CHAPTER 21

BOARDROOM TO SHOP FLOOR

TOM STANNAGE

ALEXANDER'S *Who's who in Australia* for 1938 has 4000 entries. There are captains of commerce such as Essington Lewis, Sir Keith Murdoch, Frank Packer and A.B. Were. There are rising lawyer politicians such as Harold Holt. There are nearly five hundred companions of one or another heraldic order, and 180 knights. But few women appear in this roll of wealth and power, and people educated in state high schools are swamped by those from private schools.

Who's who wrote of these people as heroes. Most worked hard and long. Essington Lewis, head of BHP, had a typically busy work schedule. His year began following a Christmas break at Landscape, the family retreat near Tallarook in Victoria. On 3 January he was back in his office in Melbourne. On 4 January he travelled by night train to Sydney, then on to Port Kembla by the firm's Buick. The next day he motored back to Sydney and caught a train to Newcastle, where he worked for a week before boarding his aeroplane, *Silver City*, and flying to Melbourne. He had a board meeting at 10 am on 13 January, then went to Government House for a meeting with the governor before returning by car to Landscape for the weekend. Such were the rhythms of his working life. 'The weight of work', his biographer wrote, 'made heavier in the late 1930s by the new ventures he was guiding, could have led to some kind of nervous breakdown. But he showed no sign of breaking.'

Lewis and his board directly controlled the lives of tens of thousands of Australians, including that quarter of the workforce in white collar jobs. His decisions determined whether they would work and if so where, what they should be paid, what conditions they should work under. He and others like him in *Who's who* were, sartorially, 'white collar' workers. Their work involved mental rather than physical activities, and like many other members of the workforce they often tackled masses of paper work at desks in offices. But whether they, or professional people such as doctors, lawyers and senior managers, considered themselves part of the white collar workforce is something which may have differed from individual to individual.

Hygienic's Board encouraged employee participation in team sports to boost staff morale and foster a sense of loyalty and commitment to the company. The 1st grade men's rugby football team and the women's vigoro team (a game that involved elements of cricket and baseball) pose for their group photograph for inclusion in the commemorative album.
BOOROWA PRODUCTIONS

Essington Lewis, born at Burra, South Australia in 1881, educated at St Peter's College Adelaide and the South Australian School of Mines, joined BHP at Broken Hill in 1904. He rose quickly through the ranks and in 1938 was appointed chief general manager. Newcastle Herald.
UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE ARCHIVES

Like most professional women of her generation, Constance Murray gave up the world of paid work when she married and began full-time employment looking after her husband and children.
C. MURRAY, 1938 COLLECTION

Such people lived in a secure world. In chapter 17 we met Angus Murray, a successful doctor who lived with his wife Constance and their four children in the comparatively new suburb of Pymble on Sydney's north shore. The Murrays employed a receptionist, a cook, a parlour maid, a house maid and a governess. They earned between £5000 and £6000 from Angus's practice, while Angus also played the stock exchange, drawing on a private income. They had no debts. Their general finances were handled by an accountant, and neither Constance nor her husband was 'very interested in money'. The family had annual holidays in the mountains or on the coast at Collaroy, often without Angus. In politics they were impeccably conservative. They were a well-to-do urban family.

George Westcott was 29, a public servant in Canberra, the son of a factory manager in Victoria. He had a state school education, and left school at fifteen to work as a messenger boy for the post office in Melbourne. After some time he was transferred to the postal section of the Prime Minister's department, and still later moved to Canberra with External Affairs. He lived first in bachelors' quarters, and moved to the new suburb of Manuka after his marriage to Jean in 1935, paying £2000 for a house. The couple had two children.

In External Affairs George looked after correspondence and records, a sort of superior postal clerk. Usually he had several men under him. They worked from 8.30 am to 4.50 pm, plus overtime, including occasional weekend work, in new buildings with large rooms, plenty of lighting and a hot water system. Although 40–45 per cent of the Australian labour force was unionised, public service unions were weak. Public servants knew that pay rises were automatic and that because employment was expanding, promotion was likely. Union membership was thought unnecessary: 'the opportunities were there, if you had the ability', George knew. When he first joined the service he was told, 'Look lad, always take a pride in your clothes . . . buy what you can afford and be clean. The same with shaving and general presentation'. That was the way to get on.

'In Sydney, the biggest Dead Letter Office in Australia, 26 men are employed. When letters give no clue to the address of the sender they are destroyed. Last year, 272,339 were burned. Money and valuables worth £82,903 were found last year in letters and packets which went astray.' Pix, *13 Aug 1938.*

George enjoyed his family and social life. He had no servants or gardeners, and each day would rise at 7 am, light the kitchen fire, take Jean a cup of tea, feed the fowls, cut the day's wood and sit down to a full breakfast prepared by his wife. Then he would get on his pushbike and pedal to work. Sometimes he would come home to a meat and salad lunch, and switch on the wireless and listen to the news. On Friday nights or after the football on Saturday he would join his mates for a beer, and on Saturdays he would do odd jobs around the house, take his wife to buy heavy groceries and go to the pictures at night. The Westcotts were Presbyterians and attended St Andrew's Church each Sunday. George bought *Smith's weekly* and the *Bulletin* to read at home and read the daily newspapers in the office. The Westcotts liked pioneering in Manuka. They were happy in the company of neighbours and friends and enjoyed each other and their children. 'I married for love', says George, 'that's what we wanted and that's what we had'. With a secure white collar job George Westcott and his wife Jean floated through the depression decade.

Although only 26 and single, Geoffrey Cooper was well on the way to becoming a company executive. His father part-owned Cooper's brewery in Adelaide and Geoffrey had graduated in engineering from the university and now worked in the family firm. His work was both technical and administrative. The brewery had struggled through the depression. Nobody had been laid off but the workers had gone on to half-time for several years. Now women worked only in the office: the company had an agreement with the union not to employ women elsewhere. One area of contention was bookkeeping. This was traditionally a male job, but the introduction of bookkeeping machines led to more women being employed in the field.

Geoffrey had a relaxed approach to his job—indeed to life in general. He had been educated at Prince Alfred College, and played all sports, often at home. 'Tennis was widely played', he recalls. 'In the better-class suburbs one house in four had a tennis court.' He lived in a large house with a central entrance hall suitable for ballroom dancing. The family had motor cars, refrigerators, wirelesses, gas and electric stoves, and an electric iron. They employed a gardener, a washerwoman and a housemaid. They took the *Advertiser* daily, and each week the *Bulletin*, *Punch* and the *Illustrated London News*. Geoffrey had been in the cadets at school and was now a member of the militia: 'the King was our King. We had always worked in peace and warfare with Britain. We were for practical purposes a part of Britain . . . There was no-one rushing around to make Australia a republic'. In politics he and his family were active conservatives, on close terms with United Australia

The Emu brewery in Perth, opened in 1937, had white collar workers in offices at the front of the plant and manual workers in the manufacturing section at the back. Photograph by P. Spearritt, 1984.

party politicians. They were Methodists, considered themselves middle class, but felt that 'It wasn't denigrating anyone to refer to them as working class'. Geoffrey was not very aware of class divisions, perhaps because the absence of a large Irish Catholic population in South Australia helped to keep things quiet. The main challenge for Australians, he felt, was to breed hard men to develop a harsh land.

