One angry clerk’s horrified reaction to a societal transgression:
Archival research continues to inform historiographies

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Empiricist interpretations of historical events along with contemporary versions such as David Christian’s Big History tend to place history into certain meta-frameworks, while empirical research and micro-histories provide materials to confirm, support, inform, and contest these frameworks. ¹ The resulting debates are necessary as they contribute to and highlight the centrality of history’s role in understanding human history, and ‘what it means to be human’. ² To support the argument that continued empirical research is necessary in developing historical scholarship, historiographies and meta-frameworks, three sets of documents located in the Public Record Office Victoria (PROV) will be considered. The documents relate to the years 1872 and 1873 and involve the life of Sarah Eliza Speeding (1854 – 1917). Interpretation of the documents demonstrates the role of empirical research in challenging and enriching orthodox historiographies and their places in meta-history.³

John Hirst, Marian Quartly and Carlo Ginzberg support the argument that archival research continues to add to the understanding of human history. Quartly states, “… A close reading of rich primary sources produces a local narrative carrying without effort or exclusion large and complex themes,” and Hirst elaborates with, “But I have found on topics long discussed and where an established view prevails, some research, often not very much research, can disturb the orthodoxies.” ⁴ Patrick Joyce concurs, praising ‘data’s capacity to extend our theoretical imagination.’ ⁵ Within primary historical data, anomalies at odds with current disciplinary frameworks may be discovered. ⁶ Carlo Ginzburg argues that such anomalies

² ibid., p. 237.
⁶ Ibid., p. 219.
assist in promoting 'history as an inquiry capable of attaining truths, rather than merely weaving tales...' Anomalies align with the sociologist Georg Simmel’s ‘Stranger’ analogy, in that the anomaly’s otherness causes the society to display its true values and attitudes. The anomaly that enables these particular archival documents to challenge historical orthodoxies is incest. The actions and reactions of the society in which this case of incest occurred add to social, cultural and gender historiographies of 1870s Victoria and reveal the relatively unexplored field of incest in historical research.

The three sets of documents were formally constructed although each provided varying opportunities for subjective explanations and opinions to be included in the records. The appearance of each set of documents prior to being filled in reflected aspects of the political and cultural structure of the society but once completed, offered glimpses of challenges to societal strictures and mores. The documents consist of firstly, a Teacher Record Book (PROV, VPRS 13579/P/0001 Unit 000001, Type VI V/AK/146/04/08) that contains four-columned pages detailing the employment history of Victorian teachers, each teacher being recorded on a separate page. The records of Thomas and Rebecca Speeding, parents of Sarah Eliza Speeding, were recorded on pages 251 and 4510, respectively. A second set of documents is contained in the Inquest into the death of the illegitimate female child of Sarah Eliza Speeding (PROV, VPRS Coronial Inquests, Number 66, Talbot, Victoria, March 9 1873), held by the District Coroner, Dr Francis M. Laidman, on March 9 1873. The Inquest material consists of a pre-printed Inquest form containing two witness depositions. The witness depositions were from Mrs. Margaret Stokes who cared for the deceased child, and from Dr Dowling who had been attending the child. There are also two separate documents. The first is a letter sent from Sarah Speeding in Melbourne to Mrs. Stokes and the second is a single page containing two statements – firstly, a police statement and secondly, additional information provided by Dr Dowling. The third document is a microfiche copy of the State Ward Register card of Sarah Speeding’s younger brother Thomas Ernest Speeding when he became a ward of the State on 30 September 1873, the cause of admission being neglect. (PROV, VPRS 4527 State Ward Registers, Children’s

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Registers Old Series 1864 – 1899, Volume 8, Folios 296 – 354, Fiche 078, Number 328). The Register cards were also pre-printed, containing categories to be filled in as well as a section in which further relevant information could be provided.

