

Creating White Australia

Edited by Jane Carey
and Claire McLisky



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5

‘A most lowering thing for a lady’: aspiring to respectable whiteness on Ramahyuck Mission, 1885–1900¹

Joanna Cruickshank, Deakin University

In September 1893, a measles epidemic raged on the Victorian mission of Ramahyuck. At the height of the epidemic, Ellie Hagenauer, the daughter of the missionary managers of Ramahyuck, recorded in her diary how she had visited the homes of the Aboriginal mission residents. ‘Poor little Mary Darby’ she wrote ‘her eyes are very blighted. I washed her face & hands & made her more comfortable. Then washed the Stephens & Moffats. Oh it was dreadful. I think it took a deal of strength from me.’²

The missionary imperative, which drove Europeans like Ellie Hagenauer’s parents to Christianise Aboriginal people, required and indeed affirmed certain kinds of physical and emotional proximity between missionaries and those they evangelised. On missions such as Ramahyuck, Aboriginal and white people lived side-by-side, shared food and drink, and touched each other. They spoke of each other using language that was familial and often affectionate. Such proximity threatened racial boundaries and hierarchies that were central to

¹ Permission to quote from the *Le Souef Family Papers* was kindly given by Marjorie Le Souef. I am also very grateful to Professor Pat Grimshaw for her helpful insights, to Claire McLisky and Jane Carey for their patience during the editing process, and to the anonymous readers of the chapter for their helpful comments.

² Diary of Ellie Hagenauer [DEH], 20 September 1893, 4370A/634, *Le Souef Family Papers*, MN 1391, Battye Library, Perth.

respectable white society, at a time when the nature of racial difference was being widely debated. For white people on and around mission stations, this could produce considerable external and internal tensions.

This chapter explores the anxieties around whiteness and respectability on Ramahyuck mission station in the late 19th century. It focuses particularly on the diaries and personal letters of Ellie Hagenauer, read in the context of the experience of the Hagenauer family and their racialised perspective. Ramahyuck was a significant mission and has received attention from a number of historians, but the papers of Ellie Hagenauer provide a different perspective from the reports to church and government officials that form the basis of most other accounts.³ In their references to whiteness, Ellie's writings also provide new insights into the mission experience, which had enormous significance for many Aboriginal people in colonial Australia.

The Hagenauer family in Victoria

Ellie was the youngest daughter of Friedrich and Louise Hagenauer, German Moravian missionaries who founded the Ramahyuck mission in Gippsland in 1863. She was born in 1873, the seventh of eight children.⁴ The personal writings considered here date largely from the 1890s, when Ellie had completed her final schooling in Melbourne and was living back at the mission. That these papers date from the later years of the Hagenauer family's time in Victoria is significant in understanding Ellie's attitude to both whiteness and respectability.

³ Accounts of Ramahyuck include Bain Attwood, *The making of the Aborigines* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989); Felicity Jensz, 'Collecting cultures for God: German Moravian missionaries and the British colony of Victoria, Australia, 1848–1908' (PhD Thesis, Melbourne University, 2007); John Harris, *One blood: 200 years of Aboriginal encounter with Christianity: a story of hope* (Sutherland, NSW: Albatross Books, 1990), 200–5, and Robert Kenny, *The lamb enters the dreaming: Nathanael Pepper and the ruptured world* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2007).

⁴ Noel Stewart, 'Mrs Ellie Grace Le Souef (1873–1947): she helped to found a zoo', in *As I remember them* (Perth: Artlook Books, 1987), 103.

