

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

2011–2017

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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.

Introduction

I first saw Iris Webber in Parliament House, Sydney, in an exhibition curated by Fabian lo Schiavo about Sydney's gay and lesbian history. There was a gaol mugshot, blown up, with a description of her as 'a 1920s gangster' who had shot and killed at least one man, in a fight over a woman. There was the epithet, *The most violent woman in Sydney*. It was 2001, and the exhibition, hung during the Mardi Gras festival, was part of the celebrations for the centenary of Federation.

Iris haunted me. How exciting to have had a queer girl gangster in my native city, who had fought over her 'moll'. A gunslinging dame still raises eyebrows, and the interwar period had always fascinated me. Yet that larger than life, black-and-white face was not glamorous. Her shoulder-length hair, side parted, was clumsily styled. The dress was plain, she wore no jewels. Her mouth was grim and compressed, her eyes hooded, her nose crooked. There was something like a scar on her top lip. She looked older than her thirty-five years, her poverty evident in her dowdy clothes and as with most police mugshots, she was wary, defensive, resentful.

The title of the exhibition, 'Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know', indicated how queers in history have been considered, as well as resurrected. For the community, their criminality has been moving from a source of shame to pride for some years, echoing the evolution of attitudes towards convict and Aboriginal heritage: it is a vestige of twentieth-century civil rights movements. Just as we have reclaimed pejoratives, *poof dyke wog black*, so too we reclaim our outlaws. The broader public opens to these figures as well, albeit more gradually: by the end of the twentieth century, Ned Kelly belonged to Anglo Australians as he never could have in the sectarian nineteenth century, when his Irish ethnicity and Catholic religion made him a pariah. In Iris, the story of greater social acceptance of queers, as well as advances in the rights of women, intersects with historical sensation.

Shortly after the Parliament House exhibition, Iris appeared in Larry Writer's

Razor, a landmark account of the decades-long rivalry between brothel madam Tilly Devine and sly-grog merchant Kate Leigh (Writer 2001). Iris was a footnote, named as a lesbian and again, ‘The most violent woman in Sydney’. She had been given a longer, more sympathetic write-up in Robert French’s marvellous yet marginalised gay Australian history *Camping by a billabong* (French 1993, pp. 71-3). She was mentioned in the exhibition ‘Femme Fatale’, at the Justice and Police Museum March 2009 – April 2010, with the same description. In the exhibition catalogue this was not expanded upon, as though it were sufficient summary (Campbell 2008, p. 19). By now, I knew this epithet came from Vince Kelly’s *Rugged angel*, the biography of policewoman Lillian Armfield (Kelly 1961, p. 77).

And by now I was becoming vexed by these portraits of Iris. They were static, tabloid. I felt she was being used for entertainment, and that the vitriolic judgment of the years before gay liberation lurked in the ironic allusory present. Of course this was not just a response to Iris’s sexuality, but also to her gender. She was a product of clichéd narratives about scarlet women more generally. None of the representations of her answered my questions:

Who was Iris Webber? How did she live? How and why did she become a criminal? How was her sexuality bound up with this criminal identity, if at all, given female homosexual activity was not criminalised as the male equivalent was? What, in view of such proscriptions of sexuality, in the context of poverty and limitations for *all* women, was *criminal*? What were the slums of inner Sydney like, post razor gangs, during the Depression and the War? How did women like Kate Leigh and Tilly Devine rise to such prominence from them; given the confines of that world and the notoriety of all three, we can assume both knew Iris: what were their relations like?

Who was Iris Webber?



Figure 1 – NSW Police Photo Book, Iris Eileen Mary Webber, 20 November 1941, No 163/139.

A short note on terminology

As Iris married twice, and became known in the 1940s as Furlong, I use her first name throughout for consistency. Criminals' names from this period are notoriously varied, with some, such as Kathleen McLennan, using up to half a dozen aliases, mostly to evade the authorities, yet often also among friends. Whilst in most cases I observe tradition by using surnames, I also choose nicknames occasionally, and in the case of women, I favour first names as more direct identifiers. Prioritising clarity, I sometimes shift between aliases to remain faithful to context.

At the time the events take place, the words 'lesbian' and 'homosexual' were scarcely used outside criminal and medical contexts. There is no evidence that Iris identified as a lesbian, yet as well as marrying twice, she had at least two relationships with women that she did not hide, a remarkable choice at a time when so few openly queer women existed in Australia, nor even worldwide, outside bohemian and upper-class circles. From a social class as disempowered as that of Iris, there are almost no others in Australia. Further, as Rebecca Jennings states in her Sydney lesbian history *Unnamed desires*, 'Without clear parameters defining exactly what constituted female same sex desire as a crime, a sickness or a sin, many women policed all aspects of their lives, and kept much of themselves hidden' (Jennings 2015, p. 25). Underpinning all was the taboo on sex in general at this time in Australia (Damousi & Lake 1995, p. 208).

I have therefore chosen to use the word 'queer' to accommodate shifting notions of sexuality and identity. Currently, and for some time, this word is the best umbrella term we have for non-heteronormative people and activity; it may also be used for men who have sex with other men, or people whose identity crosses gender binaries.

The term 'prostitute', currently eschewed due to its derogatory connotations, is retained, partly for this exact reason. In the 1930s, whilst the scale of brothel operations and profits was substantial, as evinced by Tilly Devine alone, workers did not consider themselves to be part of an industry. They were called prostitutes by media and police alike; among themselves, the affectionate derivative 'prossie' was sometimes used, or the reclaimed pejorative 'tart'.

EXEGESIS: THE MOST VIOLENT WOMAN IN SYDNEY



Figure 2 – Southern Surry Hills, 1938, Municipal Council of Sydney.

Chapter One: **According to records**

In this chapter I piece together Iris's life from the public record, accessing all available primary sources, as well as police and court records and corresponding media. As the latter three are almost exclusively written by men, I have sifted them for the truth. As well as the inevitable bias of men in positions of power against women on the wrong side of the law, there are commonplace errors in court transcriptions. One may also assume silence, denial and euphemism as the subject matter was offensive to the era's social morés. Most egregiously, journalists often fudged the truth for a more sensational story, or one that favoured the authorities. Indeed, the writing of Vince Kelly, leading crime reporter of the era, is so dominant, in all its fallacy, in the narrative of Iris thus far, that it forms the basis of my second chapter.

Iris Eileen Mary Shingles was born on 19 June 1906, in the Salvation Army Rescue Home in Bathurst. Her mother Margaret Anne, née Ewart, had been discharged from Bathurst Gaol about six weeks earlier, after serving six months of a nine-month sentence for larceny committed in Cooma. She had stolen two rings and some money from a man and his wife, a peculiar crime in such a small town, and one that would have brought great shame. A servant, Margaret had turned twenty just nine days before Iris's birth, meaning she was almost certainly pregnant when she went to gaol.

Margaret was the eldest of thirteen, her Australian-born parents James and Marion residing in Cooma (Australia Birth Index, 1839, 1869: hereafter ABI). In nearby Adaminaby, Margaret had married William Shingles in January 1905, when she already had one-year-old Hilda, whose paternity is not specified (New South Wales Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages; 1886, 1905, 1906: hereafter NSW Registry BDM).

Two children followed Iris: Miriam G and Valentine R. In NSW and Queensland Registry documents, the surnames of Iris and her three siblings vary between Ewart, Shingles, and Richardson. Iris cites Thomas Richardson as her father on her first and second marriage certificates (Queensland Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, 1925; hereafter QLD Registry BDM. NSW Registry BDM, 1943). On her birth and death certificates Iris's father is Shingles, sometimes spelt Shingels or

Shingells (NSW Registry BDM, 1906, 1953). In Queensland, an Edward Thomas Richardson born in 1908 was almost certainly Iris's half-brother; he died aged eighteen. There is no record of divorce between Margaret and William Shingles, who died in Gundagai in 1936, yet it wasn't unusual for lower-class people, not religiously adherent, or simply not Catholic as Iris's weren't, to move in and out of relationships without official blessing. It therefore seems reasonable to assume a family of four or five children, parented by Margaret and probably Thomas Richardson, lived in Glen Innes till at least the 1930s. (All biographical details found in NSW and Queensland Registries of Births Deaths and Marriages.)

Like most people of her background, Iris no doubt received rudimentary schooling but is likely to have gone into domestic service in her early teens. Later police records list her occupation as 'domestic', and whilst this was as common a cover for female criminals as 'labourer' was for male, it was also in reality one of the few occupations available to lower-class women. None of this would preclude Iris from maintaining reading and writing skills independently, yet the eloquence of her letters written from gaol fifteen years later is striking, indicating a mind far more cultivated than a life such as hers would usually allow *R v IEM Webber* (1940–41).

In 1925, Iris married Edward Webber, in later documents often referred to as Edwin (Divorce Petition 1937). Twenty years older, Edwin had enlisted in the First World War, dropping his age by two years, a move possibly motivated by the youth of most enlistees (Australian Imperial Forces).

The Webbers' marriage took place in the Restately St Mark's Church in Warwick, Queensland. It was January, a baking hot month on the Darling Downs. Warwick was a busy town, still riding on its nineteenth-century rivalry with Brisbane as state capital. Centre of stock trade and some agriculture, it had a theatre, several large pubs and churches from four denominations, most, like St Mark's, perfectly preserved. Local history still extols the visit of the Prince of Wales in 1920, and Harry Houdini in 1922 (Gifford 1988).

The 1920s were not everywhere roaring. Economic hardship for many, especially the rural working class, began years before the Crash. By 1930, when still married to Edwin, Iris was living back in Glen Innes, in Healy's Lane, a few blocks from Church Street, where she lived at the time of her wedding (Australian Electoral Rolls 1927, 1930). Subsequently, the Webbers went to live in Tyagarah Siding, near

Byron Bay, an isolated area of dense bush. These were the worst years of the Depression: in 1930, 33% of the workforce was unemployed. People walked across the continent in search of work, turning their hands to anything they could get (Lowenstein 1998). Edwin by 1932 was working as a fettler in Hay, several hundred miles south.

In May, Iris Webber caught a train to Carrathool, a tiny town adjacent to Hay in the middle of the New South Wales outback. Newspaper reports say she had come down from Glen Innes. The journey would have taken about a day, perhaps entailing a change. Iris hadn't packed much: she would later attest to having only one dress. The most valuable item in her suitcase was a pea rifle. A weapon used to hunt rabbits, as common as a garden shovel in country households of the day, this model was technically considered a revolver. Iris was evidently attached to it: the initials I.W. were carved into the barrel and it had been sawn off to just over the required length for a licence. Iris had come looking for Edwin. He had not sent any maintenance to her for six weeks and owed her mother £10, equivalent to about three weeks wages *R v IEM Webber* (1932).

Before Edwin returned from work on the afternoon of 20 May, Iris placed two metal chairs across the railway tracks. About 4.45pm Edwin approached on a tricycle with two other gangers. Stopped by the chairs, he jumped down. Iris hit him with a bottle, a scuffle ensued, then she fetched her rifle. He was running away when she fired from about thirty yards. A bullet entered his right buttock, lodging near his spine. He wasn't hospitalised: the medical officer advised him to leave the bullet in. Iris was arrested almost straight away by Constable Farrington from Carrathool, who had been on the station platform when her train pulled in. She went willingly, insisting that Edwin be taken in charge for not paying maintenance, an indictable offence at the time, as desertion by a man of his wife. The following day, Iris was still riled. 'It's alright constable,' she declared, 'There is always tomorrow and I'll get him' *R v IEM Webber* (1932, p. 5).

Iris was charged with attempted murder and taken to the recently reopened Hay Gaol, a grim colonial building ten minutes walk from the courthouse. The charge was later downgraded to wounding with attempt to do grievous bodily harm. Her threats to the constable had not helped; Iris was otherwise savvy in her dealings with the police, refusing to talk without a lawyer, evasive and pedantic on questions of whether her gun

required a licence. In Hay Gaol Entrance Book, she signed her religion 'Nil', a significant declaration at a time when atheism was radical even among the educated urban middle class. There were twelve inmates in the gaol, only one other a woman, 'deemed to be insane' (Hay Gaol Entrance Book 1932). The Hay Plain had flooded the year before, as spectacularly as it did during what is now recognised as the La Niña years 2010 and 2011. Iris spent two and a half months on remand, initially not applying for bail. Subsequently, a request in July was successful but the massive £200 total was not surprisingly unattainable *R v IEM Webber* (1932). In any case, the trial was almost upon her.

Police alleged Iris tried to strike one of them and flee on the way to the courthouse, yet she was careful in her preparations. She conducted her own defence, questioning all witnesses, including her husband, who had previously declined to give a statement. Details emerged that give a clue to their life together. Their house in the bush had the windows boarded up and no tank. Iris had been without food and clothes for some time. She needed an operation for catarrh. She had wanted to go to Sydney and get a job but Edwin had threatened suicide. The judge 'several times admonished defendant for contradicting witness'. Iris had told Edwin she 'liked him as a friend but not as a husband'. She claimed Edwin had threatened to 'bash her brains out like the dogs', and one night with his friends had thrown her from his cart into the bush. He complained she was 'always asking him questions and drove him away' ('Alleged Maliciously [sic] Wounding' August 1932, p. 4). The judge remarked of their relationship, 'you weren't exactly turtle doves'. Iris claimed to have loaded the gun with blanks, intending only to frighten him, yet the bullets found in it were real.

It is easy to imagine Edwin as a man lacking in confidence, and traumatised. He had no stars on his military record, yet could not have gone through the war without seeing atrocities. He was approaching fifty and still on the breadline; his wife was twenty years younger, fiercely intelligent and headstrong. All ingredients for the perfect storm. It would have been a surprise if their marriage had *not* been unhappy.

Iris was acquitted on a technicality. The jury returned the verdict of guilty, underlining a lack of intent; the judge opined that without intent, there was no attempt as such, and in a matter of hours, Iris walked free.

Within a year, Iris was living in Sydney, the 1933 census placing her at 14 Phillip

Street, Glebe. Her occupation was ‘home duties’, the common term for housewife. Nobody else is listed at this house (Australian Electoral Rolls 1933). Iris would never again appear on the public record except as a criminal.

Sydney police records note her on 18 September 1934, convicted of a minor assault and fined two shillings and sixpence (2/6’) (*NSW Police Photo Book* 1941). A year later, Iris was back in Central Court for gathering alms, the usual charge given to buskers. She had been playing the accordion, an occupation she would maintain for the rest of her life. She was given three months good behaviour (*NSW Police Photo Book* 1941). By this time, she was living at 6 Clisdell Street, a Surry Hills ‘locality frequented by drinkers of methylated spirits and criminals of the worst type’ (‘Razor slasher killed’ November 1937, p. 21) This slum was as notorious as Frog Hollow, at the other end of ‘Surro’, demolished from the 1910s to become the Brisbane Street Resumption (Keating 1991).



Figure 3 – 6 Clisdell Street Surry Hills, 1937, *Deposition Rex v IEM Webber*, City Coroner’s Court, November 1937, Item #9/737.



Figure 4 – NSW Police Photo Book, Kathleen McLennan, 8 July 1936, No 146/241.

Next door at number 4 lived Kathleen McLennan, known as Kath or Millie to friends and police, described by the latter as ‘a woman of doubtful character, and the associate of undesirables’ *R v McLennan* (1935)². Kath was close friends with Maisie Matthews, a twenty-year-old prostitute whom the police would later imply was in a relationship with Iris at this time, as well as with gunman and razor gangster Bill

² Apart from a handful of convictions for ‘insulting words’, Kath had featured in *Truth*’s notorious divorce column in 1932, under her alias Millicent Mary Agnes Fahey. The article reported Joseph Fahey’s petition on the grounds of desertion, a common enough crime among men, but rare and far more terrible among woman. Kath had wed Joseph, twenty years her senior, in 1918, leaving him with their child barely two years later. Kath’s birth date of c. 1905 indicates she was around 13 when she became a wife and mother.

Smillie (*NSW Police Criminal Register* 1944). Without naming Maisie specifically, Vince Kelly reiterates Iris and Smillie's rivalry for a young prostitute.

'Twice she featured in shooting affrays,' said Lillian Armfield, 'and the background of both was her lesbian practices. In each case she had lured away a criminal's girlfriend to live with her. On each occasion it was the same girl, and there is no doubt that the other woman and Iris Webber indulged in abnormal sexual relations.' (Kelly 1961, p. 78)



Figure 5 – NSW Police Photo Book, Maisie Nora Matthews, 8 July 1936, No 146/240.

On 19 September 1935, there was a party at 4 Clisdell Street attended by Kath, Iris and Smillie, who lived a few minutes away at 140 Devonshire Street in his family home. The party may have been to celebrate Smillie's release from gaol nine days

earlier. It was raided by Detective Nye and Constables George and McAuley. Solicitor Phillip N. Roach later accused the police of going into the house and herding Kath and Smillie from the back kitchen into the front room, in order to book them for consorting *R v McLennan* (1935, pp. 13–15). This was a common tactic, the law so draconian that people could be booked in the company of their own spouses (‘Consorting with wife/prostitute’ March 1930, p. 15).³ There were three other people at the Clisdell Street party, unnamed. Iris was playing the accordion.

Two weeks later, about 9.30 on a Saturday night, Smillie was found sitting on a chair bleeding outside 477 Elizabeth Street, about ten minutes’ stagger from Clisdell Street. He had been shot in each thigh with a repeating rifle owned by Iris. When the police entered 6 Clisdell Street ten days later, Constable Thompson confronted Iris. She had submitted a rifle to another detective at Redfern station for examination, but not having ample evidence, they didn’t arrest her. The following day, when the police went next door to Kath’s, Kath said, ‘Are you going to arrest Mrs Webber?’ *R v McLennan* (1935, pp.1, 6–7). In the end it was Kath who gave herself up.

Kath’s confession is written in a shaky hand, suggesting poor literacy or a lack of sobriety. She states she ‘had been keeping company with Smillie for some time – there had been quarrelling’ *R v McLennan* (1935, p. 3). She was charged with ‘shoot with intent to murder’, placed on remand then bailed for £200. She went to live with her family in Malabar, reporting daily to local police.

Smillie observed customary *omertà* by refusing to testify against Kath. There was the added incentive of humiliation due to injury by a woman. He claimed he was shot by a man in James Street, Redfern, then walked into the city *R v McLennan* (1935, pp. 17–19). The case collapsed when Kath recanted, saying she had written her confession in a state of distress, having burnt her leg with Lysol that she also intended to drink. She alleged she had been at her mother’s that night, and her family provided an alibi.

The police would not have been energetic in pursuing Smillie’s assailant. Cross-examined by Roach, Constable Thompson said, defensively, ‘I did not tell her [Kathleen] that if I found out who shot Smillie there would be no action taken’ *R v*

³ The *NSW Vagrancy (Amendment) Act 1929*, with its clause against ‘habitually consorting’ with criminals or prostitutes, had such an enormous impact on street life in Sydney that it is returned to in more detail in the third chapter of this exegesis.

McLennan (1935, p. 10). The police said Smillie was ‘of moody disposition and intemperate habits, and is regarded as a very dangerous criminal, at times being very violent’ (*NSW Police Criminal Register* 1935). The stocky, good-looking thirty-three-year-old had done five years for a vicious double slashing of rival cocaine dealers when working for Kate Leigh in the 1920s (‘Razor gangman’ November 1928, p. 11). At the time he was also romancing Kate’s daughter Eileen Earle (Writer 2001, p. 50). Nor would this powerful family have rushed to Smillie’s defence: by the mid-1930s, ties with him appear to have broken, just as the Leighs were taking over Smillie’s home turf, the southern end of Surry Hills, Kate’s beerhouse at 2 Lansdowne Street beginning operation around this time. Author Ruth Park would be resident ten years hence, her experience richly rendered in the second volume of her autobiography *Fishing in the Styx*, and more immediately inspiring her most famous novels *The harp in the south* and *Poor man’s orange* (Park 1975, 1994).

Nine years later, in her *Modus Operandi*, the police would state ‘Webber allegedly shot ... criminal William Smillie’ (*NSW Police Criminal Register* 1944).



Figure 6 – *NSW Police Photo Book*, William Smillie, 3 July 1934.

Maisie Matthews: from Orange to Sydney via Parramatta Girls

The figure central to these dramas is invisible. Since her release from Parramatta Girls' Home on her eighteenth birthday in June 1933, Maisie Matthews had accrued a lengthy record. Her surname was probably from a teenage marriage to petty criminal Frederick Matthews. Kath's later claim to have been friends with her for ten years implies that Maisie was in Sydney from a young age *R v Webber* (1937, p. 29). One may presume that Maisie was street wise to say the least.

From the age of eighteen, she was repeatedly charged with offences common to streetwalkers: soliciting, vagrancy, and the 'trifecta', as it is still known: offensive behaviour, indecent language and resisting arrest. (The 'trifecta' can result from as little as appearing drunk in public.) Maisie was on six months' good behaviour at the time of the Smillie shooting (*NSW Police Photo Book* 1936). Iris was less than a month into her own good behaviour bond. By now, Sydney police could have connected this busker with the gunslinger in Hay. Back in April, Kath had received ten days hard labour for assaulting a woman (*NSW Police Photo Book* 1936). Somebody bailed her – who? Iris? Was Kath indebted to Iris?

Iris stood to lose a lot more than Kath if indicted. Maisie would be implicated, their lesbianism exposed, and whilst not technically illegal, lesbianism was abhorred to the extent that campaigns against 'this terrible cult of perversion', were tabled by police, media and medical authorities (Kelly 1961, pp. 82–3).⁴ Kath and Iris were ten and nine years older than Matthews. They may have wanted to protect her.