Before analysing the archival material, an overview of the life of Sarah Eliza Speeding will be undertaken in order to place the material into context. Sarah’s parents, Thomas Speeding and Rebecca Briscoe, were married in Dublin, Ireland on May 19, 1853 and Sarah was born in Sunderland, County Durham, England in 1854. She arrived in Melbourne in September 1860 on the ship “Adelaide” with her mother, her father having arrived previously. In July 1861, Thomas’s occupation was recorded as a bookkeeper in Melbourne on the birth registration of his son, Thomas Ernest Speeding, and in May 1864 his occupation was recorded as an accountant in Majorca on the birth registration of his son, Abraham Briscoe Speeding. From October 1864 until October 1867 Thomas was employed as head teacher at Baringhup School and from October 1870 until August 5, 1872, when he resigned, he taught at Peter’s Diggings School. Rebecca Speeding was also employed at Peter’s Diggings School as a work-mistress from October 1870 until July 14, 1872 when she died from ‘phthisis exhaustion’, now known as tuberculosis. Rebecca’s death was reported by a friend and not by Thomas. Sarah Speeding sat a Teacher Examination Paper at Peter’s Diggings School but does not appear in the Teacher Record Books.

The final entry for Thomas Speeding in the Teacher Record Book on August 5, 1872 states, ‘D.I. [District Inspector] Bolam reports that Speeding was guilty of incest with his daughter (Sarah J. Speeding)’. When Rebecca Speeding died, Thomas had abandoned the family, although it is unclear exactly when this occurred. Sarah Speeding aged eighteen and

12 PROV, VPRS 13579/P/0001 Unit 000001, Type VI V/AK/146/04/08, Teacher Record Book, Number 4510; Deaths in the District of St Arnaud in the Colony of Victoria, Entry 12, Schedule B, 1872.
13 Ibid., Entry 12.
14 Ibid., Entry 4510.
16 PROV, VPRS 13579/P/0001 Unit 000001, Type VI V/AK/146/04/08, Teacher Record Number 251.
pregnant, Thomas Ernest, aged eleven, and Abraham Briscoe, aged eight, were effectively orphaned.\textsuperscript{17}

The coronial inquest into the death of a five-month old baby, the ‘illegitimate female child of Sarah Speeding’ was held at Talbot on March 9, 1873.\textsuperscript{18} The child, Daisy, was born on October 5, 1872 at Mrs Margaret Stokes’ home in Magpie Gully but was not recorded in either the Birth or Death registers of Victoria – the only evidence of her existence was the inquest into her death. The Inquest material established that in January 1873, Sarah left for Melbourne to ‘seek a situation’ and her brothers followed soon after. The baby was left in the care of Mrs Stokes who had taken the siblings in on September 5, 1872 at the bequest of her (Mrs. Stokes’) daughter. Mrs Stokes stated that the siblings ‘had no home to go to’ and were destitute. Sarah was to send money back to pay for the child’s board but the inquest revealed that funds were owed to Mrs Stokes and medical assistance could not be paid for. The Inquest found that despite being fed with goats’ milk, the baby died on March 7, 1873 ‘from inanition through being deprived of its natural sustenance such as its Mother’s milk.’ Inanition is defined as ‘exhaustion from lack of nourishment; starvation’.\textsuperscript{19} There was no finding of the culpability of any of those involved in the life or death of the baby.

Ernest’s State Ward Register card further elaborated on Sarah’s and his circumstances in September 1873 with the following entry, ‘Father – Thomas Speeding a school master, residence and circumstances unknown. Mother. Rebecca Speeding dead. The Father has left the Colony. Sister, Sarah Elizabeth Speeding, employed at a Clothing Factory and is unable to support the child. Sister’s address c/o R. Outhwaite Esq. Glenfern, Kew.’\textsuperscript{20} Abraham Speeding’s circumstances were not mentioned.

Further documentation relating to Sarah Speeding’s life is contained in a Marriage Register entry. On November 5, 1902 “Eleanor” Speeding, spinster, aged 48, married William Henry Jarrett, widower, at Balwyn in Victoria. Her parents were listed as Thomas Speeding and

\textsuperscript{17} PROV, VPRS Coronial Inquests, Number 66, Talbot Victoria, March 9 1873; Deaths in the District of St Arnaud in the Colony of Victoria, Entry 12, Schedule B, 1872.
\textsuperscript{18} PROV, VPRS Coronial Inquests, Number 66, Talbot Victoria, March 9 1873.
\textsuperscript{20} PROV, VPRS 4527 State Ward Registers, Children’s Registers Old Series 1864 – 1899, Volume 8, Folios 296 – 354, Fiche 078, Number 328.
Rebecca Briscoe. In addition, on March 3, 1917 Eleanor Jarrett, aged 62, died at Harkaway, Berwick, Victoria. Her parents were listed as Thomas Ernest Speeding and Rebekah Speeding, formerly Briscoe, and the document states that she had no issue (children).