Dorothy Knox was 36, single, and headmistress of the Presbyterian Ladies' College at Pymble in Sydney, earning about £400 a year. Her father had been manager of a butter factory in Benalla, Victoria, while her mother, who had trained as a dressmaker, stayed at home with the children. Dorothy went to state and private schools in Benalla, boarded at Warragul High School until she was seventeen, then spent a year matriculating from Melbourne High School. She went on to Trinity College at the University of Melbourne, graduating in 1923. In the dairying community she came from, she says, 'Politics played very little part in our lives. I think we were naturally conservative'. As headmistress of the new Presbyterian Ladies' College from 1936, when Pymble 'was still regarded as bush', Dorothy embarked on a large building program, battled with problems such as sewerage, and encouraged her girls to take up physics and maths and become doctors and lawyers. Building was proceeding apace in 1938; she administered a large domestic and academic staff and worked to increase student numbers. She had become an important educator in New South Wales.

In the modern offices of the Prudential Assurance Company in Sydney men had bigger desks than women, even though the typewriters used by the women were large and cumbersome. Men wore suits and ties, women wore suits or blouses and skirts.

HOOD COLLECTION, MITCHELL LIBRARY

This modernised perfumery and pharmacy department opened at Grace Brothers' Broadway store, Sydney, in October. Grace Brothers Store News, *Nov 1938.*
HOOD COLLECTION, MITCHELL LIBRARY

1. NEWCOMERS! Look for the wearers of "Sponsor" badges — they will help you find stock, direct customers, and write dockets.

2. Talk to customers in every-day words that will help them SEE the article in use. You will please them and save your own time answering questions.

3. Come to the LEFT of the register, and go around the operator to the wrapping table on the right.

Myer's 'TIPS ON SALE DAY SELLING'. Myer store news, *27 May 1938.*

Most of Australia's white collar workers were under 40, and more than half were women—nurses, teachers and office workers. Almost all women were in junior positions. Eighteen-year-old Larky Weise had been working as a clerk-typist for three years. She had been born in Gympie, Queensland, where her father was a stoker at the local gasworks and her mother a nurse. She went first to a Catholic convent school, and then to two state high schools after the family moved to Sandgate, closer to Brisbane. Her father was a lapsed Catholic and Larky adopted the Protestantism of her mother. In her junior class of 35, only five pupils had gone on to senior school. 'We had one brilliant child but she was a little hunch-backed girl and her father was a fisherman and couldn't afford to send her any further so she missed out.'

Three of the five who went on became teachers. The school, Sandgate Commercial High, had a Juvenile Employment Bureau, which found Larky a job three weeks before her junior exam. She had no option but to start work at once: 'it was more or less all mapped out that you did get office work'. For the next eighteen months she worked for the Catholic and General Insurance Company as a typist and claims clerk, doing 'a little bit of shorthand'. She worked with several other women in the office, but sales work was done exclusively by men. She was forced to resign from C. and G., she believed, when her bosses accepted advice from the church hierarchy that Catholic firms should employ only Catholics. Even the firm's senior woman, an accountant, was told to go. 'I would come home broken-hearted. It was very hard. And there was no dole in those days for juniors.'

Eventually Larky got work in a solicitor's office. She was happy there. She had her own office and, although she was the only woman in a firm of two solicitors and two articled clerks, some of the dull typing such as wills and conveyances was done by an articled clerk while Larky did the more interesting court work. Her

hours were from 8.30 to 5.30 with an hour off for lunch, and from 9 to noon on Saturdays. Each day she had a three-quarter hour train ride between her parents' home and work. By 1938 she was using a dictaphone, which saved her taking down a lot of shorthand. Larky also did extra chores for her boss, such as getting shampoo or 'flowers for his wife or . . . a new collar for his shirt . . . or something for one of his children'. She did not resent these things because she liked her boss's wife, 'a very nice person'. Larky was a white collar worker in a working-class home—one of many young Australians in that situation. But during the year she began to see herself in a different role. She was being courted by another young white collar worker, a clerk in the Taxation department in Brisbane, and they were thinking about marriage. When that happened, she would leave work.

This advertisement, which appeared in 1937, shows the recently opened art deco offices of the Colonial Mutual Life Assurance Society located on St Georges Terrace, Perth. Western Mail, *Christmas 1937.*

Class perceptions could be strong. Margaret Harken, a female shop assistant in central Fremantle, observed that East Fremantle was '*the* suburb'. She came from a working-class background. Malcolm O'Reilly, a 25-year-old Sydney botanist, was proud that he knew 'everybody on the North Shore line' and 'didn't know the western suburbs at all'. He felt that as a professional man from a professional family he probably belonged to the 'upper class'. Helen Heney, a student at Sydney University, thought of herself as 'a girl of the leisured classes', living 'in the class structure of Edwardian England'. Margaret Woodhill, a stenographer from a rich family, had a lot of friends who were '*the* people of Killara and had a lot of money and a couple of cars'. Margaret Evans, a kindergarten teacher in Perth's Peppermint Grove, felt she was 'definitely upper middle class', and that conditions in her home suburb were 'on the whole' better than in most suburbs. Clement Booth, a clerk

Clarice Eileen Vaughan (front, fourth from left) with her workmates at Henderson and Gregg, milliners, Parramatta. She was fifteen when she started with the firm in 1930. This photograph was taken in 1936. On 19 March 1938 she left to be married.

C. FORSYTH, 1938 COLLECTION

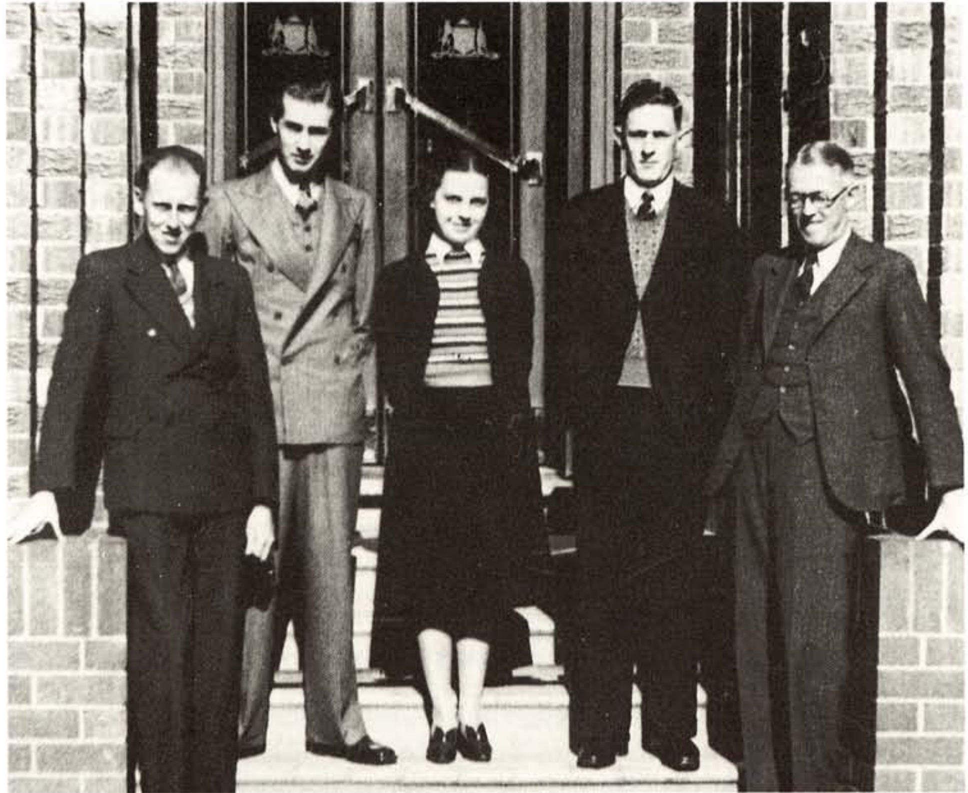
in Fremantle who was not well off, was aware that, as he put it, 'There was us and the poverty people'. Graham Thorn, a Brisbane bank clerk from a rich family, recalls that

> there were the ones with nothing, the ones out of work and down on their luck ... And there were the ones in ... blue collar jobs I suppose which were pretty hard work. The clerical sector then was getting more money than the blue collar worker. Then of course came the professional people, doctors, solicitors, and that sort of thing.

