

INTO DARKEST ADELAIDE

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About ten years ago there was an advertisement on Sydney TV, put out by the South Australian Tourism Commission for viewers outside South Australia; so I can't guess how many people here ever saw it. It began, if I recall it correctly, with a twilight shot of a church in silhouette, with holy music playing and the words 'Adelaide City of Churches'. The camera slowly zoomed in, the church doors opened wide, whereupon strobe lights and hot disco music blasted forth! It was Paul's nightclub in Pulteney Street. I was often over here in those years and people back in Sydney used to say to me, 'have you been to that disco? Is it true that there is finally some action in Adelaide?' Etc. Being somewhat older than John Travolta I could only say to them: seek, strive, you'll surely find. The South Australian Tourism Commission has never put on such an ad again, at least not that I've seen, instead it has been promoting ripening grapes and grazing kangaroos and, last year, migratory birds yet. No: the Tourist Commission knows that South Australia is a nice place, full of nice people, and its historians mostly write about nice things too.

This paper is a plea for more people not merely to reward Patricia Sumerling but to follow her and a few others, and to turn their attention to what, a century ago, in the steps of Henry Stanley and General Booth, the felon Charles Chandler called 'Darkest Adelaide'. I do not mean sinister Adelaide or weird Adelaide - those clichés so beloved of eastern journalist - nor your very private 'Adders' - only the dark spots still not searchlighted by research - which, however, admittedly do include some unpleasant aspects.

Let us say that the social depths of the city have not yet been plumbed as in Victoria, where Davison and others produced *The Outcasts of Melbourne* in 1985. I will recall a story which is probably apocryphal, the story of Melba and Peter Dawson. She is on the \$100 note, but in her day she was known as 'Madam Sweet and Low', the voice lovely but the manners frightfully common. On being introduced to the young singer from Adelaide, she said to Dawson 'What? That town of pubs and prostitutes?' We laugh: but was it true? Ah. And even saying that I do not want to suggest that my idea of darkest Adelaide is all sin and sleaze. Almost equally obscured are things like popular amusements and junior sports.

It is salutary to look through Crowley's bibliography of South Australian history and contemplate the massive amount of research that has been done in the last forty years. One can best judge by looking through all the journals of these last 25 years and going through the *Wakefield Companion to South Australian History*. It is very impressive, what has been achieved. But I find very little interest in low life. Plenty of work on Adelaide worthies, some attention to their efforts to police and control the inhabitants of the deep, well-meant help for gutter girls and so on; but very little indeed on who these people, these Others, were, what they wanted, and what they did.

Nobody who has tried to look at the underside of bourgeois society has found it an easy task. Like children, the low lifes do not write much, and even when they do publish their opinions in the form of graffiti these are at once zealously erased by council employees. The diaries of William Stagg, of Tarcowie, are really exceptional;

at least I fear that they are. The underlings mostly appear in newspaper reports and police records. That is why William Chidley's memoirs of living in Rosina Street in the 1880s are so precious, not only for the sexual matters of course, which were their *raison d'être*, but for its West End, the general ambience of the ne'er-do-wells. Very often, before the introduction of the Box Brownie camera in 1900 the only images of these people are police mug-shots, if you can get permission to access them.

It has been my fate, as I research aspects of Adelaide's educational history, to encounter again and again topics on which I found no secondary literature and was forced to dig into the newspapers and pamphlets for myself.

John Daley has done so much on sports and recreation in SA, but there remains much to do. I am pleased that the Australian Society for Sports History has revived in SA and I hope that all sorts of topics will now be investigated. In the 1990s I researched junior sport and found that nobody had touched on this, whereas in Victoria there is a history of junior and amateur football. You have a very nice little book on cricket in the suburbs, Geoff Sando's *Grass Roots: 100 years of Adelaide district cricket*, but it does not deal with juniors. There is a little book on the history of Prince Alfred's football club for old boys; but nothing else of the sort, I gather. I'm talking about a vibrant sporting underworld, where boys from the Cyclorama played against young sailors from the *Protector*, where Wilkinson and Company, grocers and tea merchants in Freeman Street, fielded a junior team called the Arabs against a team called GPO possibly coached by George Giffen. In New South Wales junior sport gets the same raw deal it does in South Australia; for almost everywhere youngsters are treated slightly. But I must tell you that in 1993 I bought two national histories of junior Rugby – alone - in, yes, you guessed, New Zealand.