When the Hagenauers first began their missionary work in Australia their nationality, religious convictions, and association with Aboriginal people meant that they occupied an ambiguous position in settler society. German nationality was not necessarily a barrier to respectability, as of all the non-British migrants to the Australian colonies, Germans appear to have been among the most accepted. They were generally small farmers and labourers of the kind desired by Australian colonial administrations for settlement, they had a reputation for being politically docile and, unlike some European groups such as southern Italians, they seem to have been considered 'white'.⁵ From 1849, several large groups of Germans arrived in Victoria, and the *Argus* commented:

We trust that they may receive a hearty and generous welcome. As the pioneers of a useful and valuable description of people it is in our interest to afford it to them. They will teach us many arts of which we are ignorant, and by their quiet industry and good conduct they will gain here, as they have gained in South Australia, the esteem and friendship of their fellow-colonists.⁶

Given their apparent adaptability to British settler culture, Germans were not the target of widespread racism prior to the tensions created by the Boer War. Nonetheless, many German settlers deliberately maintained their language and cultural practices, creating a subculture within settler society. This could result in hostility and some Germans were ostracised or harassed.⁷

For the Hagenauers, their Moravian convictions created further potential barriers to integration with settler society. The Moravian

⁵ Charles Meyer, *A history of Germans in Australia 1839–1945* (Caulfield East, Vic. Monash University, 1990), 23–4.

⁶ *Argus*, 13 February 1849. Meyer, 24.

⁷ Meyer, 24. There was also considerable negative comment in the Australian press about German colonial ambitions in the Pacific Islands during the late 19th century, which presumably impacted upon German communities in Australia. See Peter Overlack, 'Bless the Queen and curse the Colonial Office: Australasian reaction to German consolidation in the Pacific, 1871–99', *Journal of Pacific History* 33.2 (September 1998): 133–52.

movement was part of the groundswell of European pietism which pre-empted the evangelical revival of the 18th century.⁸ Moravian missionaries, mainly from working-class backgrounds, valued hard work and practical skills over scholarly prowess and explicitly disavowed involvement in the politics of the states in which they worked. They aspired to personal devotion to Jesus, humility and a rejection of ‘the world’ and its values. The Moravian missionary handbook claimed:

The Brethren ... demean themselves as loyal and obedient subjects, and strive to act in such a manner, under the difficult relations in which they are often placed, as may evince, that they have no desire to intermeddle with the politics of the country in which they labour, but are solely intent on the fulfilment of their official duties.⁹

Moravian missionaries, therefore, were not expected to seek social advancement or become entangled in the affairs of society.

If such factors as nationality and religious conviction militated against the Hagenauers becoming established members of respectable settler society in Victoria, even more significant was their choice to live and work among Aboriginal people. The first Moravian missionaries in Australia had experienced intense opposition from local settlers to their first mission, established at Lake Boga in 1843, and were forced to close it.¹⁰ Like other missionaries, they competed with settlers for land and they were accused of potentially politicising Indigenous people.¹¹

Growing up on the mission, the Hagenauer children lived in close proximity to Aboriginal people. They were nursed by young Aboriginal women and, when they reached the age of school attendance, they joined

⁸ For an excellent introduction to the Moravian movement see W.R. Ward, *The Protestant evangelical awakening* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 116–59.

⁹ Quoted in Jenz, ‘Collecting cultures for God’, 275.

¹⁰ For an account of the Moravian mission at Lake Boga, see Kenny, *The lamb enters the dreaming*, 86–99.

¹¹ Kenny discusses settler opposition to missionaries, including Hagenauer, *Ibid.* 12–26.

the other mission children at the Ramahyuck school.¹² For several years, this school was taught by an Aboriginal woman named Bessy Flower, though she was replaced by a white male teacher before Ellie was born. Jessie Mitchell has written about the potential for intimacy between missionary children and Aboriginal people, and such potential certainly existed at Ramahyuck.¹³ It is difficult to imagine anywhere else in the Australian colonies in the 1870s where Aboriginal and white children were being educated in the same classroom, at one time by an Aboriginal teacher.

In spite of these factors, by the time Ellie Hagenauer began her diary in the 1880s the Hagenauer family had taken significant steps towards integrating with—and even achieving significant status within—settler society. From the outset, missionary work made it impossible for them to remain within a German subculture in Victoria. Physically, their mission was at a distance from the major centres of German settlement. The family had to learn English to deal with colonial officials and to communicate with Aboriginal people. Friedrich Hagenauer had regular contact with representatives of both the Australian Presbyterian and Church of England denominations, who shared oversight of aspects of his missionary work. Though Hagenauer remained a loyal Moravian, in 1869 he was given the full status of an ordained minister by the Presbyterian Church of Victoria.¹⁴

Friedrich and Louise Hagenauer also went beyond merely pragmatic engagement with colonial society. Moravian missionaries all over the world traditionally sent their children to be educated at Moravian

¹² Ellie was nursed by an Aboriginal woman named Emily Stephens, with whom she had a significant relationship for much of her life. See letters from Emily Stephens to Ellie Le Souef, 4370A/713/8/7–14, *Le Souef Family Papers*, Batty Library, Perth.

