**Primary Source Passage for a Demonstration Interview**

Overleaf are extracts from an eight page, handwritten letter by 23 year old Rebecca Greaves to her uncle in England from 25 November 1851. All underlining was present in the original letter.

Rebecca migrated to Melbourne from Buckinghamshire, England in 1849. Rebecca arrived on the Louisa Baillie with her mother and nine brothers and sisters, leaving behind one sister who had married and wished to remain in England. The family set up a farm on the Plenty River, near what would become Greensborough, which is now a suburb of Melbourne. They cleared the property for wheat, potatoes and livestock, and built a family cottage.

The port of Melbourne was founded in 1835 and was the capital of the Australian colony of Victoria. By 1850, the Australian colonies of New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, and Tasmania were “self-governing colonies”, meaning they were administered by the settlers themselves and not from London - although the British monarch remained the symbolic head of state. Though a self-governing colony, Victoria maintained strong connections to Britain through trade, migration, and investment.

At the time Rebecca was writing, migration to Melbourne was booming and the population of the colony of Victoria more than doubled between 1846 and 1851 from 32,000 to 77,000 people. Before the gold rush, many of these migrants bought cheap land to become farmers. The gold rush began in 1851. Because of the gold rush the population grew even faster and reached a total of 538,000 people by 1861. Rebecca lived during this extraordinary time.

Rebecca probably worked as a domestic servant, while it is believed three of her brothers carted potatoes from a neighbouring farm to the Victorian goldfields. They may have done a little prospecting while they were there. In 1854 Rebecca married James Timms, with whom she had one daughter. Rebecca died in 1856.

What can you deduce from the passage with access to no other information? And what else would you wish to know to make more sense of it?

If you find the text difficult or unfamiliar, don’t worry: the exercise is intended to be challenging, but we hope you will also find it thought-provoking and enjoy discussing it in the interview. If you find any of the terms unfamiliar, please do not hesitate to ask us about them in the interview. We do not expect you to know anything about the history of Australia or the Victorian Gold Rush.

Please bring this document with you to the interview.

Although you have never answered my last troublesome scribble to you I have determined not to wait any longer, but to write to you for I certainly may say now that “absence makes the heart grow fonder”.

I appear to have so much to tell you that I really do not know what to tell you first. Now in the first place I will tell you My Mother has bought a hundred and sixty acres of land at a pound an acre, it is not yet cleared and is all trees like a wood. It is beautiful land, a beautiful black soil. It is not all fenced in yet as John has been busy building the cottage and clearing a piece about 6 acres for them to grow some wheat so as not to have to buy any while they are clearing some more of the ground and fencing the remainder in. They have 20 cows and calves and three horses, one pig and four goats that is all the stock at present, you know my Mother is obliged to “cut her coat according to her cloth”.

They are so anxious to get it cleared a little round the house for fear of the bush fires, as the heat here is so great in summer that the grass takes fire, sometimes for forty or fifty miles. When it once begins all attempts to escape are in vain. The fire last summer buried many Mothers and children and all the cattle on the stations[[1]](#footnote-1) where the fires raged. I myself saw two gentlemen as they were coming down the bush set fire to by the coats they had on their backs. So from that I leave you to guess how powerful the sun is here. The fire last summer got over the rivers so you see even water will not stay its rage, it is only she whose voice the wind and seas obey that can still its rage.[[2]](#footnote-2)

John is now at the diggings with James and Thomas and should they be so prosperous as to find a good quantity of Gold, which I hope they will, we shall be as it were “landed again.” I read an account that a gentleman in Melbourne with his first shovel found a piece of solid gold the size of a duck’s egg whereas the other gents that were with him only found 2 or three grains and Doctor Barker one of the party did not find any at all. So it is all chance. It is thought that the Plenty abounds in gold. They are finding it in many parts of the country it is thought that Victoria abounds in Gold, “now what do you think of our emigrating to this gold region?”

Every one has left town to go to the diggings there is not a man or boy to be seen in town even the gents at the bank are “off to the diggings.” Such an uproar never was known in the colony before, not a ship can leave the bay for as soon as the ships get in port the sailors away to the Gold mines. Go where you will, you cannot see a man unless it is an old man like my Father. The papers are full of shops to let on account of the owners going to the “diggings” they are exactly the same plight at Sydney they are finding Gold all over the country; it seems to have raised some of the poor faint hearted English. Now they have heard of Gold being found in quantities in Victoria they can raise courage enough to come out by ship loads, but even now I would not persuade anyone to come. If I were only a young man would not I go gold digging and even now I feel half inclined to dress in man’s clothes and go. I am certain if I could not dig I could rock the cradle.[[3]](#footnote-3) Only I should be afraid they would know I was not a man, as I should not like to part with my curls for that you know Uncle would spoil my beauty would it not and that certainly would be a great pity.

Truly Uncle as you are so rich and now as steam is from England to Australia you could come on a visit to our splendid country. Do dear Uncle come and see us. If you would promise to come I would go and dig some dig some gold for you.

1. Illegal settler or “squatter” outposts where cattle are raised. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is a reference to the gospels (Matthew 8:27), when Jesus calms a storm, his disciples ask: “What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the sea obey Him!” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A cheap, wooden device for sifting gold flakes from the soil and gravel in which it was found. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)