

The Wicked Witches of Wonderful Wollongong: A Case Study in Rumour-Panic and Contemporary Legend

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Abstract

In the lead up to Halloween 1993, the city of Wollongong was awash with strange rumours about an imminent international meeting of Satanists about to descend on the city, with local Christians calling for communal prayer against this impending threat and police rushing to investigate. Reported extensively in the local *Illawarra Mercury* newspaper, by mid-November these rumours had largely dissipated with no visible event transpiring other than an attempted arson attack on a building owned by a long-standing local women's charity who found themselves embroiled in these stories. Utilising insights from the study of a number of similar rumour-panics which occurred from the 1960s through to the 1990s, and tracing the development of contemporary legends surrounding Satanism in Australia over the same period, this article seeks to illuminate some of the wider societal factors and the distinct social ecology of 1980s and 1990s Wollongong which helped feed these rumours and their connection with a series of far more sinister—but far less “Satanic”—crimes ranging from systemic institutional child abuse to murder.

Keywords:

Satanism; Satanic Ritual Abuse; Rumour-Panic; Contemporary Legend; Ostension; Evil Folklore

Introduction

Beginning in mid-September 1993, rumours began to emerge in the Christian communities of the Illawarra's city of steel about an impending event, which an anonymous group of people claiming to be former members of a purported international network of Satanic covens, referred to as the “Gathering of the Spirits.” This was due to be held between 27 October and 1 November – to coincide with the Halloween period. The headlines which accompanied this were nothing new in the *Illawarra Mercury*, which had been running stories about alleged Satanic cults for at least a year beforehand and included such indicative titles as “Black massing for Halloween” and “Satanists head for Wollongong.” These stories spread like wildfire through local media conduits and in church communities.

According to the primary carrier of these rumours, a youth worker named Linda Rossi, this was to be “a major event,” and from information she had received “senior satanists from England, Canada, and

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the United States” were already *en route* to Wollongong. Such things were unsurprising to Rossi who further asserted that Wollongong had a long history of what she called generational satanism – with claims that there were many families in the region for whom “the worship of Satan is maintained within the family from generation to generation.” Surprising as these claims may have been to Wollongong locals, not least its particularly devout Christian communities,¹ they were echoed by retired Anglican Bishop Ken Short (1927–2014) who asserted that “the Wollongong and Shoalhaven areas were special to these people—they have sacred ground here.” What led Bishop Short to this conclusion was his own encounter in the late 1970s with what he called “a situation involving occult ritual.” In response, Bishop Short called local Christian communities to prayer and offered sanctuary to anyone who might wish to escape the so-called covenant.²

In one curious story attached to this wider incident, which read suspiciously like the plot of several horror films from the 1970s and 1980s—one of which, the Australian film *Alison's Birthday* (1981), was actually set on the New South Wales South Coast—one informant even claimed to have been groomed from birth to be a “queen of the covenant” who was due to be sacrificed this Halloween and who was being pursued and threatened with death if she did not return to the covenant.³

These news stories about Satanic cults continued in the *Illawarra Mercury* and other local media over coming weeks—often involving increasing levels of sensationalism—and local police, who were conducting an extensive investigation into such claims for over a year, began to become concerned that things were getting out of hand, and not amongst the ostensible unidentified occultists! By mid-October headlines appeared like “Avert Halloween hysteria – police” and as the week of Halloween approached public concern reached its peak. On the weekend before Halloween a petrol bomb was thrown through a window of a building on Denison Street owned by the Order of the Eastern Star, a sorority related to Freemasonry which had been involved in charitable work in the Wollongong region for sixty years. It failed to ignite. Despite the Order’s benign nature, in one story, a member of the Order was photographed holding a broomstick in a defensive manner outside the building with the Order’s emblem (a five-pointed star pointing downwards with various colours in each of its points) clearly visible. Was this one of the wicked witches of Wollongong?⁴

By this time, the chief informant for the *Illawarra Mercury*, Rossi, was beginning to backtrack on some of her claims, suggesting that some of what she had been told, including that she was a prime target, “may all be myth and legend,” indicating that “she may have been fed false information about the gathering to damage her credibility.” She may have been more prescient here she realised. In one of her more curious comments during this rumour-panic, Rossi noted: “Nothing is gained by hysteria or fear. The people who are whipping up this hysteria should pull their heads in.” She further asserted that “this gathering will not affect the average citizen.”⁵ Unfortunately, for the law-abiding ladies of the Order of the Eastern Star, this did not prove the case; and even today one can find easily find online rumours about the “Satanic Temple” that used to be on Denison Street.

¹ On Christianity in the Illawarra, see Stuart Piggin, *Faith of Steel: A history of the Christian Churches in Illawarra, Australia* (Wollongong: University of Wollongong, 1984).

² Brett Martin, ‘Satanists head for Wollongong’, *Illawarra Mercury*, 16 September (1993), 3.

³ Brett Martin, ‘Survivors’, *Illawarra Mercury*, 2 December (1992), 13; and ‘The Witch hunt that Wasn’t’, *Illawarra Mercury*, 13 November (1993), 27. The films in question are *Alison's Birthday* (1981); *Spellbinder* (1988); and *To the Devil a Daughter* (1976). This theme, however, is common across films of this period. See, e.g., Nikolas Schreck, *The Satanic Screen: An Illustrated Guide to The Devil In Cinema* (Creation Books, 2000); and P. J. Thorndyke, *Satan in the Celluloid: 100 Satanic and Occult Horror Movies of the 1970s* (Self-Published, 2024).

⁴ Brett Martin, ‘Halloween hysteria breeds evil cocktail’, *Illawarra Mercury*, 26 October (1993), 2.

⁵ Brett Martin, ‘Avert Halloween hysteria – police’, *Illawarra Mercury*, 15 October (1993), 4.

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Halloween 1993 arrived and, predictably to anyone familiar with the hundreds of similar localised rumour-panics about Satanic cults which had already occurred in the United States and Britain from the 1960s through to the 1980s, and would continue to occur throughout the 1990s, nothing untoward happened.⁶

The *Illawarra Mercury*, the primary conduit for the rumours, remained quiet on the topic of Satanic cults for a fortnight before an article appeared, from the same journalist who had been reporting on Satanism for over two years, Brett Martin, entitled “The Witch hunt that Wasn’t: Wollongong spared a satanic hell.” Here further claims were voiced by Rossi and her supporters suggesting that the rituals had gone ahead on private properties, including allegations that human sacrifices had occurred, but that thanks to the sterling work of Wollongong’s Christian anti-Satanists the alleged targets of the covens were protected. As the anti-Satanists’ chief spokesperson, Rossi, noted:

I am not surprised people have a hard time believing anything went on...It was very underground. Apart from a general feeling of disquiet, most people will not have noticed anything. However, that does not mean nothing happened, I just wish the sceptic could have been in my shoes for the past six weeks...It was a very tense time...The coven’s whole agenda was to get their people back—our agenda was to keep them safe.

Police, however, were more sceptical, noting the extensive investigations they had undertaken and unequivocally noting that the “sum result” of their investigations, which included several police raids, was “nothing.” The article concluded with a series of indignant comments from Martin and a telling observation “Society will never discover the truth or otherwise of ritual abuse while the media and fringe church groups continue to cloud the truth with sensationalism.”⁷ The egregious nature of this statement—given the earlier work of the journalist who penned it and his demonstrable role in feeding this sensationalism—will become clear, but it contains a kernel of truth. There was abuse of children taking place in Wollongong and some church groups were involved in clouding the truth about it, a point to which this article will return. Yet, to understand this incident of rumour-panic, and the (non)events over Halloween 1993 in what disgraced former mayor Frank Arkell (1935–1998) dubbed “Wonderful Wollongong,” it is necessary to dig deeper into some of the proximate origins of these stories and why they attracted such attention in Wollongong.

⁶ For a selection of other rumour-panics, see Robert W. Balch and Margaret Gilliam, ‘Devil Worship in Western Montana: A Case Study in Rumor Construction’, in *The Satanism Scare*, ed. James T. Richardson, Joel Best, and David G. Bromley (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1991), 249–62; Gabriel Cavaglion and Revital Sela-Shayovitz, ‘The Cultural Construction of Contemporary Satanic Legends in Israel’, *Folklore* 116 (2005): 255–71; Linda Dégh, ‘Satanic child abuse in a blue house’, *Contemporary Legend* 4 (1994): 119–33; Bill Ellis, ‘The Devil-Worshippers at the Prom: Rumor-Panic as Therapeutic Magic’, *Western Folklore* 49, issue 1 (1990), 27–49; Bill Ellis, ‘The Highgate Cemetery Vampire Hunt: The Anglo-American Connection in Satanic Cult Lore’, *Folklore* 104, issues 1-2 (1993), 13–39; William Guinee, ‘Satanism in Yellowwood Forest: The Interdependence of Antagonistic Worldviews’, *Indiana Folklore and Oral History* 16, issue 1 (1987), 1–30; Martha Long, ‘Is Satan Alive and Well in Northeast Arkansas?’ *Mid-America Folklore* 13, issue 2 (1985), 18–26; Eric L. Montenyohl, ‘Beliefs in satanism and their impact on a community: moving beyond textual studies in oral transmission’, *Contemporary Legend* 4 (1994), 45–59. Jacqueline Simpson, ‘Hecate in the primrose wood: The propagation of a rumour’, *Contemporary Legend* 4 (1994): 91–118; Jeffrey Victor, ‘A Rumor-Panic about a Dangerous Satanic Cult in Western New York’, *New York Folklore* 15, issue 1 (1989), 23–49.

⁷ Martin, ‘The Witch hunt that Wasn’t: Wollongong spared a satanic hell’, 27–8.

The Satanic Panic in Australia

Over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, though in some respects stretching back to the 1950s and 1960s, Anglophone countries witnessed a series of sequential moral panics about the threatening activities of alleged “Satanic cults” which scholars collectively refer to as either the “Satanic Panic” or “Satanism Scare.”⁸ As summarized recently by Megan Goodwin:

Many factors contributed to the transnational spread of diabolical paranoia. Confessional Satanists, especially members of the Church of Satan and the Temple of Set, engineered demonically themed publicity-seeking spectacles. Numerous disparate conservative Christianities consolidated, for the first time, into a powerful, visible, and motivated voting bloc—one that credited prophecies of Satan at work in the world. State and federal legislators were directing unprecedented public concern and funding toward preventing domestic child abuse. Second-wave feminist activists were calling out child sexual abuse and working to eradicate it. It is a remarkable phenomenon that could inspire cooperation amongst psychotherapists, anticult activists, conservative evangelicals, law enforcement officials, and feminists.⁹

While internationally the literature on this phenomenon has grown to unwieldy proportions, the serious literature on the Australian episode, or penned by Australian scholars, is of more manageable scope.¹⁰ These publications on Australia’s Satanic Panic have adopted a variety of approaches, ranging from the social-scientific to long-form journalism, but few have focused in on any particular local incidents, or examined in depth how various groups within communities—particularly evangelical and Pentecostal Christians—became conduits and contexts for its spread.¹¹ James Richardson, for example, in one of the earliest accounts, summarised the Australian situation in just two pages. While Richardson mentions

⁸ Most recently, see Joseph P. Laycock and Eric Harrelson, *The Exorcist Effect: Horror, Religion, and Demonic Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 166–99. See also, Asbjørn Dyrendal, James R. Lewis, and Jesper Aa. Petersen, *The Invention of Satanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 102–32; Bill Ellis, *Raising the Devil: Satanism, New Religions, and the Media* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000); Massimo Introvigne, *Satanism: A Social History* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016), 372–461; Kier-La Janisse and Paul Corupe (eds), *Satanic Panic: Pop-Cultural Paranoia in the 1980s* (Godalming: FAB Press, 2015); and W. Scott Poole, *Satan in America: The Devil We Know* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009), 155–84. For earlier studies see, e.g., James T. Richardson, Joel Best, and David G. Bromley (eds), *The Satanism Scare* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1991); Jean S. La Fontaine, *Speak of the Devil: Tales of Satanic Abuse in Contemporary England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Jeffrey S. Victor, *Satanic Panic: The Creation of a Contemporary Legend* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1993).

⁹ Megan Goodwin, *Abusing Religion: Literary Persecution, Sex Scandals, and American Minority Religions* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 30.

¹⁰ See e.g., Morandir Armson, ‘Signs of the Devil: The Social Creation of Satanic Ritual Abuse’, in *On a Panegyric Note: Studies in Honour of Garry W. Trompf*, ed. Victoria Barker and Frances Di Lauro (Sydney: Sydney Studies in Religion, 2007), 143–59; Richard Guilliat, *Talk of the Devil: Repressed Memory and the Ritual Abuse Witch-Hunt* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1996); Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, ‘The Devil Down Under: Satanic Panic in Australia, From Rosaleen Norton to ‘Alison’s Birthday’,’ in *Satanic Panic: Pop-Cultural Paranoia in the 1980s*, ed. Kier-La Janisse and Paul Corupe (Godalming: FAB Press, 2015), 291–307; and Michael Hill, ‘Satanic Ritual Abuse – Now You See It, Now You Don’t’, *Australian Religion Studies Review* 7, issue 2 (1994): 58–64.

¹¹ The exceptions here are Guilliat, *Talk of the Devil*, 144–7 which briefly discusses the Wollongong case; Timothy Lynch, *Satan’s Empire: The panic over ritual abuse in Australia* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag, 2011); and the important dissertation by Edward Ogden, ‘Satanic Cults: Ritual Crime Allegations and the False Memory Syndrome’ (Master’s Thesis, University of Melbourne, 1993).

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the role of Christian fundamentalism in the U.S. Satanism scare, he only mentions its relevance to Australia in passing.¹² Instead, his focus is mainly on the wider mental health sector, where certainly the most concern about Satanism could be evidenced (a point discussed below). Other studies have focused on historical perspective in wider surveys of “cults” in Australia or in terms of the Satanism scare’s impact on the Australian Neopagan community.¹³ One scholarly approach, however, which proved fruitful overseas in analysing the related phenomena surrounding the Satanic Panic, has had little impact in Australia, that of folklorists who have traced some of the proximate sources of specific stories within local social ecologies and emergent or contemporary legends.¹⁴

The lengthiest scholarly study of the Satanic Panic in Australia, anthropologist Timothy Lynch’s *Satan’s Empire* (2011), suggested a valid reason for this oversight when he concluded, “the short history of Australian settler society weakened the influence of imported occult folklore here.”¹⁵ Lynch is partially correct here. The historical timing of European settlement in Australia meant many folk traditions, particularly those pertaining to witchcraft, have left a less visible imprint on the Australian historical record when compared with places like the United Kingdom or United States.¹⁶ However, more recent studies have complicated this historiographical perspective, and the traditional view expressed by writers like Hugh Jackson is clearly in need of some revision.¹⁷

More importantly, in the present context, the contemporary legendry pertaining to Satanism which has developed primarily over the latter part of the twentieth century, examined by writers like Bill Ellis in an international context, has had a demonstrable impact in Australia, in particular the kinds of anti-occult folklore which have spread primarily through popular culture and various Christian conduits.¹⁸ As sociologist Michael Hill, commenting on the Australian situation in 1994, observed, “there is a large stock of popular ‘knowledge’ about the occult,” and “this widely diffused folklore contains a series of reiterated themes which, when combined in an occult scenario, convey the impression of an authentic network of ritual practitioners.”¹⁹

The purpose of this present article is to trace some of the Australian aspects of this contemporary legendry. While it is generally impossible to trace the precise origin of urban legends and rumours, this study will highlight some of the proximate sources for this material by examining the reservoir of ideas about Satanism which developed in Australia between the 1950s and 1990s. It will also highlight the ways in which this folklore came together to feed the Wollongong rumour-panic and underscore some wider social anxieties which may have lie behind this contemporary legendry.

¹² James T. Richardson, ‘The Social Construction of Satanism: Understanding an International Social Problem,’ *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 32, issue 1 (1997): 64, 75–6.

¹³ See e.g., Bernard Doherty, ‘Strange Gods in a Great Southern Land: A Preliminary Survey of the Australian “Cult Controversies” 1960–2000’, *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternate and Emergent Religions* 24, issue 1 (2020): 14–7; and Bernard Doherty, ‘The “Other” Sectarianism’: Australian Christians at the Borderlands of Religious Pluralism 1850–2000’, *Lucas* 2, No. 16 (2020): 117–9. See also Lynne Hume, *Witchcraft and Paganism in Australia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1997).

¹⁴ It is interesting to note that the folkloric aspects of parts of the Australian panic was noted at the time by American folklorists, see ‘Satanic Cult Detected in Australia’, *FOAFTale News* 24 (December 1991): 10–11.

¹⁵ Lynch, *Satan’s Empire*, 383.

¹⁶ For this classic view, see Hugh R. Jackson, *Churches and People in Australia and New Zealand 1860-1930* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1987), 44–5.

¹⁷ In particular, this view has been challenged by a renewed focus on the neglected archaeological evidence for folk magic, see e.g., Ian Evans, M. Chris Manning and Owen Davies, ‘The Wider Picture: Parallel Evidence in America and Australia’, in *Physical Evidence for Ritual Acts, Sorcery and Witchcraft in Christian Britain: A Feeling for Magic*, ed. Ronald Hutton (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 232–54.

¹⁸ See e.g., Bill Ellis, *Lucifer Ascending: The Occult in Folklore and Popular Culture* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2004).

¹⁹ Michael Hill, ‘Satanic Ritual Abuse’, 58.

Contemporary Legends and Evil Folklore

One of the interesting things one encounters when studying how Christian beliefs about the devil play out in the social world is that almost all beliefs about those who purportedly serve Satan have little foundation in actual empirical events. Instead, much of it is firmly rooted in the nether realm of what might fairly be classified as folklore and demonology (or, in earlier cases, heresiology), in both the anthropological and theological meanings.²⁰ Most familiar stories and themes about witches, and more lately Satanists, are legends in the sense of folk narratives which “unlike fairytales—are believed, or at least believable, and that—unlike myths—are set in the recent past and involve normal human beings rather than ancient gods or demigods.”²¹ As folklore scholar Jan Brunvand, in his seminal work *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*, notes: “Legends are folk history, or rather quasi-history.”²² More importantly, the type of folk narratives which I suggest undergirded the Wollongong rumour-panic described in the opening pages of this article were in many instances what scholars since at least the early 1980s have referred to either as “urban legends” or “contemporary legends,” helpfully defined by Patricia Turner as “unsubstantiated narratives with traditional themes and modern motifs that circulate orally (or sometimes in print) in multiple versions and that are told as if they are true or at least plausible.”²³ Therefore, the classic themes and motifs from folklore about witches and the devil are often apparent, but are less immediately recognisable owing to their purported occurrence in a contemporary context.²⁴

Writing in the early 1990s, American folklorist Bill Ellis highlighted three important aspects of contemporary legendry which I suggest have direct bearing on the Wollongong case.²⁵ First, contemporary legends take the form of “news freshly arisen from the teller’s social setting.” Ellis further notes that with these stories “motifs and structure may be quite old,” but their impact “depends on its assertion that the events or beliefs described are directly relevant to the audience’s past, present and future.” In the case of the Wollongong rumour-panic, a series of well-known tropes which had emerged elsewhere and been widely disseminated around Australia were localized within the region of Wollongong as a lens through which to explain a series of unrelated but disturbing phenomena, ranging from missing persons to animal mutilations. Through local media coverage over the year leading up to the (non)events of Halloween 1993, these contemporary legends about Satanism were securely anchored within a local context.

