

‘A menace and an evil’: Fortune-telling in Australia, 1900-1918

Abstract:

Fortune-telling was hugely popular in Australia in the early 1900s. In addition to being an indispensable entertainment at charity and society events, fortune-tellers across the country plied their trade from shops, street-stalls, private homes or travelling sideshows and advertised their businesses in the daily press. Yet fortune-telling was also a criminal practice under legislation inherited from England. Up until the early twentieth century, however, it seems to have been seldom policed. By contrast, the dawn of the new century saw spates of prosecutions against practitioners and decisions by a number of states to affirm the practice’s criminal status under new laws. Divining the future was treated as ‘a menace and an evil’, and as an embarrassment in the face of the scientific and intellectual advances of the era. At a time when Australia was entranced by a vision of itself as a rational, forward-thinking nation of white males, fortune-telling was not only considered a relic of old-fashioned ignorance, but was associated with female credulity, working-class superstitions and incursions by foreign cultures. The history of fortune-telling thus offers new ways of understanding how questions of gender, race and class inflected the national identity developed during the Federation era.

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In December 1900, various regional newspapers throughout Australia distributed coupons to their readers for a book that contained instructions for foretelling the future using ordinary playing cards.¹ The promotional activity was merely one example of the popularity fortune-telling enjoyed in Australia from the turn of the century. This growing fascination with divination may have been connected to more widespread concern about the future ushered in during the Federation period as Australia sought to establish its national identity.² It was in this crucial era that legislators sought to control our future by defining our national culture as that of a ‘white man’s country’, or more specifically as that of the educated, white male.³ The relationship between gender, class and racial

¹ *Fitzroy City Press*, 7 December 1900, 2; *Morwell Advertiser*, 7 December 1900, 2; *Barrier Miner*, 8 December 1900, 6.

² Ann Curthoys, “Identity Crisis: Colonialism, Nation, and Gender in Australian History,” *Gender & History* 15, no. 2 (1993): 165-76.

³ Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality*, Carlton: Melbourne University Publishing, 2008, 137-165; Marilyn Lake, “The Politics of Respectability: Identifying the Masculine Context,” *Historical Studies* 22, no. 86 (1986):

categories and the national self-image can be explored by investigation of early-twentieth-century fortune-telling, a topic which to date has been little examined by Australian historians. Plentiful information is however available from the period's newspapers, which not only recorded fortune-telling's popularity, but launched successive campaigns against it. Their opposition was based not, as might be expected, on traditional religious grounds, but on the belief fortune-telling represented an impediment to national progress due to its association with the cultures of women, the working-classes and non-British races. It was the perception that both the clientele and practitioners of fortune-telling were drawn from these allegedly backwards elements in society that led the practice to be labelled by Australian newspapers, including those who profited from the distribution of the 1900 fortune-telling guide, as 'a menace and an evil'.⁴

The surge of interest in divination at the turn of the twentieth century was not unique to Australia, but was also witnessed in Great Britain, Europe and North America.⁵ Newspaper reports of the overseas vogue doubtlessly influenced the practice's popularity here, with journalists noting that locals had quickly adopted what was significantly dubbed the fortune-telling 'craze' or 'mania'.⁶ While it was said to be most prevalent in the capital cities, there were also reports of fortune-tellers setting up in many rural centres.⁷ The use of palmistry, tarot cards or clairvoyant communication with the spirit world were the customary forms of divination employed, but readings were also to be had in phrenology, crystal gazing, tea-cup reading, astrology, psychometry, physiognomy, onymancy, aura reading, graphology and bibliomancy.⁸ Other fortune-tellers additionally claimed healing powers, or sold protective amulets and charms.⁹ Those who embraced divination as an occupation operated variously out of private homes; hotels or tearooms; street stalls at Sydney's Paddy's Market or

116-117.

⁴ *Truth* (Brisbane), 9 November 1902, 4.

⁵ Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, 28; Stan McMullin, *Anatomy of a Seance: A History of Spirit Communication in Central Canada*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004, 18.

⁶ *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 13 January 1900, 31; *Capricornian*, 27 July 1901, 6; *Broadford Courier*, 20 September 1901, 6; *Western Australian*, 21 January 1907, 4; *Queenslander*, 23 June 1900, 1185.

⁷ *Argus*, 28 May 1907, 4; *Barrier Miner*, 2 September 1909, 2; *Queanbeyan Age*, 12 May 1900, 2.

⁸ *Argus*, 28 November 1900, 7; *Argus*, 28 February 1903, 15.

⁹ *Western Mail*, 23 January 1904, 39.

Melbourne's Eastern Market; or even from dedicated shops in popular city thoroughfares.¹⁰ The practice's fashionability meant fortune-tellers were also frequently invited to demonstrate their skills at both charity fund-raisers and private parties, with newspapers declaring by the early 1900s that it had become a diversion that no social rout was considered complete without.¹¹ On at least one occasion a fortune-telling side-show was even offered to guests at a celebration hosted in the home of a local magistrate.¹²

Yet despite the preponderance of fortune-tellers and the open manner in which they seemingly conducted their business, purporting to tell the future was at this time an illegal act. During the nineteenth century though, it seems to have been seldom prosecuted in Australia. Even with the growing number of practitioners in the early 1900s, between 1900 and 1918 local newspapers reported only 247 prosecutions of fortune-tellers across Australia. Most of these cases occurred as part of concentrated spates of prosecutions that were launched in response to media criticism over police inaction against the trade. The practice's illegal status was inherited from English legislation that coupled fortune-telling with witchcraft as a nuisance to the community under vagrancy laws.¹³ Fortune-telling's association with occultism persisted, with early-twentieth-century fortune-tellers often dubbed modern Witches of Endor in newspaper reports.¹⁴ The outcry against fortune-telling however, was not based on religious objections. Fortune-telling was even regularly featured at church fetes, although on these occasions amateurs from the congregation rather than professionals appear to have been employed.¹⁵ Even when religious ministers did occasionally speak out against the dangers

¹⁰ Andrew Brown-May, *Melbourne Street Life*, Kew: Australian Scholarly/Arcadia; Museum Victoria, 1998, p55-56.

