

*'White Slaves' and White Australia: Prostitution and Australian Society*¹

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I would like to begin by introducing you to a sex worker. Her name is 'Joy'. For 18 months in 1995–1996 her larger-than-life figure leant against a red door-frame on the corner of Yurong and Stanley Streets in East Sydney. Of course, being a statue, she is not really a sex worker. Or is she? The story of Joy became something of a sensation in the mid-1990s. This was not just because she was allegedly the only statue of a prostitute on display in public anywhere in the world, and not just because she personified the seedier side of Sydney. Surrounding the creation of Joy was a quite extraordinary mystery. On the very day that sculptor Loui Fraser was shaping her striking facial features, a young woman was dying in a hospital in a New South Wales country town. This dying woman's face bore a remarkable resemblance to the very features Loui was sculpting. After the funeral, her mother, who had been at her daughter's bedside when she died, returned to her Darlinghurst home. There she found the newly erected statue of Joy in the street outside her house. She immediately noticed the resemblance, and overcome with emotion, took a large hammer to the sculpture. She did considerable damage before being carted off in a police wagon. When Loui later spoke to the mother about her actions, she discovered that the woman's daughter had indeed been a Sydney sex worker for many years. In fact, she had been introduced to the occupation by her mother, who was herself a former brothel-keeper. Joy was too vivid a reminder of the young woman's life, her early death a result of ill-health following years of heroin addiction.²

This grieving mother was not the only East Sydney resident who found Joy's image too confronting for comfort. Many local residents found her presence a stark reminder of the 'bad old days' when this part of Sydney was better known for its street walkers than its restaurants. Protestors lobbied South Sydney City Council. The Council eventually succumbed and had the statue returned to its owner.³ The response she provoked during her sojourn on Stanley Street is nevertheless enormously revealing about the way in which Australians deal with certain aspects of their history, about what we choose to remember, forget and celebrate.

The controversy over Joy goes to the heart of these issues. One elderly male resident who objected to the statue felt that better subjects could have been chosen. 'We should put up statues to returned soldiers—worthwhile people.' Implicit in this statement is the view that soldiers are intrinsically worthwhile; sex workers are worthless. In this value system, whores can never be heroines, but soldiers will be heroes no matter what; indeed,

despite the fact that the military have historically depended heavily on the services of prostitutes. Another elderly male resident objected to the statue because it reminded people of the area's sordid recent history. 'Everybody knows it happened, but who wants to be reminded of it'.⁴ Moral judgements about prostitutes and prostitution dictate what we choose to remember and forget. This is partly because remembering in our society (and perhaps in most societies) so often implies celebration. Which is a curious thing. At the level of the individual, we recognise that a healthy psyche requires confronting the demons in one's past in order to deal with them and move on. Collectively, however, confronting what are regarded as the less worthy or shameful aspects of our history is seen at best as muckraking, at worst as a kind of bloody-minded, politically motivated national defamation. These arguments will be familiar to many of you. I would argue that the history of prostitution is caught up in a very similar contestation.

Here again the dispute over Joy is instructive. While many vocal residents objected to her, others were very sorry to see her go. The Sex Workers Outreach Project was delighted with Loui's statue and the recognition it gave to the existence of sex workers.⁵ While she copped more than her share of vandalism, she was also treated with affection, dressed on one occasion in a pink feather boa, and draped with Christmas decorations in the festive season. She was especially popular amongst tourists, who thought it fun to be photographed arm-in-arm with a 'hooker'. Younger residents tended to be more impressed than the older generation, commenting on the honesty of the statue itself in reflecting an ongoing reality of the area's social and economic life. A young mother brought her seven-year-old daughter to see Joy as part of a day's outing to the Australian Museum. She told a journalist that she welcomed the statue because it departed from the hypocrisy which characterised so many of society's attitudes to sex. In her view, unlike the many so-called 'respectable' and well-heeled women who had sex with husbands they did not love in order to maintain a certain lifestyle, prostitutes were at least honest about what they were doing and were no less deserving of respect.⁶ Sentiments such as these, and the fact that Joy was approved by the South Sydney City Council in the first place, testify to the existence of a strand in Australian society which deplores hypocrisy and delights in calling a spade a spade. And again you can put this in a wider historical context. For almost a century after the end of the convict era, there was something of a conspiracy of silence about our convict past. Many archivists will have stories of pages savagely torn from convict registers by embarrassed descendants. It is a sign of our growing maturity as a society that we can now embrace this aspect of our origins. But remembering the convict era did not go uncontested, at least initially. Today most of us would agree that our history is richer, more complex and more illuminating for being more inclusive of our convict past. I believe the same lessons will one day apply in the case of the sex industry. Pretending it didn't happen is neither possible nor desirable. Our only choice is to embrace this history and to learn from it what we can.

There are many aspects to this history, but the one I will focus on has a particular currency. It concerns the international traffic in women and girls and Australia's part in this traffic.

As most of us would be aware, over the last five years there has been an increasing amount of interest, in both Australia and overseas, in the transnational movement of those engaged in the sex industry. In Australia, the death of Puang Thong Simaplee at Villawood Detention Centre on 26 September 2001 became a particular focus of media attention. The tragic death of this young woman raised serious questions about the nature of the traffic in women and girls from Asia and other parts of the world to work in Australian brothels. It also highlighted inadequacies in the way in which Australian

immigration and police authorities dealt with such cases. The inquest into her death was held in April 2003.⁷ Although he did not find any evidence to support the claim that she had been sold into sexual slavery at the age of 12,⁸ nonetheless the coroner did find that

there is evidence that young women are enticed to this country with false identification on the premise that they will be provided with work and earn good income only to be exploited and forced to work in brothels.⁹

Although it was unclear exactly when and under what terms Ms Simaplee came to Australia, the coroner was reasonably confident that she was the same woman who was born in Chang Mai Province in Thailand in 1974 and who was sending money to her parents' bank account from her earnings in a Surry Hills brothel.¹⁰ Her death was a result of the consequences of heroin withdrawal combined with malnutrition and acute pneumonia.¹¹ The coroner also found that she did not receive proper medical treatment in the Villawood Detention Centre because of a failure of 'suitably qualified and experienced medical staff' to reach an appropriate diagnosis.¹² Ms Simaplee's death highlighted not only the inadequate treatment she received at Villawood but also drew attention to the immigration department's standard response to potential victims of the traffic in women: it deported the individuals as quickly as possible and, in so doing, exported the evidence that might have been used against those involved in organising this traffic.¹³

Ms Simaplee's case is interesting to an historian not because it represents a new trend but because it is another example in Australia's long history as a destination in an international traffic in sex workers. And responses to this traffic—often referred to as 'white slavery'—tell us a great deal about Australian society.