Second, Ellis suggested that the meanings attributed to contemporary legends derive from the specific conditions and context in which they are told. Put another way, “Legendtelling thus embodies a complex social event, in which the performer not only narrates a good (or bad) story but also gains (or fails to gain) social control over an ambiguous situation.”²⁶ In Wollongong, I suggest, the chief claims makers surrounding this legend, in particular journalists and social workers, and those who

²⁰ The classic study of this is Maximilian Rudwin’s pioneering study, *The Devil in Legend and Literature* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1989 [1931]). On the folkloric nature of much demonology, see Phillips Stevens Jr, ‘Satanism: Where are the Folklorists?’ *New York Folklore* 15, issues 1-2 (1989): 1–22; and Phillips Stevens Jr, ‘The Dangerous Folklore of Satanism’, *Free Inquiry* 10, issue 3 (1990): 28–34. See also Véronique Campion-Vincent, ‘Demonologies in Contemporary Legends and Panics’, *Fabula* 34, issues 3-4 (1993): 238–51.

²¹ Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and their Meanings* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003 [1981]), 3.

²² Brunvand, *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*, 3.

²³ Patricia Turner, *I Heard it through the Grapevine: Rumor in African-American Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 5.

²⁴ See, e.g., Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Choking Doberman and Other “New” Urban Legends* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984), 69–102.

²⁵ Bill Ellis, ‘Introduction’, *Western Folklore* 49 (January 1990): 1–7.

²⁶ Ellis, ‘Introduction,’ 2.

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spread these stories, were seeking to express shared anxieties, gain social control, and instigate action over the very real, but also far less sensational, problem of child abuse and exploitation—in particular around vague rumours and allegations that this was being perpetrated and covered up by members of the local civic elite including politicians, judges, police, and clergy. Child sexual abuse had become such a salient social problem within early 1990s Australia more widely, but in Wollongong in particular it was seen as endemic for reasons I will recount below.²⁷ Confronted with the ambiguity created by this situation, and a powerlessness to act on it, telling stories about Satanic Ritual Abuse sought to transform or control the situation by highlighting child abuse in its most extreme form imaginable. Telling horrific stories was effective in eliciting public concern because they were so brutal that they could not reasonably be ignored by the powers that be. In Ellis’s words here “legendtelling” becomes a “fundamentally *political act*,” and certainly in Wollongong and in New South Wales more generally, the implications of these contemporary legends about Satanism were politicized in a significant way.

Third, and clearly related to the second of Ellis’ observations, contemporary legends usually embody a type of emergency situation. That is, they “embody social stresses and attempt to define ambiguous feelings of threat in vivid, dramatic form.”²⁸ The 1980s and early 1990s presented in Australia, and overseas, a period of elevated fears about child sexual abuse within the community at large, and stories about child abusing Satanic cults became a powerful symbolic expression of this wider concern.²⁹ This link, I argue below, became particularly crystallized in Wollongong owing to a series of local cases involving heightened concerns about children and wayward youth and about elite involvement in networks of abuse.³⁰ Contextualised here, the emergence and dissemination of contemporary legends about Satanism, and particularly alleged “Satanic Ritual Abuse,” and its purported apotropaic defeat by the actions of local anti-Satanism activists, may have helped to alleviate some of the tensions associated with these wider concerns, and, ultimately have served an inadvertent social good in highlighting child sexual abuse in a way which led to more serious and systematic criminal and judicial investigations—even if, paradoxically, such investigations ultimately invalidated the credibility of the claims about Satanism which instigated them in the first place. This was not, however, an unalloyed social good and there remain serious questions about how the pursuit of imaginary Satanists misdirected police resources which might have been better spent pursuing more credible accusations—in some cases in the very churches who tried to pray the Satanists away!

These types of contemporary legends were dangerous and had unintended social consequences in a series of different ways. Here, following Phillips Stevens Jr’s characterization of the wider Satanic Panic, I suggest that the contemporary legends which circulated in the lead up to the Wollongong rumour-panic were an example, like one of their closest historical analogues—antisemitic stories about

²⁷ On the (re)discovery of child sexual abuse during this period in Australia, see Dorothy Scott and Shurlee Swain, *Confronting Cruelty: Historical Perspectives on Child Protection in Australia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002), 150–73.

²⁸ Ellis, ‘Introduction,’ 3.

²⁹ See here Richard Beck, *We Believe the Children: A Moral Panic in the 1980s* (New York: Public Affairs, 2015); Joel Best, *Threatened Children: Rhetoric and Concern about Child Victims* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990); and Philip Jenkins, *Moral Panic: Changing Concepts of the Child Molester in Modern America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

³⁰ On Wollongong in particular see the discussion of Richard Guilliat, ‘City of Secrets’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 August (1998), ‘Good Weekend,’ 22–8; the excellent summaries by retired University of Wollongong academic Brian Martin, ‘Wollongong: Horror Behind the Scenes’, *Brian’s Comments*, 12 September (2019), <https://comments.bmartin.cc/2019/09/12/wollongong-horror-behind-the-scenes/>; and Nick McLaren, ‘Frank Arkell: How a vicious murder unmasked a city’s darkest secrets’, *ABC Illawarra*, 26 June (2018), <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-06-26/how-vicious-murder-unmasked-wollongong-paedophiles/9904280>.

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the alleged Jewish Blood Libel³¹—of what folklore scholar Alan Dundes called “evil folklore,” that is folklore which functions as “powerful fantasy material,” with “the capacity to act as a dangerous and all too potent force for evil.”³² These contemporary legends were folklore not only about evil happenings, but also legends which were potentially dangerous in and of themselves because they encouraged those who believed them to engage in various ostensive actions and act out aspects of these contemporary legends in various ways.³³ In the case of Wollongong, for example, by staging a vigilante murder to look like a “Satanic crime” or in attempts made to counter the vague “Satanic threat” or by trying to set fire to a co-masonic lodge.

The focus in this article, then, is not what we can historically know about Satanists, witches, and “devil worshippers,” in Australia—which before the 1960s is very little³⁴—and more about some of the localised proximate sources for contemporary legends about “devil worshippers” and “Satanic cults” which had been culturally constructed in Australia or imported from overseas in the lead up to the Wollongong rumour panic. To do this, I focus on a few cultural moments in recent Australian history which I suggest helped to resource and embed this contemporary legendry in the popular mind and which formed some of the background to the localised rumour-panic which emerged in Wollongong. To do this, then, we need a starting point, and I have chosen the 1950s and one of the most fascinating figures in the history of Australian art: Rosaleen Norton (1917–1979).

The Witch of Kings Cross

The 1950s was the heyday of Christian cultural dominance in Australia and any kind of cultural opposition to this or embrace of a bohemian lifestyle often was viewed with considerable opprobrium.³⁵ It was in this context that we encounter for the first time serious Australian concern about so-called “Satanic cults” and the story of this cannot be separated from some very particular contextual circumstances which were to inform much of the subsequent Christian and wider social discussion of the occult in Australia. In this case, the concern emerged in Roman Catholicism and particular the strong links between Roman Catholicism and the New South Wales State Government of J.J. Cahill, premier from 1952 to 1959. Catholics in power shared concerns with wider conservative interests in society, but two of the domains where their particular moral theory of government was most apparent were in terms

³¹ On the relationship of Satanic legends with the earlier Blood Libel, see Stevens, ‘Satanism’, 5; and Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and Its Relation to Modern Anti-Semitism* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1943), 124–55.

³² Alan Dundes, ‘The Ritual Murder or Blood Libel Legend: A Study of Anti-Semitic Victimization through Projective Inversion’, in *The Blood Libel Legend: A Casebook in Anti-Semitic Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 360.

³³ On ostension, see Bill Ellis, ‘Legend-Trips and Satanism: Adolescents’ Ostensive Traditions as “Cult” Activity’, in *The Satanism Scare*, ed. James T. Richardson, Joel Best, and David G. Bromley (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1991), 279–93; ‘Satanic Ritual Abuse and Legend Ostension’, *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 20, issue 3 (1992): 274–7; Bill Ellis, *Aliens, Ghosts, and Cults: Legends We Live* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2003), 220–35; and Bill Ellis, ‘Death by Folklore: Case Closed?’ *Ethnologies* 41, issue 1 (2019): 99–120. For a more recent discussion see Laycock and Harrelson, *The Exorcist Effect*, 19–37.

³⁴ On this topic more generally, see Nevill Drury and Gregory Tillett, *Other Temples Other Gods: The Occult in Australia* (Sydney: Methuen, 1980), 100–11.

³⁵ On Australian religion and society during this period see David Hilliard, ‘God in the suburbs: The Religious Culture of Australian Cities in the 1950s,’ *Australian Historical Studies* 24, issue 97 (1991): 399–419.

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of censorship and sexual morality, in actions such as strengthening the *Obscene and Indecent Publications Act*.³⁶

Under the Cahill government, the police commissioner, the first Catholic to fill the role and member of the Catholic policeman's Guild of St Christopher, Colin Delaney (1897–1969), was adamant about opposing and prosecuting homosexuality, which he considered the “greatest menace” to Australian society.³⁷ Prosecutions for what the law described as “the abominable crime of buggery,” surged during the Cahill government's tenure in office. Under this, the authorities made little distinction between homosexuality and pederasty, a conflation which was to continue in conservative Christian circles for decades, and much of their campaign was an anti-vice one against male homosexuals which can rightly be considered persecution. Part of this was tied up with cracking down on other forms of perceived sexual deviance, particularly in Kings Cross—Sydney's traditional red-light district—and this is where Rosaleen Norton comes in.

From the late 1940s Norton had become well-known for her distinct style of art, but not everyone liked her paintings and several of her pieces became the subject of obscenity proceedings. Norton's distinctly pagan themes in art, often—though somewhat superficially—compared with similarly controversial Australian artist Norman Lindsay (1879–1969), drew negative attention and her reputation in Bohemian Kings Cross attracted notoriety in the staid atmosphere of the 1950s. Regularly caught up in vice raids, Norton's fortunes took a distinctive turn in 1955 when a destitute émigré from New Zealand, Anna Hoffmann, was picked up under vagrancy laws and claimed that her ill-fortune was the result of having attended a “black mass” with Norton. Hoffman later recanted her claims. Regardless, the story received extensive press coverage, with indicative headlines like “Court is shocked by stories of Black Magic and Sex Orgies,” and subheads like “A blonde's arrest uncovers witchcraft cult.”³⁸ This led to a series of addition media exposés of occult practices in Kings Cross involving alleged animal sacrifice and “sex orgies.” While these stories about “black masses” and animal sacrifice turned out to be untrue—in one case a series of students using specimen bones borrowed from the Anatomy Department of the University of Sydney—the claims about sexual rites were closer to reality, aspects of which were more of a concern for investigating police than faux occult trappings (though it is worth noting that Witchcraft was still technically illegal in New South Wales until 1969).³⁹ The media, imitating the overseas “Wheatleyesque” coverage which accompanied the early years of Wicca in the United Kingdom, had a field day.⁴⁰

³⁶ This section draws on James Franklin, ‘Catholic Action, Sydney Style: Catholic lay organisations from friendly societies to the Vice Squad,’ *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, 108, issue 2 (2022): 172–201.

³⁷ Garry C. Wotherspoon, ‘Delaney, Colin John (1897–1969),’ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/delaney-colin-john-9945/text17617> (1993), accessed online 26 September 2024.

³⁸ On this incident see Nevill Drury, *Pan's Daughter: The Magical World of Rosaleen Norton*, revised and expanded edition (Oxford: Mandrake, 2016), 128–43. See also ‘Artist Charged After Raid On Flat At “Cross”.’ *Canberra Times*, 4 October (1955), 3.

³⁹ On this see Lynne Hume, ‘Witchcraft and the Law in Australia’, *Journal of Church and State* 37, issue 1 (1995): 135–50 148.

⁴⁰ On the media coverage of early Wicca see Gerald B. Gardner, *The Meaning of Witchcraft* (London: Aquarian Press, 1971 [1959]), 212–56; Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 253–71; and Doreen Valiente, *The Rebirth of Witchcraft* (Custer: Phoenix Publishing, 1989), 63–80. On Dennis Wheatley's influence on modern ideas about Satanism and the occult in Britain, see Bernard Doherty, ‘Black Magicians and Foreign Devils in Little Britain: Dennis Wheatley and the Invention of British Satanism’, *Aries: Journal for the Study of Western Esotericism* 24, issue 2 (2022): 1–29.

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Norton's art may have been controversial, but it did attract some admirers among the Sydney elites, one of whom was a star in the world of Australian classical music: the nominal Catholic Eugene Goossens (1893–1962).⁴¹ Goossens had migrated to Australia in 1947 to become the first permanent conductor of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and in 1956 was awarded a knighthood by Queen Elizabeth II for his services to Australian music. He also had a long-running interest in the occult, and in particular sex magic. To cut a very long story short, Goossens and Norton struck up a liaison which quickly led to the consensual practice of sex magick, of both a homosexual and heterosexual variety, along the lines advocated by Aleister Crowley (1875–1947). This sex magick also involved some sadomasochistic activities between Norton, Goossens, and Norton's poet paramour Gavin Greenlees (1930–1983), some of which were photographed. The photographs were subsequently stolen from Norton's King's Cross flat and sold to the tabloid *Sun* newspaper which, unable to publish them, passed them on to Catholic vice detectives. This, among other things, alerted police to Goossens' involvement in the occult and pornography and on return to Sydney from an overseas trip in March 1956, Goossens was arrested at Sydney airport and thousands of pornographic pictures in his suitcase were confiscated. Goossens' career was ruined by the subsequent exposure, and Norton in response to the tabloid savagery, began to actively embrace her image as the "Witch of Kings Cross" and play up to the media for much of the 1960s. Suddenly Australia could point to its very own equivalent of Aleister Crowley – albeit an arguably much better artist.⁴²

Kings Cross Black Magic

As had occurred in the United Kingdom and United States with the first generation of Wiccans, Australia tabloid newspapers embraced the spectacle of voyeurism and vice which these Norton scandals provided, and from the late 1950s one increasingly encountered a distinct melding of the occult and the pornographic. This association continued well into the 1990s, and while this type of material rarely made more responsible and respectable broadsheet newspapers, it is worth quoting what occult historians Nevill Drury and Gregory Tillett observed when writing on Satanism in 1980:

Periodically Australian newspapers burst forth with headlines proclaiming 'Black Magic sex rites: Satanists gather in suburban cellar', or 'Satanists in Black Mass horror'. Usually the articles following contain little more than lurid hints of what supposedly happened, the implications always being of bestial orgies and unbridled lust. Occasionally strange photographs accompany the articles, inevitably including naked or semi-naked females, robed figures and a goat's head in an inverted pentagram.⁴³

⁴¹ On Goossens generally see David Salter, 'Goossens, Sir Eugene Aynsley (1893–1962)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/goossens-sir-eugene-aynsley-10329/text18283> (1996), accessed online 23 August 2024.

⁴² On the Goossens affair see Marguerite Johnson, 'The Witching Hour: Sex Magic in 1950s Australia', *Journal for the Academic Study of Magic* 5 (2008): 234–87; Louis Nowra, *Kings Cross: A Biography* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2013), 228–43; and David Salter, 'The strange case of Sir Eugene and the witch', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 July (1999), 'Good Weekend', 16–21. See also the documentary by Sonia Bible (dir.), *The Witch of King's Cross* (Sydney: Journeyman Pictures, 2020).

⁴³ Drury and Tillett, *Other Temples Other Gods*, 100–1.

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While both Drury and Tillett were aware of various occult groups operating in Australia, they were also sufficiently informed about this subculture to dismiss the most egregious claims. (Though earlier in the 1970s while still an anthropology student at the University of Western Australia Tillett had fed this kind of coverage in Western Australia). The account in their 1980 book indicates how widespread these ideas had become in wider Australian popular culture; indeed by the 1970s the kinds of stereotypical devil-worshippers which had become a feature of horror films and paperback fiction internationally were even appearing on such Australian television series as *Homicide* and *Number 96*.⁴⁴

During this period over the 1960s and early 1970s risqué paperbacks, with the obligatory scantily clad witch on the cover, also began to emerge, with perhaps the most representative being a pulp book put out in 1965 by Sydney publisher Horwitz entitled *Kings Cross Black Magic*, penned by Attila Zohar, a *nom de plume* for James Holledge. Holledge wrote extensively for Horwitz over the course of the 1960s, penning over 45 paperbacks over the decade. The general tone and topics of these pulp paperbacks can be gauged from a selection of their titles, which included: *Inside Kings Cross*, *Girls for Rent*, *White Slavery*, *Australia's Wicked Women*, *Notorious Woman*, and *What Makes a Call Girl? Kings Cross Black Magic* is a representative example of his wider works, probably gauged to cash in on the lurid curiosity created by the Norton scandals and the wider occult revival which began to hit Australia in the mid-1960s. One-part literary erotica, one-part sensational journalism, Zohar's book is very much a product of its time and sought to capitalize on the kind of sensationalism which followed this kind of material throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s, and which occasionally attracted comment from concerned churchmen who found the combination of witchcraft and eroticism particularly distasteful. However, *Kings Cross Black Magic* is most interesting, historically, for one interview it contains with a visiting overseas evangelist: Kurt Koch (1913–1987).

Evangelising Against Evil: Kurt Koch's Visit to Australia

Among the most influential figures in the wider Satanism scare, and on the revival of demonology in Protestant Christianity over the second half of the twentieth century, was the German writer Kurt E. Koch. Koch's writings brought together psychotherapy, deliverance ministry, and some aspects of traditional German folk magic, into a new synthesis which proved extremely popular amongst Protestant Christians as a diagnostic aid in dealing with the diabolical.⁴⁵ Writing in an important study of the background to the Satanic Panic, Bill Ellis observed that when Koch's *Between Christ and Satan* appeared in English in 1962 he immediately found himself in demand and the German-born evangelist and former missionary commenced a worldwide evangelical crusade against occultism.⁴⁶ As part of this lecture tour, Koch visited Australia in the early 1960s and while contemporary accounts of Koch's visit are difficult to come by, one lecture he gave at a missionary conference in Sydney, and an interview

⁴⁴ For a superb treatment of Satanic themes in Australian popular culture over this period, see Heller-Nicholas, 'The Devil Down Under', 297.

⁴⁵ On the survival of these beliefs in modern Germany, see Monica Black, *A Demon-Haunted Land: Witches, Wonder Doctors, and the Ghosts of the Past in Post-WWII Germany* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2020), 167–225. See also Hans Sebald, *Witchcraft: The Heritage of a Heresy* (New York: Elsevier, 1978).

⁴⁶ Bill Ellis, 'Kurt E. Koch and the "Civitas Diaboli": Germanic Folk Healing as Satanic Ritual Abuse of Children', *Western Folklore* 54 (1995), 83. On Koch's wider background and theology see James M. Collins, *Exorcism and Deliverance Ministry in the Twentieth Century: An Analysis of the Practice and Theology of Exorcism in Modern Western Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 126–30.

