

‘All life and usefulness’

Girls and needlework in 19th-century Victoria

Catherine Gay

Introduction

In his travels around the colony of Victoria, Australia, in the early 1850s, the prolific English writer William Howitt (1792–1879) observed and commented on the lives of people he came across in the newly colonised land.¹ Howitt’s report on squatters, gold seekers and entrepreneurial types illustrates the industrious nature of this far-flung territory’s inhabitants. In his 1855 book *Land, labour and gold; or, Two years in Victoria*, he observes three sisters he has met on the goldfields. Jenny, Kitty and Lizzy Ennis, Howitt remarks, are indispensable to their prospecting parents. They help with chores, collect gold thrown out from old holes, and look after the horses. Howitt comments: ‘Such are little girls in the bush—all life and usefulness’. Seemingly a throwaway remark in a text dedicated to adult doings, this observation captures the values and expectations that colonial Victorian society placed upon its girls.² Women, and girls, had to be ‘useful’—to their families and to the wider community.³

Aside from a few publicly accessible children’s diaries or scrapbooks,⁴ most of the information we have about 19th-century Victorian girls comes from people like Howitt. Girls were prevented from obtaining ‘power, authority and literacy’ in 19th-century Western societies due to their age and gender.⁵ Consequently, their voices and presence are limited in a historical record created and curtailed by adults. Our remaining data is pulled from a compilation of what adults chose to remark upon, record and keep: written commentaries (like Howitt’s), official documents (such as census records) or institutional collections (such as children’s toys, books, clothing, artworks and other possessions now held in museums). As seen in Howitt’s remarks above, these records largely demonstrate how children were viewed in an adult world. They rarely show the unseen, or unacknowledged, contributions made by children.

Certain material sources, however, may help to close this cavernous gap in our knowledge. Material culture theory contends that the ways in which people create, alter and use their possessions—whether deliberately or unconsciously—reflect their inherent beliefs and agency.⁶ Even though things made and written by children were influenced by adult values and intervention, I suggest that the material culture that girls created can exemplify their agency.⁷ One such item is an 1871 needlework sampler (pictured opposite), part of the University of Melbourne’s extensive Grimwade Bequest. It was made by a 13-year-old girl, the neat stitches demonstrating its creator’s tangible ‘usefulness’—her ability to sew. The sampler also reveals a usefulness in addition to practicality. As a genre, girls’ needlework samplers had a sentimental ‘usefulness’; they were valued by the family that chose to keep them. In deciding to keep needlework samplers, adults unconsciously revealed their inherent belief in the worth of girls’ material culture production. This sampler is therefore an illustration of how girls were active agents and producers, who have had larger and more far-reaching influence on their families and communities than the adult-created record might show.

The sampler in question is in the University of Melbourne Art Collection, which is managed by the Ian Potter Museum of Art. Part of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest, it was bequeathed along with the couple’s Toorak home, Miegunyah, and the collection it contained. It is stitched in cheap, coloured thread on coarse fabric (now yellowed), and housed behind glass in a simple wooden frame. The maker, one Mary A. Wilson, then aged 13, has stitched her name and age along the lower part of the sampler, and the date of February 26, 1871. It is one of only a few items made by children in the extensive collection of art bequeathed by the Grimwades,



Previous page: Mary A. Wilson, Decorated alphabet sampler, 1871, cotton on linen, 39.4 × 30.4 cm (sight); 45.7 × 36.4 cm (frame). 1973.0054, gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest 1973, University of Melbourne Art Collection.

and perhaps in the entire University of Melbourne Art Collection. So why is it here? What can its unusual existence tell us?

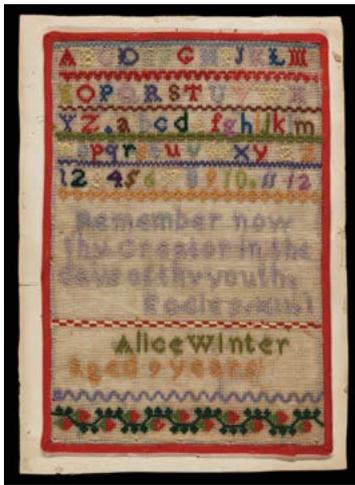
Russell Grimwade, industrial chemist, entrepreneur and philanthropist (1879–1955), and his wife, Mab Grimwade (née Mabel Louise Kelly, 1887–1973), assembled an impressive collection of colonial artefacts, pictures, scientific objects and decorative arts over their married life. Most are rare and many are of high monetary value. As the couple had no children, Russell and Mab stipulated in their wills that their estates—including Miegunyah, with its furnishings and collections—be donated to the University of Melbourne after their death.⁸ The collection was accordingly presented to the university and was eventually divided between three university collections, the art now being at the Ian Potter Museum.⁹ As described by John Poynter, the house and collection were ‘highly distinctive expressions of one individual’s interests and tastes, modestly complemented by his wife’.¹⁰ And, somehow, a run-of-the-mill girl’s sampler has ended up in this ‘distinctive expression’ of an upper-class, educated couple’s psyche. So why is it here?

