitimate) infants and small children paid other women a small weekly fee to house and feed their children in the carer's home. While the Act itself came into operation on 5 November 1883, Part 3, relating to *Infant Life Protection*, was not to come into effect until six months later, presumably to allow for the preliminary documentation to be organised. Under the Act, a woman who wished to look after children under the age of two years had to apply to register her house with the local Board of Health, and, if successful, keep a register or roll book of the details of the infants under her control. The local Board had also to keep a record containing the names of those applying to register a house, and a description of the premises. The Board had the power to refuse to register a house if they were not satisfied that it was suitable for the care of infants, and to strike out the registration if they were subsequently unsatisfied with the manner in which the care of the infant/s was conducted. There was no mention in the Act of a requirement for regular inspections of either the houses or the infants in them.

The death of any child in a registered house had to be notified to the nearest coroner within twenty-four hours, and an inquest was mandatory, unless a medical certificate certifying the cause of death could be produced. Burial of a child was illegal without the necessary coroner's or justice's certificate.

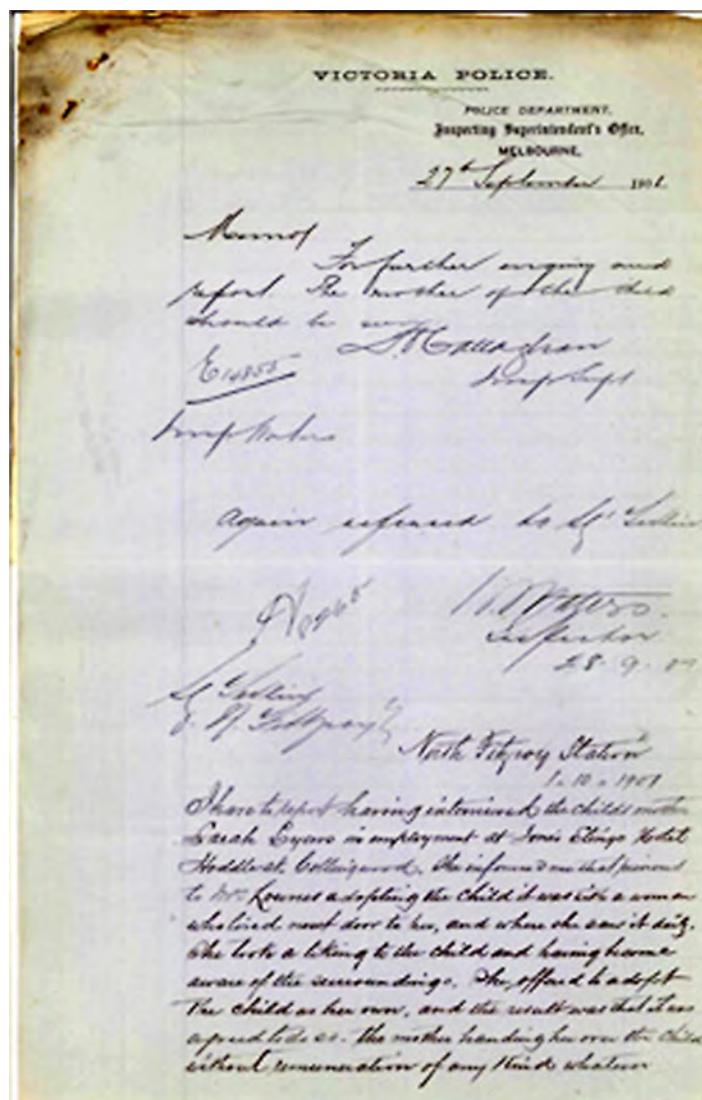
Failure to comply with the provisions of the Act meant a penalty of up to six months' gaol or £5. Interestingly, although the baby farmers or 'nurses' were overwhelmingly women, the Act used the male pronoun 'he' to describe them.

In July 1890 a further *Health Act* was passed.[5] The only change brought by this Act, with regard to the *Infant Life Protection* section (Part 7), was that henceforth local councils would be responsible for the registration and supervision of the system (this was an early attempt at cost shifting with which present-day local governments are all too familiar). Later that year a separate *Infant Life Protection Act* was passed by parliament, coming into effect on 31 January 1891, and superseding the earlier legislations.[6] In the new Act several conditions were tightened, financial penalties were increased to a maximum of £25, and the Chief Commissioner of Police was given the overall responsibility for registration and supervision of the scheme.

As always, however, the devil was in the detail, and as the *Argus* newspaper pointed out in November 1892, the Act was 'practically a dead letter' because no regulations prescribing how the Act was to be implemented had ever been passed by government.[7] While the editor was pleased that the authorities said they were at last preparing the required regulations, he pointed to recent events in Sydney, where a baby farmer had been implicated in the deaths of a number of children, as a cause for urgent action in Victoria. Two months later he asked pointedly, 'How much longer is the public to wait?'[8] The answer was shortly forthcoming, with the regulations being gazetted on 9 January 1893.[9] Under these regulations, registers of premises used by nurses were to be kept at major police stations: Russell Street in Melbourne, and in thirty country towns.[10]

The number of infants who could be taken in by a nurse depended on the available floor space of a house, fifty square feet being the minimum requirement. Any house could be inspected 'from time to time as occasion may require'. A special form was to be completed by the nurses when applying for registration. It recorded the name, marital status, occupation and address of the applicant, and included a column in which to list the people supplying references. Details of any child in the applicant's care were to be listed, including its name and age, as well as the name of the person from whom she had received the child, and whether it was nursed (that is, wet-nursed), maintained or adopted.

The police department was to supply a roll book to each person registered under the Act, in which the names of all the children who were taken in was recorded, as well as the date of their departure and the manner in which they left. The book was to be returned to the department when the nurse retired. Each nurse had to renew her registration yearly, every December.



Memo dated 27 September 1901 written by Victoria Police constable reporting on the welfare of an adopted child, PROV, VPRS 807/P0 Inward Correspondence Files, Unit 160, File P7752.

On 6 September 1893, police arrested Frances Knorr, née Thwaites, a Victorian baby farmer, and charged her with the murders of three infants whose bodies were found buried in the backyards of houses she had occupied in Brunswick. Knorr was subsequently tried, found guilty and hanged.[11]

Although Frances Knorr was not registered as a nurse under the Act, police command decided that the house and children of every registered nurse in the state should be inspected immediately, and a memo to this effect was issued to all police districts.[12] Each police district contained a number of police stations, and each station was instructed to provide the details of homes and children.

Some police simply reported the number of registered nurses and the children they had: for example, Geelong had four nurses; Hamilton had two nurses with eight illegitimate children, but only named one of them. The North-East District and Benalla, Daylesford, Echuca, Port Fairy and Warrnambool stations reported that there were no registered nurses there. Other police went into great detail about the nurses, their homes, and the children boarding with them. The records thus produced are the only known surviving listing of registered nurses and the children in their care in this early period of the Act (all names have been extracted and reproduced on a webpage – see below).