Kath's confession is pure B-Grade Hollywood: '... you have tried to make a fool of me too long this is the last time [sic]. The world is not big enough to hold the two of us, one has to go seeing I am the one in possession of the means ... you shall be the one' *R v McLennan* (1935, p. 3); ('Shot man after arguments' October 1935, p. 17).

In May 1936, Kath and Maisie attacked Irene Crowther, who also lived at 4 Clisdell Street with her family. After an apparently friendly visit, on the way out through the

⁴ The chapter on Iris in *Rugged angel*, entitled 'City's Most Violent Woman', is as much of a fulmination against lesbianism as an exposé of Iris herself, its influence on all portrayals of Iris since so pervasive that closer scrutiny of it comes in Chapter Two of this exegesis.

backyard, Kath felled Crowther with a punch, saying ‘You c ___’ (sic), then Maisie stabbed her in the side, leaving a wound eight inches long and an inch-and-a-half deep. When picked up dazed near Central in the early hours, Crowther was also bleeding from a head wound nine inches long. She claimed: ‘They cut the ear in halves’ *R v McLennan and Matthews* (1936, p. 8). Crowther was hospitalised for a week. These details, faithful to the medical report, appear in several newspapers as well (‘Woman slashed’ 12 May 1936, p. 12). Kath doesn’t seem to have been living at Clisdell Street any longer. Crowther claimed Kath had stolen money from her son, but that they resolved the issue inside, before Kath and Maisie set upon her outside as they were leaving. The assault occurred at midnight on a Monday; Kath and Maisie had been drinking *R v McLennan and Matthews* (1936, pp 7-8). They were sent to the State Reformatory for Women at Long Bay, commonly known as the ‘Refty’, to serve 18 months light labour, a long sentence for those times but consistent with the extremity of the crime. Iris was still living next door at number 6 (‘Alleged razor attack’ 13 May 1936, p. 11; ‘Woman wounded’ 27 May 1936, p. 10).

In October, Iris was fined £10 recognisance of self and given 12 months good behaviour. This was heavy punishment for a person playing music in the street, who had not been charged for a year, and then only with a minor offence. One month later, she appealed and was discharged. The following year, after breaching her bond by gathering alms and using insulting words, she was gaol. There was only one gaol for women in the state: Iris may have been pleased to see in the Refty her friend and her lover who both had one more month to serve. She may also have been upset, if she had known that Maisie was corresponding with petty criminal Alfred James Maley, alias ‘Slim’ *R v IEM Webber* (1937, p. 27). During her week in gaol, Iris was punished for ‘refusing to work’ (*Long Bay Punishments Book* 1937).

Maley was doing two years at Glen Innes Afforestation Camp for slashing a woman just two days after the Crowther assault (*NSW Police Photo Book* 1936). There appears to be no connection between the two incidents, Maley’s victim being May Lambert, a married woman from Bondi with no criminal record, according to newspaper reports (‘Bodily harm charge’ 19 May 1936, p. 11; ‘Woman wounded’ 27 May 1936, p. 10). Her injuries were not as substantial as Crowther’s yet Maley’s sentence was heavier, probably due to his gender as well as his reputation as an alcoholic. Prison farms were an innovation of the early 1930s, when gaols had become

overcrowded due to the consorting laws ('Crime in NSW' May 1930, p. 10). There was nothing bucolic about being 'out on the woodheap' (Hickie 1990, p. 139). It was searingly tough, the hours long, often seven days a week, and temperatures very cold, as vividly brought to life in the novel *Amaze your friends*, set a couple of decades later (Doyle 1998, pp. 121-36).

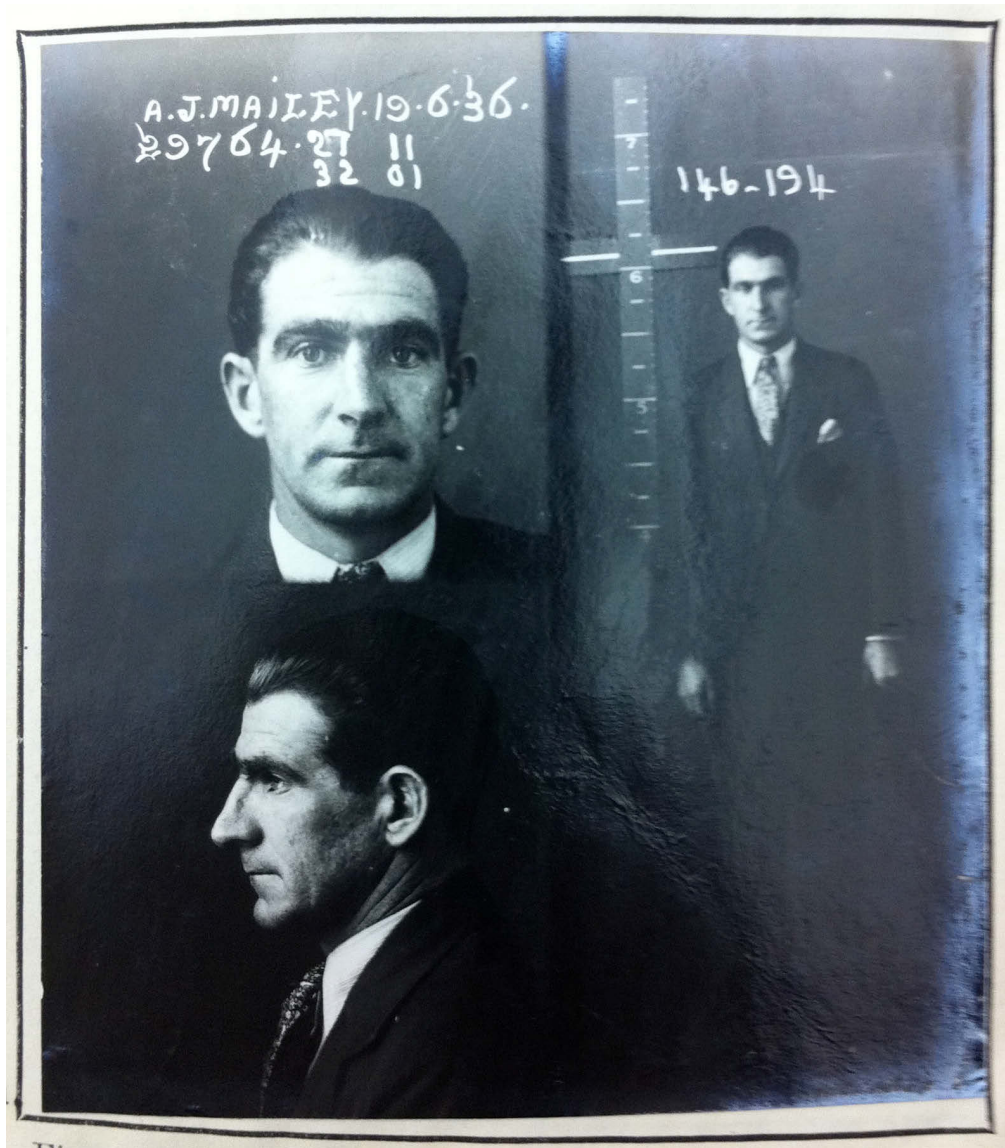


Figure 7 – NSW Police Photo Book, Alfred James Maley, 19 July 1936, No. 146/97.

Kath and Maisie got out of gaol in June. In early September, Kath was involved in a brawl ('Assault alleged' 14 September 1937, p. 6). With two other women and a man, she assaulted two women and a man, allegedly throwing the baby of one to the

floor. All were drunk. The main victim was Kathleen Gallagher, a Surry Hills prostitute in her forties who had also done time for slashing. Kath returned to the Refty, where she appears to have been slashed by Gallagher, who was gaoled at the same time. Gallagher denied it (*Long Bay Medical Records* 1937).

On 21 September Iris had Harold Munro, a divorce solicitor who had previously practised in Junee, petition her husband Edwin for divorce on the grounds of desertion. She is likely to have been motivated by the fact that authorities looked more kindly upon a woman who had been left to fend for herself. In the petition Iris states ‘At the present time I am unemployed and am in receipt of food relief and in addition I receive about ~~seven~~ [sic] four shillings and sixpence per week being proceeds earned by me by playing music’ (Divorce petition 1937, p. 1).

Maley got out of Glen Innes on 25 September and moved into a room on Crown Street with Maisie. Ten days later, they quarrelled violently and he hit her on the head with an enamel basin. Kath and Iris were there – the former just out of gaol – and helped Maisie escape to Iris’s nearby. The next morning Maley turned up drunk, threatening to get Maisie. Iris wouldn’t let him in. He came back around midday, making such a scene that Iris eventually opened the door. Kath claimed he went for Iris with a razor: Iris’s nose was bloodied. Then Iris shot him with her pea rifle, which later in court was deemed to be malfunctioning. Bullets entered his jaw, arm and neck. Kath came to his aid, mopping his face. Maley sat on the bed for a while, not bleeding much, then left.

Bert Morris, one of the mob in the brawl with Kath a couple of months prior, found Maley outside and walked him down the street. Maley asked Herb to buy him a beer, swearing ‘I’ll cut her in two’, meaning Maisie. He was found by a policeman sitting in the gutter in Butt Street across the road from Iris’s. He died in Sydney Hospital later that night *R v IEM Webber* (1937).

It took police ten days to arrest Iris. She was charged with murder and refused bail. The media coverage was impartial or sympathetic. With headlines such as ‘Man, With bullet in brain, walked, talked, asked for a drink’, the biggest sensation of the case was the length of time it took Maley to die (‘Man with bullet in brain’ October 1937, p. 17). Again, the weakness of a weapon used to hunt rabbits, let alone one that was malfunctioning, was a factor. Like Smillie, Maley was not popular, the recent slashing for its sheer gratuitousness unlikely to elicit admiration even from a criminal. In the

Coroner's court, Iris was defended by the aforementioned Roach. His criminal pedigree reached to notables Tilly Devine and Kate Leigh. The Coroner found the plea of self-defence insufficient and committed Iris for trial for murder ('Murder alleged' October 1937, p. 1). Iris did not go quietly, landing in solitary straight away for assaulting an officer (*Gaol Description Card*, Webber). Harold Munro appeared for the defence at her hearing one month later. The jury acquitted Iris without leaving the box.

Kath, Maisie and Iris make a compelling triad, their bond tested by years of pressure from the law. Assuming Maisie and Iris to be in a relationship is to assume a couple under siege and very much in need of an ally. Kath, as Maisie's best friend of ten years, and Iris's next-door neighbour, is the obvious contender. No paragon of virtue herself, on evidence poorer, less literate and more violent, Kath also needed allies. Few would be tough or forgiving enough for her. Of the three, Iris's brushes with the law are the least serious. She is also the most intelligently spoken, with an unremitting sense of justice; all characteristics that invite a position of responsibility or power, even within this reduced context. Yet her relationship with Maisie would not survive the Maley shooting.



Figure 8 – Butt Street, viewed across Clisdell Street, Surry Hills, 1937, *Deposition Rex v IEM Webber*, City Coroner's Court, November 1937, Item #9/737.

The following year, in 1938, Maisie's Modus Operandi noted her as a 'Razor slasher and prostitute' (*NSW Police Criminal Register* 1938). She had minor sentences for offensive behaviour; no connection to Iris was mentioned. In the same year, she married William Kelso, alias Walter (NSW Registry BDM). Kelso was an accomplice of George Dempsey, professional thief, who would be accused of the 1940 murder of Bill Smillie (*NSW Police Criminal Register* 1946; *NSW Police Gazette* 1940). The only subsequent charge for Maisie I have found is bigamy in 1946 (*NSW Police Gazette* 1946), a fairly frequent crime as the Catholic church almost never granted divorce. As shown in their gaol entrance cards and the NSW Police Criminal Register, Maisie, like Kath, Smillie, Maley, Kate and Tilly — indeed, almost all the crims of the day — was a Catholic, a fact whose significance is discussed further on p. 70.

Kathleen McLennan disappears from police records, in the 1940s reappearing as Millicent Tangga, a character in Woolloomooloo involved in more affrays with Iris.

Gaol bound

Iris stayed out of trouble for more than six months. It is impossible to know where she was and how she got by. A woman who had twice beaten charges of shooting men would not have been looked upon favourably by the authorities; her newfound reputation as a lesbian exposing her to even greater opprobrium. 'She was a horrible woman, a disgusting creature, completely without shame or conscience,' Sgt Lillian Armfield expostulated (Kelly 1961, p. 85). How successful was Iris in fending off this view of herself, if at all? She was guilty of manslaughter, her lover Maisie had left her to marry a man, and her friend Kath was in constant trouble for violent assaults. Perhaps Iris left the city, as two years hence she would tell police that she had been away around this time *R v IEM Webber* (1940–1941). Yet leaving her place would have risked losing it, and compared to the hovels, sometimes mere tin shacks, that characterised much of Surry Hills, Clisdell Street was worth hanging on to (Keating 1991). Iris had moved back in by 1940 *R v IEM Webber* (1940-1941).

As Iris was ultimately dependent on the streets for her income, contact with the police seemed unavoidable. When confrontation resumed, the punishments and Iris's resistance grew. Charged with gathering alms in July 1938 at Wynyard station, Iris

reputedly fought back, swearing and kicking police in the shins. She would have been no match for her arresting officers, one of whom, Constable Stehr, was an international footballer. It was Wednesday, 8.15 p.m, a strange time to be busking, especially at the coldest part of the year.

Although busking/gathering alms was a minor offence, Iris must have felt she needed powerful representation. She engaged Harold Munro, who in March had stood for a rural seat in the state elections as an Independent supporting the United Australia Party, conservative precursor to the Liberal Party ('March 26 – the election date' February 1938, p. 5). Munro was making his way up to join Phillip Roach as Sydney's most popular criminal lawyer; the following year he would appear for the men accused of murdering notorious gangster Guido Calletti.

The charge of 'gathering alms' came under the *Vagrancy Act*. A person 'having no visible lawful means of support' or 'placing himself in a public place to beg or gather alms' was liable for a sentence of up to six months. Given the poverty of the times, there were a large number of people begging, yet in *Police Gazettes* from the 1920s–40s, I found few arrests for gathering alms, in contrast, for instance, with the almost monthly occurrence of arrests for male homosexual activity. Iris may even have read the actual legislation; she was always specific in her refutations of 'gathering alms', insisting on her identity as a musician, even in her divorce petition where such an identity had no advantage. There is no clause in the *Vagrancy Act* against playing music, only clause 7(a) that proscribes obscene songs or ballads. The many observations by police and the media of Iris playing the accordion give her claims legitimacy.

Iris's appeal with Munro made it into the papers. Her personality blazes through these reports. When convicted of having assaulted Stehr and used bad language, 'she shouted to the magistrate (Mr Arnold): "How many innocent men must be in gaol. Is this the justice a citizen gets?"' She was remanded to cells. Apologising on her return, Iris was nevertheless given a hefty two years good behaviour and £13 total in fines. She said she would appeal because Constable Stehr had told lies about her ('Street musician' September 1938, p. 16).

Even divorced, Iris got no reprieve: in the space of twelve months she was arrested half a dozen times, twice under warrant, for gathering alms, indecent language, and assaulting police twice (*Gaol Description Card*, Webber). Such zealous punishment

of petty infringements is surely proof she was more than a busker in the eyes of the authorities.

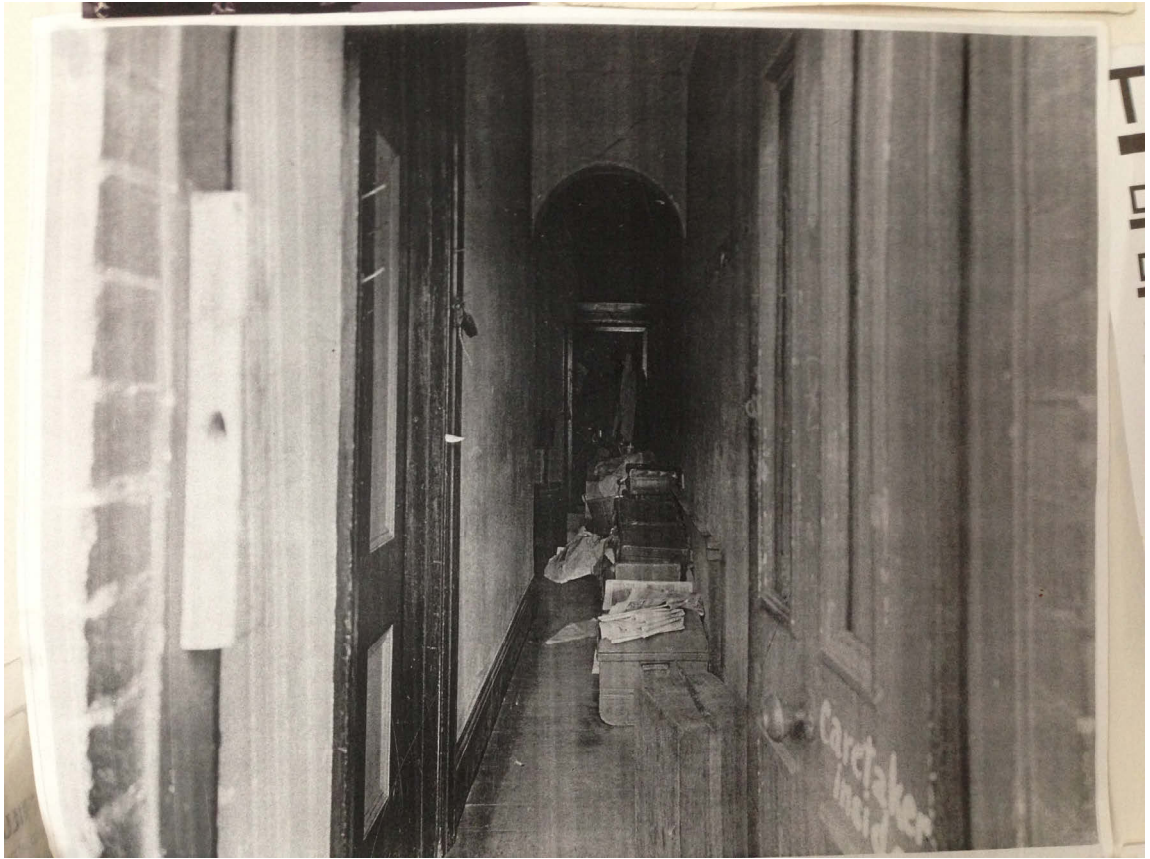


Figure 9 – Hallway of 6 Clisdell Street, Surry Hills, 1937, *Deposition Rex v IEM Webber*, November 1937, Item #9/737.

She engaged increasingly with legal sophistry. In the aforementioned divorce petition, the correction of her declaration of income from seven shillings to four is appropriately pedantic; yet it seems to me a matter of pride as well as proof. Forensic photos from the Maley case show piles of newspapers in the hall of Iris's house *R v IEM Webber* (1937). It isn't out of the question that she had seen an article about a similar court battle two years prior, by a professional musician who had lost his job in the Depression. With children to feed and government relief insufficient, the man lamented he would be better off in gaol over Christmas. The article was sympathetic, noting police persecution of street musicians at that time ('Better off in gaol' December 1936, p. 14). Bumper Farrell, noted bagman and subject of a biography by Larry Writer

(Writer 2011), claimed 'Iris Webber kept records of court cases as carefully as a lawyer keeps his briefs' (Kelly 1961, p. 79). With begrudging respect, Lillian Armfield said, '[...] she had a brilliant brain and could have gone far had she been able to curb her criminal tendencies' (Kelly 1961, p. 78).

Iris by now was a character of interest to the media. Another article described her musical performances as 'skilled' ('Musician's right to play' May 1939, p. 5). Yet she did not receive clemency, the law treating her as a petty criminal rather than a musician. Apart from her rude temper, the fact that Iris was single and childless was a big black mark at a time when women had few other roles than motherhood. Her appeals were dismissed and in mid 1939 she served two short sentences in the Refty. A third sentence at the end of the year included periods in solitary for disorderly behaviour, insolence and disobedience (*Gaol Description Card*, Webber; *Long Bay Punishments Book*, 1939). She had attempted an adjournment, complaining rations in Long Bay were so bad she was weak ('Prisoner's complaint about food' November 1939, p. 10).

This sentence ran over summer, Iris not leaving gaol for two months. She was acquitted of stealing a handbag but convicted of assaulting a policeman and female shop detective. In police documents, when assault victims are female, their gender is usually pointed out, and the curiously tautologous adverb 'unlawfully' is often employed to describe the assault (*NSW Police Photo Book* 1941). At this time, Iris began to associate with Laurie Cole, ten years older, a frequent inmate of the Refty, where she inspired much disapproval: '1. Disobedience. 2. Filthy language. 3. Threatening to report officer to Comptroller-General' (*Long Bay Punishments Book* 29 April 1935). In that same year Cole had been recommended for treatment under the *Inebriates Act* Two years later, it would seem she had relapsed: 'Cole is a thoroughly unsatisfactory type of low grade mortal, and is a nuisance' (*Long Bay Medical Records* 24 December 1937).

Cole was charged along with Iris for the 1939 bag theft, and pleaded guilty.

Iris was released from Long Bay in January 1940, but immediately received a breach of recognisance and landed back inside. She got bail a week later then won her appeal in March. There is a lacuna in her life for the next few months, right in the middle of which her old rival, Bill Smillie, was shot dead in Sadie Pinn's grocery at 135 Devonshire Street. Across the road from Smillie's house, one block from Iris's, Pinn's

was allegedly a place to fence. It was 13 July 1940.

