

# CONSTRUCTING THE ITALIAN CRIMINAL: THE PRESS AND THE PYJAMA GIRL MURDER CASE

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The Pyjama Girl murder case was an event that combined elements of intrigue, suspicion and drama. It became front-page news the instant the charred and battered body of a young woman was discovered near Albury in September of 1934. The case remains infamous and is still considered a disturbing chapter in history by commentators who refer to it as 'a crime that shocked Australia'.<sup>1</sup> The most shocking aspect was that the crime was committed by the woman's husband and that he was able to hide the fact for ten years. Antonio Agostini, an Italian migrant from the province of Treviso (Veneto) in Australia since 1927, was the man at the centre

of the murder case. His trial was closely followed by the Melbourne press. Throughout the coverage of the trial, Agostini was portrayed in particular ways and repeatedly misrepresented. However this does not negate the fact that he was a criminal. I will argue in this essay that Agostini was represented not just as a criminal, but as an *Italian* criminal. The journalists who reported the crime (and subsequent commentators on the case) invested stereotypes culturally-specific generalisations and prejudice into the 'objective' accounts, essentially constructing a particular criminal identity around Agostini and the Italian community.



Linda Platt Agostini, Sydney, 1931.



Antonio Agostini, Sydney, 1928.

The case itself still arouses sensationalism and an element of construction. Geoffrey Blainey included it in an article which combined memorable or significant events in our nation's past. The Pyjama Girl slotted neatly into the 1930s alongside the sporting achievements of Opperman, the opening of the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the introduction of the foreign cane toads into Queensland.<sup>2</sup> Instead of evoking a sense of pride or nationalism, the Pyjama Girl murder was portrayed as a startling shock, an event which gripped the interest of a public so scandalised by the crime (at the hands of an Italian migrant). The loss of innocence that authors have tried to publicise was definitely overstated: Australia was recovering from the Depression and the Second World War was in full swing by the time Agostini was brought to trial in June 1944. This was four months after his release from three and half years of internment as an 'enemy alien'. Some perspective or a better understanding of context is required, instead of authors' tendencies to inappropriately overemphasise the case as 'one of the most widely publicised mysteries in Australian criminal history'.<sup>3</sup>

The story was first publicised in Melbourne on Monday 3 September 1934 with the discovery of a young woman's battered body dumped in a culvert near Albury. *The Sun* featured a front-page spread of eight crime scene photos and included a lengthy description of the woman including the 'expensive canary-coloured Canton crepe pyjamas' that were supposed to assist in identification. The body was preserved in formalin and kept at Sydney University for ten years, during which thousands of people viewed the corpse. Sharpe

made the extraordinary claim that 'viewing the body in the bath almost became the 'in thing' to do in Sydney in the mid-thirties',<sup>5</sup> indicating the extent to which the era, as well as the case, have been misrepresented. For ten years the woman with head injuries and a gun shot wound lay unidentified, until a police sergeant identified her as Linda Platt, the wife of Agostini, in March of 1944.<sup>6</sup>

At the trial it was revealed that Linda was shot in a struggle at their Melbourne residence in Swanston Street, Carlton (it was not clear whether this was the fatal injury or the severe head wounds she also sustained). Agostini claimed, as did other witnesses, that Linda had a drinking problem which had worsened over their marriage. She was volatile, had tried to commit suicide and left him repeatedly for up to five days at a time without warning.<sup>7</sup> The day Linda died, Agostini had woken to find a pistol pressed in his face, with his wife threatening his life. When the gun was fired in the struggle Agostini panicked, took his wife and drove away. He dumped the body near Albury, doused it with petrol and set it alight. He then returned to Melbourne. Rain put out the flames and Linda's body was found by a farmer on 1 September 1934. Agostini continued to work in Melbourne and in Sydney, living his life normally for ten years until he was coerced into making a statement to the NSW police after Linda was identified in 1944.<sup>8</sup> He was convicted, not with murder, but with manslaughter and sentenced to six years jail.

The verdict was reached after a seven day trial closely documented by Melbourne newspapers such as *The Age* and to a greater extent by *The Sun* and *The Herald*. Each day, Agostini's name was cited under a bold headline and the reader was offered brief details of the case: 'Antonio Agostini, 41, Italian waiter, was charged with having murdered his wife'.<sup>9</sup> This profession was mentioned alongside his name in each article, giving a decidedly false impression. Agostini had graduated in Italy as a wool and textile engineer. Before his emigration he worked in Milan as a journalist for the trade magazine *I.C.V.O.* Soon after his arrival in Australia he worked for some time as a waiter, but his profession was in journalism working for an Italo-Australian publication. The position he held was one of authority and he was respected as 'one of the youngest and most able collaborators of the *Il Giornale Italiano* ... an active and enterprising



I.D. card of Antonio Agostini 'agent and travelling correspondent' of trade magazine *I.C.V.O.* *Indicatore Compra-Vendite ed Occasioni*, 1925.