¹¹ *Daily News*, 10 March 1900, 3; *Capricornian*, 27 July 1901, 6; *Bunbury Herald*, 17 June 1911, 9; *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, Friday 16 January 1903, 2; *Horsham Times*, 23 February 1900, 4; *Brisbane Courier*, 4 April 1900, 9; *Gippsland Times*, 11 June 1900, 3; *Brisbane Courier*, 8 October 1900, 3; *Brisbane Courier*, 7 December 1900, 6; *Mercury*, 17 December 1900, 3; *Coburg Leader*, 2 March 1901, 1; *Mildura Cultivator*, 18 May 1901, 6; *Register*, 21 October 1901, 4; *Register*, 30 January 1902, 4; *Brisbane Courier*, 16 May 1902, 6; *Morning Bulletin*, 26 September 1903, 6; *Examiner*, 14 June 1906, 6; *Singleton Argus*, 11 June 1907, 2

¹² *Bunbury Herald*, 13 February 1900, 3.

¹³ Susanne Elizabeth Davies, 'Vagrancy and the Victorians: The Social Construction of the Vagrant in Melbourne, 1880-1907' (PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 1990), 123.

¹⁴ *Advertiser*, 31 July 1902, 5; *Sunday Times*, 18 January 1903, 4.

¹⁵ *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, 16 January 1903, 2; *Western Mail*, 23 February 1907, 38; *Western Australian*, 13 November 1900, 4; *Morning Bulletin*, 6 December 1900, 6; *Mercury*, 4 February 1902, 4; *Queanbeyan Age*, 15 March 1902, 3; *Healesville and Yarra Glenn Guardian*, 20 December 1902, 4; *Western Australian*, 16 April 1903, 3; *Morning Post*, 15 January 1904, 2.

of placing too much credence in the predictions of modern prophets, their warnings appear to have been far more temperate than those of the media reporting them.¹⁶

The media's disapproval of fortune-telling did not spring from religious or superstitious grounds. Fortune-telling was instead opposed as an outrage to modern sceptical sensibilities.¹⁷ The divination craze was ridiculed as an anachronism, one paper commenting contemptuously that fortune-tellers were doing pretty well in the 'age of reason'.¹⁸ The following year another suggested that one would imagine from the preponderance of soothsayers that Australia was 'living in the Middle Ages, instead of Anno Domini 1903'.¹⁹ While fortune-telling was thus often discussed as a subject of humour,²⁰ the foolishness it betrayed was also seen more seriously as a blot on the national character. In 1901 the *Fitzroy City Press* declared that hitherto society had been 'too much inclined to sneer' at fortune-telling, but that the time had come when new legislation was needed to protect the 'credulous public...or we shall soon become a laughing-stock'.²¹ In a letter to the *Argus* in 1907 signed 'A Citizen', the writer similarly denounced fortune-telling, asserting that 'In an enlightened country, which provides free education to all, this humbug should be put a stop to. We are past the dark ages.'²² Letters in agreement quickly followed.²³ Other papers concurred that new legislation against fortune-telling was needed not to punish 'such people as our forefathers did, for an offence akin to witchcraft' or out of fear of 'incurring the wrath of righteous God', but to affirm Australia's position as a forward-thinking nation.²⁴ In framing it as a rational rather than moral issue the prosecution of fortune-tellers was even likened to other progressive measures designed to ensure community well-being, such as legislation enforcing proper sanitation or compelling parents to

¹⁶ *North Western Advocate and the Emu Bay Times*, 3 December 1904, 3; *Mercury*, 11 March 1903, 8.

¹⁷ *Advertiser*, 31 July 1902, 5.

¹⁸ *West Gippsland Gazette*, 3 June 1902, 6

¹⁹ *Examiner*, 23 May 1903, 7.

²⁰ *Broadford Courier and Reedy Creek Times*, 5 January 1900, 6; *Queenslander*, 12 May 1900, 884; *Western Australian*, 10 June 1900, 12; *Warwick Argus*, 23 June 1900, 4; *Daily News*, 29 June 1900, 3; *Capricornian*, 18 August 1900, 8; *Warwick Examiner and Times*, 1 September 1900, 3; *Broadford Courier and Reedy Creek Times*, 28 December 1900, 6; *Queenslander*, 16 November 1901, 938; *Camperdown Chronicle*, 29 November 1904, 6; *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 11 April 1906, 69; *Queenslander*, 7 March 1908, 47; *Queenslander*, 27 August 1910, 47.

²¹ *Fitzroy City Press*, 25 January 1901, 3.

²² *Argus*, 29 January 1907, 8.

²³ *Argus*, 30 January 1907, 10; 31 January 1907, 10.

²⁴ *Daily News*, 24 May 1900, 4

vaccinate their children.²⁵ Just as with these laws, legal action against fortune-tellers was portrayed as necessary in order to protect individuals in society whose ignorance was believed to place them at risk.

