



HOUSE OF DISCOVERY

Traces of Girlhood



STORIES

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History has left only traces of the experience of girlhood. Yet traces do remain, poignant and important. They tell the stories of girls and young women who grew up in 19th and early 20th-century Victoria and the central role they played in our society.

Featuring handiwork, scrapbooks, writing, archaeological artefacts and photographs, this exhibition illuminates girls' stories.

Exploring themes including opportunities and expectations, work and play, learning and connections, Traces of Girlhood gathers the diverse experiences of girls from our past through the things they have left behind.

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We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Victoria and recognise their continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures; and to Elders past and present.

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be aware that this booklet contains images of deceased persons.

Traces of Girlhood

In 1855 a girl named Annie Morgan inscribed her name onto a slate. She likely used it to practice writing, to work out sums, or to record information. The slate was on the ship *Joanna* which sank two years later off the coast of the Bellarine Peninsula, Victoria. We don't know anything more about Annie Morgan. We are unsure when she was born, who her parents were, or where she grew up. We can't even work out why this object was aboard a ship. All we know is that Annie carved her name into her slate, recording her presence in history.

We often only know about girls like Annie through the physical traces they have left behind. This could be a diary, a letter, a needlework item, or the inscription of their name on an object. Evidence of girls' lives can be found in other, more traditional sources like archives, newspapers, photographs or adult observations. Yet things girls altered or made themselves are powerful markers of girls' experiences.

This exhibition uses these traces to explore the lives of girls who grew up in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Victoria. It follows the stories of several girls who led diverse lives in this period. Their varied experiences were shaped by race, ethnicity, indigeneity, class, religion, and geography, but bound together by gender and age.

Traces of Girlhood reinscribes girls into Australian history by exploring the important contributions they made to their families, communities and society, and richness of their experiences.





Annie Morgan's Slate, 1855. Heritage Victoria Collection. Traces of Girlhood exhibition, 2024. Photographer: Jessica Charleston.

Ellen

In 1863, Queen Victoria received a crochet collar and doily, along with two letters. The items had travelled halfway across the world, all the way from Larni Barramul, or Franklinford, in central Victoria. Ellen, a 13-year-old Dja Dja Wurrung girl, had crafted these creations as gifts for the Queen. Why did Ellen make these items? What purpose did they serve?

After Victoria was invaded by colonisers in 1835, Aboriginal populations were devastated by disease and violence. Some of the surviving Dja Dja Wurrung, Traditional Owners of land in central Victoria, moved to the Loddon Aboriginal Protectorate Station. It was near their sacred mountain Lalkambuk (Mount Franklin), which means 'the Emu's nest'. The station was established by Methodist missionary Edward Stone Parker, who wanted to educate and 'civilise' First Nations people, forcing them to adopt European ways of living. This is where Ellen was born in 1849 or 1850.



Ellen at Coranderrk, 1866, aged around 16. Carl Walter, 1866. H91.1/88, State Library of Victoria.

Larni Barramul

Ellen's parents farmed land at Larni Barramul. Larni Barramul means 'home of the Emu' and connects to a sacred Dja Dja Wurrung Dreaming. The historical record reveals little Ellen's home and family life, the Dja Dja Wurrung law, lore, stories and language she would have learnt from her mother and father, the games she played, or the work she performed. Ellen, like other First Nations children, would have soon become a knowledge holder, imparted with important knowledge from her parents and Elders.



Map showing Ellen's father's plot of land, labelled 'Dickey - Yarra-bullack'. Hugh Fraser, *Plan of a Part of the Aboriginal Station in the County of Talbot* [Detail], April 1854. LODDON88, VPRS 8168/P0002, Historic Plan Collection, Public Record Office of Victoria.



Ellen, third from left, with other Dja Dja Wurrung at Mount Franklin Aboriginal Station. Richard Daintree and Antoine Fauchery, photograph, 1857. H84.167/42, State Library of Victoria.

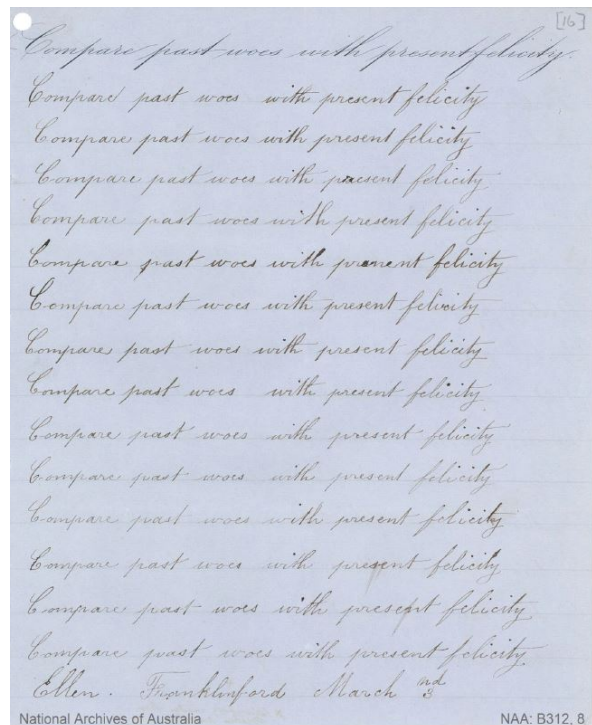
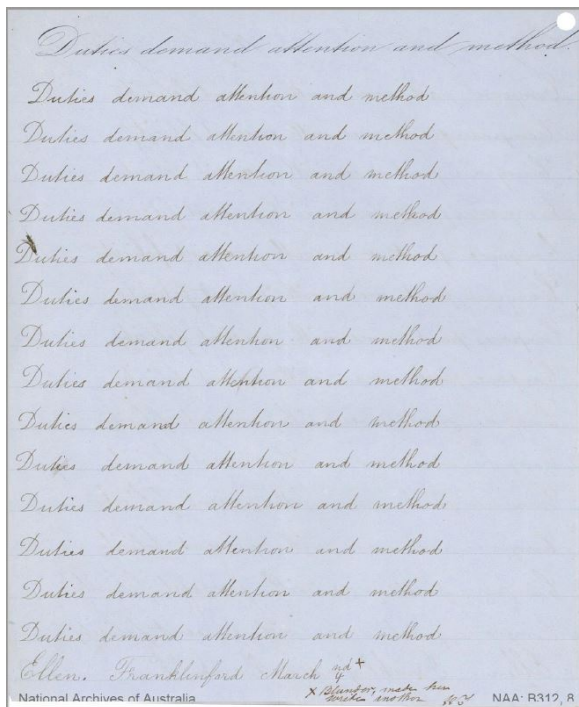


Mia mias and huts at Ellen's family's farm, circa 1858. Richard Daintree and Antoine Fauchery, photograph, circa 1858. H84.167/25, State Library of Victoria.

