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Underworld

On 23 September 1928, the tabloid newspaper *Truth* established Darlinghurst as Australia's foremost crime spot. Under a headline screaming 'CLEAN UP RAZORHURST!', the paper lamented 'Razorhurst, Gunhurst, Bottlehurst, Dopehurst – it used to be Darlinghurst, one of the finest quarters of a rich and beautiful city; to-day, it is a plague spot, where the spawn of the gutter grow and fatten on official apathy.' *Truth* campaigned for a police crackdown on the neighbourhood across the following year, describing it as 'a miniature Chicago' of organised crime. Journalist Frank Dixon later recalled that the paper's owner, Ezra Norton, had insisted 'all the resources the paper had must be turned to clean up Darlinghurst at any price'. The proximity of criminal elements to respectable citizens particularly concerned the paper, which noted that Darlinghurst's 'human beasts' lived 'cheek by jowl with decent people'.

When thinking about Darlinghurst's history, what probably occurs to many is the dubious reputation it acquired during the interwar period as a centre of crime, prostitution and gang violence. Its years as 'Razorhurst' have lingered in popular imaginings of Darlinghurst through books, television series, films, museum and photography exhibitions, crime-focused walking tours and even a local wine bar named after infamous local madam, Tilly Devine. Popular histories and academic works alike often focus on these sensational crimes rather than more prosaic offending. Yet the latter has much to reveal when it comes to local history and the lives of average residents.

How did ordinary people experience crime in Darlinghurst and what do we know of the histories of some of the area's more notorious denizens? In the 1980s, individuals who had lived or worked in Darlinghurst in the 1920s and 1930s were interviewed about their lives and experiences, pulling back a curtain onto how the area's underworld intersected with the everyday. What sorts of crimes were most common in the interwar period and what does criminal activity reveal about the people and culture of Darlinghurst?

The conditions that produced Darlinghurst's underworld had been building for several decades. Gangs of 'larrikins', a term that first emerged in Australia in the 1870s to describe youthful delinquents whose behaviours ranged from petty nuisances to serious violence, roamed the streets of Darlinghurst from the late nineteenth century. In the early twentieth century, these hooligan subcultures started to transform into more organised criminal networks with the introduction of the 1908 *Police Offences (Amendment) Act*. The Act, as Paul Ashton mentioned in his chapter in this book, increased penalties for street solicitation, encouraging previously independent sex workers into brothels under the protection of crime outfits that could afford to pay off police or raise money for bail or fines. The 1908 Act also strengthened provisions against gambling, ensuring that starting price (SP) betting would remain one of the most consistent income sources for organised crime across coming decades.

Another illegal revenue source, sly-grog selling, greatly expanded following the 1916 *Liquor Act*, which reduced trading hours for licensed hotels by mandating a 6pm closing time. Meanwhile, the First World War increased the number of firearms in circulation, as well as men who knew how to use them, with concerns expressed about growing gun crime in New South Wales from 1919. The 1927 *Pistol Licensing Act* attempted to regulate the

development of this gun culture by introducing mandatory gaol terms for anyone carrying an unlicensed firearm. It was this that led to the 'razor gangs' for which Darlinghurst became known, as criminals carried cut-throat razors instead. The 1920s also marked a turning point in the role of narcotics in organised crime, as possession as well as distribution of drugs like cocaine became a serious offence. In Sydney, this new illegal enterprise has been identified as a key factor in transforming criminal activity from the work of individual offenders to crime syndicates.

Darlinghurst was not alone in being impacted by these developments. It formed part of a ring of inner-Sydney working-class suburbs where pockets of extreme poverty provided an encouragement to crime. Despite the media's portrayal of Darlinghurst as the worst of these neighbourhoods, some present during the interwar years – and later interviewed in the early 1980s by Geoff Weary for oral histories now held by the City of Sydney – dispute such claims. Sydney police officer Ray Blisset, for instance, considered Ultimo and Chippendale the most dangerous area to patrol in that period. Another policeman, Bill Mowbray, recalled Surry Hills as the 'roughest' beat to work. Darlinghurst locals Lee De Leo and Pat Peron likewise remembered the razor gangs operating more in Surry Hills and Redfern. Others recognised the existence of a criminal element in Darlinghurst, but insisted it had been confined to particular locations. Resident Wal Marshall's impression was that except for 'a couple of lanes there, it was quite a respectable crowd of people'. Mrs Kingston, who in the 1920s lived in known vice district Palmer Street, stated that while the street had a 'bad name', this was confined to one end, with the street mainly populated by 'all respectable people, everybody knew one another ... elderly people and ... nice families'.

