THE PETTICOAT PARADE

Madam Monnier & the Roe Street Brothels

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Introduction

This is the story of Marie Monnier and the Roe Street brothels. Back in the first half of the twentieth century, Perth had a red-light district across the railway tracks from the city centre. The newspapers called it the 'Rue de la Roe' and it was an infamous part of the city. It was a dusty and dirty street, with corrugated classing on its walls, windows and fences. Dust from the railway lines and from the steam trains that were still in service settled along the footpaths and road. Against the grime of the street, red cloth in front windows were a sign of the scarlet reputation of the precinct. The brothels were mixed in with factories, markets and small grocery shops. The police restricted motor traffic along the one-way street, partially so they could regulate it more easily but also so that fewer people would wander along past the brothels. Roe Street was the main thoroughfare for the brothels, but the precinct also included brothels on James Street, Melbourne Road (later re-named Milligan Street) and Lake Street.

Roe Street was generally quiet during the day with a few cars going by and men standing out the front of the brothels. Children were warned against going anywhere near the area and, as former locals have recalled, if they had to walk along the street on their way to school, they had to hurry past the houses and not talk to anyone. By night, Roe Street was much more lively. Women were out on the verandahs and there was often music and partying inside the houses. It was mostly kept to a minimum because no one wanted to alert the police, who were known to question men waiting in parked-up cars and give warnings to the women, but there were exceptions. The private detectives also worked the late shift, looking for stray husbands and collecting evidence for divorce cases.

Marie Monnier was the most famous of the madams, but was better known as her public identity, Josie de Bray. Few knew her full story and even fewer the circumstances of her former French life and her family there. It was best to be this way. The less people knew, the less chance there was of incriminating evidence being used against her. Across

decades, Marie came to know the secrets of the city, but in return for not rattling 'skeletons in many cupboards' of the high-profile people of Perth, she was afforded some privacy. Marie was a woman of discretion and an astute businessperson who knew part of the success of her business lay in being able to keep secrets, including her own.

There were also other notable women who worked in or ran the houses. One of them was Joan St Louis. She came to Roe Street in the early 1940s as Betty Campbell and was still working there when the brothels were shut down in the late 1950s. In 1988, aged seventy-six, she shared her recollections of Roe Street as part of an oral history project. Her frank insights into being a madam on the street are a rarity. Very few madams of the early-to-mid twentieth century shared their stories, and by the 1970s, with police corruption linked to the brothel business – as the murder of Shirley Finn would so awfully demonstrate in 1975 – the brothel madams and their workers kept silent.

The madams were joined in the business by brothel keepers (madams sometimes employed other women to run their houses) and their workers, who gave half their earnings to their boss. If they wanted to make a lot of money, they worked long hours and long weeks but the conditions were fair. The bosses allowed them time off to recharge. Marie Monnier was known to send her workers out to retreats in the Perth Hills. She also allowed some of her French workers to go back to France on holiday.

Beyond the houses themselves, the district was additionally populated with customers who stopped along 'Tail-light Alley' (as Roe Street was also called), the police who regulated the brothels, private detectives hired to catch out erring husbands, and locals and business owners who either made complaints about the houses of ill-fame or simply accepted them for what they were: another city business.

The Roe Street brothels were a part of the fabric of Perth society for many decades but once the brothels were closed and the houses bulldozed for later city progress, the sounds and stories of the women from the street were silenced. Even so, the women's stories endure in the archives and newspaper reports, and in the memories of locals. Despite all the pressures of a society that agitated for decades to have the brothels closed, the women of Roe Street ran successful businesses. They were women from a cross-section of society who remained unchanged by the nature of their profession: they were working women contributing to history. As the American feminist Gloria Steinem has observed, women are not an equal part of history, despite their being an equal part of the past.

Even before this though, it was a business surrounded by secrecy and silence. These working women were the keepers of secrets and they lived in a town that preferred they were kept secret too. There is only so much that can be known about an inherently clandestine business protecting clients and the brothel workers from public scrutiny and police prosecution. Many of the clients were married and some of the prostitutes and madams concealed their work from their families. Aliases were important to protecting identities, which is why when she was establishing her brothel business, Marie Monnier became Josie de Bray.

Work in prostitution was also shrouded in secrecy because the women could face prosecution under the *Police Act* of 1892. The Act gave the police the powers to deal with people offending the good order. Betting, disorderly conduct, drunkenness, idle and disorderly, and theft were all offences. Women working in prostitution could be apprehended and charged as 'idle and disorderly' or as vagrants. If they were repeat offenders they would be charged as 'rogues and vagabonds' and 'incorrigibles'. The idle and disorderly charge meant they had no lawful means of support and might be begging, frequenting places with thieves and 'common prostitutes', or acting in a riotous or indecent manner.

