

## Missing Matilda Eliza: Suppressed Narrative Threads in the Story of Colonial Migration Jackie Cook

The story of Matilda Eliza, teenaged colonist, begins from the perspective of a now often-told anecdote. Close to obliteration within her family memory for 150 years, her experiences are now beginning to reveal interesting new threads in the history of settlement.

*In the twilight of an evening in spring, seventy miles from home and a campfire still to be lit, two Irish prospectors, searching for chrome on the wave-eroded cliffs of a place called Current Basin, noticed something floating in the tide.*

*It was bobbing gently on an ebb flow, slowly shifting down the beach, and one of the men followed down a receding wave and scooped it up. He pulled onto the beach a bag, of the kind still known as a kit: a flat satchel woven of flax, with a long shoulder strap and a small loop-and-toggle bone fastener. Inside it, tied to the base of the handles with a man's silk handkerchief, was a dead baby.*

*It was October, 1861 – for this was the spring of a colonial year, in a place where settlement had proven slow in spreading, and the steep bush-clad hills and long sea inlets had made this countryside inaccessible to farmers. So whose family had lost – or abandoned – a new-born child? As the light died, one of the men struggled to the top of the cliff, and saw a brig standing out to sea towards the North, but otherwise – nothing.*

*Burying the tiny body, still in its bag, in the dry sand at the top of the beach, and erecting a small marker cairn of stones to protect it, they made their way back to the town they had started from: Nelson, at the top of New Zealand's South Island; then a community of around 5,000, and reported the matter to the Sergeant Major of Police.*

In 1861 Nelson was a bold social experiment – but one which was largely thought to be failing. It was very much the mix of middle-class capitalists and aspirant labourers which the Wakefield settlement strategy behind its design had predicted for it. It was just that the interests of the two groups were proving incompatible, as Karl Marx had prophesied in Chapter 3 of *Das Kapital*.<sup>1</sup> The telling of a very-much suppressed part of the Nelson settlement experience – this story of one young woman and her baby – suggests that, to some extent, an incommensurability of class interests lay not just in the relations of production, but those of reproduction: in sexual politics, and the many social suppressions enacted in its name.

The aim here is not just to 'surface' unheard or disregarded voices, in the mode of second wave feminism; seeking out the untold stories of the domestic and private sphere of women's experience. With Lawler, I am 'more concerned here with the ways in which narratives circulate socially as cultural and social resources.

<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976).

These are stories through which social actors make sense of the world, of their places within it, and of their own identities.’<sup>2</sup> This study considers what Ricoeur called *emplotment*.<sup>3</sup> He urges an analysis of stories which does not attend to the structure of how they work (which would be the task of narratology), but instead considers the relations between a story, its producers, and its audiences – all to be understood within those local contextual constraints which decide when a story is, or is not, meaningful, and so worth telling, or possible to tell.

The stories surfaced in this study are those whose *emplotment* has been subject to an artificial *dis*-connection: a processing where at least some of the links which make the events-sequence in a story meaningful, have been removed. At times, characters and their actions have been ‘written out’: expunged from both family and official records. At other moments, it becomes clear that these narratives were circulating, but so heavily constrained by alternative narrative framings – *emplotments* – as to be rendered unconnectable to the lives of the original agents. It is then the analyst’s task, as anthropologist Clifford Geertz once put it, to trace out those ‘experience-near’ concepts which impacted directly upon the lived lives of those in these stories, and bring to them the ‘experience-distant’ concepts which ‘theorists have fashioned in order to capture the general features of social life.’<sup>4</sup> This is not then to assume any capacity on the part of the analyst to stand alongside and ‘experience’ how these life-stories were lived, but again in Geertz’s words, to examine the broader contexts of each story’s telling, to ‘figure out what the devil they [thought] they [were] up to.’<sup>5</sup>

Put simply, when events within stories have been reframed, often with what Lawler terms ‘violence’<sup>6</sup> to serve the needs of other social genres, the reframing itself needs analysis. For Lawler, ‘narratives always and necessarily build in attempts at understanding.’<sup>7</sup> Refusing to retell a story, or to allow it to be told, or telling it in ways outside its ‘experience-near’ *emplotment*, establishes new connectivities for the events of the story; new significances for its characters. This study argues, on behalf of the ‘missing’ or de-storied woman behind the events outlined above, for a *re-emplotment* that seeks to restore an important part of what early colonists, even to the most socially respectable and rationally planned destinations, ‘thought they were up to’.