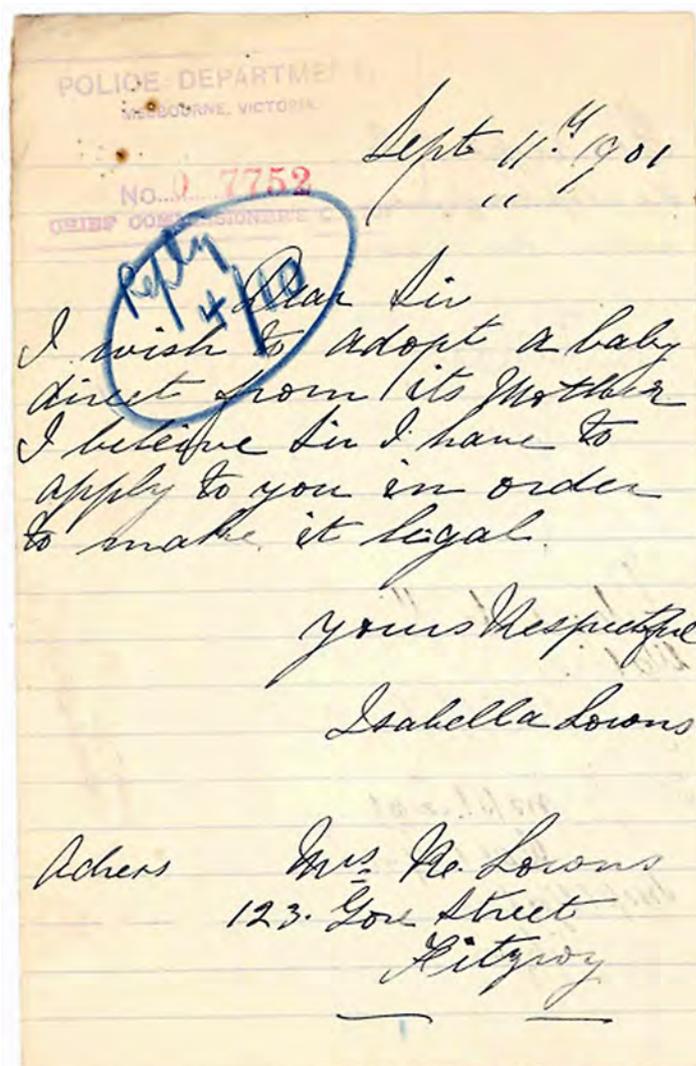
Some institutions were exempt from the Act, and could give infants to nurses who were not obliged to register. These institutions – the Victorian Infant Asylum in East Melbourne; the Salvation Army Maternity Home in North Fitzroy (The Haven); the Lying-In Hospital in Madeline Street, Carlton; and the Female (Carlton) Refuge in Keppel Street, Carlton – were also visited, and reports compiled. The officer who did the inspections reported that the Infant Asylum and Salvation Army children were returned every month for inspection, while those who lived some distance away were regularly visited by committee and other members. In the case of the Female Refuge, however, the situation was different:

the infants were kept with the mothers for some time, but between 4-12 months, if a situation cannot be obtained for the mother where she can have her child with her, the child is boarded out to a suitable person selected by the Matron, but the authorities at the Female Refuge have nothing to do with the child from the time it leaves the institution.[13]

Clearly the situation at the Refuge was not satisfactory, and after police met with the Matron, Mrs Thompson, and the Ladies Committee, it was agreed that all infants boarded out would have to be returned for inspection once a month, unless they were with country nurses. In those cases 'some competent person' connected with the Refuge would visit them in their homes.

Creches, in Richmond run by Miss Gilly Turton and in Collingwood run by Miss Clara Langley, were also inspected, but as the children were not kept overnight, the Act was not relevant to their situation.

In December 1893, the following institutions were also exempted from the Act: the Benevolent Asylum and Female Refuge at Ballarat; the Bendigo Benevolent Asylum; and in Geelong, the Convent of Mercy Female Orphanage, St Augustine's Male Orphanage, the Geelong Protestant Orphanage, the Female Refuge and the Salvation Army Home.[14]



Letter dated 11 September 1901 received by Victoria Police requesting to adopt a child, PROV, VPRS 807/PO Inward Correspondence Files, Unit 160, File P7752.

To assist with the inspections, Chief Commissioner HM Chomley selected a number of female volunteers who were to inspect the nurses' homes regularly. This plan did not work in practice, however, as middle-class women would not visit working-class areas, and most volunteers were of the former class while most nurses were of the latter.

In January 1898 the Chief Commissioner provided a summary of the administration of the Act. He felt that it needed an amendment

so as to prevent a nurse adopting a child for a lump sum. So long as she received a small weekly allowance for its care it was to her interest to keep the child alive, but, having received a lump sum, there was no longer the same incentive.[15]

There are newspaper reports of an amendment to the Act being discussed in parliament late in 1899, but it does not appear in the list of Victorian Acts.[16] Certainly the provision regarding lump sum payment was changed, as numerous files make clear.

In 1898 Victoria Police took over the entire administration of the Act, added extra requirements, and in the process generated a huge volume of paperwork. Police made detailed and minute notes of the cases they investigated. The background of each applicant for registration as a nurse, the number of people living in her home, and its physical dimensions were all recorded. Nurses were now also subjected to fortnightly visits by a local constable (in plain clothes), who inspected both her home and the infants within it. The responsible constable had also to compile a monthly return of every nurse in his district, listing their names and addresses, the children they had with them, the next of kin of the children, and the condition of the children's bedding and feeding bottles. These monthly returns were submitted to headquarters, and are to be found today within police correspondence records.[17]

While most of the nurses were from the inner suburbs of Melbourne, the children they cared for came from a wide variety of places. For example, in 1898 Ella Harding of Brunswick had Ellen Jeffers, whose mother was in Mooropna,[18] while in 1901 Harriet Lawson of Collingwood had Grace Tracy McAlpine, whose mother was in Myrtleford, and Mrs E Cameron of Richmond had Edward Braybrook, whose mother was in Loch, Gippsland.[19]

The Act had an impact not only on the lives of nurses and children, but also on statutory processes such as the registration of births. Ordinarily, a child had to be registered within six weeks of birth. Under the *Infant Life Protection Act*, however, an illegitimate child's birth was required to be registered within three days.[20] Given that the mother might not be well enough to do so, the requirement fell on the occupier of the house in which the child was born.

Failure to comply with these requirements meant that the local Registrar informed police. An investigation of the circumstances took place, with a view to prosecution in the local Court of Petty Sessions. The mother was interviewed, and also the person in whose home the child had been born, as it was the latter who would be charged. Details of the paternity of the child are often given in these cases. Although a breach of the Act had occurred, the Chief Commissioner used his discretion when there were extenuating circumstances,

and some cases were never proceeded with, as the following case shows.

Ileen May Davey was born in Footscray in 1903. When her mother, Caroline Annie Maddox (née Hall) went to register the birth, she found she was in breach of the Act, as it was more than three days since the birth. The father of the child, Reg Davey, a baker, of Hopkins Street, Footscray, was interviewed, and claimed ignorance of the requirements of the Act. A prosecution brief was prepared, but Caroline Maddox visited the local station and pleaded her case with Constable Charles Dwyer, who duly reported:

She appears to be a respectable person in a small business in Footscray. She has 3 other girls, born in wedlock, the eldest is 14 years. I think this is a case in which a summons should not issue, as Mrs. Maddox is a hard-working industrious woman and has been shamefully treated and deserted by her husband six years ago.

