The Thallium Murder Criminal Cases

Twentieth century Australia was a century filled with crime, sexuality, promiscuity, war and financial instability, yet, always aimed for the reconstruction and romanticizing (and advertising) of the Australian dream. This is evidently the case for happenings in Australia prior to the 1960s – specifically the 1950's. The 1950s was a period which established discontinuities rather than familiarity. The 1930s was a decade of depression, followed by the War of 1940, where the 1950s was a decade of reconstruction and trying to live a normal life again post war anxieties and issues. It was these prior experiences which Australians faced, that therefore predisposed the occurrences which were to follow in the 1950s, being a year of unfamiliarity and great instability in Australia's history. In this essay I will be discussing how the Thallium murder criminals cases allow us to gain further insight into what life was like in 1950s Australia.

At a time when the rat infestation in Australia (more predominantly in inner Sydney) was at its peak, Thallium was the main constituent used to eliminate the issue. Found in almost every Australian household at the time, this thallium based rat poison - known as 'Thall-Rat', was easily accessible as it was sold in almost every corner shop, was odourless, colourless and most crucially, was tasteless. These properties therefore foreshadowed the crimes which would soon occur as a result of this poison, being used as a weapon against someone without anyone knowing, as it was pretty much invisible. In regards to rats - it killed almost instantly, when used on humans however, it was slow acting, combined with a range of severe symptoms, followed by death if untreated and if consumed a lethal dose. When ingested, symptoms of the poisoning would include: sudden hair loss, body aches, pains and cramps, fatigue and loss of vision. This meant that the poison could be easily added to foods and beverages such as tea and cakes, evidently being the case for nearly all of the thallium poisoning cases which had occurred during the 1950s. This also highlights that such method could be and was primarily used by women, such as Yvonne Fletcher and Beryl Hague who added it to their husbands tea, as well as Caroline Grills who would add the poison to her much loved desserts as well as in tea – who I will be discussing in my essay.

In The Canberra Times newspaper back in 1952, an article written in relation to one of the poisoners - Ruby Norton, discusses claims in which her neighbour made in which she had asked for poison and made her intentions for its use quite clear. Concerning the idea she will get caught, Norton states: "I will do it (poison her son in law) in a way I won't hang for." This therefore supports and further underlines the idea that many believed that using this type of poison would have no consequence for them, working in their favour as it was 'invisible'. However, this wouldn't be the case, as the increase in copycat crimes, public awareness and attention it received, would not allow for the crimes to go unnoticed.

Post War Australia was believed to be a time of reconstruction, new beginnings and the great Australian dream, however, the reality could not have been any further from this. It was a period of growing tensions and decline in moral values, combined with an increase in crime and social issues. In Sydney housing and living conditions at the time were quite poor with overcrowding and housing shortages, with a wave of disease, crime, unemployment and rat infestations sweeping in, combined with post war trauma – the social turmoil that was experienced was inevitable. Many had lived in acute poverty and faced social marginalization (this was especially

the case for women since they didn’t have much power.) This can be further supported through the first hand experiences of people like Betty Moulds, a woman who lived in Alexandria through the matters which Australia went through in the beginning of the 20th century. In her transcript from the Sydney Oral Histories we are told of the hardships many faced when individuals were faced with unemployment, where basic necessities such as food could only be bought through food stamps: “well, if you didn’t like butter you went and got something, give it to somebody else for bread or something like that … Things haven't been really – well.” It allows us to gain further understanding as to what life was like for most ordinary people, not just in regards to the Thallium cases but before that. The 1950s was also a decade in which it re-established the traditional gender norms of society, after flourishing experience in the workforce and social life, especially in regards to women, during the war. The woman was a model of domesticity, whilst the man was and would always be breadwinner, demonstrates the issues and tensions related to gender relations. These criminal cases therefore show us the individual struggles within the big picture. Hence, the availability of Thallium due to the rat infestation, the social unrest of post-war society, and living conditions would set the scene for this unprecedented crimes.

World War Two was seen to have given women opportunities which they did not necessarily have before the war, such as employment and sexual freedom. Though, once the war came to end, this ‘privilege’ was taken away, rather than creating a society which accommodated to women playing a role greater than just a wife and mother. The pressures and stereotypes women faced in society, the romanticising of domesticity and taking part in the traditional role of the homemaker, combined with the social aftermath of the war became a hardship that took a toll on marriages and families. This could therefore constitute reason as to why many women took the Thallium approach as a ‘way out.’ Although we don’t know, and may never know what these women were thinking, or why they did what they did, but as historians, using the sources around us and reading beyond them, one can speculate and gain insight as to why they may have taken such an approach.

