‘A menace and an evil’

Fortune-telling in Australia, 1900–1918

Alana Jayne Piper

Fortune-telling was hugely popular in Australia in the early 1900s. Frequently employed as entertainers at society and charity events, fortune-tellers across the country plied their trade from shops, street-stalls, private homes or travelling sideshows, and advertised their businesses in the daily press. Yet fortune-telling was also a criminal practice under legislation inherited from England. Up until the early twentieth century, however, it seems to have been seldom policed. In contrast, the dawn of the new century saw spates of prosecutions against practitioners and decisions by a number of Australian states to affirm the practice’s criminal status under new laws. Divining the future was treated as ‘a menace and an evil’, and as an embarrassment in the face of the scientific and intellectual advances of the era. At a time when Australia was entranced by a vision of itself as a rational, forward-thinking nation of white males, fortune-telling was not only considered a relic of old-fashioned ignorance but was associated with female credulity, working-class superstitions and incursions by foreign cultures. The history of fortune-telling therefore offers new ways of understanding how questions of gender, race and class inflected the national identity developed during the Federation era.

This article has been peer-reviewed.

In December 1900 various regional newspapers throughout Australia distributed coupons to their readers for a book that contained instructions for foretelling the future using ordinary playing cards.¹ The promotional activity was merely one example of the popularity fortune-telling enjoyed in Australia at the turn of the century. This growing fascination with divination may have been connected to a more general preoccupation with the future ushered in by the Federation period.² Tied to this process of looking forward were endeavours both to establish Australia’s national identity and police the pastimes of its citizenry.³ It was in this crucial era that legislators sought to control the Australian future by defining the national culture as that of a ‘white man’s country’,

¹ *Fitzroy City Press*, 7 December 1900, 2; *Morwell Advertiser*, 7 December 1900, 2; *Barrier Miner* (Broken Hill), 8 December 1900, 6.

² Melissa Bellanta, ‘Rethinking the 1890s’, in *The Cambridge History of Australia*, ed. Alison Bashford and Stuart Macintyre (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 240–41.

³ Ann Curthoys, ‘Identity Crisis: Colonialism, Nation, and Gender in Australian History’, *Gender & History* 15, no. 2 (1993): 165–76.

or more specifically as that of the educated, white male.⁴ Attempts to suppress fortune-telling in the early twentieth century formed part of these efforts to construct the national image by defining it against gender, class and racial 'others'. Opposition to fortune-telling was based not, as might be expected, on traditional religious grounds, but on the belief that fortune-telling represented an impediment to national progress due to its association with the cultures of women, the working classes and non-British races. The perception that both the clientele and practitioners of fortune-telling were drawn from these allegedly backward elements in society led the practice to be labelled by Australian newspapers, including those who profited from the distribution of the 1900 fortune-telling guide, as 'a menace and an evil'.⁵

Little historical scholarship exists on fortune-telling in Australia. It was evidently not an offence that commonly appeared before the courts, although precise prosecution figures are hard to establish as official statistics tended to subsume it under broader offence categories such as vagrancy or imposing by fraudulent representations. Plentiful information on the practice is, however, obtainable from the period's newspapers, which not only recorded fortune-telling's popularity, but launched successive campaigns against it. This article is therefore largely based on material collected from the various Australian newspapers available online through Trove, as well as a manual search of *Truth* (Brisbane and Melbourne editions), *New Idea* and *Everylady's Journal*, for the years 1900–18. As a weekly tabloid specialising in crime and stirring up social outrage, *Truth* was a source of detailed coverage for particular fortune-telling trials as well as general harangues against the practice. The women's periodicals were examined to determine if different perspectives existed in writings aimed at the female public. This search returned over 8000 articles referencing fortune-telling. Some of these were duplicates of the same material where items were syndicated across different newspapers. Other articles, while not relating to the practice itself, demonstrate the strong presence of fortune-telling in the era's popular culture: there was an Australian race-horse named Fortune-teller in the early 1900s, and the comic opera *The Fortune-Teller* enjoyed

⁴ Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Carlton: Melbourne University Publishing, 2008), 137–65; Marilyn Lake, 'On Being a White Man, Australia, circa 1900', in *Cultural History in Australia*, ed. Hsu-Ming Teo and Richard White (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2003), 98–112.

⁵ *Truth* (Brisbane), 9 November 1902, 4.

a successful run in Sydney and Melbourne in 1903.⁶ Fluctuations in the number of articles referencing the term on Trove point even more definitively to the early twentieth century being a heyday for public interest in fortune-telling. From 2387 articles in the 1890s, the number of pieces mentioning fortune-telling leapt to 4154 in the 1900s and 4511 in the 1910s, before falling back to 2535 articles in the 1920s.

The surge of interest in divination at the turn of the twentieth century was not unique to Australia, but was also witnessed in Great Britain, Europe and North America.⁷ Newspaper reports of the overseas vogue doubtlessly influenced the practice's popularity in Australia, with journalists noting that locals had quickly adopted what was significantly dubbed the fortune-telling 'craze' or 'mania'.⁸ While it was said to be most prevalent in the capital cities, there were also reports of fortune-tellers setting up in many rural centres.⁹ The use of palmistry, tarot cards or clairvoyant communication with the spirit world were the customary forms of divination employed, but readings were also to be had in phrenology, crystal gazing, tea-cup reading, astrology, psychometry, physiognomy, onymancy, aura reading, graphology and bibliomancy.¹⁰ Other fortune-tellers additionally claimed healing powers, or sold protective amulets and charms.¹¹ Some operated from home, while others offered readings at hotels, tearooms, street stalls at Sydney's Paddy's Market or Melbourne's Eastern Market, and even from dedicated shops in popular city thoroughfares.¹² The practice's fashionability meant fortune-tellers were also frequently invited to demonstrate their skills at charity fund-raisers and private parties, with newspapers declaring by the early 1900s that it had become a diversion without which no social

⁶ *Referee* (Sydney), 13 February 1901, 5; *Referee*, 18 February 1903, 10; *Referee*, 4 March 1903, 10.

⁷ Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 28; Stan McMullin, *Anatomy of a Seance: A History of Spirit Communication in Central Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), 18.

⁸ *Australian Town and Country Journal* (Sydney), 13 January 1900, 31; *Capricornian* (Rockhampton), 27 July 1901, 6; *Broadford Courier*, 20 September 1901, 6; *West Australian* (Perth), 21 January 1907, 4; *Queenslander* (Brisbane), 23 June 1900, 1185.