Chief among those apparently in need of protection were women, who reputedly comprised the vast bulk of the fortune-teller's clientele. Faith Wigzell states that in Russia by the turn of the century fortune-telling 'was viewed as a demonstration of female empty-headedness and illogicality', a finding that could be equally applied to Australia.²⁶ Australian newspapers pronounced the main 'victims' of fortune-tellers to be 'simple women', 'weak-minded women' or 'members of the weaker sex'.²⁷ The association between women and fortune-telling not only perpetuated belief in female irrationality, but reinforced fortune-telling's status as a quaint custom, at odds with the logic and reason of western society. Men, as the cultural and intellectual leaders of this society, were urged to take responsibility for stamping out the trade, with calls for strengthened legislation against fortune-telling taking on a paternalistic quality as the male establishment was said to have a duty to protect women from themselves.²⁸ At the same time, female interest in fortune-telling was used to re-affirm male intellectual superiority in a period when it was increasingly called into question by the advent of first-wave feminism. In 1902 the *Queenslander* thus snidely ridiculed the women's movement by declaring that 'In an age when we are perpetually being reminded of the advance of women from a social and economic point of view, it fills the observer with amazement to find that women in this era of common sense can be so eminently foolish.... as to consult the impostors who make their living by fortune-telling'.²⁹ Even 'Comrade Mary', the female columnist for the *Worker*, agreed that the popularity of fortune-telling was evidence that 'for centuries feeling has been cultivated in women at the expense of reason', although she used this argument to advocate women's education.³⁰

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Faith Wigzell, *Reading Russian Fortunes: Print Culture, Gender, and Divination in Russia from 1765*, Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 5.

²⁷ *Examiner*, 23 May 1903, 7; *Clarence and Richmond Examiner*, 1 November 1904, 4

²⁸ *Argus*, 24 November 1909, 7.

²⁹ *Queenslander*, 5 April 1902, 757.

³⁰ *Worker*, 5 April 1902, 10.

Other supposed female characteristics were also believed to make women ‘easy prey’ for fortune-tellers.³¹ Seeking knowledge of the future was said to be an extension of the ‘natural curiosity inherent to the female mind’ equally evident in women’s penchant for gossiping, another condemned female pastime.³² Physiological rationales for female inferiority were also called upon to explain this curiosity, with it argued that an obsession with the future was a symptom of women’s ‘neurotic impulses’.³³ Fortune-tellers were moreover said to enjoy greater success with women due to their inability to keep silent or control their emotions, which provided the psychics with more informational cues to build a reading upon.³⁴ Women’s ‘romantic turn of mind’ was also labelled an influential factor in divination’s popularity, and single girls followed by unhappily married women were considered the fortune-teller’s major customers.³⁵ Sometimes though, women’s reasons for recourse to divination were anything but romantic. Through the early twentieth century a number of fortune-tellers in Australian cities were discovered providing clients with contraceptive information, acting as agents for abortionists or themselves performing such operations.³⁶ Local papers averred that the provision of such services was a natural segue for fortune-tellers whose counsel was sought both by single girls who ‘got into trouble’, and married women who hoped that the future would not include more children.³⁷ The association of fortune-telling with abortion, which was present in other countries as well as Australia, also suggests the continuance of earlier traditions in which divination overlapped with female healing and midwifery.³⁸ However, given Australia’s fears of ‘race-suicide’ in the early twentieth century, the connection between fortune-telling and women limiting their own

³¹ *Advertiser*, 31 July 1902, 5.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Clipper*, 30 June 1900, 3.

³⁴ *Warwick Examiner and Times*, 15 November 1915, 1.

³⁵ *Examiner*, 23 May 1903, 7; *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 6 January 1900, 56; *Clipper*, 26 March 1904, 4.

³⁶ Frank Bongiorno, *The Sex Lives of Australians: A History*, Collingwood: Black Inc., 2012, 71; Lyn Finch and Jon Stratton, “The Australian Working Class and the Practice of Abortion 1880-1939,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 12, no. 23 (1988): 57; Letter re Madame Le Grin, 11 January 1917, Unit 595, VPRS 897/P0, Public Records Office of Victoria (hereafter PROV).

³⁷ *Clipper*, 30 June 1900, 3; *Barrier Miner*, 9 November 1904, 4; *Argus*, 3 July 1901, 7.

³⁸ Edwin M. Hale, *The Great Crime of the Nineteenth Century*, Chicago: C. S. Halsey, 1867, 17; Willem De Blecourt and Cornelia Osborne, “Women’s Medicine, Women’s Culture: Abortion and Fortune-Telling in Early Twentieth-Century Germany and the Netherlands,” *Medical History* 43, no. 3 (1999): 376-92.

fertility tended to heighten perceptions of the practice as a threat to both male-dominated society and the country's future as a British nation.

The viewpoint that fortune-telling could have darker consequences than just the defrauding of gullible females encouraged the media's vitriol and the periodic crack-downs on fortune-tellers by police. However, as with other areas of crime involving women,³⁹ the occurrence of fortune-telling within private female realms presented problems to the male police force. Policemen ordered to investigate clairvoyants reported difficulties amassing evidence against them as the trade's preponderantly female clientele meant fortune-tellers were instantly suspicious of men presenting themselves as customers, with some even taking the precaution of declaring their services were for women only.⁴⁰ (The willingness of practitioners to relinquish potential revenue intimates men probably did comprise a relatively small part of their clientele, although the ridiculing of fortune-telling as a female past-time may have acted as a self-fulfilling prophecy by discouraging male participation.) As a result, the police often resorted to employing women as enquiry agents to gather the necessary testimony in the early 1900s, while the prosecution of fortune-tellers was a significant part of the duties of the first policewomen introduced in various Australian states during World War One.⁴¹ Actual clients themselves were of little help, with the *Advertiser* lamenting that 'weak-minded women' could not be persuaded 'to give evidence in a court which would be of any value, because many times when put to the test they have declared that there was no deception'.⁴²

While most Australian women, as Andrew Davies argues in respect to women in England,⁴³ probably treated a visit to a fortune-teller as a form of entertainment, newspapers argued that it was women's implicit belief in the fortune-teller's predictions that made the practice dangerous.⁴⁴

Referring to the fortune-telling's female customer base, one paper thus jeered:

³⁹ Judith A. Allen, *Sex and Secrets: Crimes Involving Australian Women since 1880*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1990, 20.