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which appeared in *Kings Cross Black Magic*, have been preserved and give us a good idea about the scope and focus of his crusade and some of the ideas it helped seed in some Australian churches.⁴⁷

In this interview, Koch speaks of his extensive lecture tour of New South Wales, highlighting in particular how receptive country areas were to his teaching and also claiming that Australia had its share of black magic, but that “it is an underground movement and must be uncovered.”⁴⁸ This was certainly what Koch sought to do in his ministry and writings, and predictably, given what we know about his self-styled “crusades” elsewhere and his wider theory of intergenerational curses, most of the people Koch claimed to have encountered in Australia appear to have been from spiritualist backgrounds or to have dabbled—often very tangentially—in any number of other practices ranging from astrology to parapsychology which Koch classified as “occult.” Koch referred to this as the “spook phenomenon,” and claimed “many households in Australian country centres” existed where “sometimes all members of the family believe in the Devil.”⁴⁹ (Among the anecdotal example given by Koch—unverifiable anecdotes were a key feature of his books—included one from the New South Wales South Coast!).

One of Koch’s Australian presentations, entitled “Mediumistic Powers, Natural Powers, and Spiritual Gifts,” given at a Mission conference in Sydney, was later printed in a collection of his lectures entitled *Demonology: Past and Present* (1973), and gives a feel for two of his contributions to the Australian Satanic legendry which proved highly influential, one, which had existed for over a century in Christian writings, was the emphasis on the diabolical nature of spiritualist phenomena and, second, more importantly and related to this, the way in which the curses wrought by the diabolical bonds established by various occult practices were passed down generationally.⁵⁰ Rural regions of Australia certainly included migrant farmer groups from regions which shared some of the types of folk religion which Koch’s brand of spiritual warfare spoke into and while by no means as extensive as some examples in parts of the United States, some folk magic traditions and traditional witchcraft beliefs survived, most notably amongst German communities in South Australia.⁵¹ More importantly for the development of wider folklore about localized “devil worship” and the ideas of the Satanism scare, Koch concluded his interview with Zohar by noting that, “I do not think it is an exaggeration to say there is a world-wide conspiracy by active Satanists to de-Christianise the community.”⁵²

Koch’s writings were increasingly available in English from the 1960s and proved popular alongside a series of books by generally self-appointed Anglican exorcists which also appeared during the 1970s.⁵³ Importantly, with titles like *The Devil’s Alphabet* (1971), these works classified all manner of practices, ranging from horoscopes as not only “occult” but at core demonic. Indeed, this work lists among the devil’s stratagems everything from traditional Christian bugbears like mesmerism, Freemasonry, and spiritism, through to Yoga. Yet, the eschatological tone and urgency of Koch’s works was also crucial, particularly amid some evangelical revival during the 1970s which emphasised apocalyptic fervour.⁵⁴ Koch concluded the preface with:

⁴⁷ Zohar, *Kings Cross Black Magic*, 39–42. An account of Koch’s Australian visit in German can also be found in Helmuth M Pfandl, *Mit Jesus in alle Welt* (Laval: Evangelization Publisher, 1993), 309–320, though this is sparse on details (however it did lead me to an adorable picture of Koch with a koala).

⁴⁸ Zohar, *Kings Cross Black Magic*, 40.

⁴⁹ Zohar, *Kings Cross Black Magic*, 41.

⁵⁰ Kurt E. Koch, *Demonology: Past and Present* (Grans Rapids: Kregel, 1973), 61–2.

⁵¹ On this, see Thomas Watters, *Cursed Britain: A History of Witchcraft and Black Magic in Modern Times* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 164.

⁵² Zohar, *Kings Cross Black Magic*, 41.

⁵³ See e.g., Kurt Koch, *Between Christ and Satan* (Baden: Evangelization Publishers, 1968); *The Devil’s Alphabet* (Baden: Evangelization Publishers, 1971). On Anglican exorcists, see Francis Young, *A History of Anglican Exorcism: Deliverance and Demonology in Church Ritual* (London: T&T Clark, 2018), 108–70.

⁵⁴ See e.g., Hal Lindsey, *Satan is Alive and Well on Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972).

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In the world today an increasing flood of occult movements tries to overrule the Church of Christ. We live in the last phase of the end of the age. We have therefore to raise our heads and to look for the Coming Lord to whom all power in heaven, upon earth and under the earth is given. The battle is won. The victory is His. Empowered by this fact we can dare to face all the onslaughts of the defeated foe.⁵⁵

While Protestant fundamentalism of the variety found in the United States has proven far less active a social force in Australia as overseas, conservative Christian concern over the occult became increasingly apparent over the 1960s and reached its peak in the early 1970s. It is clear from citations in later writers that Koch's books were widely read in conservative evangelical circles, particularly in Sydney, and it was here that his brand of catch-all concern about "the occult" arguably had its widest impact. Before turning to this, however, it is worth looking at a more local example of Christian anti-occult writing during this period.

Australian Fundamentalism: Clifford Wilson

Despite a more limited base for support, fundamentalist writers like Koch and Merrill Unger (1909–1980) did attract considerable interest among Australian evangelicals, particularly more conservative Baptists and Pentecostals (though arguably less among the latter due to Koch's well-known suspicion of speaking in tongues).⁵⁶ Other deliverance writers were also influential, including H. A. Maxwell Whyte (1908–1988), Hal Lindsey (b. 1929), and Don Basham (1926–1989).⁵⁷ Australia also produced its own homegrown contributors to this widening Christian anti-occult trend, among whom Clifford Wilson (1923–2012) is perhaps most representative.

While more successful in the United States than in Australia, Wilson was a one-time missionary and later a founding figure in Emmaus Bible College in Sydney (1953), heavily involved with the Melbourne Bible Institute during the 1960s, and an early director of the Australian Institute of Archaeology (1967–1970), a largely conservative Christian enterprise in the tradition of Biblical archaeology. An evangelical Baptist of conservative leanings, Wilson began writing a series of popular apologetic books in the 1970s in response to Erich von Däniken's *Chariots of the Gods?* (1968) beginning with *Crash Go the Chariots* (1972), which proved popular amongst more conservative evangelicals. It was in this biblical apologetic genre that Wilson authored two similar books on the occult: *Crash Goes the Exorcist... Where the Exorcist Failed* (1974) and *East Meets West in the Occult Explosion* (1976), which together illustrate how the wider international anti-occult trend was imported into an Australia context.

While Wilson's background was in the mission field, he was clear about what he saw as the localised growth of the occult in Australia and across the West. Noting his first occult book:

Demonism, Satan worship, and all sorts of occult practices have tremendously increased in the West...this is true in Australia...The evidence could be elaborated, for a revival of Satan worship has penetrated the continent of Europe and the rest of the

⁵⁵ Koch, *The Devil's Alphabet*, 9.

⁵⁶ See Merrill F. Unger, *Demons in the World Today* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House, 1971).

⁵⁷ On these three authors, see Collins, *Exorcism and Deliverance Ministry in the Twentieth Century*, 39–41, 53–4, 136–8.

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globe. The spiritual battle is now out in the open more, with evil forces daring to present themselves in bizarre activities around the world.⁵⁸

What these “bizarre activities” were—as well as Wilson’s primary sources of information—became clear in subsequent chapters on the occult in Australia and the United Kingdom in both his books which are largely comprised of stories pulled from tabloid newspaper reports and book length testimonials from ex-occultists about alleged human sacrifices, ritual nudity, orgies, drugs, and the Satanic corruption of countercultural youth.⁵⁹ From these journalistic sources, Wilson claimed that “witchcraft and black magic are fast taking over from drugs as the ‘in’ thing for many young people,” echoing wider societal concerns about “the rapid growth of cults in Australia.”⁶⁰ For Wilson it was important that the church face up to these challenges, asking, in a somewhat alarmist tone:

Is the church aware of this danger? Not sufficiently. Are we prepared to accept the fact of a personal devil and of myriads of demons? Again, not sufficiently...we need to be aware of the nature of the spiritual battle that surrounds us – and is ready to engulf our children.⁶¹

Wilson’s work was specifically written to “highlight these dangers,” and during the latter half of the 1970s Australia certainly witnessed a heightened societal concern over so-called “cults,” but it is important to note here that Wilson’s sources were not necessarily the most responsible kinds of journalism, and while all are agreed that there was an upsurge in interest in the occult during this period, others at the time were more sceptical about extent of the threat.⁶²

Writing in the broadsheet *Canberra Times* in early 1974, Western Australian journalist Athol Thomas was representative of a less credulous line, suggesting that “Black magic, witchcraft, and the study of the occult are often the subject of articles in Sunday papers when ‘hard’ news stories are hard to come by,” counselling further that, “readers savour the stories without really believing them.”⁶³ The case of Wilson, as well as several West Australian Anglican bishops cited in Thomas’ article, showed, however, that among Christians scepticism was perhaps a minority position, but it was not just Christians who were saturating the culture with these ideas. The primary source for claims of black magic in Western Australia cited in Thomas’ article, and also in Wilson’s book, was “a young anthropologist” from Western Australia named Greg Tillett—a name we have already encountered—who would continue to feature in these discussions into the 1990s. Appearing on, among other forums, the national current affairs program *This Day Tonight* in 1973 to share his “findings” from a Master’s thesis on witchcraft at the University of Western Australia.⁶⁴ Tillett had apparently regaled local

⁵⁸ Clifford Wilson, *Crash Goes the Exorcist...Where the Exorcist Failed* (Melbourne: Word of Truth, 1974), 49.

⁵⁹ Some of the tabloid press reports cited by Wilson included Brian Blackwell, ‘Devil Made Her Want to Kill’, *Sunday Observer*, 20 January (1974), 8–9; ‘Devil girl keeps date with death’, 17 February (1974), 6; and Geoffrey Mort, ‘Girls Flee Devil Cult!’ *Sunday Observer*, 13 January (1974), 1. All featured pictures of women in various stages of undress. Indicative of the types of literature Wilson cited here is Doreen Irvine, *From Witchcraft to Christ* (Cambridge: Concordia Press, 1973) which proved popular in Australia. On the problems posed by this book see Ellis, *Raising the Devil*, 160–66.

⁶⁰ Clifford Wilson, *East Meets West in the Occult Explosion* (San Diego: Master Books, 1976), 21.

⁶¹ Wilson, *East Meets West in the Occult Explosion*, iv.

⁶² On the concern about “cults” in 1970s Australia see Doherty, ‘Strange Gods in a Great Southern Land,’ 9–13. For an example of the kinds of article cited by Wilson, see Cecily Davis, ‘Witchcraft—it’s an epidemic’, *Pix/People*, 14 February (1974), 8-13

⁶³ Athol Thomas, ‘Black magic now in WA,’ *Canberra Times*, 2 February (1974), 1.

⁶⁴ Copies of Tillett’s thesis do not appear to have survived, though it is known by reputation in occult circles.

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Anglican bishops about the dangers posed by a growing black magic presence in Western Australia. Tillet's commentary focused in on claims about "unnatural sex acts, bloodletting, the use of drugs and blackmail." Indeed, it was this prurient interest in what Thomas called the "sexually oriented" nature of these covens which continued to attract attention – particularly in Western Australia.⁶⁵

Among the other sources Wilson cited were a series of reports from the magazine *Pix/People*, a softcore pornographic magazine which featured titillating reports on witchcraft with titles like "Witchcraft—it's an epidemic," and "Daughters of the devil," all replete with naked young women in various ritualistic poses.⁶⁶ These articles were certainly aimed to titillate—much like the exploitation of nude rites for news copy by Alex Sanders in the United Kingdom around the same time⁶⁷—but underlying them were some solid facts about witchcraft covens which were operating in Kings Cross at the time, and this was increasingly adverted in wider Australia popular culture, for example in the genre of Ozploitation films which began to appear in the 1970s, most notably the notorious *Australia After Dark* (1975).⁶⁸ By this time witchcraft and devil-worship had been inextricably linked to sex and permissive culture in the wider *Zeitgeist*.

Wilson's books demonstrate, alongside many others appearing from the United Kingdom and United States at the time, the escalating concern in more conservative fundamentalist and evangelical churches, about the occult revival.⁶⁹ It was among these churches, as well as those of the growing the charismatic renewal, that the seeds of the Australian Satanic Panic were taking root. All that was needed was something to catalyse these together and that came, arguably, with the Australian release of *The Exorcist* in 1974 and the reaction it elicited in the Anglican Diocese of Sydney.

The Devil and the Dean: Reverend Lance Shilton and the Occult Revival

In response to the increasing moral permissiveness which Christians saw taking hold in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Australian evangelicals followed the lead of their international brethren in forming reactionary movements which sought to confront these wider societal trends.⁷⁰ The most enduring of these movements was the Australian Festival of Light which galvanized conservative Christians against what it saw as an encroaching moral darkness engulfing Australian society amid what both evangelicals, and some conservative Roman Catholics, perceived as lax social standards and liberalising governments. Two figures who came to prominence during the 1970s and 1980s best demonstrate the bridge between the moral concerns of conservative Christians in the increasingly permissive Australia of the 1960s and 1970s and the Satanic Panic which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s: the Anglican

⁶⁵ Thomas, 'Black magic now in WA,' 1, 9.

⁶⁶ What a good conservative Baptist like Wilson was doing looking at such magazines remains a matter for conjecture; perhaps he read these for the quality articles.

⁶⁷ See e.g., June Johns, *The King of the Witches: The World of Alex Sanders* (London: Peter Davies, 1969); and June Johns, *Black Magic Today* (London: New English Library, 1971).

⁶⁸ In fact, the images of the coven in Cecily Davis' report 'Witchcraft—it's an epidemic,' 8–13 are actually just stills from the Ozploitation documentary *Australia After Dark*. On this film see Simon Mirando, *Book of the Banned: Devilish Movies, Dastardly Censors and the Scenes that made Australia Sweat* (Melbourne: Low Heroes Press, 2023), 50. On Satanic themes in popular culture at the time see Heller-Nicholas, 'The Devil Downunder', 295–8.

⁶⁹ See e.g., Gary North, *None Dare Call It Witchcraft* (New York: Arlington House, 1976); Roger C. Palms, *The Christian and the Occult* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1972); and J. Stafford Wright, *Christianity and the Occult* (London: Scripture Union, 1971).

⁷⁰ See David Hilliard and John Warhurst, 'Festival of Light', *Current Affairs Bulletin* 50, issue 9 (1974): 13–19.

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Dean of Sydney Lance Shilton (1921–1998) and Congregationalist minister and later politician Fred Nile (b. 1934).⁷¹

Among the early leaders of the Australian Festival of Light, while still rector at Holy Trinity Church in Adelaide, Lance Shilton was appointed as Dean of St Andrew's Cathedral in Sydney in the early 1970s.⁷² Usually described as an old-style English evangelical, Shilton was passionately clear in his concerns about declining morals when he arrived in Sydney in 1973, noting in his autobiography:

Sydney was at the time in the forefront of the permissive push, when old traditional values were being openly challenged and the inherited Christian morality was being questioned by advocates of challenging philosophies, old and new. The so-called new 'morality' could have been more accurately termed the 'old immorality'.⁷³

Shilton soon became perhaps the most well-known Anglican churchman of the Diocese and was a regular media pundit on all manner of topics over the ensuing two decades. If a soundbite from a clergyman was required, Shilton was eager to oblige, and he was an astute advocate of the need of the church to continually engage with a variety of media. It was in this capacity—and because of a brief experiment in the Diocese of Sydney which saw them hire a series of experienced journalists to assist them to more effectively engage with the media⁷⁴—that Shilton became a (perhaps initially inadvertent but certainly persistent) propagator of the Satanic Panic. Over the next two decades, Shilton could be found regularly warning of the dangers posed by the occult threat and its links to the permissive decadence of an increasingly sinful Australia.

By the time of his arrival in Sydney in late 1973, Shilton, like other churchmen, was encountering an atmosphere where strange stories about the occult were becoming increasingly common in the tabloids and where the influence of overseas literature and publishing trends were clearly refracting the occult revival through a distinctly spiritual warfare lens. Reports were appearing, for example, of witches in places like Kings Cross, particularly from congregations associated with American imports like Teen Challenge and Youth for Christ. One gets a feel for this atmosphere in an article in the Sydney Anglican magazine *Southern Cross* published in late 1973, entitled “The Occult Craze,” which aptly captured the mood. Written by a young Christian journalist named Terence Craig, who was then employed as an Information Officer in the Anglican Diocese of Sydney, the article speaks about:

The carry over from the drug saturated pop scene of the mid 1960's, with its production of hippies, psychedelia, a mental migration to Eastern religions and gospel of “do your own thing,” is now appearing in the rapidly rising interest in the occult.

Unlike most Christians at the time, however, Craig had direct experience of this, having been involved in the counterculture from the mid-1960s, dabbled in drugs, eastern religions, and the occult before his return to Christianity. Craig was also by this stage involved with Teen Challenge and encountering firsthand some of the enthusiasm both within the charismatic movement, but also among youth

⁷¹ There is no better documentation of the concerns of this constituency than reading the autobiographies of these two figures, Fred Nile, *Fred Nile: An Autobiography* (Sydney: Strand Publishing, 2001); and Lance Shilton *Speaking Out: A Life in Urban Mission* (Sydney: Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity, 1997).

⁷² On Shilton see Ed Loane, ‘Lance Rupert Shilton (1921–1998): The Eighth Dean of St Andrew's Cathedral,’ in *Proclaiming Christ in the Heart of the City: Ministry at St Andrew's Cathedral, Sydney*, ed. Ed Loane (Sydney: St Andrew's Cathedral, 2019), 127–66.

⁷³ Shilton, *Speaking Out*, 113.

⁷⁴ Email to author from Terry Craig, October 16, 2024.

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generally, for the occult and some of the problematic incidents which could occur, and which led to some young people seeking deliverance from Christian ministers.⁷⁵

By early 1974 these kinds of media reports were reaching a fever-pitch. In addition to Athol Thomas' report discussed above, and its concern expressed about black magic covens by the West Australian Anglican bishops, was another story filtering out of Adelaide. In this report, two trainee teachers had submitted their research project regarding occult practices amongst South Australian secondary school students to the South Australian Minister for Education Hugh Hudson (1930-1993). Among its more sensational findings were claims that teenagers had been “experimenting with Black Mass and occultism in secret midnight rites in disused churches in the Adelaide Hills and in at least one suburban cemetery.”⁷⁶ In the *Sydney Morning Herald*, then Anglican religion reporter Alan Gill noted matter-of-factly, in a report written to accompany the forthcoming release of *The Exorcist*, that “interest in the occult has sparked off a renewed interest in exorcism by clergy of several denominations.” The risk this occult revival was believed to pose to young people was being widely adverted and, alongside reporting of the furore surrounding the release of *The Exorcist* overseas, proved catalytic in spurring the Anglican Diocese into action.