⁹ *Argus* (Melbourne), 28 May 1907, 4; *Barrier Miner*, 2 September 1909, 2; *Queanbeyan Age*, 12 May 1900, 2.

¹⁰ *Argus*, 28 November 1900, 7; *Argus*, 28 February 1903, 15.

¹¹ *Western Mail* (Perth), 23 January 1904, 39.

¹² Andrew Brown-May, *Melbourne Street Life: The Itinerary of our Days* (Kew: Australian Scholarly/Arcadia; Museum Victoria, 1998), 55–6.

event was considered complete.¹³ On at least one occasion a fortune-telling side-show was even offered to guests at a celebration hosted in the home of a local magistrate.¹⁴

Yet despite the preponderance of fortune-tellers and the open manner in which they conducted their business, purporting to tell the future was at this time an illegal act. In Australia, however, prosecutions appear to have been rarely undertaken during the nineteenth century. Even with the industry's growth in the early 1900s and the backlash this inspired, between 1900 and 1918 local newspapers reported only 247 prosecutions against fortune-tellers across Australia. Most of these cases occurred in the context of concentrated spates of prosecutions launched in response to press criticism over inaction against the trade. It seems that police otherwise unofficially tolerated fortune-telling, which inherited its illegal status from English legislation that coupled the practice with witchcraft as a nuisance to the community under vagrancy laws.¹⁵ Fortune-telling's association with occultism persisted, with early twentieth-century fortune-tellers often dubbed modern 'Witches of Endor' in newspaper reports.¹⁶ But the outcry against fortune-telling was seldom based on religious objections. Indeed, fortune-telling regularly featured at church fetes, although on these occasions amateurs from the congregation rather than professionals appear to have been employed.¹⁷ When religious ministers did occasionally speak out against the dangers of placing too much credence in the predictions of modern prophets, their warnings were far more temperate than those of the newspapers reporting them.¹⁸

¹³ *Daily News* (Perth), 10 March 1900, 3; *Capricornian*, 27 July 1901, 6; *Bunbury Herald*, 17 June 1911, 9; *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, 16 January 1903, 2; *Horsham Times*, 23 February 1900, 4; *Brisbane Courier*, 4 April 1900, 9; *Gippsland Times*, 11 June 1900, 3; *Brisbane Courier*, 8 October 1900, 3; *Brisbane Courier*, 7 December 1900, 6; *Mercury*, 17 December 1900, 3; *Coburg Leader*, 2 March 1901, 1; *Mildura Cultivator*, 18 May 1901, 6; *Register* (Adelaide), 21 October 1901, 4; *Register*, 30 January 1902, 4; *Brisbane Courier*, 16 May 1902, 6; *Morning Bulletin* (Rockhampton), 26 September 1903, 6; *Examiner* (Launceston), 14 June 1906, 6; *Singleton Argus*, 11 June 1907, 2

¹⁴ *Bunbury Herald*, 13 February 1900, 3.

¹⁵ Susanne Elizabeth Davies, 'Vagrancy and the Victorians: The Social Construction of the Vagrant in Melbourne, 1880–1907' (PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 1990), 123.

¹⁶ *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 31 July 1902, 5; *Sunday Times* (Perth), 18 January 1903, 4.

¹⁷ *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, 16 January 1903, 2; *Western Mail*, 23 February 1907, 38; *Western Australian*, 13 November 1900, 4; *Morning Bulletin*, 6 December 1900, 6; *Mercury* (Hobart), 4 February 1902, 4; *Queanbeyan Age*, 15 March 1902, 3; *Healesville and Yarra Glenn Guardian*, 20 December 1902, 4; *West Australian*, 16 April 1903, 3; *Morning Post* (Cairns), 15 January 1904, 2.

¹⁸ *North Western Advocate and the Emu Bay Times*, 3 December 1904, 3; *Mercury*, 11 March 1903, 8.

The press opposed fortune-telling, not on spiritual grounds, but as an outrage to modern sceptical sensibilities.¹⁹ The divination craze was ridiculed as an anachronism, with one paper commenting contemptuously that fortune-tellers were doing pretty well in the 'age of reason'.²⁰ The following year another suggested that the preponderance of soothsayers made it easy to imagine that Australia was 'living in the Middle Ages, instead of Anno Domini 1903'.²¹ While fortune-telling was often discussed as a subject of humour, the foolishness it betrayed was seen more seriously as a blot on national character. In 1901 the *Fitzroy City Press* declared that hitherto society had been 'too much inclined to sneer' at fortune-telling, but that the time had come when new legislation was needed to protect the 'credulous public ... or we shall soon become a laughing-stock'.²² In a letter to the Melbourne *Argus* in 1907 signed 'A Citizen', the writer similarly denounced fortune-telling, asserting that 'In an enlightened country, which provides free education to all, this humbug should be put a stop to. We are past the dark ages.'²³ Letters in agreement quickly followed.²⁴ Other papers concurred that new legislation against fortune-telling was needed not to punish 'such people as our forefathers did, for an offence akin to witchcraft' or out of fear of 'incurring the wrath of righteous God', but to affirm Australia's position as a forward-thinking nation.²⁵ In framing it as a rational rather than moral issue, the prosecution of fortune-tellers was even likened to other progressive measures designed to ensure community well-being, such as legislation enforcing proper sanitation or compelling parents to vaccinate their children.²⁶ Just as with these laws, legal action against fortune-tellers was portrayed as necessary in order to protect individuals whose ignorance was believed to place them at risk.

Chief among those deemed in need of protection were women, who reputedly comprised the vast bulk of the fortune-tellers' clientele. Faith Wigzell states that in Russia by the turn of the century, fortune-telling 'was viewed as a demonstration of female empty-headedness and illogicality', a finding that could be equally applied to Australia.²⁷

¹⁹ *Advertiser*, 31 July 1902, 5.

²⁰ *West Gippsland Gazette* (Warragul), 3 June 1902, 6

²¹ *Examiner*, 23 May 1903, 7.

²² *Fitzroy City Press*, 25 January 1901, 3.

²³ *Argus*, 29 January 1907, 8.

²⁴ *Argus*, 30 January 1907, 10; *Argus*, 31 January 1907, 10.