¹³ Jessie Mitchell, 'The nucleus of civilisation: gender, race and childhood in Australian missionary families, 1825–1855', in *Evangelists of empire? Missionaries in colonial history*, ed. Amanda Barry et al. (eScholarship Research Centre, University of Melbourne, 2008), 103–15.

¹⁴ Jenz, 'Collecting cultures for God', 237.

boarding schools in Germany. The Hagenauers followed this practice with their first child, Theo, but he died while away and they chose to educate the rest of their children in Victoria. While the Hagenauer children completed the early years of their education at Ramahyuck mission school alongside the Aboriginal children, for their final years they were sent to boarding school in Melbourne —Presbyterian Ladies College for the girls and Scotch College for the boys.¹⁵ The Hagenauer children, educated in English and with only a small number of German acquaintances, appear to have had mixed feelings about their parents' homeland. In 1898, Ellie wrote with amusement of her younger brother, 'Hen would not sing the National Anthem he is too much of a Deutscher, it was very funny'.¹⁶

During this same period, Friedrich Hagenauer became increasingly involved in the Victorian government's management of Indigenous affairs. He played a significant role in convincing the Board for Protection of the Aborigines (BPA) to pass the notorious so-called Half-Caste Act, which caused enormous suffering to Aboriginal families forced apart.¹⁷ Hagenauer's active lobbying of the BPA, which will be considered in more detail below, demonstrated his willingness to become involved in the political sphere. This was confirmed when he was appointed Secretary and General Inspector for the BPA in July 1889. In taking on a role within the apparatus of the colonial state, Hagenauer certainly moved well beyond conventional Moravian missionary roles. He also gained a position of some status within settler society.

In the 1880s and 90s, therefore, Ellie Hagenauer was part of a family that was upwardly mobile in social terms. Her years at PLC gave her a significant network among the most respectable members of Victorian settler society. Her diary and letters for this period show that through her father's new responsibilities in Melbourne she and the rest of the family

¹⁵ Stewart, 'Mrs Ellie Grace Le Souef', 100–6.

¹⁶ DEH, 20 May 1898, 4370A/638, *Le Souef Family Papers*.

¹⁷ See Jenz, 'Collecting cultures for God'.

were regularly introduced to influential members of Victoria's government and churches.¹⁸ Increased engagement with respectable white society appears to have heightened Ellie's consciousness of her whiteness and the tensions inherent in her own position as a member of the community at Ramahyuck.¹⁹ This added to the already-complicated and often contradictory attitudes to race which are revealed by the way her parents managed Ramahyuck mission and intervened in debates about government policy in relation to Aboriginal missions.

Race at Ramahyuck

Missionaries such as Friedrich and Louise Hagenauer taught that all people were of 'one blood' and equally valuable in the sight of God. Friedrich Hagenauer explicitly criticised those 'pious Christians who confuse Europeanisation with Christianisation'.²⁰ This belief in the equal spiritual value of human beings was reflected in aspects of life on the mission. Indigenous and non-Indigenous children were educated side-by-side in the Ramahyuck school, which consistently topped the colony in examination results. Indigenous and white Christians worshipped together in the mission church. Of the church at Ramahyuck, Hagenauer wrote:

On the Lord's day, we have not only all our Black people, but likewise a great many of our white neighbours, which creates a very good feeling in the hearts of the blacks, as they thereby observe that we can worship the

¹⁸ For example, see Ellie's detailed accounts of her trip to Melbourne in June 1895 and to Tasmania in October 1896, DEH, 4370A/636 and 4370A/637, *Le Souef Family Papers*.