⁴⁰ Detective Sergeant Power re Fortune tellers, 5 June 1917, Item 318941, Series 16855, Queensland State Archives (hereafter QSA); Police report re fortune tellers, 11 February 1907, Unit 1037, VPRS 3992/P0, PROV.

⁴¹ Vince Kelly, *Rugged Angel: The Amazing Career of Policewoman Lillian Armfield*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1961, 196-197; Alison Alexander with Prue Torney-Parlicki, *A Wealth of Women: Australian Women's Lives from 1788 to the Present*, Sydney: Duffy and Snellgrove, 2001, 103.

⁴² *Advertiser*, 22 March 1907, 4.

⁴³ Andrew Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty: Working-Class Culture in Salford and Manchester, 1900-1939*, Buckingham; Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1992, 80-81.

⁴⁴ *Sunday Times*, 17 March 1909, 4.

They will tell you that they do not believe in the predictions made to them, and that they go to the seers only for amusement; but all the same they do believe. What a satire on our civilisation is this superstition.⁴⁵

Faith in the advice of fortune-tellers was not only said to make a mockery of modern Australia, but to encourage women to ruin their lives by making poor financial decisions, breaking off happy engagements or cutting friendships.⁴⁶ This perspective was given credence by a number of reports in the early twentieth century where suicides were attributed to despondency over bad news related by fortune-tellers.⁴⁷ In 1902, for example, a 21-year-old girl in North Sydney was alleged to have committed suicide after a fortune-teller predicted she would one day do so.⁴⁸

Accounts of homes breaking up due to revelations by fortune-tellers of male infidelity were particularly common.⁴⁹ One policeman was quoted as stating that the fortune-teller did inconceivable harm by ruining men's domestic peace through playing upon the feelings of 'credulous and hysterical women'.⁵⁰ This idea took hold to such an extent that in a number of instances where women sought separation or divorce from their husbands the men belittled the action against them in court by claiming their wives had visited fortune-tellers.⁵¹ In 1907 Ethel Brown's husband thus refuted allegations that he had been violent towards her, including on one occasion due to her determination to exercise her newly-won right to vote in the Federal elections, by asserting that all his matrimonial troubles resulted from interference from his wife's mother and fortune-teller.⁵² Allegations that consultations with fortune-tellers were used by women in reaching important decisions about their personal lives may hint that fortune-tellers played a vital role in this period as emotional counselors.⁵³ The media though leapt upon such stories as fresh evidence that the eradication of fortune-telling was

⁴⁵ *Clarence and Richmond Examiner*, 2 July 1904, 4.

⁴⁶ *Register*, 21 May 1901, 6.

⁴⁷ *Advertiser*, 18 May 1901, 6; *Advertiser*, 10 June 1904, 5; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 October 1904, 7.

⁴⁸ *Mercury*, 23 August 1902, 6.

⁴⁹ *Advertiser*, 31 July 1902, 5; *Sunday Times*, 29 August 1915, 14.

⁵⁰ *Barrier Miner*, 11 May 1912, 5.

⁵¹ *Advertiser*, 18 June 1903, 6; *Windsor and Richmond Gazette*, 13 January 1900, 8; *Argus*, 11 December 1903, 5; *Clarence and Richmond Examiner*, 27 February 1904, 3; *Argus*, 11 November 1905, 7; *Advertiser*, 22 March 1907, 5; *Queensland Figaro*, 3 November 1904, 6.

⁵² *Advertiser*, 22 March 1907, 5.

⁵³ De Blecourt and Osborne, "Women's Medicine, Women's Culture," 390.

needed in order to preserve Australia's family values, with the *Worker* avowing that 'All fortune-tellers should be locked up until women outgrow superstition'.⁵⁴

The construction of fortune-telling as both inane and dangerous was furthered by its association more particularly with women of the working classes.⁵⁵ The partiality of working women to such amusements was again deemed especially hazardous as among such 'uneducated and backward minds...the glib prophecies of charlatans are received as gospel'.⁵⁶ A typical joke related by the *Queenslander* in 1902 had a servant girl quit her position in faith that the fortune-teller's prediction she would marry money would soon be fulfilled.⁵⁷ While this anecdote was intended as mere humour, it represented an underlying belief that women of the lower orders risked ruining their lives by visits to clairvoyants.⁵⁸ If nothing else, it was claimed that many 'spend much more than they can afford in the silly endeavor to peep into the future'.⁵⁹ In fact a visit to the fortune-teller was no more expensive than other working-class entertainments, with some practitioners even introducing a sliding scale of charges in order to broaden their appeal to the widest range of customers.⁶⁰ Some working-class housewives also combined their visits with mundane household tasks by shelling peas (an activity that Clare Wright notes was also performed by working women during excursions to pubs) while waiting with friends to have their fortunes told.⁶¹ Yet newspapers continued to disparage divination as inconsistent with women's wifely duties, a view echoed in court hearings involving marital conflicts.⁶² One woman's petition for maintenance from her husband was thus dismissed after he alleged that when they lived together she spent his money on visits to fortune-tellers;⁶³ another woman seeking to divorce her husband on grounds of drunkenness and cruelty was told she was partly to blame for the marriage's breakup for going out to consult mediums rather than staying at home.⁶⁴

⁵⁴ *Worker*, 4 July 1903, 6.

⁵⁵ George R. Sims, *Living London: Its Work and Its Play, Its Humour and Its Pathos, Its Sights and Its Scenes*, London: Cassell, 1902, 329-330.

