Suicide and sensationalism in colonial New Zealand

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Abstract
Emma Meurant's death in 1890 at the age of 16 put her briefly but sensationally in New Zealand's national news spotlight. Her suicide was described across New Zealand daily newspapers as an agonising death caused by her taking the poison "Rough on Rats". Later, Emma's death was explained by a coroner as influenced by her reading with sensational literature, which, he and a jury determined, had put her in a state of temporary insanity. They arrived at this finding after hearing the testimony of community and family members two days after Emma's death. Sensationalism therefore reigned not only in the report of her death, but also in how it was explained – and, one might read, how that conclusion was drawn.
This article examines the context of Emma Meurant's death and its historical setting, to develop understanding of how sensationalism was understood, explained and acted out in late nineteenth century New Zealand through the coroner's inquest and newspapers. It explores the record of interactions amongst those who were involved in the event of this death, and how they appeared to fashion their own positions in relation to their social standing, their connection with Emma, and their own perspectives on sensationalism.

Introduction

"Deceased put her arms around my neck and said "Pa". She died a few moments afterwards."
Emma's father, Coroner's inquest[1]

In the mid-afternoon around 4.30pm on Saturday, 5 July 1890, 16-year-old Emma Meurant died in her father's arms on the floor of the home of her employer in Mangawhare, Northland. She was well when she'd gone to her work as Mrs Smith's housemaid that morning but had become dramatically and agonizingly ill as the day progressed. She took some time – too long – to admit that she had taken "Rough on Rats", an arsenic-based rat poison. When she finally did tell, it was too late to help her. She quickly deteriorated. Not well enough to go home, her stepmother and father were called to come to her. Her father arrived just in time to hold her as she died.

A coroner's inquest was held two days after Emma's death in the 'Reading room' of Mangawhare's small township, by the Northern Wairoa River. Six people who had been in contact with Emma that Saturday gave evidence, including a young neighbour, the storekeeper who sold Emma the rat poison, Emma's employer Mrs Smith, her neighbour Mrs Larkin, Emma's father Henry and stepmother Annie. The local doctor had been away that day but also reported his examination of Emma after her death. Each witness testified their version of the events of her death. By the end of the hearing Coroner Thomas Webb found it was very clear that her ingestion of rat poison had enabled her suicide, but why had she done it? She had been described by all as a sensible, intelligent, cheerful girl under all other circumstances. From the evidence received that day, Coroner Webb determined the cause was temporary insanity, produced by reading sensational literature.[2]

For the twenty-first century reader, this finding is not only surprising, or perplexing – but also sensational itself. Questions abound. What was sensationalist literature, and why was it

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accepted in 1890 as an explanation for a young woman's suicide? How much did thinking about sensationalist literature – and sensationalist thinking – shape the response of Emma's family and community to her death? How can this incident give us insight into the social beliefs and practices of 'ordinary' people in colonial New Zealand? This article, initially surfaced through family history research, explores the context of sensationalism and literacy in late 19th century New Zealand, not only to better understand the explanation of Emma's death, but to gain insight into how sensation was engaged with in small-town colonial New Zealand.

Sensationalist literature

Sensationalist literature first emerged in mid-19th century Britain, becoming popular across all classes of Victorian society, and spreading out to its colonies through popular press. It was, true to its name, sensational in content and believed to invoke strong sensations in its readers. The genre has been explained as reflecting social changes in Victorian England at that time, driven by increasing literacy in the population as well as the increase in invention that both enabled growth of the popular press and entertainment and gave people more time to engage in novelty leisure activities.[3] Wilkie Collins, a friend of Charles Dickens, was a preeminent writer in this genre. His *The Woman in White* (1863) is one of the best known and earliest of sensationalist novels. Many people loved reading such novels, but they could be a guilty secret – privately popular, but publicly often shunned and vilified.[4]