¹⁹ In addition to the examples of racialised anxieties below, Ellie on several occasions expressed concerns about her family being seen as 'country bumpkins' or 'country cousins' by Melbourne acquaintances. See for example DEH, January 1898, 4370A/638, *Le Souef Family Papers*.

²⁰ Rev. Hagenauer, *Der Australische Christenbote* 7, 1863, 26, cited in Felicity Jenz, 'The Moravian-run Ebenezer Mission Station in north-western Victoria: A German perspective', (MA Thesis, University of Melbourne, 1999), 77.

same God and enjoy the blessings of salvation without respect of persons or colour.²¹

Like many missionaries, however, the Hagenauers also believed that the Indigenous people of Australia were culturally inferior and in need of civilisation as well as Christianisation.²² As a result, daily life on the mission was structured in ways that created clear boundaries between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. In his analysis of the construction of Ramahyuck, Bain Attwood has noted that the mission was physically divided between the Aboriginal mission residents' houses and the 'mission enclave' of mission house, church and dormitory.²³ Other than the women who worked in the house, Aboriginal mission residents were not usually permitted into the missionaries' house.²⁴ On special occasions, such as when the Hagenauer family gave a concert in their house, Ellie noted that 'the natives' had been allowed into the dining room, or to watch from the verandah.²⁵ Social contact was also racially determined. Meeting a visitor to the mission, Ellie wrote 'I stretched forth an arm & said "Goodday" thinking he was a halfcaste, I dropped nearly with surprise when I discovered my mistake'²⁶ Although the visitor looked 'halfcaste', he was classified as white and so apparently required a different greeting.

The Hagenauers' understanding of race and racial hierarchy came more sharply into focus during debates about government policy towards the missions in the early 1880s. As Felicity Jenz has demonstrated,

²¹ F.A. Hagenauer, 'Aboriginal Mission Station Ramahyuck', November 1885, *Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Victoria*, 1885, xix, Uniting Church Archives, Melbourne, cited in Nadia Rhook, 'Inventing other voices: language and power on Moravian missions in colonial Victoria' (Hons. Thesis, University of Melbourne, 2007), 45.

²² Kenny, *The lamb enters the dreaming*, 316–20.

²³ Attwood, *The making of the Aborigines*, 13–5.

²⁴ Attwood notes that Hagenauer's study was constructed so that Aboriginal mission residents could enter the study without coming through the house. *Ibid.* 14.

²⁵ DEH, 22 January 1892 and 30 July 1892, 4370A/633, *Le Souef Family Papers*.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 6 September 1894, 4370A/635.

Friedrich Hagenauer argued strongly for the adoption of legislation which would force ‘half-caste’ people off the missions.²⁷ His reasoning reveals an understanding of race as a category that was both self-evident and fluid. In his letters regarding the legislation, Hagenauer expressed his conviction that the few remaining ‘full Blacks’ at Ramahyuck would eventually die out. The majority of those living on mission stations such as Ramahyuck were, he argued ‘half-castes’ or ‘half-whites’. Many of these were ‘nearly totally white people’. Such ‘half-whites’, Hagenauer believed, desired and deserved an opportunity for self-sufficiency that was not permitted under existing legislation.²⁸ Hagenauer was critical of the white settlers who fathered illegitimate children with Aboriginal women. Implicit in his argument, however, was the assumption that the white parentage of ‘half-whites’ had instilled in them new qualities—especially the quality of hard work—which was missing in the ‘full Blacks’ at Ramahyuck.

The same understanding emerges in a letter Hagenauer wrote in 1882 regarding a young ‘half-caste’ man who had been brought up on the mission. ‘We feel it a great pity’, he wrote:

that so well taught and well behaved a lad as the halfcaste youth Charles Foster should be left among the Blacks, as he could be quite able to earn his living and in fact become a white man in that sense as generally understood. If left among the Blacks of course, ere long he becomes a Blackfellow useless to a very great extent and his good education would also be lost.²⁹

Like his arguments to the BPA, this quote reveals Hagenauer’s understanding of race as inherited. A ‘half-caste’ person was innately different from either a ‘white’ or ‘Black’ person.

²⁷ Jensz, ‘Collecting cultures for God’, 259–66.