During the war, women were given a sense of freedom, encouraged to play a vital role in Australian society, by entering the workforce and taking over the man’s job while they fought for our country. Before, this the idea of women taking over a man’s job was seen as absurd, yet, with the war constantly changing, Australia employed ‘Total War’ towards the war effort, encouraging women towards employment. Sexual freedom and desire also increased heavily at the time due to the influence of Hollywood and the media, in which this increase stems back to when American servicemen were stationed in Australia to assist us in the Pacific War. The American soldiers exotic accent, charm, uniform and treatment of women compared to Australian men incited women’s sexual desires, as sexual activity and relations between American men and Australian women grew. Hollywood cinema and media, portrayed this idea that women were meant to be feminine and desirable, and American men were romantic and by partaking in these sexual relations and activities, it was romantic, exciting, and exhilarating for women especially. These external influences encouraged women to see the romanticism in these sexual relations and desires, and the idea surrounding marriage and settling down would be a “nice romantic story.” Women believed marriage to be a “gateway to sexual fulfillment, as a union of sweethearts,” however, married life wasn’t always full of love and passion and that was a big shock to women who dived into marriage post war. There became a moral panic over women’s behaviour during the war as they stepped out of the traditional societal gender expectations. Concerns grew as many thought women would challenge male privilege and authority after taking on more responsibility at work during the war. Men no longer seeked those desires post-war, rather wanted a nice woman to settle down with and yield the role of the

homemaker. This can evidently be seen in the increase in abuse and troubled marriages during this time, whereby the 1950s made it clear that the increasing tensions due to the changing structure of femininity accompanied by the wartime product of female desire became a threat to the traditional gender roles.

After the war, women were no longer given the opportunity to continue to grow. There was an increase in tensions towards the role of a woman post-war, as they were afraid of women challenging the societal norm of the traditional gender role which has been in place since the beginning. Gender roles were characterised by unease and repression, as rooted patriarchal values forced women back into domestic roles. All attitudes now reinforced the conventional role of a woman's place being at home and in the kitchen. Many now rushed into marriage as means of financial stability at a time of societal instability. It was expected of women to conform to domesticity and this homemaker model, as their primary role was to be a good wife and mother, demonstrating the attitudes towards women. Even in your typical wedding vows of promising to honour, love and obey your husband, reinforced the woman's submissive and subservient role within a marriage and in society as raising kids and taking care of their husbands, while they provided - undoubtedly demonstrates how society viewed women. However, married live wasn't always like it was advertised to be, men came back from the war with problems of their own such as PTSD, this could lead to a lot of mental issues and prompt in alcoholism, where bringing these issues into the home with no professional help may have constituted abuse and women were trapped. Unfortunately divorce was quite hard to achieve at the time as it was expensive and most of the time, the man was favoured. This tells us that women who may have experienced abuse at the hands of their husbands had no way to escape, and therefore found Thallium as a solution to their problem. An example of this is the crimes committed by Yvonne Fletcher. Fletcher was found to have poisoned both her husbands by Thallium, whereby the justification of her actions being a result of the domestic abuse she experienced from both marriages, was evidently downplayed, having faced such a disadvantage and inequity as the jury for her trial was patriarchal. Another woman who used Thallium as a means to escape the clutches of a man was Beryl Hague. In 1953 Hague did not kill her husband like Fletcher had, she did however confess to poisoning her husband to "give him a headache to repay the many headaches he had given me" in regards to the domestic disputes she had experienced in her marriage. This therefore sheds light on the attitudes, experiences and lives of the marginalised, which in this case were women, and the attitudes towards freedom, marriage and domestic violence in 1950 Australian society.

The 1950s brought a new idea of the nuclear family with both men and women returning to their corresponding role of the breadwinner and housewife, which was much more conservative than before. Advertisements during the 50s of commercial goods such as kitchen appliances and cleaning products, also reinforced the concept of women in domesticity. In a sense it could be considered as a form of propaganda in which women were the centre of it all and the product was merely aiding her (domestic) role. Women were meant to follow this model of being a submissive woman who had the role of the housewife, a good mother as well as pleasing their husband, however, many found this hard to maintain as they became "undone by the pressures of domestic life and the ideals of femininity," which could be a reason as to why women resorted to Thallium as a 'way out'.