‘Attention and Method’

Ellen learnt to read and write in English at the station school, alongside crochet and was probably taught how to sew. Around 14 years of age, Ellen wrote and rewrote the lines ‘Duties demand attention and method’ and ‘Compare past woes to present felicity’. Copy exercises were designed to teach students moral values alongside literacy. Ellen’s work was corrected by her teacher—for making the mistake of writing ‘March 4nd’ instead of ‘March 14th’. Ellen had to redo the whole exercise.

Formal schooling provided for Aboriginal children was culturally destructive and attempted to erase traditional knowledges, language and practices. Nevertheless, many Aboriginal Peoples in Victoria learnt to read and write in English, as they knew it would be an important way in which to communicate and advocate for themselves.



Ellen's handwriting exercises, “Duties demand attention and method” and “Compare past woes with present felicity” Aboriginal School, Franklinton, 4 March 1864. In William Thomas, Report on Franklinton, March 5, 1864, folio 16, Item 8, B312/1, National Archives of Australia.



Listen to Ellen read her school exercises and a letter here

Performer: Neane Carter, Dia Dja Wurrung descendant

Gifts for Queen Victoria

Ellen used the skills learnt at the station school to advocate for her people. In 1863, she sent a crochet collar and doily to Queen Victoria, along with two letters. Ellen's crochet has not survived, but it may have looked like the example in the exhibition which was made around 1860. Ellen's mother Eliza was photographed wearing a crochet collar. It may have been made by her daughter.



Eliza, Ellen's mother, wearing a crochet collar, perhaps crafted by Ellen. Carl Walter, photograph, 1866, Coranderrk. H91.1/41, State Library of Victoria.

Ellen's letters

Although the content of Ellen's letters is unknown, she likely asked the Queen to consider her people's welfare. The Queen thanked Ellen for her gifts and letters and the response arrived around the same time that the Government gave the Kulin, the First Nations of Central Victoria, land for a reserve near Healesville, called Coranderrk. Because of Ellen's letters, the Kulin believed that the Queen had directly given them this land, and it is thought that this idea fuelled future activism at the station.

DESPATCH from His Grace the Duke of Newcastle, acknowledging the receipt of the presents sent to the Queen and their Royal Highnesses the Prince and Princess of Wales, and His Royal Highness Prince Alfred, by the Aborigines of the Colony.

Victoria, No. 30.

[COPY.]

SIR,

Downing street, 24th October, 1863.

With reference to my Despatch, No. 22, of the 18th September, I have the honor to inform you that the presents forwarded by the natives for the Queen and the Prince and Princess of Wales have duly arrived, and have been forwarded to Her Majesty and their Royal Highnesses.

The Queen has commanded me to request that you will express to these natives the satisfaction with which Her Majesty has received such assurances of their attachment and loyalty, and the Queen would be glad that the girl Ellen should be assured that Her Majesty has had much pleasure in accepting the collar which she has worked. The Queen trusts that the advantage of education may be thus shown to this poor girl, and that she may be encouraged not only to seek her own improvement, but to acquaint the other aboriginal inhabitants of the interest that their Queen, however distant from her, will always feel in their advancement and welfare.

I have also the satisfaction to convey to you an expression of the lively sense entertained by their Royal Highnesses the Prince and Princess of Wales of the kind feeling which prompted the Aborigines to make them an offering of so much interest.

I am desired to add that their Royal Highnesses have received many tokens of good will and affection from the subjects of Her Majesty the Queen, but conspicuous in their estimation are those which show, as in the present instance, that these sentiments animate the native population of so distant and loyal dependencies.

I have, &c.,

Governor Sir Charles Darling, K.C.B.,

NEWCASTLE.

&c., &c., &c.

The Queen's response to Ellen's gift and letters, 24 October 1863.

"Despatch from His Grace the Duke of Newcastle, acknowledging the receipt of an Address to the Queen from the Aborigines of the Colony", in Fourth Report of the Central Board Appointed to Watch Over the Interests of the Aborigines in the Colony of Victoria, 1864, Appendix VI.

Weaving in disguise

Ellen kept Djaara material knowledges alive through her crochet. Her original pieces have not survived, but we can imagine what they looked like. It may have been very similar to the collar in the exhibition, made around 1860.

Djaara Elder and Masterweaver Aunty Marilyn Nicholls states that crochet is a form of 'weaving in disguise'. Crochet uses similar techniques to Djaara fibre craft, as it is the bringing together of threads to make many things. Djaara Peoples looped string to make knots, creating useful objects like dilly bags used for carrying fruits and plants. Men often wove to make nets. Djaara Peoples today are relearning traditional material practices, including weaving, basketmaking and food production.

"It was interesting weaving the design and thinking of the similarities weaving with the fibre raffia and Ellen's crochet works with cotton." Aunty Marilyn Nicholls



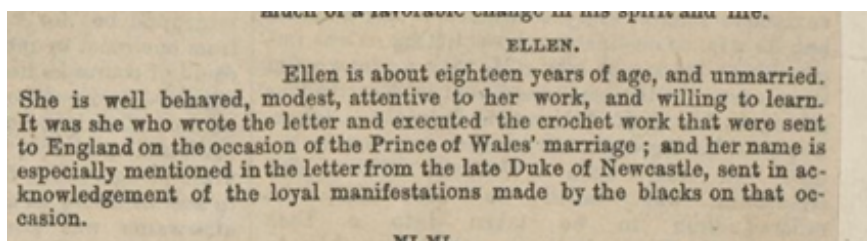
Weaving by Aunty Marilyn Nicholls, *Traces of Girlhood* exhibition, 2024. Photographer: Jessica Charleston.

Ellen's legacy

Ellen moved to Coranderrk 1864, with her mother and the remaining Djaara children at Larni Barramul. She likely attended the school. Aboriginal children were often separated from families at Coranderrk and housed in a large dormitory with other children.