Puang Thong Simaplee was part of an increasing movement of young Thai women who started coming to Australia from the mid-1980s to work in the sex industry. Current estimates put the number at anywhere between 200 and 1,000 women arriving each year. From the research that has been done on these workers, we can identify a number of features of this migration:

- Most women come from the economically depressed rural areas in north/north-east Thailand.
- Most move first to Bangkok, where they work as waitresses and often also engage in some form of sex work, although usually in a very informal way, such as taking a paying boyfriend.
- Many remit money to family in Thailand: a 1994 study found that about 50 per cent were supporting children, as well as siblings, parents and extended family.
- Although economic reasons dominate the motivation for migrating, others are motivated by a spirit of adventure: 'I'm here to learn about life. I want to take the opportunities that come my way.'¹⁴
- Still others hope to find a husband and learn English.
- Many enter into verbal contracts to repay the cost of their introduction to Australia.
- These women often become vulnerable to extortion from those who contracted to bring them out—subject to threats of violence to themselves and families, and to threats to 'dob them in' to immigration officials; they have their documents confiscated; many are virtual prisoners, being 'chaperoned' between home and workplace. Many accrue 'debts' of up to \$50,000.
- Because of their lack of freedom, they are less able to insist on safe sex practices than other workers and seem to be subject to more violence than other sex workers.

- Many women are sent back to Thailand by the Australian immigration authorities before paying off their debt and without receiving any return for their efforts.
- And the one bright spot: those who can pay off their debts can achieve a life of relative prosperity: some return to Thailand while others form independent lives in Australia.¹⁵

But, as I have said, there's nothing unprecedented in all this. On the contrary. The closest parallel to the current importation of Thai women to work in the sex industry is the transnational movement of Japanese women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the 1890s, there were approximately 300 such women at any given time working in the Eastern Goldfields of Western Australia and in mining, pearling and sugar cane centres throughout the north of Australia. Known as *Karayukisan*, these women were recruited from the poorer agricultural islands of Japan and transported to destinations throughout Southeast Asia and the Pacific. They were part of a wider migration of labour around the Pacific in the second half of the nineteenth century. In the overpopulated Kumamoto and Nagasaki prefectures, girls as young as seven were sold by their impoverished parents to entrepreneurs who smuggled them out of the country in the coal-holds of steamers. Others were tricked, lured or kidnapped by procurers. The conditions of these journeys were horrific, and often resulted in tragedy when the coal shifted in heavy seas or caught alight. A ship's captain told another gruesome tale. He reported that on one voyage from Kyushu to Hong Kong engineers were puzzled by a sudden loss in water pressure. When they went down to the bunkers to investigate they found a group of girls almost dead from starvation and exhaustion. The girls had bitten through the pipes to secure drinking water. Buried under the coal beside them were the lacerated bodies of the two procurers whom the girls had turned on and beaten to death.¹⁶

Those who did survive these terrible voyages were taken to Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Hong Kong. Here they were trained in the arts of the brothel before being re-shipped to Australia and other parts of Southeast Asia and the Pacific. The words of a contemporary sorrowful song capture the experience of these girls:

Carried on the drifting current
 Her destination will be
 In the west, Siberia;
 Or in the east, Java.
 Which country will be her grave?
 Lover's chatter
 Is like the dust
 Of any country.¹⁷

The precise terms of their engagement varied, but it seems that the girls worked for many years to pay back 'debts' for their transport and keep, the amount of these debts being calculated by their captors. Although they might be bought from their parents for as little as 300 yen, subsequent charges levied for transport, food, clothing and medical expenses meant that it could cost a woman up to 2,000 yen to 'buy back her freedom'.¹⁸

Having arrived in Australia, the conditions under which these women worked depended very much on geographical location. They were often among the first settlers in new mining and pearling areas, and many led transient and uncomfortable lives, often operating in tents or makeshift dwellings.

In 1907 a member of the Queensland Legislative Assembly informed parliament that:

At Charters Towers, when [I] was there not so very long ago, in one little

mean lane, known as Garden Lane, there were seventeen Japanese prostitutes carrying on their business in little cubicles made of gin cases, where one could not swing a cat without danger to the framework of the structure. In each of these miserable tenements there was a Japanese prostitute in her kimono. The fee was 7s 6d. The boys of Charters Towers used to meet in that lane at night, put a shilling in, and the winner used to go inside.¹⁹