Insert image 1

John Frederick 'Chow' Hayes, 1930,

Museums of History NSW, NSW Police Forensic Photography Archive, Justice and Police Museum, FP07_0141_003

While some of Darlinghurst's reputation may have been confected by media sensationalism, there was a clear criminal presence visible even to ordinary citizens. Those walking past brothels in locations like Woods and Liverpool lanes would witness crowds of up to a hundred men waiting to go inside. Local boys made a game of watching men by betting on 'how long' they would last before coming out again. Many residents had anecdotes of encounters with the area's criminal celebrities: admiring brothel madam Tilly Devine's clothes while she shopped at Mark Foys department store; being offered a shout of soda water at the corner store by John 'Chow' Hayes, a gangster who operated in Kellett Street; growing up in Riley Street next door to Guido Calletti, a pimp and standover man best remembered today for his tumultuous relationship with beautiful but ill-fated sex worker Nellie Cameron; or simply seeing Frank Green, gunman and Calletti's romantic rival for Cameron's affections, and deciding he was 'a nondescript type, nothing much to look at'.

Some underworld figures were recalled with admiration – a romanticisation perhaps enabled by the passage of time from their crimes. Sly-grog seller Kate Leigh, once labelled the worst woman in Sydney, was later remembered for her charity towards the neighbourhood's poor and unemployed. Upon her death in 1964, even the NSW Deputy Commissioner of Police spoke warmly of Leigh's efforts to deter young offenders from crime. Growing up in Darlinghurst, Bob Bartholomew remembered Leigh always having cake for local children. Bartholomew likewise thought Tilly Devine had been a 'very kind-hearted woman' who was strict with her workers but 'had a good heart'. Police officer Bill Mowbray described how one of Devine's brothels had provided a home to an elderly, bedridden woman discharged from St Vincent's Hospital with nowhere to go; she lived at the

brothel for three years before her death, with the brothel residents paying for her funeral through Darlinghurst undertakers Kinselas. Leigh and Devine may have been recollected fondly partly because their gender meant they were seen as less serious threats, even though both were leaders of Sydney's 1920s underworld. It is also perhaps because they were most closely associated with the victimless offences of sly-grog selling and sex work, even though they also orchestrated robberies, narcotics trafficking and murders of their business rivals.

Insert image 2

Kate Leigh, 1951

Courtesy of NSW State Library, ON 388/Box 069/Item 138

Such gang violence was visible to the local community. Police officer Ray Blissett recalled how busy St Vincent's Hospital was kept by slashings during the razor wars, but it did not necessarily affect residents. Many locals later stated they felt no sense of personal danger as the 'Razor Gang mostly fought amongst themselves' and that 'nobody outside their gang got hurt', and even those who 'used to cut throats for amusement ... sort of kept it within their own crowd.' Mrs Ditchburn stated that not only did the gangs keep 'their misdeeds amongst themselves', but she even 'felt protected by them', recalling how some of Chow Hayes' gang once knocked out a man who had been 'getting very fresh' with her as she walked home.

Journalist Frank Dixon, who covered the Darlinghurst courts for *Truth*, believed that keeping violence confined to other criminals helped maintain a code of silence about such crimes, as other gang members would avenge themselves rather than going to police. It also disincentivised 'civilian' witnesses from coming forward, along with the threat of violence. Such was the case, for instance, in the 1929 shooting of Bernard Dalton in front of a large crowd outside the Strand Hotel in William Street. Frank Green, who allegedly carried out the murder at the behest of Tilly Devine, was unsuccessfully prosecuted for the crime due to witnesses' refusal to testify. Resident Bob Bartholomew later claimed that 150 people saw Green shoot Dalton but their 'lives wouldn't be worth two bob' if they 'squealed'. As an adolescent in Darlinghurst, Bartholomew had been given the impression that a squealer was the 'worst thing in the world'. Even ordinary residents were usually, at best, ambivalent towards police. Lillian Armfield, the first woman appointed to the NSW Police in 1915, recalled the hostility she often encountered from locals, with mobs sometimes forming to prevent her making an arrest. Lee De Leon likewise remembered 'many a time they've [police] been attacked and men have stood around and watched them being attacked and not helped them.'