Among those interviewed by Gill was Reverend Peter Hobson, then rector of St Michael's Anglican Church in Surry Hills, a parish near Kings Cross which its incumbent rector colourfully described as “guru country.” Hobson had become heavily involved in deliverance ministry over recent years, considering the upsurge in “cults” at the time, as well as homosexuality, as symptomatic of wider demonic activity, and while other clergy were hesitant to speak publicly about this, Hobson was to feature heavily in subsequent reportage.⁷⁷

Hobson's more enthusiastic opinions were not shared by all Anglicans—a point to which I will return—but within days of Gill's article and probably in anticipation of the release of *The Exorcist* and certainly in response to the wider *Zeitgeist*, the powerful standing committee of the Diocese of Sydney, of which Lance Shilton was an active member, established a commission of enquiry to investigate the occult revival. The Commission's brief, as well as its negative position, was clear from the outset, and its terms of reference are worth quoting in full:

- (a) To enquire into the current fascination with the occult especially among young people; to examine its causes and effects.
- (b) To examine the biblical basis of spiritualism and associated practices and to examine the application to today's society of warnings about dabbling in the occult.
- (c) To examine the various current expressions of the occult and their effects.
- (d) To compile a report on the whole subject for the Archbishop, including recommendations about the attitudes Christian people ought to take and any action the Church as a whole ought to pursue.⁷⁸

Over the next eighteen months this *ad hoc* committee of theologians, biblical scholars, psychiatrists, and educators met several times, and performed its duties with diligence, if without much depth. No

⁷⁵ Interview with Terry Craig, 2 October 2024.

⁷⁶ ‘Black Magic Rife Among Students in S.A.’, *Canberra Times*, 3 January (1974), 1.

⁷⁷ Alan Gill, ‘Putting the Devil in his place’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 February (1974), 9. Gill had earlier reported on the Exeter Commission in ‘Training in exorcism urged’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 February (1973), 19. Gill later converted to Roman Catholicism. See ‘Journalist interviewed religious leaders of all faiths’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 February (2018), <https://www.smh.com.au/national/journalist-interviewed-religious-leaders-of-all-faiths-20180228-h0wsa6.html>.

⁷⁸ *The Occult: Report of an Anglican Commission of Enquiry* (Sydney: Anglican Information Office, 1975), 7.

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money was allocated to the Commission and despite the increasingly sure financial footing of the Diocese of Sydney at the time, like many similar committees at the time its work was somewhat undervalued.⁷⁹

Despite its non-existent budget, however, the Commission did attract significant media attention in both church and secular press, and Shilton knew how to capitalize with a good quotation for the papers.⁸⁰ Returning from an overseas trip in late 1974, in which, among other events, he attended the First International Congress on World Evangelization in Lausanne, Switzerland, Shilton told reporters, for instance, that “there were about 40, 000 witches” in England and the occult was clearly one of the defining threats of the 1970s, Shilton going on to opine in a memorable statement:

The fifties brought permissive sex with a consequent epidemic of VD... the sixties brought a drug culture with drop-outs from a materialistic society roaming the world in a dream...The seventies have brought a new fascination for the occult, and its consequent, harmful effects.⁸¹

Shilton was clearly on the moral hustings and despite the financial limitations, the Commission produced a Report which ran to sixty-four pages which was presented at a press conference on 13 August 1975. It was subsequently printed by the Anglican Information Office, apparently selling out within days.⁸²

The conclusions drawn by the Report were predictable, and with its release the Commission noted that it had already achieved at least part of its purpose by alerting the wider public to the “dangers of dabbling in the occult” through the significant publicity this report received nationally.⁸³ Also unsurprising, was Shilton’s linking of the occult with other forms of moral permissiveness as a leitmotif throughout the Report, with the opening pages noting:

Alongside the increasing interest in the occult has been increasing availability of books and films on violence and pornography. In fact, it could be said that pornography gets its power and its cloak of respectability from the way in which the media promote it; and occultism may provide pornography with a religious base to work from.⁸⁴

The Commission found that the church—as Clifford Wilson had similarly suggested in his contemporaneous writings—“ignored the problems raised by the renewed interest in the occult to its own detriment” and decried any theological position which downplayed traditional Anglican teaching on the devil and evil – including such things as commendatory prayers against “whatsoever defilements [the Christian] may have contracted in the midst of this miserable and naughty world.”⁸⁵ Instead, the Report called for a renewed focus on “Biblical supernaturalism” and for the Church to express even the unpopular aspects of its creed. In predictable evangelical style, the solution presented was a “personal

⁷⁹ Timothy Hall, ‘The end to a devil of a job,’ *The Bulletin*, 2 August (1975), 23–4.

⁸⁰ See e.g., Stuart Barton Babbage, ‘I believe in rabbit paws’, *Southern Cross* 14 (November, 1974), 9–10; ‘Change on exorcism studied’, *Canberra Times*, 3 July (1975), 9; Alan Nichols, ‘Viewpoint,’ *Southern Cross* 14 (April, 1974): 15.

⁸¹ ‘40, 000 British witches’, *Canberra Times*, 26 August (1974), 7. Shilton had remarkably successful strategy of issue press releases timed to capitalise on column space allocated to religion in Sunday papers.

⁸² Alan Gill, ‘Clergy may resent request to synod’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 September (1975), 16; ‘Exorcism: an embarrassing mystery’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 February (1983), 16.

⁸³ *The Occult*, 7–8.

⁸⁴ *The Occult*, 11.

⁸⁵ *The Occult*, 12.

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relationship with Jesus Christ,” for only by that, “will people in our age and society have a real choice between authentic Christian experience and false alternatives.”⁸⁶

In terms of recommendations, the Report issued two sets, one addressed to the church and another to the wider community. Among the first was an emphasis was placed on prayer, pastoral care, education and (unsurprisingly) exorcism and possible safeguards around it. In terms of the wider community the Report sought to influence the media by calling for a more serious treatment of “the harmful effects upon those who dabble in the occult” and for space set aside in magazines and newspapers for horoscopes to be replaced by material on the “Christian faith nominally accepted by the majority.” Unsurprisingly it called for shops to not sell Ouija boards, Tarot cards, and “other occult material.” Moreover, the Commission called for “some restriction” on “the sale of harmful books on the occult” suggesting that censorship should be considered. For the Commission, “what applies to violence and pornography also applies to the occult in regard to non-availability to minors.”⁸⁷ (This was a very Lance Shilton solution to moral problems!).

On the topic of exorcism, which was a clear *leitmotif* throughout the Report, it was highly ambivalent and clearly not in favour of this ministry without careful regulation, noting that it “came very strongly to the conclusion that exorcism can be a very dangerous practice in the wrong hands.”⁸⁸ Not everyone, however, was happy with this result, and one original member of the Commission, Peter Hobson, dramatically quit at the eleventh hour, informing reporters that he was unhappy with the way his views on deliverance were sidelined by other members.⁸⁹ This, however, was not the only time the issue reemerged during the 1970s and 1980s. Within months of the release of the Report, the topic of exorcism was debated at Sydney Synod, with a large majority of delegates voting in favour of a motion—sponsored by Dean Shilton—to investigate the matter in response to what Shilton and the Commission had concluded was the “disturbing evidence of an astonishing growth in the occult, particularly among young people.”⁹⁰ Speaking to Synod, Shilton lamented that experimentation in the occult led from “dabbling to delving... to devil worship,” but—citing the infamous 1974 Taylor exorcism and subsequent murder in the United Kingdom—warned against taking “spiritual short cuts.”⁹¹ The Diocese eventually put in place a series of safeguards to restrict, but not outlaw, the practice in line with the traditional Anglican approach.⁹² Hobson resented these attempts to curb his enthusiasm, more-or-less accusing other members of the Synod of cessationism, and found himself on the outer with the diocese, eventually leaving the Anglican ministry (apparently much to the relief of the Diocese) to set up a trust, the Full Salvation Fellowship, where he continued his independent deliverance ministry for decades.⁹³

⁸⁶ *The Occult*, 27–8.

⁸⁷ *The Occult*, 30–1.

⁸⁸ *The Occult*, 27. Incidentally, one the psychiatrists on the Commission was later struck off the medical register for supplying drugs to a patient in exchange for sexual favours. See Richard Guilliat, ‘Hypnotherapy’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 February (1995), 13.

⁸⁹ ‘Minister quit team’, *Canberra Times*, 14 August (1975), 13.

⁹⁰ ‘Exorcism examined’, *Canberra Times*, 14 October (1975), 3.

⁹¹ Alan Gill, ‘Synod backs curb on exorcism by clergy’, 14 October (1975), 1. On the Taylor case, see Young, *A History of Anglican Exorcism*, 142–6.

⁹² On the traditional Anglican approach, see Young, *A History of Anglican Exorcism*, 48–77. On the various approaches taken to safeguarding in more recent times, see Douglas J. Davies, ‘Spirit Possession and Exorcism in Today’s Church of England’, in *The Social Scientific Study of Exorcism*, ed. Giuseppe Giordan and Adam Possamai (Cham: Springer 2020), 137–57; Linda Malia, ‘A Fresh Look at a Remarkable Document: *Exorcism: The Report of a Commission Convened by the Bishop of Exeter*’, *Anglican Theological Review* 83, issue 1 (2001): 65–88; Neil Milner, ‘Giving the Devil His Due Process: Exorcism in the Church of England’, *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 15, issue 2 (2000): 247–72.

⁹³ Gill, ‘Exorcism’, 16; ‘Guidelines set for exorcists’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 July (1976), 10.

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Meanwhile, Archbishop of Sydney Marcus Loane heartily endorsed the Commission's findings in his foreword to the Report, describing occultism as "fake, shallow and diversionary," and suggesting that "the Report ought to be available to the public at large to consider the dangers of occultism, and to consider the truth of Christianity."⁹⁴ Loane's wish was certainly granted here, the Report was widely read, though outside of Christian circles it was viewed as something of an amusement, particularly amongst some in the wider occult community and even today is something of a collectors' curiosity.⁹⁵

Responses to the Report in Anglican circles were supportive,⁹⁶ though not all Christians welcomed it in its entirety. One of the more considered reviews of the Report, written by former Anglican ordinand turned Catholic priest (and a future auxiliary bishop) Peter Elliott, appeared in the conservative *Quadrant* magazine and raised a number of objections to the Commission's imprecise use of language and its attempt to cover too much material. Elliott was, however, on the whole in agreement with the sentiments of the Report, opining that—from a Catholic perspective—"we are not permitted to dabble in the occult," nor "are we permitted to dismiss all of it as mere fancy, or to demythologise Satan, or to close hell and clip the angels' wings."⁹⁷ Regardless of Elliott's very mild critique, the Report was widely reported in the media and its influence continued for the remainder of the 1970s. Regarding the context of "Satanic Panic," however, it was the Commission's chairman, Dean Shilton, who was to be most important and he was to continue to rail against the occult threat in some fairly interesting contexts over the next two decades.⁹⁸ Shilton's answer to the occult, and his sincere evangelical commitment on the issue, remained unchanged. As he wrote in his autobiography shortly before his death in the late 1990s:

God in Christ, through the Holy Spirit provides complete satisfaction. Those without Him crave for the substitutes of drugs, hard or soft, permissive sex, mind-boggling music, transcendental meditation, occult practices, exhilarating entertainment and/or feverish activity.⁹⁹

Regardless, Shilton's involvement in the enquiry, or in subsequent events, did not merit a mention in his autobiography, nor does the Commission or its aftermath warrant a mention in standard histories of the Diocese of Sydney.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴ *The Occult*, 3.

⁹⁵ On responses see Drury and Tillett, *Other Temples Other Gods*, 114–24. For the opinions among contemporary pagans I owe this to a conversation with Adrienne Harris.

⁹⁶ 'Occult Report', *Australian Church Record*, 16 October (1975), 4; 'Members of Occult Enquiry Commission report findings', *Australian Church Record*, 4 September (1975), 8; 'Many Disturbed by Practising 'Occult', *Australian Church Record*, 4 September (1975), 8.

⁹⁷ Peter Elliott, 'Occult Man,' *Quadrant* 19, issue 7 (October, 1975), 33-7. Elliott maintained an interest in this area and later investigated preternatural phenomena as part of his ministry. His position here is indicative of wider theological debates which emerged in Roman Catholicism regarding the Devil following Vatican II.

⁹⁸ For example, Shilton decried the rock band Kiss as 'devil worshippers' during their 1980 visit. See Christine Hogan and James Buckell, 'Outcry over Kiss Reception', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 October (1980), 3.

⁹⁹ Shilton, *Speaking Out*, 186.

¹⁰⁰ My impression from talking to several well-informed people within Sydney Anglican circles is that the enquiry has been largely forgotten, and when it has been remembered it has been with some embarrassment. The enquiry is not mentioned in either Stephen Judd and Ken Cable, *Sydney Anglicans: A History of the Diocese* (Sydney: Anglican Information Office, 1987) or the more recent work Marcia Cameron, *Phenomenal Sydney: Anglicans in a Time of Change, 1945–2013* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016). Similarly, a recent scholarly biography of Marcus Loane, Allan M. Blanch, *From Strength to Strength: A Life of Marcus Loane* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2015), does not mention the enquiry either.

The Evil Eighties and the Rise of the Charismatics

Like so many such reports by Anglican synods and the like, after the initial furore there was little pastoral follow up and like other cultural fads into the 1980s the initial occult revival of the 1960s and 1970s receded somewhat, replaced by wider concern about so-called “cults” targeting youth. These concerns too faded from view, particularly after a significant legal victory by the Church of Scientology in 1983 and the topic of the occult seemed on the backburner for Christians until material from overseas began to bring it back into the public eye from the early to mid-1980s. At the same time, the Australian press continued to run obligatory Halloween themed stories on witchcraft, with one article in 1984 entitled “The great witch boom in England,” speaking of occultists “cavorting naked in one of their sex rites—under a full moon, conjuring up black magic with the help of wine and cannabis.”¹⁰¹ Meanwhile, when Drury and Tillett released *Other Temples Other Gods* in 1980, one reporter noted that “to most Australians, this is what witchcraft is all about—the sacrifice of animals, bloodletting, sex orgies, blackmail, and the desecration of graveyards.”¹⁰² At the same time, anti-occult writings and ideas from overseas were increasingly available in Christian circles and a neglected aspect of the charismatic revival in the late 1960s and into the 1980s, and the quite spectacular growth of Pentecostalism over the same period, was an increased interest in demonology and the practice of deliverance.¹⁰³

This interest in demonology and deliverance was particularly evident in charismatic circles within mainline denominations and in various Pentecostal churches, especially those associated with the Assemblies of God, who placed significant emphasis on deliverance ministry.¹⁰⁴ Brian Houston, then a pastor at the Christian Life Centre, an affiliate church of the Assemblies of God, was emblematic here, telling a journalist, “occult practices, seances, astrology and the use of Ouija boards are very dangerous and leave people susceptible to bad spirits.”¹⁰⁵ Houston, who later became president of the Assemblies of God in Australia and lead pastor of the internationally successful Hillsong Church, was not the only Assemblies of God pastor for whom various forms of deliverance become a cornerstone of their ministry and ideas associated with Satanic Panic readily spread within this milieu—seeing Satan in everything from seances to Halloween-themed spaghetti.¹⁰⁶ Two other examples demonstrate the growing interest in Australia over the course of the 1980s.

The first brought the occult into the mainstream again in the form of a documentary by filmmaker Frank Heimans and art-critic and occult historian Nevill Drury. Entitled *The Occult Experience*, like Drury’s earlier co-authored book, *Other Temples Other Gods* (1980), this documentary sought to provide a balanced view of contemporary occult phenomena, both in Australia and overseas. It ostensibly moved away from what Drury described as the “slight feeling of titillation people get at a mention of the word occult.” To Drury’s mind, audiences “expect to see something on the seamy side that they can watch in the safety of their lounge rooms,” and in promoting *The Occult Experience* he noted his “hope this gives them a broader view.”¹⁰⁷ Unsurprisingly, for a Christian viewpoint the documentary featured a brief soundbite from Lance Shilton outside St Andrew’s Cathedral in Sydney

¹⁰¹ Andrew Casey, ‘The great witch boom in England’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 October (1984), 97.

¹⁰² Alison Stewart, ‘White witch claims name blackening’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 June (1980), 27.

¹⁰³ For a summary of the wider charismatic revival and the growth of Pentecostalism in Australia during the latter half of the twentieth century see Piggan and Linder, *Attending to the National Soul*, 382–7, 444–8, 490–502.

¹⁰⁴ See e.g., Judy Mishinski and Paulene Turner, ‘Crusade of the occult-busters’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 July (1987), 17.

¹⁰⁵ Elizabeth Fortescue, ‘City church exorcism centre’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 November (1983), 15.

¹⁰⁶ See e.g., Owen Craig and Scott Howlett, ‘Driving out the devil’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 July (1986), 10-11; Margaret Simons, ‘Church sees devils tangled in spaghetti’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 August (1987), 3; and Carol Veitch, ‘School lessons ‘dabble in occult’’, *Sunday Press*, 28 August (1988), 5.

¹⁰⁷ Shayne Collier, ‘The occult opened up’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 July (1985), 53.

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warning of the dangers of the occult, as well as an extended sequence of a house church exorcism in a Sydney suburb which aptly captured just how far anti-occult ideas had pervaded the spiritual warfare worldview which had become popular amongst Pentecostals and charismatics.¹⁰⁸ While this documentary sought to give a nuanced appraisal, it did not eschew controversy and its inclusion of robed occultists, including American Satanists, practicing various rituals, as well as an ageing Alex Sanders, and the obligatory topless Wiccan high priestess in Janet Farrar, only served to further entrench popular folklore. The accompanying book, which appeared in late 1985, proved popular and for many during the 1980s and 1990s it became a primer in this area. Once again Shilton was quoted as a spokesman for the establishment, opining that “The Church does regard the occult as dangerous...because it can lead people into all kinds of difficulties,” though by this stage he was clearly far less sold on the idea of exorcism.¹⁰⁹ What these alleged “difficulties” were became clearer as the 1980s progressed.

The second indicative example in the 1980s, which foreshadowed what was to come in Wollongong, was an attempt in 1986 at the Sydney Anglican Synod to pass a motion warning against the fantasy role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons*. While media reports, and some synod members, viewed this as ridiculous, it was symptomatic of a growing conspiratorial effervescence among some conservative Christians about the occult threat.¹¹⁰ Around the same time, the historically more moderate Anglican Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn produced its own, somewhat less sensational, report on the occult under the more innocuous title of syncretism in 1987. Chaired by Reverend Canon David Durie, a charismatic Anglican and former missionary, the Commission’s Report described the context out of which it emerged:

Some have noted an upsurge in occult practices in recent years. Many Christians are coming to believe that such things as fortune-telling, seances to call up the spirits, the magic arts of witchcraft, Tarot cards, numerology and the like are not harmless games and pastimes but may be avenues for the influence by forces of evil.¹¹¹

While the ensuing Report was less alarmist than its Sydney prototype (which it cited approvingly), it did contain material clearly informed by the developing diabolical *Zeitgeist* among conservative Christians and more widely in Australia. *Dungeons and Dragons* was singled out with other seemingly “harmless games” which might “whet the appetite for more knowledge and experience of things that seem to be beyond the ordinary realm of nature.” Moreover, in its discussion of “witchcraft,” the Report noted that in coven gatherings witches “may worship Satan and may conduct a ‘black mass’ with licentious and perverted sexual behaviour,” and that “witchcraft is not a joke or an ancient superstition,” but is “practised seriously in Australian cities and towns.”¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Frank Heimans (dir.), *The Occult Experience* (Sydney: Cinetel Productions, 1985), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j-hNhFaCC34&t=2985s>

¹⁰⁹ Nevill Drury, *The Occult Experience* (Sydney: Fontana, 1985), 7.

