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# Celebrating Kate: the criminal-celebrity of Sydney underworld figure Kate

## Leigh

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Combining historical study with cultural criminology, this paper analyses the criminal-celebrity of Sydney underworld figure Kate Leigh. It seeks to demonstrate how the three main factors of public resonance—crime type, context and image—created the celebrated criminality of Leigh. Without public resonance, Leigh would have simply remained another criminal within society. An important element of Leigh’s celebrated criminality was her ability to manage a public image that was accepted within the impoverished, working-class communities of eastern Sydney. Leigh became a criminal icon through an entrepreneurial style based on the anti-authoritarian and egalitarian values of working-class life in eastern Sydney. Criminal-celebrity theory provides a framework for understanding the factors enabling the celebration of criminals in society. It also informs historians about the ways in which criminals can manipulate their public image in an effort to legitimise their activities and gain acceptance in the community.

**Keywords:** Kate Leigh; criminal-celebrity; cultural criminology; female offenders; Sydney underworlds

When Kate Leigh died in Sydney in February 1964, the New South Wales deputy commissioner of police, W. R Lawrence, told the press that “certainly she had a criminal record, but she did all she could to help the needy and young offenders. She warned many of the youngsters about the futility of crime.”<sup>1</sup> Kate Leigh didn’t just have a criminal record; she had over one hundred convictions to her name and made her fortune in the drinking, drugs and prostitution underworlds of Darlinghurst and Surry

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<sup>1</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 February 1964, 5.

Hills.<sup>2</sup> Despite her extensive criminal record, Deputy Commissioner Lawrence recognised Leigh as more than just another criminal within society. Lawrence’s statement captures popular perceptions of Leigh’s criminality. Leigh’s criminal career resonated with the very poor of Surry Hills, earning her a reputation as a woman of the people and turning her into a “colourful celebrity”.<sup>3</sup> Kate Leigh’s crimes, social context and public image were therefore instrumental in turning her into a criminal-celebrity.

Combining historical study with cultural criminology, this paper uses criminal-celebrity theory to analyse how Kate Leigh became a celebrated criminal. Criminality becomes celebrated when the crime type is acceptable and of interest, and the context, time and image of the criminal resonates with the public. A key part of Leigh’s celebrated identity was her ability to endorse a public image of herself as a “Sly Grog Queen” providing liquor to locals suffering from the early closure of pubs each night. In the everyday lives of working-class people in inner Sydney, sly-grog selling—the sale of liquor from unlicensed premises—was an accepted criminal activity. Leigh manipulated this popular image in an effort to cover up the reality of a crime empire also funded by drug dealing and maintained through violence—activities that were less accepted in the community. Kate Leigh also crafted an image of herself as a “benevolent matriarch”<sup>4</sup> to the local Surry Hills kids. Leigh went from being an ordinary criminal to a celebrity

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<sup>2</sup> State Penitentiary for Women, Long Bay, “Photograph Description Book 1910-1930,” State Records New South Wales (hereafter SRNSW), NRS 2496, No. 188, 3/6007; “Photograph Description Book 1930–1970,” SRNSW, NRS 2497, No. 839, 14/3137; New South Wales Police, *Police Gazette 1902–1930*, SRNSW microfilm, REF 1/MAV/FM4/10916; New South Wales Police, *Police Gazette 1931–1960*, print copies, Q343.99105/1; Larry Writer, *Razor: Tilly Devine, Kate Leigh and the Razor Gangs* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 2001), 10.

<sup>3</sup> *Barrier Miner* (Broken Hill), 1 April 1954, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Kay Saunders, *Notorious Australian Women* (Sydney: Harper Collins, 2011), 202.

through changes that occurred in how her image was portrayed in the press. As a younger woman, in the 1920s and 1930s, she played a central role in the crime and violence marking Sydney underworlds at that time. From the 1940s—as an older woman and no longer a key crime figure in the city—Leigh posed less of a threat. Thus, newspapers were more amenable to a community-minded image. This paper also argues that understanding the factors needed to create criminal-celebrity can inform historians about the ways in which criminals manipulate their public images in an effort to legitimise their activities and gain acceptance in the community. In this way, criminals can influence the popular images perpetuated of them in society, particularly those with the ability to use mainstream media.

### **Underworld queen**

Kathleen Mary Josephine Beahan was born in Dubbo, New South Wales on 10 March 1881. She was the eighth child in a large, poor Catholic family.<sup>5</sup> Her parents, Timothy and Charlotte, struggled to make ends meet. Kathleen started wandering the streets as a teenager and was brought before the authorities in Dubbo. Labelled a wayward girl, she was sent to the Parramatta Industrial School for Girls where it was hoped she would reform her ways. Kate was instructed in the ways of being a good woman. She cleaned and cooked, and sewed and washed clothes. Like the other young girls around her—

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<sup>5</sup> New South Wales Government, "11430/1881 BEAHAN, CATHERINE MARY JOSEPHINE," *Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages*, reproduced birth certificate in possession of author; Judith Allen, "Leigh, Kathleen Mary (Kate) (1881–1964)," *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, accessed 15 January 2013, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/leigh-kathleen-mary-kate-7164/text12375>; Judith A. Allen, *Sex and Secrets: Crimes Involving Australian Women Since 1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 170.

there were 186 girls in the institution in 1898<sup>6</sup>—Kate was instructed as a “domestic apprentice”.<sup>7</sup> The Parramatta Industrial School for Girls was first and foremost an institution charged with “saving the uncontrollable girl from the many pitfalls that are before her if she is left to her own devices”.<sup>8</sup>

Not long after her release from the school, Kate started working in local factories and shops around Glebe and Surry Hills but soon began associating with street gangs.<sup>9</sup> Kate was arrested for vagrancy in 1901 and received fourteen days’ hard labour in prison.<sup>10</sup> A year later she married small-time crook James Lee (Leigh), but he was charged in 1905 with assault and robbery of their Glebe landlord. Kate, trying to get James off the charges, claimed her husband overreacted when he found her in bed with the landlord. Leigh was charged with perjury but was acquitted at the end of the trial.<sup>11</sup>

Kate eventually separated from her husband and, despite convictions for using insulting words and keeping a house frequented by prostitutes, she kept under the police radar until she got involved with another local crook. Samuel Freeman, charged alongside his friend Ernest “Shiner” Ryan with the Eveleigh Railway Workshops robbery of May 1914, faced life in prison. Kate offered Freeman an alibi. Heralded as the first

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<sup>6</sup> “Parramatta Industrial School for Girls,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 July 1899, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Bonny Djurie, *Abandon All Hope: A History of Parramatta Girls Industrial School* (Georges Terrace: Changan My Book, 2008), 61.