Sometimes there was a touch of arrogance and snobbery about class perceptions. We have met in chapter 21 an executive in a soap manufacturing firm in Adelaide who thought that some of his workers had low intellects and would put up with any kind of work 'as long as they got their money at the end of the week'. More often feelings of class superiority were expressed in paternalist terms, as by Leith Cook, a prosperous radio shop manager who spoke of a 'moral commitment to help the lower classes, especially in the education of their children'.

The idea that they were middle class influenced the political preferences of most urban white collar workers. Many would have agreed with Launcelot Crompton of Adelaide, that 'We were just rank conservatives and that was it'. They voted for Lyons and the United Australia party, and assumed that to do so was only natural. To many New South Wales white collar workers Labor's J.T. Lang was a monster. The right-wing New Guard had drawn much of its support from professional men on Sydney's north shore; they looked back with pleasure at the dismissal and subsequent electoral defeat of Lang. But white collar workers of working-class origins might still support the Labor party. When Marion Anderson, a young Melbourne nurse from a rich family, mixed for the first time with working-class people in a training hospital she found the experience 'a great eye opener'. She felt sympathy for those in 'the hard part of life', and she may have voted Labor.

Norm Bollenhagen and his wife, Lil (far right), in their delicatessen at Henley Beach, Adelaide. Their son Malcolm is in front of the counter. The shop was open from 7 am to 10 pm seven days a week. Assisting them were Marion Davidson and Joyce Jenkins.
N. BOLLENHAGEN, 1938 COLLECTION



Banks and government offices were major employers of white collar workers in country towns. Posing here are the staff of the Rural Bank in Lismore, New South Wales. From left: K.A. Aked, accountant, W. Teiffel, teller, Clarice Jamieson, typist, Jack Gore, ledger keeper and T.B. Cummings, manager.
K. AKED, 1938 COLLECTION

White collar workers were easily identified by their dress. Even in firms with unhealthy working conditions and poor ventilation men and boys were expected to wear a dark suit, white shirt and tie, and on the journey to and from work a hat was considered proper. Employers spoke of 'correct' or 'neat' dress for women, and supervised the hairstyles of women workers.

There was also a general expectation that on marriage women would become housewives. Nurses who were puzzled and even angry that doctors did so little for them as fellow professionals, nevertheless joined with clerks and typists, shop assistants and teachers in giving up work when they married. Women 'always did', kindergarten teacher Margaret Evans remembers. 'It was never questioned.' Millie Taylor, an office worker at Arnott's biscuit factory in Newcastle, accepted that there simply 'was not a job for them if they were married'. 'Men', says Leith Cook, 'expected women to make their clothes and save their money'. 'Men', reflects Marion Anderson, 'felt they would have to be breadwinners, support their wife and families and therefore have to be more educated. They felt they had to have the purse-strings. They made decisions . . .'

Many white collar men with skills and jobs vulnerable to competition from women had reason to uphold the ideology of the breadwinner. Male clerks and typists all over the country were battling to retain work in the face of competition from women, who appeared to take more quickly to the new technology of bookkeeping machines and dictaphones. In some government laboratories women were kept on after marriage because, as one man believed, women were better at analysis, which had 'a lot of continuous routine about it'. In general women white collar workers were, in Marion Anderson's word, 'subordinate'. The pages of *Who's who* confirmed that those who rose to eminence in Australia were almost invariably men, most often from privileged families.

STARTING AT THE *ADVERTISER*

***Stewart Cockburn started work as a copy boy at the* Adelaide Advertiser *in 1938. It was his first job and his duties varied from running errands to learning the writer's craft. Here Stewart writes about his early days at the* Advertiser.**

IN JANUARY, a raw, £1 a week, sixteen-year-old copy boy, I started at the *Advertiser.* Adelaide's only morning newspaper, its traditions hung in the air like banner headlines. Dickensian-looking old men with wispy white hair and green eyeshades, patriarchs of the printed word, dominated the editorial department, scratching their lines with steel-nibbed wooden pens, scorning younger colleagues clattering on typewriters. Heavy glass inkstands stood on sturdy desks, crumpled scraps of paper bobbed on the lino-covered floor. The chaos, the smells, the morse code machine bringing news from other states, the occasional crackle of a shortwave radio, the battery of wall clocks telling the time in London, Cape Town or Buenos Aires—it was all the purest magic. Not for anything would I have changed it for the cloisters of the university where my closest schoolfriends would soon be studying.

My job was to clean inkstands. To file papers. To run messages. To collect daily prices from the central fish market. To ride my bike around the city about nine each night to pick up late advertisements which outer suburban newsagents had lodged with helpful tram drivers, who put them in tin boxes wired to lamp posts in the main streets. To fetch supper for the subeditors as they clustered like surgeons around the body of the next day's issue, intricately stitching its words into shape. On Saturday afternoons to man the old-fashioned switchboard for an extra 5s a week. And, when the work was done, to learn in office time the writer's craft by exploring the words of its masters.

Our chief editorial writer was C.E. Wylde, a tall, forbidding gentleman who daily composed his handwritten 1200-word editorials in a high-winged collar, grey bow tie and pin-striped waistcoat. 'What are you reading my boy?', he demanded of me late one night. On my knee lay Lin Yutang's *The importance of living.* 'What's this?', barked Wylde, 'Lin Yutang! A Chinaman! Good God boy, books by Chinamen will never teach you how to write the English language! You must read Dickens, Smollett, Sterne, Macaulay, Prescott, Blair. Have you never heard of Blair's *Rhetoric and belles lettres*? No? Well, get it!' I got it, from the public library. It was in three volumes, and on the yellowing parchment of an apparently original eighteenth century edition, the 's's' were printed in archaic style as 'f's'. To my profit, I suppofe, I waded through it from the firft page to the laft.

When I began work a furious local debate turned on whether men should be allowed to wear topless swimwear on Adelaide's metropolitan beaches. I still have a letter to the editor which begins 'Sir, There is no doubt that today there is a movement towards fleshy debauchery which now threatens to invade our beaches . . .' The debate went on for some time, and it got more attention than the excerpts from S.H. Roberts's book, *The house that Hitler built*, which the *Advertiser* was publishing. 'Talk to an average German youth leader about individual freedom', Roberts said, 'and you will soon realise that here you have a completely new sense of moral values, held with such intensity that you will fear for the future . . .' But I was beginning a wonderful voyage of discovery. For me, the future held few fears.