The more fortunate led more stable lives in the bigger towns. Those who had paid their debts had more control over their work, and some seem to have accumulated considerable wealth in savings and jewellery. A study of almost 200 Japanese women in Western Australia revealed that most were in their 20s when they arrived in the 1890s, had several trips overseas and returned to Japan in old age. During the course of their careers, they were often more than prostitutes. They also owned and managed brothels and pearling interests and other small businesses, financed originally through prostitution. Many married Japanese, Chinese and sometimes European, Filipino or Malay men. Others remained single but moved from prostitution to other enterprises, such as running boarding-houses or dressmaking. However, judging from surviving police records, like contemporary Thai sex workers, Japanese women engaged in the sex industry in general seem to have been particularly prone to violence from customers.²⁰ Of course, these women were not referred to as 'white slaves'. Indeed, part of their attraction was the fact that they were not white. I'm not talking here about the current Anglo-Australian male's demand for exotic sexual partners. The appeal of Japanese prostitutes in the late nineteenth century had more to do with contemporary ideas about the status of the white race relative to what were generally referred to as 'coloured' races. Late colonial Australia was a much more ethnically diverse society than it was to become in the twentieth century, especially in the north. Large numbers of Chinese were engaged in mining, while Japanese and Malays worked in the maritime industries around the northern coast. Also, the sugar cane plantations depended on the labour of Melanesians, known generally as Kanakas. The overwhelming majority of these workers were men. This presented something of a problem for the colonial authorities, who believed that dire social consequences would follow unless a 'suitable outlet for their sexual passion' could be found.²¹ They were especially worried about 'coloured' men raping white women. The importation of Japanese prostitutes was seen as a good solution to the need to provide some sexual outlet for 'coloured' men, whilst maintaining the status of the white race. As the Queensland Commissioner of Police argued:

Social evil [contemporary code for prostitution] exists and flourishes nearly everywhere in districts where large numbers of coloured aliens are located ... The supply of Japanese women for the Kanaka demand is less revolting and degrading than would be the case were it met by white women.²²

Japanese prostitutes were also preferred for this function over Aboriginal women, who were popularly regarded as dirty, diseased and more likely to produce children of mixed descent.²³

After the introduction of the White Australia Policy in the early twentieth century, and the deportation of most non-white immigrants, the perceived 'problem' of satisfying the lust of a large population of so-called 'coloured' men no longer existed. Japanese women found themselves no longer welcome in White Australia, and most left the country. But this did not mean that Australia ceased to be a destination for itinerant sex workers, for there was another traffic in women which had also begun in the late nineteenth century that continued well into the twentieth: the movement of women between Continental

Europe and Australia via South America and Egypt. And it is this traffic that came to be referred to as 'white slavery'.

Although the clandestine nature of this traffic means we will never know its precise dimensions, the historian can gain some insight into its operations from those cases which came under police investigation. Let me give you a couple of examples. In 1902, 16-year-old Assunta Spazziani was recruited in Rome through an employment agency to work as a general servant for an Italian couple about to embark for the West Australian goldfields. According to her account, her employers, Charles Cozzi and Marie Guidotti, told Assunta that Charles was engaged in the mining industry and that she would be paid her fare and good wages. The threesome sailed from Naples in March 1902 and on disembarking at Fremantle took the train to Kalgoorlie. The couple rented a house in Brookman Street and hired a Japanese cook. Gradually the real nature of her employment dawned on the young woman. Looking out of the window of the house, she saw 'a lot of women on the other side of the street, sitting or standing at the doors of their houses, dressed in coloured, gay, loose wrappers'. Marie explained what they were doing and told her that she too would soon 'be in the fashion'. The next day she was forced to sit out the front of the house and solicit customers, her employers assuring her that she would soon get used to the work. Unfortunately for them, Assunta was not so co-operative. Whenever she was sent to a room with a man, she screamed so much that the customer was happy to retreat. Despite beatings administered by Cozzi, she continued to resist her fate and seek a way to escape.

Three months after arriving in Kalgoorlie, an opportunity presented itself in the person of a young Italian tradesman, employed to do renovations on the house. She told Ricchiardo her tale and he agreed to help her, fleeing with her by train to Perth where she was deposited with 'respectable' friends of his. She was later moved to the Salvation Army Refuge, where the officials reported the matter to the police. Cozzi and Guidotti were quickly arrested and subsequently charged and found guilty of procuring, and sentenced to two years in prison with hard labour.²⁴

Assunta's case was not unique. Seventeen-year-old Natalina Appendino was also Italian, but was living in France in 1900 and working in a Marseille factory when she was offered a job at much higher wages in Western Australia. For £2 per month, plus board, washing and her return fare, Natalina agreed to accompany a man named Lance and his female companion to work as an assistant in a confectionery and baker's shop in Kalgoorlie. Like Assunta, it was only on arriving in Australia that she discovered she would be selling sex rather than candy, but her inability to speak English made escape difficult. However, also like Assunta, she proved resourceful. First she feigned illness and was admitted to the hospital. Unfortunately, less than a week later she was visited by a Frenchwoman, Madam Galliard, who persuaded Natalina to go home with her on the promise that she would care for her. She told the girl she had bought her freedom for the sum of £65. Surprise, surprise—this woman also turned out to be in the sex industry, and Natalina found herself once more in a brothel. Madam Galliard's investment did not pay off: Natalina showed no enthusiasm for sex work and after a short time she was sold to another Frenchman, Paul Loubens of the Peerless Tobacconist Shop for £35. He placed her in Annie Smith's brothel, but she escaped and sought refuge at an Italian wine saloon. She formed a relationship with an Italian contractor who encouraged her to go to the police and lay a complaint against Loubens. Although there was no case of procuring against Loubens, he was convicted of living off the earnings of prostitution and sentenced to six months' gaol.²⁵

These cases were unusual in that they resulted in prosecution and conviction. Other

instances of procurement of European women by deception and violence were reported in the press at the time. These reports formed part of a growing international concern about the so-called 'white slave traffic'. This concern, and the terminology of sexual slavery, was originally used to apply to the procurement of sexually innocent young English girls for sale to brothels in Belgium and France. A famous case in 1880 in which the London publicist W.T. Stead bought such a girl from her procurers provided the opportunity for widespread discussion of the issue in the press. By the end of the century there was a growing humanitarian movement aimed at ending this 'white slave traffic', culminating in the first of a series of international conferences in 1899. Such international concern did not go unnoticed in Australia, where people were on the lookout for anything resembling white slavery in their midst. The cases of Assunta Spazziani and Natalina Appendino seemed to confirm the existence of this traffic.