<sup>8</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 November 1911, 6.

<sup>9</sup> *Writer, Razor*, 10–11.

<sup>10</sup> “Photograph Description Book 1910–1930,” SRNSW, NRS 2496, No. 188, 3/6007; Allen, “Leigh, Kathleen Mary (Kate) (1881–1964)”;  
James Morton and Susanna Lobez, *Gangland Australia: Colonial Criminals to the Carlton Crew* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2007), 21.

<sup>11</sup> Other historical works refer to Kate Leigh being found guilty of perjury and sentenced to five years’ imprisonment in Long Bay Prison. I could find no record of this conviction and instead found only “acquittal” details in newspapers. The only perjury conviction listed on Kate Leigh’s prison record is for her alibi in the case against Samuel Freeman in 1914. See: New South Wales Police, “RETURN OF PRISONERS TRIED AT CIRCUIT COURTS AND COURT OF QUARTER SESSIONS,” *Police Gazette*, 31 January 1906, 44, SRNSW microfilm, REF 1/MAV/FM4/10916; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 November 1905, 6.

Australian armed robbery using a getaway car, the Eveleigh heist was a national sensation and brought Leigh to the attention of newspaper readers across the country. Kate Leigh was imprisoned for five years for perjury and had to place her daughter, Eileen, in a convent while she served her time.<sup>12</sup>

When Kate Leigh was released from prison in 1919, she set about running her own business through the sly-grog trade. In 1922, her second husband, John Barry, joined Kate in the business, but their association did not last long.<sup>13</sup> Leigh's sly-groggery in Riley Street became her mainstay through many years of crime.<sup>14</sup> Twenty years after her entry into sly-grogging Kate was still known for storing large quantities of alcohol in her houses. In May 1943, she was charged with possession of over 1,000 bottles of beer, 84 bottles of whisky and a bottle of wine, all hidden under the floorboards in her Surry Hills home.<sup>15</sup> While the sly-grog business was her mainstay, Leigh was a cocaine dealer and brothel-owner, competing with her local archrival Tilly Devine. In these violent years of razor gangs and street wars, Leigh and Devine fought each other for control of the inner-city streets and illicit trade in women, drugs and booze. Leigh was a tough and often brutal crime boss who protected her employees and was not timid in taking out rival gang members. She claimed self-defence when she shot and killed Devine associate "Snowy" Prendergast, in 1930, and reportedly told a policeman, "I'll stick a knife right into your heart" if he questioned one of her workers any further about her

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<sup>12</sup> State Penitentiary for Women, Long Bay, "Photograph Description Book, 1930–1970," SRNSW, NRS 2497, No. 839, 14/3137; Writer, *Razor*, 15.

<sup>13</sup> Writer, *Razor*, 11.

<sup>14</sup> Allen, *Sex and Secrets*, 171; Allen, "Leigh, Kathleen Mary (Kate) (1881–1964)".

<sup>15</sup> "Cache of Liquor Forfeited," *Canberra Times*, 25 May 1943, 4.

employment.<sup>16</sup> By the early 1930s, Kate Leigh had forged a career as a vice-queen in a city offering endless opportunities for a crime entrepreneur.

### **Kate Leigh as criminal-celebrity**

Despite her many convictions and dominance in organised crime in Darlinghurst and Surry Hills, Kate Leigh could have remained just another criminal. What sets Leigh's criminal career apart from other crooks in Sydney at the time is her celebrity status. Kate Leigh's criminality resonated with the public, aided by an accommodating press and her own manipulation of her public image, allowing her to become a local hero.<sup>17</sup> Kate Leigh's celebrated criminality was made possible by a fascinated public interested in her illegal exploits and willing to accept her crimes as part of working-class life in eastern Sydney.

Criminals have long fascinated the public. Early celebrated criminals include bandits such as Robin Hood, made famous in popular accounts from the fifteenth century,<sup>18</sup> and highwayman Dick Turpin and thief-taker turned thief himself Jonathan Wild, both of whom feature in sensationalist accounts from the eighteenth century creating a "popular discourse of the dangerous individual".<sup>19</sup> Public fascination with crime has dramatically increased from the start of the twentieth century with the

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<sup>16</sup> *Northern Star* (Lismore), 15 February 1929, 5.

<sup>17</sup> *Writer, Razor*, 278.

<sup>18</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits*: (New York: Delacorte Press, 1969); Graham Seal, *The Outlaw Legend: A Cultural Tradition in Britain, America, and Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1–18.

<sup>19</sup> R. Kennedy, "The Dangerous Individual and the Social Body," in *Thinking Through the Body of the Law*, ed., P. Cheah, D. Fraser and J. Grbich (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1996), 195.



popularity of true-life depictions of crime in print, television and cinema.<sup>20</sup> Crime has thus been used for entertainment and consumption, and a discourse of “celebrity” has created celebrated criminality on a scale not seen before.<sup>21</sup>

Celebrated criminality is framed within cultural criminology and an understanding that “cultural dynamics carry within them the meaning of crime”.<sup>22</sup> The culture of everyday life is important for the ways in which crime, as a product of social relations, is determined against a dominant morality.<sup>23</sup> Those with power in society ultimately define and shape what is termed criminal or deviant.<sup>24</sup> How the public experiences, gives meaning to, and expresses crime turns it into “an expressive human activity” providing insights into “collective meanings and collective identity”.<sup>25</sup> At one level, criminal acts are used to exert social control and maintain tradition, conformity and value within society. Crimes are depicted as adversely affecting society and elicit public reactions of horror, fear or disgust.<sup>26</sup> At another level, criminal acts can become something else entirely when the public celebrates deviance and resistance within criminal acts. This “delight in being deviant” allows the public to transgress and engage with crime in a way that the morality of a non-criminal everyday life does not allow.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> David Nash and Anne-Marie Kilday, “Introduction,” in *Histories of Crime. Britain 1600–2000*, ed., A. Kilday and D. Nash (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 5.

<sup>21</sup> Ruth Penfold-Mounce, *Celebrity, Culture and Crime: The Joy of Transgression* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 61–69.

<sup>22</sup> Jeff Ferrell, Keith Hayward and Jock Young, *Cultural Criminology: An Invitation* (London: SAGE, 2008), 2.

<sup>23</sup> Mike Presdee, *Cultural Criminology and the Carnival of Crime* (London: Routledge, 2000), 5.

<sup>24</sup> Ferrell, *Cultural Criminology: An Invitation*, 15; Presdee, 16–17.

<sup>25</sup> Ferrell, *Cultural Criminology: An Invitation*, 2.