A typical example is that of Emily Cresswell, who was convicted as a rogue and vagabond in 1905 after numerous convictions for idle and disorderly. Police gave evidence in court that she was a 'decoy for some of the worst characters in Perth'. Street prostitution, as opposed to 'keeping a house of ill-fame', was more heavily prosecuted into the twentieth century because of the very public nature of what society defined at the time as immoral work.

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The title of this book comes from a newspaper article about the women working on Roe Street. They were known for their 'petticoat parade', walking along the verandahs of the brothels in their petticoats, and sometimes out on the street. Marie Monnier had to front court for her role in the one of the parades in 1926 and caught the eye of reporters with her stylish black attire and a 'flashing anklet of brilliants'.

There was an understanding in the red-light district that if the women in the brothels kept their work quiet and out of sight, they would be tolerated by the police. The brothels operated for so many decades because the police were pragmatic in their attitude to tolerating them in a clearly defined area rather than the haphazard nature of prostitution

that had plagued the city in the late nineteenth century. But when they had parties, brought in illegal booze (sly grog) and had noisy customers leaving at all hours of the night, the brothel keepers and madams ran the risk of a police raid and having to front court on charges of keeping a brothel. The notorious Josie de Bray was one who was particularly known for her parties and side business in sly grog. She sold sex and booze and made a fortune. Josie recognised that her customers wanted somewhere to escape from day-to-day life and let down their guard, as much as they wanted sex.

This book is about what it was like for the women working in the red-light district while facing regular police surveillance and public scrutiny of their activities. The women of Roe Street were wives, daughters, sisters and friends. They had their own identities, and their own reasons for taking up work in prostitution, and it seems fair to surmise they did not want to be demeaned or demonised by how others saw the work they did. It was only people on the outside of their work who lessened their identities but the stigma settled into their sense of self on the outside of the business. The story that unfolds in the pages ahead is not a moral one about the women who ran the brothels, the workers who offered sexual services, or the men who paid for it. It accounts for the brothels as businesses. While the moralists of the time did their best to keep people away from Roe Street and to keep the women of the red-light district from view, the street remained an icon of Perth city life.

There were those who were much more sympathetic, however, and they were often the clients. As a frequent patron of brothels and massage parlours for the last forty years explained to me, they had seen women in the business from all walks of life and 'the one thing they all had in common was they were all normal women'. All too often, however, a woman working in prostitution is not given an identity. She is portrayed as 'less than human, the archetypal "bad woman" or as a sexual "deviant".' In this way, prostitution becomes a matter of 'character, moral status or social worth'. What we lose sight of is the real women who work in prostitution.

There were campaigns to close the brothels, which would sensationally feature in the 1938 Royal Commission into the Administration of the Municipal Council of the Perth City Council, but it would take until the 1950s for the brothels to be officially closed. By then, the houses on Roe Street were prime real estate for industrial land use. The houses were pulled down in the 1970s and 1980s, some of them to make way for a

freeway overpass, and the street was widened for two-way traffic. The brothel precinct disappeared into the past.

In keeping with presenting the past on the pages that follow, as historians do and without applying present-day standards, I have used the words 'prostitutes' and 'prostitution' when referring to Marie Monnier and the women of Roe Street. People working in prostitution today are called sex workers but in Marie Monnier's time these other terms were used.

This story is being told in an effort to humanise the workers and madams. It destigmatises the business for both the service providers and the clientele. Back in the days of the 'Rue de la Roe', the brothel workers were characterised as 'degraded women'. What was lost and is now revealed here – as much as their secret lives will allow – are the women's experiences and stories.

Jessie Wilson was one of the Roe Street women. She used to sit out the front of a house at 218 Roe Street. The freeway overpass is there now and across on the other corner is the new Perth Police Station in Northbridge. Constable Reynold Sholl typed in his police report for 4 January 1940 that he had arrested and charged Jessie Wilson the previous day with soliciting for prostitution out the front of 218 Roe Street. This was the house next to where the first brothel madam had set up business on the street in 1905. With her 'Hullo Dearie' welcome, Sholl saw Jessie call out to men to come inside the house. She pleaded guilty to soliciting for prostitution and was fined in court on 18 January.

Back in 1940, Jessie watched and smiled at men as they passed by the house at number 218. Maybe they were on their way to work in one of the factories nearby, or finishing a shift and headed to the train station. Even better for Jessie were the men who knew her business and wanted to pay for it.

'Are you coming in, love?' she would say.

It's time to open the door again on the Roe Street brothels and see the people inside.

Prologue: 'Girls from France'

It was April Fools' Day 1913 and police prosecutor Sergeant James Smyth needed a result in court. He'd spent many long weeks putting the case together. James Smyth was a no-nonsense Dubliner who had left the Royal Irish Constabulary in the 1880s for a policing career on the other side of the world. You couldn't get much further away than Western Australia. Smyth had seen plenty of the shady side of life working at various police stations and especially since 1909 as a prosecuting officer in Perth. This case was different though. Prostitution was one thing; establishing a syndicate in sex was another.