Smillie's body was found in Butt Street 'next to a dead cat', as several newspaper articles picturesquely describe and Kelly and Writer reiterate ('Gunman shot 15 July 1940, p. 10) (Kelly 1961, p. 81; Writer 2001, p. 50). This was the lane where Maley had sat bleeding to death from Iris's bullets almost three years earlier. Some, including Kelly, have speculated Iris was responsible for Smillie's death yet the proximity is coincidental. One cannot imagine the police letting her go had there been the slightest suspicion of her guilt.

At war

Two months later, in October, Iris would claim to have 'been back in Clisdell Street six days' *R v IEM Webber* (1940–41). The Second World War was in full swing and Iris was charged with mugging Robert Benjamin Gregory, a member of the Australian Boot Trade Employees Federation who had a ticket for the annual picnic at Clifton Gardens and a prescription for morphine in his pocket. One of the witnesses called in this trial, Arthur Aitken, cites his address as 6 Clisdell Street, the same as Iris. There is also mention of men's army clothes in an upstairs room, so it seems certain that tenancy of 6 Clisdell Street did alter, perhaps as far back as Iris's remand for the Maley shooting. When the police arrived at 3.30 p.m., Iris was in bed with Laurie Cole *R v IEM Webber* (1940–41, pp. 2, 9).

Iris was imprisoned for over a year. A folder of letters written by her from January to March 1941 holds an eloquence striking for someone of so little education. Composed in elegant copperplate to authorities about her pending court case, they are confident, fluent documents displaying a strong grasp of legalese, fierce righteousness, and rhetorical flair. Iris was preparing her defence in these letters, arranging witnesses and evidence. The trial did not begin till February 1941, further delays caused by Iris requesting documents. Munro came in to defend her, was sacked, and replaced by a barrister known as Mr Painter.

When Iris finally had her day in court, interesting details emerged. Gregory appears to have been on a spree. He had won money at the races and had had a finger amputated two days earlier. He suffered concussion and two black eyes, injuries consistent with the knuckleduster found on Iris's mantelpiece, which police claimed she admitted to carrying for protection in the streets when she was out playing the

accordion, but that she denied knowing about, having only just moved back into the room. Gregory claimed he was assaulted by a man as well as Iris, picking her out of a line-up *R v IEM Webber* (1940–41, pp. 3–4). He said he had met Iris in the Invicta Hotel, had a couple of drinks, then lost his memory. The next thing he remembered was being in the laneway two blocks away, between Clisdell and Elizabeth Street, and seeing Iris charge at him then pin him down with the help of a man whose face he didn't see, and steal £14 from his pocket. Iris denied everything except having a drink with him.

At the Quarter Sessions in April, Gregory gave evidence that he had first been to Singleton's Bar, a known pick-up place for prostitutes. He had met a woman, gone to a residential address with her, then changed his mind and gone to the Invicta Hotel with the £14 still in his pocket. He considered himself sober despite drinking seven beers and losing his memory temporarily.

One wonders whether Gregory invented the male assailant, in tune with the usual shame men felt when assaulted by women. Certainly after that many drinks, with such a recent amputation, he may not have been a match for Iris and her knuckleduster. Likewise, his amnesia may have been due to shame. But given he was on morphine and had drunk a lot, a blackout is plausible. What might Gregory have done that he didn't want to admit? Gone with Iris for a sexual transaction?

A witness in the Invicta, Irene Gibson, claimed Gregory was shouting drinks for everyone, and 'dancing with ladies' *R v IEM Webber* (1940–41, pp. 13–17). Gibson's character was called into question as she had been booked for consorting and prostitution in the past, a fact the judge reiterated in his summing up *R v IEM Webber* (1940–41, p. 31). Iris interrupted proceedings several times, to complain and instruct Painter in his questioning. She was reprimanded by the judge, to a final warning of contempt of court. The jury took three hours to return a verdict of not guilty of robbery and guilty of assault with a strong recommendation to mercy.

To the Gaol Recorder who reads out Iris's record, Painter's parting shot supports the notion that Iris was persecuted by police:

Q: These charges against the accused of assaulting the police, would not they arise from the fact that she was playing the accordion and police action was taken against her for that?

A: I cannot answer that, I would not know that.

Painter persists to Detective Wiggins:

Q: Police action was taken against her time and time again for playing the accordion – only a minor offence – and that led to a charge of assaulting the police?

A: I could not say from my own knowledge *R v IEM Webber* (1940–41, pp. 34–35).

It was no use. Iris's twelve-month sentence was not back dated. She was released in April 1942.

By this time, Kate Leigh had increased her properties in southern Surry Hills from 2 Lansdowne Street to the now-infamous 212 Devonshire Street. She also owned 21 Pearl Street, usually inhabited by daughter Eileen Earle, closely associated with her mother's business. War brought jobs, stress and the excitement of visiting servicemen, all of which increased the thirst for grog. Despite (or perhaps because of) ongoing charges for its supply, Leigh had cemented her reputation as a Robin Hood ('Kate Leigh, "war worker"' October 1942, p. 10). Iris, on the other hand, also now selling sly-grog, was a pariah.

She had gone to live on the other side of town in Woolloomooloo. Such a move would have taken her away from the hostile police at Regent Street, Central, Darlinghurst and Redfern stations, but also away from friends. One may postulate she had done something to offend crime boss Kate Leigh; certainly there are no records Iris engaged in sly-grog when living so close to Kate. Records refer to her playing the accordion until the last year of her life, but she was never again arrested for playing it in public. It would seem the police campaign against her busking worked. However, if Iris thought she had found an easier way to make a living, she was wrong. For the next three years, she would find herself in constant trouble with the police.

Down in the 'loo

In 1943, Iris was selling sly-grog from her abode at 61 Forbes Street, Woolloomooloo. From April til October liquor was seized from this address eight times. In September, she married George Furlong in St David's Church of England, Arthur Street, Surry Hills, five minutes walk from her old stamping ground.

Iris already had a place to live and Furlong was a 65-year-old labourer of meagre means, so it seems the only thing this marriage could have offered was allayment of Iris's lesbian notoriety, which by now had been absorbed by the police and

media as a defining characteristic, naturally pejorative. The frankness of their references to her queerness in this decade could also be attributed to the gradual relaxation of attitudes towards sexuality that had occurred since the turn of the century, peaking with another war (Bongiorno 2012, pp. 188-99). *Truth's* posthumous take on the 1935 shooting of Bill Smillie was clear:

[It] transpired over the affections of a woman: or rather, affections which had grown cold.

A woman was believed to have shot Smillie, and the police subsequently charged one young woman, who was acquitted by the court ('Gunman taken for a ride' 14 July 1940, p. 16).

At the time of her wedding, Iris had just got out of gaol for assault. The victim was John Charles Hodder, known as Jackie to mates like leading Sydney gangster Chow Hayes (Hickie 1990, p. 144). Jackie was a twenty-one-year-old up-and-coming standover man ('Stand-over man' 28 August 1943, p. 4). The wounds were dreadful, necessitating surgery. With one arm in a sling, the other bandaged, he alleged in court that he had gone to Iris's after midnight for beer, only for her to attack him with a meat chopper. Iris retorted, 'He's not going to stand over me.' Roach advanced the fact that Hodder was a standover man, engaging in his trade at Iris' house ('Woman acquitted on attempt to murder' 17 September 1943, p. 3). One month later, back in Central Court, Roach withdrew this allegation and Hodder simultaneously withdrew his charge against Iris, in fine tradition claiming it was a man who had attacked him ('Woman freed of wounding charge' 19 September 1943, p. 10).

If Iris's marriage was an attempt at heterosexual respectability, it failed. A month later, she received six months for sly-grog, a good behaviour bond of three years, and a hefty £100 fine (*NSW Police Gazette* December 1943). She had sold a bottle of Scotch to American provosts for £4. 'I intend to give up this means of livelihood because of loss of sleep,' she said in court. 'It means living on your nerves more or less' (£320 in sly-grog fines' 19 October 1943, p. 6).

Imprisoned just two weeks earlier was Vera May Sariwee, née Mathias, soon to be Iris's lover, which suggests they met in Long Bay. Vera had been found in a house frequented by thieves with, among others, Phillys Sutton, who worked for Tilly Devine (*NSW Police Gazette* August 1943). Vera's sentence was increased after a failed appeal, perhaps because she had syphilis and gonorrhoea, for which inmates at the time received

extended detention orders (Sullivan 1997, p. 23). The National Security Regulations of 1942, which gave police powers to arrest suspected carriers of disease, affected women far more than men (Damousi & Lake 1995, p. 68). Born in Lithgow in 1918, Vera like Maisie had come of age in Parramatta Girls after running away from home (*Gaol Description Card*, Mathias).



Figure 10 – NSW Police Photo Book. Vera May Sariwee, 19 October 1943, No 2376/37.

Interned elsewhere, as an inebriate in Morrisset Mental Hospital, was Laurie

Cole, fresh from Parramatta Mental Hospital, where she had also been interned for long-term alcoholism. One wonders what their relations had been, since the police found Laurie and Iris in bed together when arresting Iris for the Gregory assault three years earlier. In April 1944, on exiting the Refty, Iris petitioned Furlong for divorce on the grounds of misconduct with Cole. One article quotes Iris saying in court:

I'm 37, and naturally suspicious. I went to an inquiry agent and with him raided a house in Charles Lane, East Sydney. I found my husband and the woman committing misconduct there ('Woman in gaol, seeks divorce' 8 April 1944, p. 3).

Cole initially denied the charge, then wrote a confession so shaky it is almost illegible:

I have nothing in my defence to offer so will you kindly except [sic] this letter as final I can only say that I am deeply sorry for the whole thing as I realize I have lost my best friend in Mrs Furlong (Furlong vs Furlong, pp. 6–7).

The document is unbearably painful to behold: the lurching tremulous black ink, the lone voice under duress. Behind the struggle to form those words, a lifetime of poverty, drinking, constant violence and constant punishment in dank stone gaols. And within this disempowerment, fracture rather than solidarity. The adage of how the oppressed fight amongst themselves is fully realised.

What actually happened? Why did Iris accuse Laurie? On the typed witness list in the Gregory case, next to Laurie's name, is penned, 'Not served. Unable to find witness, many attempts made, also exhaustive inquiries' *R v IEM Webber* (1940–41). Did Cole let Iris down? Had they been lovers? Being found in bed together would not alone imply this, in a context where inadequate furniture and heating brought people together for prosaic reasons; but it was at one of the hottest times of the year. The sub-editors at *Truth* were as usual rolling in the aisles ('Ancient Hubby Flighty with Wife's Gal Pal' 9 April 1943. p. 21). The media of the time would have been even more inclined than now to exaggeration or obfuscation when it came to homosexual relations, and *Truth* squeezed blood from any divorce going. The petition, handled by Munro, seems a vindictive, petty, all-time low.

Iris moved to 60 McElhone Street, a few blocks from Forbes. During the war, Woolloomooloo, like the rest of Sydney, was thick with sailors, its reputation for hosting bottom dwellers dating from the nineteenth century (Farwell & Johnson 1971; Lindsay 1960). In accordance with the blatant racial prejudice of the time, Malays

would have been relegated to the lowest rank. Woolloomooloo was this in literal geography: like Iris's prior abodes in Surry Hills and Glebe, 60 McElhone Street was at the bottom of the hill. Just as the hookers down here were older, less attractive and less healthy, so too the sailors were lowest rank (Writer 2001, pp. 199-200). Up in the city and in King's Cross nightclubs, American captains romanced Sydney society girls. Down in 'The 'Loo', dark-skinned foreigners rubbed shoulders with worn-out women of ill repute. In 1942, Vera had married Ali Bin Sariwee, a Malay man, but within two years was living with Iris (NSW Registry BDM; *R v Tangga* (1945)). Soon they were known to police as being in a relationship, according to Vera's *modus operandi*:

1. Shop breaker, robber and assailant and sex pervert.

[...]

4. Offender frequents Surry Hills and Darlinghurst in the company of criminals and prostitutes and is generally to be found in the company of her lesbian friend, Webber (*NSW Police Criminal Register* 1949).

In February 1945, in a street close to Vera and Iris's house, Margaret Tibbets, 43-year-old prostitute and thief, was shot in the groin.⁵ She was taken to hospital but bled to death soon after arrival *R v Tangga* (1945). Naturally, she didn't reveal the name of her assailant to the police. Present at Iris and Vera's with Margaret was a woman named Barbara Smith, and chameleon Kathleen McLennan, now known as Millicent Tangga since her 1943 marriage to a Malay, whose first names are not registered (NSW Registry BDM). 'A Malay' is also listed as present on this night, yet his name isn't given.

Iris was arrested along with Kath, aka Millie, and initially charged with murder. She was also charged with carrying 'a sharp cutting instrument' in her bag. Bail was refused. Less than a month later, Iris came out of remand to receive a six-month sentence for sly-grog ('Sold wine without a license' 21 March 1945, p. 6). On 7 May, as Germany surrendered, the inquest began in the Coroner's Court. It was an unruly case. Barbara Smith, alias Claire Laird, was sent to gaol for refusing to talk. Iris was repeatedly reprimanded for disrupting. Vera gave evidence that Kath had shot Margaret after a drunken argument over a debt. Munro refused to continue the defence after Iris

⁵ Tibbets had many aliases. Newspaper reports name her also as Tebbet or Holmes, Dorothy Thompson and Vera Cox. Police also knew her as Mona Ryan. She associated with Bruce Doubleday Higgs, who had been chauffeur and muscle for Kate Leigh in the 1920s, sustaining extensive razor scarring on his face after the infamous 1929 Kellet Street brawl.

insisted on cross-examining Vera. Vera in the midst of it all shouted to Iris: ‘Aw, shut up!’ (‘Woman charged with murder’ 14 June 1945, p. 8). The following week, as the inquest continued, it became apparent that Iris’s crime had been to obstruct the investigation by not talking. For this she was kept on remand, and Kath/Millie was committed to trial for murder.

Kath appeared to have gotten into a skirmish with Margaret and didn’t deny she pulled the trigger, claiming Margaret rushed her. They were arguing about a debt of Kath’s to Margaret that Kath objected was less than claimed; they had been drinking *R v Tangga* (1945). The case against Kath was dropped, not without drama (‘Hysterical scenes when jury acquits woman’ 17 June 1945, p. 8).

Entrapment

A look at the activities of lawyer Harold Munro at this time throws interesting light on policing and sexuality. During the war, along with Roach, he was implicated in ration ticket rorts for which ascending gambling boss Dick Reilly was arrested (Hickie 1990, pp. 318-9). Munro’s first experience of the butt end of the law had been a charge of receiving, eventually dismissed (‘Charge against solicitor’ August 1941, p. 12).

Less than two years later, in February 1943, Munro was named in the trial of two police officers for entrapment lurks. Griggs and Carney engineered arrests of men in public toilets known as gay beats. The police were found guilty, an extraordinary verdict for a time in which homosexuality was illegal, and cruising its most heavily punished aspect. The sheer number of arrests may have had something to do with this – Griggs made two hundred in one year – or the high profile of some of the men, particularly Clarence McNulty, editor-in-chief of the *Daily Telegraph*, who threatened to commit suicide, and whose case was a turning point, making ripples across the nation. Munro appeared for more sexual offenders than any other solicitor of the court, reputedly for cash bails, sometimes not even knowing his clients (‘Police evidence of arrest’ 14 February 1943, p. 11). Only one of the two hundred offenders had been acquitted: all the others had pleaded guilty.

Carney had arrested Iris in the past, most significantly with Constable Stehr at Wynyard in 1938, one of the cases Painter had referred to when imputing police harrassment in the Gregory trial. He was senior to Constable Griggs, and a mate of

Munro ('Constable denies payment' 18 February 1943, p. 5). The police appealed their dismissal and were reinstated to the Force in June, Griggs receiving back pay and going on to sue the *Daily Telegraph*.

In the midst of this turmoil, Munro's wife petitioned for divorce due to unfulfilled conjugal duties. Irina Popova, the daughter of Russian immigrants in Junee, was almost twenty years younger than Munro and had worked as his secretary. The day the petition was read in the divorce courts, Munro was representing Tilly Devine in her case against longtime abusive husband Big Jim ('Russian wife divorces' April 1943, p. 19). In August, Munro reconciled with his wife. His popularity with Iris's peers continued yet the pressure took its toll. In 1946, he was charged with drink driving. Adding insult to injury, the arresting officer accused him of offering a bribe ('Charge against solicitor' November 1946, p. 3).

So much activity along the spectrum of crime, fringed with homosexuality. Beside the dramas of the rich and powerful, Iris's charges shrivel. Indecent language, contempt of court, all the usual petty infringements, but she would not relent even for seven days gaol ('Magistrate had the last word' July 1946, p. 1). The type of personality the press paints at this time is an irritant, slightly mad, sometimes amusing. Yet she was soon to gain the epithet 'Most violent woman in Sydney'.

I see characteristics common to many women unable to cope with subjugation, intransigent in their refusal of injustice. Grace and diplomacy are not achieved by every fighter; even the shrewish housewives who regularly appeared in the cartoons of *Smith's Weekly* resemble this type. Women blamed for reacting; women whose lot was unrelenting in its misery.

In July 1946, aged 40, Iris went on trial for robbery of the Economic Robe Store with Vera and seasoned thief Louis 'Tich' Whitbread (*NSW Police Gazette* 1946). She appealed and was acquitted in October. Vera, who had been caught red-handed with clothes over her arm whilst Iris and Tich absconded, was convicted and given 12 months hard labour (*NSW Police Criminal Register* 1949).

At some stage, Iris moved out of McElhone Street. In January 1948, the eviction of Iris and Vera was sought by court order from the Brougham Street house of Elizabeth Jane Bateup. Vera was quoted saying to Iris, 'You killed four people and you wanted me to be the fifth.' (One assumes the word 'killed' was an inflation of 'shot'.) When accused of making noise and knocking over furniture, Iris said she couldn't help it

because she weighed fourteen stone ('Charged with two slayings' January 1948, p. 22). In the police photograph taken seven years earlier, her weight is listed as ten stone.

Vera and Iris went to live at 29 Pelican Street, Surry Hills. In April, two small-time crooks, Stanley Woods and Stuart Mackenzie, came to a 'sing-song' at their house. Conflict arose when Mackenzie came on to Vera, and Iris attacked him with a tomahawk; when Woods intervened, Vera attacked him (*NSW Police Criminal Register* 1949; 'Allegedly attacked men' 23 April 1948, p. 1; 'Two women charged' 24 April 1948, p. 10). Upon entering court for their hearing, Iris bared her leg to the judge to show bruising from a bashing in cells delivered to her and Vera, and a hank of black hair pulled from Vera's head ('Showed SM her bruises' 24 April 1948, p. 1; 'Women attack men' 24 April 1948, p. 1). This is the moment when Iris was named 'one of the most violent women in Sydney', by police prosecutor Milne ('Allegedly attacked men' 24 April 1948, p. 1). Bail was fixed at £500 for Iris and £300 for Vera.

In September, Iris and Vera were acquitted when Woods and Mackenzie did not turn up to court, yet Iris was called in for another hearing for swearing at a witness during the April hearing (Mackenzie under cross-examination by her). Court Prosecutor Sgt Goode objected, 'The Defendant just called witness a ___ lying ___' ('Sgt disliked court talk' May 1948, p. 6). Iris conducted her own and Vera's defence with 'loquacious aplomb', *Truth* describing her sardonically as a 'bush lawyer [...] equipped with a handbook titled "Evidence in a Nutshell"' ('Two women freed' October 1948, p. 7).

Did the relentless pursuit of the pettiest principles finally tire Iris out? How did she make a living during the last years of her life? It is hard to say, but whatever she did was apparently legal, or escaped the attention of the authorities. In the most ignominious piece of media, detailing her and Vera's fights in the bid for eviction, landlady Mrs Bateup claims she heard Vera call Iris 'a black greasy standover mongrel.' Iris is alleged to have had visitors at all hours of the day and night ('She was not "the cat of Woolloomooloo"' 3 January 1948, p. 3). In every deposition her accordion playing is mentioned, yet she was not apprehended for gathering alms after 1939.

The only mention I can find of Iris between 1948 and her death five years later is a minor affair for which she was, for once, the complainant. Her prowess in accordion playing is noted ('She came in like a lion' November 1952, p. 11).

On 8 August, 1953, Iris died at home in Pelican Street aged 47, of metastases, carcinoma of the rectum, and diabetes (NSW Registry BDM). She had a pauper's

funeral and was cremated at the Eastern Suburbs crematorium. Sariwee signed the deceased estate document but the informant of death was Daniel King, resident of the same building. It was probably then a dilapidated terrace. Now it is a 1970s block of flats, a stone's throw from Surry Hills Police Station, the biggest police station in Australia, erected over Frog Hollow, once one of the most notorious slums in Sydney.

Chapter Two: **People Like You Should Have Been Drowned at Birth**

The title of this chapter comes from an article in the *Arrow*, a weekly broadsheet published in Sydney from 1896–1933. The fact that the article is authored brings it closer to conventions of fiction than reportage in print media of the time, the racy headline indicating more of an entertainment than a factual account of a crime.⁶ ‘And Now Women are Holding Orgies; Man Haters Hold Weird Party in William Street Flat’ recounts the story of young feminine Dolly lured by older masculine Mona to a ‘notorious’ ‘lesbian’ party. The evening culminates in an attack committed with a can opener by corrupted young Dolly. Her father breaks in to rescue her, declaring to macho Mona, ‘People like you should have been drowned at birth’ (Mitchell 1932). Flanked by photos of scantily clad showgirls, this article is one of the few instances where the word ‘lesbian’ occurs in Australian print media until the gay liberation movement of the 1960s. The rare exceptions are references to banned books.