Consider the main plot of settlement stories: tales of heroic pioneers, and the planting of solid citizenry on the shores of a new settlement. Its histories, in their own words, seek to ‘represent the hopes, dreams and endeavours, of all the early settlers.’<sup>8</sup> But are all those hopes and dreams – even all the endeavours – ‘plotted’ within officially sanctioned records of the lives of ‘ordinary folk’? Even primary

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<sup>2</sup> S. Lawler, ‘Stories and the Social World’, *Research Methods for Cultural Studies*, ed. M. Pickering (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008) 32-49.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Ricoeur, ‘Life in Quest of Narrative’ in David Wood (ed.) *Narrative and Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 1991) 20-33.

<sup>4</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge* (Fontana, 1983) 58.

<sup>5</sup> Geertz.

<sup>6</sup> Lawler 32-49.

<sup>7</sup> Lawler 36.

<sup>8</sup> June E. Neale, *Pioneer Passengers: To Nelson by Sailing Ship – March 1842-June 1843* (Nelson: Anchor Press, 1982) ii.

sources – the ship’s logs, letters home, contemporary news reports, Court transcripts and census statistics used here – carefully ‘plot out’ entire sectors of everyday experience. From the outset, ventures as well-ordered as the Nelson settlement were scrupulous in their record keeping. At the same time however, those records were so securely founded in a proudly patriarchal social order as to discount whole layers of lived experience. Women’s lives were for instance reported as if inevitably and entirely predicated upon the enthusiastic support of their family: complete immersion within the domestic function, and with very little of significance to relate, unless it be the proud accounting of their household’s establishment. This discussion suggests however that the Nelson settlement was in many ways seriously destabilised by the presence of its women – as evidenced in the persistent upwelling of narrative fragments of contrary ways of being, surfacing within the account of an ordered colonisation. Acting as a counter-flow in the meticulous recording of this comparatively late colonial venture, there is evidence aplenty of ambivalent responses to the matter of migration. Such stories *emplot* a particular view of the colonists’ aspiration towards social transformation, involving very specific instances of the quest for a personal form of liberty, which sees the menfolk – and the moralism of those middle-class wives and mothers who so willingly acted as agents of patriarchy – struggling to assert and sustain old-country codes of social and cultural control.

In some cases the battle for respectability comes perilously close to defeat. The Ship’s Log of *The Bombay*, Deptford to Nelson, 1842,<sup>9</sup> records an enquiry held on board into the conduct of some of the single women. One, accused of having left her cabin on several occasions to ‘visit with the Steward’ had been observed to have ‘stayed for some length of time’. With remarkable enterprise, she had found a way to dislodge lattice-work and creep through to the crew quarters. An order was made that a board be nailed over the hatchway from the single women’s quarters, and the door locked at 9 pm – to no avail. Two were discovered leaving their quarters, dressed in men’s clothing – and were described as ‘very impudent’ when forestalled by the Ship’s Surgeon. The carpenter was instructed to partition their cabin, and lock them in. When told they were to be punished by having their heads shaven and their rations reduced to bread and water, they threatened to open the scuttles and sink the ship.

Careful reading of the records shows that ship-board liaisons and adventures in self-assertion were not limited to the young and unruly. One of the first German clergymen travelling to Nelson recorded disruption among an otherwise god-fearing set of emigrants, caused by the romancing of elderly widows.<sup>10</sup>

We had once a double wedding. Four no longer young persons – they made two pairs – became enamoured of one another under the warm tropic sky. The first we heard of this love story was a cry of strife among the emigrants.

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<sup>9</sup> Records held in the Nelson Provincial Museum, New Zealand, at Isel Park, Stoke; accessed February 2008.

<sup>10</sup> From the Journal of Lutheran Pastor Wohlers, Voyage of the *St Pauli*, Hamburg to Nelson, 1842-3; translated from the German, in typescript, at the Nelson Provincial Museum, Isel Park, Stoke, New Zealand.