Since November last, plainclothes officers from the city police station had been watching the comings and goings at a house in Roe Street. They were responding to complaints received by the Town Clerk at the Perth City Council which had also found their way to the new Commissioner of Police. Robert Connell had been acting in this role for a year and was about to be officially given the job of Commissioner. Connell was determined to turn the West Australian Police Force into a more professional outfit and would come to oversee the introduction of fingerprint technology which would revolutionise criminal investigations. Connell was intent on making a good start in his new role and he wanted Smyth and his officers to conduct a tight investigation into the house in Roe Street.

Plainclothes officers had kept the house under close observation, watching the front and back from various vantage points and then reporting back to Smyth with a catalogue of disturbances and questionable visitors. It was enough evidence to warrant a raid. Smyth had also come to the conclusion that something far greater than ordinary brothel business was going on. He had prosecuted a number of brothels in his time in Kalgoorlie and gained more insights watching the business while stationed at Fremantle.

The raid went ahead on the afternoon of 18 March 1913. The plan was to surprise the occupants with an afternoon raid because the police usually raided premises in the early morning or evening. Not this time.

The front door was busted in and people scampered away from the police officers, before five were arrested.

Two French women, Gabrielle Frout and Madeline Bergue, and a local woman, Vera Duffield, had to front the Court of Petty Sessions, or 'Police Court' as it was known, which was only a few blocks away at the eastern end of Roe Street. They were charged with working for an immoral purpose. Twenty-year-old Joseph Peckham was also charged, as a 'bludger', a man living off the proceeds of prostitution. Questions were raised about his collection of rents from houses on the street. But something far more professional was happening. The raid had revealed to Smyth and his officers that this was an established outfit with international connections.

The police called two other young French women to give evidence against Peckham. One of them, Marcelle Levis, recalled how, after they had arrived in Fremantle from France, Peckham picked them up in a motor car, saying it would allow them to 'avoid trouble'. He gave them a letter from 'Josie' and they were driven to Roe Street to meet her.

Sergeant Smyth asked, 'What was the business?', knowing full well what it was. He needed Marcelle to admit it in court.

Marcelle shifted awkwardly in the witness stand. 'Well, you know.'

'You tell us,' Smyth replied.

The courtroom was quiet, the reporters waited on the answer and then Marcelle said it: 'Prostitution.' There were gasps and hushed words from the public gallery.

In conservative Perth society, the three young women appearing in court that day were 'fallen women', members of the 'unfortunate class'. They had failed to live up to the ideal of the chaste woman who married, had children and thrived in the domestic sphere. Women selling sex, as the three Roe Street women were accused of doing, were outcast from society because prostitution was seen as the 'great social evil'. It was a threat to the sanctity of marriage and corrupted young women, binding them to an immoral life. Press sensationalism only fanned the flames of moral outrage further with stories of 'the extreme wantonness' of 'fallen women' who took the 'crooked road' and lost all self-respect. Some of the women could use aliases in court but many of them were named and shamed in the court reports in the newspapers.

Vera Duffield already had an interesting backstory. Born Josephine Vera McCarthy, she had married Herman Duffield in May 1908 and shortly after, her husband went to South Australia. Rather than follow

him, she went to stay with family in Northam, telling Herman she was pregnant and needed to be cared for. When Herman returned to Perth in September 1908, he found Josephine living in Roe Street. Though they tried to reconcile, Herman took off again in 1911 and Josephine wrote to him, saying he needed to forget her. He returned soon after but the relationship appeared to be over. This is when Josephine, as Vera, was arrested in the Roe Street brothel.

Augustus Sanford Roe presided over the April Fool's case of 1913. It was no quirk that he shared the same name as the street under investigation. Before its recent infamy, Roe Street had been named for the magistrate's father, John Septimus Roe, the first surveyor-general in Western Australia. Now his son worked at the Police Court on the corner of Roe and Barrack streets and met many of the women working further along the street at the brothels.

Magistrate Roe fined Joseph Peckham and sentenced him to three months imprisonment. He was scathing in his final comments to the young man, telling him that, in living off immoral earnings, he had 'got about a low down as he could get'. The three women were also fined and told that they needed to clear out of the house.

Sensationally, Josephine's appearance in court in 1913 was not her most scandalous. She would be charged with bigamy in February 1916 after she married a Greek man, Constantine Spathonis, in June the previous year. Her first husband was called on to give evidence, detailing their rocky relationship. When Herman enlisted in the war in November 1914, he did so from Sydney under an assumed name as a single man. When he was discharged as medically unfit in October 1915, he returned to Western Australia and found Josephine in Kalgoorlie. She wanted nothing to do with him. He couldn't find her there or anywhere else afterwards. Josephine had been involved in prostitution since the age of sixteen and there is evidence that her first husband had lived off the proceeds. Her lawyer claimed to have a letter in which Herman Duffield said he would not have bothered to raise the case of bigamy had she married an Australian.

