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Ian Potter Museum of Art

'All life and usefulness':

Girls and needlework in nineteenth-century Victoria

In his travels around colony of Victoria, Australia in the early 1850s, William Howitt observed and recorded lives he came across in the newly colonised land.[1] A prolific English writer, his commentary on squatters, gold seekers and entrepreneurial types belies the industrious nature of this far flung territory's inhabitants. In his 1855 book *Land, Labour and Gold; or, Two Years in Victoria,* he commented on three sisters he met in the goldfields. Jenny, Kitty and Lizzy Ennis, Howitt remarks, were indispensable to their prospecting parents; they helped with chores, collected gold thrown out from old holes and looked after the horses. Howitt commented "Such are little girls in the bush- all life and usefulness." This observation, whilst seemingly a throw away remark within a text dedicated to adult doings, encapsulates the values and expectations colonial Victorian society placed upon its girls.[2] Femininity was structured around ideas of industriousness and contribution.[3] Women and girls had to be 'useful'- to their families and to the wider community. They had to serve- they had to provide food, clothing, comfort for their family, and give birth to and raise the next generation for the fledgling colony.[4]

All the information we seem to have about girls in Australia in the nineteenth century comes from the writings of adults like Howitt. Brief comments on children and their place in the colony can tell us much about societal views towards them. Girls were doubly marginalised in nineteenth-century Victoria, due to their age and their gender, and prevented from power, authority and literacy.[5] Consequently, their voice, and presence, is limited in the historical record. Adult created text cannot reveal deeper truths, like how girls viewed themselves, or their significant, albeit subtle,

[1] William Howitt, *Land, Labour and Gold or Two Years in Victoria,* 1855.
[2] Note on the use of 'Victorian': it will be used to refer to Victoria, as in the colony (now state) in Australia. Not the 'Victorian' era, as the nineteenth century is commonly referred to.
[3] Lorinda Cramer, 'Making a Home in Gold-Rush Victoria: Plain Sewing and the Genteel Woman', *Australian Historical Studies* 48, no. 2 (3 April 2017): 214, https://doi.org/10.1080/1031461X.2017.1293705.
[4] Carol Dyhouse, *Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1981), 30. Dyhouse's analysis refers to Victorian England. Its conclusions can however, be applied to a colonial setting.
[5] Margaret Eleanor Fraser, 'With My Needle: Embroidery Samplers in Colonial Australia', 2008, 21, http://minerva-access.unimelb.edu.au/handle/11343/39834.

contributions to their families and wider society. This is where cultural collections, the items made and used by girls housed in institutions, can fill a significant gap.

The Ian Potter Museum at the University of Melbourne holds one such object. A needlework sampler was donated along with the Russell and Mab Grimwade 'Miegunyah' Bequest. It was made by Mary A. Wilson, in 1871, aged 13, most likely in Melbourne (see fig 1).[6] An anomaly in the Miegunyah Collection, is it likely the only item made a by a child, let alone a girl, in the extensive bequest, and perhaps the whole museum. So why is it here? What can its unusual existence tell us?