However, the issue was rather more complicated than the discourse of 'white slavery' implied. Leaving aside the difficult question of 'choice' in the context of limited economic options, here we have two cases of women who fit the classic stereotype of the 'white slave': young, sexually innocent women lured to a life of enforced whoredom in a foreign country. As well as serving the men of European descent who dominated the goldfields population, these young women would also have been expected to service the large numbers of 'coloured' men who visited the brothels: principally 'Afghan' camel drivers and traders but also a smaller number of Japanese.²⁶ The evidence presented to the court in these two cases indicates that the 'white slave traffic' was not simply a creation of the sensationalist press. The question is, how representative were they?

We will never be able to say for sure. It seems likely, though, that such extreme cases of deception and coercion were the exception rather than the norm. By their own reports, most of the French and Italian prostitutes who came in contact with the law in Western Australia had worked in the sex industry in their home country before coming to Australia. They were not so much innocent victims decoyed to 'a fate worse than death', as professionals seeking the best market opportunities.²⁷ Even if not professionals in their own country, they were prepared to engage in commercial sex once abroad. They were often assisted in their business by a number of men who had a variety of relationships with the women: lovers, business partners, exploiters, protectors. Other women came independently of men and the so-called 'syndicates'. They operated their businesses either alone or with other women.

Nor was the traffic in one direction only: some entrepreneurs brought young women from Europe to Australia and New Zealand while others recruited women to take back to the brothels in Buenos Aires and London. The record of one of these trafficking groups gives us a good idea of the way in which the trade operated.

Aldo Cellis and Alessandro Berard were described by the London police as 'typical Continental traffickers in women'. Aldo Cellis was the dominant partner. He was born in Turin in 1879. He was charged with theft in Turin in 1900 and sentenced to two years and nine months' gaol. He clearly didn't serve this sentence, as six months later he was convicted in Sydney for unlawful possession. Cellis's criminal record in Australia shows a series of convictions for theft and unlawful possession in Sydney and Adelaide. In 1908 he was charged with living on the proceeds of prostitution in Leonora, an isolated goldmining town in Western Australia. He did not appear to answer this charge but obviously left the country, heading for New Zealand with the Australian woman on whose prostitution he had been living. The couple set up a brothel in Wellington, New Zealand, close to another brothel run by a female friend in College Street. Some time in 1910 Cellis and the woman calling herself Marie Vernon decided to leave New

Zealand to try their fortunes in Buenos Aires. They made the acquaintance of a young New Zealand woman, 'Doris Williams', through a man who lived at the same boarding house as her. This is Doris's account of how she became involved in the international sex industry:

My correct age is 18 on the 3rd June last. I was [working] at a photographer's outside Wellington and used to come to town every evening and lived in Wellington with a very respectable family who took boarders. I there met a gentleman who asked me if I would like to travel.

I said 'Yes very much'. He said he would introduce me to a lady and gentleman who were going to travel. The gentleman took me the same evening to 24 College St, Wellington, where he introduced me to a woman saying, 'This is the lady you are going to travel with.'

She said 'We are delighted to meet you—come inside.' The gentleman left and I went into a room where I saw that curtains were drawn and everything was untidy. I asked her her names and she said just call me 'Marie'. She said to me, 'I have been looking for a nice young girl for some time to travel with me. You know if you come with me you will have to do the same as I do.' I said 'What is that?' She said 'Receive gentlemen.' 'You will have nice clothes and not want for anything and be quite happy.' She showed me some stockings etc. and said 'These things will be yours and we shall buy you some more things.'

About 15 minutes after Mr Celli came in. She kissed him and said 'Here's the young girl who is going to come with us' He came over to me and sat [at] my knee shook hands and kissed me. He said 'You are a very nice girl, you come with us and you will have no trouble or worry and be very happy. Marie will see to you.' He said 'If ever you see me on the street do not recognize me on account of the Police.' Both of them took me upstairs and showed me some high legged red plush boots. He said 'If they will fit you you may have them.' He also showed me some silk underclothing and Mrs Celli said 'You will have to wear them when you are in the business.'²⁸

At this meeting Marie Vernon established that the young woman was not a virgin, having had sex with her former sweetheart. She persuaded Doris to accompany her and Cellis to Australia, but explained that they would travel separately to avoid police suspicion. Marie and Cellis went ahead, and Doris was left in the care of their friend, a French prostitute calling herself Mrs White. When Doris finally got her steamship ticket, she discovered it was for Buenos Aires, not Sydney. Moreover, White informed her that the cost was £28, which she would be expected to repay along with the £5 paid to the man who introduced her to the couple. Nevertheless, apparently determined on world travel, silk underwear and red plush boots, Doris set sail for South America under an assumed name.

When she met up with the couple again in Buenos Aires, Marie taught her how to wear make-up and solicit men at the Casino. 'If any men look at you, put your head on one side and smile.' She also explained the subtleties of pleasing her male clients and the use of 'French letters', about which she knew nothing. This latter piece of information came too late, apparently, as after less than a month Doris was diagnosed with gonorrhoea. Cellis and Vernon decided that Buenos Aires was bad luck, so the trio embarked for London where Doris was admitted to a Lock Hospital for treatment of her venereal disease. It was the matron of this hospital who alerted the authorities to the

possible 'white slavers'. Given the international concern about this traffic, the London Metropolitan Police mounted an incredibly thorough investigation which resulted in the conviction of Cellis as well as his accomplice, Berard. Between them they were convicted of procuring four young women, mostly from France, for the sex industry. Like Doris, these girls were not sexually innocent but with one exception had not worked as prostitutes before agreeing to travel with Cellis and Berard. And also like Doris, these working-class girls were lured away from their homes in Paris by promises of comfort and travel to distant places, in this case Australia. No doubt they would have left for Australia, too, had the men not been convicted and gaoled for procuring.