Herman also had a long criminal record with convictions for assault, drunkenness, and stealing dating back to 1900. Herman was back to his old tricks in 1916 and had disappeared since informing the police of his wife's bigamy. Josephine pleaded guilty and asked for the court's mercy. She could have been sent to prison for seven years, as the justice pointed out, for an offence that was against the 'wellbeing of society'. Given that

her sister and brother-in-law were willing to take care of her, Josephine Vera Duffield avoided a prison sentence. But she didn't give up her work, eventually ending up running brothels in Queensland using the name Gaby Lewis, dying there in August 1970.

Duffield and the other women played second fiddle, however, to Sergeant Smyth's case against the woman he was convinced was 'practically importing' young women from France to work in her brothel. Police investigations had revealed her early associations with prostitution in Kalgoorlie and her gradual ascent to running brothels in Perth. Immigration records also showed she had headed back to France a number of times. Rather than innocent trips to visit family and holiday, as the accused claimed, Smyth was convinced they were recruitment drives for what he called her 'prostitution ring'.

Toleration was one thing but the professional takeover of Roe Street by the keeper of the house was creating a red-light district which Smyth knew would be harder to police. If the woman was buying up more houses on the street, as Smyth claimed, then there was every chance other brothel owners were doing the same thing to compete for business. A few brothels on a street could be tolerated but a street full of them, so close to the city centre, was not acceptable.

Marie Louise Batard was identified as the keeper of the house and pleaded guilty. Except she wasn't Marie Batard. Her surname was Bastard. From the very first moment of her arrival in Western Australia over a decade before, Marie's name caused confusion. It was a fitting name to have in a place like Australia, with the coarseness of the colonial frontier carrying over into the new century and the bawdy humour of the locals. If they liked you, they used the word as a term of endearment. A quick slap on the back, a chuckle and all was well. But it could be awkward at the same time and offensive, given the negative connotations associated with it. 'Bastard' had been used as a surname in France for centuries – and the French had a different word for what it meant in English – but Marie's French accent made the surname sound softer to the ear with the 's' less pronounced. She would often be mistaken as Batard and even Ballard in court cases.

Marie Bastard was a striking woman who adorned her five foot one frame with the latest fur cape and dress fashion from Europe. Her wavy brown hair was gathered carefully about her face and helped to emphasise her light grey eyes. It was a dramatic first appearance in the Perth Police Court for a woman who had done her best to avoid attention

while setting up her business. Except the police knew both who she was and exactly what her business plans were.

Marie's lawyer was hoping for leniency based on her unblemished court record. Arthur G. Haynes was an expert defence lawyer with an enviable track record which later, in 1925, included representing Audrey Jacob, a twenty-year-old art student who shot her ex-lover dead on the dancefloor of Government House in Perth. There were numerous witnesses, including police officers, and yet Audrey was acquitted and left court a free woman. Haynes was the commensurate professional in preparing his cases and was formidable in the courtroom. He would represent Marie Monnier many times over the years.

Marie and the three women had been advised to plead guilty. Haynes knew the police had a good case but he was looking for leniency for his clients. Exactly how Marie would be dealt with was of greater concern. She faced being fined or gaol time. Arthur Haynes explained to the magistrate that she had plans to 'sell out and leave the state'. It was on the basis of this that the police continued with their case under the *Police Act* rather than the *Criminal Code*. Under the code, Marie would have had to face a trial but was now being summarily dealt with.

Many of the women prosecuted by Smyth and other members of the police force were fined for keeping brothels. Had they been soliciting for sex on the streets – an offence far less tolerated by the police – they would have faced up to six months in prison. But Sergeant Smyth was keen on making a point about clamping down on the prostitution business in Perth. It would only be tolerated insofar as it was conducted privately and away from public eyes but there were growing social concerns that girls and young women were being duped into taking up prostitution.

Marie Louise Bastard was fined £20 in the April Fool's case and warned that if she did not pay the fine she faced two months hard labour in Fremantle Prison. Few wanted to go there. It was cold and dark with a prison staff unrelenting in their routine, in a formidable limestone building overlooking the Fremantle township. The prison was a convict barracks built in the 1850s but housing local prisoners from 1886. Royal Commissions into the prison were held in 1886 and 1911 but significant changes to the structure of the prison and reform didn't come through until the 1960s. If you believed the stories, Fremantle Prison was haunted too. One story in particular was already doing the rounds in 1913 that convicted murderer Martha Rendell wandered the corridors. She was

hanged on the grounds in 1909. She was also said to haunt the buildings in the West End of Fremantle.

Marie Bastard paid the fine and stayed true to her lawyer's promise. She left Western Australia two months later.

Sergeant Smyth won the 1913 court case but he lost the long game.

Marie Bastard would only be run out of town for a short time. She returned as Madam Monnier, but was better known as Josie de Bray, and became one of Perth's most famous brothel madams. Josie de Bray was a recognisable character about the streets of the city, with her French accent, large furs and expensive jewellery. As the newspapers would later tell it: 'Her name on a cheque was accepted for smart clothes for herself and her girls at some of the leading stores of her day.' She was also the first woman in Perth to have her hair dyed peroxide blonde.