⁵⁶ *Western Mail*, 25 May 1901, 65.

⁵⁷ *Queenslander*, 18 October 1902, 856

⁵⁸ *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, 7 March 1903, 2; *Mercury*, 6 June 1903, 6.

⁵⁹ *Morning Bulletin*, 28 February 1907, 4.

⁶⁰ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 October 1909, 6.

⁶¹ *Malvern Standard*, 27 November 1915, 3; Clare Wright, "'Doing the Beans': Women, Community and Drinking in the Ladies Lounge, 1925-1975," *Journal of Australian Studies* no. 76 (2003): 12.

⁶² *Sunday Times*, 29 August 1915, 14.

⁶³ *Western Mail*, 22 November 1912, 21.

⁶⁴ *Argus*, 11 December 1903, 5.

Fortune-telling therefore became another of a number of working-class recreations whose gendered construction during the early twentieth century reinforced the ideal of a male breadwinner in full control of the household income, and female homemakers with little right or need for leisure outside the domestic realm.⁶⁵

In many ways fortune-telling resembled drinking and gambling in its coding as a frivolous working-class pursuit, or what Richard Waterhouse refers to as an ‘enjoyable rather than educational experience’.⁶⁶ Unsurprisingly, working-class women’s participation in it therefore appears to have been policed not only by magistrates and the media, but by middle-class women, with the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union joining in denunciations of the practice.⁶⁷ However, while Australian newspapers continued to define fortune-telling as a largely working-class activity, they also voiced fears that the ‘craze’ was increasingly getting hold of women of the upper classes. For years colonial etiquette guides had reinforced the inherent foolishness of fortune-telling by warning middle-class women that it was a vulgar practice only suitable as a game at children’s parties.⁶⁸ By the early 1900s though, it became a standard feature at affairs given by notable social hostesses.⁶⁹ Even more troublingly, it was reported that ‘wealthy women and those of high social standing’ were seeking out private consultations with mediums.⁷⁰ In some cases this further increased the difficulty of shutting down fortune-tellers, as police were loath to prosecute practitioners whose clientele included individuals of some social influence.⁷¹ In 1901 the *Broadford Courier* thus bemoaned that the ‘superstition we deplore among the lower classes... grows steadily and rapidly, among the educated

⁶⁵ Richard Waterhouse, *Private Pleasures, Public Leisure: A History of Australian Popular Culture since 1788*, South Melbourne: Longman, 1995, 62.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

⁶⁷ *Mercury*, 11 March 1903, 8.

⁶⁸ D. E. McConnell, *Australian Etiquette, or, the Rules and Usages of Best Society in the Australasian Colonies, Together with Their Sports, Pastimes, Games and Amusements*, Sydney: D.E. McConnell, 1885, 574.

⁶⁹ *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 4 May 1901, 46; *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 8 June 1901, 46; *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 15 June 1901, 46; *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 7 September 1901, 44; *Queensland Figaro*, 19 September 1901, 7; *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 12 October 1901, 44; *Brisbane Courier*, 13 February 1903, 7; *Brisbane Courier*, 6 April 1904, 6; *Brisbane Courier*, 23 October 1906, 7; *Queensland Figaro*, 7 March 1907, 7; *Western Champion and General Advertiser for the Central-Western*, 10 April 1909, 7.

⁷⁰ *Register*, 29 April 1901, 4; *Advertiser*, 31 July 1902, 5.

⁷¹ Report re J Isherwood, magnetic healer and psychic medium, 14 April 1914, Item 318941, Series 16855, QSA.

classes'.⁷² Other papers likewise commented that the sight of 'educated women' being made the dupes of 'illiterate charlatans' produced especial revulsion.⁷³ Fortune-telling's popularity was perhaps so disturbing because it was seen to represent the triumph of ignorance over progress.

This perception was furthered by the gender and class positioning of the stereotypical fortune-teller in media accounts. Newspapers mocked the credulity of those who put their faith in the generally female fortune-teller, whose low status was revealed by her unkempt appearance, and whose speech invariably betrayed 'signs of having had her education neglected'.⁷⁴ The success achieved by such individuals provoked particular viciousness in the case of Mary Scales, a Sydney fortune-teller who was pursued all the way to the High Court as the police attempted to secure her conviction.⁷⁵ The fact that Scales was illiterate made the press all the more incensed that such a woman was able to escape the law's clutches while her business continued to command prime premises in the King Street arcade.⁷⁶ The only thing needed to succeed as a fortune-teller was 'plenty of audacity' commented one paper, adding that 'the fact that she was a washerwoman yesterday will not debar the fool crowd from believing she is a sorceress to-day'.⁷⁷ Stories of retired laundresses making fortunes after going into fortune-telling were a staple of articles on the practice.⁷⁸ While such accounts were undoubtedly exaggerations, it would seem that fortune-telling was an important form of penny-capitalism for working-class women.⁷⁹ Remuneration varied, but the average charge for a reading seems to have been two shillings sixpence.⁸⁰ Working at these rates, it was claimed that a fortune-teller was able to clear three to five pounds a week, or more than twice the wages earned by a general servant.⁸¹ Those whose reputations led them to be engaged for private appearances at parties, or for public performances during tours of Australian cities, were able to command even higher

⁷² *Broadford Courier*, 20 September 1901, 6.

⁷³ *Morning Bulletin*, 28 February 1907, 4.

⁷⁴ *Argus*, 28 November 1900, 7; *Examiner*, 23 May 1903, 7.

⁷⁵ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 March 1903, 11.

⁷⁶ *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, 7 March 1903, 2.

⁷⁷ *Traralgon Record*, 22 February 1907, 4.