It was discovered that an elderly and very dressy widow was the aggressive party. She was ordered onto the poop and scolded by the Agent for her breach of the peace. 'Yes' she replied, quite unabashed, 'I have boxed my daughter's ears ... because she wishes to prevent me marrying.'

What these accounts *emplot* is the struggle of a regulatory authority, moral or civil, to enact control over the all-too-often unruly aspirations of those seeking release into something less restrictive: something in which the expression of their own hopes and even desires is more immediately to be realised. The colonial venture may certainly have promised a second-chance for the many middle-class capitalists whose enterprises had foundered in Europe, some them subsequently prominent in the Nelson settlement. Documentation of the aspirations of the labouring class is much more rare, but there are diaries and letters which record the same hopes and dreams of a life renewed – and improved. At the same time, representations of working-class attitudes as seen by their masters were building a particular view as to who was, and who was not, to access the opportunities of the new society. Across the second half of the nineteenth century *Punch* magazine ran a series of cartoons called 'Servant Gal-ism, or, What's to become of the missuses?' where the middle-classes were invited to laugh at the personal aspirations of their female domestic staff. In the first offering a plain, button-nosed and thin young serving girl, warming her rather large and flat foot at the kitchen fire, remarks to her tea-drinking companion: 'I tell you what, Cook, with my Beauty and Figger, I ain't a-going to stop in sarvice no longer. I shall be orf to Horsetraylier.'<sup>11</sup>

There is, then, a tension evident within the act of colonial migration. The official licensing of the rationalist project of 'improvement' to be effected in the act of colonisation, is simultaneously being used to restrict some of the less-well-articulated but nevertheless powerfully enacted drives towards liberty and autonomy among those who sign on. Such impulses were, it seems, to be fostered only in the *idea* of a new society. For all practical purposes, those 'capitalists' whose financial investment in land and productive enterprise were to develop those colonies founded under the Wakefield scheme, saw their own social and cultural values as inevitably among those aspired to by the indentured labouring classes. Paid employees – servant girls included – were to 'work their way'<sup>12</sup> – but also to produce future generations of labour.

Nor were such perspectives limited to those like Edward Gibbon Wakefield himself<sup>13</sup> – or Karl Marx – theorising the social and cultural formations engaged by the act of colonisation. Extracts from settlers' letters home – including those

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<sup>11</sup> Cartoon: 'Servantgalism; or, What's to Become of the Missuses?' *Punch Magazine* No. 1, London, 1853; in Ruth Teale, ed. *Colonial Eve* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1978) 60.

<sup>12</sup> See especially Ruth Teale, 'Free women', *Colonial Eve* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1978) 37-64.

<sup>13</sup> Wakefield was especially close to the Nelson settlement. His nephew, Captain Arthur Wakefield, led the first expedition and later controlled the colony, until his death in a land dispute with Maori owners at Wairau. Arthur Wakefield's earlier naval career – he had been Lieutenant to Captain Hardy, Admiral Horatio Nelson's friend – explains the title of the new settlement, and its many subsequent references to Nelson's naval exploits.

dispatched to the press, in the hope of soliciting more colonists, contain endless small glimpses of attempts made to persist with the classed moral and social perspectives of the 'old country'. The colonial virtues might be founded upon hard work, practicality, and potential for productivity – but they were also to be grounded in the correct observance of social deference and ritualised cultural traditions; the only behaviours held able to produce a successful 'translation' of the old into the new.

Mrs Sarah Greenwood, a lively and persistent letter-writer for 'home' consumption, is quite clear in her own mind about what denotes colonial 'success'. In letters preserved in the Bett Collection at the Nelson Museum she records a dinner party at her homestead for the Superintendent of the Nelson settlement, Major Richmond, in 1850:

We have been quite gay lately as Major and Miss Richmond have been spending a week in Motueka. It was Miss R's first visit, and we felt bound to make her as welcome as we could. They drank tea with us the first evening of their visit, and on the next we gave the first Quadrille Party ever known on these shores amongst us RESPECTABLES. We had tea and coffee at half-past six, cleared out the tables, and danced Quadrilles, Country Dances, Polkas etc. till nearly eleven with a little singing between whiles. Our refreshments were very simple – cake, negus, wine and stewed plums and cream, mixed in a tureen. ... We had nine guests besides our own two TRIBES, and altogether the room was very well fitted and the gaiety was ALMOST EXTREME, but without anything to object to... Mrs Knyvett's very nice servant, and Mr Thorpe's Betsy (also a nice lass) saved our girls all the trouble of waiting, washing-up etc.<sup>14</sup>