I suggest that the sampler is most likely part of Mab Grimwade’s ‘modest complement’ to the collection. Mab’s mother was Agnes Dalziel Wilson, who married Charles Colman Kelly, a wealthy grazier. Agnes was born in Scotland in around 1851, the first child of Charles and Agnes Wilson (née Riddell).¹¹ The couple, from my research, had at least two other daughters, one of whom was born Mary Dalziel Wilson in 1864.¹² These dates do not match, as the Mary who made the sampler would have been born in 1858 or 1859, as she was 13 in 1871. However, it shows that Mary was a family name used by the Wilsons. I was unable to identify the creator of the sampler, for several reasons. Firstly, Scottish birth records are hard to inspect from Australia, and many have scanty

information. Secondly, if you enter the name ‘Mary A. Wilson’ on any births, deaths and marriages search site in the English-speaking world, thousands of results fill the page; both the first and last names were extremely common in the 19th century. Finally, researching a matrilineal line can be difficult, as (perhaps unsurprisingly) little information was recorded about wives or daughters in the past. Many shipping records from Britain to Australia list only the husband’s name, followed by ‘wife’ and/or the number of children. Many women are also referred to by their husband’s name only, for instance, ‘Mrs John Smith’, making it difficult to find the woman’s own name, unless you can locate a marriage certificate.

Despite my lack of findings, I have surmised that Mary A. Wilson was perhaps an aunt to Mab, or if not, a cousin or other relative of Mab’s mother, Agnes. At Mab and Russell’s wedding there were guests bearing the surname Wilson, who were relatives of the bride.¹³ If either suggestion is incorrect, as Wilson was a very common name, Mary could be a relation of Russell’s, but this would require extensive further research. Additionally, samplers were almost always kept by the family of the maker. As samplers had sentimental and aesthetic value, the Grimwades most likely kept this one because it had some connection to the family.

Girls’ and women’s crafts, such as needlework, have largely been overlooked by historians, or viewed as evidence of oppression.¹⁴ Mary’s sampler, likewise, has been overlooked in the Grimwade Collection, overshadowed by the bequest’s colonial documents, prints and oil paintings. But a sampler such as Mary’s is just as important as any other object in the collection. It reveals as much about the time in which it was created as anything else does. Using Mary’s piece as a starting point, I suggest that girls’ creation and use of material culture can be viewed as an example of girlhood agency. From such items we can draw inferences



about girls' lives, as well as celebrate their important, albeit marginalised, position in and contribution to their own society. The sampler is here, in the Grimwade Collection, because it was valuable and important to the people who kept it, even if they did not realise it.

The sampler

Stitched in coloured thread on coarse linen, Mary's piece is typical of later 19th-century Australian samplers. These are generally a piece of embroidery, almost exclusively made by girls, not women.¹⁵ Popular from the mid-18th century onwards, they allowed a girl, aged anywhere from five years to her late teens, to practise common stitches and designs that were used in ornamental embroidery for household items. They also helped her hone her plain-sewing skills. As women made and mended most of a family's clothing and household linen by hand well into the 20th century, to sew competently was an essential skill. Samplers were therefore seen as an indispensable part of a girl's education in Britain, a sentiment that travelled to the colonies. English samplers—the style from which the Australian type derives—usually consist of a decorative border; an alphabet, religious scripture or moralising quotation; individual images; the age and name of the maker; and occasionally her location. As they were ornamental and an example of a girl's skills, many have survived. Some were framed and hung in drawing rooms, or saved by girls as a memento of their education and kept in womanhood. Margaret Eleanor Fraser has studied more than a hundred Australian samplers, which in itself reflects the large number that have survived.¹⁶

Mary Wilson's sampler is in good condition, albeit slightly discoloured, and worn in places. The geometric border was probably based on a paper pattern. These were cheap and commonly available in Australia and Britain from around the 1850s.¹⁷ The materials used in this piece were also affordable. Samplers were never made with