⁷⁸ *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, 16 January 1903, 2; *Evelyn Observer and Bourke East Record*, 9 January 1903, 4.

⁷⁹ Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty*, 79-80.

⁸⁰ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 February 1905, 8.

⁸¹ *Queensland Figaro*, 17 September 1903, 16.

rewards.⁸² At the same time, it required very little outlay from practitioners themselves, and could be worked simply from women's own homes.

This made fortune-telling a perfect business opportunity for women. As a result, despite the media's representations, it was embraced by a number of women of varying backgrounds compelled to earn or supplement their incomes. Lower-middle-class women sometimes used it as a sideline to their main occupation as dress-makers or tea-room operators, sourcing their clientele from these businesses.⁸³ Middle-class women who fell on hard times are also recorded taking up the calling as one of the few occupations available to them that – if practised from home among female friends – would not necessarily entail surrendering their class position.⁸⁴ Its respectability was still questioned by a female journalist in 1903, however, who helpfully pointed out a number of more 'genteel' alternatives to struggling women, such as acting as dog-walkers or 'caring for birds of fashionable ladies'.⁸⁵ Others were more sympathetic though to the harsh realities that often lay behind women adopting the profession, with South Australia's Police Commissioner acknowledging in 1902 that many fortune-tellers were in fact 'hard-working widows...[who] employed fortune-telling as a means to support their families'.⁸⁶ Police investigations also reveal that fortune-telling frequently involved deserted wives and women living apart from their husbands, who were able to combine the practice with care for their children more easily than other occupations would allow.⁸⁷ Such women were usually treated leniently when brought before magistrates, either being discharged with a warning or imprisoned until the rising of the court.⁸⁸ The overall perception of fortune-telling as a female trade nevertheless aided in its vilification, with practitioners demonised as 'harpies' who made an 'easy living' off their 'sister-women'.⁸⁹

⁸² *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, 16 January 1903, 2.

⁸³ *Daily News*, 9 May 1916, 8; *Cairns Post*, 22 May 1912, 8; *Barrier Miner*, 11 May 1912, 5; *Mercury*, 16 April 1918, 8.

⁸⁴ Report on inquiries into character of Nellie Lord, 5 July 1912, Item 318941, Series 16855, QSA.

⁸⁵ *Fitzroy City Press*, 5 June 1903, 3.

⁸⁶ *Advertiser*, 31 July 1902, 5; *Argus*, 6 March 1903, 7.

⁸⁷ *Inquirer and Commercial News*, 18 January 1901, 7; Report re Madame Mora's complaint of police harassment, 28 April 1914, Item 318941, Series 16855, QSA; Inquiry by Mrs A. E. Church, 3 April 1912, Item 318941, Series 16855, QSA.

⁸⁸ *Singleton Argus*, 21 March 1907, 1; *Mercury*, 14 August 1918, 3.

⁸⁹ *Examiner*, 30 March 1907, 9.

Yet while fortune-telling was coded as a female activity and therefore as the antithesis of the masculine culture of scientific empiricism, there were men involved in the practice. Of the 203 individuals prosecuted for fortune-telling in newspaper reports between 1900 and 1918 (including some prosecuted on more than one occasion), 44 (18 per cent) were men. However, several of these men were prosecuted as a result of their wives' involvement in the trade, revealing that fortune-telling was also used by married women as a supplement to the family income.⁹⁰ Some women were so successful that their husbands would leave their occupations to assist them by minding the front door and making appointments, such as in the case of Mary Scales and her husband George.⁹¹ Male involvement in fortune-telling thus did not counter the gendered nature of the practice, but rather was seen to feminise those who acted as adjuncts to their wives. Men who themselves acted as fortune-tellers were also deemed at odds with traditional masculinity, with male clairvoyants derided as 'loafers' unwilling to shoulder the 'honest work' undertaken by 'real men'.⁹² Male fortune-tellers were also maligned as having sexual designs on their largely female clientele, with one man driven out of Brisbane in 1914 after he allegedly made 'immoral advances' to one of his customers.⁹³ Even such sexual activity was seen as effeminate due to the underhand means with which it was pursued, and the engagement of a limited number of men in fortune-telling thus helped rather than hindered the gendered construction of the practice.

Significantly, however, not all men who practised divinatory activities were disparaged or ridiculed by Australia's popular press during this period. The rhetoric of Tasmania's *Clipper* in 1900 points clearly to the gender and class basis of objections to the trade:

As to palmistry, if some sane and sensible believer, with a decent education and a character above suspicion, opened shop and proposed to read his clients' character from his clients' palms, in a judicial and humble (that is scientific) spirit, The Clipper would not object. It is when the bogus palmist comes along, with no education and no apparent principles, and proceeds to tell the silly servant girl that she's out of her sphere and will marry Lord Ton by and by...that The Clipper rises to make its protest, in the name of humanity and civilisation.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ *Barrier Miner*, 2 September 1909, 2; *Argus*, 14 January 1909, 6; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 January 1909, 8.

⁹¹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 March 1903, 11.

⁹² *Argus*, 24 February 1909, 7; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 February 1909, 7.

⁹³ Report re J Isherwood, magnetic healer and psychic medium, 14 April 1914, Series 16855, Item 318941, QSA.

⁹⁴ *Clipper*, 30 June 1900, 3.