Not only are the values of the RESPECTABLES explicit; they are sustained even in the presence of an obvious equalisation of labour. Mrs Greenwood's daughters are, it seems, quite familiar with 'the trouble of waiting, washing up etc'; such labour suspended only by the now-unfamiliar experience of a Quadrille Party, used quite deliberately to re-assert social superiority, and, as is often the case with Sarah Greenwood, to promote her husband's potential for colonial administrative rule. Beneath these glowing testimonials of success however is a series of rather more prosaic but even more revealing counter-narratives. Settler texts, from the domestic to the civic level, consistently hint at the reassertion of classed social values and associated practices, underlying both the ideals and the emerging realities of pioneer progress. These suggest that everyday survival under the new and always challenging circumstances of colonisation was de-stabilising attempts at imposing a bourgeois hegemony. Sarah Greenwood herself for instance, in another letter home, simultaneously asserts the power of a capitalist householder about to employ domestic labour, and a nervousness in expecting so much, for so little:

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<sup>14</sup> Sarah Greenwood Letters, Bett Collection, Nelson Provincial Museum, Isel Park. See also the biography by June Neale, *The Greenwoods: A Pioneer Family of New Zealand* (Nelson: General Printing Services, 1984).

I am fortunate in securing a good and willing young woman as servant; she comes from Newcastle-on-Tyne, and understands dairy work, bread-making and all kinds of country work. We do not intend giving more than 12 pounds.<sup>15</sup>

The social class distinctions which produce this ongoing expectation of a division of domestic labour are already under stress, having failed to deliver on promises made at the point of colonial recruitment. What is seen from the Old Country as merely the impudence of servant-Gal-ism, was already producing in the colonies a flattening of social class, in relation to social usefulness and energy, and the aspiration towards independence which drove them. Nor is it a purely economic calculation of worth which is in play, as a further extract from a Sarah Greenwood letter suggests. Still in the first few years of settlement, she is already recording lapses in class segregation, which are threatening to produce the sorts of behaviours hinted at here:

All the young people of the family are married except the younger sons, for the preservation of whose morals the kind mother steadily refuses to keep any domestic servant, but a boy of about twelve years old, as there are few women about us without some flaw in their character; at least I believe I may say that the majority are suspected.<sup>16</sup>

In the rough-and-tumble of colonial life, everyone pitching in to survive, some making good faster than others, the ambitions – and the attractions – of worker-settler women were finding expression in any number of ways. So how far did this new instability – sometimes social, sometimes moral – rest on a growing assertion of their own desires and ambitions by the labouring colonists, as opposed to the fears of the ‘Respectables’ that it might be so? Existing weaknesses in the fabric of mid-nineteenth century European society were rendered far more visible once ‘the missuses’ had to share in the deprivations and compromises and hard physical conditions of living in the colonies.

The story of settler Matilda Eliza, who achieved sudden notoriety twelve years after arriving in Nelson as a thirteen-year-old, provides powerful insight into experiences within colonial life which were not being reported in the official record. Whether or not she could read her own story as it slowly emerged in the local newspaper is unknown; what is evident, however, is the capacity of this small

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<sup>15</sup> Sarah Greenwood, Letter written upon arrival on board the *Phoebe*, 13 April 1843; see also June Neale, *The Greenwoods*, 10. A little later Sarah Greenwood notes the response of this woman to her wages and situation: ‘Poor Margaret is sadly disappointed in the place and with reason having been accustomed to excellent situations, and having expected to get 20 or 25 pounds per ann. whereas few people give more than 12, and most do without altogether. At the end of the 3 months for which I engaged her, I expect she will leave.’ Ever positive, Mrs Greenwood plans to take on her own domestic labour: ‘I find cooking is a very simple thing, and amusing enough; and as to cleaning of all kinds, I am ashamed to confess that I like it most vulgarly’ (Neale, *Greenwoods* 14-15).