Ellen married and had children, but they did not survive into adulthood. It is unsure when she died, as there are conflicting accounts. There are eighteen Djaara Martinga kuli (ancestors) who have descendants living today.

Ellen became swept up in settler mythology about Coranderrk. She was written about in the *Illustrated Australian News*, noted as the young woman who had sent crochet to the Queen. Her story shows us that Aboriginal girls and young women could advocate for their people and insist on their culture and sovereignty in the face of dispossession.



Engraving of Ellen and extract from *The Australian for Home Readers*, 25 August 1865. State Library of Victoria.

Tilly Ashton

"Gradually it crept upon me — first a mist over everything, then a grey twilight through which objects showed indistinctly. Finally, the world vanished, never again to be visible to the bodily eye, and by my seventh birthday total eclipse of sight had fallen on me."

Tilly Aston, *Tilly Aston: Australia's Blind Poet* (Melbourne: Hawthorn Press, 1946), p. 24.

Matilda Ann (Tilly) Aston (1873 – 1947) was born in Carisbrook, a small town in regional Victoria near Maryborough. Tilly finished her final year of school, started studying at the University of Melbourne and went on to become a teacher and a successful writer. She is considered one of the most famous women from the Maryborough district. The Federal Electorate of Aston in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne is named in honour of Tilly.

Tilly was the youngest of a large family. Her father was a shoemaker and had his own shop. Her vision was impaired from a young age, and Tilly lost her sight at the age of seven. But this didn't stop Tilly from playing, learning, connecting and advocating for herself and other vision-impaired people.



Left: Tilly Aston, aged 16, c. 1889. BRI 515,5, Vision Australia.

Right: Aston boot makers, Tilly's father's business. BRI-P512, Vision Australia.

Making and Creating

Tilly's father died when she was 11 years old. Tilly was wracked with grief. Even though she had lost her vision, Tilly's family members taught her skills to keep her busy, like how to "thread beads, cut paper dolls, and sew my dolly garments" (Memoir, p. 27). Her older sister taught Tilly how to knit, peel vegetables and prepare fruit for jams. Tilly likely made the knitted clothes for her doll. Tilly continued to use the craft skills she learnt as a young girl in her womanhood.



Tilly's Doll, c.1870. Maryborough Midlands Historical Society Collection. Traces of Girlhood exhibition, 2024. Photographer: Jessica Charleston.

Learning

In the 1870s and 1880s Victorian state schools had few resources for children with vision impairments or other disabilities. Class sizes were large, and teachers had little time to dedicate to individual students. For this reason, Tilly couldn't go to the state school in Carisbrook. She learnt Braille from an itinerant missionary.

Aged 8 in 1882, Tilly enrolled as a Boarder at the Asylum and School for the Blind in Melbourne. Although Tilly recalled that it was a large, impersonal institution, she made friends and enjoyed the companionship and competition with her fellow students. The teachers read to pupils, dictated lessons which the students would copy in braille, helped them trace embossed maps and taught music. Students also learnt handicrafts and had opportunities to play together in the grounds.



*Lantern slides of children at the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind, Melbourne, Victoria, c. 1900.
Children knitting, Girls Playing in the Garden, Classroom.*

Defying Expectations

When she was 16, Tilly became the first blind student in Victoria to matriculate, which is the equivalent of Year 12 exams today. She started a degree at the University of Melbourne, but again she had access to few resources. There were no course books in Braille which made learning and keeping up with other students almost impossible, so she had to stop her tertiary studies.

Teacher and Advocate

Tilly turned to teaching and became the first blind person to teach in Victoria. She experienced prejudice from some of her colleagues and left the profession. Tilly went on to become an advocate for vision-impaired Australians. She campaigned for vision-impaired people's right to vote and set up the Association for the Advancement of the Blind and the Association of Braille Writers, which are precursors to organisations like Vision Australia.

Tilly thought that blind people should be consulted on their needs. She strongly believed that her community could contribute greatly to society if the right opportunities and tools to undertake those opportunities were given to them. She received the King's Medal for distinguished citizen service twice in her lifetime. Tilly is remembered today as a tireless advocate.

"The Blind Poet"

Tilly was a talented writer and poet. In 1901 she published her first book *Maiden Verses*, which collated poems from topics such as beauty, the Australian landscape, and the experience of being blind. She also had several stories serialised in newspapers. Tilly usually drafted her books in Braille and then typed them out for her publisher. Her last book, a memoir, was released in 1946, a year before her death.

Braille Writer used in Victoria around 1900. Alfred Wayne & Co, The Visible, c. 1900. Vision Australia Collection. Traces of Girlhood exhibition, 2024. Photographer: Jessica Charleston.



Listen to Tilly talk about making, playing and learning here.

Performer: Tilda Muir

Alice and Eliza Winter

In 1847, Eliza Winter was 5 ½ years old when she stitched her first needlework sampler. Using pastel-coloured threads, Eliza worked the alphabet, motifs of birds and plants, and her name and age onto a piece of fabric.

Eliza was born in Sydney but grew up on La Trobe Street in the heart of Melbourne, likely behind or above her father's cabinet making business. She made two more samplers in the late 1840s or early 1850s using more complicated stitches, demonstrating her developing skill. Her sister Alice, born in 1857, also made samplers, stitching one aged 9 and the other when she was 10.

These two sisters never met. Eliza died in 1853, four years before Alice was born. Yet the things they created bind them in time and bring their stories to us in the present. Their samplers are a tangible reminder of these girls' lives. All girls were expected to learn to sew in 19th-century Victoria and most would have made a sampler like Alice and Eliza's.



Listen to Eliza and Alice read aloud the text they have stitched onto their samplers here.

Performer: Olivia Day



Stranded Embroidery silks, Corticelli Home Needlework, National Trust of Australia (Victoria) Collection. Traces of Girlhood exhibition, 2024. Photographer: Jessica Charleston.

Learning to Sew

Eliza and Alice Winter, like most girls, commenced their sewing education around 5 years of age. Sewing was considered a universal feminine skill in the 19th century. All girls in Victoria, whether Aboriginal, orphaned, working class, middling or well-to-do, were expected to learn to sew. Mothers or teachers at school taught girls how to stitch clothing and household linens and embroider decorative objects. A needlework sampler displayed these essential skills.