This chapter is more specific in focus. It looks at the media during Iris Webber’s lifetime, particularly the writing of tabloid journalist Vince Kelly, author of *Rugged angel*, the biography of policewoman Lillian Armfield. In this book, Kelly’s chapter on Iris has become the ur-text for almost everything written about her since (Kelly 1961, pp. 77-84).

In the first decades of the twentieth century, references to female same-sex desire began to feature more often in the Australian media than in prior decades (Robinson 2008, pp. 39-41). With sexuality in general taboo, (white middle-class) female sexuality expected to be passive, dutiful reception of male desire, and lesbianism all but invisible, the above article is striking for its portrayal of a lesbian couple in a social context. The direct connection between lesbianism and violence, much leant on by Kelly, is a common trope in popular culture to this day (Millbank 1996).

A fortnight after Mitchell’s article appeared, the *Arrow* published another story –

⁶ Bearing in mind that some novels at this time also had the by-line ‘an entertainment’ (Greene 1947).

equally lurid – about ‘Lesbians [sic]’, this time unauthored. The risible headline ‘Twisted Minds Create a Body Urge’ could also be read as prescient of late twentieth-century theories of biological determination. The introductory paragraph, even when winnowed of sensationalism, is again striking for its explicit social context.

[...] the astonishing story of a definite club that has been formed in Sydney wherein these strange creatures foregather for the purpose of indulging in their peculiar rites [...]

The formation of this club proves that homo-sexual [sic] women in Sydney are on the increase and following the ancient adage that ‘Like attracts like,’ they have secured premises where they are able to gather together and discuss sex abnormality from all its angles (‘Twisted Minds’ 19 February 1932, p. 2).

My research has turned up no other articles so directly related to lesbianism for the period during which Iris lived. News items of same-sex attracted women do, however, occur. Indeed there are enough such narratives – ambiguous, covert, euphemised, sanitised – to warrant another study entirely.

In general, stories about same-sex desire were considered so shocking that only tabloid newspapers touched them, and then through a veil of prurience and opprobrium. Short fiction in papers such as Sydney’s *World’s News* was a more likely outlet for scandalous material, which extended to drugs and non-Anglo characters. A master of this micro form was Vince Kelly, star crime reporter of *Smith’s Weekly* in the 1930s, his friendships ranging from police commissioner William MacKay to celebrity gangster Guido Calletti (Blaikie 1975, pp. 197-8). During this decade, Kelly also spent time as managing editor of the paper in Adelaide and Melbourne. By 1941, he was back in Sydney writing for the *Sunday Sun*, *World’s News*, and Melbourne’s *Weekly Times*. All these papers were aimed at the working man.

Smith’s Weekly was begun in 1919 by ex-Lord Mayor of Sydney and entrepreneur, Sydney Joynton Smith, in partnership with R.C. Packer, great-grandfather of today’s media dynasty. Written with returned soldiers in mind, it was particularly jingoistic. Counterpointing its column ‘Unofficial History of the A.I.F.’ was ‘Catty Communications’, which detailed ‘women’s gossip’, comings out, and charity balls. *Smith’s Weekly* favoured the topic of drugs as its main source of scandal, with articles on morphine, cocaine and heroin featuring as the availability and social impact of the

pharmacopoeia increased.⁷

The scandalous selling point favoured by sporting paper, the *Arrow* – sex – was far more prone to distortion by the white, heteronormative patriarchy. Images of women in various states of undress, usually showgirls, were standard. As journalist George Blaikie explains in his book about tabloid media of the time, *Remember Smith's Weekly*, the *Arrow* ‘aimed at entertaining turf and dog enthusiasts between bets with spicy, true life stories’ (Blaikie 1975, p. 26).

Kelly, a jobbing writer and hence prolific, offset his crime reportage with pulp fiction. He took this work seriously, signing his own name. A glance at his short stories gives an idea of the moral values of both author and audience. *One last chance*, set in the South Sea Islands, features an Islander woman of ‘aggressive affections’ (Kelly 1941b); *Murder of a money lender* features a Jewish shyster named Simon Goldman who gets his comeuppance (Kelly 1941a). In *The weapon of terror*, Betty Carson is ‘one of the worst women in this city, in spite of her beauty, [who] deserved the slash she got [...]’ (Kelly 1942b). Detective Inspector Price stars in most of these stories. Pipe-smoking, moustachioed, seemingly absent-minded but sharp as a tac, Price was firmly in the Anglo tradition of asexual patriarch; a sort of Antipodean Sherlock Holmes, complete with callow, hot-headed Detective Richardson as sidekick.

During the war, Kelly began to publish crime novels as well as his first commissioned biography, of wealthy philanthropist Pearson W. Tewksbury. His articles on venereal disease (VD) and the Vice Squad urged more power to police to quarantine infected women (Kelly 1944b). Writing about Phil ‘the Jew’ Jeffs in a chapter from *The bogeyman* (Kelly 1956, pp. 192-6), Kelly shows admiration for the violent gangster’s entrepreneurial success. By the late forties, Kelly was enough of a luminary to have his name and photo published with the byline ‘noted Australian journalist’ beside his articles. He was said to be a close friend of bush poet Banjo Patterson. He advocated cleaning up slums and using the lash as punishment for violent offenders, decried the understaffed police force and supported gaol as a means to social reform. He admired the ‘thuggery squad’ formed by police to combat basher gangs (Kelly 1946a; Kelly 1946b).

As a staffer at *Smith's Weekly*, Kelly would have known cartoonist Virgil Reilly,

⁷ Later, in the 1930s, there is an article on marijuana and how it turns people into ‘sex maniacs’.

illustrator of poet Kenneth Slessor's light verse, in a series so popular they were almost immediately published in book form as *Backless Betty from Bondi* and *Darlinghurst nights* (Slessor 1983; Slessor & Reilly 1981). Slim, fashionable 'Virgil girls' were Australia's sex symbols for a while. Rival Stan Cross drew more irreverent subject matter, yet like Virgil and Slessor's flappers, lairs and debonairs, his characters fitted the easygoing Australian stereotype that endures to this day (King 1978). Not even during the Depression did *Smith's Weekly* have much to say against the establishment. One cannot consider any sort of bigotry during this period without foregrounding the breathtaking racism assumed by artists and readers alike. 'Stan Cross got most of the Abo and bush jokes', Blaikie breezily asserts (Blaikie 1975, p. 78). 'Chinamen' and 'Dagoes' were also common targets. Nevertheless the paper innovated via these artists and writers, including Kelly, an urban identity as dangerous and decadent as anything enjoyed by our northern hemispheric rulers; a spear of colour piercing the dun-coloured bucolism that defined Australian culture. The nation was becoming the most urbanised in the world, as aspirational families seeking escape from the squalid inner city moved to suburbia (Spearritt 1974). The cartoonists had considerable aesthetic flair, and due to the quality of their work, circulation of *Smith's Weekly* soared to hundreds of thousands in the 1920s, even gaining a reputation on Fleet Street.



Figure 11 – Stan Cross, 'Did you steal those potatoes?', *Smith's Weekly*, 21 January 1933, p. 16.



Figure 12 – Vince Kelly & Steve Richardson, ‘The silk stocking murder’, *Sunday Sun*, 19 November 1950.

A decade later, Inspector Price appeared in a cartoon strip, the most infamous eliciting an obscenity charge due to its explicit portrayal of a strangled woman. Children, it was argued, would be unduly influenced. In parliament, Chief Secretary Clive Evatt implied Kelly was a muck raker, exploiting his contacts with police (‘Housie: attack on journalist’ November 1951, p. 4). Kelly meanwhile refined the formula that would hit paydirt.

Throughout 1952–1953, in half a dozen papers, he published a weekly series on the exploits of Frank Fahy, recently retired undercover cop. The resultant book *The shadow* sold out in two months (Kelly 1954). Fahy’s cases went back to the 1910s, among them the so-called ‘man-woman murderer’, Eugenia Falleni/Harry Crawford. In a chapter entitled ‘The Masqueraders’, Kelly writes:

In his 30 years as a police shadower, Frank Fahy regarded the trailing of men perverts dressed as women as his most distasteful assignment. [...] it was risky to arrest a pervert. Sometimes, the man arrested was a person of substance in the community (Kelly 1954, p. 63).

The following year, Kelly followed suit with the exploits of another cop, Joe Chuck, the serialisation published as *The bogeyman*, another resounding success (Kelly 1956). It had a cover blurb by then Police Commissioner C.J. Delaney, and like *The shadow*, a foreword by NSW Attorney-General, W.F. Sheahan. Both books, and *Rugged angel*, have been consulted by every scholar of the era (Allen 1990; Daniels 1984; Doyle & Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales. 2009; Doyle, Williams & Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales. 2005; Faro 2000; Frances 2007; Grabosky 1977; Jennings 2009; Jennings 2015; Kirkby 1995; McCoy 1980; Spearritt 1978; Straw 2016; Writer 2001, 2011). Queer historians, in particular, cite the aforementioned chapter in *The shadow*, as well as *The bogeyman*'s 'The Queer House', which tells the extraordinary story of a house at Wynyard occupied by cross-dressers during the first world war. (French 1993; Wotherspoon 1991).

Kelly's influence over the history of Sydney's criminal underclass during the decades-long sly-grog era – especially members doubly illegitimised by their gender or sexual orientation – cannot be overstated.

The papers – read all about it!

Before television and the internet, the newspapers Kelly wrote for had a greater reach than their equivalents today.⁸ Sensationalism, sentimentality, moralism and the mob lust for retribution fired the tabloids then as now. There are, for instance, about ten articles in country newspapers recounting Iris's attack of Edwin in 1932. None follow up with news of the acquittal.

To consider the media of the time is not only to get an idea of how stories were exchanged across social strata, of commercial trends, class morés and cultural preoccupations, but also to understand what was being absorbed by that most voracious reader, Iris Webber herself. The aforementioned claim of Bumper Farrell (Kelly 1961,

⁸ Print media has shrunk so rapidly during the writing of this thesis alone that the truth of this assertion will be even greater on its completion.

p. 79), and the forensic photograph published on page 19, corroborate Iris's habit of reading. One may deduce from her poverty, her central location and work on the streets as a busker that Iris would have been a driftnet reader, scavenging whatever material she found.

In 1935, when involved with Maisie Matthews, would she have seen *Truth's* front page serial story about the attempted murder-suicide of Rosie Forsythe and Sophie Tenzer? Rosie, a twenty-four-year-old from the country, had begun a correspondence with Sophie, a twenty-two-year-old from the city. Rosie, 'Eton cropped', 'was infatuated by her', according to Rosie's mother. She had been mistaken by Sophie in their letters for a boy, 'Then when they met they were like two twins on a stalk.' Rosie had been giving Sophie cheques for £50, pretending she was rich. The debt she incurred was given by *Truth* as the reason that Rosie eventually shot herself (dressed, incidentally, in men's clothes). The story appeared in front page feature articles for three weeks in a row ('Girls love: tragic end' 31 March, p. 1; 'Torn cheques' 7 April 1935, p. 1; 'Rosie Officer's last confession 14 April 1935, p. 1).

Would she have seen the announcement of a law suit by Leonard Doyle against Natalie Hays Hammond, 'daughter of a famous engineer', for 'the alienation of affection of Mrs Doyle, 'formerly of the stage' ('Mrs Leona Hogarth Doyle' January 1936, p. 21). If so, would she have felt kinship with these women from the upper-class and bohemian realms?

Eight years later, what would Iris have made of dialogue like this, when living with her lover, Vera May Sariwee, who was married to the Malay man Ali Bin Sariwee? Kathleen McLennan by this time was going by the name Millicent Tangga, since also marrying a Malay man.

Number Two, I suppose, is Harry Darny, that half-Turk, or whatever he is. He's got dark blood in him somewhere, and he has a reputation for hanging around after women (Kelly 1944a).

Attempting to find the gap between the actual lives led by these people, and how, if ever, they were reflected in the media, is not to point to an Elysian present where a similar demographic – queer, female, non-white, criminal – is fairly represented. Even now, this demographic is object more than subject of the tabloids. I doubt Iris, Maisie and Vera expected much from the media. Yet making the papers for any reason was

validation, as evinced by Kath souveniring a clipping about the Crowther slashing before she had been caught, ironically adding to the evidence against her *R v McLennan & Matthews* (1936, p. 4); ‘Alleged razor attack’ 13 May 1936, p. 11). Hollywood gangster movies were making US mob bosses like Al Capone and Lucky Luciano household names. Kate Leigh and Tilly Devine, realising the power of the media, were becoming adept at its manipulation. It is precisely the size of this gap – or chasm – that illustrates the positions Iris and her associates occupied: marginalised even within the margins, demonised, trivialised. A person such as Iris, avid reader, righteous in the courtroom, would have been acutely aware of this.

By the time Kelly came to write *Rugged angel*, his third biography of a police officer, Lillian Armfield, Iris had been dead eight years. It is hard to know if Kelly’s influence on her story is more retrospective than concurrent. He left Sydney in 1934, shortly after which Iris became known to police as a ‘sexual deviationist’, prejudicing their pursuit of her. By the Second World War, Kelly was back.

It is in this decade that the police explicitly labelled Iris a lesbian, as I have noted in Chapter One. Given the slur of such a claim at this time, scepticism is still necessary. Yet so much authenticates this orientation: Iris and Vera lived together, and had been in gaol together. There is no evidence that either of them refuted her relationship with the other, nor Iris previously of Maisie, despite her frequent outbursts in which no detail was too small to argue over.

Kelly’s police connections would have provided first-hand accounts of Iris’s clashes with authority throughout the 1940s, but Kelly did not relay them to the reader in an honest fashion. Take, for instance, the 1943 assault of John Charles Hodder, aka Jackie, a twenty-one-year-old up-and-coming standover man with a solid criminal record. In this year, Iris was raided eight times in six months for selling sly-grog, a clear indication of excessive police focus. Kelly and the police’s account do not describe Hodder’s profession nor the motivation of extortion he had in going to Iris’s house, described in more detail in Chapter One. Iris was charged with intent to kill and placed on remand, with mention made of a ‘sharp cutting instrument’ found in her bag (‘Woman freed of wounding’ September 1943, p. 10). Kelly claims only that Hodder had gone to Iris’s house to purchase beer, and she had struck him when he queried the price. He goes on to say ‘the man lost the use of his arms from the elbows down almost completely’ (Kelly 1961, p. 78), yet this cannot be true as Hodder was himself up for

assault a year later. His career as a much-feared gangster lasted decades (Hickie 1990, pp. 244-6). Kelly would have known all of this by the time of writing *Rugged angel*, his favouring of Hodder over Iris all the more conspicuous.

Another distortion lies in Kelly's claim that 'On one occasion she [Iris] was charged with soliciting alms in the street, and the police evidence was that she was collecting after playing a concertina' (Kelly 1961, p. 79). To reduce so many such occasions to one, is to reduce evidence of police harrassment.



Figure 13 – Vince Kelly, *Rugged angel*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1961.

Hate speech: by any other name

The title of this chapter, thesis and exegesis, and other analyses of Iris Webber and contemporaneous queer women, illustrate how dreadfully they were perceived, all having been gleaned from the media and books of the period. The titles of the aforementioned *Arrow* articles; Kelly's initiative *City's most violent woman* (Kelly 1961, p. 77), Robert French's derivative *A horrible woman, a disgusting creature* (French 1993, p. 71), my similarly drawn *Bloodthirsty savagery*⁹ (Kelly 1961, p. 77); all paint vicious, grotesque portraits consistent with characterisations of homosexuality as a criminal offence or mental illness, this period occupying a liminal zone between the two. In contrast, the bawdy trills of Ruth Ford's *What they were doing with their clothes off I don't know* (Robinson 2008, p. 39), and 'Lady friends' and 'sexual deviationists'¹⁰ (Kirkby 1995, p. 33), form a chorus line of titillation, collapsing lesbianism onto the assumed sexual availability of unmarried women in general.

In her essay "“Lady friends” and “sexual deviationists”: lesbians and the law in Australia, 1920s–1950s,' Ford breaks the silence that surrounds the law's treatment of queer women during Iris's lifetime (Kirkby 1995, pp. 33-49). She draws on Kelly's chapter about Iris in *Rugged angel*, among other things. What Ford points out about the language in Kelly's chapter could equally be applied to the articles from the *Arrow*:

Stories represented her [Iris] not just as violent, but as intensely jealous and capable of 'bloodthirsty savagery'. The representation of Iris Webber as a cross between an animal and a savage, in contrast to the portrayal of her partner as 'an attractive girl' passively available to both women and men, drew on imperialist images of violent, 'primitive', 'savages' and sexological discourses which depicted lesbians as excessively jealous and violent, and also distinguished between 'real lesbians' as deviants and the passive victims who were seduced by them (Kirkby 1995, p. 46).

The folly of these characterisations is highlighted by the assertive natures of both Maisie and Vera, revealed in their depositions and criminal records. Not insignificantly, these characterisations also resemble how non-Anglo people were viewed, just one

⁹ Title of Chapter Four; also the title of conference papers on Iris.

¹⁰ Ruth Ford's title *Filthy, obscene and mad*, derived from a female police sergeant's tirade against a lesbian officer, throws up paradoxes I investigate further in Chapter Three, (Robinson 2008, p. 91).

example being provided on the previous page. What I would add to them is the insistence on a heteronormative binary in which the masculine-identified partner is assumed to be the protagonist, and therefore, the desire being wrong, the villain. The many accounts of butch women in the frontline of persecution (Jennings 2015, pp. 8-9, 10-3), point to how defiance of gender stereotypes alone was offensive, its punishment mirroring that meted out to cross-dressing men from colonial times until the twentieth century (Chesser 2008).

Eugenia Falleni/Harry Crawford, the gender-variant Italian immigrant unjustly imprisoned for murder during Iris's lifetime, fared even worse for these reasons and more (Falkiner 1988; Tedeschi 2012). What would Iris have made of *Truth*'s casting of Falleni as 'a fiendish human monster, murderess, sexual and filthy-tongued man-woman'? (*Truth* March 1930). Would she have felt empathetic, even implicated? Interestingly, this paragraph castigates the rival publication *Smith's Weekly*'s supposed attempt to arouse public sympathy for Falleni/Crawford.

Historian Raelene Frances claims 'Kelly used the notebooks Armfield kept during her 35-year career as Sydney's first policewoman' for his biography *Rugged angel* (Frances 2007, p. 322). There are several problems with this claim as a marker of truth. Firstly, who then is the source of the false accounts of crimes such as the Hodder assault, Armfield or Kelly? Secondly, given the extreme antipathy of Armfield towards lesbianism, what other partialities are there in the text? It is impossible to verify the claim. Without today's strict conventions of indexing and citation, it is hard to know whose words we are reading in *Rugged angel*. Rebecca Jennings refers to the book as Armfield's 'autobiography', imputing a more direct voice than is the case (Jennings 2015, p. 5). Judging from the similarity between Armfield's and Farrell's speech, and Kelly's narrative, the text is an amalgam of voices, with virulent lesbophobia common to all three.

This chapter on Iris in *Rugged angel*, which has informed every representation of her, from museum plaques through entries in books to contemporary journalism, gay and straight, devotes three of its seven pages to the broader subject of lesbianism, variously named a 'vice', 'cult', and 'serious problem'. Like male homosexuality, it is equated with paedophilia, which Armfield/Kelly admits Iris refuted 'with apparent truth'. The tone used to discuss this most 'distasteful development' is one of almost obsessive relish.

“‘No girl under twenty-five is any use to me,’ was her repeated claim,” said Lillian Armfield. “... Of all the wicked ones I had to deal with, she was immeasurably the lowest, the most dangerous, and the most detestable. And although she may have truthfully claimed that she didn’t corrupt young girls in the vice of lesbianism, her own activities brought this cult under more prominent notice of the police.

“It is a problem the authorities must face [...]. It will require the co-operation of the wisest and best of our medical specialists, police, clergy, and welfare workers, because it is on the increase. Those who practise it aren’t all as open about it as Iris Webber. They are furtive and subtle, and the leaders in the cult are shrewd and persistent in their eagerness to corrupt others. It is a menace that must be grappled with somehow.”

Detective Sergeant Farrell agrees that this is a distasteful development in Australia’s social life and one which poses a serious problem. “Iris Webber was quite brazen and shameless about it,” he said. “In her various dwellings we found evidence of this cult which unfortunately, has a much wider vogue than the average citizen suspects” (Kelly 1961, pp. 79-80).

A closer look at that ‘evidence’, reveals not lesbianism per se, but Iris’s ‘addiction to masochism – three big and heavy straps, which she admitted had been used for flagellation’ (Kelly 1961, p. 80). Whether Iris was again being demonised, or did in fact enjoy practices that would place her outside the mainstream even today, cannot be verified.¹¹ The overlap of sophistication and sensation is complete.

Dr John McGeorge, Australia’s foremost criminal psychologist at the time, helped fuel the fire. Like Armfield, he advocated lesbianism being ‘fought in the open’. In tune with the latest developments in psychoanalytic theory McGeorge elucidated these views in his essay ‘Environment and Hysteria’ published in the highly reputable *Medical Journal of Australia* (McGeorge 1932, pp. 656-8). Kelly states McGeorge was part of:

[...] a committee of experts appointed by the NSW Government to examine the problems associated with homosexuality, and he said for this record ‘No investigation into the lesbianism aspect of it has been suggested. It should have been. The investigation is overdue’ (Kelly 1961, p. 83).