<sup>16</sup> Sarah Greenwood, Letter discussing a visit to the Redwood family, ‘a fine specimen of English Yeomanry’, September 1850; see also Neale, *Greenwoods* 65.

settlement to focus inexorably in on the circumstances of one young woman's life – once it can be shown to breach the sanctioned *emplotments* of colonial experience.

The *Examiner*, Nelson, 1861<sup>17</sup>

Coroner's Inquests

#### INFANTICIDE

An inquest was held on Saturday evening last, at the Pier Hotel, Haven-road, on the body of a female infant (name unknown), which was found at the Croixelles a little above high-water mark on the previous Sunday.

Drs Williams and Sealey made a post mortem examination, and gave it as their opinion that the child was dead before it was placed in the water, but from the decomposed state of the face and neck they did not feel justified in expressing a confident opinion as to whether the child had been suffocated by a ligature placed around its neck; they believed that that child did not die from convulsions, or from any natural cause. The child was the offspring of white parents.

The jury returned a verdict of wilful murder against some person or persons unknown.

The factual approach to what is a moving story preserves its events as very much part of the official record. This may be a young colony, but here it is switching in the full regulatory apparatus of a mature justice system: Coroner, medical examiners, and sworn jurors. The baldness of the reporting, a little perversely, produces its own forms of sensationalism, phrases such as 'from any natural cause' or 'suffocated by a ligature' at once scientific in their accuracy, but simultaneously inviting the most extreme conjecture. On Wednesday 6 November 1861, the case came before the Police Court, heard by the resident magistrate and two Justices of the Peace.

The Sergeant Major of Police, to whom the case had been referred by the Coroner, had been busy. Having established from the Captain of the one ship in the area at the time of the discovery of the body, the brig *Gazelle*, that no women were on board, he had surveyed all the other shipping in the area. As the local news-sheet *The Examiner* reported, 'the *Airedale* had left Nelson at about that time, and rumours were pretty rife whether the child had not been dropped from that vessel.'<sup>18</sup> Consultation with the Harbour Master had established however that the tides were wrong to have carried a body into Current Basin, and all infants carried by passengers on the *Airedale* had been identified as alive and in good health.

The Police Sergeant Major turned to the evidence on the body. Using the handkerchief which had attached the baby to the kit basket, he questioned all the linen-drapers and store owners for records of purchase of silk handkerchiefs. The story was not long in coming – but was more curious and revealing than may have been anticipated; with much to say of relations between the younger men and

<sup>17</sup> The *Examiner* began publication in the first weeks of settlement. Nelson still has its own daily newspaper, and a full archive of all editions is available at the Nelson Provincial Museum at Isel Park, with the collection currently being made available online.

<sup>18</sup> *Examiner*, Monday 12 November 1861.

women of the colony. Nelson girls, it seems, had found some very creative ways of registering their attachment to young gentlemen. *The Examiner* reported the account given to the Police Court, using the sort of reporter-shorthand telegraphese which Dickens employs, in writing the deposition of Jo the Crossing Sweeper in *Bleak House*.<sup>19</sup>

Thomas Harley, sworn: Lost a pocket handkerchief about two months since; it was a silk speckled one; lost it at the theatre at the Odd-Fellows hall, when the Waimea Players were acting; Matilda Eliza Haslam and her sister had taken my friend's handkerchief and given it back to him, and I thought they had taken mine; would know the handkerchief if I was to see it; it was marked with a T; (the handkerchief was here produced); believe that was my pocket handkerchief.<sup>20</sup>

At last the missing Matilda Eliza is named – and immediately, her story is handed over, to be re-assembled into the *plotment* of a Court document, and reproduced verbatim in the press. A local lawyer stands, and to 'save the court further trouble' reads Matilda Eliza Haslam's confession.