Before further interpretation and analysis of the documents, it must be acknowledged that Oliver J. Daddow and Arthur Marwick’s assertions apply to this research project, namely that only 80 per cent of the following ‘is likely to be soundly based,’ due to unintentional bias, ‘prejudices, the documentary lacunae and how these have impacted upon’ this researcher. The world-view of the 21st century researcher is different to that of the people he or she studies and thus clouds interpretation of events. In addition, lacunae are already evident in the documents themselves – for example, in Sarah’s changing her name to Eleanor, and the non-registration of the baby’s birth and death. Historians cannot be completely confident that their empirical research is based on accurate and truthful records, so they also cannot be confident that the conclusions they draw from their research are irrefutable.

To begin the analysis, it will be argued that the combination of the final entry in Thomas Speeding’s Teacher Record with the details recorded in the Inquest adds to historical debate. Firstly, entries in the Teacher Records are likely to have been completed by clerks. The outrage felt by the clerk who wrote the last entry in Thomas Speeding’s record was apparent in the wording, underlining and writing across the boundaries of the columns. (Appendix One) Given the clerk’s culturally responsible and educated position being entrusted with maintaining the records, it could be posited that his reaction was representative of the shock felt by communities when confronted by the discovery of cases of incest. The education of children required people of good character and the discovery of a teacher who did not fit that requirement had created anathemic reactions as the entry attests. The document itself consisted of one person’s clerical entry, unlikely to be read by the general public, but necessary in establishing a reason for Thomas Speeding’s departure. These factors explain why the record survived despite the suppression and censorship of any further mentions of incest in relation to Sarah Speeding.

21 Marriages in the District of Bourke, Fourth schedule, entry 22, 1902.
22 Deaths in the District of Berwick in the State of Victoria, Third schedule, entry 601, 1917.
At the Inquest six months later there is clear evidence of the expurgation of attempts by Mrs Stokes to include the factor of incest into the death of Daisy Speeding, as well as explaining the situation that Sarah, Ernest and Abraham Speeding found themselves in. On page one of Mrs Stokes’ four-page deposition, Coroner Laidman struck through the phrase, “it was an illegitimate child at least I was led to believe so---,” and on the third page, he inserted, “of the Mother of deceased” to Mrs Stokes statement, “The Father [insertion of ‘of the Mother of deceased’] I’m informed was a Schoolmaster at Peter’s and was named Thomas Speeding.” The addition completely changes the meaning of the sentence. (Appendix Two) No other witnesses or depositions, including Sarah Speeding’s, mention anything that could lead to a suspicion of incest so the subject was effectively expunged.

A search of the academic literature reveals fleeting references to incest in the colonial era but there appear to be no specific scholarly works on the subject. 24 In citing Anthony S. Wohl’s ‘unsuccessful attempt to examine the topic of incest’, David Vincent concludes that, “In a number of areas the silences have to be treated with respect, and the historian must withdraw from the field.” 25 As in Sarah Speeding’s case, it is highly likely that in situations in which incest occurred, knowledge of it was deleted or suppressed leading to the dearth of material to research. However, if a researcher wished to investigate the subject further, a possible source may be private diaries written in the era but the social and cultural structure of colonial Victoria makes the recording of incest unlikely even in personal journals. Another possible source of material has recently been demonstrated in the ‘first legal-historical investigation into child homicide in New Zealand’ contained in the PhD thesis of Debra Powell. 26 Powell qualitatively and quantitatively examined child homicide trials between 1870 and 1925 and uncovered documented and suspected cases of incest. 27 Powell states that,

> Sexual offences were not punished capitally, but that they

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constituted the crimes most abhorrent to society is evidenced by the kinds of sentences that were handed down by the courts and the language used to describe offenders. Those accused of such crimes as sodomy, sexual assault, child molestation, bestiality and incest, were framed in inhuman terms.  