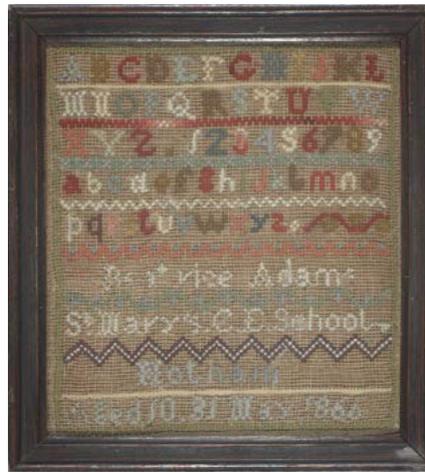
specially produced materials. Rather, girls used wool or embroidery thread that adult women employed for other tasks, like cushion embroidery or marking initials on linen. Australian samplers also became more austere as the 19th century progressed.¹⁸ We see fewer colours, and rough canvas supports. Mary's sampler is typical in that it has no indication that it was made in Australia, the imagery being very similar to that of samplers made in Britain around the same time.¹⁹ On Mary's piece a heraldic lion, a symbol of the British monarchy, sits next to a dog. A church sits to the right. English flowers adorn the bottom. There are no Australian flora or fauna anywhere on this piece. There are, however, perhaps signs of an interest in travel or knowledge of the wider world. The ship, firstly, in the centre of the sampler, implies an awareness of immigration, as migrants to Australia arrived by sea in the 1870s. Secondly, the birds look rather exotic, perhaps suggesting tropical lands.

But this sampler could have been made anywhere in the British Empire, and does not reveal Australian origins through its imagery. Comparison with samplers made in Melbourne, held in Museums Victoria's collection, confirms that Mary's is typical of those at the time. Assorted needlework made by the Winter sisters between 1846 and 1867 (see example above), and one by Beatrice Adams made in 1866 (see page 38), have similar stitches, materials and imagery.²⁰ Judging from its materials and imagery, it is impossible to say conclusively where Mary's sampler was made, other than it was most likely in Britain or Australia.

Domestic comfort

I am surmising that the sampler was made in Melbourne. Needlework in the colonies, though deriving its style from the imperial centre of Britain, served additional functions. As mentioned, needlework was a vital womanly skill, and

Beatrice Adams, Sampler, St Mary's C.E. [Church of England] School, Hotham [North Melbourne], Victoria, 31 May 1866, wool embroidery, 31.5 × 28.5 cm. SH 940966, Museums Victoria.



most girls in Victoria would have learnt to sew. In 1872 the *Education Reform Act* compelled all children over the age of six to attend school. This education was provided free of charge, except for needlework classes.²¹ The fact that some parents were willing to pay for needlework lessons for their daughters shows that needlework was considered a valuable skill. Girls would have also learnt sewing at home from female relatives, on top of their household duties.

Lorinda Cramer distinguishes between the role of women's needlework in Britain and the colonies. She contends that in Britain ornamental sewing was a marker of genteel femininity and accomplishment. In Australia, however, especially on the Victorian goldfields, she suggests that women's 'needlework could transform conditions for families and greatly improve settlers' quality of life'.²² Much of colonial Victorian space—a tent in the regional goldfields, a bark hut on a squatter's farm, or even a terrace house in the new city of Melbourne—was viewed as comfortless and uncultivated compared to Britain, far from 'civilisation' and homely furnishings. People had left everything behind to try their luck in this new colony. Women's needlecraft—embroidered cushions, hand-crocheted doilies and other items—could make a rough or lonely colonial home comfortable. Cramer states: 'Women's everyday sewing therefore had a far-reaching impact, empowering them to manipulate their material worlds into something that resembled the homes they had left behind'.²³ When possessions were few and money tight, hand-sewn items could remind a family of genteel refinement in Britain, and homely comfort in trying, sometimes dangerous, circumstances. In her analysis, Cramer concentrates on *women's* craft. I contend, however, that Victorian *girls'* needlework played an equally important function in the colonial home.

I firstly suggest that girls' material culture, such as samplers, could actively influence human emotion

and behaviour. Just as Cramer suggests that women's needlework improved comfort, a daughter's needlework would have also improved the quality of life for settler families. Their samplers, or other needlework and plain sewing that they contributed to a family's material possessions, could make a colonial house or tent infinitely more comfortable and home-like.