Sensationalist literature is difficult to define, except to say that it was sensational. Some called it a genre, while others simply dismissed it as trash. It was related to nineteenth century gothic novels - but without the supernatural elements[5] - and melodrama was also closely associated. As Pykett described, "The typical sensation novel was a catholic mixture of modes and forms, combining realism and melodrama, the journalistic and the fantastic, the domestic and the romantic or exotic … Dickens wrote of Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone*, 'wild yet domestic'". It has also been credited with laying a path for the detective novel genre; it was "the quintessential novel-with-a-secret".[6]

Sensational literature was "relatively short-lived" but a reflection of its time.[7] The novels depicted "lurid, implausible or sensational events, and frequently involving guilty secrets".[8] Stories were usually based in middle class or bourgeois domestic settings which had hitherto been regarded as places of domestic sanctuary. Sensationalist novels disrupted this view by weaving in mystery, intrigue and immorality into the characters' lives and homes. Themes of violence, infidelity, bigamy, insanity and suicide were common features of the sensationalist story – and reading them was like peeping into the dark side of private domestic life, or "mysteries … at our own doors".[9] In doing so, domestic life, and even melodrama, "lost its innocence".[10] They were variously called "bigamy novels",[11] or "novels with a secret – or several secrets".[12] Sensational novels therefore sought to push social boundaries by exploring "the darker, often forbidden areas of human experience".[13] With the genre's rise in the height of the Victorian era, sensationalist authors were seen on the one hand as rising "against Victorianism"[14] in pushing against conservative social norms in their writing, and on the other as simply making the most of high public market demand (driven by increased rates of literacy over that time) for sensational, titillating stories.[15]

Women were often the central characters in sensation novels, whether heroine or villainess. As Pykett notes, the distinction between those two roles was "fascinatingly blurred".[16] Female protagonists could be presented as complicated characters that were "bad, mad, or otherwise dangerous to know", but at the same time, often helpless and beholden to male characters. Those women were often the "lady/ies of the house" but could also be female servants or

"kitchen characters";[17] and either could be scheming, deranged and/or violent. The stories could therefore challenge the normalised class boundaries of Victorian England and suggest some empowerment of the lower classes. Characters and plots were therefore often "highly ambivalent, and the morality of the novels relativist rather than absolutist".[18]

Madness was often a characteristic of those mainly women sensationalist characters who presented as deviant, insane and often criminal. They would commit crimes of passion, bigamy, adultery, often requiring to be locked up as "madwomen in attics and maniacs in cellars". By extension, mental asylums or sanatoriums also often featured in these stories, presenting a form of institutional horror, where characters could be 'locked up' and 'buried alive' amid over-crowded insanity.[19]

Murder and suicide also commonly featured in sensation novels. Plotting to kill, or strategizing to save oneself from being killed by villainous family members or errant spouses, were common themes. Madness might lead a character to self-harm or suicide. Suicide could, however, be posed as saving oneself; freeing women from trapped circumstances and providing relief from the constraints and despair of miserable lives.[20]

Sensationalist novels were often written in a distinctive narrative style that interwove legalistic investigations and processes,[21] from the point of view of multiple characters. As Pykett suggests, such stories were presented as a mystery that none of the main narrators were completely aware of.[22] Characters could present their versions of events, like witnesses in a court, providing evidence piece by piece. The reader was drawn into the intrigue, interpreting a trail of clues through the story. In this respect sensation novels were seen as leading the development of the detective story genre. T.S. Eliot, in fact, described Wilkie Collin's *The Moonstone* (1868) as the "first and greatest of English detective novels", because of this style.[23]

As well as seeking to titillate, intrigue and stimulate the emotions, sensation novels also provided some elements of social commentary. By providing escapism to Victorian readers it was believed the literature enabled "human psychology (to be) explored under the stress of extraordinary, heightened emotion, and in which assumptions about the 'ordinary' are questioned or undermined".[24] Wilkie Collins would often give sympathetic treatment to the 'underdog', or lower-class characters in his stories. Traditional social structures were challenged, for example by portrayal of close relationships between household's servants and their masters or mistresses. Social and sexual norms were stretched by the thoughts and actions of the characters. In doing so, they further attracted readers' intrigue, but also critics' ire.