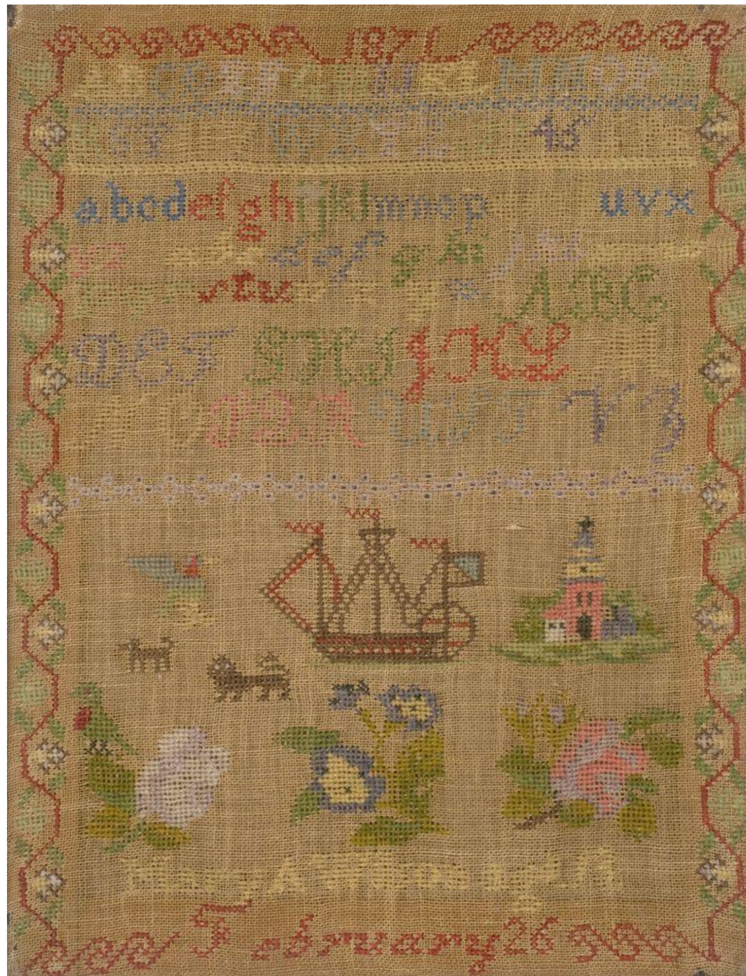

Figure 1: Decorated Alphabet Sampler by Mary A. Wilson, 1871.
Image sourced from the Ian Potter Museum of Art.

[6] Decorated Alphabet Sampler, Mary A. Wilson, 1871, Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne, Acc. No. 1973.0054.000.000

The Miegunyah collection boasts a plethora of colonial artefacts, prints, scientific objects and decorative arts. It is filled with items made by adult-hands and directives, derived from an adult-controlled world and collected by people in their maturity. The sampler here, made by an adolescent girl, can thus be read as part of this adult world – evidence of the values of nineteenth-century Victorian society and how girls were expected to behave within it. Girls and women's craft, like needlework, has primarily been overlooked or viewed as evidence of oppression by historians.[7] I contend however, that Mary's sampler can be viewed as an example of girlhood agency. Using Mary's piece as a starting point, I suggest conversely that girls' creation and use of material culture can be used to draw inferences about their lives, as well as celebrate their important, albeit marginalised, position and contributions within their contemporaneous society.

The Sampler

Stitched of coloured wool on coarse canvas Mary's piece is typical of later nineteenth-century Australian samplers. A brief genealogical search of Russell and Mab Grimwade's ancestry suggested that Mary was most likely Mab's mother's sister, as Agnes Kelly (Mab's mother) was born Agnes Wilson. However, individual biography has been avoided, as the broader significance of this sampler to me is more pertinent.

Samplers are generally a piece of embroidery almost exclusively made by girls, not women.[8] Popular from the mid eighteenth century as a learning tool, they allowed a girl, aged anywhere from five to their late teens, to practice common stitches and designs that were used in ornamental embroidery for household items. They also helped hone plain sewing skills. As women made most of a family's clothing by hand and mended worn items well into the twentieth century, sewing competently was an essential skill. Samplers were therefore seen as an indispensable part of a girls' education in Britain, a sentiment which travelled to the colonies. English samplers, the style from which Australian ones derive, usually consist of a decorative border, an alphabet, religious scripture or a moralising quote, individual images, the age and name of the maker, and sometimes their location. As they were ornamental and an example of a girls' skills, many have survived. Some were framed and hung in drawing rooms, or kept by girls a memento of their schooling. Margaret

[7] Rozika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch* sees needlework as a mechanism of oppression in eighteenth and nineteenth century England, which reinforced women's subordination.
[8] Fraser, 'With My Needle'.
The introduction of Fraser's thesis provides a good history of Australian samplers, as well as the literature on the topic.