The problem with fortune-telling was its opposition to science, which was based on the presumption that scientific thought was the realm of men, particularly men of a certain class. Men who claimed to use science to conduct readings by palmistry or phrenology to give information about a person's character and background, rather than their future, thus earned praise rather than censure. A tour by Dr Frederic Bell of Australian towns in 1900 was well-received by the press, with the *Brisbane Courier* declaring that Bell discussed palmistry 'as a science and not as a fortune-telling jumble' during his lecture at the School of Arts Hall, after which 'the hands of several ladies and gentlemen were examined with satisfactory results'.⁹⁵ The lecture series of Mr C. Ketteringham met with similar approbation in 1906, with one paper endorsing the tour with the comment that there was 'something real and reliable in the art of palmistry, scientifically practised'.⁹⁶ The distinction between such scientific practices and fortune-telling led a number of women to attempt to invoke it as a defence during trials by denying they were fortune-tellers, and claiming instead that they had likewise made a study of disciplines that enabled them to give readings of their customers' characters.⁹⁷ The fact that such assertions were accorded little credence by either magistrates or the press further reveals the gendered nature of the construction of fortune-telling as a throwback in human development.

Fortune-telling was also seen as regressive due to its racial associations. At the time the practice was commonly associated in the national imagination with gypsies, groups of whom travelled through rural Australia during the early twentieth century giving readings and selling other services and wares.⁹⁸ Their arrival was often a subject of both excitement and fear, some visiting gypsy camps to embrace the diversion their presence provided, while others visited in order to perpetrate racial violence.⁹⁹ Fortune-telling was also associated more generally with Orientalism.¹⁰⁰ While this led to its derision in the media as a superstition of less advanced cultures, it was also recognised that this

⁹⁵ *Brisbane Courier*, 15 June 1900, 6.

⁹⁶ *Barrier Miner*, 5 February 1906, 2.

⁹⁷ *Advertiser*, 13 June 1913, 14; *Examiner*, 21 August 1903, 6; *West Australian*, 13 February 1914, 8; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 January 1909, 3.

⁹⁸ Kate Wright, *Your Neighbours: The Gypsies in Australia*, Burleigh: Zeus Publications, 2011, 64-72.

⁹⁹ *Horsham Times*, 16 March 1900, 2; *Advertiser*, 10 March 1902, 3; *Healesville and Yarra Glen Guardian*, 6 July 1900, 2; *Coburg Leader*, 26 October 1901, 1; *Euroa Advertiser*, 6 December 1901, 18; *Warwick Argus*, 24 December 1901, 3; *Dubbo Liberal and Macquarie Advocate*, 21 May 1902, 3; *Windsor and Richmond Gazette*, 19 July 1902, 3. W. Ross Johnston, *The Long Blue Line: A History of the Queensland Police*, Brisbane: Boolarong Publications, 1992, 170.

¹⁰⁰ *Evelyn Observer and South East Bourke Record*, 18 January 1901, 3.

was part of fortune-telling's glamour and appeal. Many fortune-tellers appropriated the mysticism associated with exoticism as part of their self-promotion, with female fortune-tellers almost invariably adopting the title 'Madame' or 'Signora' followed by a foreign-sounding pseudonym.¹⁰¹ Others appeared before clients garbed in some 'strange Eastern gown', or claimed that they were aided in their work by the wisdom of Indian spirit guides.¹⁰² While these allusions to exotic ethnicity were usually for show, Australian newspapers also record the existence of several 'mahogany-tinted seeresses' of Jewish or mixed-race extraction.¹⁰³ Such reports were even more common in relation to male fortune-tellers, who were frequently said to be of the 'Chinaman, Hindoo or Assyrian' caste.¹⁰⁴ Of the 44 men charged with fortune-telling, 12 (27 per cent) appear to have been from non-European backgrounds. The opening fortune-telling was seen to give these men to interactions with Anglo-Australian women stimulated fears of white slavery, another popular concern of the period. During the separate prosecutions in 1903 of two Melbourne fortune-tellers, Meyer Singh and Wilton Gonsalvez, the police thus drew special attention to the presence of teenage girls among their clientele, which may have influenced the imposition of especially high fines in both cases.¹⁰⁵ The racial associations of fortune-telling meant its eradication not only became linked to the protection of white women, but white culture. A letter to the *Mercury* in 1916 calling for Hobart to follow the mainland's lead in putting down the clairvoyant business was thus telling signed 'White Australia'.¹⁰⁶

The combined force of the concerns expressed in newspapers from 1900 eventually prompted a number of police raids on fortune-tellers in which undercover operatives posed as clients to gather evidence against practitioners. The first of these crackdowns occurred in 1903, and involved multiple prosecutions in Sydney, Melbourne, Hobart and Perth. That fortune-telling had previously gone largely unprosecuted was clear from the evidence of many of the individuals brought to court. Melbourne fortune-teller Annie Paul claimed she had been carrying on her business for twenty-four

¹⁰¹ *Examiner*, 23 May 1903, 7

¹⁰² *Argus*, 5 October 1901, 6; *Coburg Leader*, 20 February 1909, 4; *Malvern Standard*, 4 December 1915, 5,

¹⁰³ *Morning Bulletin*, 29 March 1902, 6; *Brisbane Courier*, 15 March 1907, 4; *Traralgon Record*, 22 February 1907, 4.

¹⁰⁴ *Brisbane Courier*, 10 October 1901, 7.

¹⁰⁵ *Argus*, 28 February 1903, 15; *Argus*, 7 March 1903, 19.