Exposure of her private life could have been ruinous for Caroline's business, as the Chief Commissioner was quick to realise, and the prosecution brief lapsed.[21]

Many single women had neither the ability to care for the child themselves, nor the means to continue to pay a baby farmer, so had no objection to the child being adopted. The only requirement under the Act, regarding adoption, was for the adoptive parent to write to the Chief Commissioner of Police, seeking approval.[22] He would refer the letter to local police, who would then compile a report on the applicant. Upon confirmation of the bona fides of the adoptive parents, permission would be given, via a letter, and a note made on the file. Occasionally a solicitor also drew up a formal statement signed by both parties, and a copy was given to the department.

An example of the type of information that can appear with adoption papers is that of Sarah Lyons, who gave birth to an illegitimate child in Richmond in 1901. Sarah was a widow, her husband having died fifteen years previously. She had been deserted by the father of the child in Adelaide, and had a blind son to maintain there. Like a number of women she travelled interstate to give birth, and thus avoid a scandal (some women came from as far away as New Zealand). Sarah left the child with a nurse in Melbourne, and in the same year Isabella Lownes successfully applied to police to adopt it.[23]

Not all the adoptions were of illegitimate children; some mothers were simply destitute and had a number of other children to support. In at least one case there is reason to suspect a society cover-up occurred in the process of adoption.

125 York St  
 Sydney  
 Sep. 19<sup>th</sup> 1901  
 1901

POLICE DEPARTMENT  
 MELBOURNE

No. 100  
 CHIEF COMMISSIONER

Sir  
 I have adopted  
 on the 18<sup>th</sup> September  
 the illegitimate  
 female child  
 of Sarah Eyrns  
 whose name is  
 Marion Eyrns  
 born on the 12<sup>th</sup>  
 March 1891

Letter dated 19 September 1901 received by Victoria Police in relation to an adopted child, PROV, VPRS 807/P0 Inward Correspondence Files, Unit 160, File P7752.

In November 1901 the Chief Commissioner received a letter from Dr David Egryn Jones of Collins Street, the husband of Dr Constance Stone:

Sir,

a boy named John Francis Barkle is now boarded out with Mrs. Nichol at 1 Downshire Rd. Elsternwick under police supervision. An opportunity occurs to get him adopted, without any money consideration whatever, by people who will thoroughly look after him and the adoption will be very greatly to the boy's advantage. There are circumstances which make it desirable that the police should not interfere with him in his new home, if that is at all possible. I am willing to give a personal guarantee that the child will be well treated, and if necessary to bring him before you, if at any time enquiry should be considered necessary.

I would beg that the police at Elsternwick should be informed that it is not desirable to give any information

in regard to parentage to anyone. Should this rather vague arrangement not be satisfactory to you I shall be pleased at any time to call at your office and make full verbal statements. Trusting my request may receive your favourable attention ...

Chief Commissioner Chomley did ask for more detail, and on the back of the letter noted:

Dr. Jones has explained all the circumstances to me and I should be glad if the police complied with the request of Dr. Jones, not to give information about the parentage of this child to anyone.

The file went to Elsternwick police station, on 9 November, where the request was duly noted by the officer in charge, who replied that the directions would be

strictly observed at this Stn. I have also requested Mrs. Nicol to refrain from giving any information concerning the child.

The arrangements did not find favour with the nurse, however, and a letter from her to the Chief Commissioner arrived on the same day:

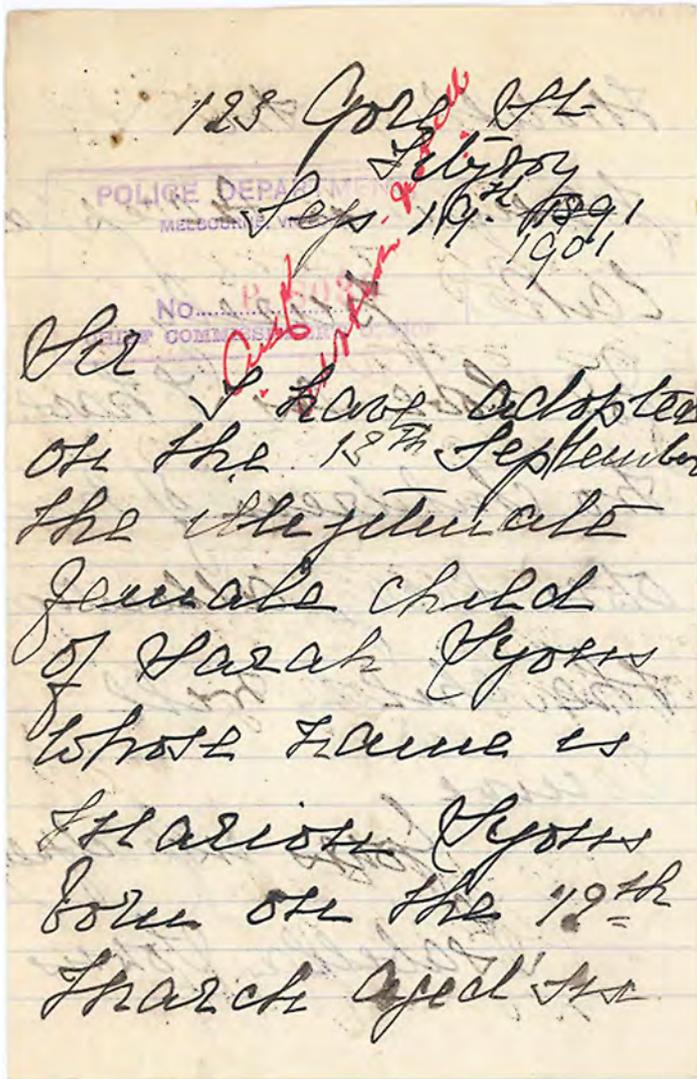
Sir,

I have this day given up charge of Jack Franklin Barkle, aged two years & seven months old, to a strange man whose name I do not know, & he has gone where I have no idea. I was written to by Dr. Constance Stone who told me to take the little boy into her rooms in Collins St., & this strange man would be there. When I asked him to sign the book, he refused, saying Dr. Stone had told him Dr. Jones had been to Mr. Chomley & there was no need to tell any name or where he was going. I made him repeat this statement before Dr. Clara Stone, who told me she was sure it was all right, tho I strongly objected to the whole thing. I hope I have not done wrong; but to my mind it is a strange thing that influence can let off one person & a poor servant girl has to tell all her business, or she is religiously hunted up. I have cared for this child since he was a fortnight old, & loved him as a mother & today I saw him carried off screaming down the street, it was cruel. No one has ever been to see him, save once, this man called last December, it is a cruel thing to take him at this age, amongst strangers. You will remember it was this case that Dr. Stone refused to give the mother's name to me, and it had to be seen to afterwards. Trusting you will see he is well cared for, I remain yours sincerely,

Margaret S. Nicol.

The file reveals that the child went to the principal of the Daylesford primary school, but nowhere is the parentage mentioned.[24]

By 1906 over 500 nurses were registered,[25] and the police department was being overwhelmed by the amount of time and paperwork that was involved in regulating the Act. As well as checking the new applications to register, each nurse's home had to be inspected fortnightly, and monthly returns compiled.



Example of an application for registration to care for an infant, PROV, VPRS 807/P0 Inward Correspondence Files, Unit 160, File O7560.

Children who had left a nurse's care had to be followed up, adoption applications had to be checked, and breaches of the Act prosecuted. Constables complained that they could not undertake other work because they were devoting so much time to fulfilling the requirements of the Act.