Eleanor Fraser has studied over one hundred Australian samplers, showing the number that have survived.[9]

Mary's sampler is in good condition, albeit slightly discoloured and worn in places. The geometric border was likely stitched from a paper pattern. These were cheap and commonly available in Australia from around the 1850s.[10] The materials used in this piece were also affordable. Samplers were never made with specially produced materials. They instead used wool or embroidery thread that adult women used for other tasks, like cushion embroidery or marking initials on linen. Australian samplers also became more austere as the nineteenth century wore on.[11] They began to use less colours and rough canvas as a support. Mary's sampler is typical in that it shows no indication that it was made in Australia, as the imagery is very similar to that of samplers made in the UK around the same time.[12] On Mary's piece a rampant lion, a symbol of the British monarchy, sits next to a dog. English flowers adorn the bottom. There is no local flora or fauna anywhere on this piece. A church sits to the right. There are, perhaps however, indications of an interest in travel or knowledge of the wider-world. The ship, in the centre of the sampler, implies an awareness of immigration, as migrants to Australia would have arrived by boat in the 1870s. The birds too are quite exotic, perhaps indicative of tropical lands. This sampler, however, could have been made anywhere across the British empire and does not belie its Australian origins through its imagery. Samplers in Museums Victoria's collection confer that Mary's is typical of those at the time. Assorted needlework made by Winter sisters between 1846-1867 (fig. 2), and one by Beatrice Adams made in 1866 (fig. 3), utilise similar stitches, materials and imagery.[13]

Domestic Comfort

Needlework in the colonies, though deriving its style from the imperial centre of Britain, served additional functions. As mentioned, needlework was a vital skill, and most girls in Victoria would have learnt to sew. In 1872 the education reform act compelled all children over the age of 6 to

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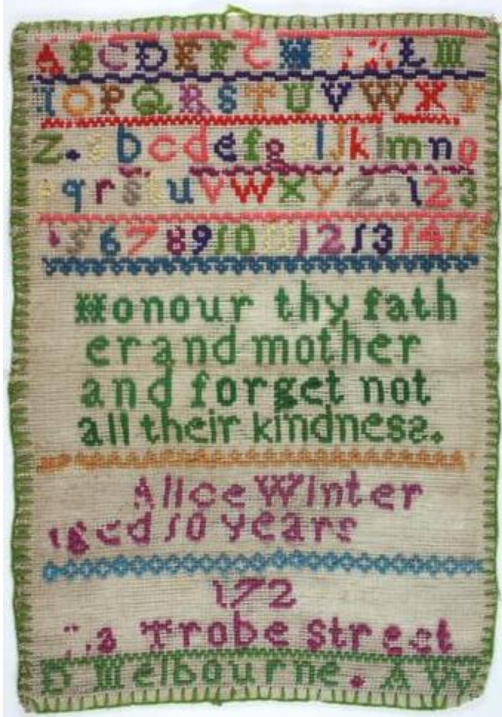
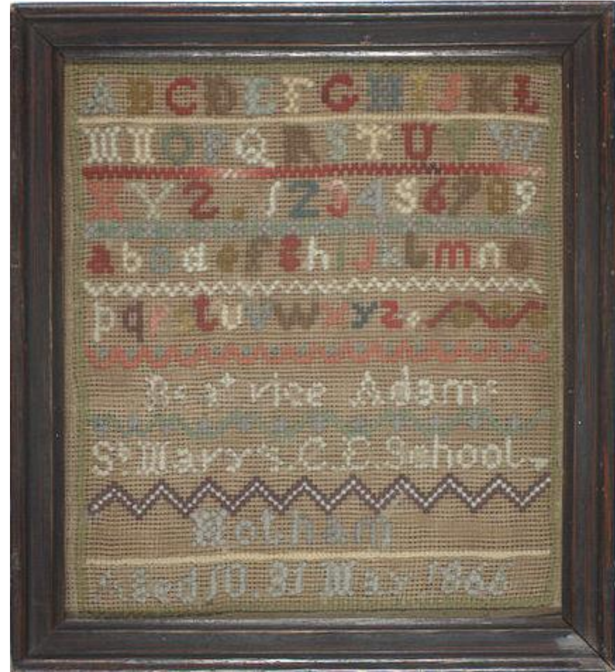
[9] See Fraser's thesis, *With my Needle*.
[10] Fraser, 28.
[11] Fraser, 31.
[12] Fraser, 30.
[13] Item HT 38738, 'Sampler - Eliza Winter, Alphabet with Birds & Flowers', Melbourne, circa 1846-1853; Item HT 38899, 'Sampler - Alice Winter, 'Remember Thy Creator in the Days of Thy Youth', Melbourne, circa 1866; Item HT 38901 Sampler - Alice Winter, 'Honour Thy Father and Mother and Forget Not All Their Kindness', Melbourne, circa 1867; Item HT 38902 Sampler - Eliza Winter, Alphabet & Numerals, Melbourne, circa 1846-1853; Item HT 38903 'Sampler - Decorative Motifs & Borders', Winter Sisters, Melbourne, circa 1846-1853; Item SH 940966 Sampler - Beatrice Adams, St Mary's School, Hotham, Victoria, 31 May 1866.