Surviving Samplers

Although many women kept their samplers and passed them down, comparatively few remain today. Surviving samplers stand in for the thousands of other pieces that haven't been preserved.



Samplers from the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) Collection. *Traces of Girlhood* exhibition, 2024. Photographer: Jessica Charleston.

Decorative and Practical Skills

Along with decorative embroidery, girls also learnt to make clothing and everyday items. They were taught how to stitch seams and hems, make buttonholes, and darn, which was a way of fixing holes and tears in clothing. Girls even made miniature dresses and shirts, in preparation for making life-sized garments.



Sampler from National Trust of Australia (Victoria) Collection. Traces of Girlhood exhibition, 2024. Photographer: Jessica Charleston.

How to Make a Sampler

1. Start with a 'ground', being the backing fabric, usually made from linen.
2. Plan out your design, which could include text like the alphabet, numerals, religious scripture or verse. A design usually also has decorative borders and motifs, which are symbolic images.

TIP: You can use embroidery patterns for letters and motifs, which are traced onto the fabric and used as a guide for placing stitches.

- Place your fabric into an embroidery hoop, with the part you want to work on in the centre.
 - Thread your needle with embroidery thread, usually made from wool, which comes in skeins. Carefully choose the colours. New dye technologies from the 1860s means that there are lots of bright colours to choose from.
3. Stitch your sampler! You can use a range of stitches, including running stitch, backstitch, stem stitch, French knots, satin stitch and many others to form letters and patterns. The most common stitch at the end of the 19th century was cross-stitch, made by forming small X shapes with thread.
 4. If you make a mistake, unpick your threads and start again. This is an exercise in neatness, not creativity, and your sampler is expected to be perfect.
 5. Finish by stitching your name, age and the date of completion
 6. Voila! Your sampler is complete.
- Once you're competent enough, you can move on to making decorative items, like pincushions or embroidered pictures, or help make and mend household items. A major task will be to mark linens and clothing with family initials, using the alphabet skills you learnt. Fabric was expensive and families needed to keep an eye on it to ensure it didn't get lost or stolen.



Samplers from the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) Collection. *Traces of Girlhood* exhibition, 2024. Photographer: Jessica Charleston.

The Martin Sisters

There were five Martin Sisters living at Viewbank Homestead in Melbourne's north-east. Edith, Emma, Lucy, Annie and Charlotte, resided with their brother Robert and their parents, Dr Robert Martin and Mrs Lucy Martin. They were part of a pastoral settler family and were raised at the idyllic homestead by the Yarra and Plenty Rivers from the 1840s.

The family were well-to-do and enjoyed a prominent place in Melbourne society. All the children grew up and married, with Lucy marrying into the Boyd family of artists who had connections to the Armytages at Como House.

Archaeological excavations at Viewbank have revealed the comfort in which the family lived, as well as the way the Martin sisters passed their time.

A Wealth of Goods

So much of girlhood in the nineteenth century centred around preparing for a good marriage. For the Martin sisters, this meant little formal education, moving in the right social circles, learning manners via dolls and tea sets, and needlework as can be seen in the things archaeologists found at the family home.

Items found Viewbank Homestead include thimbles, pins, needle, bobbins, doll fragments and toy tea sets.

Being a Good Girl?

But how good were these good girls? As well as the dolls, there were also cap gun cartridges, marbles, dominoes, and die which were unlikely to have only belonged to their one brother and suggest more lively play. Either Edith or Emma scratched her ownership into this shell button. A cup marked "A Present for a Good Girl" was smashed.

This liveliness shows again when the girls came to marry. Lucy eloped with Captain Boyd, defying her father's orders, while Edith took over two years to convince her father to allow her to marry her Captain Bradley. Annie, however, after showing much resistance to marrying the middle-aged Dr Youl when she was 17, gave in to her father's wishes a year later.

A friend of family wrote:

The Exhibition has been a great pleasure and very good concerts have been constantly held there. One of the belles has been Annie Martin upon whom Dr Youl has got quite spoony. When she left for Heidelberg he sent her a magnificent gold watch and chain which the young lady declined.

Bou Youk and Bou Laan – Alice and Ethel Tong

Bou Youk and Bou Laan were born in Melbourne, and lived with their family at 24 Lacey Place, just off Melbourne's Little Bourke Street in a laneway. Mr Tong (Chin Tong) was a storekeeper, and Mrs Tong (Sue Hoe) raised their five children. There were four daughters and one son living in the cottage.

Bou Youk, who was also called Alice, was 12 years old when her father died in 1912. Her sister Bou Laan, also called Ethel, was 6 years of age. After the death of their father, the family travelled to China. Bou Youk cried for a long time as the boat sailed away.



Bou Youk (top left) and Bou Laan (bottom left) with their mother and three other siblings, Melbourne, circa 1910. National Archives of Australia.

A Close-Knit Community

In 1999, an archaeological excavation of the Tong family home at Lacey Place in inner Melbourne revealed a scatter of buttons, Chinese porcelain, and toys under the floorboards. They show us that the family kept close links to the Chinese community, and that the children played together with toys bought in Melbourne.

Mrs Tong sent her children to local schools and befriended their teachers. Sister Emilie Anthoness of the Central Mission kept a portrait of the family and said that she “used to visit the house and constantly saw the children” and Sarah Shaw, of the Presbyterian Chinese Mission School, saw the family off when they left for China. Both these women wrote letters identifying Alice and Ethel Tong when they re-entered Australia in 1916.

The family also maintained a close friendship with their relative, Chin Wah Moon, who would later look after Bou Youk and Bou Laan.



Children's toys, tableware, buttons and medicine bottle found at Lacey Place. Heritage Victoria Collection. Traces of Girlhood exhibition, 2024. Photographer: Jessica Charleston.

Racial Discrimination

Sue Hoe and two of her daughters died in China. In 1916, Bou Youk and Bou Laan returned to Melbourne on the *Tango Maru*. These were the years of Australia's White Australia policy, which restricted entry of non-British people to Australia. As the girls were of Chinese appearance, they had to prove they were born in Melbourne to be allowed to enter. They were held on the ship alone, waiting for their identities to be confirmed. During that time, Bou Youk wrote of her memories of life in Melbourne and had to state that she was sure that 10-year-old Bou Laan was her sister. The girls' schoolteachers and family members rallied and provided letters of identification and copies of a family portrait that Sue Hoe had left with friends.