'SUN *and* SAND *at* CHITON . . . *From left, Edna Cooper, Bruce Macklin, Isabel Good, Barbara Shearer, Meg Thomson, at Chiton.' Photograph by J.N. Tomlinson.* South Australian homes and gardens, *1 Feb 1938.*

TOPLESS BATHERS

The tide of opinion in favor of topless bathers for men, has risen with a swiftness and certainty scarcely expected by the majority of members of seaside councils. Although many such councillors doubtless foresaw that the worldwide tendency towards trunks, and trunks only, must sooner or later extend to this State, only a small section believed at the beginning of summer that the public in general would approve of the bisection of the traditional male costume before this season had ended. Doubts on this point, however, have been largely dispelled by developments in recent weeks. There have been unmistakable evidences that a large majority of male bathers prefers the abbreviated costume. Where topless bathers have actually been permitted, men clad only in trunks have overwhelmingly outnumbered those wearing what was formerly the conventional design. The reconciliation of the public mind to this new fashion, moreover, has steadily proceeded. Although a number of citizens, in a sincere belief that the change in costume is not desirable, have steadily opposed any amendment of municipal by-laws on the subject, it has become increasingly clear that most people, even if they are not personally enthusiastic about trunks, see nothing seriously objectionable in the wearing of them, and, for this reason, are not prepared to support a general ban on their use. The municipal bodies, which bear the responsibility of prescribing what may, or may not, be worn on the beaches, are naturally apt to be conservative in their estimate of the public demand in such matters. The conversion of one council after another in the topless bather crusade, has been the reflection of the trend in public thought and taste.

Editorial Adelaide *Advertiser*, 24 Jan 1938

WORKING FOR ELDERS

LENORE LAYMAN AND GAIL REEKIE

If someone asked you where you worked you'd be very happy to say 'I work for Elders' . . . You'd be really proud.

The South Australian firm of Elder, Smith & Company Limited was one of four firms handling Western Australia's stock and station business. It employed about five hundred white collar workers in Western Australia, a 'tight knit team' in a company with an 'exceptionally high reputation'. Over four hundred of them were men, and many defined their identity in company terms: they were 'Elders' men'. They believed that their own interests, the company's objectives, and the needs of the man on the land were all served by their work for the company. One employee thought that 'the guiding principle was loyalty: loyalty between the company and its clients, loyalty between management and its staff, loyalty amongst the staff to each other'.

There were several reasons for this. Any job was welcome. Employees remember being 'happy to have employment' at a time when 'There wasn't much opportunity elsewhere'. In 1938, one explains, 'It wasn't a matter of whether you liked your job, it was whether you had one'. But many did like the work. Working for Elders, though demanding, gave men responsibility, some freedom to make decisions, and some social standing, all of which Elders encouraged with a liberal office routine, paternalistic management and reasonable social and welfare policies. Women's work was less highly regarded at Elders, and women employees had less to do with clients; but they too had a sense of commitment to helping farmers and their families.

Elder's weekly, *30 June 1938.*

Elder's weekly, *3 Feb 1938.*

Many young Elders' employees had family contacts with the firm. Some from farming families saw working for Elders as the best compromise between their dream of farming and their need for economic security. A farmer's son who took a job with Elders considered it 'a fairly active type of life aligned with what we had been used to'. This was particularly true of work in Elders' 25 country branches and more numerous sub-branches in the agricultural areas. Here Elders' staff were in direct contact with farmers, providing loans, credit, stores and technical advice, handling their stock and wool sales, and keeping them in touch with costs and prices. The work thus combined the status and security of white collar office work with the enjoyment of outdoor activity and the farmers' social network.

Working at Elder House in St George's Terrace, Perth, or at the wool store in Fremantle, gave fewer rural contacts and less outdoor work, but junior clerks had to help part- time with yarding and retrucking at the Midland Junction saleyards, and many office staff were caught up in the bustle of wool sales. Women seldom left their offices, but they too shared the excitement of the wool sales and the competition for top price waged among the stock firms.

The workers were aware of their white collar status, and felt that 'you were someone to have a job in St George's Terrace'. Elders' men on operational work might be proud of their manual and sales skills, and sometimes spoke dismissively of mere 'pen pushers', but they never dreamed of calling themselves tradesmen. The firm made clear distinctions between its white collar workers and others. White collar people were 'staff', permanently employed, with plenty of promotion opportunities. The rest were employed temporarily and seasonally for stock and wool sales. Farm labourers and less prosperous small farmers often did this casual work in country centres, while at Fremantle at the start of the wool selling season a casual pick-up operated at the doors of the wool store. Inside the wool store these

Elders' girls on a social club expedition to the Darling scarp outside Perth.
E. MORRISON, 1938 COLLECTION

distinctions were maintained. 'Whitecoats', as labourers called the wool technicians, marked the floor in sale catalogue order; labourers moved the bales to their marked positions.

The wool selling season was from September to February, and in the off months wool department juniors—those in their first three years with the firm—were laid off and expected to get experience working as shedhands or rouseabouts on shearing teams before being re-employed. Yet even with them a status difference was apparent: they were labelled 'silvertails' or 'college boys' by the shearers. They learned the game while enjoying a temporary change in way of life, but they knew that back in Perth the security of Elders awaited them.

Elders recruited most of its staff directly from school, and company and workers alike were clear in their expectations: that boys would make 'a career' with the firm and girls would leave on marriage. Men worked as office boys, clerks, salesmen/auctioneers/stockmen, and branch and departmental managers. Most women workers were typists, stenographers and adding-machine operators—jobs only one step above office boy in the hierarchy—but senior or head typists, single women of many years' service, enjoyed higher status and could wield considerable influence. The wives of country branch staff were 'unpaid members of the staff'. They worked unacknowledged by management, answering the telephone in their husbands' absence, taking messages and doing odd jobs.

In the Perth office women employees ran a social club, ESCOL, which organised picnics, trips and parties among the staff. 'We were all such good friends', one

recalls, 'there would be twenty-first birthdays and you made a lot of friends in your life there ... I think you got a lot out of Elders like that'. Most of the typists and stenographers worked together in a large room on the third floor of Elder House. There were various departments—Wool, Stock, Stud Stock, Shipping and Merchandise—each supervised by a chief clerk and a head typist, who allocated work, ensured high standards of presentation, and tried to keep down talk and laughter. The head typist in the wool department 'mothered' the younger women, accompanying them to the doctor, advising them to rest up on their 'off days' or allowing them to take a walk around the shops if they were upset. In the 'girls room' women could sit and sew or talk while waiting for work to come in. Morning tea, not officially a break for the men, gave women another occasion for sociability. They went to the tearoom in two shifts, and would 'get round the table and have a gossip'. The convivial atmosphere made Elders a happy place for women to work, despite the limited opportunities the firm offered.

Men were kept aware that promotion rewarded diligence and efficiency. After serving as junior clerks, those with ambition and aptitude could either move into operational or field work, handling sales, stock and merchandise and dealing with clients, or work their way up the clerical hierarchy at head office. Most hoped to reach managerial level. A boy who had left school and got a job in the correspondence department remembers thinking that, however menial and poorly paid the initial position, he had a job for life, and would eventually move up within the company. 'You'd look forward', he says,

> to the day when you'd get a message to see the Accountant, and you'd brush yourself up and go out and wet your hair and comb it and go trembling to the Accountant, and be told: 'Next Monday ... you'll report to ... the Wool Department'. You'd feel like you were getting out of gaol. You'd still be delivering letters, you'd still be the junior, but you felt as though you were somebody because at last you'd got your foot onto the bottom rung of the ladder. You were making a start.