²⁸ Friedrich Hagenauer to Br. Connor, 24 March 1884, cited in Jensz, ‘Collecting cultures for God’, 259–66.

²⁹ F.A. Hagenauer to Rev. Macdonald, 6 July 1882, ‘Letterbooks of F.A. Hagenauer, 1865–1885’, MS 3343, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

Such an understanding reflected the broader racial thinking of the late 19th century, in which social Darwinist arguments were marshalled to provide new grounds for the widespread European assumption that ‘race’, to quote Robert Knox’s famous phrase, was ‘everything’, determining physiology, ability and character.³⁰ Social evolution or ‘developmentalism’ was publicly debated in Melbourne in the 1870s, with the evangelical Anglican Bishop of Melbourne, Charles Perry, a supporter of Ramahyuck, arguing against such theories and for racial unity and equality.³¹ In addition, Perry questioned the over-emphasis within such theories, on notions of ‘civilisation’ and ‘progress’. Civilisation, he pointed out, was no guarantee of spiritual or moral character.³² Though Hagenauer shared Perry’s evangelical theology, Robert Kenny has argued that as social Darwinist thought became pervasive, Hagenauer became more convinced of the deep-rooted differences between races.³³

Yet these comments also reveal Hagenauer’s assumption that race was fluid and changeable, not simply innate and immutable. Hagenauer believed that Charles Foster could become a ‘white man in that sense as generally understood’ or a ‘Blackfellow’. Race, then, was a result not simply of innate characteristics, but also of personal choices and the influence of others. Racial identity might be particularly unstable for those of mixed racial heritage, but this understanding of the changeability of racial identity had potential implications for white people living among Aboriginal people, and vice versa.

Hagenauer’s arguments to the BPA played a significant role in the eventual adoption of ‘An Act to Provide for the Protection and Management of the Aboriginal Natives of Victoria’ in 1886. Under this

³⁰ See Nancy Stepan, *The idea of race in science: Great Britain, 1800–1960* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 20–62.

³¹ For an overview of social Darwinist views relating to race and their promotion in Victoria see Kenny, *The lamb enters the dreaming*, 288–99.

³² *Ibid.* 292.

³³ *Ibid.* 298–99.

legislation, Aboriginal people identified as 'half-caste' were forced off mission stations if they were under the age of 34. The Act separated families and caused immense suffering and disadvantage. Letters written by Aboriginal residents of Ramahyuck and other Victorian missions to the BPA in the years after the Act was passed provide eloquent testimony to this, as separated families sought permission simply to see each other, or requested the most basic necessities as they struggled to survive in settler society.³⁴ Ellie Hagenauer's accounts of life on the mission and her own responses to it were written primarily in the years after this Act was passed, as it was gradually implemented. Though she does not mention the Act, the debates over racial identity which accompanied it, and in which her father participated, form the background to her references to whiteness.

Respectable whiteness at Ramahyuck

Ellie's complicated response to her position at Ramahyuck emerges in accounts she wrote of her interactions with both Aboriginal and white people at Ramahyuck. In July 1894, she recorded in her diary an argument with Mr Hasting, a man who had been helping on the mission. During breakfast, she lost her temper and told Mr Hasting to 'be quiet'. 'I shall not put up with his nonsense any longer' she wrote. 'He shall not run down the natives or the Moravians in my presence'.³⁵

Ellie's defensiveness about 'Moravians' and 'natives' is evidence of both her sense of identification with these groups and her awareness that such identification was open to criticism. To be a Moravian was to embrace a piety that was conservative by the standards of polite Melbourne society. Ellie did not attend the local races or other local social events so as not to become 'worldly', and noted that the daughter of

³⁴ See Elizabeth Nelson, Sandra Smith and Patricia Grimshaw, eds., *Letters from Aboriginal women in Victoria, 1867–1926* (Melbourne: History Department, University of Melbourne, 2002), especially 123–44 and 239–312.