I have not found a history of the Our Boys Institute, the junior branch of the Adelaide YMCA and unique in Australia. And, dare I say it, except what is in Massey's *Y.M.C.A. in Australia: a history*, published in 1950, I have found all the history of the Adelaide YMCA itself to be contained in David Hilliard's article in the *Wakefield Companion*. Incidentally, on my first visit to Chicago in 2003 I was startled when walking down South Michigan avenue to find that the facade of the Chicago Athletic Club (by Henry Ives Cobb, finished in 1893) was in the same stones-of-Venice style as the Our Boys Institute building in Wakefield Street by F.W. Dancker, opened four years later, in 1897. Did Dancker visit Chicago for the 1893 World's Fair and copy Cobb because the two buildings were homes for athletics? I don't know, because the OBI is too late for the Jensens' *Colonial Architecture in South Australia* and I haven't been able from Sydney to pursue the matter. Architects of major buildings are of course properly the concern of heritage keepers - the point I emphasize is that this was one of the very few buildings built for youngsters that was not a school. I believe the OBI building has undergone some transformations of late.

And there is no substantial history of the Adelaide Turnverein. In the early nineties I checked out myself the building where the Leschen family, Adolph and his sons Hugo and Waldemar, taught gymnastics for so many decades, and roughly noted its dimensions (I paced it out). It was at the back of the Tivoli hotel in Pirie Street. Although the Tivoli appears in *Heritage of the City of Adelaide*, the gymnasium was knocked down a couple of years after my visit; more lost Adelaide... This morning I found that the Tivoli itself has gone. The demolition of buildings, the destruction of documents, the enormous gaps in the German newspapers... The

Turnverein was an integral part of the German community, and - beyond that - most important for physical education in Adelaide and the whole colony. We have forgotten a lot of that history.

For example, the published 1909 catalog of the library at 100 Grenfell Street, operating on the premises of the South Australian German Society (Incorporated), is very interesting. The library, almost all German-language books, contained hundreds of solid literary works, Goethe and the German classics as one would expect; but also Dostoyevsky, Maupassant and Sacher-Masoch. Among the more than 500 volumes of science and politics, there was much advanced stuff: for instance, Marx's *Capital* in 4 volumes plus the *18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, Engels on *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Tolstoy, Bebel, Dühring, Liebknecht, Kropotkin, and ten books by Nietzsche!! Some of these were books I think the public libraries of Australia didn't buy till decades later, if ever; and this catalogue is proof, I believe, as Ian Harmstorf remarked, that the Germans here were not all Lutheran peasants from the Barossa. It is time to re-read the *Australische Zeitung*. Actually, bearing as I do a Teutonic surname, and having read Kerrie Round's sad tale of the South Australia German Historical Society of 1935, I sympathize with the successive generations of Germans who have kept a low profile and kept it mostly religious and quaint.

There is a fascinating book by Dylan Walker called *Adelaide's Silent Nights: a pictorial history of Adelaide's picture theatres during the silent era 1896-1929*, which is mostly about the buildings; but no account that I can discover of movie-going and audiences in Adelaide, from 1894 until, say, the Great War, matters in which to some extent I have interested myself. But it is not merely a matter of plebeian tastes: the legitimate theatre has found its historians but not theatre audiences, it appears. These strictures apply Australia-wide, for no local has done anything as sophisticated as the research into New York nickelodeon audiences. The thing is, Adelaide has always been small enough to be studied entire and in depth, and it is sad that nobody has produced local audience studies.

Let me tantalize you with something that was mentioned yesterday. The Adelaide correspondent of the *Australian Christian World* (Sydney) reported in March 1914 that 'the purveyors of amusements in Adelaide have recently introduced the Tango with all its rather objectionable surroundings for not only have we at one of the theatres Tango dances, but additions which are surely subversive of morality to a large extent. The questionable corset parades in which girls march up and down the stage, in a condition which can only be described as half-dressed deserve special condemnation. Nor are these parades confined to the stage, but special promenade gangways are carried up the seating accommodation so that the audience can see the girls in a condition as near nudity as is presumably so far as the management dare allow'. This catwalk was in the City of Churches one year before Gallipoli. I would like to discover who made up that audience; and incidentally I would like to know the identity of the informant of the *Australian Christian World*.