Reactions to sensationalist literature

The scandalous nature – and wide popularity - of sensationalist literature caused widespread moral concern, and even outrage. Law argues that the outrage was fuelled by a perceived blurring of the boundaries between the middle and working class by bringing together "what had hitherto been seen as the proletarian themes of violence, infidelity and insanity into bourgeois settings".[25] Deviance and scandal were presented as evident across all society, and upstairs or downstairs in the British home. An important element in "electrifying the nerves" of the Victorian readers was that the stories were set "among the people we are in the habit of meeting".[26] In doing so, the stories were widely criticised as threatening the fabric of Victorian society.

Writing on newly published sensation novels in 1862, Margaret Oliphant remarked on how the stories depicted evil and criminal acts that were committed by likeable, even heroic, characters

so that they invoked strong emotions and passions of readers.[27] Henry Mansel was more explicit the following year, stating that "Excitement, and excitement alone, seems to be the great end at which [sensation writers] aim", and that the excitement would be evoked by morbidity and corruption in the stories that "supply the cravings of a diseased appetite" in readers.[28] Indeed, sensationalist novels were designed to shock and titillate, and to both portray and provoke heightened emotions. Further, the literature was proving popular across the classes, so that the traditional, hierarchical social fabric of Victorian England appeared threatened. Braddon's writing was accused in 1865 of '"making the literature of the kitchen the favourite of the Drawing-Room",[29] while Collins' writing was blamed the following year for creating "Sensation Mania" as a "virus … spreading in all directions, from the penny journal to the shilling magazine, and from the shilling magazine to the thirty shillings volume".[30]

Sensation literature's wide accessibility to the public was a key to its success. High speed printing presses and mass newspaper production enabled serialisation of novels to become a feature of British newspapers, so stories were published in parts at regular weekly or bi-weekly intervals. The 'racy' nature of the narrative and the regularity of points of shock or intrigue meant that sensation writing could work well in this mode, to the extent that they were termed "newspaper novels" by one critic.[31] Oliphant described this as the "violent stimulant of serial publication – of *weekly* publication, with its necessity for frequent and rapid recurrence of piquant situation and startling incident".[32] This was further evidence of the low cultural quality of sensation literature, because the serialisation of the stories were seen to encourage the middle class to participate "in the proletarian mode of weekly serialisation".[33] In 1870, Alfred Austin further noted this made "the kitchen and the drawing-room kin".[34]

Serialisation of fiction in newspapers was not incidental, but an explicit business strategy by British publishers such as W.F. Tillotson and John Maxwell. Tillotsons was an especially prominent fiction syndicate which sold serialised fiction to newspapers.[35] They capitalised on the "Victorian age of the novel"[36] and the growing public interest in spectacle and sensation,[37] by providing cheap and easily digested forms of literature that could be read in short bursts, such as while travelling on the train.[38] Wilkie Collins called such readers the "unknown public" and "lost literary tribes" who tended to read for quantity rather than quality, and that often the stories they consumed had an "extraordinary sameness".[39]

The popularity of sensation literature in Victorian Britain was such that Anthony Trollope in 1870 declared that "Novels are now in the hands of us all, from the Prime Minister down to the last appointed scullery maid".[40] That 'kitchen literature' was also in the hands and minds of middle-class women was seen as not only a threat to the social system, but an encouragement towards madness, murder and suicide. The genre's existence and popularity was seen by some as evidence of a "cultural disease", being both "cause and symptom of the depravity of contemporary morality and the modern sensibility".[41] As early as 1857 an article in the *Irish Quarterly Review* argued that "excited curiosity" from reading sensationalist literature may cause people to develop "empathetic imagination" towards suicide.[42]