³⁵ DEH, 9–10 July, 1894, 4370A/635, *Le Souef Family Papers*.

another Moravian missionary was sent to stay at Ramahyuck 'that she may see that inmates of a Mission house do not go to balls & dances etc'.³⁶ This conservatism could create embarrassment for Ellie: she noted that while shopping in Melbourne, her father told the shop assistant 'not to put a male & female doll in one box as it was not decent. She thought him a country bumpkin'.³⁷

While being a Moravian posed certain social challenges for Ellie, however, being associated with Aboriginal people was far more threatening to respectability. As noted, on the mission, proximity to Aboriginal people was both a pragmatic necessity and a religious duty for the missionaries and their family. Ellie's daily life, as recorded in her diary, could involve theological discussions with Aboriginal Christians, sharing domestic tasks with her former nurse, or having her hair washed by one of the young women on the mission.³⁸ Physical care of sick mission residents was a regular duty. After visiting one Aboriginal man, Ellie wrote:

Mother & I went to see old Jack, poor fellow he is very low, barely a sign of life about him. In the afternoon we went over to see him again. Mother did what I could not, she washed his face & changed his clothes & then cleaned the house, it is now a pleasure to visit the old man ... Mother nursed him all day as only she could, my noble Mother!³⁹

As this quote suggests, Ellie saw a willingness by her mother to physically care for mission residents as a sign of 'nobility'. This perception was not necessarily based on assumptions about racial difference, but her comments demonstrate that such contact was weighted with all kinds of meanings that could and apparently often did have more to do with powerful tropes of maternalism and condescension than of anything like emotional intimacy on an egalitarian footing. Nonetheless, such close

³⁶ Ibid. 17 February 1898 and 23 August 1897, 4370A/638.

³⁷ Ibid. 12 July 1894, 4370A/635.

³⁸ Ibid. 15–7 October 1894 and 1 February 1893, 4370A/635, 4370A/634.

³⁹ Ibid. 22 March, 1893, 4370A/634.

contact between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal was unusual and Ellie could display a profound sense of internal unease about living so close to the racial boundaries.

This unease is obvious in Ellie's anxieties about the opinions of others as well as her own prejudices. She confided to her diary her anger at a visitor who accused her of eavesdropping. 'I'm savage with Mrs Harm. She thinks evidently I try to listen when she talks to Mr Hardie in the study ... I must say I do have some honorable feelings tho' I do live amongst the blacks'.⁴⁰ It is not entirely obvious how ironic Ellie was being in this comment, but it clearly communicates her awareness of a common perception that living 'amongst the blacks' could threaten those 'honorable' qualities that respectable white people shared. In judging herself, however, 'native' qualities could also serve for Ellie as a minimum standard against which her own behaviour could be measured. On one occasion, she wrote in her diary 'Tonight I am consumed with remorse for allowing my temper to get the better of me & for not entering into a joke even as well as a native girl'.⁴¹ In both incidents, though whiteness is not mentioned, it is implicitly defined in contrast to the inferior qualities of 'blacks' or 'a native girl'.

This anxiety about preserving the qualities of whiteness while living 'amongst the blacks' emerges not only in comments about Ellie's own behaviour and reputation, but in her concern over the behaviour of those white people associated with her family and the mission. Her brothers, who lived on the mission for part of this time, were subject to scrutiny. She complained of one brother: 'August is not at all sociable but sits playing draughts with the blacks in the old house'.⁴² Another brother, Johannes, who was later appointed manager of the mission, also spent significant amounts of time with the Aboriginal men who laboured on the mission. On one occasion, when a fire threatened the mission, Ellie

⁴⁰ Ibid. 15 February 1895, 4370A/636.

⁴¹ Ibid. 20 March 1896, 4370A/637.

⁴² Ibid. 3 March 1897, 4370A/638.

dedicated several diary entries to complaining about ‘such laziness as is shewn [sic] by Joh & our native men.’ She claimed that ‘Mother had a great work to make Joh go—& at last when they did go they sat on our boundary fence & waited for the fire to come ... Such laziness!!!’⁴³ In this account, Johannes, who associated with the ‘native men’, was seen to share the quality of laziness, a vice which was repeatedly attributed to Aborigines by settlers, by her father and elsewhere by Ellie.⁴⁴

Most acute, however, was Ellie’s concern that proximity between white and Aboriginal people not produce an intimacy that she considered inappropriate. She wrote a very critical note in her diary regarding a neighbour who had visited Ramahyuck:

Mrs Hooper ... did not leave here till nearly 10 pm & I was so vexed with her, she ought to be with her child at home & not leave the little girl with such a young servant girl (15yrs) for so many hours at night & above all she shd not leave her little servant girl alone there with a black boy.⁴⁵

Though she later added an apologetic note—‘Sorry I got scotty and wrote this’—it was clearly the hostility towards Mrs Hooper rather than the principle of guarding against the ‘black boy’ of which she repented.