It is interesting to note the grouping together of male and female homosexuals: the criminality of the former implicates the latter. It could also be due to the increased visibility of mixed queer social spaces around the time of the Second World War, as

¹¹ Currently, the inclusion of BDSM practices in the US-published *Diagnostic and statistic manual of mental disorders* is being reviewed.

described in *At the Cross*, a memoir/novel published the same year as *Rugged angel* (Rose 1961). Another memoir from the 1960s, *The innocent victims* by retired Magistrate A.E. Debenham, analysed the *Crimes Act of NSW*, Section 79, in terms of the ambivalent place female homosexuality occupied in the eyes of the law (Debenham 1969, pp. 195-7). In a chapter titled 'Perversion', Debenham recommended the *Crimes Act* be amended to include women. He claimed:

[...] at a conference of Chief Secretaries in Melbourne some two or three years ago a decision was reached to amend the *Crimes Act* in each state to include 'and females' in the applicable clause in the Act, but to my knowledge the only State to implement this has been Victoria. This has had the result of female homosexuals leaving that State for others where the law has not been changed as yet. Such a woman, in this State, can only be charged with vagrancy, and if she happens to be in employment as most of them are, that charge would fail. Even when the mothers of girls who have been destroyed by such acts go to the police for help, nothing can be done to the pervert (Debenham 1969, p. 196).

Graham Willett's authoritative essay on homophobia in Australia in the 1950s, 'From "vice" to "homosexuality": policing perversion in the 1950s', whilst not locating this specific event, corroborates more broadly the growing concern about homosexuality in social and legal circles in the period (Phillips et al. 2000, pp. 67-85; Robinson 2008, pp. 113-25). Damnation by all religions was a given.

Like Kelly, Dr McGeorge was a friend of Commissioner MacKay's. He had a Macquarie Street practice for many years. In 1939 he was also psychiatrist to the state penitentiary, and visiting medical officer at The Reception House, a small asylum adjacent to Darlinghurst Police Station. In 1951, he was appointed to the prison parole board and in 1952 made consulting psychiatrist to Long Bay Gaol, a newly created position. He still found the time to study law, and in 1952 was made a member of the Bar. The following year he became consultant psychiatrist to the NSW Government. In the 1960s, McGeorge appeared regularly on television. For decades, his reach was enormous.

Joining the force in 1915, Armfield was employed specifically to deal with women, both as perpetrators and victims of crime. She remained the most powerful female police officer in the service until her retirement in 1949, and as such will be looked at in more detail in the following chapter.

With popular crime reporter Kelly as mouthpiece to this police officer and

forensic psychiatrist, and so many more in the legal fraternity sharing their views, the punishment of lesbians was all but an official policy.

Murderous coppers

Although every writer on this era cites Vince Kelly, few interrogate his honesty. Robert French, one of the first to do so, intuited Kelly's accounts as 'perhaps a little exaggerated', and referred to his 'purple prose' (French 1993, pp. 72-3). Yet French's landmark work *Camping by a billabong* did not find a wider audience, probably due to its gay subject matter. Kelly's sharpest critic appears to be Melbourne historian Richard Evans. His PhD thesis *William John MacKay and the New South Wales Police Force, 1910–1948: a study of police power*, is a diligent critique of MacKay, as well as the institution he led from 1935 till 1948, a period that happened also to be Iris's most prominent in the criminal justice system (Evans 2005).

In 'Murderous Coppers', Evans characterises police history as 'inaccurate, evasive and brief' (Evans 2012, p. 179). Extrapolated from Chapter 5 of the thesis, this essay dissects the myth of MacKay's pivotal role in busting the 1929 Rothbury mining strikes, one of the most spectacular struggles between labour and capital during the Depression. The strikes persisted for more than a year, climaxing in the fatal shooting of a miner, Norman Brown, and critical injury of two others. The only detailed account of MacKay's actions on the morning of the shooting is written by Vince Kelly in *From boilermaker to Governor-General*, his biography of Sir William McKell (Kelly 1971). Kelly puts MacKay at the centre of the action, in an heroic role, a version that has been repeated across a plethora of secondary sources. Yet Evans's examination of contemporaneous evidence yields something entirely different. 'MacKay *was not there*' (Evans 2012, p. 187) (emphasis original). Evans goes on:

Given its many errors, Kelly's account would be of little interest, except that MacKay himself was probably the source. [...] The story's presence in the book is odd, as its relevance to McKell is tenuous. But Kelly, in his many books about policing in New South Wales, often mentioned his close relationship with MacKay, and it is clear that Kelly was anxious to record for posterity his late friend's great achievements, at times digressing from the subject at hand to do so. It is inconceivable that Kelly would not have asked MacKay about a famous incident such as Rothbury in the course of their acquaintance. Had MacKay wished to distance himself from the tragedy, he could easily and legitimately have done so. Instead he appears to have told Kelly, and

presumably others, an outrageous piece of make-believe (Evans 2012, p. 189).

It is remarkable how far Vince Kelly went to gild the story of this highest ranking police officer, whose life ended in 1948 due to ill health, exacerbated by a drinking problem. When Kelly wrote *From boilermaker*, MacKay had been dead for more than two decades. He was not universally well viewed, having been found in 1937 by the Royal Commission into Gaming and Betting to be 'impetuous and impulsive' (Writer 2001, p. 138).

Kelly's love of the police dominated his entire oeuvre. MacKay was central. In almost every chapter of *The shadow* he appears in dramatised exchanges with his staff, gruffly ordering intrepid Frank Fahy on another dangerous mission into the evil slums. Kelly used his relations with police for commercially lucrative stories: to this extent, he operated like most crime reporters. All his stories follow the formula of illicit thrill assuaged by moral crusade, the journalist narrator heroic at the helm.¹² Yet Kelly's ardour for authority and tradition, his equally excessive fear of sexuality, femininity and difference, go further, through a sort of *Boys' own* fantasy to archaic ideas of manliness and heroic friendships, predicated on female inferiority.¹³ Even Armfield is elevated with an adjective – *rugged* – usually associated with men. Thus myopic with masculinomania, Kelly doesn't seem to realise how much he himself was being used, just like his contemporary 'Bondi' Bill Jenkins, whose hours-long drinking sessions with police yielded myriad stories in their favour; although the same officers were later shown to be corrupt, Jenkins never relinquished belief in their honesty (Jenkins, Lipson & Barnao 1992, pp. 152-3).

Kelly's stories could be seen as classic homosocialism, as elucidated by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theories of canonical literature wherein the structure serves relations between male characters, the females mere conductors (Sedgwick 1985, p. 17). In *Murder in Kings Cross*, for the entire story, Price and Richardson literally talk over a dead woman's body (Kelly 1942a). I would also interpret this type of narrative as a male version of the trope of female companionship that obscured sexually passionate female homosexuality for so long, and lingers to this day.

¹² A photographic plate in *The shadow* shows the journalist present at the raid of an opium den.

¹³ See the website *The art of manliness* for a contemporary hipster version.
<http://www.artofmanliness.com/2008/08/24/the-history-and-nature-of-man-friendships/>

The myth of MacKay's involvement in the Rothbury Mining Strikes persists most egregiously in the *Australian dictionary of biography* (Cain). The vexed implications that apocryphal or fallacious accounts have for stories about historical figures only increases for those without a voice. As Peter Doyle says in his essay 'Detective writing: mapping the Sydney pre-war underworld':

We are left with the provisional conclusion that the writing of the Sydney underworld before the Second World War (and even for many years *after*, if we include Vince Kelly's books) was mostly, one way or another, directly or indirectly left to the police (Doyle 2012, p. 43).

Within this paradigm, the writing of Vince Kelly about Iris Webber could never have been sympathetic, let alone insightful. An outspoken, female, queer protagonist such as Iris scarcely existed in *any* narrative form at the time that Kelly was writing. Yet in Kelly's versions of events there are enough truths from which to form a story, both of Iris and of the time and place in which she lived.

Chapter Three: **Sticks and stones**

In this chapter, I will examine the methods of the NSW police during the early twentieth century, and the laws that they enforced. I will place these in the broader context of violence – institutional, street and domestic – which characterised the world of Iris Webber.

In 1915, the NSW Police Force appointed Maude Rhodes and Lillian Armfield. They were the first female police officers in Australia, and among the first in the world. Rhodes didn't last long. Armfield played a role in her discharge: on 25 November 1919 Rhodes refused to obey a 'legitimate order' to go to Central railway station, given to her by 'her superior officer – Special Constable LM Armfield'. Rhodes was given 14 days' notice and discharged (Perrottet 2015).



Figure 14 – Lillian Armfield, 1915.

Armfield was thirty years old and had worked at Callan Park Hospital for the Insane. She was paid no overtime, superannuation, or compensation for injuries, as her male colleagues were, yet was bound to the same discipline. Promotion was slow. By the time Armfield encountered Iris Webber, she was a special sergeant, on her way up from 2nd to 1st class.

The relationship between Lillian Armfield and Iris Webber was complicated by sexuality in ways far more complex than have been alluded to by any writer on the subject to date. Larry Writer interviewed several police for *Razor* (Writer 2001). Policeman Lua Niall told him Armfield was a lesbian. A female officer, Maggie Baker (a pseudonym used due to the woman's fear of reprisals), implied lesbianism was common in the Force with allusions to how she, like Armfield, had never married (Writer 2012-14). The attraction of policing as a career to lesbians has received scant academic study and is not the subject of this thesis, yet within our community it has long been well known. Whilst NSWPF does not collect statistics on the sexual and gender identity of their employees, a voluntary survey as part of the Australian Workplace Equality Index submission in 2016 was responded to by 1010 people. 18% (n=186 people) said they were not heterosexual, and amongst this sample 63% said they were women and 36% men.¹⁴ That breaks down to roughly 10% lesbians, a significant number. Over recent decades, the visibility of lesbian police has increased with the Gay and Lesbian Liaison Officers program, now in its twenty-seventh year. Further, NSWPF have been marching in the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Parade for more than ten years, and female entrants far outweigh male. According to Inspector Kylie Smith, current head of GLLO, lesbian officers marching in the 2017 parade numbered 35, and in 2018 will number 70.¹⁵

Nevertheless, Armfield hated lesbians. A pointer to how common such an attitude was may be found in Ruth Ford's essay 'Filthy, Obscene and Mad'. Ford interviewed a woman who was sacked from the Victorian Police Force in the early 1960s for being a lesbian. Alison, as she was known, said, 'I found that the policewomen who were lesbians themselves were those that were most down on

¹⁴ Statistics provided on email by Jackie Braw, Senior Programs Officer, Sexuality, Gender Diversity and Intersex, NSW Police. 19 December 2017.

¹⁵ Telephone interview December 19, 2017.

lesbians' (Robinson 2008, p. 39). Covert or closeted homosexuals frequently punish open ones more zealously than their heterosexual counterparts, to avoid guilt by association. Even now, Catherine Burn, Deputy Commissioner in 2016 – unmarried and butch like Armfield – is easily imagined as a lesbian, yet her sexual orientation is never mentioned.

Armfield was described by Maggie Baker as swearing like a sailor and tackling her quarry physically if need be. She was 5 feet, 7 3/4 inches (172cm), and 12 stone (King 1979), tall and strong even for a man at that time. These attributes helped her gain employment in the Force as violence was considered part of the job. In his interview with Writer, lifelong policeman Ray Blissett ('The Blizzard') laughingly recalls the bashing of a 'sword-swallower' on his first night at Regent Street Police Depot training centre (Blissett 1999). They were criminals, after all. On how he was taught to serve, Blissett is direct: 'Like with the sword-swallower, you knocked 'em down and if they got up and complained, you knocked 'em down again' (Writer 2001, p. 139).

The hands-on nature of early twentieth-century policing was partly circumstantial. They worked on foot, and conveying arrestees to the station through narrow back streets, dimly lit at night if at all, was difficult. Police might attempt to enlist the help of passersby, yet the inner-city poor often had no moral argument with the common crimes of betting and prostitution, especially during the Depression, and as much of the violence took place among themselves they resented the interference of outsiders, law or not. In Louis Stone's novel *Jonah*, set in early twentieth-century Waterloo, the eponymous hero coolly observes a young policeman trying to make his first arrest. The policeman '[...] looked in astonishment at the grinning, hostile faces, too nervous to use his strength, harassed by the hatred of the people'. The man is only caught when an older sergeant weighs in (Stone & Moorhouse 2013, pp. 18-20). Armfield was also attacked by a mob in this way (Kelly 1961, pp. 30-3).

One of the greatest powers gained by police at this time was *The NSW Vagrancy (Amendment) Act 1929*, for many decades the most significant broadening of NSW criminal law in the twentieth century (Grabosky 1977, p. 124). Opposition leader Jack Lang, of the Labor party, had an unambiguous response to its mooted introduction:

Glancing through the bill it seems to me that it might be possible for some grave injustice to be done under it to persons who are perfectly innocent. Under the bill as it now stands [...] If a decent woman can be hauled up because she's found in

conversation with another woman who has been found to be guilty of certain practices and can be sent to reformatory or jail although she may have been talking to the other only for the purposes of reforming her, the position is intolerable (*Parliamentary Debates* 1929).

A Consorting Squad, headed by Blissett, was specially formed by Superintendent MacKay to enforce these laws. By the time Lang came to power in 1930, the Act had been so effective that gaols were overcrowded, bringing a whole new set of problems ('Crime in NSW' May 1930, p. 10). Hay Gaol, Iris's first place of detention, was re-opened for this reason ('Hay Gaol to be re-established August 1930). Law academic Alex Steel's sedulous critique, 'Consorting in NSW', argues for the law's repeal, describing it as 'an extraordinarily broad offence' and 'a novel contribution of Australia to the criminal law' (Steel 2003, pp. 567, 8). Steel goes on: 'The New South Wales Police appear to have, from the start, seen the offence as an intelligence gathering power or an informal means of gaining compliance' (Steel 2003, p. 568).¹⁶ As Blissett himself said, 'We were allowed liberties then' (Writer 2001, p. 141).

Blissett's testimonies are neither alloyed nor egotistical. Even criminals valued his honesty (Hickie 1990, p. 115). Alfred McCoy, still considered an authority, declared of this period 'no city in the world could rival Sydney's tolerance for organised crime' (Davidson 1986). Others agree that vestiges of the penal colony, along with this proliferation of laws, created an environment fecund for corruption (Birmingham 1999, pp. 458–66).

It is important to note the particular application of the law to women, who at this time, as elsewhere in the Western world, were only just forging the independence to go out alone (Solnit 2001, pp. 232–5). Women alone in public were commonly assumed to be prostitutes, and sexualised regardless. Women of impoverished circumstances – such as the characters in my thesis – were especially vulnerable to the police as 'being seen as having no visible means of support' – grounds enough for arrest under the vagrancy laws, even before the revamped consorting clause.

Despite his passionate opposition, Lang did not repeal the act. The NSW Police

¹⁶ The consorting laws fell out of favour after criticism from the 1970 Wood Royal Commission into Police Corruption. They were revamped in 2014 by the O'Farrell government, supposedly in response to the criminal activity of bikie gangs. The main victims to date, however, have been Aboriginal people in rural areas.

during his term appear to have been just as tough on crime; Lang was on very good terms with MacKay, soon to be Commissioner. MacKay had been the legislation's primary pusher, eventually persuading then Commissioner Mitchell, whose take on street crime was more tempered (Evans 2005, pp. 94–110). Since *The Pistol Licencing (Amendment) Act 1927*, which could deliver a person in possession of a firearm a six-month sentence, razors had increasingly been carried by criminals, attacks with them grist to the tabloids' lurid mill. Steel and Evans both track the contribution of the media, particularly *Truth*, to the campaign for greater police powers, and the leading part MacKay played in it. As Evans says, 'MacKay did not just suppress Razorhurst. He was at least partly responsible for creating it' (Evans 2005, p. 97).

The force expanded in other ways. A drug bureau had been established in 1926, with the *Police Offences Amendment (Drugs) Act* in 1934 taking administration of dangerous substances from the Pharmacy Board and giving it to police. A year after the 'Consortos', another squad was formed to quash illegal betting and sly-grog. The Criminal Investigations Bureau was streamlined, and part of the Metropolitan Division was transferred to the northern coalfields to quash the Rothbury Strikes, with the *Crimes (Intimidation and Molestation) Act 1929* aimed primarily at industrial protest (Evans 2012; Grabosky 1977, pp. 126–7, 9).

Something of a neophyte, obsessive about forensics, MacKay went overseas soon after his appointment to study policing methods in the UK. Shortly after his return in 1936, police cars (Black Marias) and radios were introduced, giving the force greater power on the streets. First-hand accounts of inner-city policing even of children, while disagreeing on outcomes, describe the same methods. '[...] you could lose your life,' Terry Murphy, a child in 1930s Erskineville, attested. 'I was bloody careful. They weren't nice. They were bloody unbelievable. The police were supreme!' (Rosen 2000, p. 168). Frank Altoft, in 1920s Newtown, considered police threats of 'a boot in the tail' to be fair, and 'doing more good than harm' (Rosen 2000, p. 166). Portia Fitzsimmons, from Surry Hills, echoes Murphy:

We didn't trust them at all. They were authority, and there were very punitive laws in those days, and mainly they seemed to be picking on poor people, like they've always done. [...] Police were no friends to the working class (Rosen 2000, p. 168).

Robin Hammond's thesis 'When murder stalks the city streets' investigates

police behaviour around this time in relation to her uncle, criminal Clarrie Thomas (Hammond 2008, pp. 76–8). Thomas spent most of the 1920s and 30s in gaol, eventually becoming politically active with the encouragement of Long Bay Methodist Chaplain Reverend Morris, a vocal campaigner for prisoners' rights. Within two weeks of leaving gaol in August 1937, Thomas was booked fifteen times for consorting (Hammond 2008, p. 148). Outraged, Reverend Morris invited Thomas to speak of his experiences from the pulpit in Randwick Methodist Church in October. Several weeks later, on 18 November, Thomas was shot dead at close range on the corner of Park and Castlereagh Streets by Dick Reilly, then a bouncer at nightclub The Ginger Jar. Dick was with his brother Gerald, both over six foot tall and former professional boxers; a third brother was a constable. Despite the number of eyewitnesses, Reilly was acquitted of murder in twenty minutes, leaving the court in the company of his police officer brother (Hammond 2008, pp. 154–60). A decade later, Reilly was Sydney's baccarat king.

Well after this period in which the consorting laws were applied intensely, the police and media continued to work in tandem. After the Second World War, towards the end of MacKay's term, police formed 'thug squads' 'specially trained', as enthusiastically described by Vince Kelly, 'for the grim task of suppressing those subhuman terrorists whose stock-in-trade is the boot, the bottle, the bludgeon, the knuckle duster, and cold, stark brutality' (Kelly 1946b).

In 1948 when led into court, as told in Chapter One p. 25, Iris alleged a bashing in cells, raising her skirts to show the bruises. In naming her 'one of the most violent women in Sydney', police prosecutor Sergeant Milne may have been seeking an excuse for his handiwork ('Women attack men' April 1948, p. 1). One wonders when the words 'one of' were removed, totalising the epithet; perhaps thirteen years later by author Vince Kelly, when titling his chapter on Iris in *Rugged angel*.

Post war nationalist Russel Ward, tracing antipathy towards the police back to colonial times, claimed in 1953, the year Iris died: 'Dislike and distrust of policemen, at least partly merited, has sunk deeply into the national consciousness' (Ward 1966, p. 160). Ward's *The Australian legend*, an investigation into the traits that supposedly define our nation's character (mateship, egalitarianism, toughness of body and mind), is limited by its almost entirely masculine focus, and scant consideration of ethnic and Indigenous cultures. But for early twentieth-century society, some insights are

revealing. Ward quotes a letter from the *Herald*:

I hate Sydney's policemen because they so clearly indicate by offensive language, aggressive manner, and threatening expression, their belief that they are not Public servants but masters of the Public [...] I hate them because their apparent carelessness allows so many arrested persons to receive injuries falling down while in custody (Ward 1966, p. 160).

It would be fair to suppose that criminals, especially queer ones, had an innate sense of the sexual proclivities, no matter how repressed, of the authority figures with whom they clashed. If Iris, as Armfield disgustedly recalled, 'blatantly boasted of her activities as a lesbian', she may have been taunting the hypocrisy of a culture which in its overall denial of female sexuality paradoxically gave them leeway. It is also possible that she was taunting Armfield personally. This single, staunch Methodist, devoted to protecting women, fitted a type common to times in which it was impossible to be out and hold public office, especially if you were female.



Figure 15 – Lillian Armfield in later life, after her retirement, c 1960s.

Inside

The systemic violence used by police in NSW was evident in other institutions, most notably gaols and places of juvenile detention. Clarrie Thomas was involved in the 1924 Bathurst prison riot (Hammond 2008, pp. 119–20). His spells in other prisons, such as Maitland and Parramatta, included rioting as well as incidents of ill-treatment at the hands of the warders (Hammond 2008, pp. 135–8, 44–5).

The privations of prison life had been a concern for years, prompting calls for reform ('Proposed prison reform' September 1925, p. 2; 'Prison reform' November 1929, p. 1). Ten years later, the *Sydney Morning Herald* wrote of Iris 'Complaining she had had very little to eat at Long Bay Gaol and that she was weak' ('Prisoner's complaint about food' November 1939, p. 10). The appearance of such an inconsequential story could be explained by the fact that Iris by this time was a figure of interest to the media. Nevertheless the unadorned style of the broadsheet, its eschewal of the sensationalism purveyed by papers like *World's News* and *Truth*, lends credibility to her claim.