Once in Australia, they would have found their presence tolerated, if not welcomed. The visible presence of large numbers of 'foreign' women, be they Japanese, Italian or French, allowed local commentators to congratulate themselves on the advanced status of Australia. In 1915 a West Australian politician, the Honourable R.H. Underwood, told the Legislative Assembly that:

We can take credit, and I think should take credit to ourselves in WA for our social conditions when we reflect that the supply of prostitutes in this country has given out. Most honourable members know that prostitutes in WA are supplied chiefly from France, Japan, and Italy. As a matter of fact the Australian social system has kept the Australian women out of it.²⁹

This was a comfortable illusion rather than a reality: the majority of those engaged in the local sex industry were actually Australian born and, as we have seen, some Australian women travelled abroad to participate in the international sex industry. But it was true that non-Australian and non-British women were disproportionately represented amongst the ranks of sex workers. All this was about to change, however, as Australia became increasingly determined to create a specifically British version of White Australia after the First World War, and also became more conscious of its status as an emerging nation on the world stage.

Although popularly understood both within and outside Australia as a policy of racial exclusion—hence its popular designation as a White Australia Policy—the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901 was not framed in racial terms. On the contrary, there was no specific mention of racial attributes in the selection of immigrants, the primary mechanism for exclusion being a dictation test in a European language. Those excluded were expected to believe that it was not the colour of their skin but their spelling that Australia found objectionable. The test was used in the twentieth century to exclude not just 'coloureds' but also others considered subversive to Australia's political institutions. The case of the Communist Egon Kisch, excluded in 1934 after failing a test in Gaelic, is well known.³⁰ Less well known is the use made of this dictation test to exclude those of suspect sexuality.

The prosecution of Cozzi and Guidotti in 1902 coincided with an increase in international concern about the traffic in women. The international movement arising from this concern had close connections with existing 'abolitionist' groups who sought an end to all systems of state-regulated prostitution. In the first 14 years of the twentieth century there were three international conventions aimed at suppressing the so-called 'white slave traffic', and Australia was a signatory to them all.³¹ Australian feminists were active in this campaign at both a local and international level. Being amongst the few enfranchised women in the world at the time, Australian feminists felt a responsibility to take a leading role in the international battle to improve women's status. Indeed, Millicent Garrett Fawcett, in her capacity as First Vice-President of the International

Woman Suffrage Alliance, wrote to the Australian Prime Minister in 1913 to urge the Australian government to conduct an inquiry into the white slave traffic. In support of her case she wrote:

It was pointed out by many delegates [to the Seventh Congress of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance] from countries where women have the vote, that one of the first uses to which women have put their newly acquired political power, was to strengthen the law for the prevention of commercialized vice and for the protection of the young of both sexes. A delegate from Australia informed the Congress that the existence of women voters in Australia had enabled the women of the Commonwealth to insist upon a vigorous and impartial administration of the laws for the repression of the White Slave Trade and kindred evils, with such satisfactory results that commercialized vice had been very greatly diminished in Australia.³²

The delegates to this congress resolved to urge their own governments to 'institute an International enquiry into the extent and causes of commercialized vice' and to 'institute a national enquiry along the same lines'. The Commonwealth government was not prepared to take any action, believing it had already done everything within its powers under the Immigration Restriction Act. The Prime Minister suggested that the matter would be more appropriately dealt with by the State governments.³³ However, the Australian authorities were not convinced that traffic in women was a serious problem in Australia and the 1914 Premiers' Conference refused to hear from a delegation, led by the Women's Political Association of Victoria, on the issue.³⁴

What is especially significant about the lobbying of feminists and the response of politicians is the way the focus on the *white* slave traffic deflected attention from the sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women within Australia exposed at the time by the Roth Royal Commission in 1905. In 1914, the Premier of Western Australia could thus write, without fear of contradiction, that 'the procuration of white women for immoral purposes is not now practised'. For feminists, the focus on the *white* slave traffic encouraged a certain blindness where the traffic in non-white women was concerned.³⁵

The outbreak of war in 1914, however, was to mark a new departure in the history of government and feminist reactions to the international sex industry. Australian troops fighting in the Middle East frequented the brothels of Cairo, a fact that was generally known both to the authorities and to feminist organisations in Australia.³⁶ This intercourse (and I use this term advisedly) drew attention both to the extent of the traffic in women in Egypt and also heightened concern about the relationship between prostitution and venereal disease, and especially about the importation of new, 'foreign' strands of the disease to Australia.³⁷ After the war, feminist concerns about the traffic in women overlapped with eugenicist fears about the impact of sexually transmitted diseases on racial vigour. The post-war Australian government shared these fears about racial decline and was also concerned that Australia be seen to acquit itself well as a 'civilised' and 'advanced' society on the international stage. When the League of Nations took over the administration of the international conventions on the traffic in women, Australia was keen to become a signatory and to carry out its obligations under the convention.³⁸ By the middle of the 1920s, most Australian governments no longer regarded the presence of foreign prostitutes as beneficial or even benign. As we have seen, the advent of the White Australia Policy had meant an end to the importation of 'coloured' Pacific Island and Chinese labourers and the enforced repatriation of most of Australia's existing 'coloured' populations. The racial rationale for tolerating foreign prostitutes to service a

large non-white male population no longer existed. Japanese prostitutes were themselves victims of the new immigration laws: the door was closed firmly against new arrivals while most already in Australia were required to leave. French prostitutes were now targeted as the main contaminating influence, both morally and physically. After Australia's experiences during the war, it was not difficult for the government to be convinced that a traffic in women did exist and that the Middle East had a particular role to play as a staging post en route to Australia and the Orient. In 1927 the Director of the Attorney-General's Department referred to impending Commonwealth action due to 'a growth in the obnoxious traffic in this country, organised in Alexandria and Port Said'.³⁹

The question was, what action should be taken. In retrospect it is not difficult to see why the policy of exclusion commended itself to the authorities. As the Director of the Attorney-General's Department explained:

As principal executive officer in Australia under the White Slave Convention of the League of Nations, I am of opinion that one of the best practical methods of dealing with the question of White Slavery is to make it impossible for the unscrupulous foreigners to import women of the unfortunate class to Australia, and that the best way to do this is to deport any such women who manage to enter and who immediately practise their profession here.⁴⁰

Although convenient for the government, the effects of Australia's approach to the 'white slave traffic', however, were much more ambiguous from the point of view of the Abolitionists. As we have seen, the activities of the International Abolitionist Federation and the various conventions which it spawned had considerable impact on immigration policy and policing within Australia. Activists would no doubt have been most gratified at the exclusion or deportation of men allegedly involved in trafficking in women. However, the deportation of foreign prostitutes, which was carried out as a government strategy to discourage the international movement of sex workers, was more problematic from a feminist perspective. Indeed, the question of the compulsory repatriation and exclusion of prostituted women was a contentious issue in the League of Nations forums, with feminists and civil libertarians arguing against discriminatory measures. As debates in the League's International Bureau for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women show, civil libertarians were alive to the potential for official abuse of any such measures. Monsieur Reelfs of Switzerland also pointed out that such repressive measures meant that 'The prostitute was being considered as a special class which could be driven from place to place.'⁴¹

Several sensational cases involving French and Italian nationals in the late 1920s and early 1930s proved his concerns to be justified. The first case involved a French woman of ill-repute who had married an 'ex-digger' to escape deportation. She soon became bored with her marriage to a suburban motor mechanic and returned to her former acquaintances. In April 1929 she 'was hailed before the customs office charged with being a prohibited immigrant. A dictation test in German was applied, and, failing to pass it, she was sentenced to six months' imprisonment and deportation.'⁴² Four days later the *Sun* (Sydney) reported the deportation of one of her associates after failing to pass a dictation test in English. The article made it clear why he was being deported, reporting the item with a bold caption: 'WHITE SLAVERY INQUIRY'.⁴³ The government claimed that it had only acted after receiving 'a communication from the White Slavery Committee of the League of Nations'.⁴⁴ Earlier cases made the same connection. In July 1928, the Melbourne *Argus* reported that two French women,

residents of Perth, were to be deported after failing to pass the language test in English. ‘The police alleged that they kept a house of ill-fame.’⁴⁵ The Melbourne *Age* went into more detail, reporting how the women had lived in Egypt before coming to Australia with £2000, which they invested in a house in Roe Street, Perth. As most Australians were aware, Roe Street was a notorious red-light district, while European women who lived in Egypt were immediately suspect.⁴⁶ In their defence, the women argued that the Immigration Act should not have been applied to them as they had made it clear by their investments that they intended to settle in Australia permanently. As such they were ‘citizens’, not ‘immigrants’. The Chief Justice was unconvinced, pointing out that the dictation test could be administered any time within the first three years after arrival. ‘Persons who entered Australia could do so only subject to Australia’s terms, and, so to speak, were here for the first three years on approval.’⁴⁷ Clearly, Australia did not approve of prostitutes and therefore had the right to deport them. The Australian authorities, it is implied, were behaving in the best interests of Australia. The references to the League of Nations also suggested that Australia was carrying out broader agendas as part of its responsibilities as a member of the community of (civilised) nations. What is clear from all of these cases is the importance of an association with prostitution as a criterion for exclusion, regardless of the wealth or property of the individuals concerned. Nor were women the only targets of these deportations: men believed to be involved as procurers or associates of prostitutes were also excluded.

The description of these cases as being examples of ‘white slavery’ is also interesting. While the government and press were keen to use ‘white slave’ terminology, the situation of the women and their male companions, as reported both by the police and by themselves in evidence, suggests that the relationship was a far cry from the popular idea of white slavery. The women concerned were neither young nor inexperienced, nor did they appear to be vulnerable to the men with whom they associated. However, by using the language of white slavery, the government was better able to justify its actions—and no doubt the newspapers sold more copies.

The women who were subsequently deported from Australia had previously left Egypt in the wake of changes brought about by the activities of the International Bureau for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women, working in conjunction with the local police.⁴⁸

As the official files relating to the 1920s deportations show, many, perhaps even most, of the women who came to Australia from France via Egypt intended to become long-term residents. They bought property and established businesses in the relatively lucrative and safe environment of Roe Street in Perth. These women became the unintended victims of the anti-trafficking campaign, forced to sell their property at a loss and to leave a country where they had hoped to achieve modest comfort and security. We don’t know what became of these women who were forced to ‘move on’ from Australia. Contrary to the intention of those who were trying to stop the exploitation of women’s sexuality, such deportations probably prolonged the working life of prostitutes by forcing them to recoup their Australian losses elsewhere.

The Australian government’s policy of using the dictation test to exclude those considered ‘undesirable’ also had other unintended consequences: no proof of any offence was required, and the discretion given to immigration officials gave them enormous power, which was open to abuse. This is nowhere more clearly illustrated than in the case of Mrs Mabel Freer, who was refused permission to enter Australia in 1936.

Mrs Freer was the Indian-born daughter of an English army pensioner and his British wife. In 1936 she was an attractive 26-year-old mother of two, divorced from her English husband, residing in Bombay. Some time during 1936 Mrs Freer met and fell in love

with a young Australian army officer. He, too, was unhappily married and separated from his wife. He decided to return to Australia and organise a divorce and she accompanied him on the same ship, hoping to marry him in due course. Unfortunately, their plans were thwarted by the intervention of the Australian Department of Immigration. The young lieutenant's father-in-law, concerned at the course of events, lobbied acquaintances in the army who used their position to persuade the Immigration authorities that Mrs Freer was an undesirable immigrant. When the boat carrying the couple reached Fremantle in October 1936, Mrs Freer was given a dictation test in Italian, which not surprisingly she failed. She was promptly declared a prohibited immigrant under the Immigration Restriction Act. Subsequently, Mrs Freer was given permission to trans-ship to New Zealand, where she appealed against her fate for eight months before finally being allowed to enter Australia. In the meantime, however, she became something of a cause célèbre in the Australian press: because the Immigration Department refused to give any reason for her exclusion, the public had no limit when it came to speculation. Was she a spy or a dangerous subversive? Was she a woman of ill-fame? Even engaged in the white slave traffic? Was she a 'dope fiend'? Was she, perhaps, really of mixed English and Indian descent? Even when the Federal Cabinet learned the real history of the case and eventually decided that she should be admitted to Australia, no official explanation was given nor any apology or compensation. As Mabel Freer put it, her 'character was ruined'.⁴⁹ Her solicitor protested to the Australian Attorney-General: 'It seems hard to believe that any Government would, in light of the circumstances ... go so far as to exclude a British citizen from its territory.' In his opinion, the way in which the dictation test was used constituted a breach of the basic principles of British justice: a denial of the 'primary right to which every British subject is entitled—open accusation and open opportunity for reply'.⁵⁰