<sup>26</sup> Presdee, 4–5; Presdee and Carver, *Cultural Criminology and the Carnival of Crime*, 23–24; Penfold-Mounce, *Celebrity, Culture and Crime*, 69.

<sup>27</sup> Presdee, 4–5; Presdee and Carver, *Cultural Criminology and the Carnival of Crime*, 23–24.

This is what has been termed the “joy of transgression”.<sup>28</sup> Transgression arises from a criminal’s connection to the public. For a criminal to become celebrated, they must resonate with the public, usually in a voyeuristic way. Responses can include consumption as a fan, conversations around media stories or feeling unable to avoid a criminal due to their regular presence in the media. Dismissing the attention given in the media to a particular individual is also a response. As a part of mass media, the culture industry places not constraints of who becomes a celebrity, therefore providing criminals with the opportunity to become celebrities.<sup>29</sup>

A variety of explanations has been offered in an effort to understand why criminals resonate with the public. Psychological explanations point to the public’s fascination with the “other” as a form of rebellion and transgression. Crime can elicit feelings of pleasure and excitement as much as fear and horror. Psychological studies of transgression offer insights into the “amoral delight” of crime. As the example of Kate Leigh will demonstrate, the female offender is a prime example of social perceptions and reactions to the “monstrous other” involved in crime.<sup>30</sup>

From cultural and sociological viewpoints, public fascination with criminals reflects the society in which they operate. Cultural explanations point to resonance with “the values and conflicts of a group of people at a certain time”.<sup>31</sup> The American gangster myth of the 1930s is a prime example of celebrated criminals understood within a society oppressed by the Depression and viewing gangsters as fighting the state,

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<sup>28</sup> Penfold-Mounce, *Celebrity, Culture and Crime*, 4–7.

<sup>29</sup> Penfold-Mounce, *Celebrity, Culture and Crime*, 63, 64, 69.

<sup>30</sup> Penfold-Mounce, *Celebrity, Culture and Crime*, 72, 73; P. Brophy, “Horality – The Textuality of Contemporary Horror Films,” *Screen* 27.1 (1986): 5–8.

<sup>31</sup> Penfold-Mounce, *Celebrity, Culture and Crime*, 75.

particularly corrupt banks.<sup>32</sup> A sociological approach to celebrated criminality—relating to transgression—suggests that crime is celebrated most obviously in a disenchanting society, most prominently one affected by severe deprivation. Criminals can become role models for those who are deprived of opportunities, confined to poverty, and excluded from modern consumerism.<sup>33</sup>

According to Penfold-Mounce, criminal-celebrities can be subdivided into four main groups: the social bandit, criminal hero, underworld exhibitionist, and ubiquitous criminal.<sup>34</sup> Within each group, celebrated criminality is reliant upon three key factors of resonance: crime type, context, and image.<sup>35</sup> These factors of resonance are all present in Kate Leigh's celebrated criminality and identity as a criminal hero.

A key factor in a criminal's resonance with the public is crime type. Either favourable or negative responses to crime will elicit public acceptance, interest or horror.<sup>36</sup> In Kate Leigh's case, acceptance of her crimes and continued interest in her criminality in the eastern Sydney communities combined to turn her into a celebrated criminal. However, community acceptance of criminality is dependent upon the criminal's motivation and the seriousness of the crime. Kate Leigh evoked favourable responses from working-class people in Darlinghurst and Surry Hills because she was a sly-grog seller. As will be discussed further, Kate's ability to market an image of herself as a sly-grogger and play down her involvement in drugs and prostitution was calculated to maintain her acceptance in the community.

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<sup>32</sup> Penfold-Mounce, *Celebrity, Culture and Crime*, 76–77.

<sup>33</sup> Penfold-Mounce, *Celebrity, Culture and Crime*, 79.

<sup>34</sup> Penfold-Mounce, *Celebrity, Culture and Crime*, 83–92.

<sup>35</sup> Penfold-Mounce, *Celebrity, Culture and Crime*, 97–108.

<sup>36</sup> Penfold-Mounce, *Celebrity, Culture and Crime*, 97.

The sly-grog trade was a product of both the everyday habits of ordinary Australians and campaigns to limit alcohol consumption. The temperance movement was active in Australia from the 1830s. Advocates looked to education and reformation of the individual as key aims in dealing with the social ills of excessive drinking. Their efforts were closely linked to ideas about the regeneration of society through dealing with the vice of drunkenness.<sup>37</sup> The Australian temperance movement was responsible for pressuring state governments into greater regulation of the supply of alcohol. The Licensing Amendment Bill of 1905 in New South Wales brought in stricter licensing control of hotels, widely regulated the supply of alcohol and outlawed unlicensed Sunday drinking and drinking in unlicensed premises. Temperance campaigns were also responsible for achieving a six o'clock closing time for pubs across five states during and after the First World War. This was enacted in New South Wales under the Holman Government's Liquor Act of 1916, closing all pubs at 6 pm.<sup>38</sup> The anti-drink campaign lasted longer in NSW than other states, and it was the only state in the early twentieth century to hold a referendum on prohibition.<sup>39</sup>

Regulation of hotels and new closing times stemmed some of the flow of alcohol, but sly-grog shops remained popular. Sly-grog selling had been around in Australia for many decades and the press reported on the moral panics concerning "nurseries of crime" and immorality in poor neighbourhoods. In July 1857, a Goulburn press article featured in the *Sydney Morning Herald* to publicise an image of sly-grog shops as "the

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<sup>37</sup> Quentin Beresford, "Drinkers and the Anti-Drink Movement in Sydney, 1870–1930" (PhD thesis, Australian National University, 1984), 1–2.

<sup>38</sup> Writer, *Razor*, 39.

<sup>39</sup> Beresford, "Drinkers and the Anti-Drink Movement in Sydney, 1870-1930," vii.

curse of the country” where, in these “dens of infamy and shame ... many a single hearted youth trace the ruin of his character, and his initiation into every species of evil and immorality”.<sup>40</sup> However, despite the fact that it did not create sly-grog selling, the *Liquor Act* increased demand for the illicit supply of alcohol, and unlicensed drinking was forced underground. Sly-grog shops were now more popular than ever before.<sup>41</sup>

By the 1920s, sly-grog shops were centralised within the inner-city neighbourhoods of eastern Sydney.<sup>42</sup> Usually run out of a back room in terraced houses or small shop premises, sly-grog shops accommodated a growing number of locals demanding beer or spirits outside of early closing hours. Of the three main categories of drinkers in Sydney at the time—social outcasts, the working class and “respectable” society—working-class men and women felt most aggrieved at the loss of their drinking rights.<sup>43</sup> Most working-class Sydneysiders drank in public houses, the main sites of protest of reformers. The Sunday session down at the local pub was especially targeted in the new legislation to curb after-hours drinking and force working men back home to their families.<sup>44</sup> Working-class people in the inner-city areas—everyday drinkers—were thus the prime supporters of the sly-grog trade.<sup>45</sup> The plight of working-class drinkers was also supported by media acceptance of the sly-grog trade in Sydney. Some local press emphasised the need for inner-city workers to enjoy a drink on a Sunday. As one

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<sup>40</sup> “Our Social Position: Baneful Effects of Sly-Grog Selling,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 July 1857, 4.