Even more explicit, however, were her statements regarding one of the mission schoolteachers, Miss Seymour. Throughout the 1880s and 90s, the mission school was staffed by a series of school teachers employed by the Victorian government. These teachers lived on the mission and had some authority over mission residents, but were not necessarily in sympathy with the missionaries’ faith or their methods of managing the mission. Ellie’s diaries make it clear that this could produce

⁴³ Ibid. 15 and 16 March 1899, 4370A/638.

⁴⁴ For an extended complaint about ‘the natives’ laziness and incapacity see Ibid. 13 September 1895, 4370A/636.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 30 March 1898, 4370A/638.

situations of significant conflict between the missionaries, the school teacher and the mission residents.⁴⁶

In early 1898, Miss Seymour was appointed to the mission school and initially appeared to get on well with the Hagenauers. As the year progressed, however, Ellie made a number of increasingly critical comments in her diary and letters regarding the new teacher. In October 1898, writing to her fiancé in Western Australia, Ellie criticised Miss Seymour for getting involved in ‘the blacks’ gossip’ though ‘she means well.’⁴⁷ In early November, she wrote in her diary ‘Miss Seymour in the miserables. I simply can’t understand her at all, allowing herself to get entangled with the blacks.’⁴⁸ Three weeks later, these vague references crystallised:

Mother asked Miss Seymour to resign & I hope she will ... as it is now among the white larrikins in Sale, the laughingstock how the “ladies of Ramahyuck” behave since Miss S allowed her name to be coupled with Haines Cameron & he boasts of his connection with her, a most lowering thing for a lady. I can’t understand her a bit.⁴⁹

Haines Cameron was the son of Bessy Flower, the Aboriginal woman who had taught at the Ramahyuck school before Ellie’s birth.

Ellie’s reaction to the revelation of Miss Seymour’s behaviour, and in particular her ‘connection’ with Cameron, is revealing of her complicated understanding of the relationship between whiteness and respectability. Miss Seymour’s actions are criticised not as an offence to religious principles—there is no suggestion that she and Cameron have had sexual relations—but as incompatible with being ‘a lady’. Though Ellie interacted

⁴⁶ Most notably, in 1892, two teachers at the mission school attempted to rally the mission residents against the Hagenauers and, according to Ellie’s account, were virtually driven off the mission by the Aboriginal residents, amidst ‘loud hurrahs & flying flags’. See *Ibid.* 11 January–14 March 1892, 4370A/633.

⁴⁷ Ellie Hagenauer to Ernest Le Souef, 23 October and 28 October 1898, 4370A/224, 226, *Le Souef Family Papers*, Battye Library, Perth.

⁴⁸ DEH, 6 November 1898, 4370A/636, *Le Souef Family Papers*.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 27 November 1898, 4370A/636.

with Aboriginal people every day of her life on the mission, she clearly distinguished between such interaction and becoming 'entangled with the blacks'. Intimacy with Aboriginal people, as represented by becoming involved with 'the blacks' gossip' or worse, a romantic relationship, was unacceptable for a respectable white woman, or 'lady'. Miss Seymour's offence was clearly heightened, in Ellie's eyes, by the fact that the unrespectable 'white larrikins' of the local town were using this information to mock the white 'ladies' at Ramahyuck. For Ellie, respectable whiteness was a vulnerable quality. It could be threatened, and thus to some extent was defined, by both unrespectable white people and by those identified as non-white.