The surviving indexes to correspondence back up the constables' claims.[26] They show that twenty pages per year, of one-line entries, were devoted just to the *Infant Life Protection Act* requirements. In November 1907 the Act was amended, and the Department of Neglected

Children was given the responsibility for its regulation. [27] In February 1908 the first paid Female Inspector, Marie Madeline Maxwell Murray was appointed, at a salary of £120 per annum.[28]

As the above examples show, the correspondence files contain a wealth of fascinating material. Locating this material is problematic, however. There is no index to police correspondence prior to 1901. After that date, where there is an index entry and a file number, trying to locate the file within VPRS 807 (Inwards Correspondence to the Chief Commissioner, 1894 onwards) is a hit-and-miss exercise, with about a 50% success rate. Many files are simply not where they should be; Criminal Offence Reports, which used the same numbering system, have been mixed up with correspondence files; and some files have been placed in Units which have no relationship to either the file number or the year of the event. As well, there are around 200 Units of miscellaneous correspondence which have never been catalogued, any one of which can contain material from a wide range of years, from 1853 to 1940. Some years ago I listed the names of all people referred to in the indexes from 1901-1908 and released a series of microfiche indexes, along with a listing of the Units in which they should (but not necessarily would) be found. A copy of the microfiche is held in the PROV reading room at North Melbourne. Since then I have listed many names and basic details found about them on my website: see *Infant Life Protection Act Indexes*. [29]

This article has focused on just one of a number of different bodies of information that can be found in police correspondence files, mainly those within VPRS 807. Given the paucity of records showing the intimate and private lives of working-class women, both married and single, and their surroundings, these files are a treasure trove of primary source material. They can provide the researcher, whether family historian or academic, with the opportunity to solve long-standing questions about paternity, adoptions, and family and work arrangements. Sometimes the answers are written in the women's own hand, and sometimes the women are quoted verbatim.

## Endnotes

[1] Except for widows and married women, who were sent to their husband's birthplace. See 'The Workhouse', available at <<http://www.workhouses.org.uk/>>, accessed 22 October 2010, for details of the British scheme.

[2] D Jaggs, *Neglected and criminal: foundations of child welfare legislation in Victoria*, Phillip Institute, Bundoora, Vic., 1986.

[3] S Swain & R Howe, *Single mothers and their children: disposal, punishment and survival in Australia*, Cambridge University Press, Oakleigh, Vic., 1995.

[4] *An Act to Amend the Laws relating to Public Health*, No. 782. All Acts mentioned here can be accessed online via the Victorian Historical Acts database, available at <[http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/vic/hist\\_act/](http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/vic/hist_act/)>, accessed 22 October 2010.

[5] *Health Act 1890. An Act to Consolidate the Law relating to Public Health*, No. 1098.

[6] *Infant Life Protection Act 1890*, No. 1198.

[7] *Argus*, 23 November 1892, p. 5a.

[8] *Argus*, 4 January 1893, p. 4h.

[9] The regulations appeared in both the *Victoria Government gazette*, 13 January 1893, p. 145 and the *Victoria Police gazette*, 18 January 1893, pp. 19-20.

[10] These were: Ararat, Bairnsdale, Ballarat, Beechworth, Benalla, Bendigo, Castlemaine, Daylesford, Echuca, Geelong, Hamilton, Horsham, Jamieson, Kilmore, Kyneton, Mansfield, Maryborough, Mildura, Nhill, Omeo, Palmerston, Port Fairy, Portland, Sale, Shepparton, St Arnaud, Stawell, Wangaratta, Warragul and Warrnambool.

[11] M Cannon, *The woman as murderer*, Today's Australia Publishing Co., Mornington, Vic., 1994.

[12] PROV, VA Victoria Police, VPRS 937 Inward Registered Correspondence, Unit 348, Bundle 1.

[13] *ibid.*

[14] *Victoria Police gazette*, 13 December 1893, p. 334.

[15] *Argus*, 15 January 1898, p. 11f.

[16] *Argus*, 25 September 1899, p. 4; 9 October 1899, p. 4.

[17] PROV, VA 724 Victoria Police, VPRS 807 Inwards Correspondence to the Chief Commissioner.

[18] *ibid.*, Unit 1274, No. 3155.

[19] *ibid.*, Unit 164, No. 9388.

[20] *Infant Life Protection Act 1890*, Section 18.

[21] PROV, VPRS 807, Unit 1226, No. 6046.

[22] Section 22 of the Act.

[23] PROV, VPRS 807, Unit 160, No. 7752.

[24] *ibid.*, Unit 164, No. 9435.

[25] *ibid.*, Unit 323.

[26] PROV, VA 724 Victoria Police, VPRS 10257. The Index to Correspondence is in a subject-based format.

[27] *An Act to Amend the Infant Life Protection Act*, No. 2102.

[28] *Victoria Government gazette*, 12 January 1908, p. 971.

[29] Helen Doxford Harris, 'Infant Life Protection Act', available at <<http://helendoxfordharris.com.au/historical-indexes/ilpa>>, accessed 22 October 2010.

# Everything Changes

## Piecing Together Evidence for a Story of Loss and Absence

Dr Janet Marles

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'Everything Changes: Piecing Together Evidence for a Story of Loss and Absence', *Provenance: The Journal of Public Record Office Victoria*, issue no. 9, 2010. ISSN 1832-2522. Copyright © Janet Marles.

Dr Janet Marles is a research fellow and lecturer at Griffith University and lecturer at Higher Colleges of Technology in the United Arab Emirates. Her current practice-based research is a biographical online documentary project exploring the conflation of non-linear and linear narrative, and how these seemingly disparate narrative structures come together through an interactive platform to deliver the story in a way that echoes its content. This work stems from her extensive career as an editorial photographer, audio-visual producer and short-form filmmaker.

### Abstract

**When a World War I veteran, who has been blinded in one eye on the battlefields of France, drives his car into a tram, he is killed. He leaves behind a wife and three daughters. It is 1937. Tragically, less than four years later the girls' mother dies from a mysterious illness, and the girls are boarded in a succession of houses hundreds of kilometres away, disconnected from their past. More than sixty years go by, and the youngest daughter is handed a shoebox containing documents that fill in some of the pieces of her story. This sets in train a journey of discovery that is at once geographical and emotional. After locating inquest documents at PROV, the woman's daughter makes an interactive online documentary about the shoebox, and an online audio dramatisation of the car accident as a pivotal event in her mother's life. The present article describes the process of unlocking the evidence, both personal and archival, to produce this work.**

### A Family Tragedy

On a wet September evening in 1937, Donald McDonald drives his car into a tram and dies instantly. He leaves behind a wife and three daughters. Less than four years later, his wife Clara dies from a mysterious illness. The girls, Gwendoline aged seventeen, Marjory aged fourteen, and Heather aged ten, are put under the guardianship of their father's brother, Uncle Jock, a stock and station agent who lives in Kaniva, in central-western Victoria.

A silence descends over the family, as the old ones feel it is best not to upset the girls by talking about their unfortunate situation. Uncle Jock insists the girls are not to be separated. Yet it is the World War II and accommodation of any sort is very scarce. So they are boarded in a succession of houses hundreds of kilometres away in Geelong. For Heather, the youngest, it is a dozen homes in eleven years. With only scraps of information and two small photographs, she ponders her origins and the cause of her mother's death for over sixty years until, unexpectedly, at the age of seventy-two, she is handed a shoebox containing documents that fill in some of the pieces of her story.