<sup>41</sup> Beresford, “Drinkers and the Anti-Drink Movement in Sydney, 1870–1930,” 232.

<sup>42</sup> Allen, *Sex and Secrets*, 174.

<sup>43</sup> Beresford, “Drinkers and the Anti-Drink Movement in Sydney, 1870–1930,” xiii-xiv.

<sup>44</sup> Beresford, “Drinkers and the Anti-Drink Movement in Sydney, 1870–1930,” xiii.

<sup>45</sup> Beresford, “Drinkers and the Anti-Drink Movement in Sydney, 1870–1930,” 229.

newspaper argued, “If the laws do not command man’s respect, they would not observe them”.<sup>46</sup>

Local support for unlicensed drinking legitimised Kate Leigh’s criminal activities and allowed her to take advantage of the context in which she found herself. A culture of resentment against early pub closing<sup>47</sup> allowed acceptance of her crime type and ongoing interest in her fight against liquor restrictions imposed on working people through repressive reforms. For ordinary drinkers, “sly-grogging was a way of life, even an economic necessity”.<sup>48</sup>

Some criminals take advantage of being born in a place and time that benefits acceptance of their crimes.<sup>49</sup> Time, place and circumstance are vital to how a criminal will resonate with the public.<sup>50</sup> Social and political tensions, change, instability and repression can create a context in which criminals are celebrated as reacting against these circumstances.<sup>51</sup> By the 1920s, eastern Sydney was the heartland of prostitution, drugs, gambling and sly-grog underworlds.<sup>52</sup> Kate Leigh’s celebrated criminality was dependent on the social, political and cultural context in which she conducted her criminal activities. Leigh used this context to achieve celebrated status by appealing to a repressed public and marketing a favourable image within the context of working-class

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<sup>46</sup> *Australian Star*, 5 March 1908 cited in Beresford, “Drinkers and the Anti-Drink Movement in Sydney, 1870–1930,” 234.

<sup>47</sup> Tanja Luckins, “‘Satan Finds some Mischief’?: Drinkers’ Responses to the Six o’clock Closing of Pubs in Australia, 1910s–1930s,” *Journal of Australian Studies* 32.3 (2008): 297.

<sup>48</sup> Luckins, “‘Satan Finds some Mischief’?” 297.

<sup>49</sup> P. Kooistra, *Criminals as Heroes: Structure, Power and Identity* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Press, 1989), 158.

<sup>50</sup> Penfold-Mounce, *Celebrity, Culture and Crime*, 101.

<sup>51</sup> Kooistra, *Criminals as Heroes: Structure, Power and Identity*, 158.

<sup>52</sup> Allen, *Sex and Secrets*, 174.

eastern Sydney life.<sup>53</sup> Kate Leigh provided the local community with access to alcohol at a time when ordinary drinkers felt repressed by new legislation aimed at curbing their everyday social habits. The media played their part in perpetuating the acceptance of Kate's sly-grog selling. Downplaying her wider connection to organised crime (especially through drug dealing), the newspapers treated Kate Leigh "as a kindly provider of a social service in a repressive era, against whom no real 'wrong-doing' was convincingly proved".<sup>54</sup> Perceptions of what makes a crime change over time are dependent on community acceptance. In the case of Kate Leigh, emphasis on her sly-grog selling as her mainstay allowed her to gain popular acceptance, given that it was criminalised but not viewed as a serious crime in her local communities.

The gendered nature of Leigh's crimes is another consideration in looking at crime type and context. While it has been argued that women were largely excluded from the drinking culture in colonial Australia, with drinking viewed as a "masculine privilege",<sup>55</sup> there was greater acceptance of female involvement in work associated with drinking, whether as barmaids, publicans or sly-grog sellers.<sup>56</sup> By the 1930s, there was also greater acceptance of female drinking, but within the home.<sup>57</sup> This acceptance of female drinking in the home assisted female sly-grog sellers. Instead of being outcast by the local community, they were affectionately treated as matriarchs by locals in the

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<sup>53</sup> Penfold-Mounce, *Celebrity, Culture and Crime*, 103, 104.

<sup>54</sup> Allen, "Leigh, Kathleen Mary (Kate) (1881–1964)".

<sup>55</sup> Marilyn Lake, "The Politics of Respectability: Identifying the Masculinist Context," *Historical Studies* 22.86 (1986): 116–31; Judith Allen, "'Mundane Men': Historians, Masculinity and Masculinism," *Historical Studies* 22.89 (1987): 617–28.

<sup>56</sup> Clare Wright, *Beyond the Ladies Lounge: Australia's Female Publicans* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003).

<sup>57</sup> Diane Kirkby, "'Beer, Glorious Beer': Gender Politics and Australian Popular Culture," *Journal of Popular Culture* 37.2 (2003): 247.

community. When Kate Leigh's customers knocked at the back door of her Surry Hills premises looking to purchase sly grog, they were known to ask if "mum" was in.<sup>58</sup>

Leigh's involvement in prostitution provides another example of crime type and the careful negotiation of public perceptions to gain acceptance in the community. While sly-grog selling was targeted by temperance groups as part of a wider campaign against drunkenness, prostitution was viewed as a more serious moral threat to society. Prostitution was the "extremity of failure in the monogamy test".<sup>59</sup> The woman who broke the sanctity of the family was seen as a direct threat to society.<sup>60</sup> From the late nineteenth century, the Australian colonies favoured a regulatory model in dealing with the problem of prostitution. Middle-class pressure on the government and police led to a preference for containment of prostitution within brothels by the beginning of the twentieth century. It was easier for police to tolerate illegal sexual activity if it could be contained within designated areas and run by semi-respectable madams.

From the late eighteenth century, however, Australian working-class communities accepted a broad range of female sexual identities, prostitution, drinking, and general rowdiness. Prostitutes, and those controlling the business, were not necessarily outcast in local working-class communities as they were by middle- and upper-class opinion.<sup>61</sup> Prostitutes in the first decades of the twentieth century generally lived and worked in their local communities and were a recognised part of the

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<sup>58</sup> "FINED FOR SELLING SLY GROG THAT WAS WATER," *Mirror* (Perth), 6 February 1954, 4.