Whether reading about madness, suicide and crime could lead to these being acted out in reality was difficult to prove, but a case in 1840 shows that this was not beyond the imagination of the British public or justice system. When Lord William Russell's butler was found guilty of his murder, the butler's recent reading of a crime novel was considered as providing the inspiration and motivation.[43] That case is also an example of the interplay between sensation fiction and sensation journalism in newspapers, as the reporting of the murder and case played out widely through the news media. Sensational news reporting was a growing feature of the Victorian

era, which presented graphic and often horrific details of crimes and deaths to the public. Pykett described how sensation journalism was seen just as much as sensation fiction as "a form of creeping contagion, the means by which the world of the common streets, and the violent or subversive deeds of criminals were carried across the domestic threshold to violate the sanctity of the home".[44] Boyle likewise suggested that the growing incidence in British newspapers such as the *Daily Telegraph*, of sensational headlines explicitly describing details of deaths and suicide demonstrated "the possibility that the newspapers were indeed the source (or a source) of the troubled and subversive tone of the Sensation novels."[45]

The decline of the sensation novel in British newspapers by the mid-1880s was driven by moral concerns as well as market considerations. In moral terms, publishers such as Quaker Ernest Taylor of the Northern Newspaper Syndicate had become "increasingly uncomfortable with the sensational material the Northern Newspaper Syndicate came to rely on" and Taylor resigned his post there in protest.[46] Market forces were perhaps more influential over sensation literature's decline, however. From the mid-1880s, while fiction serialisation continued, there was a shift to other genres of "adventure, mystery and romance". The stories therefore looked more widely than the sensation focus on English domestic life – and moved to "naval, colonial or wild-west adventures", then further to detective series and exotic romances.[47] Sensational news reporting, however, continued for some time.

The New Zealand context

The British elements of the availability of, demand for, and concern about sensationalist fiction of the 1860s were transplanted to colonial New Zealand through the migration of settlers and international trade in fiction. There seems, however, to have been some time lag, and whereas sensation fiction was losing its popularity in Britain in the 1880s, it seemed to continue in New Zealand into the late 1880s and 1890s.

As in Britian, sensation fiction was made readily available to a wide public in New Zealand through serial publication in newspapers. A vigorous international trade in fiction writing, driven by the work of firms like Tillotsons, made it possible for newspapers in the colonies to publish similar content to their British counterparts.[48] By the late 19th century, high-speed printing presses enabled a "print revolution" in New Zealand.[49] New Zealand newspapers expanded their content and distribution across the colony, selling to an increasingly literate public from across the social classes. Entertainment sections helped attract "proletarian readers" who were recognised as reading for pleasure rather than information.[50] Dulcie Gillespie-Needham noted that "by the '90s, the quality of fiction read by settlers, no matter their social position, revealed a taste for the romantic, the spectacular and the sentimental."[51] That attraction further extended to youth. Chris Brickell has highlighted how New Zealand youth of the late nineteenth century were drawn to sensationalism as a vehicle for pleasure, through a range of entertainment activities that included reading "penny dreadfuls" and sensation novels.[52]

Like in Britain, sensation fiction was frowned upon in colonial New Zealand despite its apparent popularity. In 1891, Otago University's Professor of Mental and Moral Science, William Salmond expressed his concerns at the threat such literature posed to society, especially emphasising the potential effects on readers. In an address at the University of Otago, he opined that "Emotional novels indulged by the second class produced emotional drunkenness – a painful moral disease. Passive emotion, which did not lead to action, hardened the heart." He further "detest(ed) novels which dealt in the morbid and vile, and such sensation-mongers as Miss Brandon, Rider Haggard and Wilkie Collins. No one would be the better off

for reading 'She' or 'The woman in white". Like earlier British critics, he warned of the dire effects on the morals of sensation readers; that "the lover of sensation, who read to be moved with emotion without action."[53] Brickell has also noted how engagement with sensation novels was blamed for self-indulgent behaviours, troublesome feelings, and demoralising young people.[54]