Elder's weekly, *10 Feb 1938.*

To climb the ladder required long hours, hard work and patient, single-minded commitment to the firm. Those who did only what was officially required, or left the office at five o'clock smart, whether the job was finished or not, were seldom rewarded by promotion. Elders was a hard taskmaster. 'They worked us like galley slaves', one employee remembers. Stock sales, wool auctions and country branch work in particular demanded extremely long hours. 'The job was all-important', a wool technician says of the sales. 'If we couldn't finish it in eight hours we worked ten and if we couldn't finish it in ten hours we worked twelve', and the attitude among country branch men was that 'if there was work to do it was done', whether this involved loading stock into rail wagons at night or working throughout weekends to prepare for stock sales. One country branch man recalls frequent absences from home. '[My wife] got used to it. It was part of the job.' Junior clerks in Perth might sometimes get overtime, but these men, being 'staff', never did.

In country branches staff worked largely independently of head office. 'I was my own boss', one remembers with pleasure. 'Nobody told us to go and load those cattle at midnight', explains another. 'We did it ourselves because it made sense.' Clerks had less choice, but at least technology was not undermining their skills. Office work remained routinely personal and old methods continued to be valued. Decisions at Elders were taken more centrally than in most stock firms, but branch managers had discretion about such matters as credit to farmers, the organisation of office work and the training of junior staff, and the career path before them was predictable and long established. There was no uncertainty. To get on in

Elders, employees knew, you 'put your nose down and your tail up and just got stuck into it'.

Elders was also seen to care for its staff. A number of branch managers were father figures who treated younger staff as part of their big family. They were both disciplinarians and mentors. And the firm itself was a shield against misfortune. It 'stood by' permanent staff who 'got sick or struck trouble', one man recalls. 'In all my years of experience', he says, 'I always had that comfortable feeling that Uncle Elder was going to look after me if I was in trouble'.

'Uncle Elder' was particularly good in adversity. There was no formal sick leave policy, yet it was company practice that staff continued to be paid while absent through illness. Similarly, compassionate leave was given to staff with domestic difficulties. One typist, for example, was given a substantial pay increase to enable her to pay for board and lodging after her mother died. In such ways Elders effectively averted conflict in the workplace.

Other management policies cemented this loyalty, including a provident fund, to which both company and employee contributed, which was available to all male white collar staff who had worked for Elders for three years. Women were excluded from the fund no matter what their length of service. The fund was tangible proof to men of the permanence of their employment, while for the company it ensured that labour turnover was small.

Elders secured loyalty without paying high salaries. A branch salesman might earn less than £5 a week after five years' service, at a time when the state basic wage was almost £4 and the minimum award wage for a senior clerk was £5 4s 11d. Meagre salaries might be supplemented, however, with yearly bonuses; senior country staff were provided with a house at low rent, a car and a telephone, and all staff could purchase goods at discount through the firm. Yet few benefits were given as a right: most were gifts from the company, incentives for greater effort and loyalty. As the time approached for paying annual increments, clerks at Elder House would wait expectantly until one day, returning from lunch, they would see white envelopes on the huge lino-covered tables at which groups of six men worked. Some would find nothing at all; the rest received varying bonuses. No explanation was given and the clerks accepted the judgment with delight or distress. Memories are that 'Nobody ever complained ... Elders' word was law'. The workers had no staff association and few belonged to a trade union. When the Clerks Union made occasional attempts to reach employees it was obstructed. The Elders' management was hostile to unions, and workers feared losing their jobs or damaging their prospects of promotion.

Elders also regulated the public image and reputation of its staff. Formal behaviour in the office, courtesy to clients and a code of dress (for men, coat and tie except when stock work had to be done, for women, a dress or blouse and skirt with hat and gloves) were prescribed. So too was a respectable way of life, necessarily 'frugal' and with 'careful budgeting'. 'It didn't help you if there was any derogatory tale about your behaviour got back to the company', recalls a man who was a clerk in 1938. The rules were accepted as appropriate for white collar workers sensitive to the gap between themselves and manual labourers.

MELBOURNE HORROR

Chicago Methods In Bank-Roll Killing

THE SPOT WHERE SHERRY WAS MURDERED.

MYSTERY OF GUNMAN'S IDENTITY

(Special "Truth" Representative.)

MELBOURNE, Saturday.

ALL Australia has been horrified by the callous brutality of the pay roll bandits who shot to death William Sherry, 47-years-old Clifton Hill shoe manufacturer, whose only crime was that he was attempting to protect his own property. Gunmen using such Chicago methods as characterised this attack have been terrorising Melbourne for years, and there is little doubt that the same coldly ferocious gang have been responsible for many similar crimes.

Truth, *4 Sept 1938.*

DETECTIVE WORK

ALEX CASTLES

Spring started badly for Melbourne's citizens on Thursday 1 September. With shock and indignation they read in their evening newspaper that a local businessman had been murdered. Stockbrokers, bank clerks and labourers knew that crime and corruption lurked beneath the city's morality and respectability, but the news the *Herald* boys were shouting along Swanston Street and under the clocks at the Flinders Street station touched them much too directly. William Sherry, a shoe manufacturer, who had achieved the Victorian dream of rising from humble apprentice to managing a successful enterprise, had been cold-bloodedly killed by two payroll bandits as he struggled in a gutter at Clifton Hill. A law-abiding man, a deacon in the Baptist Church, a freemason, a father of six children had been murdered. At their own doors was the kind of violent crime that Melbourne people associated with Chicago or Sydney.

The southern capital could take pride in the way Sherry and others had attempted to stop the robbery. The gold-braided man outside Hoyts cinema in Bourke Street might extol the regular offerings of gangster movies inside, but respectable people would have no truck with these alien practices on their streets. The shoe manufacturer died stubbornly trying to save his payroll. His maroon sedan was forced into the kerb, a masked man with a drawn pistol threatened him and a companion as another bandit sat poised at the wheel of a touring car. A bullet shattered the sedan's windscreen, but Sherry grappled with his attacker, broke from the car, and dragged the bandit along until he stumbled and was shot. Men from a cable tram depot rushed to help, but they were forced back as a masked man brandished a pistol at them. One shouted, 'You dirty rotten cur', and retreated only when the weapon was pointed at his stomach at point blank range. A grip man stopped his cable tram as he heard two shots and rushed to the dying Sherry. A passing car driver risked his life, giving chase at speeds of up to 105 kilometres an hour, as he saw the masked man accelerate away. He lost them after several kilometres in a web of narrow streets.

The lingering spirit of England's ancient hue and cry, citizens banding together to preserve the peace, had failed to apprehend the perpetrators of a modern, urban crime. The screaming tyres of the speedy getaway car were a sound of changing times, and in Sydney the *Bulletin* observed that Hollywood's moviemakers seemed

to be providing models for Melbourne crime. But Sherry had defended the city's traditional virtues. His last mortal act saved most of his company's payroll, for he and his companion had stuffed the banknotes in their pockets, keeping only loose change in the money bag seized after Sherry was shot.