Insert image 3

Gang leader Tilly (Matilda) Devine in 1935

National Library of Australia, 160635593

Community tolerance towards the local underworld was probably encouraged by the undeniable overlap of Darlinghurst's legitimate and illegitimate economies. The latter helped support the former, as members of the underworld patronised local businesses, from grocers to funeral parlours. Many criminal operators themselves had legitimate businesses as either fronts or sidelines: Guido Calletti ran a fruit stand, while Kate Leigh hired out barrows for selling goods at the city markets. Businesses could also have both legitimate and illegitimate elements. The pub was a classic example. Not only did many become sly-grog shops after hours – to the extent that police officer Bill Mowbray speculated that every second hotel was at the trade, but pubs were also hubs for prostitution, thievery and illegal gambling. The Tradesman's Arms at the corner of Liverpool and Palmer streets, Tilly Devine's favourite

watering hole, was particularly infamous as a crime hotspot. Most importantly, while enterprises such as sex work, SP bookmaking and sly-grog selling were mostly under the control of organised crime by the 1920s, they only existed due to market demand from ordinary individuals for such services. The underworld thus did not overwhelm the lives of Darlinghurst's 'respectable' residents to the degree that moral panic mongers like *Truth* feared, but there was an unmistakable intermingling between them.

Insert image 4

Tradesmans Arms Hotel, corner Liverpool and Palmer St, 1930

Courtesy of the Australian National University Archives, Tooth and Company yellow cards collection, N60-YC-716

Everyday offending

It was not underworld slashings that occupied the most police time and accounted for the highest number of arrests, but rather a raft of offences related to disturbing the public order. The most frequent charge was public drunkenness. Police officer Harry Rasmussen commented that it was not unusual for him to have 'charged over 80 odd drunks' on one Saturday afternoon alone. Public drunkenness was an offence that targeted the working classes, who were more likely to drink in hotels, rather than at home, and walk back afterwards, rather than taking private transport. Discretionary charging further enforced this class bias, as Rasmussen revealed:

You'd see a man, a well dressed man. He'd been out and he was as drunk as a boot ... You'd get a cab and put him in a cab and send him home, but you find another bloke, dirty what's a name down there using foul language and abusive, nasty, everything else like that, you locked him up.

Rasmussen recognised that public order offences, which encompassed a broad range of behaviours that could be interpreted as riotous or offensive, was one of the most powerful tools that the police had for removing individuals perceived as problematic from the streets. Police particularly used such offences to prosecute sex workers. Laura Bartelson, a prostitute living at 7 Burnell Place in 1921, was one. The address was described by *Truth* at the time as 'one of the filthiest hovels' in the area. Bartelson served several stints in Long Bay Gaol across the 1910s and 1920s for offensive behaviour and being idle and disorderly. Major criminals were sometimes also charged with minor offences in the absence of sufficient evidence of more serious activities. As a result, several famous names appear in the police gazettes on public order charges. Frank Green, for example, appeared for using indecent language in Palmer Street in 1925. And that same year his rival Guido Calletti also faced a charge of riotous behaviour.

Property offences were the dominant subject of police gazette reports that mentioned Darlinghurst, with around 32 percent of reports relating to robberies, burglaries or other larcenies, and a further 20 percent concerning property thought either lost or stolen. Interestingly, while men generally predominated as complainants in almost every category of crime report, when it came to reports of property lost or stolen, women were in the majority as complainants. Female complainants comprised 58 percent of such reports, compared to just 31 percent of other property offence reports. Perhaps men were more confident that their items had been stolen, not just lost, or police were more inclined to believe men when they reported potential losses as thefts. Some robberies were suggestive of gang activity, particularly those involving multiple offenders. One such case was a robbery committed upon a Crown Street resident by six men in a lane off Oxford Street in 1920. However, robberies