<u>Figure 2:</u> Alice Winter. Sampler, circa 1867.
Item HT 38901. Museums Victoria.

Image sourced from:
https://collections.museumvictoria.com.au/items/209



<u>Figure 3</u>: Beatrice Adams, Sampler. 31 May 1866. St Mary's School, Hotham, Victoria.
Item SH 940966. Museums Victoria.

Image sourced from:
https://collections.museumvictoria.com.au/items/254355

attend school. This was free, except for needlework classes.[14] As parents were willing to pay for needlework lessons separately for their daughters, this shows it was considered a priceless skill. Girls would have also learnt at home from female relatives, on top of their household duties.

Lorinda Cramer distinguishes between the role women's needlework played in England and the colonies. She contends that ornamental sewing was a marker of genteel femininity and accomplishment in England. However, in Australia, especially on the Victorian goldfields, Cramer suggests women's "needlework could transform conditions for families and greatly improve setter's quality of life".[15] Colonial Victorian space- a tent in the regional goldfields, a bark hut on squatters' farm or a stone dwelling on remote property – was viewed as comfortless and uncultivated, far from 'civilisation' and homely furnishings. Women's needlecraft - embroidered cushions, hand crocheted doilies and other items - could make a rough colonial home comfortable. Cramer states "Women's everyday sewing therefore had a far-reaching impact, empowering them

[14] Geoffrey Blainey, *A History of Victoria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 297.
[15] Cramer, 'Making a Home in Gold-Rush Victoria', 221.

to manipulate their material worlds into something that resembled the homes they had left behind."[16] Handsewn items reminded a family of genteel refinement in Britain; of homely comfort in trying, sometimes dangerous circumstances. In her analysis, Cramer focusses on women's craft. I contend, however, that Victorian girls' needlework played equally as an important function in the home.

I suggest that girls' material culture production, like samplers, could actively influence human emotion and behaviour. Like Cramer suggests women's needlework improved comfort, a daughter's needlework would have also improved 'quality of life' for settler families. Their samplers, or other needlework and plain sewing they contributed to a family's material possessions, could make a colonial house or tent infinitely more comfortable and home-like. Furthermore, girls were expected to be an 'Angel in the House' – an emotional support and pure moral guide for family members.[17] Thus, their material culture production perhaps served as tangible tokens of the emotional comfort a daughter or a sister could provide. The fact that so many samplers have survived, probably framed and hung in drawing rooms like the Grimwade's Miegunyah house, infers their sentimental value.

Furthermore, in stitching a sampler, a girl created something permanent and domestic. Girls wrote their names on their work - they marked them as their own property. Mary A. Wilson thus saw herself as an individual, with the ability to create a beautiful piece of needlework. She must have exhibited pride in its creation, as she identified herself as the maker. A sampler is therefore not merely a symbol of idealised femininity, but possibly a manifestation of a girls' individual identity and pride in her creativity. The permanency of samplers also attests to their influence. As mentioned, many survive in cultural collections and as family heirlooms. Samplers were designed to be permanent mementoes. The existence of the pieces mentioned in this paper shows they have been designated as important remnants of girl culture by institutions and individuals alike, for over 150 years.