<sup>59</sup> Jill Julius Matthews, *Good & Mad Women: The Historical Construction of Femininity in Twentieth-Century Australia* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (North Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1984), 122.

<sup>60</sup> Martha Vicinus, "Introduction: The Perfect Victorian Lady," in *Suffer And Be Still: Women in the Victorian Age*, ed., Martha Vicinus (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), xiv.

<sup>61</sup> Raelene Frances, *Selling Sex: A Hidden History of Prostitution* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2007), 29, 244-47.



community.<sup>62</sup> However, the acceptance was based on a distinction between respectable, semi-respectable and common prostitutes. Where a woman was not loud and obscene in public and worked in a less conspicuous manner, she gained greater acceptance in the local community. The “appearance of respectability” was crucial to a prostitute’s acceptance in the community<sup>63</sup> and brothel owners negotiated public acceptance carefully. Early on in her criminal career, Leigh was described in police reports as a “shrewd and dangerous woman” who kept houses “frequented by prostitutes”.<sup>64</sup> In her efforts to legitimise her community identity from the 1930s, Leigh sought to distance herself from having been involved in selling sex herself or prostituting others. She publicly acknowledged her role as a sly-grog seller but denied her role in inner-city prostitution, saying “I been 13 times in gaol and never once for prostitution”.<sup>65</sup> Leigh knew it was easier for her to gain acceptance in the inner-city working-class communities as a sly-grog seller than a former prostitute or brothel madam.

### *From ordinary criminal to the “Worst Woman in Sydney”*

Crime type, period and place encourage the celebration of criminality, but, for criminals to resonate more fully with the public, image is crucial. How the public perceives a criminal influences acceptance, interest and celebrity status. Successful criminal-celebrity is dependent on the construction and conveyance of an image that resonates

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<sup>62</sup> Frances, *Selling Sex*, 244–47.

<sup>63</sup> Frances, *Selling Sex*, 169.

<sup>64</sup> Supreme Court Papers and Depositions, “Supreme Court Sydney and on Circuit [9/7196] R V Kate Leigh, Perjury,” SRNSW, NRS 880 [9/7196].

<sup>65</sup> “Study in Scarlet: An Uncrowned Queen of Slumland Drips with Diamonds and Charity,” *People* (Sydney), 15 March 1950, 14.

with the public. Mass media plays an important role in disseminating knowledge about crime in society and enables criminal-celebrity through regular stories generating public interest in criminals. Regular media stories about particular criminals increase public interest—expressed as fascination, voyeurism and the thrill of criminality—and this further enables celebrated criminality.<sup>66</sup> Criminals are also instrumental in controlling, managing and marketing an image through the media that resonates and will sustain their criminal-celebrity. In this way, unreality and reality are blurred in an effort to play down villainy in favour of a heroic image.<sup>67</sup> Yet, Kate Leigh was only able to manipulate a more favourable view of herself in the press once she was no longer deemed a serious public threat.

News stories are shaped by news values whereby “editors and journalists will select, produce and present news according to a range of professional criteria that are used as benchmarks to determine a story’s ‘newsworthiness’”.<sup>68</sup> Ultimately, newspapers use sensationalist headlines to accompany “stories about crime designed to shock, frighten, titillate and entertain”.<sup>69</sup> As crime historian Michael Sturma has argued, newspapers are complicit in detailing and also shaping community perceptions of crime.<sup>70</sup> The press aided Kate Leigh’s criminal-celebrity through regular stories about her criminal enterprises and work around the local community.

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<sup>66</sup> Penfold-Mounce, *Celebrity, Culture and Crime*, 99.

<sup>67</sup> Penfold-Mounce, *Celebrity, Culture and Crime*, 104–8.

<sup>68</sup> Yvonne Jewkes, *Crime and Media* (London: SAGE, 2011), 37.

<sup>69</sup> Jewkes, *Crime and Media*, 3.

<sup>70</sup> Michael Sturma, *Vice in a Vicious Society: Crime and Convicts in Mid-Nineteenth Century New South Wales* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1983), 4.

Newspapers create images of offenders as different or “other” to mainstream society but can generate resonance as readers transgress social boundaries and follow popular criminals through regular crime updates.<sup>71</sup> Offenders are thus “packaged” in particular ways in the press. It is important to acknowledge the difference in readership between the main newspapers covering Leigh’s criminal career and the ways in which the stories about her were packaged. *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Truth* were the two leading newspapers featuring Kate Leigh in stories from the 1920s. While the *Herald* was an old, mainstream paper, *Truth* was a “scandalsheet” in the first decades of the twentieth century. *Truth* featured headlines and stories specifically designed to shock and entertain its readers. *Truth* was more populist and appealed to working-class readers, some of whom would have been entertained by Leigh’s exploits as a local.

As an ordinary criminal early on in her career, Kate Leigh was positioned in press stories in relation to the charges faced in court, or as a woman or young offender.<sup>72</sup> The charges featured in the stories more than her personal identity. However, once Leigh became embroiled in the crime scene in eastern Sydney in the 1920s, press interest in her identity changed.

At the height of her criminal career in the late 1920s and 1930s, Kate Leigh faced greater press scrutiny for her illegal activities at a time when the authorities were trying to tackle the problem of gangs controlling drink, drugs and prostitution in the city. A

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<sup>71</sup> Ulrike Tabbert, “Crime through a Corpus: The Linguistic Construction of Offenders in the British Press,” in *Constructing Crime: Discourse, and Cultural Representations of Crime and Deviance*, ed., Christiana Gregoriou (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 142.

<sup>72</sup> See, for example: “Eveleigh Case. Remarkable Story of a Witness. A Woman in the Box,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 July 1914, 6.

special vice unit of the NSW Police Force was created to deal with sly-grogging,<sup>73</sup> and new consorting laws were included in the Vagrancy Act of 1929, making it an offence to consort with known criminals and “bad characters”. This also led to the creation of a police consorting squad.<sup>74</sup> Anyone found guilty of consorting faced up to six months in prison, as Kate Leigh found out in June 1929. Arrested for being in a house frequented by thieves, she was sentenced to four months’ imprisonment at Long Bay Prison.<sup>75</sup> The consorting laws impacted on Leigh’s activities, and she regularly faced court for associating with other criminals. In January 1932, she was sentenced to six months’ imprisonment for “habitually consorting with women of ill repute”.<sup>76</sup>

Newspapers played their part in raising public awareness of underworlds and their threat to city life. As *Truth* declared in January 1932, “GANG RULE MUST GO!”<sup>77</sup> Supported by police and the government, newspapers publicised the violent rule of gangs in Darlinghurst, Surry Hills and Paddington. In May 1929, *Sydney Morning Herald* ran a story on “GANG WAR” in Darlinghurst and a return to the violence of recent razor slashings.<sup>78</sup> The *Herald* also backed campaigns to have the federal government step in and deal with the drug traffic and underworld claims of inner-city Sydney.<sup>79</sup>

Amidst this heightened interest in Sydney’s underworlds, Kate Leigh was singled

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<sup>73</sup> Alfred W. McCoy, *Drug Traffic: Narcotics and Organised Crime in Australia* (Sydney: Harper & Row, 1980), 138.