could also be opportunistic affairs committed by individuals from all walks of life. In 1920, another man reported being robbed in the public lavatory in Taylor Square by four men in military uniform. Robbing men by rifling their trouser pockets while they visited sex workers, a practice known as ‘gingering’, was common in vice districts like Palmer Street. Despite Palmer Street’s dubious reputation, other property offences reported there reveal it to also have been home to ordinary businesses and residents. In 1930 there was a break-in of a tobacco store at the corner of Stanley and Palmer streets. In 1925 a Pathé cinema camera was stolen from 222 Palmer Street, home of budding film producer William Alexander Duncan. Duncan’s house had been on fire at the time and a passer-by took advantage of the distraction to grab a camera placed on the street for safety while the fire was being put out. The 1920s and 1930s saw an increase in burglaries, but this did not necessarily translate into the community feeling unsafe. Mrs Kingston recalled that even during the Depression she regularly left the house unlocked when she went out, as ‘we didn’t have that feeling, we didn’t think anybody was going to come and break in.’

Insert image 5

The neighbourhood – single-storey terrace houses at nos 58–64 Palmer Street in 1913
City of Sydney Archives, A-00036683

Only 6 percent of police gazette reports regarding Darlinghurst concerned offences against the person, belying the area’s violent reputation. Assaults, the most common charge, mainly involved men as both perpetrators and victims, many arising from unsuccessful robberies or altercations with police officers. Gang violence was likely significantly under-reported due to the culture of silence and personal vengeance. The same applied to domestic violence. Not only were NSW Police discouraged from intervening in what was seen as a private matter, but women were reluctant to pursue charges, fearing retaliation or the loss of the family breadwinner at a time when female employment options were limited and poorly paid. This is probably the reason why in 1925 an arrest warrant for wharf labourer William Amass for assaulting his wife Minnie, then living at 12 Darley Street, was quickly cancelled. Prolonged domestic abuse often only attracted public attention when it reached a fatal conclusion, such as the 1915 murder of Sarah Ann Sullivan by her partner Joseph Clayton. Clayton had beaten Sullivan on several occasions while living in her house at Burton and Sherbrooke streets. On the final occasion Sullivan had demanded Clayton leave the house. He returned with a revolver. Clayton was convicted of murder, his death sentence later commuted to life in prison. The conviction for outright murder was unusual at that time. According to historian Judith Allen, only one in ten men charged with killing women during this period in New South Wales were convicted as charged.

Another significant form of offending, responsible for around 19 percent of Darlinghurst’s police gazette notices, were men wanted for wife desertion or failing to pay court-ordered maintenance towards their wives or children. These notices often reveal histories of family violence. In 1915 James McEntee, wanted for non-payment of maintenance for his two children, had broken his wife Bridget’s jaw and nose at their house in Bourke Street four years earlier, precipitating their separation. Some notices point to alcohol abuse as a likely source of marital tension or inability to meet support payments, with several warrants noting being ‘addicted to drink’ as an identifying feature of men wanted for maintenance. Darlinghurst appears in these records not only as the residence of women seeking missed support payments, but also as a place where men were suspected of having disappeared to, its growing collection of boarding houses and flats offering a convenient location for remaining anonymous.

Juvenile offending or 'larrikinism' was also one of the more everyday crime concerns in Darlinghurst. Residents regularly penned letters of complaint written to the town clerk to report having been disturbed by noise or public property damage caused by local children. Adolescents often faced informal forms of policing that did not make it into official reports. William Sarnich, interviewed for the NSW Bicentennial Oral History Project, recalled how boys like him who participated in local street 'gangs' growing up would earn a 'clip around the ear' from police to deter them from future disorderliness. Only 6 percent of reports regarding Darlinghurst in the police gazette mentioned suspects who were less than 20 years of age. Most of these concerned juveniles charged with being an uncontrollable or neglected child. The situations that led to such charges often reveal the class, gender and racial biases of the period. For instance, when 15-year-old Eileen Leigh was found living with a 'half-caste Chinese' man in 1915, it was Leigh's behaviour that was problematised as uncontrollable. In other cases it is hard to determine whether children's living conditions were the result of neglect or simple poverty. Policeman Harry Rasmussen recalled being very affected when he would visit homes in the area, as the children often lacked proper clothing and food because the family 'had nothing'. Such poor starts in life or institutionalisation for juvenile offending sometimes led to continued offending later on. Kate Leigh was sentenced to the Parramatta Reformatory as a neglected child at ten years old; Guido Calletti likewise spent time at the Mittagong Farm Home for Boys. In this way, accounts of 'everyday offending' in some ways cannot be unentangled from Darlinghurst's underworld history, as they reflected the conditions that allowed it to develop.