The girls were released after two days, into the care of Chin Wah Moon. Thanks to their family ties and community networks, they were spared the notorious dictation test. This test could be set in any European language and was only for non-British migrants. After 1909, no one ever passed the test.



Listen to Bou Youk (Alice) read aloud her memories of Melbourne here

Performer: Lola Wilding

Sisterly Bonds

Chin Wah Moon arranged for Bou Youk to be married into a prominent Bendigo family soon after she arrived back in Victoria. She was 16. Her younger sister Bou Laan, by now 10 years old, lived with her big sister and brother-in-law. They remained close as they got older, travelling to Hong Kong together with Bou Youk's family in 1918. Bou Laan married aged 21, and later moved with her husband to Geraldton in Western Australia.



Alice and Ethel's handprints. National Archives of Australia.

Institutionalised Girls

Many girls in 19th-century Victoria found themselves without a home and placed into an institution. There were many reasons for this including poverty, illness, becoming orphaned or abandoned, or being convicted of a crime.

There was an increase in families unable to provide shelter and support for their children during the Gold Rush years. Men chased their fortune on the goldfields, sometimes leaving their wives to struggle to bring up many children with little or no income. Many couldn't cope, and children ended up in orphanages, reformatories, industrial schools or asylums. Victoria had the highest number of children in out-of-home care of all the colonies.

These were all hard places to be a child. There was little freedom or nurture, and rules were strict and sometimes cruel. The girls who lived in these institutions are among the most hidden and silent, but despite these restrictions, they still managed to make their mark on the world. They showed their resilience through creativity, standing up to bullies or by finding something that they loved.

The Former Geelong Orphanage and Common School

Both girls and boys were sent to the Geelong Orphanage and Common School. It opened in the 1850s to cope with the large number of poor and orphaned children in Geelong brought about by the Gold Rush. It closed in 1933.

Archaeology at the orphanage has revealed a little of what life was like for the children who grew up there.

Girls were put to work around the orphanage. They scrubbed floors and washed clothes, as well as sewing and mending orphanage clothing. This prepared them to be apprenticed as domestic servants in their mid-teens. Archaeologists found scrubbing brushes, laundry blue and child sized thimbles that reveal this work.

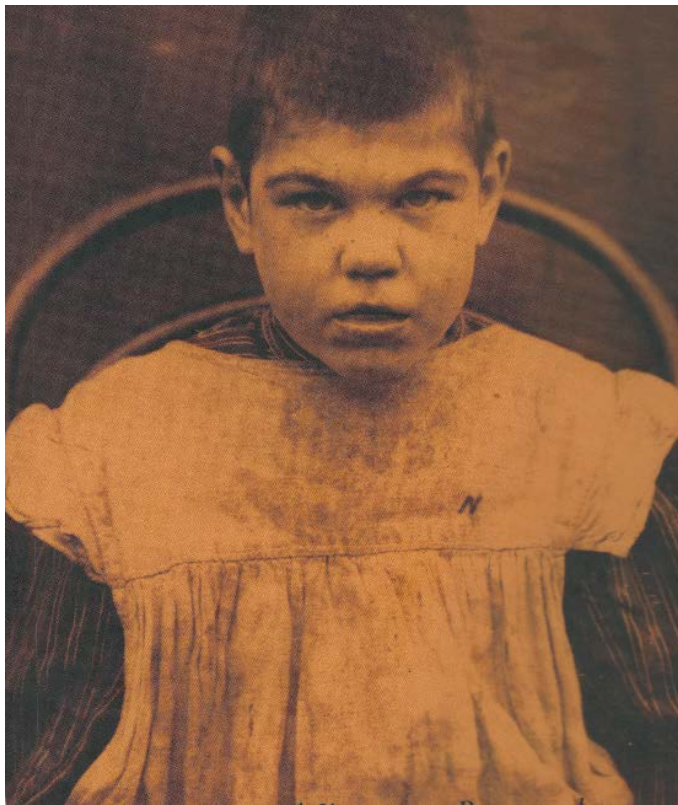
Archaeologists also discovered that the children of Geelong Orphanage were creative and playful. Amongst many other toys, small homemade game tokens were found, crafted from broken china and glass, as well as coins and bottle tops. What games would they have played with these?

Dolly Stainer

When Dolly Stainer was very small, she was labelled a 'neglected child' removed from her mother's care. She was shuffled between foster families until she was four years old, when she was sent to Kew Asylum, then called Kew Idiot Asylum. She lived there for the rest of her life.

Dolly had an intellectual disability. As a small child she displayed challenging behaviours and by her own admission, was often violent towards others. This was probably made worse by a lack of stimulation. Children at Kew Asylum were left in a small yard with nothing to play with. Dolly remembered having no toys, and when she was given dolls and dolls clothes as an adult, they became prized possessions.

Before Dolly was a teenager, she was expected to contribute to work at the Asylum. She worked in the nursery looking after babies, as well as caring for children with significant disabilities. She said *"There was such a lot of babies, and there was such a lot to do there, with all babies messing. But nobody's allowed to touch the babies, beautiful babies...Everybody had their own children, nobody was allowed to touch anybody else's children"* (Stainer 1988-1989, p. 16)



Dolly Stainer around the time of her admission to Kew Asylum, 1915.



Listen to Dolly speak to Fran Van Brummelen and remember her childhood.

Kew Historical Society Inc.

Irish Famine Orphans

When Winifred Duffy was 16 years of age, she was sent from her home in Donegal, Ireland to Victoria. She was one of 43 girls on the ship Lady Kennaway who were part of the Earl Grey Scheme. The scheme brought Irish orphan girls to Victoria to be servants. Most girls had lost their families in the Irish Famine and were sent to live in workhouses. Workhouses were cold and uncomfortable places, and they became very crowded in the 1840s.

To relieve the crowding, Earl Grey, Secretary of the State for the Colonies, came up with a plan to send some girls to Australia to be placed in households to work. Some girls found themselves with cruel masters, but if they complained, they were punished. Between 1848 and 1850, over 4000 Irish girls came to Australia via this scheme.

Winifred couldn't read or write, but she was employed by Mr and Mrs Longbottom at Moonee Ponds as a maid for a year. She was Roman Catholic, and there was a lot of anti-Irish and anti-Catholic feeling in Victoria at the time, so girls like Winifred were not always welcomed or treated well.