Regardless of the high-brow critics, sensation fiction enjoyed a strong presence in New Zealand newspaper publications. Novels were published in parts, weekly or bi-weekly in supplements of major newspapers. The most published author in those serials was Bertha M. Clay, along with other 'second string' writers such as M. E. Braddon, William Black, Walter Besant, Wilkie Collins, James Payne, and William Norris. As Traue has noted, those writers' works were expensive though, so New Zealand newspapers often "plugged the gaps" with "third-string British authors and American dime novelists."[55]

Emma's reading

"She used to read periodicals with sensational tales in them. … I used to tell her if she read too much of that trash it would drive her mad." (Emma's father, Coroner's inquest).

As a reader of sensation novels, Emma fitted the stereotypical profile of the genre's assumed audience in that she was young and a servant. She probably learned to read through the public school system established in 1877, three years after her birth, and if she had a typical education, she would have been taught through to the end of primary school. Emma's family were likely quite poor, her father working as a bushman and she as a servant. They had only moved six months earlier to the small port village of Mangawhare, with its population of about 140 people.[56] For girls like Emma, newspaper publication would have been an important source of reading, and as her father and step mother attested in the coroner's hearing, she "used to read very much"[57] and "was a great reader of novels".[58] Further, her father said that she "used to read periodicals with sensational tales in them", but he was also concerned about this. He recalled that "I used to tell her if she read too much of that trash it would drive her mad."[59]

It cannot be certain which newspapers Emma read, but the larger Auckland-based *Auckland Star* or *New Zealand Herald* were likely to be available in Mangawhare in 1890. Despite having different political orientations, both newspapers published serialised sensation stories. Over the first half of 1890 the *Auckland Star* serialised "The Household of McNeil" by British author Amelia E. Barr, "A Wonderful Woman" by Canadian May Agnes Fleming, and "Ishmael or In the Depths" by American E.D.E.N Southworth. The *New Zealand Herald* published "Max: A Cradle Mystery" by Mrs Georgie Sheldon, and "Gladys Greye" by Bertha M. Clay.

Each of those stories reflected characteristics of the sensationalist genre. They included stories of families, friends and individuals dealing with household drama, romantic manoeuvring, hidden truths, diffracted and reunited families, long lost relatives and heirs, fragile friendships and ongoing social intrigue. Central characters commonly presented as upright, moralistic citizens whose respectability would be challenged by villainous deeds, often by thwarted suitors or those seeking to deceitfully acquire fortunes. The newspapers marketed these stories as artistic, astounding and amazing love stories by which readers would be "constantly enthralled", as an advertisement for "Gladys Greye" promised.[60] True love's redemption was a common closing trope, such as Gladys' love for Gerald pulling him back from near death in "Gladys Greye", or Beatrice's loving protection of Ishmael's reputation in "Ishmael or In the

Depths". Equally important was the triumph of morality, as in Katherine's ultimate overcoming of all threats to her position as Lady Dangerfield in the conclusion of "A Wonderful Woman". There is nothing to suggest in the content of those stories that they would have encouraged Emma to suicide; that theme is not evident in any of them. It would only be speculation to consider that the richness and exoticness of the stories may have stirred dissatisfaction with her own very contrasting life through their reading. Two of the stories finished close to her death; "Gladys Greye" concluded on June 28, and "A Wonderful Woman" was last published on 5 July 1890, so if she had been reading it, its last instalment was probably delivered after her death.