Secondly, Victorian girls were expected to be an 'angel in the house'—an emotional support and pure moral guide for other family members.²⁴ Thus, their material culture production perhaps served as a tangible token of the emotional comfort a daughter or a sister could provide, and might even be a morale booster. The fact that so many samplers have survived, probably framed and hung in drawing rooms such as the Grimwades' at Miegunyah, implies their almost universal emotional value. The sampler could also be a tangible token of a girl's physical contribution to a household. As Howitt stated, daughters were useful in a colonial household, as they performed vital chores. Kathryn Hunter emphasises the important, and unrecognised, role that daughters' labour played on family farms and in colonial households.²⁵

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, like the Winter sisters, Beatrice Adams and the hundreds of other girls whose samplers have survived, saw herself as an individual. These girls were creative agents with the ability to create a beautiful piece of needlework. Mary must have felt proud of her creation, as she identified herself as its maker. Many women kept the samplers made while girls throughout their adult life. This act of retention shows the value some women placed on their girlhood creations. A sampler is therefore not merely a symbol of idealised femininity, but possibly a manifestation of a girl's individual identity and pride in her creativity.

The permanence 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 article shows they have been designated as important remnants of girls' culture by institutions and individuals alike, for more than 150 years. The fact that the sampler in question was kept by Russell and Mab Grimwade, who were acclaimed cultural connoisseurs, reveals its significance to these two individuals.

Aboriginal girls' fibrecraft

But white, potentially well-to-do girls like Mary (if she was indeed a relative of the affluent Grimwades) were not the only ones who sewed. Girls from all social classes and circumstances created samplers. For instance, one was presented to the wife of the governor of Van Diemen's Land in 1838 by girls at the Female Orphan School in Hobart.²⁶ Koorie girls living in Victoria also created needlework. The invasion of Victoria by white settlers from the 1830s culminated in a repressive, protectionist policy by the 1860s. The government forced Aboriginal populations onto missions and government stations,²⁷ in an effort to eradicate traditional ways of life and 'assimilate' Aboriginal people into European-style society.²⁸ In the 1850s and 1860s, mission schools began to teach Aboriginal children basic numeracy and literacy.²⁹ The girls at some missions also learnt sewing, as shown in an 1867 letter from Bessy Flower at Ramahyuck station.³⁰ Although no (currently) known examples of Koorie girls' colonial-era needlework have survived, other examples of their material culture do exist. Samples of Koorie women's fibrecraft from this period, such as baskets and weaving, are housed at Museums Victoria. Girls at missions such as Coranderrk worked alongside senior women to create baskets for sale and for their own use.³¹ European techniques and styles, taught and

encouraged by mission authorities, were adopted to create items that would appeal to a white market. In absorbing these methods into their traditional practice, these women and girls ensured the continuation and development of culture. In such an under-studied area, Koorie girls' needlework and sewing could possibly be an equally important marker of resistance and resilience. Their sewing perhaps made vital contributions to community, like that of girls in settler homes.

Conclusion

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

Catherine Gay is a recent graduate of the University of Melbourne, who is embarking on a museums and cultural collections career. She is hoping to undertake her PhD next year at the university. Her BA (Honours) thesis, 'Collection, collation and creation: Girls and their material culture, Victoria 1870–1910' (School of Historical and Philosophical Studies, University of Melbourne, 2018), explored Victorian girls' use and creation of material culture, including Koorie girls' fibrecraft production.

The University of Melbourne Art Collection is managed by the Ian Potter Museum of Art: <https://art-museum.unimelb.edu.au/>.

- 1 William Howitt, *Land, labour and gold, or, Two years in Victoria, with visits to Sydney and Van Diemen's Land*, London: Longman, Brown, Green, 1855.
- 2 I use the term 'Victorian' for the Australian colony (now state) of Victoria, not for the period during which Queen Victoria reigned.