And then 'one of the most talked about women in Perth' went missing. Marie Monnier disappeared in 1940 and it would be another nine years before her fate was known.

1. The Woman from Saint-Nazaire: Marie gets her starting money

Twenty-one-year-old Marie Bastard arrived in Fremantle on 10 July 1902, ready to make a new life for herself on the other side of the world. It wasn't an easy journey for a young woman to undertake and her family had no doubt worried for months until receiving a letter telling them she had reached her destination. This was no Atlantic crossing from France to America. It was twice as long with many months at sea. What all these immigration trips shared was their fair share of sickness aboard and, sadly, deaths at sea. The Irish appeared to suffer the worst, half a century before, with their 'coffin ships' bound for what the Europeans called the New World but that were in fact the ancient and traditional lands of the Indigenous peoples there. Marie was a young woman alone on the journey but she was far from being naïve; she knew how to manage the attentions of men, and how to profit from them in her new home. She already had plans to bring out friends from France to work for her in Western Australia.

Fremantle was Marie's first taste of life in Australia. In 1902, it was a thriving port town which wore its working-class identity as a badge of honour in contrast to the more gentrified city of Perth. Railway lines ran near to the harbour's edge for the loading and unloading of goods off the ships onto freight carriages and mail steamers. Sand and dirt, coal and lumber bordered the shipping precinct around main buildings, which included the railway station that linked up Fremantle to Perth and other major towns including Kalgoorlie. Carriages hurried along the streets with short periods of respite for the horses to pause and drink water from the horse troughs on Phillimore Street.

It was an interesting place, this Fremantle township, situated on the west coast of Australia. For over 40,000 years, the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation had cared for this country before the tall ships arrived in the winter months of 1829. On board those ships were hundreds of British people, including James Stirling, the man who would claim the region for

Britain and establish a colony as its first governor. The newcomers moved in and the traditional custodians were pushed off their ancestral land, often brutally forced to make way for a colonial economy measuring the land in terms of its wealth and maintained through human labour and servitude.

The town was bookended with a church at one end and a prison at the other. Fremantle Gaol was the first permanent building established in the colony. Later called the Round House, it opened in 1831 just as the Swan River 'mania' was dwindling and people started leaving the colony for other parts of Australia. Large number of incoming immigrants also steered clear, preferring Melbourne and Sydney, or Adelaide and Hobart.

Despite the efforts of the colonial gentry's desires to establish a genteel society, many of the newcomers were a shabby bunch. One colonist, Irishman George Fletcher Moore, wrote in his diary of 'dissatisfied' people 'who plod through the sand from hut to hut, to drink grog and grumble'. Doctor Thomas Braidwood Wilson portrayed Fremantle a 'very bad place, owing to the idleness, roguery, and thieving' of the people there. One of the first ships bringing settlers, servants and military men to the colony, the *Marquis of Anglesea,* had to be converted into a holding place for criminals before the gaol was built.

Through depression years and in a state of 'sin and sorrow', a colony emerged but it prospered on the back of convict transportation. Close to ten thousand male British criminals arrived from 1850 to 1868 and their labour was used to build much of the colonial infrastructure, including the current Shipwrecks Museum and Fremantle Prison.

Colonists continued to worry about sin, which had ample opportunity to thrive in a town in which thousands of criminals were arriving. Governor William Robinson described Fremantle in 1873 as a 'seaport lockup for drunken sailors and prostitutes'. Even into the new century, Fremantle suffered a harsher press than Perth. The *Sunday Times,* based in Perth, said Fremantle was the 'dirtiest town in the state' and its housing was 'dilapidated' where 'social outcasts of all sorts and conditions' lived.

By the time of Marie Bastard's arrival in 1902, Fremantle was a dishevelled, ratbag kind of place with a reputation for being somewhere you could find a 'brothel between two churches'. This suited Marie just fine but she also recognised something familiar in this remote outpost of the British Empire. Her French home town, Saint-Nazaire, where she was born on 2 October 1880, was similar to Fremantle. Located on the Loire River estuary on the west coast of France, Saint-Nazaire had been

a fishing village until the middle of the nineteenth century when a port was created. It became a major European port into the twentieth century with large-capacity shipbuilding yards.

Marie's early life in Saint-Nazaire is shrouded in secrecy. She revealed as little as possible about her French family and friends in the years following her Australian arrival, perhaps to avoid public attention for her family. Her father, Francis Auguste Bastard, was a farmer and her mother, Jeanne Marie, was from the Torzec family and no occupation is known, if there was one. This was the information Marie later provided for her marriage certificate and it was never made public. Newspaper journalists following Marie's later career speculated she came from a respectable family who 'moved in the best circles' and her work would have embarrassed her family. But Marie was never outcast from her family and visited her hometown over the years, albeit while on recruitment drives to find more young French women to work in her establishments. She also later nursed her ailing mother.

