

## Kay Saunders review of:

### Leigh Straw, *The Worst Woman in Sydney: The Life and Crimes of Kate Leigh*

(Sydney: NewSouth, 2016), 272 pp., PB \$32.99, ISBN 9781742234793

### Leigh Straw, *Lillian Armfield: How Australia's First Female Detective Took on Tilly Devine and the Razor Gangs and Changed the Face of the Force*

(Sydney: Hachette Australia, 2018), 306 pp., PB \$32.99, ISBN 9780733638107

Leigh Straw has secured her reputation as one of Australia's most prolific and versatile writers by these two companion books. Her sheer versatility is astounding, not only its breadth but in its consistent quality and inventiveness. As a historian at Notre Dame University in Western Australia, she is best known for her study of Fremantle and its seedier side. Her recent conference papers on the plight of returned servicemen for World War I again shows a sympathy and depth of understanding for a person young in years but mature in compassion and insight.

Straw's novel *Limestone*, published in 2015 in Edinburgh, is a police procedural, set in her familiar territory of Fremantle where a young Detective Sergeant, Claire Patterson, is attempting to find the identity of a serial killer. The characters and their interrelationships within the police service allow considerable scope of a continuation as a series. Unfortunately the book did not receive the attention or critical acclaim it merited. No doubt the difficulties of distribution hampered a wide readership.

Her first foray into these biographies, so entwined and mirrored almost as a parable of good and evil, was disguised in the form of a historical novel. Set in the 1920s, *Sophia Lane* (2015) takes the reader into the dark and violent world of inner Sydney when it was still dangerous and raw. Ruth Park's novel *Harp in the South*, published in 1948, is set in this environment, although the trilogy consists of a family saga where sectarianism proves a fertile theme for the intergenerational drama. In Straw's fiction, the storyline is more contained. Lyndsey Collier, an ambitious young woman from the bush, joins the police force as a novelty in the all-male domain of law enforcement. Her life and career are ruined, not by the criminals and prostitutes, but by a corrupt officer. Being fiction, there is a romance between Collier and a man of somewhat dubious character.

Straw uses the device to construct her complex narrative by employing a young journalist who attempts to record Collier's life story at the end of her life. The parallels between the choices women make in both professional and private domain are skilfully explored. As far as researchers know, in real life Lillian Armfield did not pursue sexual romances with men; though, somewhat as a tantalising afterword, Straw ponders whether Armfield had an illegitimate daughter left behind with her family in Mittagong.

By choosing Kate Leigh as her subject, Straw was indeed a brave woman. The excellent studies by Larry Writer on Tilly Devine and Leigh, as well as his work on the Razor Gangs of the 1920s in inner Sydney, clearly marked out a territory, at first glance, hard to enter. With the endorsement and encouragement of Writer, a supportive colleague, Straw perforce does cover some of his territory, just as I did in my study of Tilly Devine in *Notorious Australian Women* (2011). However, the material is so rich and diverse that it allows multiple forays, adding texture to the pioneering studies by Writer. Previously, much of the sagas was contained in lurid features in the tabloid press rather than serious analysis.

These more popular books on Leigh and Armfield are difficult to write for anyone trained in academic research and writing. There can be no discussion of methodology or theory. Footnotes are kept to the minimum. The central story has to buzz along with the sure hand of an experienced biographer, keeping to the main highways of the life without diminishing the lure of the interesting byway or side street or, in this case, unhealthy lane clogged with drunken bodies and garbage. Academics have the safety of the whole superstructure of conventional discourses.

Yet the capable writer has to undertake the same degree of research in the archives, memoirs and newspapers, and seamlessly weave it into the narrative without being obtrusive or obvious. In this regard Straw excels. Her primary research is thorough and impressive but at no time does it deter from the telling of each woman's life. The environment they inhabited, Leigh as a criminal entrepreneur in sly-grog, cocaine, prostitution and protection rackets and Armfield as force of the law to counteract these nefarious undertakings, is skilfully depicted. Not in a sensational or lurid manner but as a geography of appalling poverty, where the survival of the fittest was a rule for the criminals. For Leigh, her dual role as a drug dealer and Madame, often forcing vulnerable girls and women into the lower echelons of prostitution, alongside her Janus face of local matriarch giving benefit to the community before the days of social security, is scrutinised as both logical and consistent.

For Armfield no such dilemmas presented themselves as the first policewoman in Australia, entering the NSW service in 1915. This was the same year as the United Kingdom initiated this new role that extended a woman's role from Police Matron to a police officer, albeit with more limited duties, opportunities and pension. This coincided with their recruitment in a select number of states in the United States.