Winifred complained. She accused Mrs Longbottom of making her do hard chores, like chopping wood, which wasn't part of the contract. Mrs Longbottom grabbed Winifred by her hair and beat her with a stick. Mrs Longbottom said that she was punishing Winifred for 'dirty habits and laziness'. The police charged Mr and Mrs Longbottom and fined them 4 pounds, with 2 pounds costs.

Girls at Work

Work was a universal feature of Australian girls' lives. Apart from the very wealthy, most Victorian girls took on unpaid domestic labour in the home. The value of 'usefulness', of being valuable and helpful to others, underpinned expectations for girls' work. Girls would cook, clean, sew, look after siblings or even help in family businesses.

Children were essential domestic workers for their families. The 1877 Victorian Royal Commission on Education estimated that children aged 12 to 15 contributed around £400,000 worth of unpaid labour for their families each year. The work of children aged 6 to 12 also had significant value.

Around the age of 14 or 15, many girls entered paid employment. In 1901 girls aged 5 to 19 made up 25 per cent of the total female workforce. Most worked in domestic service, factories or on farms. Other girls trained as teachers or governesses. By the late nineteenth century, more shop and office roles were available to girls and young women.



The Factory Girls of Melbourne leaving work. Samuel Calvert, engraving, 1873. IAN20/05/73/SUPP/84.



Madam Strachan's Maids, Creswick, about 1890. Museums Victoria Collection.

Servant Girls

Many young Victorian girls worked as domestic servants. Going into service was seen as the perfect job for a young working-class girl, as it would train her in domestic skills like cooking, cleaning and household management.

Daughter of Scottish migrants, Agnes McEwin started paid domestic work around 12 years of age as “there was no trouble in getting little girls into positions those days, there were lots of mothers needed helpers”. Agnes was born in Heidelberg in Melbourne’s north-east in 1858. From around 1870 she worked for a Mrs Dunn. Agnes recalled in her reminiscences that she would clean the living room, light fires and make breakfast for the family.

Agnes continued to work in service throughout her life. Her sisters Elizabeth and Jeannie followed her into the profession, and they sometimes worked in the same household.



Listen to Agnes talk about her childhood here.

Performer: Izzy



Girl feeding animals on a farm in rural Victoria, circa 1890-1900. Michael Drew. H2012.171/124, State Library of Victoria.

Tweeny

Como House employed a teenage girl or young woman known as the “Between Stairs” maid, shortened to “Tweeny”. Little is known about the girls who performed this role for the wealthy household. Tweeny was on the lowest rung of the servant hierarchy. Her days would have been filled with hard work from early morning until late in the evening. Tweeny would deliver meals, light fires, sweep and scrub floors and perform general jobs as required. She lived up the stairs in an attic bedroom, all by herself.



Como House Servants, with Tweeny at the bottom right with dustpan and brush, circa 1880-1900. Ada Armytage. University of Melbourne Archives.

Queer Girls

Many nineteenth-century girls had no say in who they married. Then as now, some girls were queer.

This was not something that could be spoken of, even by the girls themselves. Same-sex attraction even between women, beyond certain accepted bounds, was strongly frowned upon.

Many girls and women spent their lives alone or in arranged marriages. However, some were able to establish same-sex relationships of deep meaning and connection. They may have not identified themselves as queer or lesbian, but many of these relationships were life long and deeply loving.

Ethel May “Monte” Punshon

In 1880, Ethel May Punshon was born in Ballarat to ‘prim and proper’ middle-class parents. Despite growing up in a relatively conservative household and being taught feminine work from a young age, Ethel, or Monte as she came to be known, went on to live an unconventionally independent life. She became a teacher, worked in an amateur theatre group, became an artist, presented a radio program, worked for a ladies’ tailor and learnt Japanese, and worked overseas in Tokyo and Vanuatu.

Throughout her life, Monte had romantic relationships with women, though she never described herself as lesbian. She met her first love ‘Debbie’ in 1910. The pair had a relationship for 12 years before Debbie left her for another woman. Monte had other relationships but claimed she never found love again.



Listen to Monte talk about her childhood here

Performer: Maggie Muir

Monte learnt to sew when she was around 5 years old. Aged 6, she made a “Fancy Work” newspaper holder out of red felt embroidered with decorative columns and sequins. Her mother entered this piece into the 1888 Melbourne Centennial Exhibition, held at the grand Exhibition Building near the city. Monte recalled “As I was under the age of seven, my exhibit was accepted, and won first prize of two guineas and a certificate.” The Punshons went to visit the prize-winning piece several times.



Ethel Punshon, Newspaper holder, 1888, Melbourne. Image of original object in Museums Victoria Collection.

Mary E Fullerton

As a young woman, Mary Fullerton realised that she had a “strong predilection for my own sex”. One of her school teachers was a young fair-haired woman whose violet eyes “made a secret poet of me”. Mary had no romantic interest in men. Instead, she spent her adult years with her beloved Mabel Singleton, for whom she wrote beautiful and romantic poems.

Mary was a significant Australian poet, as well as a leader in the fight for women’s rights. Her interest in women’s rights was sparked when she realised her very clever mother was not allowed to vote, but men who couldn’t read could vote. She later joined and became an important member of the Women’s Political Association in Melbourne and worked as a journalist.

Her childhood in Gippsland was one of hard work at home, but also invented games, and achievement at school. Her education was brought to a sudden end, aged 13, with a form from the School Inspector stating she was ‘sufficiently educated’. Mary continued her own education, locking herself away and reading anything she could get her hands on. She had already published her first poem, *Under the Wattles*, at age 12.

As she grew, Mary realised how hard it was to be a girl. She said:

“It was a bitter day for my tomboy pride that on which it was borne in upon me that there is a tyranny of garments—that the child of the skirted sex is, becoming subject to the skirt, thereby tamed.”



Listen to Mary talk about the games she played here

Performer: Adele Sato



Mary Eliza Fullerton in later life, circa 1900. LTAF 1250/143, State Library of Victoria.