Aboriginal Girls' Fibrecraft

White, well-to-do girls like Mary, however, were not the only ones to sew. Girls from all social classes and circumstances created samplers. For instance, one was presented to the wife of the

[16] Cramer, 226.
[17] Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (London: Croom Helm, 1982), 38–48.
Gorham discusses girls living in England's relationship to their families as one of 'service'. She would provide support and be a moral model for fathers and brothers.

governor of Van Diemen's Land in 1838 by girls at the Female Orphan School in Hobart.[18] Koorie girls, living in Victoria, also created needlework.[19] By the 1860s, protectionist policy had concentrated Aboriginal populations to designated areas, being missions and government stations.[20] This was designed to eradicate hunter-gatherer lifestyles and 'assimilate' Aboriginal people into western society.[21] In the 1850s and 60s mission schools began to teach Aboriginal children basic numeracy and literacy.[22] The girls also learnt needlework.[23] They made not just samplers, but what I will term as 'fibrecraft'. This refers to anything made by fibres into an object - like crochet, plain sewing or weaving.

These fibrecraft items, I contend, are physical manifestations of Koorie girls' agency and contributions to community, and evidence of their 'imperial literacy'. This framework of 'imperial literacy' is theorised by Tracey Banivanua Mar. Indigenous peoples across the Pacific antipodes, including Koorie men and women in Victoria, used learnt and adopted political tactics that would be recognised by European colonisers, to assert sovereignty and protest injustices- like written appeals, petitions and deputations.[24] Richard Broome puts forward a similar contention, stating "European ideas were often embraced in order to assist Aboriginal emancipation in the face of new realities," stating examples of when Koorie people embraced western education and aid to ensure the survival of their community.[25]

A delegation of Kulin men to the Melbourne Queen's birthday celebrations in 1863 is an example of 'imperial literacy' in action. The men, from the newly settled station at Coranderrk, wrote letters of petition to Queen Victoria.[26] They had been forced from their traditional lands and were asking for a plot near Healesville to be permanently gazetted for their community's use. The men presented the letters, along with gifts of rugs and shields, to the Governor to be sent to the Queen. Through the use of European political tactics it was hoped the colonisers would be

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[18] Fraser, 'With My Needle', 13.
[19] 'Koorie' refers to Aboriginal people living in the Victorian region of south-eastern Australia. 'Koori' is used to refer to Aboriginal people from the New South Wales region.
[20] The longest running stations were Lake Condah (1867-1918), Lake Hindmarsh (Ebenezer) (1858-1903), Lake Tyers (1861-1908), Lake Wellington (Ramahyuck) (1862-1908) and Coranderrk (1862-1924).
[21] Ian Clark, *A Peep at the Blacks': a History of Tourism at Coranderrk Aboriginal Station, 1863-1924* (Warschau/Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 5.
[22] Patricia Grimshaw et al., eds., *Letters from Aboriginal Women in Victoria, 1867-1926* (Melbourne: History Department, University of Melbourne, 2002), 15.
[23] Grimshaw et al., 198.
Girls were taught needlework, as evidenced in a letter from Bessy Flower, Ramahyuck, to Anne Camfield, Annesfield, Albany, August, 1867, in which she states "I have begun to knit this afternoon[;] we are going to have a sewing class every afternoon" at the school on the mission.
[24] Tracey Banivanua Mar, 'Imperial Literacy and Indigenous Rights: Tracing Transoceanic Circuits of a Modern Discourse', *Aboriginal History* 37 (2013).
[25] Richard Broome, *Aboriginal Victorians: A History since 1800* (Crows Nest, N.S.W: Allen & Unwin, 2005), 127.
[26] Bain Attwood, *The Good Country: The Djadja Wurrung, the Settlers and the Protectors* (Clayton, Vic: Monash University Publishing, 2017), 180.

more likely to recognise the Kulin's right to protest and claim to the land. Banivanua Mar's theory, however, privileges textual 'literacy' over material. She focusses on how adults engaged with formal – usually written - political structures to empower themselves. However, I wish to broaden the scope of this framework. The 1863 deputation illustrates how children can be imperially literate, and how material items can figure in this 'literacy'.