Sensation was not only provided in newspapers through fiction, however. It was also very apparent in news reporting. News reporting at the time often had sensationalist tones, dealing regularly with murders, unusual deaths and suicides. An example is an article in the *Auckland Star* supplement for 28 June, 1890, the week before Emma's death, which reported "Two Tragedies" graphically describing how a woman in New York had strangled her child to death, and axed her own head to kill herself.[61] Likewise, the *New Zealand Herald* that same day reported "A most cold-blooded murder" in Paris where a man shot his sister-in-law and her employer, giving graphic descriptions especially of her shooting at close range.[62] Mangawhare itself had already featured in such reporting only two years earlier where an article called "An Auckland sensation" gave explicit details of where a local woman's body had been found by the river, the wounds she had sustained, and where the woman had been and with whom before her death.[63]

The reporting of Emma's death, although brief, also gave graphic detail. Newspapers across the country carried the same short story as the *Auckland Star,* which reported on 7 July, 1890 with the title "Rough on Rats: Suicide of a young girl at Mangawhare":

> A young girl, named Emma Meurant, sixteen years of age, committed suicide at Mangawhare on Saturday afternoon by taking "Rough on Rats". She died in great agony.[64]

Rough on Rats

"She said she wanted to poison rats … Deceased lived next door to me. I had no hesitation in giving the box as I know the place to be full of rats" (Shopkeeper, Coroner's inquest).

The coroner's findings appear to have been accepted definitively, and no record remains of any questioning by Emma's family or the wider public on that determination, as may be expected to happen today. However, one thing that is most certain about the cause of Emma's death was that she died from taking "Rough on Rats".

"Rough on Rats" was invented in the USA by a Mr E.S. Welles, who created the compound largely from arsenic. Welles became very wealthy from the invention, and "Rough on Rats" featured as a regular advertisement in New Zealand newspapers in the late 19th Century. "Rough on Rats" was advertised in creative postings that promised to not only clear mice and rats out of the house, but also "roaches, flies, ants, bed-bugs, beetles, insects, skunks, jack rabbits, sparrows, gophers".[65] Welles diversified his product line to include "Rough on Corns", "Rough on Itches" and others through this time.

It may indeed be that Emma was influenced by the information given on the effectiveness of "Rough on Rats" through reading the *Auckland Star* or *New Zealand Herald*, or the *Northern*

Advocate which was a more local paper in Mangawhare. Table 1 shows the amount of advertising of Rough on Rats in those newspapers over the 2 ½ years before Emma's death. While the set advertisements were phased out from both papers after 1888, the Northern Advocate, another possible newspaper in Mangawhare, continued regular advertisements through 1889.

Table 1: Newspaper publishing about "Rough on Rats", 1/1/1888 – 5/7/1890

Newspaper	Advertisements for "Rough on Rats"	Reported cases of suicide, attempted suicide, or poisoning by "Rough on Rats"
Auckland Star	35	12
Northern Advocate	28	0
New Zealand Herald	12	13

Perhaps more importantly, Rough on Rats continued to be 'advertised' as a means of human poisoning and suicide. This method of suicide was not terribly novel at that time; evidence suggests that many people who chose to end their lives did it this way. What was never declared in the newspaper advertisements but certainly was publicised by the amount of reporting of suicides over the 1880s through to the early 20th century in New Zealand, was that "Rough on Rats" was an effective tool for the death of humans too. *Te Ara* notes that poisoning was the most common means of suicide in the early 20th century in NZ, and "Rough on Rats" was often used.[66] Reporting of suicide by "Rough on Rats" was a regular occurrence in New Zealand newspapers, including in the *Auckland Star* and *New Zealand Herald* in the last few months before her death.

In a count of newspaper articles across New Zealand from the 1880s to 1912 through *Papers Past*, over 50 suicides were reported as being caused by the digesting "Rough on Rats". The headlines were indicative of the weariness of the use of this poison in this way – with headlines through the 1880s announcing "Another case of 'rough on rats'"; "Another suicide with 'rough on rats'"; "'Rough on rats' again"; "More 'rough on rats'"; "The suicidal epidemic". Of the over 50 reports identified through that search, Emma was the 30th person reported to take her life in this way. However, the report on her death suggested that hers was slightly different. She was identified as a "young girl" – most suicides were suggested as being older adults. It also emphasised that she died "in great agony".[67]

The inquest

"I consider that deceased's mind was perfectly poisoned by reading novels"
(Emma's stepmother, Coroner's inquest).