²⁵ *Daily News*, 24 May 1900, 4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Faith Wigzell, *Reading Russian Fortunes: Print Culture, Gender, and Divination in Russia from 1765* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 5.

Australian newspapers pronounced the main 'victims' of fortune-tellers to be 'simple women', 'weak-minded women' or 'members of the weaker sex'.²⁸ The association between women and fortune-telling not only perpetuated belief in female irrationality, but reinforced fortune-telling's status as a quaint custom, at odds with the reason of western society. Men, as the cultural and intellectual leaders of this society, were urged to take responsibility for stamping out the trade. The calls for stronger legislation against fortune-telling acquired a paternalistic quality; men had a duty to protect women from themselves.²⁹ At the same time, female interest in fortune-telling was used to reaffirm male intellectual superiority in a period when it was increasingly called into question under the advent of first-wave feminism. In 1902 the *Queenslander* thus snidely ridiculed the women's movement by declaring that '[i]n an age when we are perpetually being reminded of the advance of women from a social and economic point of view, it fills the observer with amazement to find that women in this era of common sense can be so eminently foolish.... as to consult the impostors who make their living by fortune-telling'.³⁰ Although intended primarily for a female audience, *New Idea* likewise condemned belief in fortune-telling as one of the worst 'vagaries of women', adjuring its readers that money spent on fortune-tellers would be far better invested in chocolate-creams.³¹ 'Comrade Mary', the female columnist for the *Worker*, also agreed that the popularity of fortune-telling was evidence that 'for centuries feeling has been cultivated in women at the expense of reason', although she used this contention to advocate women's education.³²

Other supposedly female characteristics were believed to make women 'easy prey' for fortune-tellers.³³ It was claimed that seeking knowledge of the future was an extension of the 'natural curiosity inherent to the female mind' equally evident in women's penchant for gossiping, another condemned female pastime.³⁴ Physiological rationales for female inferiority were called upon to explain this curiosity; an obsession with the future was a symptom of women's 'neurotic impulses'.³⁵ Fortune-

²⁸ *Examiner*, 23 May 1903, 7; *Clarence and Richmond Examiner* (Grafton), 1 November 1904, 4.

²⁹ *Argus*, 24 November 1909, 7.

³⁰ *Queenslander*, 5 April 1902, 757.

³¹ *New Idea* (Melbourne), 6 June 1903, 939.

³² *Worker* (Brisbane), 5 April 1902, 10.

³³ *Advertiser*, 31 July 1902, 5.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Clipper* (Hobart), 30 June 1900, 3.

tellers were moreover supposed to enjoy greater success with females due to women's inability to keep silent or control their emotions, which provided the psychics with more informational cues on which to build a reading.³⁶ Women's 'romantic turn of mind' was similarly labelled an influential factor in divination's popularity, as single girls followed by unhappily married women were considered the fortune-teller's major customers.³⁷ Sometimes, though, women's reasons for recourse to divination were anything but romantic. Through the early twentieth century a number of fortune-tellers in Australian cities were accused of providing women with contraceptive information, acting as agents for abortionists or themselves performing such operations.³⁸ Local papers averred that the provision of such services was a natural segue for fortune-tellers whose counsel was sought both by single girls who 'got into trouble' and married women who hoped that the future would not include more children.³⁹ The association of fortune-telling with abortion, which occurred in other countries as well as Australia, suggests the continuance of earlier traditions in which divination overlapped with female healing and midwifery.⁴⁰ But given Australia's fears of 'race-suicide' in the early twentieth century, the connection between fortune-telling and women limiting their own fertility tended to heighten perceptions of the practice as a threat to male-dominated society and the country's future as a British nation.

The viewpoint that fortune-telling could have darker consequences than just the defrauding of gullible females encouraged the media's vitriol and periodic police crackdowns on fortune-tellers. As with other crimes involving women, however, the occurrence of fortune-telling within the private female realm presented problems to the male police force.⁴¹ Policemen ordered to investigate clairvoyants reported

³⁶ *Warwick Examiner and Times*, 15 November 1915, 1.

³⁷ *Examiner*, 23 May 1903, 7; *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 6 January 1900, 56; *Clipper*, 26 March 1904, 4.

³⁸ Letter re Madame Le Grin, 11 January 1917, Unit 595, VPRS 897/P0, Public Record Office of Victoria (PROV); Frank Bongiorno, *The Sex Lives of Australians: A History* (Collingwood: Black Inc., 2012), 71; Lyn Finch and Jon Stratton, 'The Australian Working Class and the Practice of Abortion 1880–1939', *Journal of Australian Studies* 12, no. 23 (1988): 57.

³⁹ *Clipper*, 30 June 1900, 3; *Barrier Miner*, 9 November 1904, 4; *Argus*, 3 July 1901, 7.

⁴⁰ Edwin M. Hale, *The Great Crime of the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: C. S. Halsey, 1867), 17; Willem De Blecourt and Cornelia Osborne, 'Women's Medicine, Women's Culture: Abortion and Fortune-Telling in Early Twentieth-Century Germany and the Netherlands', *Medical History* 43, no. 3 (1999): 376–92.

⁴¹ Judith A. Allen, *Sex and Secrets: Crimes Involving Australian Women since 1880* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1990), 20.

difficulties amassing evidence against them, as fortune-tellers were instantly suspicious of men presenting themselves as customers; some even took the precaution of declaring their services were for women only.⁴² (The willingness of practitioners to relinquish potential revenue in this way intimates men probably did comprise a relatively small part of their clientele, although the ridicule of fortune-telling as a female pastime might have acted as a self-fulfilling prophecy by discouraging male participation.) As a result, the police often resorted to employing women as enquiry agents to gather the necessary testimony in the early 1900s, while the prosecution of fortune-tellers was a significant part of the duties of the first policewomen introduced in various Australian states during World War One.⁴³ Actual clients themselves were of little help, with the *Adelaide Advertiser* lamenting that ‘weak-minded women’ could not be persuaded ‘to give evidence in a court which would be of any value, because many times when put to the test they have declared that there was no deception’.⁴⁴

Most Australian women, as Andrew Davies argues in respect to women in England, probably treated a visit to a fortune-teller as a form of entertainment.⁴⁵ In newspapers the practice was represented as dangerous, however, due to the assumption that women implicitly believed the predictions they received. Referring to fortune-telling’s female customer base, one paper thus jeered:

They will tell you that they do not believe in the predictions made to them, and that they go to the seers only for amusement; but all the same they do believe. What a satire on our civilisation is this superstition.⁴⁶

Faith in the advice of fortune-tellers was not only said to make a mockery of modern Australia, but to encourage women to ruin their lives by breaking off happy engagements, cutting friendships or making poor financial decisions.⁴⁷ This perspective was given credence by a

⁴² Police report re fortune tellers, 11 February 1907, Unit 1037, VPRS 3992/P0, PROV; Detective Sergeant Power re Fortune tellers, 5 June 1917, Item 318941, Series 16855, Queensland State Archives (QSA).