The McCrae Sisters

Sisters Georgiana Lucia, Margaret Martha, Frances Octavia and Agnes Thomasina McCrae were born in Victoria in the 1840s and early 1850s. Their mother, Georgiana, was the illegitimate daughter of the Duke of Gordon. She had been brought up in London boarding schools where she learnt languages, music and art from well-regarded artists. Their father, Andrew Murison McCrae, was a Scottish lawyer. The girls' parents had married in Edinburgh in 1830, and in 1839 emigrated to Sydney with their four sons, then to the Port Phillip District (as Victoria was then known).

Lucia, Margaret, Frances and Agnes had a very different girlhood compared to their mother's upbringing. Instead of London classrooms and elite society, they spent much of their childhood on Bununrong Country on the Mornington Peninsula at Arthur's Seat, their family's farm. Georgiana wanted to give her girls the best but had to make do with the resources available to her. The family had financial troubles in the colonies but they couldn't afford to return to England so made their life in Victoria.



View of the verandah facade of the McCrae's house, Arthur's Seat circa 1845-1851. Georgiana McCrae (attributed to). National Gallery of Victoria.

Births and Christenings

The McCrae sisters were born into the social elite of the Port Phillip District. When the family arrived, there were a few thousand settlers in the colony, with many working-class and ex-convict inhabitants. Even though their mother was an illegitimate daughter, Georgiana was recognised by her noble father and her lineage held great weight. The girls' parents were friends with other influential families such as Superintendent Charles La Trobe and his wife Sophie.

Georgiana Lucia Gordon (b. 1842) and Margaret Martha (b. 1844) were both born in Melbourne, whereas Fanny (b. 1847) and Agnes (b. 1851) were born at Arthur's Seat. The girls' births were celebrated and marked with christenings, where they were welcomed into the Church of Scotland.

It was believed a child needed to be baptised to enter heaven. There was no church near Arthur's Seat, so in 1847 four-month-old Fanny travelled with her mother from their remote property to Melbourne for her christening.



Lucia McCrae 1843. Georgiana McCrae, National Gallery of Victoria.

Playing and Creating

Lucia, Margaret and Sophie, from a relatively well-off family, had access to toys. From the 18th century, elite families began to carve out space and time for children's leisure and began to see play as central to healthy and happy childhood. The McCrae girls likely played with dolls and tea sets, and perhaps other toys like puzzles, blocks or books of games that entered mass production in the mid-19th century.

Growing up at Arthur's Seat, the McCrae sisters were kept closer to the house than their older brothers, who had the run of the property. When the family returned to Melbourne in the 1850s, the girls stayed even closer to home. Both Margaret and Lucy compiled scrapbooks, filled with mass-produced imagery, cards, newspaper cuttings, drawings and inscriptions. Scrapbooking was an activity that taught girls organisational and aesthetic skills.

Learning to be Ladies

The McCrae sisters needed to learn how to be ladies. Growing up at Arthur's Seat, far from Melbourne, the girls were removed from polite society. Their mother would have taught them feminine accomplishments, like plain sewing and embroidery, and how to draw, sing and play a musical instrument. The girls would have used the *Ladies Work Table Book*, a popular manual for making clothing and objects for the home.

However, their education would have been compromised so far from the city. In 1851 they moved back to Melbourne. Lucia was nearly 10, Maggie 7, Fanny 4 and baby Agnes was only six months old. Their mother was grateful for the family's move to the city and "for our little girls' sakes I hoped to remain here". Georgiana employed a governess, Miss Nihill, who refined her daughters' feminine skills in preparation for marriage and life in polite society. The three surviving McCrae sisters all went on to marry.



Portrait of Maggie McCrae, circa 1865. National Trust of Australia (Victoria) Collection.

Illness and Health

I have been thinking so much about you since I heard the sad news about Mamie but it's very hard to put my thoughts into words, I can't bear to think what a dreadful mark it will make in your life."

Alice Beecher, student at Faireleight Girls' Grammar School in St. Kilda, to her friend Enid Hamilton, December 31, 1900. State Library of Victoria.

In December 1900, when she was 17 years old, Enid Hamilton lost her fifteen-year-old sister Mamie to diphtheria, a deadly bacterial infection. At home at Ensay Station in Gippsland, Enid received many letters from school friends expressing their sympathy and grief.

Many girls in nineteenth-century Victoria lost their sisters and grew up without them. For the better part of the 1800s, at least four in every ten Australian children never made it to adulthood. Melbourne saw waves of infectious, and untreatable, disease sweep through the crowded city. Although charitable hospitals could care for some of the poorest members of society, most people had to pay for their own medical care from private doctors. Accidental death was also a high cause of child mortality. Adults had different understandings of children's capacity and risk and often did not supervise their children closely.

Moody Sisters, Bendigo

Isaac and Adelaide Moody wanted to provide the best of everything for their five daughters. Items they discarded in a cesspit on their rented property in Bendigo included 'A present for a good girl' mug, toy tea sets, dolls, writing slates, pencils and thimbles. These objects reveal a great deal about the childhood expectations and future hopes for the Moody sisters.

Also discarded were a large number of medicines and medical items including Winslow's Soothing Syrup containing morphine and used to settle babies. There was also a modern baby feeder of a type which became notorious for causing the deaths of many babies. Sadly, baby Leah died in 1871, aged 6 months. The Moody's desire to buy the best for their daughters had resulted in the worst possible outcome.



Archaeological finds from the Moody family's property. Heritage Victoria Collection. Mrs Winslow's Soothing Syrup Trade Card, 1885 (reproduction). Traces of Girlhood exhibition, 2024. Photographer: Jessica Charleston.

The Armytage Girls

The wealthy Armytage girls, daughters of Caroline and Charles Armytage, grew up at Como House. However, they were not to be spared grief and illness. Ethel Armytage, born in 1865, died in 1872 at age 7. She passed away from diphtheria, a deadly bacterial infection. Diphtheria was once among the top ten causes of child death.

Her sister Laura, born in 1869, was sickly throughout her life. She travelled with her sisters as a teenager but kept to the house as she got older. While her sisters went off to volunteer during the First World War, Laura, who was frail, stayed in Melbourne. Laura never married and lived at Como until 1956.