It is worth recalling that at this time, the death penalty still applied. Young Chow Hayes was doing one of his first stretches in Long Bay when notorious 'Lovers' Lane' murderer William Moxley was hung in 1932 (Hickie 1990, pp. 96–8). *The Crimes (Amendment) Act 1929* had re-introduced flogging as punishment for grievous bodily harm and malicious wounding, in addition to penal servitude (Grabosky 1977, p. 124). Although judges did not administer these punishments, the threat of them was constant. Vestiges of the penal colony persisted in NSW gaols as late as 1898, with some accounts claiming manacles, chains and wooden gags were used (Murray 1973, pp. 184–5). Even inside, people felt the economic pinch, with gaol wages in 1931 reduced by 20 per cent (Grabosky 1977, p. 129). Yet the expansion of afforestation camps, such as Glen Innes, which housed Slim Maley in 1936, were done with reform in mind, for inmates requiring minimum security.

Conditions in childrens' homes and juvenile correction centres (the adult age varied between 18 to 21) were also bad enough to elicit protest ('NSW won't build more gaols' April 1928, p. 5). 'Barbarities' at the Yanco State 'Farm Home' for Boys included a ritual in which boys were put into boxing gloves, then set upon by an older,

tougher opponent until they passed out. In 1934 a special inquiry was held ('Horrible stories of welfare farm' January 1934, p. 1). Notwithstanding *Truth's* predilection for the gruesome and tendentious, the fact the inquiry took place is irrefutable, and other first-hand accounts draw similar pictures.

In his memoir *Kings Cross, double cross*, Frank 'Tubby' Black, who worked for Dick Reilly, remembers his times in Mittagong and Gosford Boys' Homes. The children ate well, from their own garden and chickens, a major factor for a working-class boy during the Depression. Without self-pity, Black details regular beatings, cold showers in winter, the withholding of food, and tortures idiosyncratic and bizarre, including sexual escapades engineered by female staff (Black 2008, pp. 7–26). Slim Maley and Guido Calletti were in these homes around the same time (*NSW Police Photo Book 1936*). Hayes also spent time in Guildford Truants' Home, which he described as 'a breeding ground for criminals' (Hickie 1990, p. 12). His memories of Gosford Boys' Home are not dissimilar to Black's (Hickie 1990, pp. 22–34). Most of the assaults – physical and sexual – came from the oldest boys.

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, which ran from 2012–2017, received thousands of testimonies from places already mentioned here, going back to the 1940s. Hay Institute for Girls¹⁷ features, and the Parramatta Industrial School for Girls, which housed Maisie Matthews, Vera May Sariwee and Kate Leigh, to name a few. Here wards of the state were housed with 'wayward girls' and convicted criminals. A large number were teenage runaways fleeing abusive backgrounds; the charge of 'uncontrollable child' often applied to them as well. A cartoon by the infamous artist Rosaleen Norton, who worked for *Smith's*, gives an indication of the permissive attitudes about the sexual exploitation of girls, even in the family home.

The discipline at Parramatta Girls was intense, with girls made to march in single file, eyes to the ground, and less than an hour for meals and socialising (*Findings from RCCSR 2014*). In 1941, when Vera was an inmate, there was the first of what would become annual riots, the likely basis for Kylie Tennant's girls' home riot in *Tell morning this*, set in Woolloomooloo during the war, the same period that Iris lived there (Tennant 1967, pp. 232–7). Tennant's novel is full of slum girls loose with both fist and

¹⁷ Hay Gaol had many incarnations, including a unisex gaol when Iris was interned there, a POW camp during the Second World War, and a girls' home from 1961 – the Hay Institution for Girls.

tongue, and Petworth, based on Parramatta, features as a formative place for them. The riots at Parramatta Girls resulted in an inquiry by the Child Welfare Advisory Committee in 1943. The finding was that the place was being run as a 'punitive institution' (*Findings from RCCSR 2014*). Indeed, to be an inmate in Parramatta, no matter why you were there, was to be a criminal.



Figure 16 – Rosaleen Norton, ‘Come and give your new daddy a nice big kiss’, *Smith’s Weekly*, 18 May 1935, p. 17.

Militaristic discipline, sanctioned bullying, gratuitous punishments: these practices ran beyond correctional facilities to other institutions such as boarding schools. Kenneth ‘Seaforth’ Mackenzie’s 1937 autobiographical novel *The young desire*

it tells the story of Charles Fox's experiences at a boarding school in 1920s Western Australia. Bullying by other boys as well as 'the intense affections' of a teacher are central. Mackenzie, like Black, recounts schoolmaster Penworth's sexual advances without judgment, the power and licence of the adult unassailable (Mackenzie & Malouf 2013, pp. 80–1).



Figure 17 – Jonsson, 'A school for boys,' *Smith's Weekly*, 28 January 1933.

None of this would have been considered odd in an era when corporal punishment of children was *de rigueur*. In the 1960s, my four brothers were caned at Catholic private schools Aloysius and Riverview. In our middle-class household, a common disciplinary phrase used by our father – who did not strike us – illustrates the times in which he came of age: 'If you don't behave, I'll cut your throat.'

Born in 1915, my father was educated at Stanislaus College near Bathurst, a Christian Brothers boarding school for boys from the area.¹⁸ Douglas McGregor went on to serve in the Australian army during the Second World War; whilst not in direct combat, he did go to Borneo. He often said the army was 'a picnic' after his experiences at Stanislaus. The bullying appeared to be constant, both physical and psychological. I suspect, from his vehement homophobia, that it was also sexual.

Violence in myriad contexts was so habitual that it was a source of amusement, as those tabloid cartoonists knew so well.

¹⁸ The Royal Commission's findings on abuse from this order run to more than 20%.

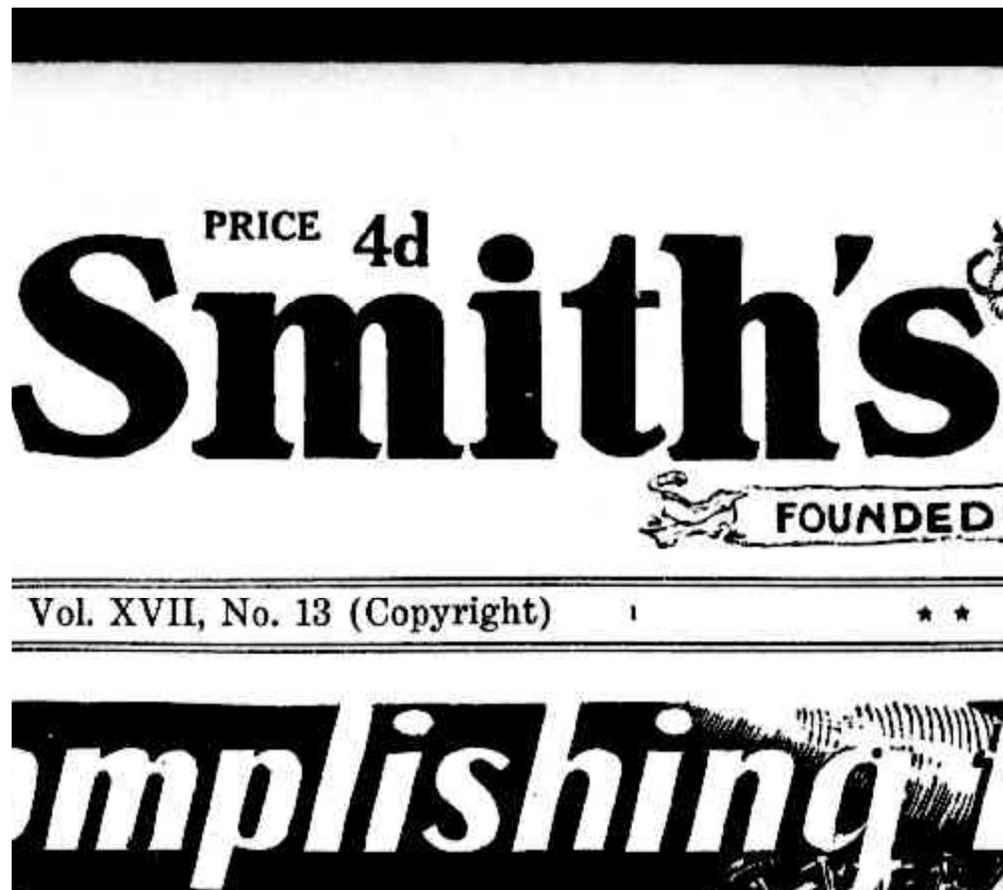


Figure 18 – Stan Cross, ‘We want one o’ dem petrol irons, boss’, *Smith’s Weekly*, 25 May 1935.

Trigger happy

The effects of war on the local population did not become fully apparent until the 1920s. The 1916 riot of returned servicemen in Parramatta that had led to the implementation of ‘the six o’clock swill’ was at the time blamed on alcohol. Ten years later, with many returned soldiers still engaging in violent and disruptive behaviour, shell shock – or what we would now call Post Traumatic Stress Disorder – was entering public consciousness as a cause (Allen 1990, p. 130). These men, one of whom was Clarrie Thomas, another ‘Big’ Jim Devine, Tilly’s husband, were also often armed, and trained to kill. It is doubtful that the aforementioned *Pistol Licencing (Amendment) Act 1927* would have been imposed upon a society unmarked by war.

In *Sex and secrets*, Judith Allen explains how inter-war street life was rife with armed, often unhappy men. During the Second World War, the massive influx of

soldiers from Australia, the US, England, Malaysia and more, brought with it more violent behaviour, with uniforms used as justification (Allen 1990, pp. 218–24, 40–42). Women absorbed the trauma of these men, in body and mind alike. Beyond the domestic sphere, ‘Australian women were enjoined to stay inside under supervision [...] Women who failed to observe these norms were “fair game”’ (Allen 1990, pp. 152–5).

Apart from war, guns had a more pragmatic place in society. Earlier historical accounts which described Iris as a ‘1920s Darlinghurst gangster’ are, as my research demonstrates, de-contextualised responses to Vince Kelly’s descriptions of the ‘shooting affrays’ that Iris was caught up in, the erroneous decade and characterisations chosen perhaps for their more glamorous associations (Jennings 2009, p. 32). Pea rifles, such as those Iris owned, were routine household items, propped in the shed next to the shovel, used for rabbit shooting, an occupation especially common among the rural poor who relied on rabbit as a food source. In the city, guns were routinely traded in pubs, according to Bill Hancock, who grew up around Cleveland Street just after the war (Hancock 2014). Country folk like Iris learnt to shoot as children; the bullets were called ‘rabbiter’. Pea rifles were unaffected by *The Pistol Licencing (Amendment) Act 1927*, being over the required length. Yet Iris was attached enough to the rifle she used in Hay to have carved her initials into the barrel, and mindful enough of the law to carefully saw it off to a length that fitted in a suitcase yet was still ‘over the required length’ for a licence *R v IEM Webber* (1932, pp 3, 6).

Iris’s subsequent malfunctioning pea rifle (the 1932 weapon was confiscated by the court) would have been scorned by gunmen like Bill Smillie, who was on the receiving end of it two years prior to Maley. Although this incident remains shrouded in mystery, the later insinuation of Iris’s guilt by Vince Kelly and the police rings true, considering the close relations of all these people, and the fact that the weapon used belonged to Iris.

The weaker sex

In October 1935, when shot multiple times in the thigh, Bill Smillie’s refusal to name his assailant was consistent with the code of silence that criminals used to protect their world from the police *R v McLennan* (1935, pp 17–19). Yet he was also undoubtedly motivated by the humiliation of being injured by ‘the weaker sex’. Time and again, men

assaulted by women denied the gender of their assailants. From the evidence, we can deduce Smillie's assailant was almost certainly Iris Webber; it is likely that this shooting initiated her fearsome reputation in Sydney.

Yet Iris was not alone in attacking a man with a weapon. In the late 1930s, well-known prostitute Nellie Cameron shot her lover Charles Johnson, but Johnson refused to testify. Tilly and Jim Devine fought so often in public it would have been no surprise that she caused the razor scar on his cheek; yet he denied it. Edwin's refusal to testify against Iris in 1932 probably also originated in masculine pride, yet as this shooting was witnessed by three others, he could not deny it was her.



Figure 19 – Stan Cross, ‘Turning over a new leaf’. *Smith’s Weekly*, 20 January 1934, p. 12.

Edwin fits perfectly the model of man likely to express his frustrations using violence. One can imagine him returning to Australia traumatised, to prospects as limited as those he left. These hardships would have been compounded by his age: a poor, working man nudging forty being well past his prime. In her trial, Iris tabled expletive-ridden letters from him, as well as stolen money and a refusal to provide maintenance; there was also the incident where Edwin threw Iris off their cart into the bush (‘Alleged Maliciously Wounding’ August 1932, p. 4). Not great sins, however, in a world where domestic violence was so assumed that it wasn’t even called that; just routine male dominance. Judith Allen contextualises this:

The violence of husbands was familiar, condoned and at times habitual in Anglo-Saxon cultures. It received cultural endorsements, such as the Punch and Judy show. [...] Representations of wives as nagging, shrewish, whining or, in the Australian vernacular, ‘whinging’ were legion, and posed as provocation to men’s violent responses. Popular newspapers such as *The Bulletin* and *Truth* were exemplars of this genre of representations (Allen 1990, p. 46).

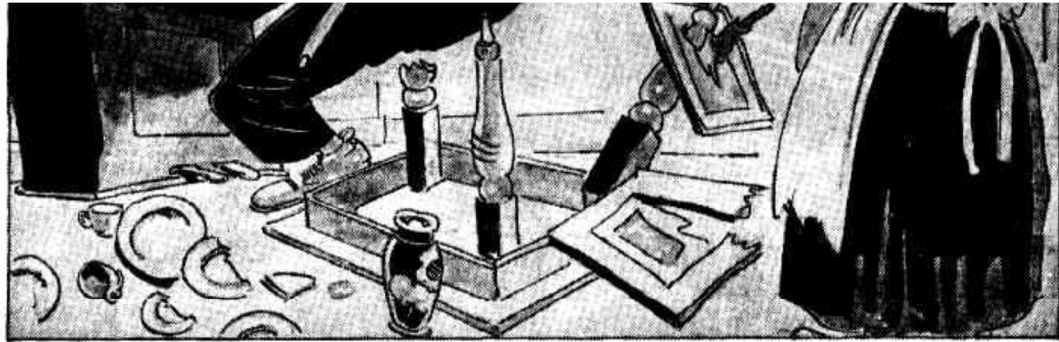
The paradigm was marriage as unhappy, with violence implied if not overt.



Figure 20 – Virgil, ‘Do you believe in clubs for women?’, *Smith’s Weekly*, 20 January, 1934, p. 18.

Not even the rich and powerful in the inverted world of crime were spared. Tilly regularly sported black eyes from Jim. Nellie Cameron’s body on death was a map of violence, with scars and cigarette burns across her skin, and bullets still lodged in her abdomen (Perkins & Australian Institute of Criminology. 1991, pp. 83–4). It is in the fiction of the era that everyday life is most vividly depicted; as all the writers cited in this thesis were driven by socialist sympathies, lived in the areas they wrote about, and worked in a social realist style, their texts read as convincing social documents. In Kylie Tennant’s novel *Foveaux*, set in inter-war Surry Hills, ‘Nobody blamed Joe for beating [his wife] and occasionally locking her out. He only had the courage to do it when he got drunk, so he got drunk fairly often.’ Joe’s wife, Mrs Metting, herself ‘enjoyed a fight more than anyone’ (Tennant 1968, p. 127). Inculturated, intergenerational violence, not confined to Anglo-Celtic families, also features in D’Arcy Niland’s *The big smoke*, set in Sydney around the same time. As the wife of the Jewish rag-and-bone man reflects:

There were the beatings, the cuffs, the filthy abuse: from cradle to cradle, the beatings, until the boys got to him and beat him, and cried as they did with anger and rage and self-reproach. But that didn't stop it. He went on beating her and they went on beating him (Niland 1978, p. 128).



“—And if I hadn't smashed the step ladder I'd tear the paper off the ceiling as well!”

**BRILLIANT PERFORMANCE
BEAUTIFUL APPEARANCE
... COMFORT**

Figure 21 – ‘—And if I hadn't smashed the step ladder ...’, *Smith's Weekly*, 25 May 1935, p. 2.

When the law was lenient towards women assaulting men, it was more due to assumptions of female inadequacy than enlightened views on gender injustice. In 1930, Kate Leigh shot and killed young gangster Snowy Prendergast when he broke into her Darlinghurst house to rob her. She was swiftly acquitted, appearing in court as usual bedecked in furs and jewels. To be fair, Leigh also had a reputation as a ‘phizzgig’ (police informant). Although there is no hard evidence of her giving police information about other criminals at the time of this trial, she did visit the office of *Truth*, resulting in a favourable article (‘Says she shot in defence’ March 1930, p. 13). In 1931 and 32, she was named as ‘one of the recruits of the Lang faction’, having acted as a scrutineer for Labor candidate Donald Grant, who had stood for by-election for the City Council

(‘Latest telegrams’ September 1931, p. 3; ‘Woman arrested’ January 1932, p. 4). That this story seems to have only been reported in regional newspapers – *Richmond River Herald*, *Northern Districts Advertiser*, *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, *Daily Standard*, *The Northern Miner* – is very curious.

Women had to be adept at taking advantage of their assumed weakness to evade punishment. Across all social strata, control, exploitation and abuse by men was a fact of life. With few work options and then on a fraction of men’s pay, contraception difficult to obtain, if at all, and no access to a bank account without their husband’s permission, women were very restricted (Cusack & James 1951; Summers 1975). On the opposite side of the harbour, and at the opposite end of the class spectrum of Iris and her associates, the confined, downtrodden wife in Elizabeth Harrower’s novel *The watch tower* conveys a vivid picture of this norm, suffering a form of psychological abuse easily concealed by middle-class appearances (Harrower 1991).

As women made advances in their rights, disapproval from across the religious and political spectrum abounded. From the 1880s to the 1930s, when the temperance movement was at its height, the Protestant and Catholic churches, with traditional sectarian rivalry, continued competitions of morality which rendered women’s increasing economic and sexual independence anathema (Matthews 1984, p. 80). Inroads into working environments such as teaching and retail shrivelled in periods of economic downturn. In 1930, 600 married female teachers were sacked by the Minister for Education, the reason given that a husband’s wage would suffice (‘Married women teachers to go’ December 1930, p. 6). Such policies were also common in department stores, as well as the sacking of workers on reaching adult age.

Public bars were generally closed to women, due to the lack of decorum associated with drinking (Matthews 1984, p. 82). As Clare Wright explains in *Beyond the ladies lounge*:

With six o’clock closing preserved in legislation for over fifty years of the twentieth century, Australian public drinking became pervasively associated with an overtly masculine style of social engagement: hard, fast, loud, competitive and gender-exclusive [...] the Australian pub secured its notoriety as an exclusively male domain (Wright 2003, p. 215).

Yet ladies’ parlours in working-class areas could be as rough as men’s public bars. In *Caddie*, the author remembers fights as commonplace in the inner Sydney pubs she

worked in throughout the Depression, between women as well as men. In an early scene, one woman nearly glasses another, the fight resulting in her eviction by police (Caddie & Cusack 1966 / 1953, pp. 5–6).

The spectacle of violence was common in these areas with their overcrowded houses, undernourished kids, unemployed men, and uninhibited manners. ‘Plug alley had no secrets’ (Tennant 1968, p. 126). Resolution and justice could be achieved quickly and with good humour, even if one person ended up in hospital. Often, they ended up in prison, fights breaking out between men in pubs at the end of an evening’s drinking. This culture was not confined to the inner city: in fiction, the phenomenon is depicted in a remarkable six-page-long fight choreographed in D’Arcy Niland’s *Dead men running*, set coincidentally in Glen Innes at the time Iris was growing up there (Niland 1969, pp. 276–81). Fights were often entertainment, as for Steve Tookey in *Missus*, who has ‘not a thought in his head beyond the next fight or feed or kiss’ (Park 2009, p. 26). Notably, these are people matched in gender, class, and generally age and size, like the women Caddie witnessed in the pub.

Fighting both professional and unprofessional is a central motif of *The big smoke*, set in early twentieth-century Sydney (Niland 1978). One of the main characters, an untrained Aboriginal youth named Frankie Tarcutta, knocks out legendary black US boxer Jack Johnson with one blow. It’s a David and Goliath plot twist in which diminutive, agile Tarcutta king-hits Johnson after discovering Johnson has raped his sweetheart, a young Aboriginal maid. Johnson receives no other retribution; the book ends with him walking away smiling (Niland 1978, p. 224).

The harp in the south, the most iconic novel of the era, is set around the corner from Iris’s house in Clisdell Street at the time Iris was leaving for her first long stint in Long Bay. In one scene, sixteen-year-old Phyllis, ‘working as a prostitute since she was ten’, and an older woman, Flo, set upon Chocolate Molly, ‘an Indian half-caste’ prostitute, and kick her unconscious. The bashing is revenge for Molly’s ‘pimping’ (informing to the police about) Delie Stock for ‘dope peddling’, the latter character based on Kate Leigh. The event is calmly observed by neighbours. ‘It did not occur to them to interfere, because in that district it is neither polite nor politic to get into others’ quarrels’ (Park 1975, pp. 108–10).