Men were also having to follow the traditional role of the 'breadwinner' to preserve their masculinity and identity as a man in post-war society. Male masculinity played a fundamental role in relation to the gender role culture, as men were perceived as more superior and had the

hardest job compared to women. Being a breadwinner wasn't just the idea of one providing for their family because that is their duty, being a breadwinner demonstrated ones identity of manhood and being a man, "to be a man is to be a provider, and to be a provider is to demonstrate adult manhood." Many considered this expectation of the man at work and woman in the home as a norm, however, many also found it to be an "imbalance of opportunity and power within the family," whereby this underlying idea of the man's role in society being superior to women could/may have been used and abused or taken advantage of, and therefore, led women to be the main criminals during this time period. Some may have seen this as a sense of full control of the family, and unfortunately created violent tyrannical husbands, which led to the abuse of many women, which can link back to the experiences of Yvonne Fletcher and Beryl Hague as discussed before.

Ruby Norton was another perpetrator during this Thallium craze, where in 1952 she was believed to have murdered her son-in-law as a result of her hatred for men, and hatred of the patriarchal society in which she lived, she was however, not found guilty of the murder. This could therefore support the idea of this disadvantage and imbalance of power women faced, and allow us to speculate as to why these women may have done what they done. Going against the gender role system which has been in place for years was unorthodox and frowned upon as the idea which one man claims, that, " the woman want to be man and the man want to be woman" was laughable, as domesticity was definitely not the 'man's role.' By assuming the breadwinner role it asserted the males authority and dominance in the home and in society, this was the expectation which has been instilled in them all of their lives. A woman could not possibly be both a mother and housewife as well as being a provider or the 'breadwinner' of the family; it unquestionably highlights the attitudes and views men had towards women and their position in society.

The reconstruction of Australian society after the end of the Second World War was planned as a new beginning and a positive direction towards the future. Rehousing was seen to be a solution in order to ameliorate the standard of living at the time. Homeownership was the dream, yet, was quite difficult for most Australians to achieve. After the end of the war in 1945 there was believed to be a shortage of 300,000 houses in Australia, with 69,000 being in Sydney alone. This was seen as a huge problem for Australians at the time as it led to overcrowding of suburbs as many resorted to sharing homes with family and friends, and some even lived in tents. By looking at this aspect of Australia's social history, one could deduce the reasoning behind why Caroline Grills may have poisoned her first two victims, as she would benefit a financial gain from them such as inheriting her family's housing and property, which we have seen at this time was very hard to come by with the housing conditions and shortages. Caroline Grills was a 63 year old woman from Sydney who was notoriously known for murdering four of her family members by Thallium poisoning, and attempting to murder another three between 1947-1953. Her first two victims may have been a financial gain however, the other two deaths and the three other poisonings suggest no motive, rather shows a sense of mental stability which many people faced due to the stresses of society. Sydney especially experienced quite low housing and livings rates compared to other areas, which is where most of the Thallium poisonings occurred. Whereby in 1947 it was found that only 40% of those who lived in Sydney actually had home ownership, in which inner Sydney had 90% of its population renting homes rather than owning them. Conditions were poor and sometimes even unsanitary with overcrowding and rat infestations, combined with increased rental costs – for those who were low income workers or were unemployed, it would have been a period of hardship in their life after experiencing social instability for quite some time with the Great Depression of the 1930's,

the Second World War in the 1940s, and societal uncertainty in the 1950s. Reconstruction was deemed to be a solution in order to suburbanise and clear the ‘slum’ areas of Sydney in order to improve living conditions, however, better housing in inner/inner west Sydney was not really important enough and was more of an afterthought compared to other areas – in which they didn’t take into consideration the needs of those who lived in those suburbs, rather, just wanted to quickly fix the problem instead of allow for proper growth and suburbanisation.

In conclusion, criminal cases such as the Thallium Murder cases allow us to gain further insight in regards to the social history of Australia prior to the 1960s, and what life was like for those consider ordinary and marginalised. The Thallium craze which took Australia by storm demonstrates to us social issues such as the position and role of women in the home and Australian society during that time combined with the problems which arose Post World War Two such as economic, financial and social instability that affected the lives of many Australians.