As Heather's daughter I share her desire to uncover more of the family history. Inspired by the detailed information contained in the shoebox, together we undertake a genealogical and emotional journey that involves visiting relatives, historical buildings, community halls, cemeteries, archives and key locations from her childhood. Gradually fragments of evidence are unearthed until a more precise picture of her past can be drawn.

## The Shoebox

Over the Easter break of 2002, my mother Heather visited Kaniva, a small town in the wheat-growing district of the Wimmera, in order to meet relatives as yet unknown to her. One of her grown nephews accompanied her. She had lost touch with her country relatives since her parents' deaths and had only returned to the district three times between 1950 and 2002.[1] On this, her fourth trip, a most extraordinary event occurred.

At one of the family dinners arranged for Heather and her nephew they met, for the first time, Heather's guardian Uncle Jock's grandson, Grahame McDonald. The following day Grahame decided to finally eradicate the white ants in his mother's shed. As he was cleaning out the contents of this shed Grahame came across a fifty-year-old shoebox. On the lid, written in pencil, were the initials DN & JAS McD.

Grahame sifted curiously through the contents in the shoebox, but could not recognise any of the names referred to in the papers. Taking the shoebox inside, he asked his mother about it, who thought it might perhaps belong to the parents of Heather, the distant relative Grahame had met the night before.[2] Grahame immediately took the shoebox to where Heather was staying. He confessed later that the contents of the shoebox seemed so personal he felt he was prying, and was anxious to deliver it to Heather as soon as possible.[3]

Inside the shoebox Heather discovered records: account books, cheque butts, letters, and other documents stored by her guardian Uncle Jock relating to her and her sisters' board and keep. The shoebox also contained the wills of both her parents plus probate documents filed at the time of their deaths. There were documents concerning land taxes and Donald's horse-breeding activities, and the purchase documents dated 1937 for the Moolap property where Heather was living when her father died. This property known as Abdullah Park is a fifty-acre horse stud located just outside Geelong. The sale documents revealed Heather's father died just eleven weeks after the family moved from the Wimmera to Abdullah Park.

The documents in the shoebox were all dry fiscal records dating from 1922 to 1950, yet to Heather these papers were a tangible link to her long deceased parents. Their discovery enabled her to touch and scrutinise items used and written by her mother and father more than sixty years before. As Margaret Gibson explains in her book on memory and mourning, 'for the bereaved objects can transpose into quasi-subjects, moving into that now vacant bereft place'.[4]



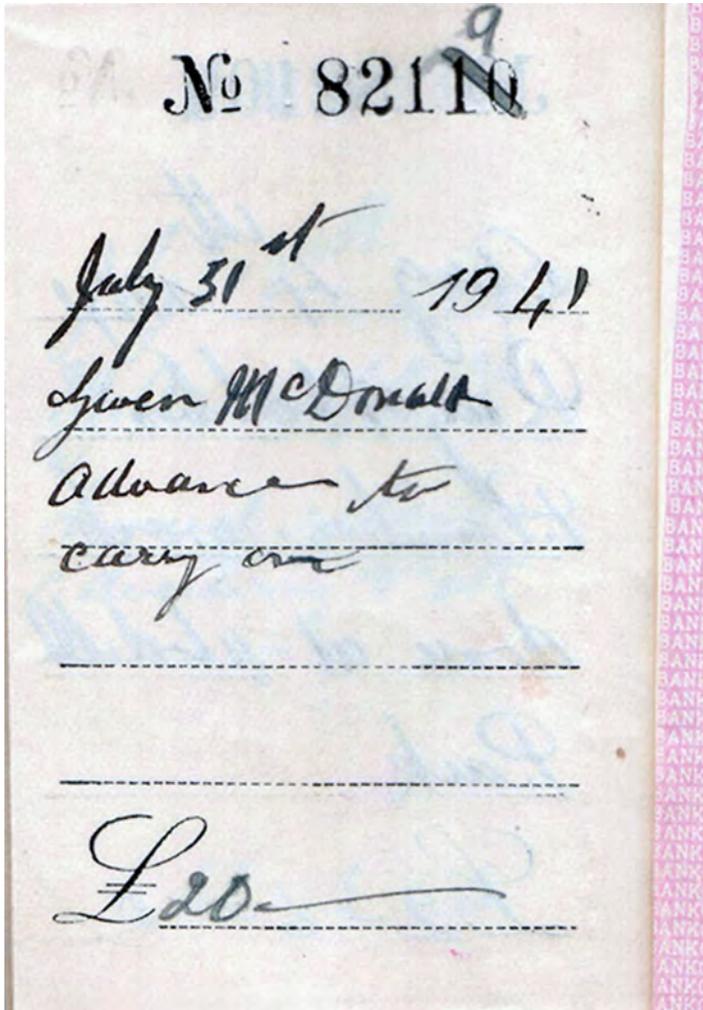
The shoebox lid showing penciled initials in top right-hand corner. Photograph by Janet Marles.



Contents of the shoebox showing account book ledger. Photograph by Janet Marles.

This humble collection of papers told Heather much about the choices that had been made for her as an orphaned child. There were ledgers with dates indicating when the girls moved from one boarding house to another and itemisations of their costs and weekly board. There were letters to bank managers and letters from the girls themselves requesting funds from Uncle Jock. One cheque butt for twenty pounds dated 31 July 1941 had Uncle Jock's poignant notation: 'advance to carry on'. This cheque was written ten weeks after the death of Heather's mother Clara.

Heather's recall for the events of her childhood is fragmentary. Being so young when she was orphaned, she was frequently unaware of situations occurring around her and was often not told what was happening or why. The shoebox, too, is full of fragments, tiny time capsules of information and random records. There is no chronology, no diary, no personal memoir or intentional biography. It is just a collection of documents, the daily detritus we usually discard once it is no longer useful.



Cheque butt dated 31 July 1941. Photograph by Janet Marles.

Yet these documents were kept, and serendipitously presented to Heather, initiating her quest to discover more. She had always been hungry for knowledge and details about her parents, details that were not forthcoming even from family members who were older and who had witnessed events as they transpired. Now, here finally was some information and it whetted her appetite to uncover more. Why had particular decisions been made? What motivated certain actions? Was it now possible, after such a long time, to find the answers to some of her questions?

### A Genealogical Journey

I started to document Heather's process of discovery, and began the lengthy task of searching for photographs and records, conducting interviews, visiting key localities and piecing together explanations for missing portions of her history.