¹¹⁰ See Alan Gill, ‘Satan at work or just a game? A judgement avoided,’ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 October, (1986), 4. On the wider reaction to *Dungeons and Dragons* see Joseph P. Laycock, *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-playing Games says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015).

¹¹¹ *Report on Syncretism in the Church* (Canberra: Anglican Church of Australia Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn, 1987), 3.

¹¹² *Report on Syncretism in the Church*, 67.

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How representative the Report was of wider feelings within the Diocese and the wider church is a matter of conjecture.¹¹³ The Commission itself was ultimately split over its approach to non-Christian religions, with most evangelical members opting for a more exclusivist position than a dissenting minority who took a more inclusivist and less combative line closer to that advocated for elsewhere in the Anglican communion. The Report's content, and the list of references cited, however, were predictable and indicative,¹¹⁴ as were its recommendations which included educating the laity about "Biblical teaching on occult matters," making sure that no occult activities (as broadly defined in the Report) occurred on church owned properties, and "that all Christians should know the way of deliverance from occult bondage both for themselves and for others who may confide in them their need."¹¹⁵

With this kind of atmosphere in even the most moderate of churches, fed in large measure by imported material from overseas, it followed that various concerns about heavy metal music emerged, and into the 1990s the Satanic Panic was taking hold. A handful of (generally) minor crimes were being linked to devil worship and Satanists, and a coterie of anti-occult campaigners, like private investigator David Lentin, and Christian countercult campaigner Adrian van Leen began to regularly appear in press stories about the growing threat.¹¹⁶

As part of this wider interest, and mimicking overseas media, news magazine *Sixty Minutes* ran reports on teenage Satanists killing sheep in rural Queensland and on claims from the United Kingdom—later debunked—about so-called "Satanic Ritual Abuse," some of the first to appear in the Australian media.¹¹⁷ Chief in pushing these stories was journalist Ian Leslie, who in late 1989 switched television networks from Channel Nine to Channel Ten, with a brief to lift ratings as anchor of the nightly news bulletin and by producing current affairs documentaries. Given his successful tenure on *Sixty Minutes*, the format some of this news and these documentaries took was predictable, and Channel Ten soon became the major source for television news stories on Satanism over the ensuing years.¹¹⁸

Trash TV Australian Style

Perhaps the most egregious, and certainly the most memorable, television program of Australian's Satanism scare came in September 1990 when Channel Ten aired *The Devil Made Me Do It*. This

¹¹³ My own inquiries with well-informed people around the Anglican Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn suggests that a significant number of people shared these concerns and there was significant anti-occult sentiment, indeed at the time part of screening of ministry candidates included asking whether they had been Freemasons. This report, and another in Sydney from the same period dealt separately with the issue of Freemasonry, which was considered 'occult' by some in the church (this issue continues to be controversial).

¹¹⁴ Among the works cited were the Sydney Report, as well as a combination of standard Anglican works and more fundamentalist literature including the writings by Kurt Koch and Hal Lindsey cited above.

¹¹⁵ *Report on Syncretism in the Church*, 9. This was indicative of wider divisions within the Diocese. The report and inquiry do not receive a mention in the standard history by Tom Frame, *A Church for a Nation: A History of the Anglican Diocese of Canberra and Goulburn* (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 2000).

¹¹⁶ See e.g., Norm Aisbett, 'Dark World of the Secret Satanic Cults', *The West Australian*, 14 March (1991), 11; Jenny Stevens, 'Devil worship' fury after slaughter', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 August (1986), 5; Frank Walker, 'Satanists lure kids into covens', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 September (1987), 19; and 'Victims of obsession', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 July (1987), 17.

¹¹⁷ See 'Satan's Children', *Sixty Minutes*, produced by John Penlington, 9 April (1989), at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c2ioRBNriG8>. See also, 'Satanic Cult', *Sixty Minutes* (1989), at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yiN27M0akuY&t=103s>

¹¹⁸ It is worth noting that by the early 1990s some of the more sceptical appraisals of these activities overseas were appearing in some Australian venues, though they were not the dominant discourse. See Doherty, 'Strange Gods in a Great Southern Land', 16–7.

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program was an American style tabloid trash TV mishmash which riffed off the infamous *Geraldo* special “Devil Worship: Exposing Satan’s Underground.”¹¹⁹ Drawing together a live audience of Christian ministers, criminologists, psychologists, self-styled Satanists, and heavy metal enthusiasts, the program was introduced by Leslie, rehashing, often almost word-for-word, a familiar series of “Satanic crimes” from the United States before slipping into an audience discussion. The result was described by one media commentator as “an extended *60 Minutes* beat -up,” in which “a few pertinent facts prop up swags of shock/horror hearsay and unsubstantiated conjectures.”¹²⁰ Clearly most in the studio discussion were not taken in, particularly the academics, with Greg Tillett—now far more sceptical than in the 1980s—in particular expressing his incredulity at one alleged ex-coven member coming on live television and admitting to being an accessory to the murder of an infant, and criminologist Paul Wilson expressing similar irritation at some of the claims.¹²¹

But others were more adamant believers, most notably New South Wales Labor politician, and then Shadow Minister for Family and Community Services, Deirdre Grusovin (b. 1938), who suggested that “there could be a network, I believe there is, a network of paedophiles, working very effectively, in this state, and in other states in Australia, and what concerns me is that we could have quite widespread abuse going on because of these established networks, such as the Satanists, who could be involved in these practices.” Then touted as a potential future leader of the ALP in New South Wales, Grusovin was careful to qualify what she said, but it was clear that she accepted these allegations as fact, and she was supported in her claims by child psychiatrist Anne Schlebaum, who was treating several alleged cases of “Satanic Ritual Abuse” and was a major public figure disseminating these ideas in mental health circles.¹²²

What the documentary did not reveal was that all charges in the case which Schlebaum and Grusovin were tacitly referencing in their comments—the infamous Seabeach Kindergarten case (known as the “Mr. Bubbles Case”)—had already been dropped on the grounds of contamination and that Grusovin had developed what one journalist called an “apparent obsession” with the case.¹²³ Grusovin was to appear again in relation to Australia’s Satanic Panic and, alongside fellow ALP member Franca Arena, was later to play a significant—and some might say overzealous—role in exposing

¹¹⁹ Ian Leslie (dir.), *The Devil Made Me Do It* (Sydney: Channel Ten, 1990), at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s3NG0AUs4VU>. On the notorious *Geraldo* special, and the role of tabloid television culture on the Satanic Panic more generally, see Sarah A. Hughes, *American Tabloid Media and the Satanic Panic, 1970–2000* (London: Palgrave, 2021), esp. 73–7.

¹²⁰ Doug Anderson, ‘The Devil Made Me Do It’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 September (1990), 67.

¹²¹ Wilson had taken an interest in these matters going back to the mid-1980s as part of a study conducted by the Australian Institute of Criminology into trends in pornographic and violent films. See Mishinski and Turner ‘Crusade of the occult-busters’, 17. It is perhaps indicative that the Australian Institute of Criminology did not mention the occult in either of its reports, nor did it conduct research into so-called Satanic Ritual Abuse.

¹²² For Schlebaum’s later involvement, see Doherty, ‘Strange Gods in a Great Southern Land’, 17. See here also Karen McGuinness, ‘Doctor claims evil cults and disgusting acts go unprosecuted’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 November (1990), 3. Her views are recorded at greatest length in Anne Schlebaum, ‘Nursery Crimes: A Perfect Little Holocaust in the Suburbs’, in *The Patient, the Law and the Professional: Proceedings of the 11th Annual Congress of the Australian and New Zealand Association of Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*, ed. Deidre Greig and Ian Freckelton (Melbourne: The Association, 1990), 259–83.

¹²³ On this case, see Ben Hills, ‘Life in the shadow of Mr Bubbles’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 September (1997), 13. See also, Alex Mitchell, ‘Grusovin: The mother who would be premier.’ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 October (1990), 17. For two different perspectives, S. E. Hatty, ‘Of Nightmares and Sexual Monsters: Struggles around Child Abuse in Australia’, *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry* 14, issue 3 (1991): 255–67; and Nicole Rogers, ‘Mad Mothers, Over-Zealous Therapists and the Paedophile Inquiry’, *Southern Cross University Law Review* 3 (1999): 115–35. The Royal Commission discussion of this case can be found in Royal Commission into the New South Wales Police Service, *Final Report*, Vol. 4: The Paedophile Inquiry (Sydney: The Commission, 1997), 173–92.

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corruption and paedophilia within New South Wales and having the Wood Royal Commission into the New South Wales Police Service expanded to look at several aspects of the investigation of paedophilia within the state, including so-called “Satanic Ritual Abuse” (discussed below). This cost both women their political careers and credibility, both within the Labor party and with many in the wider public.¹²⁴

True to form, it was the moral crusaders Lance Shilton and his long-term sidekick Reverend Fred Nile—then a member of the New South Wales Legislative Council—who were cast as the defenders of Christian morality against the scourge of the Satanists.¹²⁵ Shilton’s comments toward the program’s conclusion were representative here, accusing High Priest of the Temple of Set, Michael Aquino, of a whitewash and warning the audience against being hoodwinked by the deceptive Satanists, pronouncing, “It needs to be exposed for what it is, and I hope that this program is doing just that.” Shilton’s position on methods of social control had clearly shifted little since the 1970s, noting “There ought to be very strict laws against it [i.e., Satanism], I suggest banning it.” The Satanists, represented by Robert Ledwidge of the group calling itself the Circle of the Awakening, with a fair degree of posturing, turned the Christian objections on their head, much to the indignant outrage of some Christian panel members.¹²⁶

The following day, Nile raised the documentary in the New South Wales Legislative Council, asking Police Minister Ted Pickering, “Will the Government investigate these serious allegations, particularly the activities of the Church of Satan in Sydney, to ensure that children in New South Wales are protected from the activities of satanists?” The minister’s answer was that “those allegations are being thoroughly investigated,” although just how extensive these investigations were, however, was not to become fully transparent until years later.¹²⁷ Nile attempted to keep this matter on public record, raising it again a month later following two presentations at the Eleventh Annual Congress of the Australian and New Zealand Association of Psychiatry, Psychology and Law, one of which, by Anne Schlebaum, made some startling further claims about Satanic Ritual Abuse—suggesting, among other things, that up to “60% of children in Canberra are currently involved in some way with satanic cults”—calling it “a perfect little holocaust in the suburbs.”¹²⁸ Nile here spoke of “evidence of an alarming increase in the number of sexual abuse cases during the past 10 years involving groups associated with child pornography, paedophilia, the occult and satanism in Australia.”¹²⁹ Nile continued his campaign against paedophilia over the years, though his biography downplays the occult aspects of his claims.¹³⁰

The Devil Made Me Do It would have probably been forgotten, only to be resurrected as a piece of nefarious nostalgia by scholars studying the Satanic Panic, had it not been for a follow up story on Satanism on Channel Ten’s nightly news bulletin which appeared in the lead up to Halloween 1991. Entitled *The Awful Truth* this report repeated all the same tropes which had been developing elsewhere in the media over the last two decades, complete with talking head Christians making unverifiable (and

¹²⁴ On Franca Arena’s role here, from her perspective, see *Franca: My Story* (Sydney: Simon and Schuster, 2002),

¹²⁵ Other Christians featured as well, for example, Pastor John McDonald, an Assemblies of God minister and freelance exorcist from Victoria who had already featured in several news reports from the late 1980s. Also included, and speaking far more reasonably, was Pat Mesiti from Youth for Christ, who gave a qualified defence of heavy metal music.

¹²⁶ Anderson, ‘The Devil Made Me Do It,’ 67. See also Ian Warden, ‘The Devil Made Me Watch It’, *Canberra Times*, 17 September (1990), 1.

¹²⁷ New South Wales Parliament, *Hansard*, Legislative Council, 12 September (1990), 6932.

¹²⁸ Schlebaum, ‘Nursery Crimes’, 259–83.

¹²⁹ New South Wales Parliament, *Hansard*, Legislative Council, 26 November (1990), 10459.

¹³⁰ The occult is not mentioned at all in his autobiography, though the “wiles of the devil” in politics are a frequent topic, see e.g., Nile, *Fred Nile*, 177–88. Incidentally, despite both discussing their extensive engagement with the media, good and bad, neither Lance Shilton nor Fred Nile mentions this particular report, or Satanism, in their respective biographies.

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sometimes demonstrably false) claims. As one report in *The Canberra Times* the following day read, “Satanic cults involved in cannibalism, mass murder, pack rape and child abuse may be operating in at least 14 NSW towns,” and as was to be expected, Wollongong was on this list.¹³¹ The source of these claims, it was noted, were “social welfare groups and other agencies.” What this actually meant was anticult activists and a network of therapists and social workers who since the late 1980s had been disseminating international ideas about Satanic Ritual Abuse in Australia.¹³² One of the chief sources presented, for example, was David Poulton, a former federal policeman then involved in pastoring the New Creation Ministries Pentecostal Church in Canberra who claimed, among other things that there was evidence of “vast, evil Satanic cult which appeared to be teaching a creed of Satanism.” Poulton was quoted elsewhere at the time giving exorbitant figures for rates of Satanic activity in Australia.¹³³ This was not the first, or the last time, Poulton was to appear in news reports over the coming years as we will see. Others, however, were less easily persuaded, notably police forensic expert Dr Edward Ogden who, despite having his work cited by Fred Nile in parliament, was already becoming increasingly sceptical about the claims he was encountering in his police work.¹³⁴

Like *The Devil Made Me Do It*, it is what *The Awful Truth* did not mention which is most interesting. Police had already been investigating these claims for over a year and had not turned up any corroborating forensic evidence, a point to which we will return.¹³⁵ A dedicated Crimestoppers telephone line, as well as a line for counselling, were set up by Channel Ten. Despite police in New South Wales and Victoria setting up these dedicated hotlines for calls relating to alleged Satanic crime, which was apparently jammed from receiving so many calls, no credible leads were to emerge (at least with regard to alleged Satanism).¹³⁶

The impact of this second news report, however, was far more visceral, and what its claims ultimately lacked in terms of forensic evidence it made up for in impact. The following day Fred Nile raised the issue again in question time in the N.S.W. Legislative Council. Responsibly, given the influx of calls to the Crimestoppers hotline, the NSW police minister Ted Pickering set up a special taskforce, ominously named Operation Omen.¹³⁷ Meanwhile a handful of print journalists began to take a greater interest in the claims and investigating these alleged “Satanic Cults.” Some of them produced serious pieces, notably Mike Safe, whose article ‘Speak of the Devil’ in *The Australian* magazine a month later is one of the few responsible pieces of responsible to appear at the time.¹³⁸

While all the isolated elements of Satanic Panic were present in protean way in Australia before this, it is reasonable to say that *The Devil Made Me Do It* and *The Awful Truth* proved pivotal in the shifting public perceptions from a more general discourse on the occult and Satanism informed by a developing contemporary legendry to a demonstrable Satanism Scare centred on claims about “Satanic Ritual Abuse.” With these two reports the cumulative contemporary legendry which had been developing since the 1950s solidified into Satanic Panic as it was occurring simultaneously in other

¹³¹ ‘Satanic cults in NSW towns,’ *Canberra Times*, 29 October (1991), 5.

¹³² See Guilliat, *Talk of the Devil*, 84–112 for a detailed analysis of this network.

¹³³ See Yvonne Preston, ‘The Scream that Must be Heard’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 December (1990), 41.

¹³⁴ See an earlier publication, Edward Ogden, ‘Cults Covering Crime’, in *The Patient, the Law and the Professional: Proceedings of the 11th Annual Congress of the Australian and New Zealand Association of Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*, ed. Deidre Greig and Ian Freckelton (Melbourne: The Association, 1990), 253–8. For his more developed view see Ogden, ‘Satanic Cults’.

¹³⁵ Paul Conroy, ‘Police May Investigate Claims of Satanic Cults’, *The Age*, 29 October (1991), 5.

¹³⁶ ‘Cult calls jam police lines,’ *Canberra Times*, 30 October (1991), 4.

¹³⁷ New South Wales Parliament, *Hansard*, Legislative Council, 29 October (1991), 3469.

¹³⁸ Mike Safe, ‘Speak of the Devil’, *The Australian Magazine*, 30 November–1 December (1991), 8, 10–14. Richard Guilliat’s work should also be mentioned here.

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contexts throughout the world.¹³⁹ The extent to which these developing themes had crystallised among certain sectors of the population became apparent a year later when a conference on Satanic Ritual Abuse was held at the Monash Medical Centre in Melbourne.

Satan's Seminar

The Australian Association of Multiple Personality and Dissociation (AAMP&D) was formed in 1991 by a self-described “group of dedicated professionals in Melbourne, working with survivors of ritual abuse.” In July 1992, this group amalgamated with the Australian Association for the Prevention of Ritual Abuse. This network, and its 1992 conference, “A Multi-Disciplinary Perspective on Satanic Ritual Abuse,” formed the epicentre of subsequent therapeutic claims about Satanic Ritual Abuse, and became a major seeding event for the Wollongong rumour panic.¹⁴⁰

Over the two days in September 1992, attendees from around Australia were presented with papers from lawyers, counsellors, policemen and clergy on various SRA related phenomena. As the conference organizer, Susan Henry, writing on behalf of the organizing committee, noted: “We wanted to get across to the professional community that SRA IS happening right now in kindergartens, churches and homes – and that we must acknowledge it.”¹⁴¹ This was a sentiment echoed by Dr John Spensley, a paediatrician from the Jamillon clinic in Hawthorn in Melbourne, who opined:

Let there be no mistake. Reports are coming from many countries of children being ritually abused in the most painful, degrading and evil way. It would be nice if it were not happening in Australia but it is.

The paranoid and conspiracist tone of the wider conference, however, became increasingly apparent. Spensley's opening speech continued, describing the “Satanic Cult” as “a big organization based on evil – a truly Evil Empire,” and that “they work in secrecy and by fear. They infiltrate. They are cunning, brilliant and evil,” with “seemingly huge sums of money at their disposal from their various activities” which allowed them to “exert considerable power.”¹⁴² The types of claims which dominated the rest of the proceedings, are perhaps best summarised by two paragraphs from the paper “M.P.D. and Satanic Ritual Abuse,” by a psychiatric nurse in Spensley's clinic, Gillian Johnson, which stated:

To summarize what the clients have told me, there is a highly organized, criminal organization operating throughout Australia. It is money making and it is very secret. The basis of this organization is the worship of Satan. The organization is involved with drugs, pornography, paedophilia, ritual murder, cannibalism, sexual abuse, and the torture of children. This same information has been given to other counsellors through Australia and corresponds with information of Satanic Cult activity by counsellors, in America, Canada and Britain.

¹³⁹ Philip Jenkins, *Moral Panic*, 169. According to Jenkins, 1991 was the peak year in the United States for media articles on Satanic Ritual Abuse.

¹⁴⁰ This network is examined at greater length in Guilliat, *Speak of the Devil*, 84–112.

¹⁴¹ Susan Henry, ‘Aims of the Conference Organizers’, in *Multi-Disciplinary Perspective on Satanic Ritual Abuse*, Monash Medical Centre, Clayton, Victoria, 4-5 September, 1992 (Melbourne: The Association, 1993), n.p.