¹⁰⁶ *Mercury*, 25 January 1916, 6,

years with ‘no notion she was doing wrong’, while 69-year-old Ellen Vyner stated that she had been practising for twenty years without interference from the police.¹⁰⁷ However, the cultural anxieties of the early twentieth century meant further crackdowns followed, particularly in 1907, 1909 and most significantly during the war years, especially 1917. Legislators were also involved in the process of re-framing fortune-telling more definitively as an unlawful practice. Initially fortune-tellers were prosecuted in most states through the inheritance of English legislation in the form of *Act 5 George IV*, chapter 83. The reliance of police on archaic British law was mooted by a number of individuals as a defence against the charges against them on the grounds the law was out-of-date or did not apply locally.¹⁰⁸ In the 1907 case against Mary Scales the High Court ruled that, in regards to New South Wales at least, it would be a serious anomaly to declare that the provision in question had been incorporated into the State’s law when for the past seventy-five years it had clearly never occurred to anyone that it was in force.¹⁰⁹ This was remedied as the period saw the strengthening of laws and penalties against fortune-telling across various states, including Queensland (1901), Victoria (1907), New South Wales (1908), South Australia (1916) and Tasmania (1917). The Federal Government even became involved in efforts to suppress fortune-telling with the 1901 *Post and Telegraph Act*, which made it an offence to carry on a fortune-telling business by mail.¹¹⁰ This widespread legislative activity suggests that while fortune-telling as a criminal practice may have been a state matter, it had also come to be seen as an important national issue in terms of delegitimising the culture of those who did not embody Australia’s preferred citizen group, namely educated, white males.

Given the connection between efforts to eradicate fortune-telling and attempts to solidify Australia’s national identity, it is perhaps not surprising that the advent of World War One, seen by many as Australia’s defining moment, gave rise to unprecedented police activity against the trade. Directives for a nation-wide crackdown from the Prime Minister’s own office meant that of the 247 prosecutions from 1900 until the end of the war, 83 (34 per cent) occurred in 1917 alone as women desperate for reassurances about relatives fighting overseas flocked to fortune-tellers in even greater

¹⁰⁷ *Argus*, 2 March 1903, 5.

¹⁰⁸ *Examiner*, 7 August 1903, 6.

¹⁰⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 December 1907, 5.

¹¹⁰ *Argus*, 13 June 1901, 7.

numbers.¹¹¹ Fortune-tellers were further demonised as the greed of these ‘grasping harridans’ and ‘foreign charlatans’ was contrasted with the selfless sacrifice of the nation’s armed forces and the ‘true women’ awaiting them at home.¹¹² Clairvoyants were even accused of actively campaigning against the national interest by dissuading men from enlisting through prophecies of dark futures.¹¹³ Police found little to substantiate such rumours, and some fortune-tellers attempted to establish their patriotism in court by pointing out that they freely gave their services for charity fundraisers in aid of the war effort.¹¹⁴ Others claimed the attacks against them was tantamount to religious persecution by associating themselves with the burgeoning Spiritualist movement, which enjoyed a better reputation than fortune-telling due to its emphasis on viewing spiritual phenomena from a scientific perspective.¹¹⁵ However, while the growth of spiritualism likely further boosted fortune-telling’s popularity, and the doctrine may have appealed to many fortune-tellers due to its advocacy of class, gender and racial equality, actual Spiritualist organisations sought strongly to disassociate mediumism from other forms of divination.¹¹⁶ The events of the war thus provided for the culmination of early-twentieth-century trends in regards to fortune-telling by augmenting both its pervasiveness and its negative image as the practice’s association with the ‘other’ in terms of national identity and ideals became all the more stark.

In conclusion, the growth of the fortune-telling industry in the early twentieth century saw spates of prosecutions against practitioners and decisions by a number of states to affirm the practice’s criminal status under new laws. Divining the future was treated as ‘a menace and an evil’, and as an embarrassment in the face of the scientific and intellectual advances of the new era. At a

¹¹¹ Circular from the Prime Minister's Office, 30 March 1917, Item 318941, Series 16855, QSA.

¹¹² *Camperdown Chronicle*, 17 February 1916, 6; *North Western Advocate and the Emu Bay Times*, 2 November 1917, 3; *Barrier Miner*, 18 February 1918, 4; *Brisbane Courier*, 8 May 1917, 6.

¹¹³ Anonymous letter to police, 25 April 1917, Item 318941, Series 16855, QSA; Commissioner of Police to The State Organising Secretary, 5 June 1917, Item 318941, Series 16855, QSA.

¹¹⁴ *Brisbane Courier*, 5 September 1914, 6; *Daily News*, 28 November 1914, 7; *Ararat Advertiser*, 19 January 1915, 2; *Advertiser*, 13 December 1915, 8; *Advertiser*, 1 February 1916, 8; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 July 1918, 10; *Brisbane Courier*, 5 September 1914, 6.

¹¹⁵ *The Prahran Telegraph*, 12 May 1917, 5; *Advertiser*, 25 June 1917, 7; *Bathurst Press*, 28 December 1917, 1; Alfred J. Gabay, *Messages from Beyond: Spiritualism and Spiritualists in Melbourne's Golden Age 1870-1890*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2001, 100.

¹¹⁶ *Brisbane Courier*, 1 November 1919, 9; *Geelong Advertiser*, 20 June 1917, 6; Oppenheim, *The Other World*, 28-29; Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Nineteenth Century England*, London: Virago, 1989, 4-5; Amy Lehman, *Victorian Women and the Theatre of Trance: Mediums, Spiritualists and Mesmerists in Performance*, Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2009, 131.

time when Australia was entranced by a vision of itself as a rational, forward-thinking nation of white males, fortune-telling was not only considered a relic of old-fashioned ignorance, but was associated with female credulity, working-class superstitions and incursions by foreign cultures. While the legal crack-down on fortune-tellers was thus seen by some as a triumph of the age of progress, it was clearly based upon backward class, racial and gender prejudices. These laws remained in place into the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.¹¹⁷ While the study of fortune-telling can thus tell us much about Australia's history, some of its most significant revelations relate to how people in the past saw the nation's future. It also points to the importance of understanding concepts such as progress as a gendered, classed and racialised discourse.

¹¹⁷ Lynne Hume, "Witchcraft and the Law in Australia," *Journal of Church and State* 37 (1995): 135-50.