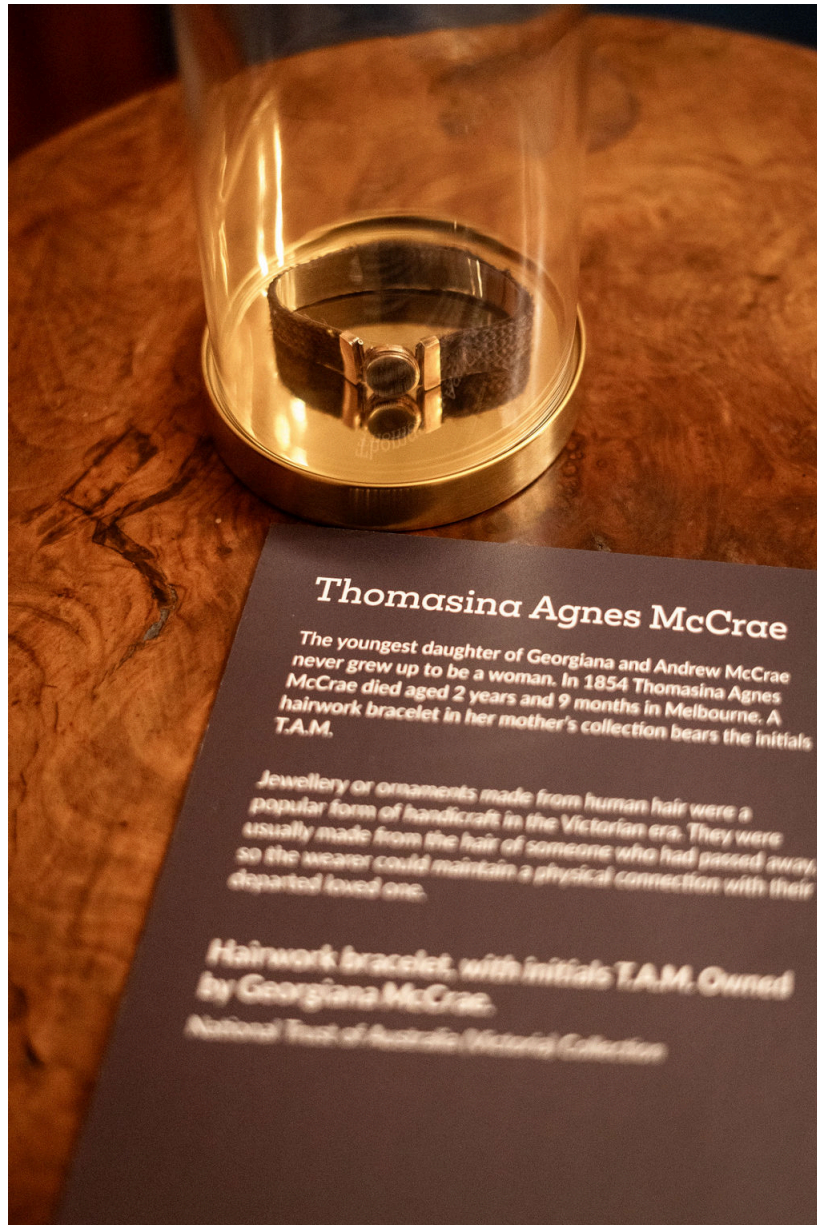
Left: Laura Evelyn Armytage as a girl. University of Melbourne Archives.

Right: Armytage children in Switzerland, circa 1878. Left to right: Constance, Ernest, Laura; seated left to right: Leila, Frederick. CMO 0203

Thomasina Agnes McCrae

The youngest daughter of Georgiana and Andrew McCrae never grew up to be a woman. In 1854 Thomasina Agnes McCrae died aged 2 years and 9 months in Melbourne. A hairwork bracelet in her mother's collection bears the initials T.A.M.

Jewellery or ornaments made from human hair were a popular form of handicraft in the Victorian era. They were usually made from the hair of someone who had passed away, so the wearer could maintain a physical connection with their departed loved one.



Hairwork bracelet, with initials T.A.M. Owned by Georgiana McCrae. National Trust of Australia (Victoria) Collection. Traces of Girlhood exhibition, 2024. Photographer: Jessica Charleston.

Mary Ellen O'Meara

Mary Ellen O'Meara was the only daughter of the O'Meara family who lived at and ran the Coach and Horses Hotel in Ringwood. She had four surviving brothers. Mary Ellen's mother, Mary, was the licensee of the hotel in 1907. She ran a business while also raising five children.

The hotel burned to the ground in 1907, when Mary Ellen was seven. The family managed to escape but the fire was very intense. They lost everything they owned. Archaeologists excavated the site of the hotel and found toys that probably belonged to the family.

Expectations – Building a Girl

Archaeological excavations of the Former Coach and Horses Hotel suggested that the children had at least 16 dolls, as well as several doll sized tea sets. Mary Ellen was being taught through her toys about appropriate roles for girls, as well as good taste and good manners. Perhaps her parents were keeping Mary Ellen occupied while her busy mother Mary ran the pub. They would also have been encouraging her to be genteel, to stay indoors and be clean.

At this time, toys were designed to teach middle-class children how to behave appropriately. Parents wanted to raise their daughters to be good mothers, so dolls dominated the toy market for girls. Boys had many more choices. Building blocks, toy trains, ships, and soldiers were all popular.

The O'Meara children went to Ringwood State School No. 2997. At school, Mary Ellen was also learning about how to be a genteel girl. Girls and boys had separate lessons. Teachers Miss Kelly and Miss Coleman taught girls sewing, while boys were sent to woodworking classes.



Coach and Horses Hotel, Ringwood 1881. State Library Victoria. This hotel was later run by the O'Meara Family and home to Mary Ellen.



Mary Ellen's dolls and tea set fragments. Heritage Victoria Collection. *Traces of Girlhood* exhibition, 2024. Photographer: Jessica Charleston.

Play and Gender

But how do we know that Mary Ellen's brothers didn't play with her dolls too? And how do we know that Mary Ellen played with her dolls the way adults expected?

The children of Ringwood State School didn't always follow these rules. One former student remembers that there was no yard duty by teachers at the school and the children, boys and girls, used to run wild around the paddocks and bush during break times. Girls were not restricted to quiet games of 'house' or dolls but played 'chasey', often ending up far away from the school.

Just as today, in nineteenth century Victoria, not all people fitted into a binary gender role. But opportunities for expressing this were few, and taboo. Play may have been one of the only ways to break the gender boundaries set by society.



Mrs John Bawden's untitled photograph of boys in girl's clothing - PH41-1994 – NGV.