¹⁴² John Spensley, ‘Introductory Talk’, in *Multi-Disciplinary Perspective on Satanic Ritual Abuse*, Monash Medical Centre, Clayton, Victoria, 4-5 September, 1992 (Melbourne: The Association, 1993), 1.

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One of the reasons why I believe the stories the clients tell, is the consistent picture which emerges of an extremely clever organization, using sophisticated brainwashing techniques. It has become clear from listening to clients reports, that the people behind these activities are well aware of the child's ability to dissociate, and deliberately create personalities, that can be controlled by the Sect. The techniques are based on a thorough knowledge of child psychological development, and an understanding of the process of dissociation.¹⁴³

None of this would have been unfamiliar to overseas readers, and the echoes of what had been claimed in the United States and United Kingdom reverberate through these conference proceedings.¹⁴⁴ The problem was that these claims were already considered highly dubious even among many mental health professionals.

The conference itself, however, was apparently well attended and its proceedings later printed and distributed, and it certainly achieved its stated aim of making people aware of Satanic Ritual Abuse claims. The conference proceedings came complete with various illustrations claiming to document aspects of the "Satanic Cults" operations including a chart showing the purported hierarchy of the Satanic Cult—which included among its officiants Father Christmas—and children's drawings of purported Satanic rituals.¹⁴⁵ However, within the published proceedings, two very different positions were emerging on the veracity of these claims.

On the one hand, law enforcement analysts were becoming, in the absence of corroborating forensic evidence, increasingly sceptical of claims disclosed in therapy, which they believed were more likely to be the results of social contagion or contamination occurring as the result of repeated interviewing or as iatrogenic owing to certain therapeutic interventions being used (e.g., hypnosis). Here the paper presented at the seminar by Detective Sergeant Raymond Carroll of the Child Exploitation Unit of Victoria Police, entitled "Occult Investigation: The Police Dilemma," was notably for its non-committal tone and was quite critical of what he called the "conspiracy theory" intimated by many of those treating alleged Satanic Ritual Abuse.¹⁴⁶ On the other hand, however, some in the therapeutic professions were becoming increasingly convinced of extent of the problem.¹⁴⁷ It was through these networks, and a series of professional development seminars on child protection and related matters, that these ideas spread further. Moreover, some of these mental health workers, like Schlebaum in New South Wales, went a step further and dissatisfied by the response they were receiving from the police—or the failure of their claims to withstand forensic and judicial scrutiny—began to lobby politicians and

¹⁴³ Gillian Johnson 'M.P.D. and Satanic Ritual Abuse,' in *Multi-Disciplinary Perspective on Satanic Ritual Abuse*, Monash Medical Centre, Clayton, Victoria, 4-5 September, 1992 (Melbourne: The Association, 1993), 43. Not surprisingly, some of the sources cited by Johnson included Lawrence Pazder and Michelle Smith's *Michelle Remembers*.

¹⁴⁴ For a measured summary of contemporaneous discussion, see Frank Putnam, 'The Satanic Ritual Abuse Controversy,' *Child Abuse and Neglect* 15 (1991): 175-9. It is worth noting that other works appearing around this time downplayed discussion of "Satanic" claims, see e.g., Gillian Calvert, Adrian Ford, and Patrick Parkinson (eds), *The Practice of Child Protection: Australian Approaches* (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1992).

¹⁴⁵ For the hierarchy chart, see Johnson 'M.P.D. and Satanic Ritual Abuse,' 58. For the children's drawings see 60-8. The hierarchy chart was later to appear in press reports in the *Illawarra Mercury*.

¹⁴⁶ Raymond Carroll, 'Occult Investigation: The Police Dilemma,' in *Multi-Disciplinary Perspective on Satanic Ritual Abuse*, Monash Medical Centre, Clayton, Victoria, 4-5 September 1992 (Melbourne: The Association, 1993), 76, notes that "To carry out these activities to the level claimed while maintaining a façade of normal lifestyle is impossible."

¹⁴⁷ Indeed, a survey conducted in the late 1990s still found that a significant portion of counsellors believed explicitly in Satanic Ritual Abuse, see John Schuttermaier and Arthur Veno, 'Counsellors' Beliefs About Ritual Abuse: An Australian Study', *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse* 8, no. 3 (1999): 45-63.

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contact newspapers. Among those journalists who was contacted was Brett Martin from the *Illawarra Mercury*.

Entering the Heart of Darkness

Brett Martin had been a journalist with the *Illawarra Mercury* since the mid-1980s and had reported on some strange items during this time. He was something of an aficionado of Wollongong's seedy underbelly and it is unsurprising that he was the journalist whose investigations into purported Satanic cults turned up what they did. To give but one example, during the late 1980s Martin had written on notorious sect leader William Kamm, "The Little Pebble," who was later convicted of serious child sexual offences.¹⁴⁸ Similarly, it was predictable that the *Illawarra Mercury* was the paper that ran with these stories. The issue of child abuse was a major theme for the newspaper throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, to the degree that some considered its editor at the time, Peter Cullen, somewhat obsessed.¹⁴⁹ Martin was to later with a Walkley Award in 1994 for his 1993 investigative report, "Brother, Parish priest molested us" (an article we will return to). Unfortunately, however, in the 1992 series entitled "The Heart of Darkness," Martin's journalistic instincts were way off.¹⁵⁰

Like the Channel Ten documentaries which preceded it, this series of articles, commencing on 30 November 1992, crystallised all the themes which had been floating around in previous material surveyed above into one intertwined legendry of local devil worshippers. Beginning with the frontpage headline "Unmasking the ultimate evil" with the subheading "Special occult investigation" this article launched the series as concerned with "the existence of organised paedophile and criminal Satanic networks with links in the Illawarra that are involved in drug dealing, child pornography, child prostitution, ritual child abuse and human sacrifice." Further describing its sources as "sane and responsible," this opening salvo suggested that journalists had "no desire to start a witch-hunt," and a weak disclaimer about the legality of Satanism and witchcraft, indicative of the quality of the reporting to come, however, was the fact that this first article was accompanied by a misprinted Baphomet.¹⁵¹

Continuing later in the same edition with evocative titles, including "Sinister secret behind violent crimes," "Coven cover for sex, sadism," and "In Satan's Service," the origins of this series was reported as taking place "after hearing allegations Wollongong teenagers had attended a human sacrifice on the escarpment." Several unnamed teenagers claimed to have seen a young man—described as "a street kid snatched from Kings Cross"—sacrificed. The rumours were traced back to an unnamed Wollongong businessman and members of what was described as "one of the Illawarra's most staunch minority groups." The result of these teenager rumours was that the newspaper claimed it had "uncovered what we believe to be a criminal organisation which uses the mystique of the occult to recruit Illawarra teenagers." Among other claims was that "the Sydney organisation operates a shuttle-bus service which takes street kids from Sydney to criminal occult groups up and down the South Coast whenever they are needed for ritual or sacrifice."¹⁵² These already familiar themes of drugs, prostitution, and street

¹⁴⁸ On Kamm, see Bernard Doherty, "Mourning the Death of Our Faith': The Little Pebble and the Marian Work of Atonement 1950–1984", *Journal of the Australian Catholic Historical Society* 36 (2015): 231–273.

¹⁴⁹ See Guilliat, 'City of Secrets',

¹⁵⁰ Guilliat, *Talk of the Devil*, 144. As Guilliat poignantly observed, "stands as an unfortunate example of the way that child abuse allegations can be confabulated into a parable of evil which is then 'authenticated' by investigators and experts."

¹⁵¹ Brett Martin, 'Unmasking the ultimate evil,' *Illawarra Mercury*, 30 November (1992), 1. The title is a nod to Maury Terry's book *Ultimate Evil* which is quoted later in the series. The Baphomet misprint is unsurprising, during the 1980s and 1990s the *Illawarra Mercury* had a reputation for poor editorial standards and was locally referred to as 'The Mockery.'

¹⁵² Brett Martin, "Heart of Darkness – In Satan's Service," *Illawarra Mercury*, 30 November (1992), 13.

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kids, were not new and part of the *Zeitgeist* of Wollongong in the early 1990s, but Satanism was novel and provided the proverbial peg on which to hang these more prosaic social ills. Moreover, this was just the first day of a series which ran over the next four days!

Where these ideas were coming from, other than rumours among local teenagers, however, was soon laid bare. Youth workers and police were listed as the sources, though as we shall see these were not currently serving police. In fact, much of the material was purloined directly the proceedings of the 1992 AAMP&D conference and what one suspects was Martin's reading of journalist Maury Terry's infamous book *The Ultimate Evil* (1987), the ideas of which are peppered throughout the series of articles.¹⁵³ Not all the sources, however, were so respectable. In a follow up article on 1 December, touted as "Satanist Reveals Coven's Secrets," were a series of claims by a former drug addict, "Adam," who claimed to have been involved in a coven during the early 1980s which dealt drugs, snatched people off the streets of Kings Cross for sacrifice, filmed child pornography at a studio in Coogee Bay, and had specially prepared "Red Room" in a Maroubra mansion specially designed for sacrifice. After fleeing this purported coven and allegedly going on the run for decade, Adam had recently returned to Wollongong and was intent on speaking out. According to the report, Adam had "provided *The Mercury* with names and addresses of people involved in criminal Satanic activity." These had been passed on to police. This article ended ominously with Adam telling Martin, "It's bad and it's getting worse – it's gonna get a lot worse. They used to boast they were gonna make it big through the '80s and '90s. Make everyone stand up and notice. Let people know they were serious."¹⁵⁴ Like *The Devil Made Me Do It* and *The Awful Truth*, however, it was what was not reported that is most indicative. Police had already investigated Adam's claims at length, with one officer later describing them as "a wild goose-chase."¹⁵⁵

The other chief source claimed for this series of articles were police, but this needs to be understood more broadly than serving police officers. The reality was that a number of anti-occult campaigners at the time had backgrounds in law enforcement, but had ceased to be involved in the profession. This was most evident in the (appropriately titled) article "Chasing Shadows," which featured a series of the chief moral entrepreneurs who were helping to drive this concern—chiefly retired so-called "cult-cops," as this phenomenon was called in the United States.¹⁵⁶ Among them were at least three conservative Christian ministers and self-appointed "cult-busters," two of whom were former policemen, whose names had been floating around as part of a network in numerous newspaper articles over preceding years. Reverend Roy Close, a Newcastle based Pentecostal pastor and ex-policeman; Reverend David Poulton, a former Australian Federal policeman who we have already encountered. Both major voices in media reports on Satanic crime at the time; as was Reverend Adrian van Leen.

Van Leen was a Perth-based Churches of Christ minister who had run a Christian countercult ministry—Concerned Christian Growth Ministries—since the late 1970s, and who had been a regular commentator on Satanism since the late 1980s. While van Leen had a reputation as a "cult buster," and certainly was critical of Satanism, he was far less drawn into aspects of the Satanic Panic and his commentary here did not go beyond the evidence, noting in a very measured, C. S. Lewis way:

¹⁵³ See e.g., Brett Martin, 'The Mystery of Multiple Personality', *Illawarra Mercury*, 2 December (1992), 12 which interviews AAMP&D member and earlier contributor to the conference, Doctor Jim Quinn. Terry's book is directly cited in one of the later articles in the series, Brett Martin 'A world-wide conspiracy?' *Illawarra Mercury*, 2 December (1992), 16.

¹⁵⁴ Brett Martin, 'Satanist reveals coven's secrets,' *Illawarra Mercury*, 1 December (1992), 12.

¹⁵⁵ Guilliat, *Talk of the Devil*, 147.

¹⁵⁶ On this phenomenon see Robert D. Hicks, *In Pursuit of Satan: The Police and the Occult* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1991); see also, 'The Police Model of Satanism Crime', in *The Satanism Scare*, eds. James T. Richardson, Joel Best, and David G. Bromley (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1991), 175–90. See also Ben Crouch and Kelly Damphousse, 'Law Enforcement and the Satanic Crime Connection: A Survey of "Cult Cops,"' in *The Satanism Scare*, 191–204.

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There are two dangers in this whole thing. One is for people to be so sceptical they say there is nothing there at all – no Satanists and no occult power...The other is to see Satanists with enormous power behind every tree.¹⁵⁷

When it came to serving police officers, or those involved with wider law enforcement, the position taken was—as noted above—far more cautious (owing to ongoing investigations), if not sceptical. What serving police thought of these self-proclaimed “consultants” is difficult to surmise, but almost certainly was not positive.¹⁵⁸

Embedded all through this series of stories were a series of by now familiar conspiracy motifs including Satanists in high places, including local government, and a number ended, interestingly, with an important note that “*The Mercury* has made all the information it gathered available to police. Their investigations are continuing.” Each of the core features of the American Satanism scare was presented over the ensuing week, but now anchored in an Australian context and featuring Australian “experts.” Stories were told about animal sacrifice and recovered members, missing persons, and sacrificed children.¹⁵⁹ Moreover, like in the United States, a handful of tangentially “Satanic” crimes were listed in “Sinister secret behind violent crimes” all of which had been frequently recycled over previous years as ostensibly *prima facie* evidence for a wider Satanic conspiracy (discussed below).¹⁶⁰

Other articles, particularly one entitled “Coven cover for sex, sadism,” were arguably libellous. This article claimed that early Australian Wiccan Simon Goodman (1951–1991) (also known as Ian Watts), a well-known figure in the Australian occult community since the 1970s, had been “a paedophile and a sadist” who died of an “AIDS-related disease.” The allegations here cited an unnamed “police officer who dealt with him.”¹⁶¹ Goodman, as a public figure who ran the Occult Reference Centre in Canberra and was involved in the Fellowship of Isis, and who had died a year earlier, was an easy target, and certain aspects of Alexandrian initiation rites do involve ritual binding and scourging which could be interpreted as having a sadomasochistic element.¹⁶² Regardless, Goodman had not been charged or convicted of any crime, despite claims in the article that a police search revealed a “video library of adult and child pornography.” The article ended with an indicative conspiratorial claim that Goodman kept an extensive diary which included “the names and addresses” of “very influential people in Australia and overseas—including current and past members of the English House of Lords.”¹⁶³

Material lifted directly from the proceedings of the conference held by the AAMP&D in 1992 also appeared in several articles, with stories from “Survivors” with recovered memories featuring alongside

¹⁵⁷ On this group of Christians see Doherty, ‘Strange Gods in Great Southern Land’,

¹⁵⁸ Ogden comments in thesis.

¹⁵⁹ Brett Martin, ‘Teens practise on animals’, *Illawarra Mercury*, 1 December (1992), 13; ‘Where are all the missing people?’ *Illawarra Mercury*, 1 December (1992), 13

¹⁶⁰ See Mike Safe, ‘Did the Devil Make Them Do It?’, *The Australian Magazine*, 30 November–1 December (1991), 13.

¹⁶¹ Given the circumstances cited in other articles in the series and elsewhere it is probable that this officer was David Poulton.

¹⁶² This interpretation was tentatively suggested by Professor Doug Ezzy, email correspondence with author, 14 August 2024. For more on Goodman see Doug Ezzy, ‘Australian Paganisms’, in *The Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, ed. James R. Lewis and Murphy Pizza (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), 465–6. For more on the sadomasochistic aspects of Wicca, see Jo Pearson, ‘Inappropriate Sexuality? Sex Magic, S/M and Wicca (or ‘Whipping Harry Potter’s Arse!’)’, *Theology and Sexuality* 11, issue 2 (2005): 31–42.

¹⁶³ How seriously we take these claims is difficult to surmise. Goodman was a controversial figure in the pagan community, see Tamara von Forslun, *Pagan and Witch Elders of the World: Past and Present* (Xlibris, 2020), 319–21. However, no one I have spoken to knew of these claims.

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an interview with conference participant Dr Jim Quinn, then head of psychiatry services at Liverpool Hospital in Southern Sydney.¹⁶⁴ One alleged survivor story, curiously, opening with the statement that:

Up until about November last year I had no memory of what I am about to share. Since then things have slowly come back to me – mostly a whole incident at a time or one small segment that seems disconnected from everything else.¹⁶⁵

It is perhaps not so strange a coincidence that these memories began to be recovered immediately after *The Awful Truth* attracted so much attention on Australian television. The highly baroque and distasteful series of “memories” which followed were familiar from international accounts and included acts of sadism, chanting and ritual, and the blood sacrifice of cats. Another alleged survivor story spoke of a coven in Sydney’s Western suburbs where children were drugged and child pornography was produced, including “sex and blood ritual that involved human sacrifice” usually of “derelicts and hitch-hikers,” or “cult members who had slacked off.” A number of these self-described survivors now identified as Christians. These ‘survivor’ stories, moreover, were accompanied by dubious statistics on missing persons which sought to identify a potential pool of satanic victims; and animal cruelty reported by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA).¹⁶⁶

Exaggeration was the order of the day rather than evidence, for example, the article titled “Police confident of convictions.” The reality here was that the content suggested that police involved were simply conducting routine investigations and there was no indication in the content of the article that these inquiries were leading anywhere. Indeed, reading between the lines one suspects the police were somewhat frustrated by the lack of solid leads which the inundation of phone calls to specially established crime-stopper hotlines had yielded—in contrast to the success yielded by the contemporaneous Operation Paradox which ran annually to elicit leads on wider concerns about suspected child abuse.¹⁶⁷ The logic of the entire series, and its legendry—which could have been lifted from books like those of Maury Terry or Carl Raschke¹⁶⁸—was nicely put in one of the final articles:

Painting a picture of occult crime in Australia is like struggling with a 5000-piece jigsaw. Over the past 18 months *The Illawarra Mercury* has talked with police, survivors, social workers, priests, politicians, occultists and psychologists. Each had a piece of the puzzle. Each was working in isolation. The picture that finally began to emerge was deeply disturbing—all the pieces were black.¹⁶⁹

One does wonder, reading some of this material with the benefit of hindsight, whether an element of morbid satire was at play and if aspects of this were in fact a hoax perpetrated on the reading public. At the least, most of the material featured in “The Heart of Darkness” series lacked corroborating evidence,

¹⁶⁴ Brett Martin, ‘The mystery of multiple personality’, *Illawarra Mercury*, 2 December (1992), 12.

¹⁶⁵ Martin, ‘Survivors’, 13. Regarding these “survivor” stories, see Philip Jenkins and Daniel Maier-Katkin, ‘Occult Survivors: The Making of a Myth’, in *The Satanism Scare*, ed. James T. Richardson, Joel Best, and David G. Bromley (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1991), 127–44; and the article by Jeffrey S. Victor, ‘Satanic Cult ‘Survivor’ Stories’, *Skeptical Inquirer* 15 (1991): 274–280.

¹⁶⁶ Martin, ‘Teens practise on animals’, 13. This article concluded with a comment from an RSPCA worker: “To be honest we haven’t had anything that we can substantiate. We’ve had calls but inquiries have gone nowhere.”

¹⁶⁷ This is borne out by Guilliat who interviewed key police involved. See Guilliat, *Talk of the Devil*, 146–7.

¹⁶⁸ Carl Raschke’s book *Painted Black: From Drug Killers to Heavy Metal—The Alarming True Story of How Satanism is Terrorizing our Communities* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990) was one of the more egregious books of the Satanic Panic in the United States.

¹⁶⁹ Brett Martin, ‘Chasing shadows’, *Illawarra Mercury*, 4 December (1992), 14.