Sherry's death was a special event for the Victoria Police, particularly the officers in its Criminal Investigation Bureau (CIB). The detective force was undergoing drastic changes. It had long been accused of corruption, complacency and inefficiency, but a new broom was sweeping through police headquarters in Russell Street. The normally lethargic Victorian parliament, debating a new Police Regulation bill, had voiced strong support for the new chief commissioner, Alexander ('Wee Alick') Duncan, who had arrived from Scotland Yard in 1937 with the reform of the detective force greatly in mind. He had sent detectives back to the beat, opened up positions in the CIB to uniformed police, and was seeking greater authority to control promotion and the disposition of his force.

The Sherry investigation gave new detectives a chance to win their spurs, and case-hardened officers possibly their last chance to stay in what many regarded as the elite branch of the Victoria Police. 'Wee Alick' was grimly determined that his force would regain the respect of the community. No officers would be allowed to rest easily until the Clifton Hill killers were behind bars.

There was, however, no easy way to find them. Witnesses could not identify the men: large handkerchiefs covering their faces had seen to that. The tram men, caught up in a few moments of violence, fear and confusion, could give only fragmented accounts of what had happened. Sherry's companion, hit by debris from the bullet-shattered windscreen, had no recall of the crucial seconds. The getaway car might have revealed fingerprints when it was discovered, but it was found burnt out in suburban Ivanhoe just after 7 pm. It had been stolen several weeks previously by persons never traced.

The nature of the crime suggested that the wanted men were professional criminals. This helped to narrow the police enquiries, but also complicated them. Melbourne's criminal world was a fiefdom of sleazy boarding houses, sly grog

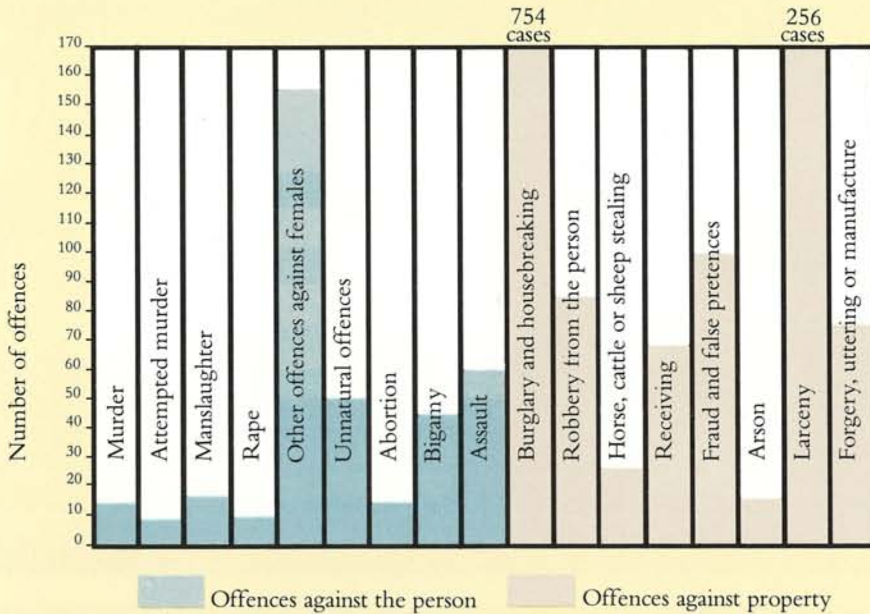
CONVICTIONS PER 10 000 INHABITANTS AUSTRALIA 1938

State	*Serious crime*	*Drunkenness*
NSW	46	100
VIC	35	60
QLD	26	107
SA	25	45
WA	48	54
TAS	43	14
NT	108	n.a.
ACT	53	120

The Northern Territory figure in the first column has been calculated by adding half of the 1937/38 year to half of the 1938/39 year. The figure for drunkenness in Queensland has been calculated in the same way.

Commonwealth year book 1940, 196–202.

CONVICTIONS AT SUPERIOR COURTS BY TYPE OF OFFENCE, 1938



Source: *Commonwealth Year Book*, 1940, 201.

joints, brothels and gambling dens. Men and women lived, bred and died violently in its precincts. It had its own taboos, its princes, its honour roll of martyrs who had served its causes down the years. Above all, it supported its own, moving them from place to place when the heat was on, often to the care of fellow criminals in Sydney and Adelaide. In this case the suspects could be any two of a hundred or more young men who seemed to fit the general description of the bandits. They were likely to be young bloods on the make, in their early twenties, trigger-happy petty criminals who had nervously bungled their first attempt at violent crime.

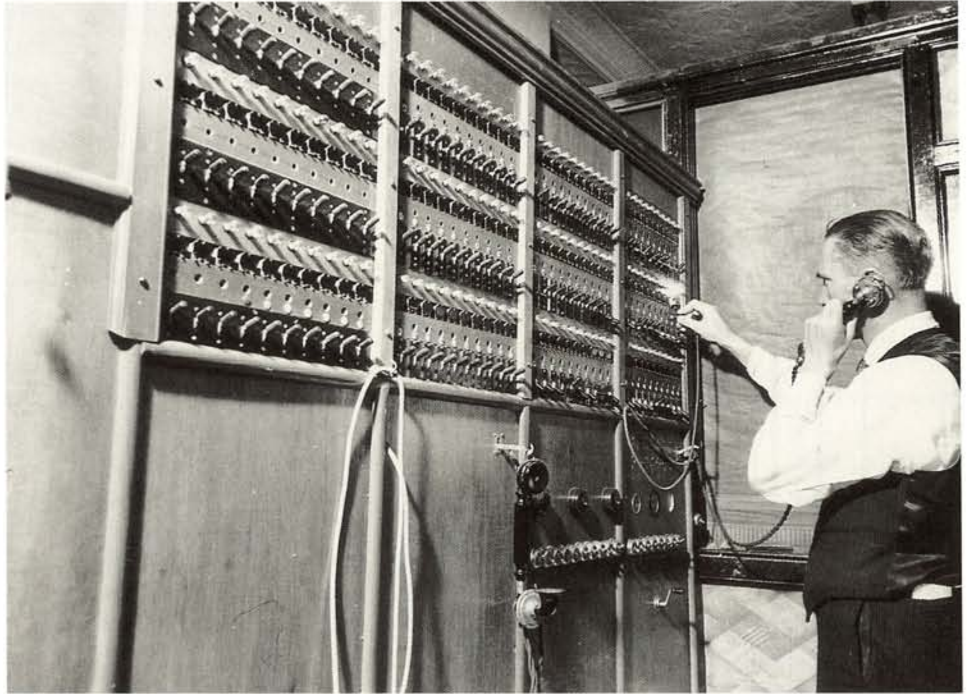
In time the newly created detective school and the recently purchased microscopes and other scientific equipment might change the way detectives went about their business. Now, old-fashioned methods were at a premium. Between Thursday 1 and Sunday 4 September Melbourne's shadowland of criminality was placed under siege. Every available policeman in the metropolitan area was set to find the bandits. Night raids were made on houses in the inner city and nearby. Bleary-eyed men were stirred from the arms of their women. Guards at gambling hideaways and 'protectors' of brothels were brought in. Smartly dressed men who cut a dash in downtown pubs told detectives they were far away when the hold-up took place at Clifton Hill. Sunday took its normal charge of the city's life, exiling its newspapers, battening the doors of its theatres and pubs—but the officers worked on. By Monday they were certain they had, in their official jargon, a 'line of inquiry'. The pictures of two men they wanted were already in police records and the search was on.