Within this context, it is the 1936 slashing by Maisie and Kath of Irene Crowther that

seems the most abject example of violence by women. Two against one; the victim neither physically nor socially powerful, nor armed. Irene's misdemeanour remains mysterious, Kath saying to the arresting officer, 'She's got all that is coming to her as she once shelled me over some money'; Irene on the other hand claiming Kath had stolen from her son, yet they resolved the dispute *R v McLennan & Matthews* (1936, pp. 4, 8). The injuries sustained by Irene were extreme: deep gashes necessitating sixty stitches and hospitalisation for a week ('Alleged wounding. Two women charged' May 1936, p. 10). The factors of drunkenness and poverty; the major transgression 'shelling' (informing to police) constituted, seem the sum cause. It was Maisie who wielded the razor: is it possible that, inexperienced with a blade, she didn't intend to cut that deeply? Kath already had several convictions for assault and a month after completing the sentence was involved in a group assault mentioned in Chapter One. In 1945, in Iris and Vera's house in Woolloomooloo, she shot a woman in the groin, the woman later dying ('Witness sent to gaol' May 1945, p. 5). Yet history has forgotten Kathleen McLennan, aka Millicent Tangga.

In forensic photos of Iris's room taken after the Maley shooting in 1937, we see furniture made of packing crates. Bloomers hang on a line over the bed; on the packing crate table are two hats, a jar of sugar, a hurricane lamp, a saw. There is no wardrobe: she may have only had one spare dress. Crate scraps are stacked at the end of the bed, perhaps for the construction of more furniture, or for fuel. The number of quart bottles suggest heavy drinking *R v IEM Webber* (1937). This habit was never ascribed to Iris, though the police did not hesitate to record any of her misdemeanours; as Maisie and Kath were in this room the night before the photo was taken, and both were often described as drunk, it is likely they who brought the bottles in.

Iris's living quarters are miserable by today's standards; makeshift and pragmatic in her immediate context. If they provide a clue to her crime against Slim Maley, it would be, in my mind, in their resourcefulness as much as in their poverty. Combined with the low status of women, the all-pervasive, fully sanctioned persecution of queers, and the everyday language of violence, I see a logic to Iris's actions. The shooting seems inevitable and Iris becomes a person I can empathise with. The point of empathy is central to a novelist. In the following, final chapter, I will explain why this genre is ideal for the story of Iris Webber to be told in its richest, most complete form.



Figure 22 – Iris’s bedroom, 6 Clisdell Street, 1937, Deposition Rex vs IEM Webber, November 1937, Item # 9/737, p. 17.

Chapter Four:

Bloodthirsty savagery

If it were possible to be confident that patterns of policing and of indictment are indeed accurate representations of actual criminalities in the past, and that visible, evidenced actions of official agents are always the most significant for the analysis of historical transformations, no quarrel with conventional crime history would arise (Allen 1990, p. 8).

This chapter considers the place of my thesis among existing narratives about Sydney's sly-grog era, from the popular to the academic. I will discuss what I have contributed, and how it is indispensable to both the history of the period, and literature more broadly. I will show how gaps in the record create as many opportunities as they do problems.

A recent biography of Kate Leigh opens with the popular myth that Nellie Cameron was born on the North Shore (Straw 2016, p. 1).¹⁹ This myth was first inscribed by Vince Kelly's contemporary, the aforementioned tabloid journalist George Blaikie, in his period romp *Wild women of Sydney* (Blaikie 1980, p. 163). It continued in *Razor* (Writer 2001, p. 58). No doubt its popularity stems from the more palatable notion of a middle-class girl fallen from grace — therefore redeemable — than a lower-class girl who has chosen her profession from diminished circumstances. One may glean that Nellie herself cultivated this myth, for kudos with clientele and media alike. Between her birth in working-class Waterloo and departure from home aged fifteen, she managed a few years' private school education, and seems to have had a natural gift for social performance, a valuable asset for any person relegated to a criminal class (*Gaol Description Card* Nellie Cameron).

Other factual errors in accounts of Sydney's sly-grog era commonly arise from vagueness of dates, placing, for instance, Kate Leigh at 212 Devonshire Street as early as the 1920s, when in fact she did not acquire this house until the early 1940s. Such

¹⁹ Nellie's actual birthplace of Waterloo is current on her Wikipedia entry, her birth name being Jean Kelly (*Gaol Entrance Card*, Cameron).

details become significant when one considers the considerable difference between these decades in terms of town planning, housing, population, wealth, social morés, and so on. If we are to move even closer to our subjects' politico-social circumstances and personal psychology, careless dating becomes substantial historiographical error.

Yet *Wild women of Sydney* and *Razor*, along with Kelly's books, remain fundamental to knowledge of the era. Blaikie wrote vivid, atmospheric prose filled with idioms of the time. There is a strong sense of the streets, a sort of vernacular truth, no matter how warped the events and characters. Uninhibited by Kelly's prudery, Blaikie's ribald sensibilities convey the joie de vivre of Sydney's sly-grog underworld; its sheer merry pranksterism. He colludes with the criminals' irreverence. Thus the boldness of the women he focusses on – Kate Leigh, Tilly Devine, Nellie Cameron and Dulcie Markham – triumphs, even over his sexism.

The inaccuracy of much writing about Sydney's sly-grog era is understandable when we look at ur-texts like Blaikie's and Kelly's: consistent with the tabloid style of the times, neither are academic in their accounts, actual dates are rarely supplied and citations non-existent. Nevertheless both authors created a legacy. We are left with the conundrum that as loose with the truth as tabloid journalism was, it also highlighted people and events that would otherwise have been consigned to the dustbin of history if it had been left to the worthy pursuits of respectable scribes.

Factual inaccuracies can often be remedied by locating primary sources and cross-referencing. Yet the unreliability of history, as evinced particularly in Chapter Two's focus on Vince Kelly, lies as much in how facts are interpreted, as in the facts themselves. As Simon Leys contends: 'History (contrary to the common view) does not record events. It merely records echoes of events – which is a very different thing – and, in doing this, it must rely on imagination as much as on memory' (Leys 2007).

The most astute writing about the criminals that made up Iris Webber's world is, I argue, in *City of shadows* and *Crooks like us* (Doyle & Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales. 2009; Doyle, Williams & Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales. 2005). In these books, Peter Doyle interprets forensic photographs from early twentieth-century Sydney with shrewdness and equanimity, illuminating not only the people, but also the domestic and urban environments they inhabit. He roams into their psychology, most audaciously in *Crooks* using the second person to construct little fables (McGregor 2012). For Doyle, the crime punctuates a life, like anyone's, replete with so much more.

The writing blurs fiction and non-fiction, finding its subjects through imagination and a sound knowledge of the world they lived in; employing, significantly, vernacular as a way to convey the voices of the people. It is intimate, tangible and authentic.

Missing links

The fiction of early twentieth-century Sydney is strong on female representation, and left-wing politics. Tennant, Stead and Park were all committed socialists, Park being a prominent campaigner for public housing in the part of Surry Hills where she, Iris Webber and Kate Leigh lived (Park 1994). Yet, as some have pointed out, supporters of public housing were often motivated by middle-class values of sanitisation, rather than wanting to empower disadvantaged communities (Spearritt 1974; Spearritt 1978, p. 15). A similar mindset can be seen in the way authors draw characters from such communities. When we peel back moral assumptions, we find values not nearly as egalitarian as presumed.

The representation of queers in Australian fiction from the period is either non-existent or derogatory. There is Christina Stead's effeminate young man in *Seven poor men of Sydney*, who approaches the main character Michael in a dark street one night. With his 'small manicured hands [...] his hairless face [...] pink and powdered', the man is pitiful and predatory. Naturally, 'Michael brushed rudely past him', as the author does herself (Stead 1981, p. 245).

In *Tell morning this*, Kylie Tennant, more sympathetic, less supercilious, gives us this tantalising double take, recognising and dismissing at once:

Red's got pulled into Petworth. She'll hate that because she was queer on Julie, but it won't be any time before she's falling all over Pretty Bet or one of the other screws. Poor old Red. She's square, you know, but she falls for other girls a lot (Tennant 1967, p. 424).

Tennant's straightforward style lends her characters more transparency than those of Stead, screened as they are by virtuosic modernism's common tool, the mutable narrative voice. Rene, whose dialogue is quoted above, is surely one of the great female characters of Australian literature yet she has not been adopted by readers as enthusiastically as *The harp in the south* novels' Roie, the same age, living in the same

poverty on the other side of town at the same time. No doubt this is because Rene is a teenage prostitute, unrepentant, whilst Roie is clean-living, with ambitions of marriage and children. Tennant's sprawling social webs may be harder to grasp than Park's straightforward family units, yet I also believe the difference in the reception of these two books and characters is indicative of a change in social morés, which have seen little improvement in the status of sex workers, whilst gay men and lesbians, once reviled even more for similar reasons, have come to be accepted by the majority.

Consistent with her times, even gritty, street-smart, sexually wise Rene's attitude towards lesbians is awkward and aversive. No wonder, as Terry Castle says:

The lesbian is never with us, it seems, but always somewhere else: in the shadows, in the margins, hidden from history, out of sight, out of mind, a wanderer in the dusk, a lost soul, a tragic mistake, a pale denizen of the night. She is far away and she is dire. (She has seldom been as accessible, for instance, as her ingratiating twin brother, the male homosexual.) (Castle 1993, p. 2)

My long-standing attraction to the interwar period is also due to its association with urban queer identities. Yet pretty much all the examples we have from that time – Janet Flanner, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, Radclyffe Hall, Vita Sackville-West, Christopher Isherwood, W.H. Auden, Marlene Dietrich, Claude Cahun and Susanne Malsherbes, to name just a few – were in the northern hemisphere, mainly Paris, in bohemian or monied society. At least six female Australian artists from this period also had relationships with women: all were from middle- to upper-class backgrounds, and also travelled to Paris (Sciascio 2011). Irish born Melbourne writer Agnes Murphy, who revealed lesbian desire in her 1895 novel *One Woman's Wisdom*, subsequently spent most of her life in England. Writers Eve Langley and Rose Praed are worth a mention and yet, to be openly queer seemed only possible if you were privileged and protected.

Further, the literary output of even the most publicly queer, such as Radclyffe Hall's *The well of loneliness*, did not reach Australia except in clandestine circumstances, as books merely mentioning homosexuality were banned until the 1960s (Hall 1987). Trefusis's *Broderie anglaise*, published in 1935, was not translated into English until the 1980s (Trefusis 1986). Japanese poet Yosano Akiko, whose erotic work sometimes addressed women, was not translated until the 1970s (Rexroth 1976).

Patricia Highsmith's lesbian love story *Carol* was published two years before Iris died, under the pseudonym Claire Morgan, as pulp fiction. It was reprinted in the

1980s with an afterword by the author, still pseudonymous, although her true identity was by then an open secret (Morgan 1984). Highsmith's *Ripliad*, a series of four novels bookended by suppressed homosexual desire, began around the same time and ended close to her death (Highsmith 1971, 1976, 1979, 1980). Highsmith was well known in the gay and lesbian bars of the early twentieth-century East Village; she had many lovers, some de facto. But she never took them to literary events, and she never wrote about her sexuality under her own name (Schenkar 2011).

It is easy to surmise that Iris would not have read anything about female same-sex desire apart from the cited articles from *Truth* and *The Arrow*.

Finding in Sydney none of the dark sophistication of Weimar Berlin, Paris or New York, has only increased my resolve to convey our city's sly-grog era as honestly as possible. The tyranny of distance was much more evident prior to the technology and communication revolution of the twentieth century; Anglo-Saxon puritanism more dominant before the multiculturalism that now defines us. The research in this thesis reveals a place aware of its isolation, unexpectant of change, brave in its inventiveness nonetheless, for the same reasons; averse to flamboyance yet naturally vulgar, its bedrock of British values skewed by Irish defiance. Indeed, the sectarian nature of our society at this time, and its relevance to the criminal world, have not been touched upon in any of the literature I have cited. It is in mine.

Iris's cultural difference is noted at times by the characters in their interactions. On all documents, apart from the Hay Gaol Entrance book, her religion is Church of England (C of E). By contrast, her milieu was overwhelmingly Roman Catholic (including Tilly Devine, who was a convert), and of Irish heritage. Land ownership in Ireland was a mere 5% at the time Australia was colonised, ensuring that the Irish had a far lower social ranking here (Campion 1987). As Ruth Park describes in the opening sentence of *The harp in the south*, 'The Hills are full of Irish people. When their grandparents and great-grandparents arrived in Sydney they went naturally to Shanty Town [...] because they were poor' (Park 1975, p. 1). Intriguingly, Iris's second name, Eileen, is Irish (her third name, Mary, was used by both the Irish and English). Kath, Maisie, Bill Smillie and Slim Maley were all of Irish Catholic origin.

One question most relevant to this thesis is, were there any known queer women with whom Iris might have socialised? Singer Gladys Moncrieff (1892–1976), 'Queen

of Australian Song' and 'our Glad', was in later life a lesbian. A star in England for some years, Gladys back in Australia lived with her companion Elsie Wilson until her death. Elsie is nominated as such by the National Library in its catalogue of interviews with her (Capern 1988). Yet the *Australian dictionary of biography* omits their partnership, Burgis coyly stating in the last paragraph:

Perhaps it was also her [Gladys]'s sense of fun and tender-heartedness that attracted her large following of 'gallery girls', women who queued for standing room and followed her movements with flowers and mail (Burgis 1986).

Whilst Moncrieff's social status would have kept her from Iris, another singer, Des Tooley (1896–1957) known as 'the lady baritone' and 'the rhythm girl', may well have crossed Iris's path. Born Amy Ruwald in Redfern, Des was closely associated with her pianist, Beryl Newell, a celebrated musician in her own right, as the first woman to be appointed musical director at Parlophone Records in 1928. Des moved from vaudeville to radio around the late 1930s. Both she and Beryl are remembered by Australian jazz historians as pioneers (Haesler 2015). Both were married for a time, but apparently unhappily; in 1957, Des died an alcoholic in Long Bay State Reformatory. Whilst there is no hard evidence of their partnership, some historians have noted Des's queer following (Wotherspoon 1991, p. 62).

Given the externally and internally imposed censorship of queer lives at this time, I have taken a chance and brought Des and Beryl into my thesis at a nightclub called Black Ada's, remembered by a gay man as operating in the 1930s–40s (Wotherspoon 1991, pp. 61–2). Black Ada's had a mixed clientele of gay men and 'knowall girls'. Ada herself seems to have been Australian, of Indigenous, South Sea Islander or African-Indian origin. Given the lifelong evidence of Iris's accordion playing, an environment where fringe-dwellers congregate around music seems apposite.

Economies of the night

Three of the women focussed on by Blaikie, Kelly and Writer – Tilly Devine, Kate Leigh and Nellie Cameron – also feature. As well as the main character of Iris Webber, I have been motivated to (re)create these characters due to the illicit economies of sex

and drugs they managed and participated in. I have worked in these economies myself and found them conducive to independent and anti-authoritarian lifestyles. They provide opportunities to people lacking financial or cultural capital, dissolving class barriers more than most legitimate employment. They give permission to unsanctioned aspects of humanity which have been relegated to the margins of literature, and even then, commonly viewed through a prurient lens. At the coalface of changing morés about the body and sexuality, sex workers have contributed a great deal to women's and sexual liberation but this has been underestimated due to prevailing attitudes of moral discrimination, a mindset that demotes any woman who is sexually engaged, denying her intelligence. Notwithstanding, the violence, exploitation and lack of agency discussed in earlier chapters affects my female characters across the board. Yet the financial independence offered by the economies of the night, their occupation of public space and disruption of obedient domesticity, make them especially significant in the early twentieth century when women were so much more confined.

Even today, almost a century after the period in which my novel is set, it would be remarkable to have women so powerful in the underworld. Prostitution, illicit drugs and petty theft feature prominently in crime fiction, yet rarely looked at from a female perspective. These economies span all social strata: prostitution in particular is, and has always been, a female- and queer-dominated profession (Laing, Pilcher & Smith 2015, pp. 209–10; Perkins & Australian Institute of Criminology. 1991). Kate Leigh's sly-grog dens can be compared, without detracting from their idiosyncrasy, to the underground parties and clubs that have catered to a Sydney nightlife heavily curtailed by licensing laws during my lifetime. Iris's musicianship gives her access to these places as both creator and customer. To observe Tilly, Kate and Nellie through the eyes of a woman even more marginalised than they were lends itself to the combination of intimacy and distance that good fiction thrives on.

The inter-war period was a protean time for these illicit economies. With so much of my research focussed on legislative change and law enforcement, I have been struck by the parallels to current times. MacKay's zeal mirrors that of recently retired Police Commissioner Scipione, who in 2016 worked with Police Minister Troy Grant and then Premier Mike Baird to bring in 'public safety orders' that ban public assembly, impose curfews, restrict people's movements, and compromise habeas corpus (McNamara & Quilter 2016). In 2014, then NSW Premier Barry O'Farrell revamped the

notorious consorting laws, which again have been proven to affect the most vulnerable, in this case Indigenous people in rural areas. In 2002, Premier Bob Carr introduced drug detection dogs, which give police the power to enter public places at any time, and search people suspected of carrying as little as one joint. Throughout the fifteen year period I have been researching this period, which ranges from boom times through depression to war and fascism, a similar political trajectory has occurred. Sydney's dual legacy of punitiveness and lawlessness has swung to the former and New South Wales has become a police state. Thus the past can tell us about the present, and so-called historical fiction reflects the way we live today.

Feminist tropes are confounded by women such as Iris, Tilly and Kate. Tilly Devine and Kate Leigh ascended as their male counterparts did, through grit, force and acumen. They enacted their authority physically when necessary, a ruthlessness crucial to maintaining respect and order. Apparently unmotivated by improved conditions for their gender, they neither feared nor favoured women, colluding with the male power structures that bound them. Whilst breaking free of the traditionally secondary female position, they conformed with the only roles available to women — whore and mother-figure — and relied on men for muscle and companionship.

In contrast, Iris's violence seems to have been reactive. It's possible there was abuse in her childhood — a common enough occurrence as my research shows — but impossible to prove specifically. Iris was not interested in social status or financial gain, or if she was, was so unsuccessful that these ambitions are lost in time. Her relationships with men are well documented. She had male friends yet did not rely on them. The price she paid for such radical independence was poverty, ignominy and an early, painful death. This makes her difficult to write about as the redemptive or triumphant story arc is unavailable. I see her as a person who prevailed. Her refusal to hide her relationships with women, to accept injustice, show somebody who lived by their principles at all costs. Obsessive, righteous, courageous, foolhardy, intransigent, arrogant.

The vulgarity and violence of Iris, along with Tilly and Kate, have written them out of the feminist canon, dominated as it is by the educated white middle-class hegemony, strong on decorum. While Rose Scott and Dulcie Deamer are remembered for their activism on behalf of lower-class women and female prisoners, the women they actually represented remain unnamed, as though less important. Yet like Bea

Miles, who was immortalised in *Lilian's story* (Grenville 1986), the very abjection of Iris, Tilly and Kate is why, and how, they broke down barriers. They fought literally tooth and nail.

How to render

My decision to use the actual names of historical figures in the creative component is based on a desire to write as closely to the public record as possible, whilst offering a new interpretation of it: I am engaging in a form of historical revisionism. The mythical status that Kate and Tilly achieved is indicative both of their media savvy, and the level of interest in this period. What those women did not want us to know is almost impossible to prove. For instance, Kate Leigh was arrested in 1935 for possession of a large quantity of barbiturates and though one report quotes her saying she took the drugs for sleeping, no historian to date has ruminated on her possible habitual use ('Drug act breach' May 1935, p. 8). Leigh went to great lengths to deny she had worked as a prostitute, and neither drank nor smoked. Yet soliciting is one of the many charges on her record. By underpinning my narrative with actual names, places and events, I am able to imagine a version that has not been told, not only by virtue of leading the story with the hitherto unknown character of Iris Webber, but also by examining, through her eyes, people and events given to us so far in cursory or biased form.

Neither the fictional nature of the work is belied by this, nor its historical veracity. As Michael Riffaterre says in his study *Fictional truth*, 'Fiction is a genre whereas lies are not' (Riffaterre 1990, p. 1). All of the queer characters are invented by me. Adeline, the shopgirl who turns; Jean, her butch lover, who is based on a handful of photos in the NSW Police Criminal Register: Supplement B of women with short hair, in trousers; and Bosky, the male prostitute and bouncer. All blend seamlessly with the world of recognisable people. Actual names of people are met with actual streets, pubs, nightclubs, department stores, and so on. Actual events are used as often as possible. Thus the novel may be read as both myth and document.

Scholarship on historical fiction has shown how a novel can potentially present the fullest picture of any medium because it can travel through internal as well as external worlds, simultaneously lateral as well as literal. As Dorritt Cohn states in her chapter,

‘Fictional versus Historical Lives’, fiction can locate ‘purely inner experiences that no biographer can know about a real person’s death, and none would dare to invent’ (Cohn 1999, p. 21). My novel inducts the reader into a world recognisable from history to date and the streets we still walk on, then steers them to the unknown by entering Iris’s consciousness and finding those ‘moments where fiction conveys the intimate subjective experiences of its characters, the here and now of their lives to which no real observer could ever accede in real life’ (Cohn 1999, p. 24).

The psychological truths of fiction are cause and effect of their social context, making the form a necessary companion to documented history. As Simon Leys says:

The fact is, these two arts – history writing and fiction writing – originating both in poetry, involve similar activities and mobilise the same faculties: memory and imagination; and this is why it could rightly be said that the novelist is the historian of the present and the historian the novelist of the past. Both must invent the truth (Leys 2007).