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but it clearly struck a chord with a reading public already sensitized over previous years to stories of Satanic Panic. This farrago of contemporary legend, however, had serious political consequences.

Commenting in response to the series, on 3 December 1992, Deirdre Grusovin made calls for a Royal Commission “into the activities of criminal occult networks” purportedly revealed in the *Illawarra Mercury*, opining that “she had no doubt criminal occult covens are operating in Australia.”¹⁷⁰ While Grusovin’s portfolio was now as opposition spokeswoman on housing, she was still an influential figure in the party, and her alleged obsession with the abandoned Mr Bubbles prosecution had clearly not diminished.¹⁷¹ This call was never followed up when parliament resumed sitting in early 1993 and Grusovin never got her royal commission into the occult. However, she did try a year later to get an inquiry into paedophilia, again to no avail, though later the Wood Royal Commission into the New South Wales Police Force, a wide-ranging probe into allegations of police corruption, was to widen its brief to investigating aspects of paedophilia in the state after Grusovin named major public figures—including one-time Wollongong Lord Mayor Frank Arkell—as alleged paedophiles under parliamentary privilege—a point to which I will return.

The final article in the Heart of Darkness series, entitled “Local stands up to covens,” introduced Linda Rossi, a youth worker turned anti-occult crusader who following a child protection seminar in 1991 had founded SOZO, described as “a loose network of health works, youth workers, police, psychiatrists and Christians that has challenged the covens.” In the article Rossi uses the language of typologies used by cult cops familiar from the United States, claiming that evidence of covens throughout the region, from Dapto in the north down as far south as Bega, noting that “there appears to be a range of groups operating in the Illawarra—from teenage dabblers through non-traditional covens to generational and overtly criminal covens.” To a reader unfamiliar with the deeply problematic law enforcement literature circulating in the United States at the time this all sounds very plausible.¹⁷² The telltale sign, however, came later in the article when Rossi admitted, “I have had no real contact with them yet,” noting that she had received a threatening letter and someone had slit her cat’s throat—distasteful and disturbing—but not necessarily diabolically-inspired.¹⁷³

Viewed in historical perspective, the “Heart of Darkness” series reads like a schlock horror caricature of Satanic themes which had been developing in popular culture over the previous decade—worthy of recent films invoking the climate of the period like *They Summon the Darkness* (2019) or *Satanic Panic* (2019)—but despite its at times almost cartoonish quality, the series was taken seriously by many at the time, and this pastiche of the wider themes of the Satanic Panic lay at the root of the broader anxiety about Satanic cults which were to set off the rumour panic a year later. Throughout the discussion above, however, I have alluded to some of the evidential problems it raises and it is important to briefly examine what is known about what police investigations into these claims turned up, and whether there were in fact “Real Satanists” at work, before discussing what I suggest were the far darker realities and social anxieties which may have lain behind the Wollongong rumour-panic.

Absence of Corroborating Evidence

Beginning in late 1989 following the Seabeach Kindergarten case (‘Mr. Bubbles’) in New South Wales, and even earlier in Victoria, various Australian police agencies undertook extensive investigations into allegations of Satanic cult activity. The findings, always less publicised than initial claims in the media,

¹⁷⁰ Brett Martin, ‘Satanism: MP demands inquiry’, *Illawarra Mercury*, 4 December (1992), 1.

¹⁷¹ Brett Martin, ‘MP demands answers’, *Illawarra Mercury*, 4 December (1992), 15.

¹⁷² On this literature, and the typologies found in it, see Hicks, *In Pursuit of Satan*, 32–99.

¹⁷³ Brett Martin, ‘Local stands up to covens’, *Illawarra Mercury*, 4 December (1992), 15.

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were negligible despite the significant resources allocated to these investigations. For example, in Victoria, a day following the airing of *The Awful Truth* on Network Ten, Dr Edward Ogden was quoted in the Melbourne broadsheet newspaper *The Age* indicating that “there was no evidence to support the women’s claims that infants whose births had never been registered had been used as human sacrifices, and that adolescents had been used in sexual rituals.”¹⁷⁴ Meanwhile, in New South Wales, reporting a month later in *The Australian Magazine*, Mike Safe quoted police responses to claims levelled by Schlebaum that investigations had been inadequate, noting “a task force spent 16 months investigating the claims,” and that, among other actions, “350 interviews” were conducted. The outcome was that “they found no basis on which charges could be laid.” Further details of the task force, Operation Disk—which was primarily an investigation into abuse claims against a Christian church—had been disclosed by police minister Ted Pickering in parliament. Who described them as coming to “nought.” As Pickering noted in reply to Fred Nile in November 1990:

I recall one afternoon the task force was involved in digging up what were thought to be five burial sites for young children. I remember waiting in the hope that five small bodies would not be uncovered. They were not. The information supplied was nonsense.¹⁷⁵

This was a pattern which was already familiar internationally, where vast resources had likewise been expended on searches and excavations of alleged mass graves that simply did not exist.¹⁷⁶ The full extent of the police investigations only really came to light in the wake of the Wood Royal Commission which ran from 1996 onwards and conducted case studies as part of its investigation into claims of police covering up paedophilia (a point to which I will return).

Despite this, and following the additional claims of Satanic crime in the media set in train by *The Awful Truth* report and pressure from Reverend Fred Nile in the Legislative Council, New South Wales Police set up a second investigation into Satanic crime: Operation Omen. While these investigations were subsequently hyped in media, particularly the series of articles in the *Illawarra Mercury*, they too turned up nothing which led to charges being placed against Satanists. Instead, what it did lead to was inadvertent information about the fundamentalist Christian sect the Children of God/ The Family, leading to what Dorothy Scott and Shurlee Swain called “the largest, the most dramatic and the most public child protection intervention in Australian history.”¹⁷⁷ In this case, involving a Christian sect, no charges were laid and the group was eventually awarded damages in the New South Wales Supreme Court.¹⁷⁸

Finally, Wollongong police launched an investigation following the “Heart of Darkness” series in late 1992. Again, no corroborating evidence was found. When interviewed later, Detective Sergeant Dennis Green noted that, having spent a year investigating the allegations, “there was no basis to the whole thing.”¹⁷⁹ Instead what Green and his colleagues found were claims from so-called recovered memories.

¹⁷⁴ Conroy, ‘Police May Investigate Claims of Satanic Cults’, 5. SPACING ISSUE IN FOOTNOTES

¹⁷⁵ New South Wales Parliament, *Hansard*, Legislative Council, 12 September (1990), 6932.

¹⁷⁶ For a meticulously documented recent case study of this, see Jack Legg, *Digging Up Devils: The Search for a Satanic Murder Cult in Rural Ohio* (Self-Published, 2023).

¹⁷⁷ Scott and Swain, *Confronting Cruelty*, 169.

¹⁷⁸ Royal Commission into the New South Wales Police Service, *Final Report*, Vol. 4: The Paedophile Report, 100. See Doherty ‘Strange Gods in a Great Southern Land’, 17–8.

¹⁷⁹ Guilliat, ‘Courts Yet To Be Swayed By Claims of Satanic Abuse’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 August (1995), 5.

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When the final report of the Wood Royal Commission into the New South Wales Police Service was tabled in 1997, after the height of Australia's "Satanic Panic" had receded, a more sober perspective emerged and is worth briefly recounting. In what should probably be read as a subtle rebuke of the likes of Grusovin, Arena, and Nile, Justice Wood concluded the chapter on SRA by noting unequivocally:

[A] critical and responsible approach needs to be taken by those in public office who level serious allegations of SRA and sex rings at others within the community. Unreasoned and uncritical support for the existence of rings of highly placed SRA offenders does not represent a sensible contribution to the debate on child sexual abuse.¹⁸⁰

Volumes 4 and 5 of the Wood Royal Commission, the infamous paedophile reports which were to prove damning of actual paedophilic activities taking place in Wollongong, dedicated a whole chapter to the topic of "Satanic Ritual Abuse." While generally judicious in its language, its tone was on the whole sceptical, if not at times incredulous. In short, after extensive investigation, the Commission was "unable to find sufficient evidence to justify further inquiries."¹⁸¹ The Commission, moreover, invited the Federal Bureau of Investigation's expert in these things—and the man who probably did more to investigate and ultimately debunk most claims in the United States—Kenneth Lanning to address the hearings at length. Lanning offered a series of alternative explanations which included: pathological distortion; the development of pseudomemories; normal childhood fears and fantasy; misunderstanding; confusion and trickery; exposure to urban legends; and overzealous interviewers. On the topic of urban legends, the Commission's report noted how "Satanic cults" had been "the subject of discussion at conferences held by health professionals or law enforcement agencies, and then blown up by the mass media because of their bizarre and attention-grabbing nature."¹⁸² One would struggle to find a better description of the Channel Ten documentaries *The Devil Made Me Do It* and *The Awful Truth*, AAMP&D conference on Satanic Ritual Abuse, or the "Heart of Darkness" series in the *Illawarra Mercury*. Among the most telling statements made by Justice Wood was that:

From a commonsense perspective, while it must be recognised that apparently respectable and successful members of the community do commit child sexual abuse, *a quantum leap in credibility* is required to suppose that they would do so in the bizarre, ritualistic way described, which includes the infliction of serious, even fatal, injury and mutilation upon their own children.¹⁸³

The Wood Royal Commission found extensive evidence that not only does child abuse happen—a point to which we will return—but that it should be taken seriously and carefully investigated. It also found that claims of "Satanic" trappings usually only hampered such investigations.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸⁰ Royal Commission into the New South Wales Police Service, *Final Report*, Vol. 4: The Paedophile Report 116.

¹⁸¹ Royal Commission into the New South Wales Police Service, *Final Report*, Vol. 4: The Paedophile Report, 99.

¹⁸² Royal Commission into the New South Wales Police Service, *Final Report*, Vol. 4: The Paedophile Report, 103.

¹⁸³ Royal Commission into the New South Wales Police Service, *Final Report*, Vol. 4: The Paedophile Report, 102. Emphasis added.

¹⁸⁴ Royal Commission into the New South Wales Police Service, *Final Report*, Vol. 4: The Paedophile Report, 114.

Real Satanists?

While the overwhelming scholarly consensus is that the Satanism scare was a moral panic and that there are insufficient grounds to warrant anything approaching its most conspiratorial claims about organized child sexual abuse, what about the evidence for comparatively less serious claims about animal mutilations, graffiti, grave desecration, or church vandalism?¹⁸⁵ Or the various other Satanic crimes cited in newspaper reports? What was the explanation for these things? While the evidence against the existence of the more conspiratorial aspects of the Satanic Panic is overwhelming, it would be remiss not to address these other aspects, and to offer some explanation as to how these other activities were utilized to give seeming credence to more outré beliefs about Satanism.¹⁸⁶ Here I would suggest that one was dealing here with, at worst, what scholars have called cases of “Reactive Satanism,”¹⁸⁷ though I believe the primary explanation here was a combination of ostensive action and relatively harmless teenage delinquency.

Utilising further insights from the study of folklore, perhaps the most helpful explanation for most of these petty crimes, and the purported evidence they left behind, is with reference to the theoretical concept of ostension, the way in which contemporary legends are lived out either through forms of performance or through copy-cat actions.¹⁸⁸ Following a now-classic study by Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonji, Bill Ellis identified four kinds of ostensive behaviour: ostension proper, pseudo-ostension, proto-ostension and quasi-ostension. Each of these helps to formulate some explanation for the types of evidence for lesser Satanic crimes.

According to Ellis, “*Pseudo-ostension* involves a hoax in which the participant produces evidence that the legend has been enacted: Teens often fabricate evidence of cult sacrifices, even to the extent of killing animals and leaving occult symbols behind at the site.”¹⁸⁹ In the material I have analysed there are several examples, particularly in the “Heart of Darkness” series which might readily be classified as pseudo-ostension. The alleged evidence of Linda Rossi’s cat and the purported death threats she received are suggestive of this kind of ostensive action. While animal cruelty or making death threats are not things that should be dismissed out-of-hand, they are certainly not the types of alleged Satanic Ritual Abuse with which they were associated in news reports.

Secondly, again following Ellis, “*Proto-ostension* occurs when, to gain attention, persons take a story alleged to have happened to someone else and claim it as a personal experience of their own.”¹⁹⁰ In examining the Wollongong rumour-panic and the lead up to it this (non)event proto-ostension most often occurred in terms of some of the alleged survivor stories which appeared from the late 1980s onwards, many of which seemed to mimic those which were appearing overseas, as well as the plots of various horror films like those mentioned above. Upon investigation no corroborating evidence was found for these stories, but this did not prevent either their continued circulation or imitation.¹⁹¹ The

¹⁸⁵ See e.g., Peter Haran, ‘Wall of silence over 18 occult suicides’, *Sunday Mail*, 15 September (1991), 5; Amanda Place, ‘Vandals, cultists hit cemeteries’, *The Sun*, 18 August (1987), 6; Stevens, ‘Devil Worship’ fury after slaughter’, 5; Veitch, ‘Schools lessons ‘dabble in occult’’, 5.

¹⁸⁶ The challenge in writing anything on the Satanism scare revolves around answering the question, not always well formulated by the inquirer, of “What about the real Satanists?” On this challenge, see Doherty, ‘Mapping the Territory of the Devil’, 4.

¹⁸⁷ See Dyrendal, Lewis and Peterson, *The Invention of Satanism*, 5.

¹⁸⁸ See n. 30 above. See also here Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonji, ‘Does the Word “Dog” Bite? Ostensive Action: A Means of Legend-Telling’, *Journal of Folklore Research* 20, no. 1 (1983): 5–34.

¹⁸⁹ Ellis, ‘Satanic Ritual Abuse and Legend Ostension’, 275.

¹⁹⁰ Ellis, ‘Satanic Ritual Abuse and Legend Ostension’, 275.

¹⁹¹ Indeed, these ideas continue to circulate and reappear in various places, see here Richard Guilliat, ‘Through the past, Darkly’, *The Weekend Australian Magazine*, 30 September 2017, 14.

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dynamics of this kind of proto-ostension were very well described at the time by National Institute of Mental Health psychologist Frank Putnam, who observed that:

The child abuse community is particularly susceptible to such a rumor process as there are multiple, interconnected communication/ education networks shared by therapists and patients alike. In addition, there is massive media dissemination of material on the satanic through dramatic autobiographical accounts, sensational talk-shows, and news reports of alleged cases, not to mention numerous movies and television programs that feature occult and demonic themes. Contagion and contamination are very real and powerful processes that can account for a large degree of apparent similarity in SRA allegations.¹⁹²

Thirdly, Ellis spoke of quasi-ostension, which “involves a misinterpretation of naturally occurring events in terms of an existing legend.”¹⁹³ Here news reports which featured a purported “ritual site” outside of Canberra are a case in point. The pictures were of a popular family picnic spot at the Cotter Reserve which—while almost certainly frequented by some Neopagans—was likely just a stack of rocks. The report, however, included the caption: “This photograph was taken outside Canberra shortly after an illegal ritual. The stacked rocks and uprooted trees allegedly were by-products of the energy released in sacrifice.”¹⁹⁴ Other illustrations could be given, for example articles on animal cruelty and missing persons in the “Heart of Darkness” series, but the point is that quasi-ostension is a case of misattribution.

Ostension proper provides the most interesting example here, but before discussing this with reference to the Wollongong rumour-panic, it is worth looking briefly at the question of juvenile delinquency. During the 1980s and 1990s the issue of what was sometimes referred to as adolescent or teenage Satanism attracted a significant amount of media and law enforcement attention, especially in the United States, in particular with regard to suggestions about its relationship with drug and alcohol misuses and various types of misdemeanours ranging from relatively trivial vandalism and trespass, to more serious crimes like murder.¹⁹⁵ Most of this commentary was relatively superficial, and often alarmist, however, what is clear is that Satanism (or pseudo-Satanism) was being utilised by some youth as a means of teenage rebellion and this was certainly the case in some rural towns in Australia. However, as was the case overseas, serious study of this found no evidence for Satanism as a social movement of the kind described by the types of advocates we have encountered in this article.¹⁹⁶

The one serious study of this phenomena published in Australia at the time, dealt with an intervention program undertaken with teenage Satanists in an unnamed rural New South Wales town. While the author, Linda Johnson, cited many problematic sources,¹⁹⁷ two of her findings are of importance for interpreting the ostensive nature of the minor acts of deviance hypothesized above. First,

¹⁹² Putnam, ‘The Satanic Ritual Abuse Controversy’, 177.

¹⁹³ Ellis, ‘Satanic Ritual Abuse and Legend Ostension’, 274.

¹⁹⁴ Brett Martin, ‘Sacrifice, ritual and sex magic’, *Illawarra Mercury*, 3 December (1992), 17.

¹⁹⁵ For one sane example, see Gordon A. Crews and Reid H. Montgomery, ‘Adolescent Satanist: A Sensible Law Enforcement Approach’, *Journal of Policing and Criminal Psychology* 11, issue 1 (1996): 13–8.

¹⁹⁶ See here, e.g. the important studies of Kelly R. Dampousse and Ben M. Crouch, ‘Did the Devil Make Them Do It? An Examination of the Etiology of Satanism Among Juvenile Delinquents’, *Youth and Society* 24, issue 2 (1992): 204–27; and William B. Swatos, ‘Adolescent Satanism: A Research Note on Exploratory Survey Data’, *Review of Religious Research* 34, issue 2 (1992): 161–9.

¹⁹⁷ Notably the collection by David K. Sakheim and Susan E. Devine (eds), *Out of Darkness: Exploring Satanism and Ritual Abuse* (New York: Lexington Books, 1992) xii. Particularly problematic here were two essays contributed by an American doctoral student at the University of Sydney during this period, Martin Katchen.

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she found that regarding these teenage Satanists, “their involvement can be distinguished from the ritual abuse claimed to be associated with generational Satanism.” While not discounting the idea of generational Satanism (which her sources took more seriously), Johnson recognized that what she was encountering in her social work was a discrete phenomenon and could not be lumped together with more conspiratorial claims.¹⁹⁸ Her second salient finding related to the extent of their Satanic practices, which consisted entirely in meeting a series of criteria from an American study, ranging from displaying satanic symbols through to participation in self-styled rituals involving animal sacrifice.¹⁹⁹ None of this behaviour, it is worth noting, was related to more extreme claims related to Satanic Ritual Abuse and the evidence cited for the wider impact of this group of juvenile delinquents on the community consisted of what could fairly be classified as a handful of relatively minor deviant acts:

[R]eports to police from disturbed residents about unusual activity in the local cemetery; the theft of chalices from a church and an increasing incidence of animal disappearances from private homes and from the local pound in the period immediately prior to significant ceremonial dates.²⁰⁰

While some of these behaviours were certainly destructive and distasteful, there is little evidence that they extended beyond typical juvenile delinquency. Indeed, as Fine and Victor observed, after a review of American situation, “there is precious little evidence that a genuinely crimogenic ideology is present,” rather “Satanism is merely a cover for a variety of illicit teenage activities.”²⁰¹

While some scholars of self-identifying modern Satanists would likely object to such a dismissive attitude, or to terms like pseudo-Satanism, it remains the case that most of these activities were not sequelae of Satanic beliefs as a feature of individuals core identity, but rather simply acts of teenage rebellion.²⁰² As Victor and Fine noted:

Aside from the thrills of engaging in such deviance, leaving remnants of it has the subsidiary benefit of shocking adults, often a sufficient justification for the activities in the first place. When the media publicize these minor entertainments as evidence of a serious problem threatening the community, the youths have achieved their goal.²⁰³

Ostensive actions and teenage performativity, and a few small groups of organized Satanists, like Robert Ledwidge of the Circle of the Awakening, who were foolish enough to appear on programs like *The Devil Made Me Do It*, evidence suggests comprised the sum of “Satanic” activity in Wollongong and around Australia at the time. The origin of the “Heart of Darkness” series, in a series of teenage rumours, is a case in point. Stories frequently told by teenagers, coupled with anomalous events like animal mutilations, graffiti, and the discovery supposed ritual sites, were enough to anchor these claims in the

¹⁹⁸ Linda Johnson, ‘Surviving Satanism: Overcoming self-destructive behaviour in rural adolescents’, *Youth Studies Australia* 13, issue 3 (1993), 48–9.