<sup>74</sup> Peter N. Grabosky, *Sydney in Ferment: Crime, Dissent and Official Reaction 1788–1973* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1976), 126; McCoy, *Drug Traffic*, 138.

<sup>75</sup> State Penitentiary for Women, Long Bay, “Photograph Description Book, 1930-1970,” SRNSW, NRS 2497, No. 839, 14/3137.

<sup>76</sup> “CONSORTING CHARGE. Kate Barry Sentenced,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 January 1932, 6.

<sup>77</sup> “GANG RULE MUST GO!” *Truth* (Sydney), 3 January 1932, 1.

<sup>78</sup> “GANG WAR,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 May 1929, 11.

<sup>79</sup> “DRUG HABIT. Far Reaching Effects,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 April 1928, 14.

out in the press as a main player in the gang feuds, and the drugs and prostitution trade. No longer simply identified as a female offender, Leigh was regularly labelled a “VIOLENT WOMAN”, and a serious threat to the social order.<sup>80</sup> By 1930 she was identified in court as “the worst woman in Sydney”.<sup>81</sup> *Truth* called her “Sydney’s Vicious Harridan of the Underworld”.<sup>82</sup>

Regular reporting of Leigh’s criminal activities and her rivalry with fellow crime boss Tilly Devine singled her out as a known criminal, but it also had the effect of turning her into a household name. From the late 1920s, Leigh’s name was used to attract *Herald* readers. Known as both Kate Leigh and Kate Barry (after her short-lived marriage to Edward Barry) she headlined crime stories: “KATE LEIGH ARRESTED”, “CONSORTING CHARGE. Kate Barry Before Court” and “KATE LEIGH. Robbery charge dismissed”.<sup>83</sup>

*Truth* sensationalised the criminal rivalry between Leigh and Devine through regular reporting of their feuds and arrests, and often featured photographs of the women close to the headings. In one article, photos of the two women were positioned alongside the heading “TILLY TO KATE Underworld Hymn of Hate”.<sup>84</sup> Kate Leigh’s photo also appeared in a report on charges against her driver, in which the driver’s name did not feature in the headline. Instead, the story ran as: “KATE’S DRIVER GETS 15 MONTHS”.<sup>85</sup> The regular use of Leigh’s image alongside headline stories in the press

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<sup>80</sup> “COCAINE RAID. House Surrounded. VIOLENT WOMAN PRISONER,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 July 1930, 14.

<sup>81</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 April 1930, 8.

<sup>82</sup> *Truth*, 19 October 1930, 1.

<sup>83</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 December 1931, 6; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 March 1932, 6; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 October 1931, 11.

<sup>84</sup> “SAYS TILLY TO KATE Underworld Hymn of Hate,” *Truth*, 29 June 1930, 15.

<sup>85</sup> “KATE’S DRIVER GETS 15 MONTHS,” *Truth*, 27 July 1930, 17.

further extended her celebrity for the public. Not only was she identified by name and for her illegal activities or gang feuds but readers were also able to recognise her in public.

The press, sensationalising Leigh's criminal-celebrity, also emphasised her identity as a *female* underworld leader. Interest in Leigh's crimes was in part generated by interest in her identity as a female criminal. Leigh was repeatedly identified in the press as "Queen of Sydney's Underworld".<sup>86</sup> At a time when men dominated the underworld and the emerging organised crime scene in Sydney—and indeed across Australia—Kate Leigh orchestrated her place in history as a female crime boss. Implicit in this, also, is the challenge she posed to ideals of femininity in the early twentieth century.

Social codes defined the respectable woman as a "frail but appealing, intellectually inferior but morally superior being, whose duty it was to be passive, decorative and sexually pure".<sup>87</sup> According to Jill Matthews, Australian women were expected to live up to particular ways of being, from speech and appearance to behaviour and thoughts that signified a woman's place within the gender order and power relations.<sup>88</sup> This regulation of female behaviours aimed to limit any deviance.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the judiciary, police, press, churches, medical professions and social purity campaigners constructed the good Australian

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<sup>86</sup> "Kate Leigh Plans to take a Trip to 'Blighty'," *Arrow*, 17 July 1931, 15.

<sup>87</sup> Mary S. Hartman, *Victorian Murderesses: A True History of Thirteen Respectable French and English Women Accused of Unspeakable Crimes* (London: Robson Books, 1985), 2.

<sup>88</sup> Matthews, *Good & Mad Women*, 88.

woman as “domestic, home and family-bound, pure, clean and rationalised”.<sup>89</sup> Some Australian feminists also incorporated a maternalistic approach to their “new social order” for the twentieth century, identifying mothers as key to the ideal of the moralistic female citizen.<sup>90</sup> While early feminists recognised the economic constraints on working-class women against extending their civic role beyond the home, working women were still expected to uphold a social ideal of “the reputable working class and the deserving poor”.<sup>91</sup>

All women have a sense of their own femininity, but it is socially constructed against “what it is to be a good woman, and what it is to fail”.<sup>92</sup> This is most relevant to female criminal lives. By virtue of their actions in public, mainly engaging in illegal activities, female offenders deviated from the feminine ideal. Judith A. Allen also argues that female criminality is interpreted as “a form of deviation from natural or normal womanhood”.<sup>93</sup> Criminal women, therefore, provide alternative experiences in which to locate constructions of femininity. In terms of sex comparisons, men were more likely to commit crimes across Australia in the first decades of the twentieth century. This is not surprising given historically that three in four criminals are men.<sup>94</sup> Male crime, in dominating criminological data, helped to define female offending as unusual and deviant. Female criminals transgress a “metaphoric womanhood” that assigns caring, maternal and moralistic meanings to women. The female criminal “reaffirms the

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<sup>89</sup> Matthews, *Good & Mad Women*, 88.

<sup>90</sup> Marilyn Lake, *Getting Equal: The History of Australian Feminism* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1999), 53.

<sup>91</sup> Vicinus, *Suffer and Be Still*, x, xiii.

<sup>92</sup> Matthews, *Good & Mad Women*, 88.