Agostini's family members in Italy, 1930s.

person, his work has been extremely precious and full of excellent results'. The significance of such an 'oversight' was that the newspaper portrayed Agostini as an unskilled, unprofessional, uneducated migrant working in a menial job instead of the career he had pursued successfully in Melbourne. Blainey went one step further in marginalising Agostini by stating 'in those days a waiter was an unusual occupation, for most people did not sit down to a meal in a restaurant even once in the course of the year'.<sup>11</sup> Actually, *Romano's* (where Agostini worked) was a busy restaurant that had been described as 'a favourite haunt of Sydney's 'Café Society' of the 1930s'.<sup>12</sup> It was a popular hangout for even the NSW police commissioner, various detectives and police officers with whom Agostini had had very close contact.

While Agostini's professional past was an omission from the coverage, some of the inclusions also left a notable impression. He was made to appear ignorant not only because of his 'strange' occupation, but also his 'halting English'<sup>13</sup> when giving testimony. However, Agostini appeared eloquent from the court reporting some newspapers presented. He had no trouble making a statement to the police and the suggestion from the comment again served to make the man seem somewhat deficient and more importantly, a foreigner. His demeanour was examined in the press quite carefully, but sometimes quite contrastingly. For instance, the prosecution's case was printed in full so that when Agostini described his wife's maddening fits, the prosecution urged 'by 'so maddening' did you not mean maddening to yourself?'<sup>14</sup> He was trying to elicit an angry, enraged response to justify that Agostini killed his wife out of blind anger. The account exploited the idea of the volatile, emotional and capricious Italian man, thus forcing a preconceived social and psychological identity

on Agostini on the basis of his nationality. As Stratton articulated, 'nationality was seen in concrete terms: the swarthy moustached Italian 'type' was given a reputation for shiftiness and passion'.<sup>15</sup> In stark contrast, his passivity and lack of emotion was also reported on by the press: 'Agostini showed no emotion when the verdict was announced'.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, we can assume that by not showing emotion, Agostini was represented as a sly and callous murderer. On the other hand, by being innately emotional and passionate, he was acting consistently with his national 'type': the angry Italian male.

The pieces of court proceedings that journalists chose to print revealed ulterior motives, namely to discredit Agostini. Consistent with the notion of isolating national 'types', the press insinuated that he had links in organised crime syndicates (some overtly accused him) undoubtedly because he was an Italian. This was demonstrated by the accounts of Agostini's encounters with NSW Police Commissioner Mr Mackay. He coerced Agostini into making a statement by saying: 'You can trust me. I give you my word as a Scotsman. You know that I am friendly with your friends'.<sup>17</sup> The implication was protection and the knowledge of a secret connection between Agostini and some unmentionable 'friends'. Bold accusations against Agostini were also printed. 'Have you not been threatened by gentlemen known as the *Camorra*? Had you no connection with these people up to then?'<sup>18</sup> Agostini was made to defend his reputation due to the irresponsible claims based on general prejudices. The account tried to present him as a suspicious figure and linked him to behaviours allegedly associated with Italian migrants. As an Italian in the press, Agostini the individual, represented a group. As Stratton claimed 'an ethnic group could be known by its spectacular representation'.<sup>19</sup> The organised crime notion was a marker of cultural difference, and this case demonstrated how *any* form of Italian criminality could be attributed to the old Mafia stereotype (a decidedly 'un-Australian' activity).

The trial of Agostini, and the subsequent press coverage, did not deal exclusively with the offender. The Italian community and Agostini's involvement with it were also investigated. The link to organised crime was already discussed, but newspaper accounts also tried to establish whether Agostini was 'keen in going to the Italian Club'<sup>20</sup> and mentioned that at least one man,



# MANSLAUGHTER VERDICT ON AGOSTINI

**ANTONIO AGOSTINI, 41, Italian waiter, was remanded for sentence by Mr. Justice Lowe in the Criminal Court yesterday after a jury had found him guilty of the manslaughter of his wife, Linda Agostini.**

**The body of Mrs. Agostini, identified as the Pyjama Girl, was found under a culvert on the Albury-Howlong road on September 1, 1934.**

The jury, which retired for nearly two hours, found Agostini not guilty on the charge of murder.

The crowd which filled the public galleries during the trial waited in draughty passages until 5.30 to hear the verdict.

Agostini showed no signs of emotion as the verdict was announced.

On the question of sentence, Mr.

Fazio (counsel for Agostini) referred to the fact that Agostini was some years in an internment camp and in his good character.

Manslaughter carries a maximum penalty of 15 years' imprisonment.

During the trial members of the jury each earned £7/6. They were thanked for their patience by Mr. Justice Lowe.

## Burial Arrangements

ARRANGEMENTS which have been made for the burial of the remains of Mrs. Agostini may not be disclosed until after the City Coroner (Mr. Tingate) has given the order for burial.

Apart from the request by Agostini to bury his wife, it is known that a friend of the dead woman has made provision for the interment, and also that certain instructions have been received from her mother in England.

Possibly the mother's wishes may fit in with the arrangements made by the friend.

The body is not now in the same state of preservation as when brought to Melbourne in a formalin bath after being preserved for 10 years.