But Marie was only passing through Fremantle. She had her sights set on a town further inland that already had a reputation for prostitution and brothels. Before there was the *Rue de la Roe* in Perth, there was the *Rue de Brookman*. It was here that a young Marie Bastard travelled on a train from Fremantle not long after her arrival in Australia. Kalgoorlie was her starting place and gave her the money to establish herself in Perth. It also provided her with an alias that many actually mistook for being her real name, so well known was it in the years to come.

If Fremantle felt like a frontier town when Marie arrived there, Kalgoorlie was even more so. The main streets were set out in a grid-like fashion similar to Fremantle and Perth, with hotels, shops and houses lining them, but the feel of the place was very different. It was a north-eastern town hundreds of kilometres from the other major settlements and closer to the Nullarbor Plain and the Great Sandy Desert. The heatwaves were intense, and dust and smoke hung around the town from Kalgoorlie's biggest drawcard: mining.

Since the late 1880s and the discovery of gold in the Kimberley, and then Yilgarn in the eastern Wheatbelt region, prospectors had been coming to Western Australia from across the world. One of them, Patrick 'Paddy' Hannan, was part of an Irish partnership with two other men and they found gold near Coolgardie in June 1893. As news of the find spread, thousands of men travelled from across Western Australia, the other Australian colonies and from China, the United States and other

part of the globe to make their fortune in gold, just as had happened in the 1850s in Victoria and in California in the 1840s. Western Australia's population tripled, with the gold rushes going from less than 50,000 people in 1889 to 170,000 by the close of the century.

Gold also brought prostitution to the town. Non-Indigenous women started migrating to Kalgoorlie in the 1890s and a demand for their work increased after Hannan's gold success. They found work as barmaids (because the number of pubs had increased to accommodate the gold diggers) and nurses. Other women took up prostitution. These women provided essential services – health, drinking and sex – in a largely male population.

Brookman Street became Kalgoorlie's main area for prostitution from the late nineteenth century. It extended down to Hay Street and created a red-light district. Marie Bastard bought a house on Brookman Street and turned it into a brothel. Over the years, she would add another one or two to the collection and sold them off when she needed more money for her Roe Street establishments.

Prostitutes were the largest group of women on the goldfields, working out of cottages along Brookman and Hay streets. It didn't take long for the newspaper reporters to report on this scandal to the locals. Perth's *Sun* newspaper announced to its readers in October 1898 that the 'evil' was in Kalgoorlie:

> The social evil as it exists on the goldfields is a frightful open sore, gross and palpable to every man, woman, and child who walks our streets – an offence to public decency, a danger to the moral sense of the community, a source of hideous disease, blasting the lives of men, and entailing the awful curse of inherited disease upon ages yet unborn – a shame and a reproach to our local governments. The evil is here.

A few days after the *Sun* article, a local resident – calling themselves 'A BELIEVER IN FACTS' – wrote to the editor of the paper and asked for the 'crusade' to be kept up against the 'soul-and-body-damning evil'. The sensationalism continued in the years to come, with the *Sun* arguing in 1903:

> There can be no question that prostitution in Westralia, and particularly on the goldfields, flaunts itself in the face of respectability in a manner truly unconventional. Nowhere else in

> any British-speaking community is the traffic in vice carried on so systematically, so much in the open light of day, and in so absolutely matter of fact a manner.

Kalgoorlie was a latecomer to a scene that had been around in Australia since the late eighteenth century. It was of great concern to Scottish naval lieutenant Ralph Clark, as he travelled to the other side of the world in 1787. He was onboard the *Friendship* with its shipload of convicts and had spent months at sea with criminals who were being 'transported beyond the seas' to an enforced exile in the yet-to-be established penal colony of New South Wales. But it was the female convicts who seemed to bother him the most as he committed pen to paper in his journal. Clark was part of the First Fleet which arrived in Sydney in January 1788 and established the first penal colony in Australia for the British Empire.

'My God, not more of those damned whores,' Clark said, catching sight of the female convicts coming off the Second Fleet of ships in Sydney. With this statement, which would echo down the years, he tainted all women transported to the other side of the world as 'damned whores'.

Clark's 'damned whores' were more a reflection of his own class bias, judging working-class female convicts as unrespectable women. They drank, smoked and were disobedient, and military men such as Ralph Clark thought this ran contrary to the Victorian feminine ideal of the chaste, moralistic and passive woman. This didn't stop Lieutenant Clark from becoming intimate with one of the convict women though. He later fathered a child with Mary Branham while he was posted to Norfolk Island and still married to his wife, Betsy.