⁴³ Vince Kelly, *Rugged Angel: The Amazing Career of Policewoman Lillian Armfield* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1961), 196–97.

⁴⁴ *Advertiser*, 22 March 1907, 4.

⁴⁵ Andrew Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty: Working-Class Culture in Salford and Manchester, 1900–1939* (Buckingham; Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1992), 80–81.

⁴⁶ *Clarence and Richmond Examiner*, 2 July 1904, 4.

⁴⁷ *Register*, 21 May 1901, 6.

Figure 1. Cartoon by Ben Strange (1868–1930) for *Western Mail*, 23 March 1907, 29.

An undercover policeman is depicted visiting a coarse-featured clairvoyant, satirically named Madame Slapooffsky. Accoutrements of her profession are shown in the background, including playing cards, palm reading and phrenological charts, and a painting of a shipwreck, a common subject of fortune-telling predictions.

Courtesy of National Library Australia.

number of reports in the early 1900s in which suicides were attributed to despondency over bad news related by fortune-tellers.⁴⁸ In 1902, for example, a 21-year-old girl in North Sydney was alleged to have committed suicide after a fortune-teller predicted she would one day do so.⁴⁹

Accounts of homes breaking up due to revelations of male infidelity were also common.⁵⁰ One policeman commented that the fortune-teller did inconceivable harm in ruining men's domestic peace by playing upon the feelings of 'credulous and hysterical women'.⁵¹ This idea took hold to such an extent that in a number of instances where women sought separation or divorce from their husbands, the men belittled the proceedings against them in court by claiming their wives were acting on the advice of fortune-tellers.⁵² In 1907 Ethel Brown's spouse refuted allegations of domestic violence, including beating her on one occasion for presuming to exercise her newly won right to vote in the Federal elections, by asserting that all his matrimonial troubles resulted from interference from his mother-in-law and her fortune-teller.⁵³ An exposé on mediums in the *Everylady's Journal* argued that there was 'an almost constant attempt' among them 'to loosen the marriage tie' through predictions of future marriages to spouses to whom they were better suited.⁵⁴ Such allegations might alternatively suggest that women used fortune-telling consultations as a space to evaluate their personal lives, with fortune-tellers playing a vital role as emotional counselors.⁵⁵ The media, however, leapt upon such stories as fresh evidence that the eradication of fortune-telling was needed in order to preserve the family, with one paper avowing that '[a]ll fortune-tellers should be locked up until women outgrow superstition'.⁵⁶

The construction of fortune-telling as both perilous and crass was furthered by its association more particularly with women of the

⁴⁸ *Advertiser*, 18 May 1901, 6; *Advertiser*, 10 June 1904, 5; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 October 1904, 7.

⁴⁹ *Mercury*, 23 August 1902, 6.

⁵⁰ *Advertiser*, 31 July 1902, 5; *Sunday Times* (Perth), 29 August 1915, 14.

⁵¹ *Barrier Miner*, 11 May 1912, 5.

⁵² *Advertiser*, 18 June 1903, 6; *Windsor and Richmond Gazette*, 13 January 1900, 8; *Argus*, 11 December 1903, 5; *Clarence and Richmond Examiner*, 27 February 1904, 3; *Argus*, 11 November 1905, 7; *Advertiser*, 22 March 1907, 5; *Queensland Figaro* (Brisbane), 3 November 1904, 6.

⁵³ *Advertiser*, 22 March 1907, 5.

⁵⁴ Ellen Vears, 'The Daughters of Eve', *Everylady's Journal* (Melbourne), 6 February 1918, 79.

⁵⁵ De Blecourt and Usborne, 'Women's Medicine, Women's Culture', 390.

⁵⁶ *Worker*, 4 July 1903, 6.

working classes.⁵⁷ The partiality of working women to such amusement was again deemed especially hazardous due to the conviction that among such 'uneducated and backward minds ... the glib prophecies of charlatans are received as gospel'.⁵⁸ A typical joke related by the *Queenslander* in 1902 had a servant girl tell her mistress that she was quitting her position because the fortune-teller informed her she would soon marry into money.⁵⁹ While this anecdote was intended as mere humour, it represented an underlying belief that women of the lower orders risked ruining their lives by visits to clairvoyants.⁶⁰ If nothing else, it was claimed that many 'spend much more than they can afford in the silly endeavor to peep into the future'.⁶¹ In fact a visit to the fortune-teller was no more expensive than other working-class entertainments, with the average cost being two shillings sixpence, although readings could be had for as little as sixpence.⁶² Some practitioners introduced a sliding scale of charges in order to broaden their appeal to the widest range of customers.⁶³ According to one newspaper in 1915, working-class housewives combined readings with mundane household tasks by shelling peas while waiting with friends to have their fortunes told (an activity that Clare Wright notes was also performed by working women during excursions to pubs).⁶⁴ Yet newspapers continued to disparage such entertainments as inconsistent with women's domestic duties, a view echoed in court hearings involving marital conflicts.⁶⁵ One woman's petition for maintenance from her husband was dismissed after he alleged that when they lived together, she spent his money on visits to fortune-tellers.⁶⁶ A judge told another woman seeking to divorce her husband on grounds of drunkenness and cruelty that she was partly to blame for the marriage's breakup for going out at night to consult mediums rather than staying at home to cook her husband's

⁵⁷ George R. Sims, *Living London: Its Work and Its Play, Its Humour and Its Pathos, Its Sights and Its Scenes* (London: Cassell, 1902), 329–30.

⁵⁸ *Western Mail*, 25 May 1901, 65.

⁵⁹ *Queenslander*, 18 October 1902, 856

⁶⁰ *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, 7 March 1903, 2; *Mercury*, 6 June 1903, 6.