<sup>93</sup> Allen, *Sex and Secrets*, 11.

<sup>94</sup> Clive Emsley, *Crime and Society in England: 1750–1900* (London: Longman, 1987), 32.

essence of women, ensuring the resistance of an abhorrent case".<sup>95</sup> For her repeated outbursts of bad language, violent threats and underworld dealings, Leigh was characterised by police and press alike as a fallen woman.

### *Surry Hills matriarch*

By the 1940s and 1950s, Kate Leigh was increasingly being associated in the press with a community identity, removed somewhat from images of her as an underworld crook. She was able to do this by publicising her community image and monitoring and protecting her public profile in newspapers. Newspapers were also complicit in legitimising Leigh's community image through supportive articles outlining her attempts at reform and her central role in the Surry Hills community. This was made possible by Leigh's diminished role in the 1940s Sydney crime scene. She was no longer regarded as a leading crime figure and could thus manipulate her public identity and how she recalled her criminal past.

Kate Leigh's criminal-celebrity was based on the construction of a favourable image as a benevolent sly-grog seller and community hero. Despite the fact that she made a fortune out of taking advantage of local demand for illicit alcohol and was instrumental in organising crime through prostitution and drug dealing, her carefully crafted public image resonated because it appealed to the ordinary, working-class people in eastern Sydney and across the country. One important way in which Kate Leigh was able to market a favourable image was through the press.

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<sup>95</sup> Penfold-Mounce, *Celebrity, Culture and Crime*, 74.



In the absence of archival records providing insights into Kate Leigh's private life and perceptions of her criminal career, Leigh's newspaper interviews and comments are important for what they reveal about how she viewed her identity in the community. Using press interviews, Kate Leigh created an image of herself as a Surry Hills matriarch. This was popularised in her annual Christmas parties for local children and publicised in the press. In one *People* article on "Slumland" life in Surry Hills, Leigh is photographed waving to children from her house, alongside Santa. The photo includes the following caption:

All hail Kate Leigh. All hail the Yuletide spirit embodied by a caparisoned friend of Kate's who volunteered to assist her distribute her bounty to the underprivileged neighborhood (*sic*) kids from the balcony of her Surry Hills residence. The children also crowd her smallgoods shop.<sup>96</sup>

In the interview accompanying the photo, Leigh emphasised her support for the local Salvation Army and church charities, and her Christian charity in adopting a local orphan.<sup>97</sup> Leigh's manipulation of a popular community image was encapsulated in her long-time residence in Surry Hills. She was a Hills matriarch who worked, lived in and supported the community: "I've been in the Lansdowne Street place for 17 years. And I've never once missed giving a Christmas party for the kids round here. I love them and

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<sup>96</sup> "Study in Scarlet," 13.

<sup>97</sup> "Study in Scarlet," 13.

they love me”.<sup>98</sup> Unlike her rival, Tilly Devine, who lived out at Maroubra, Kate Leigh lived in Surry Hills and perpetuated an image based on commitment to the local people. As she told the press in 1950, “The Hills people were pretty good to me when I had nothing and I won’t leave them now”.<sup>99</sup>

Offering charity to the local community is one way in which people can gain acceptance in their neighbourhood, and criminals can use this to their advantage in an effort to display a community-minded identity aiming to downplay a criminal life. Despite negative portrayals of Leigh’s crimes, the press at times played down Leigh’s organised crime associations in favour of a flattering, popular image of her as assisting her local community. Leigh was depicted as a woman who went to the courts nearly every day to help out first offenders and the community that had helped her when she was “down and out”.<sup>100</sup> This entrepreneurial style was based on the egalitarian values of working-class life in Surry Hills and the idea that the locals had to help one another. In 1942, *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that Kate had given up slog-grog selling in favour of aiding the war effort.<sup>101</sup> Locals also praised Leigh in the press for the help she provided to the unemployed during the Depression.<sup>102</sup> Newspapers also used police testimony in court to publicise Kate’s better side. In 1933, one police officer told of Kate Leigh’s “good side”, demonstrated in her giving food to the unemployed and paying funeral costs for the deceased wife of a local man.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> “Study in Scarlet,” 14.

<sup>99</sup> “Study in Scarlet,” 15.

<sup>100</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 February 1964, 5.

<sup>101</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 October 1942, 9.

<sup>102</sup> Allen, *Sex and Secrets*, 174.

<sup>103</sup> “Woman Bound Over,” *Barrier Miner* (Broken Hill), 3 June 1933, 1.

Leigh's view of herself as a Surry Hills matriarch allowed her to publicise a moralistic image, legitimising her further in the community and, in so doing, winning over the wider public. Despite her criminal history, Kate stood firm on the morals she thought counted the most. Appearing in court in 1943, Leigh argued that "Nobody can say anything against my morals".<sup>104</sup> She told *People* magazine in 1950 that she didn't drink or smoke and couldn't understand how some young women lost control of their lives, saying, "You can't do nothing for some women".<sup>105</sup> Leigh also took advantage of comparisons with her rival, Tilly Devine. She in fact saw herself as a better and more moral woman than Devine. While they had both served numerous prison sentences, Leigh told the press that, unlike Tilly, she had never prostituted herself.<sup>106</sup> Personal pride and morals were crucial to Leigh's "matriarch" image.

Creating an image that resonates is dependent, too, on a criminal sustaining a favourable image for the public. This involves a criminal monitoring and protecting their public profile. Kate Leigh was able to craft a favourable image of herself in the press through scare tactics employed to ensure her image remained as she wanted it. When a Sydney newspaper ran an article in 1950 claiming that Leigh had willfully shot dead "Snowy" Prendergast back in 1930, Leigh confronted staff in the newsroom. As the *Mirror* newspaper reported, informed by Leigh's version of events, typists had to cover their ears from "the purple flow of invective" while men rushed to escape the "fury of her attack". One man lost a clump of hair and was given a swift backhander from Leigh

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<sup>104</sup> *Mirror* (Perth), 27 March 1943, 12.

<sup>105</sup> "Study in Scarlet," 15.

<sup>106</sup> "Study in Scarlet," 14.

as he fled.<sup>107</sup> It was imperative to Leigh that the papers supported the popular image she had created of her crimes: having served a repressed community or, when violent, being forced upon her in self-defence.

