

DCA: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF IRIS WEBBER, MARGINAL CRIM OF
SLY-GROG SYDNEY

2011–2017

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Certificate of authorship and originality

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of the requirements of a degree and that the work is the original work of the candidate except where sources are acknowledged.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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This research is supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

Acknowledgements

Bundanon Trust, Debra Adelaide for support beyond the call of duty, Fabian lo Schiavo for unwittingly first alerting me to Iris, John Keons of Corrective Services for the tour of cells at Central Police Station, Larry Writer for enthusiasm and the gift of primary sources especially the interview on cassette with Ray ‘the Blizzard’ Blissett, Literature Board of the Australia Council, the staff at New South Wales State Archives in Kingswood, Peter Doyle for knowledge and support, Robert French whose chapter on Iris in *Camping by a billabong* provided the first sympathetic queer perspective, Robin Hammond, University of Technology.

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Abstract

This thesis reconstructs the life of petty criminal Iris Webber (1906–1953) and opens the gap into which queer women fall in a context where male homosexuality is criminalised. Under police scrutiny from 1932 until her death, Iris Webber’s epithet is ‘the most violent woman in Sydney’. Whilst lesbianism in Australia wasn’t a criminal offence, authorities branded queer women ‘sex perverts’ and persecuted them. Iris did not identify as a lesbian but was open about at least two relationships she had with women, including prostitute¹ Maisie Matthews. Twice married, twice acquitted of murder, she made her living as a busker, thief and sly-grogger. All these occupations are explored in the creative component of this thesis, and her star-crossed affair with Maisie Matthews is a central narrative thread.

In the exegesis, I build a timeline of Iris Webber’s life from the primary sources of police files and media stories. As these are written by men of authority, about a female queer criminal, they are necessarily interrogated. Particular attention is given to tabloid crime reporter Vince Kelly, whose chapter on Iris in *Rugged angel*, his 1961 biography of Sergeant Lilian Armfield, has underpinned all narratives about her since. I also examine the context of violence in society at that time, along with legislation and policing methods that affected Webber and her associates. Finally, I consider the historical novel, and the creative component of this thesis uses this form to bring Iris Webber to life.

In the creative component, I have focussed on the years 1932 to 1937. With the novelist’s attention to psychology, atmosphere and intimacy, I conjure Iris’s life as I imagine she experienced it. Giving equal attention to her inner and outer worlds, depicting the personal and the everyday alongside the external forces of the law in a socio-political context, I take advantage of the ellipses in the primary sources. The creative component consists of vignettes from Part 1 of a two-part novel project.

Living in poverty in a time of ingrained brutality, some perpetuated by women such

¹ Whilst current terminology favours the term ‘sex worker’, I have used the term ‘prostitute’ contextual to the time. On p. xi, a short note on terminology explains this in more detail.

as brothel madam Tilly Devine and sly-grog queen Kate Leigh, Iris was the most reviled of these women, and I explore why this is so. Both aforementioned crime bosses appear as characters in the creative component, alongside other criminals of the time. Through them, I observe the economies of the night – blackmarket drugs, alcohol and sex – which threaded through every tier of society.

The invisibility of women in public life, and history, is compounded by non-heterosexual lifestyles. Yet the number of fierce female protagonists in Sydney's sly-grog era is remarkable. Iris Webber was the least known, most marginalised, and undoubtedly most radical of these, providing a fresh aperture through which to view a fascinating time and place.