The most extraordinary lack, considering my purposes, was any history of the Chinese in Adelaide. C.F. Yong's *The New Gold Mountain: the Chinese in Australia 1901-1921*, though written and published in Adelaide, gives scant attention to Adelaide. I wrote to Dr Yong asking if he or any of his students was at work on Adelaide's Chinese community and was told that it was of no significance being so

small; whereas I think the beauty of it is that it could be studied completely, being so small, if the student could read Chinese of course. But the treatment of ethnic groups has been uneven. The Cornish and their starry-gazey pies have been done almost to death, doubtless as a spin-off from the biennial festival, while Devon folk have hardly been touched; and as for minorities like the Chinese, and even the Greeks and Italians, there are big shady areas. What are overlooked are apparently the things that the South Australian elite considered to be if not Lacan's 'Other' then at least 'not quite us'.

I was working on the school for Chinese conducted for forty years by the interdenominational Adelaide City Mission (not to be confused with the Adelaide Central Mission run by the Methodists). Where was it? In Light Square. Just down the street, where the Barron Town House now rises, was the Chinese temple known as the joss house. Although the extensive records of the City Mission are in the Mortlock Library, on that organisation there is one small pamphlet of 30 pages published for the centenary in 1967 with one sentence on the Chinese school - and there is a short life of Annie Green, the Mission's battling manager. Caldicott's 1996 history of the Churches of Christ gives one page to their Chinese school in Grote Street. Almost nobody outside of Sumerling has concerned themselves with the people who lived around Light Square, not only the Chinese but all the others. Some were Lebanese, Christians for the most part, I gather. There is a little on the Adelaide Lebanese in the Batrouneys' 1985 *Lebanese in Australia*, but to local eyes they must have got lost among the Afghans because there is no separate study of them. The pre-1886 Lebanese families are, moreover, not in Statton - though that should not be a great surprise.

I wanted to know who the teachers at the Chinese school were. They were many, and transient; but they seem to have been mostly teenage Sunday-school teachers. There is no history of Sunday schools in South Australia, because, as I understand, the educational historians considered such institutions beneath contempt, and no church historian has been able to overlook denominational boundaries.

One teacher was William Fleming, who ended his life in 1897 being hacked to death in China and so becoming the first martyr of the China Inland Mission. Fleming was a Scot, a sailor (probably the ship's cook, as we are told he had a dab hand with roasts) who jumped ship at Port Adelaide with its 25 hotels. There is a history of Port Adelaide as the setting for the story of the Port Adelaide Institute, but it is, like Ronald Parsons' general history, very slight on the sailortown aspects, the sailors' hotels, the crimping and the shanghaiing.

Anyway, Fleming jumped ship and hid out in the west end. At some point he found himself at the YMCA Sunday lectures and was netted by John Virgo to work in the slums. He took on the running of a boarding house (nothing on these) and used to go with several others trawling through the slums of a night on what was called rescue work. At times this meant lifting young drunks out of the gutter: at that time fifteen year olds legally drank in hotels. At other times it meant counselling Chinese men crazed with opium, wild-eyed if we can believe it. In 1905 Thistle Anderson claimed that there were eight opium dens in Adelaide, more than in Melbourne; and it seems that not all their patrons were Asiatic. Nobody has done research to test

Anderson's claims. The Chinese missionary at the City Mission led the fight against the opium trade in South Australia. Nothing has been written on George Gee Wah's campaign, I think.

After his time as a boarding house manager, Fleming went up to Belair to study for the Chinese mission field with Lockhart Morton, who was running an inebriates home and a missionary training college. He wrote an autobiographical memoir in 1913. Nobody has done anything since on the man and his various establishments, on alcoholism and drifters. Nothing - that I have found - on the denizens of Whitmore Square!