The reason for this denial of natural British justice was the fact that the Immigration Restriction Act targeted those who transgressed either (or both) the racial and moral ideals of White Australia. Like the vagrancy laws, the dictation test was used to police women's sexuality. Sex workers were an obvious target, but clearly any woman whose sexuality seemed to contravene the ideal of exclusive marital relationships was also vulnerable. Like the sex workers deported in 1929, Mrs Freer was excluded despite her class background. The Freer case shows not just the arbitrary power available to immigration officials under the Act, but also the increasingly narrow definition of 'White Australia' between the two world wars. The dictation test gave immigration officials the flexibility to respond to this narrowing definition without having to resort to legislative changes.

As an historian, I am constantly struck with the resonances of these past stories and past dilemmas. We don't seem to have learnt a lot from over 100 years' experience as a destination in the transnational sex industry. We still find it more convenient to deport the victims than attempt any more fundamental challenge to a system which is undeniably exploitative of many of the women and girls involved. Of course, it is true that it is difficult for one nation to solve a transnational problem. But again, we have been co-operating with other countries to overcome this limitation since the 1904 convention. The intellectual descendants of the Abolitionists are still active in campaigns to put an end to prostitution and sexual traffic. And their solutions are still basically the same: tougher laws against all forms of prostitution and those who organise the traffic. And perhaps the first charges brought under the 1999 Commonwealth Sexual Slavery legislation will act as a deterrent. An alternative strategy is proposed by workers in the sex industry who see the issue as one primarily of labour regulation: to stop the

movement of women into Australia, they argue, would close off an important economic option for a large number of Third World women. What is required is legislation and policing that ensures women are employed under reasonable conditions and remuneration once in Australia. But this would require the government to take a politically difficult decision: to issue work visas to sex workers to allow them to work legally in Australia. Whether any government can be persuaded to take such a decision remains to be seen, but I for one will be watching the ongoing debates with great interest.

To end, I'd like to return to my beginning—to Joy and the statue that once stood in the busy heart of busy Sydney. Joy, like so many of the sex workers we have examined here, has moved on. She's safely tucked away in the peaceful grounds of Macquarie University's sculpture gardens. Removing Joy from the public eye seemed to offer a solution. She no longer challenges us, no longer confronts us, she's an artistic aside, part of the scenery. Deporting or excluding sex workers might well seem a similar kind of solution. We can marginalise them, ostracise them, hide them, and ultimately expel them. But really that avoids rather than confronts the problem.

There is one thing that we can be sure of: their destination will not be as secure or as serene as the gardens of a university.

NOTES

1. This article is based on research for a larger project on the history of prostitution in Australia since 1788, funded by an Australian Research Council Discovery grant. The author would also like to thank Tony Harris for invaluable research assistance funded by this grant, and Bruce Scates, who read and commented on an earlier draft of this article. Loui Fraser was also incredibly generous in sharing her account of the Joy story, as well as her collection of newspaper clippings and television documentaries.
2. This account is based on Loui Fraser's unpublished manuscript, 'Joy's Story'. See also *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 November 1995; *Wentworth Courier*, 22 November 1995.
3. Letter from Joel Johnson, Parks Development Manager, South Sydney Council, to Loui Fraser, 28 May 1997.
4. Video interviews conducted by Lisa Molloy, 17 May 1996.
5. Indeed, Joy's image, with angel's wings, adorned the Sex Workers Outreach Project's (SWOP) 1998 Christmas card, with the words 'Joy to the World' inside.
6. Video interview conducted by Lisa Molloy, 17 May 1996.
7. '1169/02—Inquest into the Death of Puang Thong Simaplee: Coroner's Finding', Westmead Coroner's Court, 24 April 2003 (conducted by Deputy State Coroner, Carl Milovanovich).
8. 'Simaplee Inquest', p. 3.
9. 'Simaplee Inquest', p. 4.
10. 'Simaplee Inquest', p. 4.
11. 'Simaplee Inquest', p. 19.
12. 'Simaplee Inquest', p. 17.
13. For example, 'Death Exposes Agony of Sex Slaves', *Weekend Australian*, 15–16 March 2003. Also Ruddock's reply to these allegations, *Australian*, 20 May 2003.
14. 'Sunny', cited in Linda Brockett and Alison Murray, 'Thai Sex Workers in Sydney' in Roberta Perkins *et al.* (eds), *Sex Work and Sex Workers in Australia* (University of New South Wales Press) Kensington, 1994, p. 195.
15. This account is based on the research of Brockett and Murray, 'Thai Sex Workers in Sydney', pp. 191–202; see also Linda Meaker, 'A Social Response to Transnational Prostitution in Queensland, Australia' in Susan Thorbek and Bandana Pattanak (eds), *Transnational Prostitution: Changing Patterns in a Global Context* (Zed Books) London, 2002; Kerry Carrington and Jane Hearn, 'Trafficking and the Sex Industry: From Impunity to Protection', *Current Issues Brief*, no. 28, 2002–03, Department of the Parliamentary Library, Canberra; Steve Butcher, 'State to Pursue Brothel Operators on Slavery Charges', *Age*, 1 August 2003.
16. C. Sissons, 'Karayuki-San: Japanese Prostitutes in Australia 1887–1916—I', *Historical Studies*, vol. 17, no. 68, April 1977, p. 339.