⁶¹ *Morning Bulletin*, 28 February 1907, 4.

⁶² *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 February 1905, 8.

⁶³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 October 1909, 6.

⁶⁴ *Malvern Standard*, 27 November 1915, 3; Clare Wright, '“Doing the Beans”: Women, Community and Drinking in the Ladies Lounge, 1925–1975', *Journal of Australian Studies* 76 (2003): 12.

⁶⁵ *Sunday Times* (Perth), 29 August 1915, 14.

⁶⁶ *Western Mail*, 22 November 1912, 21.

dinner.⁶⁷ Like a number of other recreations in the early twentieth century, the politics surrounding fortune-telling reinforced the ideal of a male breadwinner in full control of the household income, and female homemakers with little right or need for leisure outside the domestic realm.⁶⁸

From the late nineteenth century, recreational culture in Australia became a site of both class and gender conflict as a prosperous and self-assured middle class sought to impose its values on those lower in the social hierarchy. While drinking, gambling and ribald theatricals were the favoured entertainments of the working classes, the middle classes attempted to promote pursuits with an educational and moral purpose. Women, whose participation in working-class pleasures was already inhibited by their gender and economic position, have been perceived as complicit in this process. Richard Waterhouse suggests that inculcation in the values of domesticity and respectability during their time as servants and shop assistants meant working women were instrumental in persuading men to forgo drinking for rational recreations endorsed by the middle classes, such as mechanics' institutions.⁶⁹ The condemnation of fortune-telling nevertheless shows that the middle-class attack on popular culture was not limited to male pastimes, but targeted those of women as well. In many ways fortune-telling resembled drinking and gambling in its coding as a frivolous working-class activity, or what Waterhouse refers to as an 'enjoyable rather than educational experience'.⁷⁰ Unsurprisingly, working-class women's participation in it was therefore policed not only by magistrates and the press, but by middle-class women through bodies such as the Woman's Christian Temperance Union which joined in denunciations of the practice.⁷¹

Yet, while Australian newspapers continued to define fortune-telling as a largely working-class activity, they also expressed fears that the 'craze' was getting hold of women of the upper classes. In the colonial period, etiquette guides reinforced the inherent foolishness of fortune-telling by warning middle-class women that it was a vulgar practice suitable

⁶⁷ *Argus*, 11 December 1903, 5.

⁶⁸ Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty*, 56; Richard Waterhouse, *Private Pleasures, Public Leisure: A History of Australian Popular Culture since 1788* (South Melbourne: Longman, 1995), 62.

⁶⁹ Richard Waterhouse, 'Cultural Transmissions', in *Cultural History in Australia*, 124.

⁷⁰ Waterhouse, *Private Pleasures, Public Leisure*, 84–85.

⁷¹ *Mercury*, 11 March 1903, 8.

only as a game at children's parties.⁷² By the early 1900s, though, it had become a standard feature at affairs given by notable social hostesses.⁷³ Newspapers reported that 'wealthy women and those of high social standing' were seeking out private consultations with mediums.⁷⁴ In some cases this increased the difficulty of shutting down fortune-tellers, as police were loath to prosecute practitioners whose clientele included socially influential individuals.⁷⁵ In 1901 the *Broadford Courier* bemoaned that the 'superstition we deplore among the lower classes ... grows steadily and rapidly, among the educated classes'.⁷⁶ Other papers likewise commented that the sight of 'educated women' being made the dupes of 'illiterate charlatans' produced especial revulsion.⁷⁷ Fortune-telling's popularity was disturbing because it was seen to represent the triumph of ignorance over progress.

The gender and class position of the stereotypical fortune-teller in press accounts did nothing to dispel this notion. Newspapers mocked the credulity of those who put their faith in the predominantly female fortune-teller, whose low status was revealed by her unkempt appearance, and whose speech invariably betrayed 'signs of having had her education neglected'.⁷⁸ The success achieved by such individuals provoked particular viciousness in the case of Mary Scales, a Sydney fortune-teller who was pursued all the way to the High Court as police attempted to secure her conviction.⁷⁹ The fact that Scales was illiterate made the press all the more incensed that such a woman was able to escape the law's clutches while her business continued to command prime premises in the King Street arcade.⁸⁰ The only thing needed to succeed as a fortune-teller was 'plenty of audacity' commented one paper, adding: 'the fact that she was a washerwoman yesterday will not debar the fool crowd from believing

⁷² D. E. McConnell, *Australian Etiquette, or, the Rules and Usages of Best Society in the Australasian Colonies, Together with Their Sports, Pastimes, Games and Amusements* (Sydney: D.E. McConnell, 1885), 574.

⁷³ *Australian Town and Country Journal* (ATCJ), 4 May 1901, 46; ATCJ, 8 June 1901, 46; ATCJ, 15 June 1901, 46; ATCJ, 7. September 1901, 44; *Queensland Figaro*, 19 September 1901, 7; ATCJ, 12 October 1901, 44; *Brisbane Courier*, 13 February 1903, 7; *Queensland Figaro*, 7 March 1907, 7; *Western Champion and General Advertiser for the Central-Western* (Barcaldine), 10 April 1909, 7.

⁷⁴ *Register*, 29 April 1901, 4; *Advertiser*, 31 July 1902, 5.

⁷⁵ Report re J. Isherwood, magnetic healer and psychic medium, 14 April 1914, Series 16855, Item 318941, QSA.

⁷⁶ *Broadford Courier*, 20 September 1901, 6.

⁷⁷ *Morning Bulletin*, 28 February 1907, 4.

⁷⁸ *Argus*, 28 November 1900, 7; *Examiner*, 23 May 1903, 7.

⁷⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 March 1903, 11.

⁸⁰ *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, 7 March 1903, 2.

she is a sorceress to-day'.⁸¹ Stories of retired laundresses making fortunes after going into fortune-telling were a staple of coverage on the practice.⁸² While such accounts were undoubtedly exaggerations, it seems that fortune-telling was an important form of penny-capitalism for working-class women.⁸³ Remuneration varied, but the average fortune-teller was said to clear three to five pounds a week, or more than twice the wages earned by a general servant.⁸⁴ Those whose reputations led them to be engaged for private appearances at parties, or for public tours of Australian cities, were able to command even higher rewards.⁸⁵ At the same time, fortune-telling required very little outlay from practitioners themselves, and could be worked from home, making it the perfect business opportunity for women.