One of the things Fleming was asked to do was to teach in the Chinese school, as all the missionaries did. He was very slow of intellect; steady but slow. He could not manage to learn Chinese. Eventually and after an exceptionally long apprenticeship he was reluctantly accepted for the mission field, but mainly I gather because he volunteered to work his way to Shanghai as a sailor and so saved the CIM some dollars. At all events he was sent to work not with Chinese speakers but with one of the non-Han ethnic groups in China, and it was in their area he met his death plodding along a dusty road. The proto-martyr had a monument in Shanghai until 1949, and maybe still has today - under layers of red paint. Back in Adelaide most of his acquaintances could scarcely remember him; and it was galling to them that thick-as-a-brick William Fleming had, by virtue of his martyrdom, been ushered into heaven already when their own spiritual fates were uncertain.

Of course it will be difficult to find evidence. These lowlifes and minorities did not write diaries or keep letters, that's if they were literate at all; they left their mark in newspaper reports of sporting matches or in transcripts of court proceedings, very occasionally in evidence given to official commissions. Youngsters seldom generated any documents; apart from a few long-lived colleges, schools did not maintain archives where students' progress and difficulties were recorded by teachers and inspectors. People who moved around didn't accumulate private papers. The Leschen papers all disappeared around 1920, from what I can make out by interviewing family members in Perth and Melbourne.

I had been doing work on Hugo Leschen's involvement with the short-lived cadet corps of 1900, using papers and the 1970 thesis by Hans Zwillenberg, later excerpted in *Sabretache* in 1985 but never put out as a book. All the records of the South Australian army itself were shipped to the Australian Army headquarters in Melbourne and went missing (unaccountably?? I can't tell). In 1992 Andrew and Sandra Twining compiled with enormous industry a list of the South Australian volunteers for 1855, though not situating the men; but never carried their enterprise further. A pity. The *Chronicle* newspaper was always very concerned about military matters, and from its pages the careers of various volunteers can be traced.

I found in the *Chronicle* for the summer of 1899-1900 a most interesting set of items in which appeared the names and self-descriptions of hundreds of men who had volunteered for the Boer War. I never found the time to go through Murray's *Official Records of the Australian Military Contingents to the War in South Africa* (1911) and compare it with the *Chronicle's* lists, but Blackmore's *Story of the South Australian Bushmen's Corps* lists the 100 officers and men who were chosen to go,

and the *Chronicle* lists (two that I found) show well over 300 bushmen who volunteered for it. These men were very often young and unmarried and, one presumes, living with their parents or boarding; because they are not in *Sands and McDougall* which lists only householders. We get entries like : 'Fred Hoad, Chain of Ponds, 22, single; good rider and shot, 12 months in Gumeracha Mounted Rifles', and 'C.E. McCabe North Adelaide, fire brigade station, 27; good horseman and shot, bush experience in Australia and America'. In many cases the volunteers seem to have drifted around the colonies working as roughriders and cooks and kangaroo hunters. J. Hughes of Adelaide, single, was 26 and had been in the bush in Western Australia, New South Wales, and now of course in South Australia, for the last twelve years since he was 14. I mention these men to prove that there was an underclass in Adelaide which only sporadically breaks out of obscurity. As to the navvies who toiled on the transcontinental railroad ... their employment records are probably in Peterborough or somewhere. Fragmentary biographies like these might be worth collecting together - into a group portrait, perhaps. It would require the skills of the family historian but would produce something more widely interesting than the record of a single lineage.

Otherwise the evidence for the underclass exists in the accounts of their doings written by bourgeois - often critical of their subjects. It was not just a matter of deploring the slums or of abolishing maypoles and fan-tan, of stigmatizing Devonshire wrestling and other low pursuits. It was a matter of hegemony, with the subaltern groups marginalised or reconfigured so as to make them harmless and folkloric. If this was difficult then they became waifs to be saved, larrikins to be reformed, and in short social problems to be solved. These problems were of course defined as such by the ruling group. The larrikins posed no problem for themselves. It is not easy to give speech to those who in life were muzzled, and it may be that the records really are deficient, though I doubt it. I suspect it is more that the museums and the rest of the heritage apparatus try to portray what visitors are presumed to want : not Darkest Adelaide, not even Eventful Adelaide, but only the nice Adelaide, what shall I say, the nice Nimble-and-Nipper Adelaide.