One of my first archival searches was with the Geelong Historical Society. Although Heather and her sisters did not attend either parent's funeral, Heather knew precisely the dates on which each had died. The Geelong Historical Society located the relevant death and funeral notices for her parents from the local newspaper the *Geelong advertiser*: Donald Neil McDonald (23 October 1893 – 9 September 1937) and Clara McDonald née Bell (3 September 1898 – 20 May 1941).[5]

Nothing new surfaced to clarify the mysterious illness that killed Clara at just forty-two years of age. However the *Geelong advertiser* did contain two small articles on Donald's motor vehicle accident and these both referred to an inquest being opened to investigate the circumstances of his death.[6] Heather had not known an inquest had been conducted and believed her guardian, Uncle Jock, was also unaware.[7]

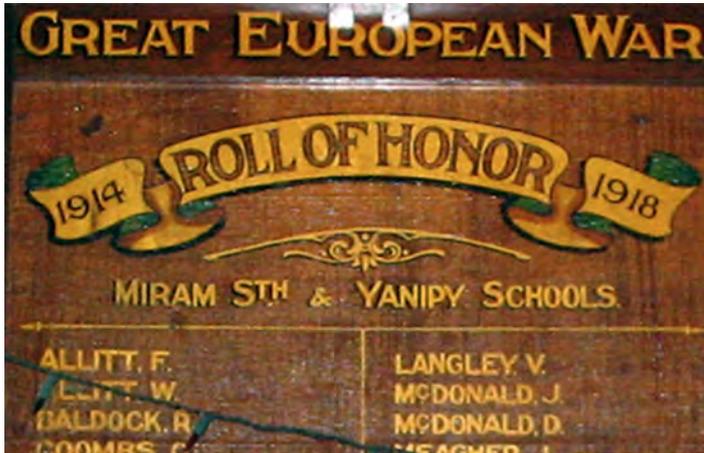
#### *Inquest Opened*

An Inquiry into the death of Donald McDonald, aged 44 years, married, of Moolap, who was killed when his motor car came into collision with a tramcar in Ormond road, East Geelong, on Thursday evening, was opened yesterday by Mr. F.G.H. Ritchie, deputy Coroner. Evidence of identification was taken, and the inquest was adjourned to a date to be fixed. The Deputy Coroner inspected the wrecked motor car and damaged tram.

With this newfound knowledge and with so many strands of Heather's childhood story beginning to come together, she and I planned another trip to the Wimmera in November 2005. On this occasion my eldest sister accompanied us. Anna Haebich explains this type of travel:

The quest for the past has spawned a new tourist niche – genealogical, roots or homeland tourism – that sits somewhere between pilgrimage and heritage tourism. The search engines of the world wide web are the departure points for these journeys. The destinations are off the beaten track, places where travellers seek emotional, personal and even spiritual contact with the past, as well as museums and archives where they search for genealogical and historical facts to embellish their memories.[8]

Flying into Melbourne and hiring a car, the three of us drove 400 kilometres northwest to Kaniva. We went to the relative Heather and her nephew had stayed with in 2002. From there we met family and visited districts Heather remembered from her childhood. We visited the 2500-acre property at Miram South where Heather lived until she was six years old, and the one-teacher primary school at Bill's Gully she attended for her first year of schooling. Now a community hall, this building houses a roll of honour naming the men from the district who fought in the World War I. Heather's father Donald McDonald and his older brother James are both listed.



World War I honor roll in Bill's Gully Hall, Wimmera district central-western Victoria. Photograph by Janet Marles.

Earlier that day we had visited the Kaniva cemetery. The cemetery has impressive entrance gates and two distinct areas of burial, one for Catholics, the other for Protestants. All the McDonalds were in modest, unadorned graves that reflected their Protestant origins, except for Heather's grandparents John and Mary McDonald (née McLean) whose grave was comparatively stately. It was adorned with a tall marble column between the two graves, crowned with a draped urn.[9]



Heather visiting her paternal grandparents' graves, Kaniva cemetery, November 2005. Photograph by Janet Marles.

Among the McDonald clan headstones we found the grave of James McDonald. James was one of Donald's five brothers. He was five years older than Donald and the only other McDonald brother who fought in the World War I. Both James and Donald were badly injured at the Battle of the Somme in July 1916; they made it home, yet both died prematurely. James remained unmarried and died aged forty-eight on 15 July 1937, coincidentally just eight weeks before Donald. The initials JAS on the shoebox lid (see image above) refer to James McDonald's deceased estate.

Leaving Kaniva we travelled east forty kilometres to the region around the town of Nhill where Heather's mother's clan, the Bells, hailed from. Heather's maternal grandparents Tom and Margaret Bell (née Rainer) raised eight children on their property at Kinimakatka – six girls in a row followed by two boys. Heather's mother Clara was their youngest daughter.



Heather (front centre) with members of the Bell clan, Nhill November 2005. Photograph by Janet Marles.

In Nhill we were treated to a family reunion dinner with a gathering of twenty-seven relatives. Some of Heather's cousins had travelled from as far away as South Australia and Perth to be there to meet her. This gesture of unity had profound significance for Heather who, as an orphaned child, had often felt disconnected, distanced, vulnerable and fragmented.

## Reading the Inquest at PROV

After some days with the Nhill relatives we journeyed back to Melbourne. My sister flew home, and Heather and I drove to the Public Record Office in North Melbourne. Weeks before I had ordered the inquest documents of Donald McDonald's fatal car accident of 9 September 1937, and we were scheduled to view them. Arriving at the PROV building I was relieved to be through the unfamiliar Melbourne traffic and eager to see the inquest documents.

Heather, however, was becoming increasingly reticent. She was suddenly disinclined to see these documents. Not wanting to upset her I suggested we get a coffee in the cafe adjacent to the entrance. This she readily accepted. Heather's reticence stemmed from her childhood of grief and her family's disinclination to speak to the girls about their tragic situation. They were boarded with strangers hundreds of miles from the rest of the extended family and discouraged from asking questions. Heather received no grief counselling and had been brought up with the philosophy, common for the time, of 'just get on with it'.

Yet there was so much she wished to know. What ailment had killed her mother? Was it grief and stress or a disease of some sort? What were her parents like as people? How did they get along together? How was her father able to surge ahead financially when he had been so badly injured in the war? Was there any truth to the family whisper that her mother's grandmother was Aboriginal? Why hadn't Auntie Addie and Uncle Alec taken the sisters in when they moved to Geelong to retire?

These questions and many like them are the kind of enquiries children make in an attempt to understand their parents, their families, who they are, and how they too fit in. With Heather's family's unwillingness or inability to talk to the girls about their situation, these questions and many more remained unanswered.