Just under 25,000 women were transported to New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land, the first non-Indigenous women to settle in Australia. They were mainly from working-class backgrounds and brought with them a range of skills. There were publicans and schoolmistresses, needlewomen and milliners, specialised and domestic servants. Over half of the women were transported for stealing and rather than being from a professional criminal class, were mainly first offenders. For those who became involved in prostitution, their image would always be taken as the opposite of the 'good' woman.

While not all of the female convicts had a history of prostitution or took up this work in Sydney, it is true that prostitution was brought to Australia with the arrival of the first ships filled with non-Indigenous men and women. There is no evidence of prostitution in Aboriginal communities before colonisation. Around twenty per cent of convict

women had been prostitutes before their transportation to New South Wales. With limited economic opportunities, prostitution was a means of self-support for some women in the early colonial period. It could also be a profitable enterprise, given the demand for sex within the colonial population and the close proximity of the port and visiting seamen.

As the colonial capitals developed – a mixture of convict and free societies – so too did prostitution. By the last years of the nineteenth century, there were identifiable areas in the major towns where streetwalkers were known to solicit for sex while other women worked from their houses. Melbourne's red-light district developed in the block bounded by La Trobe Street, Spring Street, Lonsdale Street and Exhibition Street. It was known as the 'Little Lon' district. Sydney's main centre of prostitution in this period was in the city centre, along George, Pitt, Castlereagh, Elizabeth, Liverpool, Phillip and King streets.

We don't know why Marie Bastard chose Western Australia over the other colonies but she fit the demographics of prostitution in Kalgoorlie. Most of the sex business from the 1890s operated out of French and Japanese brothels, said to be run by syndicates. By 1900 there were at least fourteen or fifteen French brothels in Kalgoorlie and up to a dozen Japanese-run businesses. The local girls in Kalgoorlie, either from Western Australia or other Australian colonies and making up at least half of the prostitutes, usually worked in female-run establishments.

While there is no evidence, beyond rumours, that Marie was linked to one of the syndicates, she may have been recruited from France as were other women in the town. Once in Kalgoorlie, she would have been able to make connections with establishments in Perth, given some of the women worked in both places.

The police in Kalgoorlie tolerated prostitution as a 'necessary evil' but expected the women to stay in the brothels and not mingle with the rest of the population. Both the Kalgoorlie Municipal Council and the Kalgoorlie Roads Board tried to suppress and restrain the brothels but left it to the police to act on complaints. The effect of this approach was to create an unofficial policy of containment in Kalgoorlie.

The foreign monopoly on brothels in Kalgoorlie also led to press campaigns about a slave trade in young women. There were stories of young women being duped into taking up prostitution and not looked after once in the brothels. There was a greater use of pimps, and a trade going on in the sale of women between establishments. Few of the women ever came forward with complaints to the Kalgoorlie police, most

probably fearing retributions from their bosses, and so it's difficult to say just how bad things were on the goldfields for the brothel workers.

Marie and other women knew all too well how violent this life could be. Customers could be unpredictable but it was also the 'bludgers' – the men who lived off their work – who could cause more trouble. Kalgoorlie had its fair share of pimps, whereas this was something that didn't carry down to the Roe Street brothels. Pimps lived off women on the Perth streets but the brothel owners wanted nothing to do with them. One way in which the women in Kalgoorlie could try and move beyond the pimps was to buy a house and run it themselves. However, even this didn't preclude them from violence. Marie herself would later be threatened at gunpoint in Roe Street but back in her days in Kalgoorlie, another French brothel owner featured in a sensational murder case and suffered a terrible demise.

Parisian-born Adele de Montigney, alias Amelia Mignon and also Mignon Vasseur, was running her brothel in Brookman Street in November 1903 when an argument broke out between herself and a Frenchman, Louis Castignan. Another man, Italian immigrant Giuseppe Piazzola, stepped in and a scuffle broke out between the two men in the back yard of the brothel. Giuseppe picked up an axe and threatened to hit Louis with it but decided instead to push past him and try to take off out of the house. At the front door, Louis pulled him around and there was another tussle in which Louis bit Giuseppe on the face. The fight continued out onto Brookman Street, with witnesses gathering, and as the two men fought on the ground, Louis was stabbed a number of times. Giuseppe ran off to the police station where he accosted a constable and told him he had been assaulted but the blood on his clothes worried the officer who asked Giuseppe to take him back to the house. It was there that they found Louis dead in the dining room. This, it would be later revealed, was from a fatal wound to the heart. Amelia Mignon and Frenchwoman, Josephine Pauline Guelit, were with Louis.

Despite Giuseppe's claims that the knife belonged to Louis and he had accidentally stabbed himself in the chest, the inquest led to a trial and much of the police evidence hinged on the statements from the women who had been in the brothel with the men. Amelia Mignon sensationally claimed that she had overheard the accused tell Louis that he would murder him. But her worker, Marie Guelit, gave evidence that in fact it was Amelia who told Louis first that if he did not leave the house she would 'stick a knife into him'. But there were witnesses on the street who

had clearly seen two men fighting and Amelia Mignon was not there. Whether or not she had incited Giuseppe's fury is speculation only but tensions had clearly been high in the lead-up to the fatal attack.