As a result, and despite the media's representations, fortune-telling was embraced by a number of women of varying backgrounds compelled to earn or supplement their incomes. Lower middle-class women used it as a sideline to their main occupation as dressmakers or tea-room operators, deriving their clientele from these businesses.⁸⁶ Middle-class women who fell on hard times sometimes took up the calling as one of the few occupations available to them that – if practised at home among female friends – would not necessarily entail surrendering their class position.⁸⁷ Its respectability was still questioned by a female journalist in 1903, however, who helpfully pointed out a number of more 'genteel' alternatives to struggling women, such as acting as dog-walkers or 'caring for birds of fashionable ladies'.⁸⁸ Others were more sympathetic to the harsh realities that often lay behind women adopting the profession, with South Australia's police commissioner acknowledging in 1902 that many fortune-tellers were in fact 'hard-working widows... [who] employed fortune-telling as a means to support their families'.⁸⁹ Fortune-telling also frequently involved deserted wives and women living apart from their husbands, who were likewise able to combine

⁸¹ *Traralgon Record*, 22 February 1907, 4.

⁸² *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, 16 January 1903, 2; *Evelyn Observer and Bourke East Record*, 9 January 1903, 4.

⁸³ Davies, *Leisure, Gender and Poverty*, 79–80.

⁸⁴ *Queensland Figaro*, 17 September 1903, 16.

⁸⁵ *Bathurst Free Press and Mining Journal*, 16 January 1903, 2.

⁸⁶ *Daily News*, 9 May 1916, 8; *Cairns Post*, 22 May 1912, 8; *Barrier Miner*, 11 May 1912, 5; *Mercury*, 16 April 1918, 8.

⁸⁷ *Argus*, 2 March 1903, 5.

⁸⁸ *Fitzroy City Press*, 5 June 1903, 3.

⁸⁹ *Advertiser*, 31 July 1902, 5; *Argus*, 6 March 1903, 7.

the practice with childcare more easily than most other occupations would allow.⁹⁰ Such women were treated leniently when brought before magistrates, usually either being discharged with a warning or imprisoned until the rising of the court.⁹¹ The overall perception of fortune-telling as a female trade nevertheless aided in its vilification, with practitioners demonised as 'harpies' who made an 'easy living' off their 'sister-women'.⁹²

Although fortune-telling was coded as a female activity and therefore as the antithesis of the masculine culture of scientific empiricism, there were in fact men involved in the practice. Of the 203 individuals prosecuted for fortune-telling across 247 cases in newspaper reports (including some individuals prosecuted on more than one occasion), 44 (18 per cent) were men. However, several of them were prosecuted as a result of their wives' involvement in the trade, revealing that fortune-telling was also used by married women as a supplement to the family income.⁹³ Some women were so successful that their husbands would leave their occupations to assist them by minding the front door and making appointments, such as in the case of Mary Scales and her husband George.⁹⁴

Male involvement in fortune-telling did not counter the gendered construction of the practice, but rather was seen to feminise those who acted as adjuncts to their wives. Men who acted as fortune-tellers themselves were also regarded as at odds with traditional masculinity, with male clairvoyants derided as 'loafers' unwilling to shoulder the 'honest work' undertaken by 'real men'.⁹⁵ Some were maligned as having sexual designs on their female clientele, with one man driven out of Brisbane in 1914 after he allegedly made 'immoral advances' to one of his customers.⁹⁶ Even such sexual activity was seen as effeminate due to the underhanded means by which it was pursued.

Significantly, however, not all men who practised divinatory activities were disparaged by Australia's popular press during this period. The

⁹⁰ *Inquirer and Commercial News* (Perth), 18 January 1901, 7; *Truth* (Melbourne), 27 March 1909, 5; *Brisbane Courier*, 17 February 1917, 4.

⁹¹ *Singleton Argus*, 21 March 1907, 1; *Mercury*, 14 August 1918, 3.

⁹² *Examiner*, 30 March 1907, 9.

⁹³ *Barrier Miner*, 2 September 1909, 2; *Argus*, 14 January 1909, 6; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 January 1909, 8.

⁹⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 March 1903, 11.

⁹⁵ *Argus*, 24 February 1909, 7; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 February 1909, 7.

⁹⁶ Report re J. Isherwood.

rhetoric of Tasmania's *Clipper* in 1900 points clearly to the gender and class basis of objections to the trade:

As to palmistry, if some sane and sensible believer, with a decent education and a character above suspicion, opened shop and proposed to read his clients' character from his clients' palms, in a judicial and humble (that is scientific) spirit, The *Clipper* would not object. It is when the bogus palmist comes along, with no education and no apparent principles, and proceeds to tell the silly servant girl that she's out of her sphere and will marry Lord Ton by and by ... that The *Clipper* rises to make its protest, in the name of humanity and civilisation.⁹⁷

The problem with fortune-telling was its opposition to science, a criticism based on the presumption that scientific thought was the realm of men, and particularly men of a certain class. Men who claimed to use 'science' to conduct readings by palmistry or phrenology to give information about a person's character and background, rather than their future, therefore earned praise rather than censure. A tour by Dr Frederic Bell of Australian towns in 1900 was well received by the press, with the *Brisbane Courier* declaring that Bell discussed palmistry 'as a science and not as a fortune-telling jumble' during his lecture at the School of Arts Hall, after which 'the hands of several ladies and gentlemen were examined with satisfactory results'.⁹⁸ The lecture series of Mr C. Ketteringham met with similar approbation in 1906, one paper endorsing the tour with the comment that there was 'something real and reliable in the art of palmistry, scientifically practised'.⁹⁹ The distinction between such scientific practices and fortune-telling led a number of women to attempt to invoke it as a defence during trials by denying they were fortune-tellers, and claiming instead that they had made a study of disciplines that enabled them to give readings of their customers' characters.¹⁰⁰ The fact that such assertions were accorded little credence by either magistrates or the press further reveals the gendered nature of the construction of fortune-telling as a throwback in human development.

Fortune-telling was similarly seen as regressive due to its racial associations. The practice was commonly associated in the popular imagination with gypsies, groups of whom travelled around Australia during

⁹⁷ *Clipper*, 30 June 1900, 3.

⁹⁸ *Brisbane Courier*, 15 June 1900, 6.

⁹⁹ *Barrier Miner*, 5 February 1906, 2.