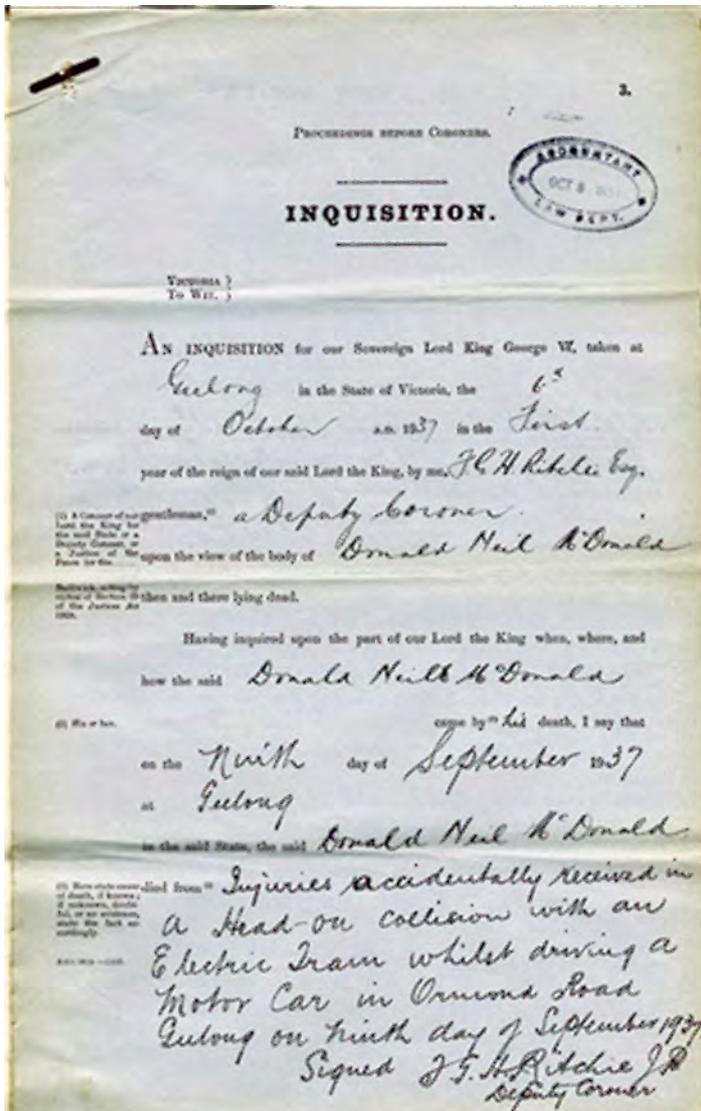
Once we had finished our afternoon tea Heather agreed we should go to the reception counter. Two attendants greeted us. I showed one of them the file number I had been sent<sup>[10]</sup> and the letter identifying that we were here to view documents. Again Heather hesitated but the staff, in their professional way, had begun to process us. The force of the bureaucracy took over and we passively followed. We were shown into a side room, asked to leave our bags in a locker and to wear the white gloves provided. Once ready we were shown through a locked door and instructed to walk the length of the room to the last counter where our file would be retrieved for us.

The document viewing room is a large space; to the left are rows of tables and chairs similar to libraries before the digital era, to the right the staff have their offices surrounded by rows of files and cabinets. We approached the last counter where a man in his late twenties greeted us. We told him why we were there and showed him our document number. He asked us to wait while he located our file. A short time later he returned with a plastic bag containing a few sheets of paper and indicated we could go to one of the tables to view the documents. He kindly suggested we take as long as we needed.

Heather held the plastic bag containing the documents and we sat at one of the tables. She opened the bag. There were sixteen pages, twelve handwritten and four typed. We read each page carefully. Heather occasionally read aloud or expressed small surprise, but other than this she remained calm, contained, stoic. Her emotions were held tightly in. This was the first time either of us had seen inquest documents and we were amazed at the precise details they contained. There was a cover page with the document number, date, place, name of deceased, and name of the coroner, followed by a statement of cause of death as determined by the deputy coroner. The language used in the documents dispelled any possible doubt that these were significant papers.

Proceedings Before Coroners  
Inquisition  
Victoria  
To Wit

An Inquisition for our Sovereign Lord King George VI,  
taken at  
Geelong in the State of Victoria, the 6th  
Day of October A.D. 1937 in the First year of the reign of  
our Lord the King, by me,  
F.G.H. Ritchie Esq,  
A Deputy Coroner  
Upon the view of the body of Donald Neil McDonald  
then and there lying dead.  
Having inquired upon the part of our Lord the King when,  
where and  
How the said Donald Neil McDonald  
came by his death, I say that  
on the Ninth day of September 1937  
at Geelong  
in the said State, the said Donald Neil McDonald  
died from Injuries accidentally received in  
a head-on collision with an  
Electric Tram whilst driving a  
Motor Car in Ormond Road  
Geelong on ninth day of September 1937.  
Signed J.G.H. Ritchie JP  
Deputy Coroner



Page 2 of PROV, VPRS 24/P, Unit 1339, File 1937/1288, Coroner's Inquest into the death of Donald McDonald, October 1937 (transcript above).

There was a report from police constable WW Kuhne who attended the scene of the accident; a report from the deputy coroner requesting an autopsy; an identification statement sworn and signed by Donald's brother John Fraser McDonald (Uncle Jock); one witness report from Lewis O'Sullivan, the licensee of the Criterion Hotel Geelong, who was the last person to speak with the deceased; three witness reports from Herbert Deller, the driver of the horse-drawn dray involved in the accident; a report from the medical practitioner James Ernest Piper who conducted the post mortem; two witness reports from Percival Wallis Fuller, the driver of the tram that collided head-on with Donald's automobile; one witness report from Keith Martin Atkins, the conductor of the tram; a

second statement from 1st Constable William Walter Kuhne of East Geelong Police; and a backing page with identification and file record numbers. All in all, sixteen pages containing the opinions, evidence, and statements from eight people.

These pages of the Coroner's Inquest, stored in the archives for sixty-eight years, revealed some surprising details. Donald had consumed three small gins at the Criterion Hotel approximately half an hour before the accident. The publican Lewis O'Sullivan considered him to be perfectly sober, however, and made the comment that Donald only had sight in his left eye. Donald had sustained a severe head injury during the war, resulting in the loss of sight in his right eye.

At the time of Donald's car accident the weather conditions were wet and windy, daylight was fading and visibility was poor.[11] Heather's guardian John Fraser McDonald identified the deceased as his brother Donald on 10 September 1937. He stated that the last time he had seen Donald was on 17 July 1937. This was two days after their brother James McDonald had died. Donald had returned to Kaniva to attend James's funeral.

Police Constable Kuhne, who attended the scene of the accident, reported that the front portion of the car and engine were driven back into the vehicle, jamming the driver who appeared to be dead. The autopsy report found severe and deep lacerations on the legs, body and head. Both legs and the right humerus were broken. Several ribs were also broken and one had pierced the heart. The stomach smelt strongly of alcohol. The cause of death was given as direct injury to the heart, combined with shock.

When Heather had read every page she folded them back into the plastic bag and said, 'Right, let's go'. I was quite surprised. It had taken an enormous amount of emotional energy to get us there and now she just wanted to leave. I had expected we would read over the documents again and possibly chat about some of the content, but Heather just wanted to go. I suggested we acquire a copy of what we had just read. She was disinclined. She did not see the need to have copies. I went to enquire how much the copies would cost. They were less than one dollar per page and PROV would post them to us. I ordered one set.

Once outside I felt drained but also slightly elated. We had managed to navigate this difficult emotional journey and had discovered so much more than we had imagined. The minute details contained in the Coroner's Inquest provided a wealth of information. During the drive to our hotel we talked about other things and began to relax. A little later Heather said, 'Now I know more than anyone else. Even Uncle Jock didn't know there was an inquest. He said there wasn't one'.<sup>[12]</sup>

### Return to Abdullah Park

The following day we drove to Geelong for the next part of our expedition. Here we were keen to locate the numerous boarding houses Heather resided in as an orphan lodger. We had also arranged to visit Abdullah Park. Heather recalled a family story of how her father bought the property. Prior to the sale the surveyors calculated the land area as three acres less than the vendor Mrs Eleanor Gibb had indicated. Donald said he was not paying for land that was not there and Mrs Gibb would not change her price. A stand-off ensued, until Donald suggested they toss for it. The bank manager thought this was outrageous, declaring 'You're not tossing in my office!', so they all went outside onto the pavement. Donald won the toss. He leased the 2500-acre wheat farm in Miram South and moved the family 400 kilometres to Abdullah Park. Eleven weeks later he was dead.

At the time, Heather knew her father had died in a car accident but it was not until she read the inquest documents that she discovered the details. With these precise particulars, and with Heather's memories and the documents from the shoebox, we can now piece together how the accident occurred.