As terrible as the case was, something else came to light too. It seemed that the young worker, Marie Guelit, had been forced into prostitution and was looking for police protection. The newspapers decried another 'white slave trade' case and cast doubts yet again over the brothel business. When the trial was over, young Marie was assisted with her passage back to France and her family.

Giuseppe Piazzola was convicted of manslaughter – his lawyer having claimed he did not intentionally mean to stab the victim – and sentenced to five years imprisonment down at Fremantle Prison.

Twenty-three-year-old Adele de Montigney left Kalgoorlie and under the name of Mignon Vasseur set up business in Fremantle. She had a place on Nairn Street and later moved to a house in Norfolk Street which she ran as a brothel. Adele ran into some trouble with the police and late in 1909 was sentenced to six months imprisonment for vagrancy, no doubt linked to her work. She was released the following April and was seen around Fremantle with a young Italian man, Scurri Alessandro. The police were watching the pair closely, knowing Scurri was living off the proceeds of prostitution, something which they could charge him with.

One month later, on 30 May 1910, Adele was seen screaming in her doorway, her clothing on fire. Scurri later told the police he ran out of the house to get a doctor but they claimed he was found in a wine shop. It was all very suspicious. In the meantime, suffering horrific injuries and shock, Adele was rushed to hospital. She succumbed to her injuries on 2 June.

Sergeant Smyth, the same policeman who would later prosecute Marie Bastard and other Roe Street women, clearly thought Scurri was responsible. While there was nothing in the inquest to pin on him and take to trial, the police stepped in and had him charged with vagrancy. His actions after the attack on Adele were questionable. Scurri had pawned some of her property after the fire and taken her savings from her bank account. He was also known to fight intermittently with Adele and screams had been heard from inside the brothel.

Sergeant Smyth held little back in questioning Scurri in Fremantle Police Court, asking: 'Haven't you been living with Mignon from April 4 to the day when you left her burning in the doorway?' Scurri said this was not true and was concerned by the line of questioning. When Smyth

again asked him why he had left her burning, Scurri said he went for a doctor. The seasoned police officer then asked Scurri if there really was a doctor to be found in a wine shop. Smyth clearly wanted it to be known that Scurri was responsible for Adele's death.

But there was one problem. Adele gave a dying deposition from her hospital bed in which she denied Scurri had hurt her and instead told the police that an Englishman had been at the brothel, they had argued, and he had thrown the lamp at her before taking off.

Turning to the magistrate in the vagrancy case against Scurri, Sergeant Smyth pleaded for harsh sentencing. Scurri, he said, had been living off Adele for months 'and yet the callous wretch left the woman burning to death, while he repaired to a wine shop'. Scurri Allesandro received three months imprisonment.

Recalling Adele's life in its own piece on her death, *Truth* newspaper claimed she was more 'sinned against than sinning' and had suffered terrible abuse at the hands of men associated with her work. The newspaper also revealed that Adele herself had been pushed into prostitution and her mother had contacted people in Western Australia trying to find her, pleading that her daughter was 'long and mysteriously lost to her'. Adele's mother came forward before her daughter's death, trying to locate her after she received an unsigned letter she believed was from Adele. But, as *Truth* pointed out, Western Australia was a big place and the connection hadn't been made that Adele was in fact either Amelia Mignon or Mignon Vasseur.

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For all her later notoriety, Marie Bastard kept a low profile in Kalgoorlie. She avoided apprehension and no convictions were recorded against her before she removed permanently to Perth. This move to Perth was one shared with other madams on Roe Street, including Leontine Blanc and Betty Campbell. The more formidable Marie Guidotti also featured in Roe Street but didn't remain there long-term. There was a clear code on the street and someone with Guidotti's reputation didn't sit well with the other women.

In Kalgoorlie in 1902, she had been charged with procuring girls for prostitution and other charges were laid against her over the years that followed. By 1913, she was in Fremantle, operating 'Rose Villa', but earned notoriety for drunkenness and violence in the brothel. She was described in 1916 as the 'most notorious brothel keeper in the State' when she

was charged and convicted with keeping a brothel on Roe Street. She didn't feature on Roe Street after then, mainly because Marie Bastard was buying up the houses and pushing Guidotti out. It's also probable the authorities deported Marie Guidotti back to Europe as she is unheard of in the records after 1916.

Kalgoorlie was a good starting place for the business but it was a hard, isolated town too. But before Marie relocated permanently to Perth, she found herself another name. On 15 October 1908 the *Sunday Times* included in its 'Goldfields Gossip' section notice of an upcoming marriage: 'Mr. Addis Bray, of Binduli, is to marry Miss Mariette Bastard, of Perth, on the 28th inst.' There is no known official marriage certificate and Marie's later marriage certificate only identifies her by her maiden name. But Marie did take something from the relationship. Addis gave her an alias.