¹⁰⁰ *Advertiser*, 13 June 1913, 14; *Examiner*, 21 August 1903, 6; *West Australian*, 13 February 1914, 8; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 January 1909, 3.

the early twentieth century performing readings and selling other services and wares.¹⁰¹ Their arrival was often a subject of both excitement and fear, with some citizens visiting gypsy camps to embrace the diversion their presence provided, while others visited in order to perpetrate ethnic violence.¹⁰² Fortune-telling was also associated more generally with Orientalism.¹⁰³ While this led to its derision in the press as a superstition of less advanced cultures, it was recognised too that this was part of fortune-telling's glamour and appeal. Many fortune-tellers appropriated the mysticism associated with exoticism as part of their self-promotion, with female fortune-tellers invariably adopting the title 'Madame' or 'Signora' followed by a foreign-sounding pseudonym.¹⁰⁴ Others appeared before clients garbed in some 'strange Eastern gown', or claimed that Indian spirit guides aided them in their work.¹⁰⁵ While these allusions to exotic ethnicity were usually for show, Australian newspapers did record the existence of several 'mahogany-tinted seeresses' of Jewish and mixed-race descent.¹⁰⁶ Such reports were even more common in relation to male fortune-tellers, who were frequently said to be of the 'Chinaman, Hindoo or Assyrian' caste.¹⁰⁷ Of the 44 men charged with fortune-telling, 12 (27 per cent) appear to have been from non-European backgrounds. The opening that fortune-telling afforded these men to interactions with Anglo-Australian women stimulated fears of white slavery, another popular concern of the period. During the prosecutions in 1903 of two Melbourne fortune-tellers, Meyer Singh and Wilton Gonsalvez, the police drew attention in each instance to the presence of teenage girls among their clientele, which might have influenced the imposition of especially high fines in both cases.¹⁰⁸ The racial associations of fortune-telling meant its eradication not only became linked to the protection of

¹⁰¹ Kate Wright, *Your Neighbours: The Gypsies in Australia* (Burleigh: Zeus Publications, 2011), 64–72.

¹⁰² *Horsham Times*, 16 March 1900, 2; *Advertiser*, 10 March 1902, 3; *Healesville and Yarra Glen Guardian*, 6 July 1900, 2; *Coburg Leader*, 26 October 1901, 1; *Euroa Advertiser*, 6 December 1901, 18; *Warwick Argus*, 24 December 1901, 3; *Dubbo Liberal and Macquarie Advocate*, 21 May 1902, 3; *Windsor and Richmond Gazette*, 19 July 1902, 3; W. Ross Johnston, *The Long Blue Line: A History of the Queensland Police* (Brisbane: Boolarong Publications, 1992), 170.

¹⁰³ *Evelyn Observer and South East Bourke Record*, 18 January 1901, 3.

¹⁰⁴ *Examiner*, 23 May 1903, 7.

¹⁰⁵ *Argus*, 5 October 1901, 6; *Coburg Leader*, 20 February 1909, 4; *Malvern Standard*, 4 December 1915, 5.

¹⁰⁶ *Morning Bulletin*, 29 March 1902, 6; *Brisbane Courier*, 15 March 1907, 4; *Traralgon Record*, 22 February 1907, 4.

¹⁰⁷ *Brisbane Courier*, 10 October 1901, 7.

¹⁰⁸ *Argus*, 28 February 1903, 15; *Argus*, 7 March 1903, 19.

white women, but white culture. A letter to the *Mercury* in 1916 calling for Hobart to follow the mainland's lead in putting down the clairvoyant business was tellingly signed 'White Australia'.¹⁰⁹

The combined force of the concerns expressed in newspapers from 1900 eventually prompted a number of police raids on fortune-tellers in which undercover operatives posed as clients to gather evidence against practitioners. The first of these crackdowns occurred in 1903, and involved multiple prosecutions in Sydney, Melbourne, Hobart and Perth. That fortune-telling had previously gone largely unprosecuted was clear from the evidence of many individuals brought to court. The Melbourne fortune-teller Annie Paul claimed she had been carrying on her business for 24 years with no notion she was doing wrong, while 69-year-old Ella Vyner testified that she had been practising for 20 years without interference from the police.¹¹⁰ However, the cultural anxieties of the early twentieth century meant further crackdowns followed, particularly in 1907, 1909 and, most significantly, during the war years, especially 1917. Legislators were also involved in the process of reframing fortune-telling more definitively as an unlawful practice. Initially fortune-tellers were prosecuted in most states through a British vagrancy statute passed in 1823. This reliance on inherited English law was mooted by a number of individuals as a defence against the charges against them on the grounds the legislation was outdated or did not apply locally.¹¹¹ In the 1907 case against Mary Scales the High Court ruled that, in regard to New South Wales at least, the legislation was not applicable, citing among other issues that it would be a serious anomaly to declare that the provision in question had been incorporated into the state's law when so little effort had been made to enforce it during the preceding 75 years.¹¹² This was remedied as the period saw the strengthening of laws against fortune-telling across various states, including Queensland (1901), Victoria (1907), New South Wales (1908), South Australia (1916) and Tasmania (1917).¹¹³ The federal government even became involved in efforts to suppress fortune-telling with the 1901 *Post and Telegraph Act*, which made it an offence to carry on a

¹⁰⁹ *Mercury*, 25 January 1916, 6,

¹¹⁰ *Argus*, 2 March 1903, 5.

¹¹¹ *Act 5 George IV*, chapter 83; *Examiner*, 7 August 1903, 6.

¹¹² Griffith CJ, *Mitchell v Scales* in *Commonwealth Law Reports* 5 (11 December 1907): 405.

¹¹³ Queensland 1899 Criminal Code, Victoria *Police Offences Act* 1907, New South Wales *Police Offences (Amendment) Act* 1908, South Australia *Police Act* 1916, Tasmania *Police Amendment Act* 1917. Western Australia had previously included clauses against fortune-telling in its *Police Act* 1892.

fortune-telling business by mail.¹¹⁴ This widespread legislative activity suggests that while fortune-telling as a criminal practice might have been a state matter, it had also come to be seen as an important national issue in terms of delegitimising the culture of those who did not embody Australia's preferred citizen group, namely educated, white males.