Ellie's response to the incident with Miss Seymour makes clear how powerful was her desire to be integrated with respectable white society. This desire existed in conscious tension with her loyalty to her family and religious convictions. As she lamented to her dairy in September 1897:

It does not do for me to go out to meetings etc. it just makes me long to live among white people & in a white congregation where one can go to meetings and take an interest in church affairs etc. & yet I have such a happy home & so very many blessings for which my heart overflows with gratitude.⁵⁰

Three years later, Ellie's desire to 'live among white people' was granted when she moved to Western Australia with her husband and became a respected member of the upper echelons of settler society in Perth.⁵¹ In keeping with her desire to 'go to meetings and take an interest in church affairs', she was an office-holder in the Women's Service Guild and the Australian Federation of Women Voters, and an active member of Trinity Congregational Church, the League of Nations Union, the YWCA and the boards of a number of state schools.⁵² She visited Ramahyuck

⁵⁰ Ibid. 3 September 1897, 4370A/638.

⁵¹ Stewart, 'Mrs Ellie Grace Le Souef', 104-5.

⁵² Ibid. 105.

regularly and maintained an affectionate correspondence with Emily Stephens, the Aboriginal woman who had been her nurse.⁵³

Whiteness, Ellie Hagenauer and missions

Reading Ellie Hagenauer's diaries and letters, her personal anxieties about whiteness are obvious. Whiteness was not 'everything' for Ellie, rather it was a central but fraught aspect of her self-understanding, which related in complicated ways to her religious faith, her loyalty to her family, her relationships with individual Indigenous people, and her desire for respectability and sociability. Her proximity to Aboriginal people clearly had the potential to threaten her status as a respectable white woman. However, it also allowed her to construct this status in relation to Aboriginal people, whether through the 'nobility' of nursing Aborigines during sickness, or by defining her own qualities of 'honour' in contrast to the qualities with which she imbued Aboriginal people. Though she was defensive of 'the natives' and had affectionate relationships with a number of Aboriginal people on the mission, she clearly believed that such relationships should involve an emotional distance that echoed the distance separating her family's home from those of Aboriginal mission residents. To violate this principle through inappropriate intimacy was to lower one's status as 'a lady'. Nonetheless, as the incident with Miss Seymour and Haines Cameron demonstrates, both white and Aboriginal people might choose to cross this distance.

Beyond the specific historical experience of Ellie Hagenauer and those who lived at Ramahyuck, can anything broader be gathered from these texts and their context? Ellie's opinions cannot be taken as representative of missionaries as a whole: though she was certainly influenced by her parents, she herself was not a missionary. Focusing on whiteness in her writings does, however, provide some significant new insights into life on missions, where race was defined in ways that had a

⁵³ See letters from Emily Stephen, AC4370A/713/8/7-14, *Le Souef Family Papers*, Battye Library, Perth. Ramahyuck Mission was closed in 1908.

huge impact on Aboriginal residents—whether through the everyday demarcation of racial divisions or through devastating impositions like the Half-Caste Act.⁵⁴ In particular, it highlights the diversity of whiteness on and around a mission. Mission histories often focus primarily on the actions of one white man or couple. By contrast, Ellie's writings demonstrate that a variety of white people were involved in mission life at any time, such as an assistant like Mr Hastings, the adult children of missionaries like Ellie and her brothers, visitors to the mission like Mrs Harm or Mrs Hooper and schoolteachers like Miss Seymour. As Ellie's accounts of these people show, different white people on missions related to Aboriginal people in quite different ways, from the apparent contempt of Mr Hastings to the 'entanglement' of Miss Seymour. Such an insight helps guard against the tendency to generalise about all white people on missions as 'missionaries', and then to further generalise about their attitudes to race. On missions, as elsewhere in settler-colonial Australia, whiteness was a diverse construct, though one which uniformly held the potential of power and privilege for those who claimed it.

⁵⁴ Accounts of the significance of Victorian missions, including Ramahyuck, on the life of Aboriginal individuals and communities are given in Phillip Pepper and Tess de Araugo, *The Kurnai of Gippsland: what did happen to the Aborigines of Victoria* (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1984); and Phillip Pepper, *You are what you make yourself to be: the story of a Victorian Aboriginal family, 1842–1980* (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1980).