About the twenty-fourth day of September last I went over to Wellington in the *Wonga Wonga* steamer and was there confined. Shortly after I felt very bad in the head and back, and fearing I should get an attack of fever the medical man gave me some medicine which drove away my milk; the child suffered severely from the want of the milk, and I was advised to give it something to nourish it with; I gave it some Godfrey's cordial. One night the child was more unwell than usual; I had no cordial in the house but I had some rum and peppermint which I was in the habit of taking. I gave it a teaspoonful which it sucked down and appeared relieved. When it again commenced to scream, I gave it some more in a table spoon, which took away the child's breath. I felt frightened at the appearance of the child, I danced it up and down for about a quarter of an hour, but it died. I knew not then what to do, I had no friend to consult, so I kept the body until the time of departure of the *Wonga Wonga* steamer for Nelson, when I went on board, taking the body in a Maori basket under my cape, intending to bring it on to Nelson; but during the voyage, as the body began to smell, I tied the handles of the basket together, and in the evening dropped it over the side of the vessel with the clothing and handkerchiefs around the body, the same which have been produced. I declare that I had no thought of destroying the child, but on the contrary thought the rum and peppermint would relieve it from pain, as the cordial had often done before.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (London: Collins, 1953).

<sup>20</sup> *Examiner*, 11 February 1862.

<sup>21</sup> *Examiner*, 11 February 1862.

On Friday 11 February 1862, a full trial was held before the circuit judge of the Supreme Court, *The Examiner* reporting that ‘the large Court-house was crowded with spectators and auditors of both sexes’. After four hours the jury brought in a verdict of *manslaughter* – but the judge would have none of it. He too had a sense of how stories were to be interpreted, and if jurymen could not get things straight, they would have to be corrected. If the jurors believed that the child came by its death ‘from some cause unknown’, they must then disbelieve the prisoner’s written statement, which gave clear evidence of what had brought about the child’s death. He insisted that they retire once more, in the expectation of a guilty verdict. After an hour and a half, they returned with a verdict of ‘manslaughter, believing the main of the prisoner’s evidence to be true’.<sup>22</sup>

The Judge, reported *The Examiner*, ‘then addressed the prisoner at the bar very impressively’:

The jury had found her guilty of the least of three charges that had impended over her. He would not impugn the verdict of the jury, and he hoped the public would not, but if that jury had found her guilty of wilful murder he could not have quarrelled with them, for it was perfectly open to them to have done so. After a long and patient investigation the jury had decided most mercifully: for it was but right to tell her and the public that if they had found her guilty of manslaughter, disbelieving her statement, it would have been his duty to inflict one of the severest accoutary punishments the law permits.<sup>23</sup>

In the event, he sentenced her to twelve months hard labour – probably laundry work, although so far it has been difficult to find out, for Matilda Eliza Haslam, along with her entire family, now drops from history. Her father died soon afterwards, and her mother retired to the home of her eldest daughter; her oldest brother took ship for California, where he subsequently died in the Boveice Mine disaster,<sup>24</sup> and her other relatives moved off to the anonymity of North Island colonies. So who was Matilda Eliza Haslam, and how did her story evolve? We know from the migration records that she arrived with her family at the age of thirteen, sailing in on the *Berenicia* in 1849 – along with Mrs Greenwood’s sister. Like the Greenwoods, the Haslams are recorded as being from Mitcham, in Surrey – likely to have been recruited by those letters home that Danforth Greenwood and his busy wife Sarah kept dispatching to the English press, painting such very rosy pictures of the colony and its potential.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Examiner*, 11 February 1862.

<sup>23</sup> *Examiner*, 11 February 1862.

<sup>24</sup> Like many early New Zealand settlers, the eldest Haslam son set out to seek the fortunes his family had failed to make, going to the goldfields in California. Some of his nephews, sons of Matilda Eliza’s eldest sister, went to gold-rushes in Kalgoorlie in Western Australia – but the eldest Haslam boy was killed in a mine explosion on 27 September 1863, aged 24.

<sup>25</sup> Many of these letters, including ones subsequently published in English newspapers, are included in June Neale’s study.