Given the connection between efforts to eradicate fortune-telling and attempts to solidify Australia's national identity, it is perhaps not surprising that the advent of World War I, seen by many as Australia's defining moment, gave rise to unprecedented police activity against the trade. Directives for a nation-wide crackdown from the prime minister's office meant that of the 247 prosecutions during 1900–18, 83 (34 per cent) occurred in 1917 alone.¹¹⁵ This clampdown was a response to the perception that women, desperate for reassurances about relatives fighting overseas, were flocking to fortune-tellers in even greater numbers. In January 1918, the *Everylady's Journal* even launched a series of articles to convince its readers of the 'perils of spiritism'. The magazine declared that while it was natural that women 'in these days of deep anxiety should desire to see into the future', it was abominable that others should make money from them by 'pretending to lift the veil'.¹¹⁶ Fortune-tellers were further demonised as the greed of these 'grasping harridans' and 'foreign charlatans' was contrasted with the selfless sacrifice of the nation's armed forces and the 'true women' awaiting them at home.¹¹⁷ Clairvoyants were even accused of actively campaigning against the national interest by dissuading men from enlisting through predictions of their deaths, although police found little to substantiate such rumours.¹¹⁸

Some fortune-tellers attempted to establish their patriotism in court by pointing out that they freely gave their services for charity fundraisers in aid of the war effort.¹¹⁹ Others claimed the attacks against them were

¹¹⁴ *Argus*, 13 June 1901, 7.

¹¹⁵ Circular from the Prime Minister's Office, 30 March 1917, Item 318941, Series 16855, QSA.

¹¹⁶ *Everylady's Journal*, 6 January 1918, 15.

¹¹⁷ *Camperdown Chronicle*, 17 February 1916, 6; *North Western Advocate and the Emu Bay Times*, 2 November 1917, 3; *Barrier Miner*, 18 February 1918, 4; *Brisbane Courier*, 8 May 1917, 6.

¹¹⁸ Anonymous letter to police, 25 April 1917, Item 318941, Series 16855, QSA; Commissioner of Police to The State Organising Secretary, 5 June 1917, Series 16855, Item 318941, QSA.

¹¹⁹ *Brisbane Courier*, 5 September 1914, 6; *Daily News*, 28 November 1914, 7; *Ararat Advertiser*, 19 January 1915, 2; *Advertiser*, 13 December 1915, 8; *Advertiser*, 1 February 1916, 8; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 July 1918, 10; *Brisbane Courier*, 5 September 1914, 6.

tantamount to religious persecution by associating themselves with the burgeoning spiritualist movement, which enjoyed a better reputation than fortune-telling due to its emphasis on viewing spiritual phenomena from a scientific perspective.¹²⁰ However, while the growth of spiritualism during the war likely further boosted fortune-telling's popularity, and the doctrine might have appealed to many fortune-tellers due to its advocacy of class, gender and racial equality, actual spiritualist organisations sought to disassociate mediumism from other forms of divination.¹²¹ The First World War thus proved the culmination of early twentieth-century trends in fortune-telling by augmenting both its pervasiveness and its poor reputation. The end of the First World War in general marked a shift in popular culture as legal force was given to middle-class values, for example through the introduction of early closing hours in bars around Australia. Yet as Tanja Luckins has shown, rather than achieving the ambitions of temperance advocates, this reform led to the unedifying spectacle of the 'six o'clock swill'.¹²² Likewise, fortune-telling did not altogether disappear in the face of legal suppression, but the dubious and disapproving attitudes towards it led to greater covertness, and might also have resulted in more of its practitioners during the 1920s being drawn from the criminal underclasses.¹²³

In conclusion, the growth of the fortune-telling industry in the early twentieth century saw crackdowns against it and decisions by a number of states to affirm the practice's criminal status under new laws. Divining the future was treated as 'a menace and an evil', and as an embarrassment in the face of the scientific and intellectual advances of the new era. At a time when Australia was entranced by a vision of itself as a rational, progressive nation of white males, fortune-telling was not only considered a relic of old-fashioned ignorance, but was associated with female credulity, working-class superstitions and incursions by foreign cultures. The laws against fortune-telling remained in place into

¹²⁰ *The Prahran Telegraph*, 12 May 1917, 5; *Advertiser*, 25 June 1917, 7; *Bathurst Press*, 28 December 1917, 1; Alfred J. Gabay, *Messages from Beyond: Spiritualism and Spiritualists in Melbourne's Golden Age 1870–1890* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2001), 100.

¹²¹ *Brisbane Courier*, 1 November 1919, 9; *Geelong Advertiser*, 20 June 1917, 6; Oppenheim, *The Other World*, 28–29; Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Nineteenth Century England* (London: Virago, 1989), 4–5; Amy Lehman, *Victorian Women and the Theatre of Trance: Mediums, Spiritualists and Mesmerists in Performance* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2009), 131.

¹²² Tanja Luckins, 'Pigs, Hogs and Aussie Blokes: The Emergence of the Term Six O'clock Swill', *History Australia* 4, no. 1 (2007): 8.1–8.17.

¹²³ Kelly, *Rugged Angel*, 196–7; James Morton and Susanna Lobez, *Gangland Queensland* (Carlton: Melbourne University Publishing, 2012), 5.

the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.¹²⁴ While the study of fortune-telling can therefore tell us much about Australia's history, some of its most significant revelations relate to how people in the past saw the nation's future. It also points to the importance of understanding the language of progress as a gendered, classed and racialised discourse.

Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks to Dr Karen Downing and Dr Frank Bongiorno for editing this article, and to the two anonymous peer reviewers for their helpful comments. Thanks also to Dr Melissa Bellanta and Ana Stevenson for providing feedback on an early draft.

About the author

Alana Jayne Piper is a postdoctoral research fellow at the ARC Centre of Excellence in Policing and Security at Griffith University, currently investigating the history of theft in Australia. Her PhD thesis, completed at the University of Queensland, examined the significance of relationships between women within criminal subcultures in urban Australia between 1860 and 1920. In 2010 she won a university medal for her honours thesis, which looked at alcohol use among women in early-twentieth-century Brisbane. She has previously published work in *History Workshop Journal*, *Journal of Australian Studies* and *Queensland Review*.

Correspondence to Alana Jayne Piper: a.piper@griffith.edu.au

¹²⁴ Lynne Hume, 'Witchcraft and the Law in Australia', *Journal of Church and State* 37 (1995): 135–50.