The police pressure put the criminal fraternity off balance, threatening many of its daily pursuits. In a bid to keep the police at bay, a wink and a nod from some of its princelings, or a quiet word to undercover officers, disclosed information

STEVEN DUNBAR

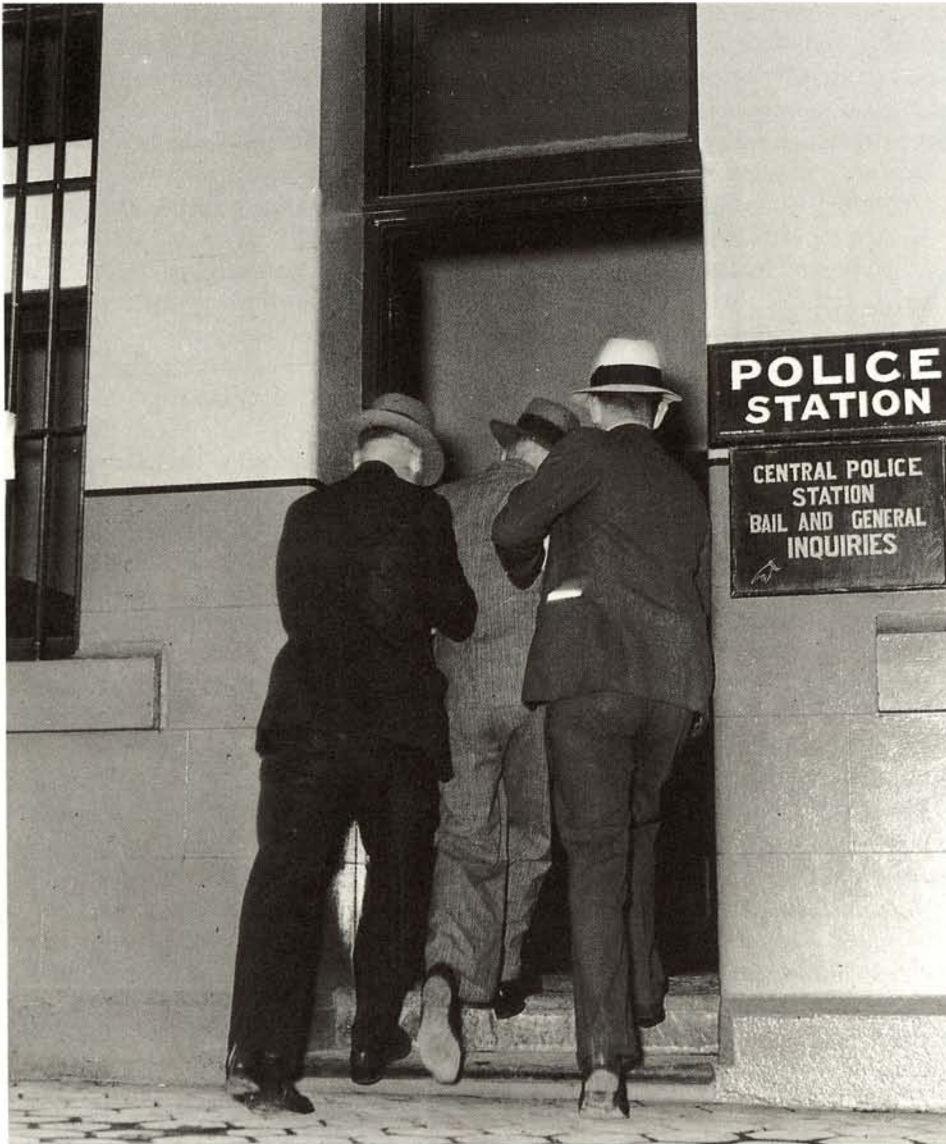
The brutal Sherry murder evoked memories of a crime committed by William Poe who shot a teller and manager during a hold-up on the Government Savings Bank. Poe is seen here leaving Sydney after serving nine years of a twelve year sentence. Truth, *4 Sept 1938.*

Modern robbery prevention: Pix *reported a new burglar alarm system able to detect the presence of a burglar through an invisible beam from a photoelectric cell.*



Right.
'A Light Flashes on the board at the Central Dept. The apparatus looks something like a telephone switchboard. Forced entry into one of the subscribing company's buildings is revealed.'

Below.
'The Chase Is On. In a few seconds after the burglar climbed through the window, the call has been transmitted to the patrol car, in charge of a senior detective. The car races off, then eases down to approach the scene silently.'



'Into the Police Station he goes. He is wondering now how the police got the tip. He had worked as cunningly as ever, had carefully planned everything.' Pix, *12 Feb 1938.*

about the suspects. Soon after the crime one appeared to have fled interstate. The other was still in Melbourne, and the places where he could hide were dwindling rapidly. His friends could no longer afford to protect him. On the afternoon of 6 September he seemed to court arrest by walking openly through the city. He was spotted by a uniformed member of the police bicycle patrol, and was quickly on his way to police headquarters.

The lack of strong evidence to prove the identities of Sherry's attackers in court seriously troubled the CIB. But if signed voluntary confessions could be obtained from either of the bandits, perhaps both, it would be much simpler to prove them guilty of murder. Judiciously, the detectives told the press the man they had picked up in the city had 'voluntarily' agreed to assist the CIB in its inquiries. By 10.45 pm, Selwyn Wallace, a 22-year-old man with a criminal record, was lodged in the city watch house, charged with murdering William Sherry. During the afternoon and early evening he had been closely questioned at Russell Street. He had been driven to Clifton Hill and several other places. Finally he had signed an official statement

admitting he was at the scene when Sherry was killed. He strongly denied he had carried a gun, and claimed his job was to drive the touring car for another man who had actually organised the hold-up. 'I have never shot anybody in my life', he told a questioning officer. He refused to identify his companion, declaring he had 'never squealed on a pal' even if this meant 'taking the rap' for murder.

Wallace's confession was more than enough to have him held in custody for murder. A week in the bleak surrounds of Pentridge gaol helped loosen his tongue a little more. He told the police his companion at Clifton Hill was a 23-year-old man, Edward Jenner. They had served time together in the Castlemaine reformatory, 'Victoria's great University of crime' as *Truth* newspaper regularly described it. The detectives had already suspected Jenner, and on searching his lodgings had seized an empty cartridge box. But there was no trace of him in Victoria. Wallace told the police he thought his friend had gone to Sydney. The New South Wales police were asked to help find him.

Although Jenner was missing the processes of the law went on. In mid-October the city coroner committed Wallace to be tried for murder in the supreme court. Tall, with well-groomed brown hair and stylish clothes, neatly pressed, he put on a bold front when he appeared in court. There were touches of bravado, even of defiance about him as he learned that he would have to stand in the dock of the state's highest judicial tribunal. If his compatriot was still on the run, he alone would face what the police confidently believed was an almost certain verdict of guilty.

But well-laid cases can go awry as the CIB found when Jenner was finally tracked down in Sydney and captured at gunpoint by a Victorian detective on 20 October. He too gave a signed confession to the police. But it differed substantially from the earlier story the detectives had been told. Jenner admitted freely that he had been at the scene of the crime. But he denied that he was the chief conspirator or had ever carried a gun. 'So far as I knew there was to be no gunplay, and I did not at any time use a gun', he told the detectives, 'Shots ... may have been fired by Wallace, but they were definitely not fired by me'.