Like many, the Haslams had themselves photographed – a common means of reflecting to family still at ‘home’ that all was well, and everyone prospering.<sup>26</sup> But there is no photo of Matilda, and those last few elements of the record which do exist tell an interesting, if fragmentary, story. By the Nelson Census of 1849, just 2 years after the family arrival and eleven years before Matilda took the trip to Wellington on the *Wonga Wonga*, the Haslams were doing badly. Many settler families never recovered from the financial collapse of the Wakefield enterprise which had become The New Zealand Company.<sup>27</sup> The Haslams were then recorded as living in a thatched hut on common land, having failed to make the leap into the small-holding purchase and independence for which every colonist hoped. The Census officer noted that they owned one goat. However, that same census listed Matilda Eliza Haslam, then aged fifteen, as ‘the householder’ in a brick cottage, with a maidservant, at Shakespeare Walk. The address is to this day a prestigious inner-city location, with the low river-flat access which in the nineteenth century allowed for easy water supply and grazing for domestic stock. This was a woman who was earning rather more than the twelve pounds per year offered by the most substantial settlers – its ‘Respectables’ – to multi-skilled ‘excellent young women.’ She was able, in fact, to offer just such a salary to another. Perhaps her income is explained in a remark made at the trial in 1862, in the testimony of a Mrs Briggs, brought over from Wellington by that energetic Police Sergeant Major to discuss the events of Matilda Eliza’s lying-in. Mrs Briggs deposed that ‘she told me this was her second child, and she had no husband’.<sup>28</sup>

Among the greatest local scandals of its time, noted by *The Examiner* as being ‘as terrible a case as any we have yet had to record’<sup>29</sup> – and that despite two axe murders troubling the Police Sergeant Major’s time in the very same year – this story of Matilda Eliza has much more to reveal. The Police Sergeant Major for instance, demonstrated skills in forensic examination which are generally considered to have developed decades later. More to the point: the twelve good men and true who refused a Judge’s direction, and avoided the ‘accouardy penalty’ of hanging, chose to believe a young woman with a very shaky story. Their decision suggests local knowledge; perhaps community pressure, which persuaded them to risk angering the Supreme Court. Consider too some of the other economic and social circumstances of this story. A non-‘Respectable’ contrived to present herself at first the Police Court, and subsequently a Supreme Court trial, with a lawyer. He too argued a sympathetic perspective on her case: one which suggested that both her pregnancy and the subsequent death of the child were as much the outcomes of the lack of any ‘place of refuge’ as from her own conscious actions. There is evidence

<sup>26</sup> Nelson has a photographic archive dating back to the early 1860s, deeded to the City in the early 1950s by pioneer woman photographer Rose Frank, who ran a photographic business in the main street from the 1880s till her death. The collection, most of it on glass plates, is cross-indexed by family name, and Haslam family members are included – but not Matilda Eliza. Interestingly, Rose Frank was Matilda Eliza’s niece, her mother Emma Haslam being the second Haslam daughter.

<sup>27</sup> Sarah Greenwood herself records many of the privations and instances of suffering caused by this collapse – typically representing it as a challenge to the settlers’ stoicism and ingenuity; at least in Letters for Home consumption.

<sup>28</sup> *Examiner*, 11 February 1862.

<sup>29</sup> *Examiner*, 11 February 1862.

here of a series of intersecting, yet contradictory, emplotments of the Matilda Eliza story – each addressing the same audience of citizens, but in very different ways.

Each iteration of a story has as much to say of the circumstances of its composition as of its events – including this one. As Ricoeur notes, narrative composition involves ‘composing a story from the temporal point of view, drawing a configuration out of a succession.’<sup>30</sup> Migration history we know to be at once an official record of shipping movements, colonial development policies and the glowing ‘letters home’ of middle-class gentlemen settlers and their devoted wives, and an oral archive of family memoir and anecdote. It sets up in both instances an attempt at the creation of a coherent, continuous, positive, ‘licensed’ and always respectable account of progressing family fortunes and social growth. Even those from the worst of beginnings: convicts, ne’er-do-wells, remittance men, outcasts of this or of that regional conflict, are shown to ‘make good’ as they transform themselves and their proud descendants into pillars of the new society.

The suppressed counter-texts which are beginning to surface here however, show that such stories can also be *emplotted* very differently. Not all the migration story is ever fully ‘on the record’. Yet, given the assiduity with which the enterprising and surveillant Victorian consciousness noted, recorded and archived so much of every daily life, including Matilda Eliza’s sad tale, ‘plotted-out’ stories such as these are still recoverable. Until we tell them too, we reproduce a very thin version of our history – and understand ourselves in limited and limiting ways.

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<sup>30</sup> Ricoeur 22.