17. James Warren, *Ah Ku and Karayuki-san: Prostitution in Singapore 1870–1940* (Oxford University Press) Oxford, 1993, p. 75.
18. Y. Tomoko, 'Sandakan No. 8 Brothel', *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, vol. 5, no. 8, 1975, p. 52.
19. *Queensland Parliamentary Debates*, 1907, p. 1587, cited in Clive Moore, "'A Precious Few": Melanesian and Asian Women in Northern Australia' in Kay Saunders and Raymond Evans (eds), *Gender Relations in Australia: Domination and Negotiation* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich) Sydney, 1992, p. 69.
20. Susan Jane Hunt, *Spinifex and Hessian: Women's Lives in North-western Australia 1860–1900* (University of Western Australia Press) Nedlands, Western Australia, 1979, chapter 5.
21. Report by Police Commissioner W.E. Parry-Okeden, February 1899, quoted in Raymond Evans, '“Soiled Doves”: Prostitution in Colonial Queensland' in Kay Daniels, *So Much Hard Work: Women and Prostitution in Australian History* (Fontana/Collins) Melbourne, 1984, p. 139.
22. Parry-Okeden, February 1899, quoted in Evans, '“Soiled Doves”', p. 139.
23. See *Bulletin* cartoon, 7 January 1904, reproduced in Moore, "A Precious Few", p. 68.
24. *Sunday Times*, 24 August 1902, p. 5; 14 September 1902.
25. Raelene Davidson (now Frances), 'Prostitution in Perth and Fremantle and on the Eastern Goldfields, 1895–1939', MA thesis, University of Western Australia, 1980, p. 172; Police vs Loubens, Kalgoorlie Police Court Minutes, 18 May 1900, Batty Library, acc. no. 1340/12.
26. See police reports of men observed visiting the premises of Molly Young, Kalgoorlie Police Court Minutes, 17 October 1910, Batty Library, acc. no. 1340/22.
27. Detectives reported making extensive inquiries regarding allegations of coercion during 1898, Kalgoorlie Detectives Occurrence Book, 20 October 1898. See also report 1 April 1903.
28. Witness Statement of Doris Williams, 13 July 1910, London Metropolitan Police, Public Record Office, Kew, MEPO 3/197.
29. Hon. R.H. Underwood, *Western Australian Parliamentary Debates: Legislative Assembly*, vol. 51, 7 September 1915, p. 637.
30. The most recent account of this episode is Stuart Macintyre, *The Reds: the Communist Party of Australia from Origins to Illegality* (Allen & Unwin) Sydney, 1998, pp. 270–3.
31. National Archives of Australia (NAA) Series A1108, item vol. 31. Sheila Jeffrey, *The Idea of Prostitution* (Spinifex) Melbourne, 1997, chapter 1, contains a brief history of these international conventions.
32. Letter from Millicent Garrett Fawcett to Andrew Fisher, 17 November 1913, NAA Series A1/1, item 1915/5651.
33. Letter from the Prime Minister to Miss A.B. Witham, Hon. Secretary, Women's Non-Party Political Association of South Australia, 13 November 1913, NAA Series A1108, item 31.
34. NAA Series A1, item 1915/5651; also NAA Series A1108, item vol. 31.
35. Letter from J. Scadden, Premier of Western Australia, to Prime Minister, 6 July 1914, NAA Series A1108, item vol. 31. See also Raelene Frances, 'Australian Prostitution in International Context', *Australian Historical Studies*, no. 106, April 1996, pp. 129–30.
36. NAA Series CP78/23/1, item 14/89/252 Pt 1; Bruce Scates and Raelene Frances, *Women and the Great War* (Cambridge University Press) Cambridge, 1997, chapter 6.
37. Judith Smart, 'The Great War and the "Scarlet Scourge": Debates about Venereal Diseases in Melbourne during World War I' in Judith Smart and Tony Wood (eds), *An Anzac Muster: War and Society in Australia and New Zealand 1914–18 and 1939–45* (Monash Publications in History) Clayton, 1992, pp. 58–85.
38. The first two conventions (1904 and 1910) were administered by the French government.
39. Letter from H.E. Jones, Director, Attorney-General's Department, to the Secretary, Home and Territories Department, 29 July 1927, NAA Series 2998/1, item 51/576.
40. Letter from H.E. Jones, Director, Attorney-General's Department, to the Secretary, Home and Territories Department, 29 July 1927, NAA Series 2998/1, item 51/576.
41. International Bureau for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children, *Congress Reports*, London, 1930, cited in Jeffrey, *The Idea of Prostitution*, p. 24.
42. *Smiths' Weekly*, 20 April 1929.
43. *Sun Pictorial*, 20 April 1929.
44. *Sun Pictorial*, 20 April 1929.
45. *Argus*, 13 July 1928.
46. *Age*, 13 July 1928.
47. *Advertiser*, 13 July 1928.
48. Extract from *Vigilance Record*, March–April 1929, in International Bureau for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women Papers, Josephine Butler Archives, Fawcett Library, London, ms. 4/1BS, box 112.

49. Letter from G.P. Finlay, Barrister and Solicitor, Wellington, New Zealand, to the Attorney-General of the Commonwealth of Australia, 11 November 1936, NAA Series A432/85, item 36/1360. The Mabel Freer case is documented in the following files, held at the National Archives in Canberra: Series CP 290/1/1, item 16; Series A422/85, item 43/1139; Series A432/85, item 36/1360; Series A5954/1, item 973/13.
50. Letter from G.P. Finlay, Barrister and Solicitor, Wellington, New Zealand, to the Attorney-General of the Commonwealth of Australia, 11 November 1936, NAA Series A432/85, item 36/1360.