Armfield's duties were conceived to encompass the female domain of runaway girls, vulnerable, destitute women and prostitutes. By necessity this brought her into contact with the crime entrepreneurs like Devine and Leigh. This is not to say that Armfield was not exposed to life-threatening danger. 'Botany Mary', a noted cocaine dealer, threatened her with a red-hot iron and arrests were made with knife-wielding male criminals. Armfield was permitted to carry a revolver given the occupational hazards and perils she faced daily.

At the other side of the law, Leigh faced constant danger and potential death from rival gangs as well as violence within her own circle with hard-drinking, violent sexual partners. Long terms of imprisonment were an occupational hazard to be endured. These were a serious worry as her complex business could collapse or be eclipsed by rivals such as Devine. Her business, however, thrived until the nature of the industries she was involved in saw new players with more modern methods.

Both women were essentially pioneers. Despite Prohibition and later the Depression, the United States produced few women like Devine or Leigh. Stephanie St Clair ran a prosperous sly-grog enterprise in Harlem, and women like Texas Guinan operated popular speakeasies. Women like Bonnie Parker and Ma Baker in the next decade were essentially part of a bank robbery operation rather than career criminals with a diverse portfolio. In this instance, they resembled famous male gangsters in New York City and Chicago, though these gangs operated along ethnic lines. Devine and Leigh were successful business women in their own right not 'gangsters' molls'.

During the 1920s and into the 1930s the changes in the drug laws allowed new opportunities for the unscrupulous trader. In the nineteenth century, patent medicines given to teething babies and fractious children contained large doses of opium. Laudanum, a mixture of opium and alcohol, was readily and legally obtainable as an antidepressant and sleep inducer. Women used these products to soothe menstrual cramps. Seemingly innocent remedies such as Godfrey's Cordial and Bonnington's Irish Moss contained cocaine, as did Coca-Cola until 1905. Cocaine was available in pharmacies without prescription as a 'pick-me-up' for adults.

Canadian and Australian soldiers on the Western Front found the pleasures of cocaine and laudanum a balm to the horrors of trench warfare. It was after the epidemic of addiction of men returning from war that alarm bells rang over the toxicity and addictive qualities of these drugs. Legislation in the early and mid-1920s across the English-speaking world addressed this issue. Given the prolonged exposure of children to soporifics and presumably addiction, it is a wonder that alarm had not been earlier expressed.

This is where Leigh enters a new market outside of her usual fare of prostitution and sly-grog. She was not without competition. But her business acumen and organisational skills saw her operations lead the Sydney market. It was never a major element of her business, though an intensely lucrative one.

Unlike morphine or heroin, cocaine contained a glamorous reputation. Sherlock Holmes, in the Arthur Conan Doyle stories *The Sign of Four* (1890) and 'A Scandal in Bohemia' (1891), takes cocaine when he feels depleted or morose. Agatha Christie's well-regarded novel *Death in the Clouds* (1935) contains the character of a chic cocaine-addicted Countess. Drug addiction also features in her novel *And Then There Were None* (1939). Other popular crime novelists of the period like Ngaio Marsh, who often sets her fiction in the theatrical world, explore the issue of addiction. In *Enter a Murder* (1935) a wealthy theatrical impresario runs a cocaine racket on the side of his legitimate business. The prolific American crime novelist Elizabeth Daly also has cocaine running through her milieu of smart, sophisticated Upper East Siders.

This fictional representation was not the reality for cocaine and other drug taking in Sydney in the interwar years. The trade was sordid, dangerous and highly competitive. In July 1930, Armfield arrested Leigh on drug charges. The next year saw her arrested for attempted murder. Five years later, Leigh appeared again in court charged with possessing phenobarbitone.

Yet in other respects the lives of Leigh and Armfield run as parallels. Both were born into rural poverty in the 1880s. Armfield trained as a nurse, working in Callan Park Hospital for the Insane before joining the NSW police in 1915. She slowly worked her way up to Sergeant First Class by the end of her career in 1949. Though given a generous pay-out, she was not entitled to a pension and lived frugally. Leigh took the other route of alliances with criminals and establishing her own crime operations. Though, like Devine, she made enormous amounts of money, she failed to pay her income tax and was declared bankrupt in 1954. Both died in relative poverty after a lifetime as independent women. Vince Kelly wrote a major book on Armfield in 1961, 10 years before her death. It contains valuable oral reminiscences. Leigh waited until Larry Writer explored her life as a career criminal.

Straw's companion biographies are lively, thought-provoking and challenging. Exploring the lives of two women who defied convention by rejecting marriage and motherhood as a woman's sole occupation and inhabited the dangerous streets of inner-city Sydney of the interwar years, both are role models of independence and ambition. This is not to endorse the nefarious activities of Leigh's enterprises or her pervasive violence. In many respects the two women were each other's mirror image, the light and the dark, the good and the evil.

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