Ellen, a 13 year old Dja Dja Wurrung girl, living on Larrneambul station in 1863, created two European style items- a crocheted doily and collar.[27] These were included with the other gifts sent to the Queen. Ellen received a personal letter from the Queen, warmly thanking her for the gifts and promising her (the Queen's) interest in the Kulin's advancement and welfare. This was around the time the land at Coranderrk was officially gazetted for permanent Aboriginal use. By gifting her own material culture, Ellen herself, like the Kulin elders, entered into a recognisable negotiation with the Crown. She had exploited opportunities to gain an 'imperial literacy', by learning how to read and write, *and* the European craft of crochet. She used material techniques which a Western audience would empathise with, to make her case. It can be assumed Queen Victoria learnt to sew and crochet in her youth, like most British girls. The approval of Ellen's actions, as evident in the Queen's warm response and the gazettal of the land, proved to the Kulin that their 'adopted' political tactics were viable and potentially successful. Bolstered by the amicability of the Queen's personal thanks of Ellen, the Kulin elders felt they had the Crown's personal blessing, which gave them confidence in future political struggles. It has been noted by many historians that after the 1863 protest, a culture of political activism and resistance prevailed at Coranderrk for the remainder of the nineteenth century.[28] Koorie girls like Ellen, therefore, made important contributions to their communities through their needlework. Ellen's material culture can be seen as a symbol of subtle resistance against colonial forces.

Furthermore, Koorie girls, alongside elder women, contributed to economic security at stations such as Coranderrk through their fibrecraft. Traditional baskets, mats, as well as European style crochet, sewing or weaving, were sold at many missions and stations across Victoria to tourists.[29] This was to supplement government funding and money made from agricultural enterprise. Girls and women at Coranderrk for instance, were famous for their baskets, which were sold at *Reed's Fancy Repository* in Collins St in the heart of Melbourne by 1869.[30]

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[27] Attwood, 180.

[28] Jane Lydon, *Eye Contact: Photographing Indigenous Australians*, Objects/Histories (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 17; M.F. Christie, *Aborigines in Colonial Victoria, 1835-86* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1979), 191.

[29] Clark, *A Peep at the Blacks'*, 16.

[30] *Ballarat Star*, 22 July 1869.

The production and sale of fibrecraft by Koorie girls can also be seen as a form of material imperial literacy. Ian Clark has commented that at Coranderrk, "Aboriginal people were able to exploit the presence of tourism through the sale of distinctive artefacts and staged performances".[31] Koorie people 'exploited' the western construct of tourism and 'settler capitalism' for their own benefit. Girls and women therefore utilised the tourist and retail markets introduced by colonists to ensure economic security at Coranderrk station.

Conclusion

A sampler, like Mary's is more than merely an example of its maker's skill. Its threads hide stories and secrets that we can extract from the canvas. Girls across Victoria contributed to their families and communities through their needlework. Settler daughters' samplers and needlework improved quality of life for their families. Aboriginal girls at stations such as Coranderrk also improved quality of life, in the production and sale of fibrecraft. Victorian girls however, also exhibited agency in their production. They asserted their identities or resisted colonial injustice as active creators of material culture.

[31] Clark, *A Peep at the Blacks'*, 7.

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Objects from Museums Victoria Collections

Item HT 38738. Sampler - Eliza Winter, Alphabet with Birds & Flowers, Melbourne, circa 1846-1853.

Item HT 38899. Sampler - Alice Winter, 'Remember Thy Creator in the Days of Thy Youth', Melbourne, circa 1866

Item HT 3890. Sampler - Alice Winter, 'Honour Thy Father and Mother and Forget Not All Their Kindness', Melbourne, circa 1867.

Item HT 38902. Sampler - Eliza Winter, Alphabet & Numerals, Melbourne, circa 1846-1853.

Item HT 38903. Sampler - Decorative Motifs & Borders, Winter Sisters, Melbourne, circa 1846-1853.

Item SH 940966. Sampler - Beatrice Adams, St Mary's School, Hotham, Victoria, 31 May 1866.