The abhorrence with which society viewed these acts must be a factor in why incest was expunged so thoroughly from Daisy Speeding’s inquest. In relation to Sarah Speeding being a victim of incest, it also introduces the possibility that the censorship and prevarication in the Inquest documents may have been partly due to sympathetic and enlightened men attempting to protect her from the stigma of incest as she sought to establish a life for her brothers and herself.

Gendered historiography surrounding feminism, masculinity and masculinism in the mid to late 1800s is a contested field, as evidenced by writers such a Marilyn Lake, Chris McConville and Judith Allen, but this case reveals a more compassionate masculinism than has been shown in previous historical studies. Magistrates were known to show benevolence and give assistance to needy women, especially if they displayed ‘self-sacrificing, chaste femininity’ and had ‘children’s best interests at heart.’ It could be argued that the actions of the Coroner, Inquest witnesses and jurors showed they shared an ambivalence to the ‘masculinist tones of the dominant ethos of the “brotherhood of man”’ and had a more egalitarian vision for women who found themselves in situations such as Sarah Speeding’s.

The men at the Inquest would have been aware of the difficult economic, social and cultural position that Sarah Speeding faced especially in regard to the high probability that she and her brothers would need charitable assistance. Protecting her reputation would therefore increase her chances of accessing help.

There were few options available for destitute women and children in 1870s Victoria. Most western countries had Poor Laws or poor relief systems but the Australian colonial

28 Ibid., p. 217.
governments were averse to the practice because of the belief that ‘poverty was an individual moral failing.’ While male desertion of families had caused the Victorian Government to initiate the State Ward system in 1864, its preference was the social model of ‘philanthropy to alleviate the suffering of the poor … while providing substantial funding for charities when the generosity of better-off colonists failed to meet expectations.’ The established charities and benevolent societies of 1870s Melbourne were organised and administered by predominantly Protestant women ‘from an emergent urban social elite, engaging in highly selective and morally charged charitable assistance’ meaning that women seeking charity who presented themselves as virtuous and respectable but had fallen on hard times were the preferred clientele. Any mention of incest may have caused the refusal of assistance.

1870s Melbourne was also the scene of intense debates concerning poverty, homeless children and the State ward system which philanthropic members of charities and benevolent societies were involved in. By 1872, the State ward industrial schools and institutions were overcrowded and inmates were suffering physically, mentally and emotionally. A boarding-out system whereby destitute children could be sent to ‘carefully chosen homes’ that would be ‘more beneficial’ to their development was proposed. In addition, the debates involved ‘emergent discourses of social reform which sought to expose and politicise the causes of poverty.’ Women’s rights reformers, for example Mary Ann Colclough, who were seeking ‘to address and eliminate the causes of poverty’ clashed with the established charities and benevolent societies accusing them of merely providing ‘palliative charity.’ Complicating the situation further was the involvement of

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34 Ibid., p. 241.
35 The Argus, December 31, 1872, p. 4, available from http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/5845398?searchTerm=benevolent%20charities%20destitute&searchLimits=l-decade=1872%7C%7C%7C-year=1872%7C%7C%7Csortby=dateAsc%7C%7C%7C-title=13
36 Ibid., p. 4.
38 Ibid., p.1.
the Victorian government through its financial backing of established charities, and the involvement of middle-class men who provided funds to support their women-folks’ participation.