Addresses To Jury—Page 5

Castellano, knew of the murder and dissuaded Agostini from going to the police.<sup>21</sup> The implication was that Italians grouped together, were a cause for suspicion and that Castellano was perhaps another criminally-minded Italian who 'protected' his friends. Just as Agostini's criminal identity was constructed for him, the Italian community was implicated in the crime and portrayed as a suspicious ethnic group which congregated in clubs and protected their own. The most glaring example of such old commentary was written by Krauth in 1993: 'I have been told that influential Italians offered to pay Agostini's fare back to Italy ... to avoid a scandal that would reflect badly on his countrymen ... the crime was held over his head as a 'threat'.<sup>22</sup> The insulting coverage in the 1940s facilitated the rise of such damaging statements. Jupp spoke of cases such as this which 'give official and public sanction to general prejudices based on a tiny grain of truth.'<sup>23</sup> More importantly, the Italian community became a suspected minority. Again, the assumption in the press was that an entire community could be judged on the merits (or lack thereof) of one person.

The effect of such constructs, the stylised representations of Agostini and the Italian community, was that the case was embedded with the qualities of a narrative. The myths surrounding Agostini translated well into a work of fiction,

and consequently, the Pyjama Girl case was the subject of two films and at least two novels.<sup>24</sup> Agostini had a series of identities: the waiter (ignorant migrant), emotionless man (the cold and callous murderer), passionate (the aggressive Italian) and criminal (the mobster). The constructs were by no means isolated to this case or these circumstances, as Hollingsworth asserted 'mass media are prone to sensationalism and parochialism'.<sup>25</sup> Significantly, the newspaper accounts in this case were brief and dealt with generalities, but they had the reputation of delivering the 'facts' as though they were devoid of mediation or bias. The coverage of Agostini's trial proved that the investment of stereotypes led to gross misrepresentation and the construction of the Italian criminal type as well as criminalising an entire ethnic community.

In conclusion, the Pyjama Girl murder was a tragic case and the coverage in the Melbourne press at the time communicated this effectively. Unfortunately, the publicity that Agostini received was effective for different reasons. By selecting, editing and pruning the facts of the story, journalists constructed a criminal identity around Antonio Agostini, as well as implicating the entire Italian community. The stereotypes and culturally-specific generalisations utilised in the 1940s were shown to be enduring as recent commentary on the case exhibited similar tendencies toward misrepresentation and marginalisation. The irresponsibility of the press lay in its capacity to construct a particular image of Agostini not only as a criminal, but as an Italian criminal who engaged in activities that were foreign and distasteful to upstanding Australians.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See G. Blainey, *The Age*, 23 October 1999, p.6. A. Sharpe, *Crime and Punishment: 50 Crimes That Shocked Australia* (Crows Nest: Kingsclear Books) 1997, p.213. N. Crauth, 'The Pyjama Girl Murder Case' in S. Coupe & J. Ogden (eds.) *Case Reopened*, Sydney, 1993, p.1.

<sup>2</sup> G. Blainey, *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> N. Krauth, *op. cit.* p.217

<sup>4</sup> *The Sun*, 3 September 1934, p.1.

<sup>5</sup> A. Sharpe, *Infamous Australian Crimes* (Milton's Point Brolga Books) 1982, p.110.

<sup>6</sup> *The Herald*, 21 June 1944, p.3.

<sup>7</sup> *The Herald*, 27 June 1944, p.3.

<sup>8</sup> *The Sun*, 24 June 1944, p.5.

<sup>9</sup> *The Sun*, 24 June 1944, p.3

- <sup>10</sup> 'Vade Mecum degli Italiani in Australia', *Il Giornale Italiano* (illustrated annual of *The Italian Journal*) Melbourne 28 October 1937, p.29. Author's own translation of original text which reads: 'è uno dei più giovani e più abili collaboratori del *Giornale Italiano* ... persona attiva ad intraprendente — la sua opera è stata preziosissima e ricca di ottimi risultati'.
- <sup>11</sup> G. Blainey, op. cit.
- <sup>12</sup> A. Sharpe, op. cit.
- <sup>13</sup> *The Herald*, 27 June 1944, p.3.
- <sup>14</sup> *The Sun*, 28 June 1944, p.5.
- <sup>15</sup> J. Stratton, *Race Daze: Australia in Identity Crisis*, Pluto Press, Sydney, 1998, p.125.
- <sup>16</sup> *The Sun*, 29 June 1944, p.3.
- <sup>17</sup> *The Herald*, 27 June 1944, p.3.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup> Stratton, op. cit., p.152.
- <sup>20</sup> *The Herald*, 27 June 1944, p.3.
- <sup>21</sup> *The Sun*, 28 June, 1944, p.5.
- <sup>22</sup> Krauth, 'The Pyjama Girl', p.220.
- <sup>23</sup> J. Jupp, *Arrivals and Departures*, Cheshire-Landsdowne, Melbourne, 1966, p.112.
- <sup>24</sup> P. Bosi (ed.) 'Il Mistero della ragazza in pigiama', in *Australia: ieri oggi domani*, Foreign Language Publications, Sydney, 1985, p.185.
- <sup>25</sup> D. Hollingsworth, *Race and Racism in Australia*, Social Science Press, Sydney, 1998, p.281.

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