Darlinghurst

Crime records offer a window into early twentieth-century Darlinghurst, including the suburb's eclectic assortment of inhabitants. Darlinghurst was a suburb peopled not only by the underworld gangster, struggling poor and respectable working classes, but city professionals and even some wealthy elite, mostly living in the more fashionable upper Darlinghurst. This class mix is evident from the occupations of men charged with desertion or failing to pay support: the largest cohort at 32 percent consisted of skilled tradespersons, with 27 percent listed as labourers and another 27 percent engaged in white-collar occupations ranging from salespersons and clerks to managers and professionals (the remainder were engaged in work not easily classified into socio-economic groupings).

Some well-known Sydney identities also figure among victims of crime reported in the gazette. Among these was Rita Blau née Foley, daughter of a wealthy entrepreneur described in her youth as a 'well-known society girl' and 'one of the best-dressed damsels in the city', who even at her divorce proceedings in 1926 turned up 'dressed to kill'. By 1930, the fashionable Rita was living at the Carisbrooke Flats in Springfield Avenue when she was robbed by her maid of a fur coat, other clothing and household goods valued at £100. Other notable robbery victims include Sir Joynton Smith, an influential hotelier, racecourse and newspaper owner whose investments opened up Blue Mountains tourism in the early 1900s. In 1925 Smith lost goods valued at £85 in Kellett Street in 1925. Mortimer William Lewis, son of the architect of the same name responsible for designing the Australian Museum, Darlinghurst courthouse and the former Darlinghurst Gaol, was another well-known victim. In 1920, Lewis, who was residing near Kings Cross at the time, was robbed of a signet ring, gold sleeve-links and a pair of opera glasses.

Darlinghurst's crime also reflected the multicultural backgrounds of both victims and suspects. Several Italian shopkeepers suffered firearm hold-ups; a Russian migrant living in Rosebank Street was a victim of false pretences; a Greek resident of Burton Street was robbed by his business partner; a woman of Chinese heritage was wanted for taxi fare

evasion; and men charged over missed maintenance payments included a Spanish migrant, a Belgian ex-soldier, and a second-generation Italian-Australian. Other Darlinghurst residents appeared in the police gazettes because they were foreigners who had failed to report a change of address to police – a close surveillance often justified in the White Australia policy era by unsubstantiated claims that immigrants were a significant source of crime. Ironically, as research by historians Mark Finnane and Andy Kaladelfos shows, during the 1920s most of those deported for criminal offences were British, Australia's preferred migrant background. One of the most infamous deportations in the wake of tightening immigration restrictions was centred on Darlinghurst. In 1918 English-born Tom Barker, a radical socialist and leader of Sydney's Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) movement, was deported to Chile after his rooms in Darlinghurst were raided and incendiary materials relating to the 1917 Great Strike were discovered.

Darlinghurst's cultural and class mix – combined with its underworld reputation – contributed to its bohemianism. It attracted the urban intelligentsia and creative professionals. Some of these, like poet Kenneth Slessor, found inspiration in Darlinghurst's dark side during the 1920s. Darlinghurst's bohemian status is reinforced by gazette reports of suspects' occupations, which included a journalist, marathon dancer, racecourse punter, several jockeys, persons described as theatricals or theatre advance agents, a man 'connected with some circus', and a man who performed spiritualist readings at rooms in Oxford Street. Even celebrities appear, such as 'well-known footballer' Louis Dalpuget and 'well-known actor' Cyril Mackay, both wanted for child maintenance. Darlinghurst's bohemian night-time economy of theatres, dance halls and wine bars encouraged the development of the area's nascent homosexual subculture. We get a glimpse of this through one of the oldest offenders to appear in the police gazette sample, a 68-year-old grocer charged alongside a 36-year-old man for indecent assault of each other – a common charge levelled at the consensual homosexual encounters that took place in the suburb's 'cruising' scene of parks and public lavatories at night.