Whatever the role sensation fiction or reporting played in Emma's death, it lingered in the testimonies given at the coroner's inquest, held two days later. The transcript of the hearing reads very much like a scene from a sensationalist novel, with its legalistic tone and embedded mystery. Through the hearing, one by one each witness gave an account of what the 'deceased' (Emma is never named) did, and they did, on that Saturday. Collectively they pieced together the narrative of her death through different times, observations and conversations. Each profess

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their surprise at the actions of a normally "sensible", "intelligent", "friendly", "cheerful" girl being so secretive about what she had done, and her seeming willingness to die. They recalled her purchasing "Rough on Rats", of her suddenly becoming ill, of how they sought to help her, and ask what she had done. No one recalled her asking for help, only to be taken home when she had grown too weak. She only told them late in the day she had taken the poison. That she had died from ingesting rat poison was confirmed with "no hesitation" by Doctor Norton who examined her after her death.[68]

Emma refused to give a reason why she took "Rough on Rats", or why she wanted to die. Her stepmother attested that she had found no note in Emma's belongings, only the "Rough on Rats" packet in the pocket of the dress she wore on her final day. She said she had not the "slightest idea" of why Emma would take her life, but that she was "was a great reader of novels and her mind may have been poisoned".[69] In Emma's father's testimony that followed he reinforced that:

> I know of nothing to trouble deceased's mind. She used to read too much. I used to tell her that if she read too much of that trash it would drive her mad. She used to read periodicals with sensational tales in them. Deceased was not of an excitable temperament.[70]

The final view heard in the inquest was that of Emma's stepmother who, when recalled, testified that:

> I consider that deceased's mind was perfectly poisoned by reading novels. I used to say many times that she would be practicing what she read. It is really my opinion that deceased has been trying to practice what she has been reading. Deceased was very determined, and whatever she made up her mind to she would endeavour to accomplish it.[71]

It seems that was enough to convince Coroner Webb and his jury, who made a final determination that Emma's suicide was caused by temporary insanity while under the influence of sensationalist literature. Those findings were made public a few days later by the *New Zealand Herald*, which reported that:

> … the jury returned a verdict that deceased took a dose of "rough on rats" while in a state of temporary insanity caused by reading sensational literature.[72]

That insanity, even in temporary form, was cited as the cause of Emma's death is not unusual for the time. As 'self-murder' suicide was deemed a crime in 19th century New Zealand, reflecting an English law which had as early as the thirteenth century deemed suicide illegal.[73] Being named a criminal would mean that the deceased would have their property seized by the state, creating the complication, amongst other things, of banning any inheritance from the deceased. Being deemed insane therefore avoided criminalisation of the deceased, and reporting on suicides over the late 19th century showed that this was a common conclusion of coroners. Most of the reporting of suicide by "Rough on Rats" over the two years prior to Emma's death blamed temporary insanity, being of unsound mind, or drinking heavily as the causes.

Emma's place in history

The story of Emma's death, surfaced through my own family history research, is the main remaining record of her life. Beyond this, there is little else recorded about her. Her life was relatively unremarkable up until Saturday, 5 July 1890. She was something of an 'ordinary' 16-year-old, whose life had quite possibly had its share of difficulties. Her family seems to

have moved around over the previous years and they had only recently moved to Mangawhare. Emma's work there as a servant likely involved long hours of menial labour. The shopkeeper insinuated that Emma's family's home was in poor condition when she remarked that she knew her family's house was riddled with rats. The sense from the witnesses' testimonies at the coroner's hearing was that Emma's family were a familiar, but not highly positioned, members of the small Mangawhare community.