It was the evening of Thursday 9 September 1937. Donald had a business meeting at the Criterion Hotel in Geelong just seven kilometres from his new home at Moolap. When he failed to arrive home by sunset, Clara rang the hotel and was told that Donald had left half an hour earlier. Concerned, she kept ringing around to find out where Donald could be. Finally the police came over the telephone line. 'There's been a collision between a car and a tram on Ormond Road. It's your husband Donald.'

A horse and dray with no light on the vehicle was on Donald's side of the road.<sup>[13]</sup> He swerved his 1936 Ford to miss it, but, with only one eye, fading light, and rainy weather conditions he misjudged the distance and ran into a tram that had just left the East Geelong terminus on its way to town. He was killed instantly.



Donald and Clara McDonald's grave, East Geelong cemetery. Photograph by Janet Marles.

That night Clara told the girls there had been an accident outside Mrs White's house. It was their Dad, she said, and he was being looked after. The next morning the girls were told their father had died. It was Gwen's fourteenth birthday. Clara was thirty-eight, Marjory was ten, and Heather had just turned seven.

Recently moved and suddenly without the head of the family, Clara and the girls continued to live at Abdullah Park. Then, unthinkable, less than four years later Clara was taken to the Geelong hospital suffering from an unknown illness. Critically sick for one month, she died in hospital leaving her three daughters orphaned.



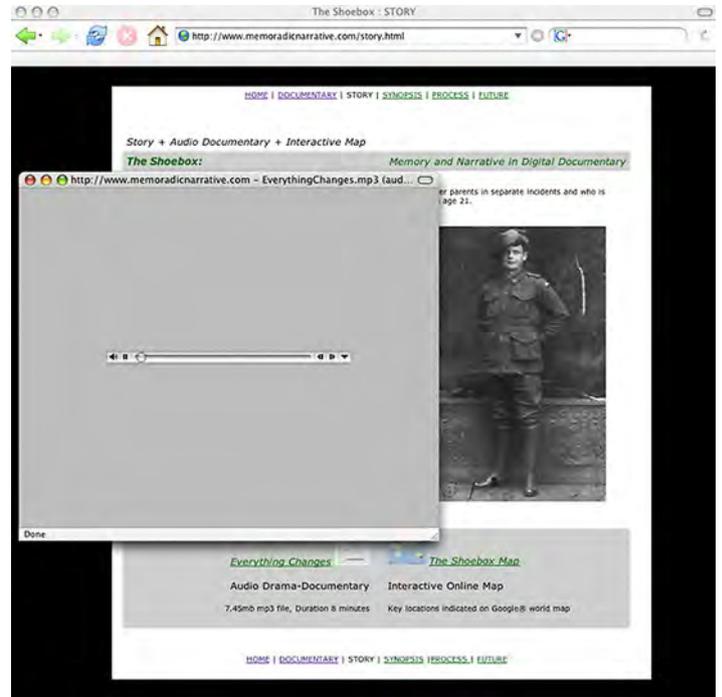
Heather and her sisters leaving Abdullah Park 10 August 1941. Photograph courtesy of Heather McDonald.

Two months later, on 10 August 1941, the girls packed up their belongings from Abdullah Park and moved into Geelong with a friend of their mother's, Mrs Pearse. Heather continued to attend the local school along with the children of the family who moved into Abdullah Park, yet, as she recalls with some surprise, she never spoke to these children about Abdullah Park and never even enquired about the cats they had had to leave behind. Such was the all-pervading pressure not to speak of her ordeal.

### **Everything Changes: An Audio Drama-Documentary**

With this portion of our genealogical journey completed, Heather and I returned to our respective homes. I began collating the information, documents, newspaper reports, interviews, and photographs we had uncovered and started developing a script for an interactive online documentary of Heather's unique story, called *The shoebox*.<sup>[14]</sup> It was clear Donald's accident was crucial to the sequence of events and I decided to write this part of the story as an audio drama-documentary.<sup>[15]</sup>

Sound design is a central feature of online documentary production and I wanted to explore this re-enactment as audio only, allowing the audience to picture the scenes with their individual mind's eye. I gave this sequence the title *Everything changes*. It consists of nine scenes and is termed a drama-documentary because it is a dramatisation of reality. As Cohen et al. state, 'this genre of documentary blends drama and fact with dramatic stories – involving either real persons, or actors confronting real issues – presented as being true'.<sup>[16]</sup>



The audio drama-documentary *Everything Changes* opens in a new window from the 'Story' webpage. Image by Janet Marles.

*Everything changes* describes Heather's family's relocation from the Wimmera to Abdullah Park in Moolap in July 1937 and Donald's fatal car accident eleven weeks later.

### **Conclusion**

Like detectives, historians and documentary-makers need to find the evidence – the piece of paper, the record, the statement, or photograph – that can verify the story they are building. These, sometimes tiny, pieces come together to provide texture, depth, and clarity to the narrative content. The act of uncovering these portions can in turn be surprising, tedious, fascinating, traumatic and cathartic. I have experienced all of these sensations as I sifted through various databases and archives searching for historical records and accumulating the numerous fragments of evidence to piece together my mother's life story – a story that began to emerge with the discovery of a shoebox and expanded with archival research into a website and audio drama-documentary.



## Endnotes

[1] Interview with Heather recorded 2005.

[2] Interview with Heather recorded 2005 and confirmed in my meeting with Grahame McDonald and his mother on a trip to the Wimmera in November 2005.

[3] Conversation between Grahame McDonald and the author in November 2005.

[4] M Gibson, *Objects of the dead*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, Vic., 2008, pp. 47-79.

[5] Copies of the *Geelong advertiser* for 1937-1941 were examined in the Geelong Historical Society Newspaper Archives in November 2005.

[6] *Geelong advertiser*, Saturday 10 and Sunday 11 September 1937.

[7] Interview with Heather recorded 2005.

[8] A Haebich, 'A long way back: reflections of a genealogical tourist', *Griffith Review*, 6, 2004, p. 181.

[9] A draped urn often symbolises the death of an older person: see, for example, the Art of Mourning website, available at <<http://artofmourning.com/symbolism.html>>, accessed 22 October 2010. John McDonald died in 1922 at the age 73, Mary died aged 77.

[10] PROV, VPRS 24/P Inquest Deposition Files, Unit 1339, File 1937/1288.

[11] This statement is corroborated in the the Geelong Mechanics' Institute meteorological station registrations reported in the *Geelong advertiser*: rain (from 6 pm) to 9 am (night of 9/10 September) – 34 points.

[12] Interview with Heather recorded 2005.

[13] PROV, VPRS 24/P, Unit 1339, File 1937/1288, pp. 7, 8.

[14] J Marles, *The shoebox: memory and narrative in digital documentary*, containing a Synopsis, available at <<http://www.memoradicnarrative.com/story.html>>, accessed 22 October 2010, and a Documentary, available at <<http://www.memoradicnarrative.com/doco.html>>, accessed 22 October 2010.

[15] *Everything changes* can be accessed online as an MP3 audio file, available at <<http://www.memoradicnarrative.com/Clips/EverythingChanges.mp3>>, accessed 22 October 2010.

[16] H Cohen, JF Salazar & I Barkat, *Screen media arts: an introduction to concepts and practices*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 2009, p. 304.