The women’s rights reformers believed that the establishment ‘bourgeois female’ philanthropists were ‘complexly and contradictorily positioned as ... agents of social control while simultaneously being subjected to socially determined notions of respectable womanhood and genteel femininity,’ thus reinforcing the class system of ‘difference, deference and distance’ that existed between them and the women and children they purported to assist.\(^{39}\) With funds and professional services from alternative sources such as the ‘noted physician and philanthropist, Dr. John Singleton’, the women’s rights reformers established a model-lodging house (the Melbourne Home) in 1875 that provided an alternative to the type of charitable assistance provided by the established charities.\(^{40}\) The Melbourne Home’s primary aim was to provide temporary shelter for underpaid working women who included ‘elegant, refined and educated ladies... “daily reduced to the verge of self-destruction for want of the means to buy bread”.’\(^ {41}\) It aimed to provide women with a ‘proper home’ from which they could ‘aspire towards independence.’\(^ {42}\) In contrast, the established charities, such as the Melbourne Servants Home and the Melbourne Ladies’ Benevolent Society, aimed to situate the women it assisted into live-in servant positions in homes or into employment in factories while living in lodgings.\(^ {43}\) The difference in the models was that the traditional charities reinforced the social hierarchy and did not provide the opportunities for women to extricate themselves from poverty that the reformist model did.

Unfortunately, Sarah Speeding and her brothers had become destitute in 1873, two years prior to the reformist innovations. Sarah’s March 1873 letter to Mrs. Stokes stated that she was waiting for letters from ‘home’, that she was spitting blood, that both her brothers were very ill, and she hoped to marry a gentleman in May, 1873. Ernest’s September institutionalisation indicated that Sarah had not married and that her income had not been


\(^{40}\) Ibid., p. 11.

\(^{41}\) Ibid., p. 11.

\(^{42}\) Ibid., p. 14, p.15.

\(^{43}\) Ibid., p. 10.
enough to keep them together, despite her literacy and education and the fact that she had cared for her brothers for almost a year. It seems highly likely, therefore, that Sarah committed Ernest to the State Ward system because she been able to access a traditional charity meaning she was forced to take a position with a family as a domestic servant as well as work in a factory.

As previously mentioned, historical research has shown that benevolent Magistrates and reformist philanthropists like Dr. Singleton showed compassion and adeptness at working within political, societal and cultural boundaries in order to promote agency for women. The actions of the men of Talbot who participated in the Inquest indicate that much broader community support for women in dire situations existed. The men were able to achieve conditions that allowed women the best opportunities to progress their lives, and those dependent on them, within a moralistic and judgmental society.

This paper has argued that archival research continues to be necessary because of its capacity to uncover anomalies that can contest, inform, support and challenge historical writing. If the anomalies reveal enough evidence or unexplored areas of historical endeavour, they can potentially change historiographies. The anomaly discovered in this research project was a late nineteenth century case of incest in regional Victoria, with three sets of documents concerning Sarah Eliza Speeding providing the information. To place the documents in context, the life of Sarah Speeding was outlined. Then, to demonstrate how the case informs history, the documents were analysed. Firstly, a linguistic/cultural analysis showed how completing the pre-printed forms revealed societal and cultural rules, taboos, and challenges, in the form of censorship, to those mores. While the Teacher Record clerk’s outrage physically and literally transgressed the boundaries of the document, the Inquest members kept within the boundaries and removed some details that could negatively affect the future prospects of Sarah Speeding and her brothers. Secondly, a class analysis indicated that middle-class women involved in operating traditional charities and benevolent societies were actively maintaining the dominance of the middle-class over the working class. Thirdly, a gender analysis demonstrated that charity reformists of both sexes were involved in attempting to provide a more egalitarian society in which women could become financially and socially independent. Women in morally conflicted situations such as Sarah Speeding were assisted by reformist or benevolent men to fit the criteria set by the women
administering the traditional charities. Across the three analyses runs the masculinist meta-narrative of a large group of men who have been relatively invisible in Australian history – quiet men like the Inquest members, Magistrates and Doctors who worked within the systems and structures to provide a ‘fair go’ for women as well as men.

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Public Record Office Victoria. VPRS 13579/P/0001 Unit 000001, Type VI V/AK/146/04/08. Teacher Record Book.


Appendix 1

PROV, VPRS 13579/P/0001 Unit 000001, Type VI V/AK/146/04/08. Teacher Record Book. Entry 251.
Appendix 2

PROV, VPRS Coronial Inquests, Number 66, Talbot Victoria, March 9 1873. Evidence of Mrs. Stokes.