Without further court proceedings the Victorian attorney-general ordered the two men to be tried together. It did not matter in law who had fired the fatal shot. Both could be equally guilty of murder if they had joined in the robbery, as each admitted, even if only one had carried a gun. There was a growing fear, however, that the obvious discrepancies between the two confessions might create serious problems for the crown, particularly as these were the main evidence against the accused. These differences might confuse a jury, leading it to decide that one of the accused was not a murderer, or even that some unknown person had actually been responsible for Sherry's death.

The detectives pondered for several weeks, then decided that traditional methods, which had played a vital role in bringing the two men to the dock, might not, after all, be sufficient to prove the guilt of the accused. The new scientific instruments being given a place in the CIB might have their uses, despite the scepticism of some older detectives. Less than 48 hours before the trial began the subinspector in charge of the technical branch was called in to make a minute examination of Sherry's sedan. He found fragments of the bullet which had shattered the windscreen. A careful miscroscopic examination showed that they had come from a .22 calibre weapon and not the .32 calibre pistol which had killed the shoe manufacturer. It seemed likely, whatever the two accused said in their confessions, that both had carried firearms to the fatal rendezvous.

The new evidence was crucial at the five-day trial which began on 28 November. The two confessions safely placed the accused at the scene of the crime. The scientific testimony plausibly suggested that each had lied when he denied

carrying a gun. The defence counsel were put off balance by the new revelations. Almost despairingly, Jenner's barrister suggested in his final address that an unknown third person may have been responsible for Sherry's death, but Mr Justice Gavan Duffy told the jury that there was nothing in the sworn evidence to support this speculation. The accused themselves in their signed statements as well as the bystanders had made no mention of a third person with a gun.

The prim, green-lined, nineteenth century courtroom was silent as the jury filed in just after 7 pm on 2 December to deliver its verdict. The sentence for murder could be death. This was the most solemn drama of the criminal law. There was confusion, even a possibility for a few tense minutes that one of the accused might be freed. Unequivocally, the jury declared Jenner guilty. During the trial he had seemed the bolder of the two in a rugged, thickset way. Now he swayed a little, dropped his head as the judge pronounced the death sentence, and had to be almost carried down the narrow stairway from the dock to the cells below. The jury found Wallace guilty of being an accessory to murder, but the judge pointed out that the accused was not charged with this offence, and ordered the jury to deliberate again.

The jury retired for a short time, but the extra minutes were critical for the accused. The jury returned to declare Wallace also guilty of murder, and he stood more defiantly than his friend as the death sentence was imposed. But the jury added an important rider to its verdict: a few spare words which virtually guaranteed that neither man would face the gallows. It recommended both of the convicted men to the mercy of the crown because of their youth. There may have been some confused recognition in this that Jenner seemed more responsible for the crime and had fired the fatal shot. More likely it was an act of grace applied to both men. As representatives of 'God and Country', as the old law books described a jury, it reflected the community it served. Deep down its members may have had an understanding that a great city and its way of life must also bear some responsibility for what had happened to the luckless William Sherry. For whatever reason, the jury rider ensured that the Victorian Executive Council commuted the sentences to life imprisonment. The reprieves came in mid-December, in time for the convicted men to rest a little more easily as they sampled the modest Christmas fare in Pentridge gaol. They were now isolated from ordinary life, in another segment of the twilight world they knew best.

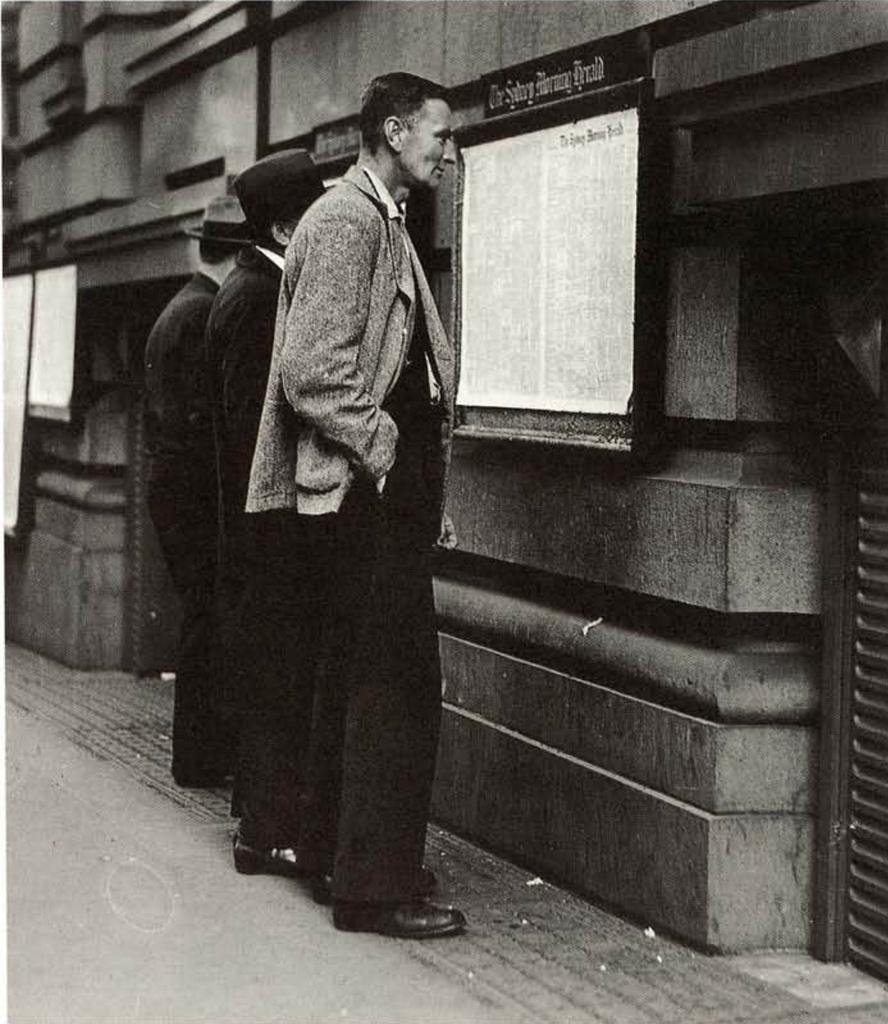
DEATH SENTENCE FOR BANDITS

(FROM "TRUTH'S" MELBOURNE OFFICE.)

FOUND guilty of the cold-blooded murder of Frederick William Sherry, Fitzroy shoe manufacturer, who was shot dead while taking his employees' pay to the factory on September 1, Selwyn Wallace, 23, traveller, and Herbert Jenner, 22, laborer, were sentenced to death on Friday night by Mr. Justice Gavin Duffy. The jury added a recommendation to mercy in each case on account of the prisoners' youth. In Wallace's case the recommendation was "very strong."

FREDERICK JENNER, one of the accused.

Truth, *4 Dec 1938.*



'Every day I go to one of the notice boards where the advertisement columns of the newspapers are pasted up. It's become a habit to read though them in search of a job, but its pretty hopeless.' Pix, *29 Aug 1938.*
MAGAZINE PROMOTIONS