At that stage Emma's family life was far removed from the circumstances her father Henry had been born into. His mother Kenehuru (later known as Eliza) was the daughter of Tainui chief Te Tuhi o Te Rangi of Ngāti Mahuta, and his father Edward Meurant had been a well-known government interpreter. Edward and Kenehuru held multiple properties after their marriage in the 1830s but had their land in Auckland seized in the 1840s by the government under pre-emption rules. Edward made a claim for the return of the land in 1848, but it was unresolved at this death in 1851. Kenehuru continued the claim for nearly three decades while continuing to bring up her children, including oldest son Henry, alone.[74] Through the mid-1800s the wealth and status of the family significantly declined, and the compensation finally received in 1879 did not resurrect their fortunes. In 1874 Henry married Johanna McLeod who died nine years later, leaving him widowed with Emma and her five siblings. There is no record of how the stepmother 'Annie Meurant' joined the family, but it is evident that she played an important role in Mangawhare in July 1890, especially in explaining Emma's death.

Regardless of the role sensation fiction really played in this story, the newspapers nevertheless are major characters. They fed sensationalism to Emma through her reading, but whether it was sensation fiction or fact that motivated her – or something else entirely – was taken by Emma to the grave. However, it seems certain that if Emma was regularly reading newspapers, she was also receiving much information about the effectiveness of "Rough on Rats" as a means of ending one's life, through their regular reporting.

Sensation was, therefore, an important theme in the story of Emma's death, whichever way the act and its aftermath are interpreted. The characters were ordinary folk going about their daily lives when an extraordinary, shocking act and tragic death caused significant disruption, and, one imagines, grief. Secrets and mystery captivate the characters – and their audience – through the short timeframe that their actions and words are recorded. But, like the end of sensation novels, much is left in the air as to what happened next, the longer-term impact of Emma's death on her family and community, and to what lessons may have been learnt – or missed – from the sense that was made of this tragedy.

Emma's story provides a contribution to social history that connects across explorations of sensational crimes, suicide and engagement with sensation in New Zealand history, although her story is earlier than the scope of the most obvious connecting studies. It provides an early connection to Brickell's examination of youth engaging with sensationalism from the early 1900s.[75] It has some parallels with Bronwyn Dalley's "The cultural remains of Elsie Walker" which considered the sensationalising of a 17 year old woman's death through the news media in the 1920s.[76] While Elsie Walker's story excited much more and prolonged coverage and speculation over her death in the 1920s media, it highlights, like Emma's story, the impact of news media in perpetuating sensationalism. It showcases coroner's reporting as providing important insights into otherwise unknown stories, as Doug Munro and John Weaver's studies of suicide in New Zealand using coroner's reporting have shown on a much wider scale.[77] A final aspect is the small insight this story gives into colonial reading habits, which most

prominently have been told in the context of family libraries, such as Lydia Wevers' *Reading on the Farm.*[78]

While these histories all connect, their themes are brought together in a unique way in Emma's story. It shines a light into how a small community's 'everyday' turned extraordinary and tragic was accounted for, reacted to, explained and reported on. It has not only provided insight into a distressing event in the small town of Mangawhare in 1890, but also illuminated wider social actions, attitudes and concerns in colonial New Zealand.

Conclusion

Emma's story, found through my own family history research process, has inspired much consideration, discussion, speculation and debate amongst us descendants of her younger sister. The evidence has provided enough to tell the story in part, but not to draw any certain conclusion. It is difficult to know whether Emma's death could be explained by anything more sinister that was going on for her particularly, or for her family more generally at that time. I imagine that at 16 Emma probably was not thinking of the future, or of the effects she would have on her wider family and their future generations. But her story has certainly left an impact. It is both emotive and instructive, enabling insight not only into this family story, but to the wider social values and behaviours of late 19th century New Zealand of those who existed in the lesser-known contexts of New Zealand's colonial history.

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