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The Scent of Cordite: Sydney's Gangland Wars of the 1960s

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The Scent of Cordite: Sydney's Gangland Wars of the 1960s

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On Sunday June 26, 1967, the well-known Sydney baccarat operator Richard Reilly stepped out of his mistress's flat in Manning Road, Double Bay. He adjusted his fedora, loosened his silk tie, and flicked a wrinkle from his bespoke tailored suit. He stood there, silhouetted in the streetlight, as a spray let off from a sawn-off shotgun cracked the night air, cutting a swathe through his chest and shoulder, the stray pellets shattering into the brickwork behind. Reilly was the latest victim in a gangland war that had engulfed the Sydney underworld for almost four years. But he was more than just another prosperous racketeer. He was the most feared gambling boss in the city with more than a dozen murders committed at his instigation. Reilly had proven ties to the Labour Party that had ruled NSW for decades. He had worked as a 'chucker-outer' for Eddie Ward, at political rallies around the inner city, and had demonstrable ties to Jack Mannix, a former State Minister for Justice, who had taken an interest in Reilly's case since his release from jail for wartime racketeering. In 1965, the NSW government changed hands in a cliffhanger election that brought one of the State's most notorious premiers to power, Robin Askin — and it seemed that the changeover in Macquarie Street was having peculiar reverberations in the underworld that would remain a puzzle several Royal Commissions and half a century later.

Camilla Nelson lectures in Literature and Communications at the University of Notre Dame Australia. She is the author of two novels, including Crooked, a book about the death of Richard Reilly, which was shortlisted for the Ned Kelly Awards in 2009. Her academic work has been published in Australia and internationally.