The local community also supported Leigh's favourable public image. In Surry Hills, where "life is characterised by the personalities of people",<sup>108</sup> Leigh's tough, no-nonsense personality resonated in a community defined in the press by "the roughness of jungle justice".<sup>109</sup> When underworld beauty Nellie Cameron died in 1953, Kate Leigh attended the funeral at a Darlinghurst funeral parlour. Dodging press and photographers on her way into the parlour, one photographer got on her wrong side and she smacked him in the face with her fur cape and called him a mug. Bystanders cheered Leigh's performance shouting, "Good on you, Kate".<sup>110</sup>

For the children who lived in Surry Hills, Kate Leigh was a powerful and admired presence in their lives. Former local Hal Baker often visited Leigh in her Devonshire Street home where she would make him lunch. Hal's grandfather, "Jack" Baker, worked for Leigh as a "strong-arm man", providing personal protection for her from the 1930s. Describing Leigh as a "bit of a wag", Hal recalled her purchasing Shetland ponies so local kids could ride them in a vacant block of land at Ward Park. Even today, Kate Leigh remains an "Australian version of Robin Hood" for Hal Baker.<sup>111</sup>

Tilly Devine did not enjoy the same resonance in Darlinghurst and Surry Hills. Tilly recognised this in a letter she wrote to *Truth* from England in 1930. Visiting her sick

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<sup>107</sup> "No Murder Trial, Claims Kate Leigh," *Mirror* (Perth), 1 April 1950, 2.

<sup>108</sup> "Study in Scarlet," 11.

<sup>109</sup> "Study in Scarlet," 11.

<sup>110</sup> *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 11 November 1953, 1.

<sup>111</sup> Hal Baker, interview with author, 16 August 2013.

mother and not wanting to return to Sydney, Devine said, “you people did not like me because I am English. If I had been an Aussie girl there would have been nothing said”.<sup>112</sup> Kate Leigh’s Australian background aided her local appeal. Born in Dubbo, Leigh was “native born”<sup>113</sup> and this nationalist element aided her popularity and acceptance among the inner Sydney locals.

Devine also suffered from local prejudice towards the English in the years following World War I. According to former Surry Hills local Hal Baker, being English put Devine “behind the eight ball” in a community where there was “almost a hatred of English in these parts” where old diggers were still reeling from the actions of English officers in World War I.<sup>114</sup>

When Devine died in November 1970, one patron at the Tradesman’s Arms in Surry Hills proposed a toast, remembering it as one of Tilly’s favourite drinking spots. No one else lifted a glass.<sup>115</sup> In direct contrast to police descriptions of Kate Leigh on her death, Police Commissioner Norman Allan described Tilly as a “villain”.<sup>116</sup> Ron Saw, writing for the *Daily Telegraph*, labelled Tilly a “vicious, grasping, high-priestess of savagery, venery, obscenity and whoredom”.<sup>117</sup> For Saw, the former rascal Kate Leigh was “a kindly and generous old trot with many friends”, while Tilly Devine was a

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<sup>112</sup> *Truth*, 29 June 1930, 15.

<sup>113</sup> See, John Molony, *The Native Born: The First White Australians* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2000).

<sup>114</sup> Hal Baker, interview with author, 16 August 2013.

<sup>115</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 November 1970, 18.

<sup>116</sup> *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 25 November 1970, 6.

<sup>117</sup> *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 25 November 1970, 6.

“wretched woman” missed by no one.<sup>118</sup> Leigh was eulogised as a woman who, despite her years of crime, did all she could for the community she lived in.<sup>119</sup>

Kate Leigh’s celebrated identity also raises the issue of what Graham Seal has termed “convenient fictions”.<sup>120</sup> While Kate Leigh’s criminal career does not employ the imaginary, elements of her story indicate artful untruths used by the media and accepted by the public as part of Leigh’s appeal.<sup>121</sup> Media narratives about Kate Leigh, and her appropriation of a popular image, appealed to the poor and oppressed in eastern Sydney. Leigh’s manipulation of her image is evidence of the way in which criminals will take advantage of artful untruths to resonate with the public. So convincing was Leigh’s manipulation of her image, that one policewoman, a contemporary of Leigh’s, wistfully reflected back on the era: “When Kate died I felt, well, there’s a bit of good old Australian history that’s gone”.<sup>122</sup>

Another intriguing part of Kate Leigh’s celebrity is that it has undergone a recent revival with the publication of Larry Writer’s book, *Razor: Tilly Devine, Kate Leigh and the razor gangs*, and the resulting *Underbelly: Razor* series in 2011. Leigh has also been portrayed in a one-woman cabaret show developed by Vashti Hughes in 2011 and performed to regular audiences since at The Bordello Theatre in the Kings Cross Hotel.<sup>123</sup> Leigh lingers in the public imagination because she is still seen as a sympathetic figure and is a subject of popular interest in Darlinghurst and Surry Hills as part of a

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<sup>118</sup> *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), 25 November 1970, 6.

<sup>119</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 February 1964, 5.

<sup>120</sup> Seal, *The Outlaw Legend*, 184.

<sup>121</sup> Seal, *The Outlaw Legend*, 184.

<sup>122</sup> Writer, *Razor*, 320.

<sup>123</sup> “Razor Gangs Revisited, Caberet-Style,” City of Sydney Media Centre, accessed 4 December 2014, <http://www.sydneymedia.com.au/razor-gangs-revisited-caberet-style/>.

criminal underworld past romanticised by the passing of time. Danielle Cormack, the actress who played Leigh in *Razor*, told *Timeout Sydney* that she thought of Kate Leigh as “hearty, fearless, formidable, ruthless, menacing, loving”. For Cormack, there was more to Leigh than her label as a notorious criminal woman: “despite the terror she instilled, there are also tales of her kindness that make you think twice about who she really was and how she became this legend”.<sup>124</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Crime type, context, and image are three key factors of resonance essential to transforming ordinary criminals into criminal-celebrities. Kate Leigh was able to achieve criminal-celebrity through the acceptance of her crimes within the context of inner Sydney working-class life. Image was also a crucial element in Leigh’s celebrated status. Media depictions of Leigh as a sly-grog seller to repressed locals, and Leigh’s creation of her image as a Surry Hills matriarch legitimised her place within the community. This public image, closely monitored by Leigh, resonated more with the public than the reality of a life of crime profiting from standover tactics, drug addiction and prostitution. This study of Kate Leigh demonstrates the value of incorporating cultural criminology into historical studies of crime and criminality. Criminal-celebrity theory provides a framework for understanding the factors enabling the celebration of criminals in society. It also informs historians about the ways in which criminals can influence their public images in efforts to legitimise their activities and gain acceptance in the community. In

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<sup>124</sup> “Kate Leigh – Underbelly: Razor,” *Timeout (Sydney)*, 11 August 2011, accessed 30 May 2013, <http://www.au.timeout.com/sydney/timein/features/9582/kate-leigh-underbelly-razor/>.

this final factor of resonance—image—the criminal-celebrity can influence popular perceptions of their place in history.