An important element in the creative component of my thesis is the use of the vernacular. Dialogue has always been prominent in my fiction. Through reading literature of the era, police and newspaper reports, and consulting the works of philologist Sidney Baker, I have recreated the language of the streets (Baker 1981, 1982). As each author writes dialogue differently, down to variations in spelling, I have formed my own version in which echoes of Park, Tennant, Stead, Doyle et al can be heard. By relying so heavily on dialogue to convey the story, I literally give voice to Iris and her associates. There is a common language, as well as personal ties. Tilly Devine speaks with inflections of cockney, Ted Pulley with New Zealand ones. Iris and Maisie Allen use the occasional old Queensland/Northern NSW idiom such as ‘port’.

Historical fiction that has been useful to me in this regard includes Anthony Burgess’s *A dead man in Deptford*, wherein the author recrafts Elizabethan English into a street vernacular; *The book of night women*, narrated in the uneducated voice of an eighteenth-century female Jamaican slave; *The secret river*, where eighteenth-century cockney grapples with Indigenous Australia; and *Alias Grace*, narrated by a nineteenth-century Irish maid, emigrant to Canada (Atwood 1996; Burgess 1994; Grenville 2005; James 2009). (A second novel, not included here, spanning the years 1940–45, will return the language to the authorities via characters from the law, police and the media.)

One of the main narrative threads in my creative component is something no document could ever reproduce, that is to say the relationship between Iris and Maisie. The novel is in part a love story, doomed, warped, yet persistent. Iris's life, according to the records shows little ambition to status or financial gain. She displays great loyalty in her lifelong friendship with the hair-trigger-tempered Kath. And clearly great attachment to Maisie to have shot two men over her. These relationships then, become central.

I am also interested in Riffaterre's breakdown of the literary representation of desire, and how it applies to proscribed desires, such as those lived by Iris and Maisie.

For desire to exist subjects must project their libidos onto the object and the predication expressing this projection must be negated or postponed. Otherwise fulfillment would be attained and desire would cease to exist. The structure of desire must accordingly be comprised of a desiring subject and an object both attractive and frustrating. [...] Hence the kinship between desire and narrative. [...] Even though desire applies to everything, sexual desire is especially germane to the unconscious, since it is the form of desire most likely to be repressed (Riffaterre 1990, pp. 86–7).

Time selection and structure of the thesis

As Nelson Goodman observed, 'The whole truth would be too much; it is too vast, variable, and clogged with trivia' (Riffaterre 1990, p. vii). Accordingly, the creative component of this thesis focusses on a five-year period in Iris's life, 1932–1937, which is bookended by the shootings of her husband Edwin Webber and petty criminal Slim Maley. Although it does not explicate the events of 1932, these overshadow and contextualise Iris's arrival in Sydney shortly after.

The creative component is divided into three parts, titled with place names: Darlinghurst, Surry Hills, Long Bay. I have chosen this structure in accordance with the focus on place in my writing to date; each part is also characterised by a different approach to how I have alchemised history into fiction. Most significantly, each forms a vignette. Although the narrative proceeds in a mostly linear fashion, there are ellipses far greater than a full-length novel would allow. As a novelist, I have always worked to lengths of over 100,000 words; to this extent, the presentation of vignettes is the best way in which my research can be conveyed in the required length of 60,000 words.

Part One: Darlinghurst imagines Iris coming to Darlinghurst and working for Tilly Devine. It takes place from September 1932 to June 1933, a period during which there are no records for Iris. Her progress is fictional, pinned down by actual events and people documented elsewhere in the criminal underworld. Characters from life, such as Maisie (Maybe) Allen and Slim Maley are introduced, alongside purely fictional characters such as Adeline.

Part Two: Surry Hills takes Iris to the house in Clisdell Street that she occupied for more than five years. It is the longest section, and weaves an imaginary working relationship with Kate Leigh into evidence-based relationships with Maisie Matthews, Kathleen McLennan, Bill Smillie and Slim Maley. My research into police records threw up many fascinating characters: from them I chose Ted Pulley, as his associations with Bill Smillie, Chow Hayes and Nellie Cameron make him an ideal linking character. Pulley is joined by associates Hoppy Gardiner and Nigger Fox, the latter providing an opportunity to observe racial relations of the time, as does Herbert Morris the barman, whose photo in the *NSW Police Gazettes* shows a face that may, or may not, be partly Aboriginal. Whilst the crimes, occupations, and physiognomy of all these characters are faithful to the record, their interactions with Iris are imagined. The character of Chow Hayes has been chosen for his links to Kate Leigh (*NSW Police Criminal Register* 1935) as well as the liveliness of his voice in the much-cited, if slightly unreliable, *Chow Hayes: gunman*. His assertion that ‘everybody knew one another’ gave me the courage to entwine all these characters (Hickie 1990, p. 95).

Part Two is the longest section, and is divided into a) which moves from 1934–1935 and b) which moves from 1936–1937.

Part Three: Long Bay takes place in the State Reformatory for Women, when Iris is incarcerated for the Maley shooting. Most events are based on documented misdemeanours in the *Long Bay Punishments Book*. The character of Kathleen Gallagher is true to life, right down to her brawls with Kathleen MacLennan.

In *War and peace*, amongst fictional characters, Tolstoy brings to life Emperor Napoleon, his personality revealed in the domestic realm as much as on the battlefield. We accept this character as Napoleon, albeit Tolstoy’s Napoleon (Tolstoy, Pevear & Volokhonsky 2008). In *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the bodies*, Hilary Mantel joins the dots of Thomas Cromwell’s political career with imagined relationships between the actual

figures of Henry VIII and Thomas More. She gives equal place to the private realm with Cromwell's wife and family (Mantel 2009, 2012). In spite of historiographical disagreements that flowed in the wake of these books, Mantel's Cromwell stands. We, the readers, understand him as a *version*.

It is worth adding television to these considerations, such is its current power as a narrative form. In the US television series *Deadwood* (2004–2006), the mythical 'wild west' of Hollywood is pared down to brutal realism. One of the main characters is Calamity Jane, whose alcoholism and latent lesbianism bring her closer to the historical figure on which she is based, than the many versions of her to date, including, most famously (and ironically), the film starring Hollywood's best-known closet lesbian, Doris Day. Jane, like Tolstoy's Napoleon, is flanked by figures from history, such as Wild Bill Hiscock, as well as from fiction.

All of the characters in all these stories, whether based on actual figures or fully invented by the writers, are equally plausible, their authenticity dependent on the strength of the writing and the rigour of the research.

It is a risky, audacious decision to create fictional characters from actual people, and not change their names. My principal motivation, to liberate Iris Webber from the moralistic prejudice that has restricted and denigrated her to date, and understand the world in which her personality was forged, has a flow-on effect to her associates. My approach to all the characters in the book has been driven by the same parameters of empathy, rigour and courage, resisting redemption as much as damnation. The novelist's voice is not so much an authority as a conduit, trusted in the manner of a theatre chorus, a compere, a campfire narrator. For Hamburger, a theorist cited by Cohn, 'psychic omniscience is not a narrative type or mode or device or technique, but *the* pivotal structural norm that rules the realm of third-person fiction and that is logically ruled out in all other discursive realms' (Cohn 1999, p. 25). This is what distinguishes my narrative mode. The necessity of trust, established by the authorial voice is, to me, the linchpin of this.

I do not doubt that my version of Iris Webber's life and times – from the best-known characters to the completely imagined – will be one of many. What I want it to be is the most trustworthy, complex, plausible and compelling.

CREATIVE COMPONENT:
IRIS – BOOK ONE (CRIME)
– Vignettes of a novel –

Fiona McGregor
2017

[Production note: NO FULL TEXT OF THIS CREATIVE COMPONENT AVAILABLE.
Access is restricted indefinitely.]

GLOSSARY

- *angie* – cocaine. See also, *snow*, *dope*.
- *backstop* – back alley lookout.
- *bagswinger* – street prostitute. v. to swing a bag.
- *banana bender* – Queenslander. Sometimes also close to the border, northern NSW.
- *belly-ache* – v. to complain
- *Bengal* – the favoured brand of razor. Also *Gibraltar*.
- *biff merchant* – muscle for hire. See also *knuckleman*
- *binjee* – n. extremely strong illicit liquor, sometimes contained methylated spirits.
Also *binjey* – stomach.
- *bite* – v. to beg or borrow from someone – money, food, goods. (similar to *cadge*)
- *bludger* – n. man living off the earnings of a prostitute. Hence. *to bludge*.
- *blue* – n. & v. fight, argument.
- *bluey* – a bundle, like a swag, orig. consisting of a blue blanket with belongings rolled in it. Also a writ, eg *Slap a bluey on someone*.
- *bob* – a shilling. See *deener*
- *bonzer* – excellent
- *boob* – n. idiot, fool. Also *gaol*.
- *boozington* – drunkard.
- *bounce* – v. pressure, put pressure on.
- *brick* – n. ten pounds.
- *briney marlin* – darlin’.
- *bronza* – arse.
- *brush* – n (sing. & pl.). young woman, or women.
- *bugle* – (v.) to drink beer straight from the bottle.
- *bumper* – cigarette butt.
- *bunger* – cigarette.
- *case of fruit* – suit – see also *fiddle and flute*.
- *caser* – a crown, five shillings.
- *chamber* – chamber pot.
- *chat* – n. old bum, alcoholic, lowest life in *gaol*. Hence adj. *chatty* – filthy.
- *chromo* – n. older prostitute/loose woman. Sometimes implied lesbian.
- *cockatoo* – street corner lookout.
- *cockie* – n. as above, but more commonly a farmer from out west.
- *consorto* – a member of the consorting squad of NSW Police, formed to enforce legislation of late 1929 that decreed it illegal to consort with anyone with a criminal record. It was sufficient to be sighted in that person’s company to be arrested. The law could thus proscribe contact with spouses, next of kin and housemates, indiscriminately, and could be applied in the privacy of a home if the police chose to enter.
- *cop the blister* – to take punishment, usu. of the law.
- *Darlinghurst smile* – tell-tale curved scar from a razor slashing, usually crossing the left cheek and ending at the corner of the mouth.
- *dead horse* – sauce.
- *Dee* – *demon* – detective, police-officer. See *rozzer*, *walloper*.
- *deener* – a shilling piece. See *bob*.
- *dip* – n. pickpocket.
- *the Dom* – Domain baths.

- *dona/donah* – n. a woman or a girl.
- *drac* – terrible, awful. Often ugly and unattractive, of an older woman.
- *a drag* – a three-month prison sentence.
- *droob* – drongo, stupid person.
- *fit* – v. charge with an offence by the police.
- *fiddle and flute* – suit; see also *case of fruit*.
- *flapper* – young, urbane, liberated woman, c. 1920s, ass. nightclubbing/partying
- *footpad* – street thief.
- *ganger* – foreman/head of a gang of workmen. Occ. one of the gang.
- *Gibraltar* – see *Bengal*. Another favoured brand of cut-throat razor.
- *gig* – n. an idiot, stupid. v. to tease, hassle. *He was a good butt for a gig*. Also short for *phizzgig*, therefore, an informant, a tattletale, n. and v.
- *ginger* – n. & v. theft from a client by a prostitute and/or their accomplice. Thus n. *gingerer*.
- *goanna* – piano. Also *pianner*.
- *goodtime girl* – casual prostitute, often working in a legitimate job, exchanging sexual favours for money with men on the side.
- *goog* – an egg. Hence, *full as a goog*.
- *goolly* – pebble, stone. Pl. *goollies*.
- *honk* – to stink, smell really bad. ... *like a gaggle of geese*.
- *hoon* – prostitute's street protection.
- *hump* – to shoulder or carry. Esp. *hump a bluey* – carry a bluey/bundle.
- *I suppose* – nose.
- *job* – v. to hit, bash, beat up.
- *keyed up* – wound up, jumped up on drugs, usu. Cocaine. Also *jazzed up*. Or *Up the mountains (on snow)*.
- *knock around* – to work as a prostitute. Hence *knock shop* – brothel.
- *knock off* – v. race off, fuck. Later, v. to steal.
- *take the knock on* – to not pay one's debts, esp. an SP to clients.
- *knuckleman* – a thug employed to enforce. Also *biff merchant, backstop*.
- *lag* – old prisoner
- *lair* – a flashily dressed man, usually uncouth. Whence *dead lair* or *mug lair*, a particularly obnoxious one. Also v. *lairise*, to dress or act like a lair; and *lair up/get laired up*, to dress up (a man); don one's best clothes.
- *lamp* – v. to see.
- *log* – a person lacking ability, brains and energy.
- *Marcel wave* – a kind of deep wave, in women's hairstyle c. 1930s, orig. Marcel Grateau, Parisian hairdresser. Hence *Marcelled*.
- *nark* – n. a nuisance. V. to annoy someone, make a nuisance.
- *pan* – n. face, mouth.
- *park the tiger* – v. vomit.
- *park your bundle* – sit down, settle.
- *the Pen* – Penitentiary – men's gaol at Long Bay.
- *phizzgig* – n. police informer, sometimes 'gig'. Hence v. *to gig*.
- *pig's ear* – beer.
- *pimp* – n & v. dobber, tattletale, to the police.
- *pinkie* – new wine fortified with cheap spirits (hospitalised many).
- *pitch for* – to make a play for (a woman).
- *pony* – twenty-five-pound note.

- *port* – suitcase. Esp. in QLD, or northern NSW.
- *pood/poud* – An effeminate male, implied homosexual. Also *faerie*, *queen*, *daisy*.
- *punchy* – spoiling for a fight.
- *the Refty* – State Reformatory for Women, Long Bay. (At this time, the other half of Long Bay Gaol was the State Penitentiary for Men, or *the Pen*.)
- *ridge* – serious, genuine, sincere, sometimes satisfactory. From *ridgey-didge*.
- *ring the changes* – lurk involving deceipt over change given in shops.
- *rozzar* – n. cop, police officer. See *Dee/demon*, *walloper*.
- *saner* – n. ten shillings, a note, sometimes *sane/sein*.
- *scran* – food. See *tucker*.
- *shelf* – v. to inform on someone over money. Similar to *phizzgig*, *topoff*.
- *shivoo* – n. party, do. Also, *shivaroo*.
- *sixer* – n. six-month prison sentence.
- *sling to* – n. pay off the police.
- *snorter* – n. small drink, a nip.
- *snow* – n. cocaine. See *angie*.
- *squib* – n. coward. v. to evade (an issue). To avoid, to choke. To betray a person.
- *steak and kidney* – Sydney. Also *steak and kid*.
- *(like) stink* – going off, going well. See *swell*.
- *stoolie* – *stool pigeon* – n. butt of a scam.
- *stretch* – n. a prison sentence – usually six months.
- *Susso* – n. the dole / government sustenance. A person receiving it, i.e. poor.
- *swell* – n. a toff, a big cheese. Adj. As of a party, going off.
- *sword swallower* – n. male homosexual. See also *pood/poud/daisy/queer*.
- *tea-leaf* – n. & v. thief, to thieve.
- *thunderbox* – outdoor lavatory, usually in a terrace house.
- *tootsie*, *tootsie doll* – lesbian. Also *shemale*, *lezzo*.
- *topoff* – n. informant to police, and v. to inform. See *phizzgig*.
- *touch* – to take too big a cut, e.g., by a fence. Occ. cut a drug deal.
- *tucker* – food. See *scran*.
- *twang* – n. opium.
- *wake something up* – to bring up again, go over unnecessarily.
- *walloper* – n. police officer. See *Dee*, *rozzar*.
- *warby* – unwell.
- *weigh in* – v. pay police. As in *sling to*.
- *whip the cat* – v. cry over spilt milk. As in *flog a dead horse*.
- *woodheap* – n. farm gaol. Hence *out on the woodheap*.
- *yarra* – adj. mad, crazy.
- *yike* – n. & v. to argue, tiff. Or n. a Jew.
- *zac* – sixpence.
- *Zu-Zus* – popular sweet of the day.

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A note on locations At the time I commenced research on this project, in 2002, the New South Wales State Archives were still at the Rocks. I accessed some initial births, deaths and marriages on microfiche there. All subsequently were found online.

Electoral Rolls were accessed with the UTS subscription to the Census database, as well as a private subscription to ancestry.com, on which I have built a family tree for Iris.

In 2002, likewise, the Mitchell Library still held numbers of Police Gazettes, up until the 1950s, and embargoes were not strictly enforced. Therefore, I initially consulted some police records at this location. Since then, embargoes have moved and become more strictly enforced, and digitisation has gathered pace. Therefore, for instance, although I originally accessed Margaret Ann Ewart's gaol record through the database of State Records of New South Wales at Kingswood, it is now openly available online. After the Mitchell Library, I accessed all other police, court and gaol records at the State Records of NSW at Kingswood.

Similarly, newspapers have come into the Trove NLA database constantly over the past decade. I read many articles on microfilm in the State Library of NSW, particularly media such as Sydney's *Truth*. I also found a local paper — *The Riverine Grazier* — when on a field trip to Hay. It was in the library, not mentioned elsewhere, and it gave me the most detailed account of Iris's 1932 trial. The *Riverine Grazier* subsequently became available on Trove. From early 2015, I came to rely mostly on Trove, although *Smith's Weekly* is still only on microfilm at the time of completion of this thesis in early 2017.

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Apart from books already cited in this exegesis, others were useful for the writing of the creative component. Fiction draws on many different types of writing and sources of information for both technical, as well as more abstract and lateral forms of support, knowledge and nourishment. Memoirs yielded a lot of period vernacular and details of daily life: *Growing up in the 1930s, All manner of people, Aunts up the Cross, My town – Sydney in the 1930s, The watcher on the cast iron balcony, Larrikin days* (Carroll 1982; Debenham & Dreyer 1967; Eakin 1965; Gill 1993; Porter 1984; Stephens & O’Neil 1983). Some of these, such as Gill’s book, were also a good source of photographs, along with *A Pictorial history of south Sydney* (Whitaker 2002).

I sought out novels and poetry written during or set in, the early twentieth century, prioritising Sydney, but also travelling beyond. For instance *The floating garden, Threepenny novel, Heatwave in Berlin, Birdsong, Long Bay, Palace Walk, Lovers at the Chameleon Club Paris 1932, Selected poems of Kenneth Slessor, Awakenings, The colour purple* (Ashmere 2014; Brecht 1961; Cusack 1961; Faulks 1994; Limprecht 2015; Mahfouz 2011; Prose 2014; Slessor 1977; Toer & Lane 1982; Toer & Toer 1991; Walker 1983). US writer E.L. Doctorow’s novels were especially pertinent due to their focus on the same period and its criminal milieu, as well as their reinventions of actual historical figures (Doctorow 1976, 1980, 1989). *Long Bay* and *Lovers at the Chameleon Club Paris 1932* also does this. *Palace Walk* looks at known historical figures in the distance, whilst focussing on a fictional family as its main characters.

Apart from the aforementioned, other historical novels that were useful were *The summer exercises, Burial rights, The vivisector* (Gibson & 2008; Kent 2013; White 1970). White is always useful for a Sydney novelist, particularly, as time goes on, for one with an historical focus. *The summer exercises* was useful for its focus on the criminal world; *Burial rights* for how it draws the pathologising of female criminality as well as its depictions of poverty. I read nineteenth-century fiction for clues to past attitudes towards women and criminals (Dickens 1985; Hardy 1992; Tolstoy, Pevear & Volokhonsky 2000). Also *Low Life*, for urban lower-class history (Sante 1992).

I read a lot of crime fiction, for insights into how criminals have been portrayed and changing ideas of what constitutes crime (Carré 2004; Mosley 1990; Pelecanos 2001; Thomas 1986). I found the genre often crippled by conventional morality, even in the case of the so-called masters, P.D. James, Sara Paretsky and Ian Rankin (James 1997, 2003; Paretsky 2003; Rankin 1999). While the problem of didacticism in the authorial voice may be applied to literature more broadly – *Anna Karenina* comes to

mind – it is at the forefront of considerations of crime fiction, which tracks characters’ trajectories in terms of misdemeanours, hinging on conflict with the law and authority (Tolstoy, Pevear & Volokhonsky 2000). Closer to my sensibilities were writers such as Horace McCoy with his bleak fatalism and Graham Greene with his elegant style and psychological complexity (Greene 1969; McCoy 1983). Others more celebrated, such as Thompson, Cain and Chandler, felt dated by their overwhelming misogyny (Cain 1978; Chandler 1977; Thompson 1990). Peter Corris, Peter Doyle, P.M. Newton and Dave Warner were useful for the local context (Corris 1998; Doyle 1996, 2001; Newton 2011; Warner 2000).

Australian literature from earlier times provided a bedrock of national consciousness (Baynton 1972; Gunn 1957; Lawson 2001). As did Australian literature set during or close to the Second World War (Harrower & Falconer 2013; Harrower & McGregor 2012; Page 2003; Phelan 1962).

Helpful also were books by lesbian authors spanning the twentieth century to now. It was interesting to note that even from the heart of cosmopolitan bohemia, Sybil Bedford, born around the same time as Iris, disclosed next to nothing about her sexuality. Contrast an author my age, Sarah Waters, whose lesbian-focussed reinventions of history have been consistently well received both critically and commercially (Bedford 2005; Waters 1999a, 1999b, 2003). As well as cited works on queer Australian history, I read papers from the Homosexual Histories Conference (Phillips et al. 2000).

Writing by and about sex workers, in first person or oral history form, was useful for insights into both prostitution as it was practised at the time, and more generally in terms of relations between workers and clients (Holden 2005; Hull 2002; Perkins & Australian Institute of Criminology. 1991; Shields 1992).

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