Crime reports reveal Darlinghurst as a suburb that was quickly embracing the cultural changes of the twentieth century. The material culture of stolen goods points to various markers of the area's modernity. By 1930, gramophones or gramophone records featured in several burglaries from Darlinghurst flats. Yet it was only in 1925 that the first gramophone record factory in Australia was established at Darlinghurst. Resident Mrs Kingston recalled what a major purchase a record player was when their family acquired one around this time – 'we were in heaven'. One of the most commonly reported stolen items in the police gazettes were bicycles. Local Pat Peron observed that during this period people 'more or less stayed within their areas because they didn't have a transport', but noted that when bicycles became more common the neighbourhood children could suddenly visit Centennial Park or Coogee.

Insert image 6

Cartoon about wife beating by artist Percy Lindsay, published in *Recorder*, 19 May 1934

National Library of Australia, 95801706

Automobiles also increased residents' mobility, although even by 1950, only one in ten households had a car in Australia. Darlinghurst was at the centre of the motor car trade from the 1920s, with a number of garages springing up along William Street. The 37 motor vehicle thefts that appear in the police gazette sample, compared to just four horse thefts, speaks to this trade and how quickly Darlinghurst was converting to new forms of transport. Another frequent offence reported in police gazettes was robberies of taxi drivers or individuals evading taxi fares. The Yellow Cab company was then operating out of Tewkesbury Avenue, which perhaps contributed to the number of such incidents in the

locality. Mrs Minogue, who worked for the company as a switchboard operator, later recalled how drivers would use their lunch breaks to visit nearby brothels. She also described how her boss would chase her 'around the table half the time'. Only later would Minogue recognise such behaviour as sexual harassment, so normalised was it at a time when women working outside of the home was still unusual.

Memories and records of crime in early twentieth-century Darlinghurst thus reveal a place that was not only a centre of crime, but at the centre of new developments in Sydney generally. Long-time resident Gavin Harris described the area as a 'maelstrom of modernity', reflecting that its embracing of new drugs and forms of vice in the 1920s and 1930s was perhaps just a consequence of its tendency towards embracing the new in general. Yet as much as tabloids condemned the depravity of inner-city suburbs like Darlinghurst, as historian Tanja Luckins points out that, they also conveyed a sense that this was a mark of Sydney's cosmopolitanism, showing curious pride that the city now had the type of modern culture necessary to produce a vice district of the type found in Europe or America.

Underworld's end?

In 1929 Darlinghurst found itself at the centre of another new development: the introduction of consorting laws, legislation that sought to break up organised crime by making it an offence to associate with known criminals. Within a few months of its introduction, the NSW Police Minister declared that the consorting laws had ended the 'reign of terror' of the razor gangs. *Truth* remained sceptical, noting on 19 January 1930 that the 'night-life of Darlinghurst still throbs in the nerve centres of crime'. It is true that the underworld presence never entirely disappeared from the suburb; even at the time of writing, newspapers are carrying stories of renewed attempts by police to rid the area of organised crime. However, the consorting legislation did mark a significant turning point in this colourful phase of Darlinghurst's history.

There is more to the history of crime in Darlinghurst than just its underworld associations. For most ordinary citizens of Darlinghurst, this underworld presence simply meant more opportunities to place a bet, get a drink or visit a sex worker. It meant brushes with celebrity-criminals to gossip about, provided it was not to police. Mostly though, the underworld was ignored – a feature of the neighbourhood outside the orbit of daily concerns. The everyday offences that concerned Darlinghurst residents was the risk of being picked up for public drunkenness on the way home from the hotel; the loss of a beloved item – a bicycle, camera, gramophone record or fur coat – to opportunistic thieves; husbands being violent or refusing to pay child support; or children being taken away because long work hours made them impossible to supervise, and sometimes still could not provide them with life's necessities. Darlinghurst's crime records reveal that those impacted by crime were a diverse mix of classes, nationalities, occupations and lifestyles drawn together by one thing: they were part of a suburb at the forefront of Australian modernity, including its modern crime culture.

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