- 3 Carol Dyhouse, *Girls growing up in late Victorian and Edwardian England*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981, p. 30. Dyhouse's analysis of 19th-century England can be applied to a colonial setting. Lorinda Cramer makes a similar contention of the colonial valuing of 'industriousness' in 'Making a home in gold-rush Victoria: Plain sewing and the genteel woman', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 48, no. 2 (3 April 2017), p. 214.
- 4 Two diaries and one memoir are studied by Kate Williams in 'Like mother, like daughter: Middle-class girlhood in Victoria 1870–1900', BA (Hons) thesis, University of Melbourne, 1995. Examples of scrapbooks made by girls, now held in the collection of Melbourne Museum, include 'Scrapbook, Miss Jones, Bendigo, late 19th century' (SH 991062) and 'Scrapbook, Margaret Knopp, Woods Point, 1884' (HT 23656).
- 5 Margaret Eleanor Fraser, 'With my needle: Embroidery samplers in colonial Australia', Master's thesis, School of Historical and Philosophical Studies, University of Melbourne, 2008, p. 21.
- 6 On material culture theory, Prown is considered one of the first treatises in the interdisciplinary use of the methodology: Jules David Prown, 'Mind in matter: An introduction to material culture theory and method', *Winterthur Portfolio*, vol. 17, no. 1 (1982), pp. 1–19. Gerritsen and Riello provide a contemporary summary and framework: Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello (eds), *Writing material culture history*, London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.
- 7 Kate Darian-Smith and Carla Pascoe, *Children, childhood and cultural heritage*, London: Routledge, 2013, p. 7.
- 8 For an extensive history of the Grimwades' Miegunyah bequest and its legacy, see John Poynter and Benjamin Thomas, *Miegunyah: The bequests of Russell and Mab Grimwade*, Melbourne University Press, 2015.
- 9 Papers, photographs and other documents are part of University of Melbourne Archives, while the books are in Special Collections in the Baillieu Library.
- 10 Poynter and Thomas, *Miegunyah*, p. 100.
- 11 Death record number 12238 / 1931, Victoria. Public Record Office Victoria, Births Deaths and Marriages.
- 12 Birth record, Scotland Births and Baptisms, see www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:XYR1-VL6.
- 13 Queen Bee, 'Wedding of the week: Grimwade–Kelly', *Australasian*, 16 October 1909, p. 45.
- 14 Rozsika Parker for example presented needlework as a mechanism of oppression in 18th- and 19th-century England, which reinforced women's subordination (Rozsika Parker, *The subversive stitch: Embroidery and the making of the feminine*, London: Women's Press, 1989).
- 15 Fraser, 'With my needle'. The introduction to Fraser's thesis provides a good history of Australian samplers, as well as a review of the literature.
- 16 Fraser, 'With my needle'.
- 17 Fraser, 'With my needle', p. 28.
- 18 Fraser, 'With my needle', p. 31.
- 19 Fraser, 'With my needle', p. 30.
- 20 Eliza Winter, Melbourne, Sampler: Alphabet with birds and flowers, c. 1846–53 (HT 38738); Alice Winter, Melbourne, Sampler: 'Remember thy creator in the days of thy youth', c. 1866 (HT 38899); Alice Winter, Melbourne, Sampler: 'Honour thy father and mother and forget not all their kindness', c. 1867 (HT 38901); Eliza Winter, Melbourne, Sampler: Alphabet and numerals, c. 1846–53 (HT 38902); Winter sisters, Melbourne, Sampler: Decorative motifs and borders, c. 1846–53 (HT 38903); Beatrice Adams, St Mary's School, Hotham, Victoria, Sampler: Alphabet and numerals, 31 May 1866 (SH 940966).
- 21 Geoffrey Blainey, *A history of Victoria*, Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 297.
- 22 Cramer, 'Making a home in gold-rush Victoria', p. 221.
- 23 Cramer, 'Making a home in gold-rush Victoria', p. 226.
- 24 Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian girl and the feminine ideal*, London: Croom Helm, 1982, pp. 38–48. Gorham discusses English girls' relationship to their families as one of 'service'. Girls would provide support and be a moral model for fathers and brothers.
- 25 Kathryn McKerral Hunter, *Father's right-hand man: Women on Australia's family farms in the age of Federation, 1880s–1920s*, Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2004.
- 26 Fraser, 'With my needle', p. 13.
- 27 The longest-running stations were Lake Condah (1867–1918), Lake Hindmarsh (Ebenezer) (1858–1903), Lake Tyers (1861–1908), Lake Wellington (Ramahyuck) (1862–1908) and Coranderk (1862–1924).
- 28 Ian Clark, *'A peep at the Blacks': A history of tourism at Coranderk Aboriginal Station, 1863–1924*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016, p. 5.
- 29 Patricia Grimshaw et al. (eds), *Letters from Aboriginal women in Victoria, 1867–1926*, History Department, University of Melbourne, 2002, p. 15.
- 30 Bessy Flower (at Ramahyuck) to Anne Camfield (at Annesfield, Albany), August 1867: 'I have begun to knit this afternoon[;] we are going to have a sewing class every afternoon' [at the school on the mission]. Grimshaw et al., *Letters from Aboriginal women*, p. 198.
- 31 Clark, *A peep at the Blacks*, p. 16.