¹⁹⁹ Gary M. Steck, Stephen A. Anderson, and William M. Boyline, ‘Satanism among Adolescents: Empirical and Clinical Considerations’, *Adolescence*, 27, issue 108 (1992): 904.

²⁰⁰ Johnson, ‘Surviving Satanism’, 49.

²⁰¹ Gary Alan Fine and Jeffrey Victor, ‘Satanic Tourism: Adolescent Dabblers and Identity Work’, *Phi Delta Kappan* 76, issue 1 (1994): 72.

²⁰² It is difficult, however, to generalise too much here as there were few actual studies of teenage satanist subculture generally which actually engaged with it ethnographically. For a commendable exception to this see Kathleen S. Lowney, ‘Teenage Satanism as Oppositional Youth Culture’, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 23, issue 4 (1995): 453–84.

²⁰³ Fine and Victor, ‘Satanic Tourism’, 71.

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Wollongong region and add seeming plausibility to the more outré claims of Satanic Ritual Abuse. The extent of these stories, moreover, has by no means completely abated.²⁰⁴ This type of ostensive teenage Satanism, however, also provided the social script for what I suggest was the dramatic denouement of this whole affair in what can be interpreted as an act of “*ostension* proper,” that is “the literal acting out of a legend,” in the brutal murders of David O’Hearn and Frank Arkell.²⁰⁵

Crime and Retribution: The Aftermath

While there is no evidence that the “Gathering of the Spirits” took place over Halloween 1993, at the same time the *Illawarra Mercury* was reporting the rumours, on 27 October 1993, journalist Brett Martin published another report which appeared on the front page of the newspaper that was far more harrowing and set in trail a series of further revelations about child abuse and cover-ups which shocked the Wollongong establishment to its core.²⁰⁶ This time Martin’s journalistic instincts rang true; there was organised child abuse and churchmen and leading civic leaders were involved.

Martin’s headline story told of claims about two stalwarts of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Wollongong, Fr Peter Comensoli²⁰⁷ and Brother Michael Evans, who had abused young schoolboys at Edmund Rice College. Unlike the claims about the alleged Wollongong Satanists, these claims both had substance. Peter Comensoli later pled guilty to a series of charges; Michael Evans—who at one stage wrote a column in the *Illawarra Mercury*—upon investigation, committed suicide.²⁰⁸ While progress was slow, the floodgates were opening and the *Illawarra Mercury* continued to publish a deluge of exposés over the following years, on top of its coverage of the Wood Royal Commission.²⁰⁹ These stories exposed in various ways the much darker reality of actual child abuse which had festered under the surface of Wollongong’s conservative political and religious culture, and included two former Wollongong mayors: Tony Bevan and Frank Arkell.²¹⁰

Bevan had, it was alleged, run a teenage prostitution racket involving young men. He was also fond of blackmail, in particularly tape-recording incriminating conversations and using the recordings for leverage, and when he died in 1991 the *Illawarra Mercury* came into possession of some of these tapes.²¹¹ Among those exposed in these tapes was (allegedly) Frank Arkell, whose leadership over the period of the 1980s is often credited with Wollongong’s slow recovery from a period of economic

²⁰⁴ In 2021 Nicola West published a novel, *Catch Us the Foxes* (Sydney: Simon and Schuster, 2021), which was partly inspired by local urban legends which she had heard during her upbringing in Kiama in the Illawarra region. See Glen Humphreys, ‘Kiama plays host to a dark tale about murder and mayhem’, *Illawarra Mercury*, 21 August (2021); Jo Thornley, ‘Perfect place for a cult’, *The Australian*, 14 August (2021), 17.

²⁰⁵ Ellis, ‘Satanic Ritual Abuse and Legend Ostension’, 275.

²⁰⁶ Brett Martin, ‘Brother, parish priest molested us.’ *Illawarra Mercury*, 27 October (1993), 1.

²⁰⁷ Not to be confused with current Archbishop of Melbourne Peter Comensoli.

²⁰⁸ On these cases and the wider impact see Peter Cullen, ‘Catholic Church Should Defrock this Molester’, *Illawarra Mercury*, 20 April (1996), 7; Peter Fox, *Walking Toward Thunder* (Sydney: Hachette Australia, 2019), 73–9; Richard Guilliatt, ‘Brotherly Love’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, Spectrum, 22 July (1995), 1A; ‘The Sins of the Brothers’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 April (1996), 25; and Chris McGillion and Damian Grace, *Reckoning: The Catholic Church and Child Sexual Abuse* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2014), 1–23.

²⁰⁹ See e.g., Paul McInerney, ‘Priest damns bishop, senior police officer: Commission probes Comensoli, Evans case’, *Illawarra Mercury*, 17 April (1996), 1; ‘Bishop gets call to front commission: Murray allegedly ignored police calls’, *Illawarra Mercury*, 23 April (1996), 4; ‘Paedophiles will now face two inquiries’, *Illawarra Mercury*, 23 April (1996), 5; ‘Accused Brother on police committee’, *Illawarra Mercury*, 23 April (1996), 5; ‘Inspector admits records missing: Omissions hurt investigation’, *Illawarra Mercury*, 23 April (1996), 5.

²¹⁰ For a selection of these reports see Martin, ‘Wollongong: Horror behind the Scenes’. While it is important to note that neither was ever convicted of the alleged crimes, the evidence against both was considerable.

²¹¹ Peter Cullen, ‘Arkell Murdered: Vigilante on the loose.’ *Illawarra Mercury*, 29 June (1998), 1; ‘Frank did put Wollongong on the map...but for all the wrong reasons.’ *Illawarra Mercury*, 29 June (1998), 8.

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decline. As a result of the exposures in the Bevan tapes and reporting in the *Illawarra Mercury* and other forums, coupled with wider political concerns over corruption in the New South Wales Police force, the Wood Royal Commission was called and its terms of reference quickly extended.²¹²

To truncate a very complex series of events, Labor MP Deirdre Grusovin and a handful of other zealous members of the New South Wales parliament, including Fred Nile and Franca Arena, continued to pursue the issue of child abuse with a persistence which bordered on mania. Eventually, in May 1994, independent MP John Hatton did manage to be the decisive voter to bring about the Wood Royal Commission into the New South Wales Police Service, initially to investigate corruption. In December of the same year, after Grusovin used parliamentary privilege to name Arkell and others as an alleged paedophiles and suggest they were being protected by powerful interests, the terms of reference were extended to include a more detailed inquiry into allegations of the cover up of paedophilia in high places within the state. The Royal Commission began work its work in March 1996, and from the beginning claims in the media about evidence on paedophilia were rife—including from Brett Martin—who, now working for *The Bulletin*, noted ominously: “the NSW royal commission is about to uncork a horrible genie, which is set to implicate many well-known men in paedophilia rackets.”²¹³ The anti-paedophile campaigners got the investigation they had called for—though as the investigations into Satanic Ritual Abuse discussed earlier in this article indicated, perhaps not the results they expected—and both Grusovin and Arena paid a high political price for their crusade.²¹⁴

In some ways, the Wood Royal Commission brought the types of rumours and contemporary legendry discussed above full-circle, and just as New South Wiles Vice squad detectives had once hounded perceived sexual deviants like Rosaleen Norton and Gavin Greenlees, the Wood “inquisition,” as it was sometimes called, turned the spotlight on Kings Cross police whose sins were being laid bare in the tabloids. Sexual offences became a prime focus of the Commission, and disturbingly many of the targets of the claims (though never convicted of abuse) were high profile closeted homosexual men, whose sexuality had never come into the public eye.²¹⁵ For these men, some of whom were almost certainly not guilty of slanders made against them, their very secrecy made their conduct in other parts of their lives seem suspect when the Royal Commission started digging. Major public figures including Justice David Yeldham, barrister John Marsden, and Arkell were all called before the Commission, along with several Church officials from Wollongong. The findings about Wollongong were quite damning, and some of those investigated committed suicide before ever facing justice. These reports are readily available and make for sordid and sobering reading, but the important point in the present context is that the Wood Royal Commission’s focus on paedophilia in Wollongong found significant evidence of historical abuse—particularly in the Catholic Church²¹⁶—as well as enough evidence to pass on to Police which led to Frank Arkell being charged on a number of sexual offences, but no evidence involving Satanism!

²¹² On this see Guilliatt, ‘City of Secrets’, 22–8.

²¹³ Brett Martin, ‘Not a safety-house in sight’, *The Bulletin*, 12 March (1996), 24–5.

²¹⁴ For the subsequent fate of Arena see her own account in Arena, *Franca*, 238–306. See also the discussion in Michael Hill, ‘Satan’s Excellent Adventure in the Antipodes’, *Issues in Child Abuse Accusations* 10 (1998), http://www.ipt-forensics.com/journal/volume10/j10_9.htm Fred Nile appears to have emerged from the affair without any consequences, though he is very circumspect about his involvement in his autobiography.

²¹⁵ On the problematic nature of the entire paedophile aspect of the Wood Royal Commission see the nuanced discussion in Lynch, *Satan’s Empire*, 327–53.

²¹⁶ Royal Commission into the New South Wales Police Service, *Final Report*, Vol. 5: The Paedophile Report, 1003–5. It is worth noting that the subsequent Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse found even more damning findings about the Diocese of Wollongong.

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But the story did not end there. Earlier in this article I alluded to murder and ostensive crime, what Bill Ellis once called “Death by Folklore,”²¹⁷ and a helpful place to end this account of the Wollongong rumour-panic and its relation to the wider Satanism Scare is with a coda regarding the fate of Frank Arkell.

On the morning of Saturday 13 June 1998, police attended the home of shopkeeper David O’Hearn in Albion Park, south of Wollongong. A private man, dedicated to his family, O’Hearn’s body was found decapitated, disembowelled, and further mutilated, in what was to be the first of two of the most brutal murders in Australian criminal history.²¹⁸ Importantly, in our present context, according to the later trial judgement:

There was blood smearing on a table on which liquor decanters were located and the word Satan had been written on a mirror suspended above that table. The word Satan had also been written in blood on the wall above the lounge upon which the severed hand was resting and immediately above that word, and also written in blood, was a pentagram. On the wall beside the television set an inverted cross had been drawn in blood.²¹⁹

Suddenly the fears of Satanism which had fed Wollongong five years earlier seemed far too real, and news reports quickly appeared linking the crime to Satanism.²²⁰ A fortnight later, in a granny flat in nearby Wollongong, another body was found. This time, however, the communal shock was mixed with uneasy feeling among many in the community that however brutal the circumstances somehow justice had been served: the victim was Frank Arkell.

Police investigations pursued the Satanism line of inquiry, interviewing one suspect, Keith Schreiber, before independently, months later, Schreiber’s friend Mark Valera turned himself in and confess to both murders. Valera (earlier known as Mark van Krevel), was a deeply disturbed man in his late teens, obsessed with death metal, Satanism, and serial killers. He was eventually convicted and sentenced to two life sentences without the opportunity for parole. While Satanism was a minor aspect of Valera’s defence, it was only mentioned in passing in the trial and not taken seriously by the judge. Within ten days of Valera’s being found guilty, his best friend, Keith Schreiber, with the cooperation of Valera’s sister, Belinda, climbed in the window of the family home of Valera’s father, Jack van Krevel. Proclaiming “This is from Mark, fucking paedophile bastard. You’ll never molest another kid again,” Schreiber brutally bludgeoned van Krevel to death and mutilated his body.²²¹ While van Krevel had admitted physically abusing his son during Valera’s trial, he denied ever having sexually abused him. Once again, Satanism was mentioned in passing in Schreiber’s trial but was not taken seriously. Schreiber was sentenced to sixteen years jail with a non-parole period of twelve years.

In the end, the only ostensible “Satanists” charged with crimes during this period were not paedophiles, nor were they involved in ritualistic crimes, but two disturbed young men who were coming of age at the time of the Wollongong rumour-panic, both of whom had viciously murdered men they ostensibly believed to be paedophiles in frenzied attacks displaying brutal violence worthy of the

²¹⁷ Ellis, *Aliens, Ghosts, and Cults*, 220–35.

²¹⁸ On these cases see Paul B. Kidd, *Australia’s Serial Killers: The Definitive History of Serial Multicide in Australia* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan Australia, 2000), 292–310. For a full account of this series of murders see John Suter Linton, *Bound by Blood: The True Story Behind the Wollongong Murders* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2004).

²¹⁹ *R v Valera* [2000] NSWSC 1220, 7.

²²⁰ Daniel Dasey, ‘Satanic beheading’, *Sun Herald*, 14 June (1998), 2; Penelope Green, ‘Satanic leads in decapitation’, *The Australian*, 15 June (1998), 10.

²²¹ *R v Schreiber* [2001] NSWSC 1184, 10.

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worst atrocities which had previously emblazoned the pages of the *Illawarra Mercury*.²²² The two young men's obsession with Satan became a minor feature at their trials, but by 2000 the Satanic Panic in Australia had largely receded and Mark Valera and Keith Schreiber were seen for what they were, not denizens of a wider Satanic plot, but just two violent, disturbed young murderers.

Conclusion

There is a significant degree to which the stories which undergirded the Wollongong rumour-panic were—to borrow from Joseph Laycock and Eric Harrelson's recent book *The Exorcist Effect* with reference to similar claims in the U.S.—“bullshit.” As Laycock and Harrelson observe, “a liar is concerned about truth and seeks to keep people from uncovering it, while a bullshitter has a fundamental disregard for truth.”²²³ Like similar rumour-panics in the United States, there was little regard for the truth of these matters or responsibility taken for the consequences spreading such rumour-based contemporary legends might have. In the end, this was dangerous bullshit. Like elsewhere in the world, lives were ruined by some of the cases in Australia's Satanic Panic and much more could be written about its impact. The temptation to moralise on this is great, not least considering the subsequent moral failings of a number of key figures discussed above.²²⁴ Viewed in historical perspective and with a synoptic lens which was not available at the time, the absurdity of much of the material produced in the lead-up to and during the Wollongong rumour-panic is patently clear. The same goes for the wider Satanism Scare in Australia. Alexandra Heller-Nicholas made a very valid observation when she suggested that “the real damage done by the Satanic Ritual Abuse controversy—both in Australia and elsewhere—is that it diverted both public attention and essential funds away from the very real and tragically ubiquitous horrors of child sexual abuse of an altogether more earthly nature.”²²⁵

A more charitable interpretation of the events in Wollongong, however, might be found in a perceptive comment on the wider Satanic Panic put forward by Morandir Armson, who suggested, not unreasonably, that at the heart of these claims was actual abuse, and that in at least some cases Satanic Panic was the “folkloric ‘shadow’ of the real phenomenon of CSA [Child Sexual Abuse], filtered through the religious biased views of the anti-occult movements, and reflecting our society's struggle to face the reality of child sexual abuse.”²²⁶ Interpreted this way, the Wollongong rumour-panic of 1993 outlined above, and the extensive contemporary legendry which underpinned it, was perhaps not complete bullshit, but a perverse grappling after truth, and like all legends the stories told about Satanic cults abusing children pointed to these deeper anxieties. What transpired in the years after 1993 unveiled that while child abusing Satanic cults were clearly not rampant in the City of Steel, Wollongong held equally dark secrets and ones which needed to come to light.

The events which followed are shot through with dark ironies. The contemporary legendry of Satanism helped in a roundabout way to bring about the Wood Royal Commission, which, while discrediting claims about Satanic Ritual Abuse, found disturbing evidence about real child abuse by powerful political figures within the Wollongong community—both sacred and secular. The journalist who penned the truly dreadful “Heart of Darkness” series—Brett Martin—ended up winning a Walkley

²²² It is important to note that David O'Hearn was not in any way victim of a vigilante attack. He was a private shopkeeper with no criminal record who appears to have taken pity on the desperate Valera who subsequently brutally murdered him.

²²³ Laycock and Harrelson, *The Exorcist Effect*, 239.

²²⁴ I will leave it up to the reader to examine this; it suffices to say here that several of the Christian contributors to Australia's Satanic Panic discussed above have suffered significant falls from grace.

²²⁵ Heller-Nicholas, ‘The Devil Down Under,’ 306.

²²⁶ Armson, ‘Signs of the Devil,’ 157.

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Award for his later report exposing clerical child abuse and the *Illawarra Mercury* played a laudable role in exposing some of these more sinister happenings.²²⁷ The Wollongong rumour-panic, then, is perhaps a salient lesson about the dangers of ignoring the very banality of evil, that it exists in communities, and a reminder that we do not need to posit diabolical Satanists when often far more insidious garden-variety predators and real monsters exist.²²⁸ Perhaps the darkest irony of all, however, was that the Satanism Scare and its contemporary legendry helped to birth ostensive teenage Satanist Mark Valera who, in an orgy of violence, caught up in what his court-appointed psychologist described as “satanic thoughts,” enacted a terrible retribution upon the architect of “Wonderful Wollongong,” Frank Arkell.²²⁹ In the view of the *Illawarra Mercury* and many others, Arkell may have escaped justice in this life, but in a perverse way it might be said that the devil still claimed his prize.²³⁰

²²⁷ Peter Newell, ‘Long struggle to expose evil of abuse of children in the Illawarra.’ *Illawarra Mercury*, 16 November (2012), <https://www.illawarramercury.com.au/story/1126599/long-struggle-to-expose-evil-abuse-of-children-in-the-illawarra/>

²²⁸ It is worth noting here that during the same period mutilated bodies were showing up in the nearby Belanglo State Forest – the victims of serial killer Ivan Milat (1944–2019). Satanic claims featured early in the investigation into Milat. See e.g., Frank Walker, ‘Forest of Death’, *Sun Herald*, 7 November (1993), 15; and Martin Warneminde and Frank Walker, ‘Vital Clue,’ *Sun Herald*, 7 November (1993), 1. The reality was much more frightening, see Kidd, *Australia’s Serial Killers*, 260–75.

²²⁹ *R v Valera* [2000] NSWSC 1220, 67.

²³⁰ For responses to Arkell’s death in the media, see Pilita Clark, ‘The media and the murder’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 July (1998), 33; Cullen, ‘Frank did put Wollongong on the map...but for all the wrong reasons’; and Kidd, *Australia’s Serial Killers*, 96. See also Alex Mitchell, ‘Double life of Mr Wonderful,’ *The Sun-Herald*, 28 June (1998), 6–7.

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