

The Scarlett Woman of Pitt Street



Photo: Courtesy Naomi Kalogiros
Ada Scarlett (née Murray)
1874-1944

References:

- ¹ Inquest Deposition File 1909-609 (VPRS 24)
- ² The Argus, 16 March 1909, p. 8
- ³ The Argus, 28 October 1909, p. 5
- ⁴ The Argus, 17 November 1909, p. 11
- ⁵ Ada's birth date sourced from Murray Family records
- ⁶ Reg. no. 7623/1900 (NSW Registry of Births, Deaths & Marriages)
- ⁷ Divorce case file 1912/202 (VPRS 283)
- ⁸ The Argus, 27 November 1912, p. 5
- ⁹ The Newsletter: an Australian Paper for Australian People, 21 June 1913, p. 3
- ¹⁰ The Argus, 21 March 1914, p. 11
- ¹¹ NAA:B2455, Scarlett Alfred (National Archives of Australia)
- ¹² The 1881 English Census records an Alfred Scarlett, aged 14 years, born in North Shields Northumberland.
- ¹³ Reg. no. 7935, 1933 (Marriage Index Victoria)
- ¹⁴ The Argus, 26 August 1944, p. 2
- ¹⁵ Gilgandra Weekly, 31 August 1944, p. 2
- ¹⁶ The Argus, 11 March 1871, p. 1 Supplement
- ¹⁷ Index to Defunct Hotel Licences (VPRS 8159)
- ¹⁸ The Age, 26 December 1893
- ¹⁹ Index to Defunct Hotel Licences (VPRS 8159)
- ²⁰ The Argus, 25 September 1915, p. 1
- ²¹ Hotels and Liquor Licensing (PROVguide 35)
- ²² The Argus, 10 November 1915, p. 15
- ²³ The Argus, 20 November 1915, p. 3

In the early hours of the morning of 12 July 1909 Ada Scarlett, former actress and licensee of the Football Club Hotel, descended the stairs and found herself in the midst of a real life and death drama. Hanging from the rafters in the kitchen was the body of her employee, John (Jack) Ashman. Thinking this was a joke, Ada called out to him. Then seeing the overturned chair, Ada realised with horror that this was no joke. Taking a knife, Ada cut down Ashman's body, lifeless but still warm, and attempted to revive him with brandy. But John Ashman, a young man aged 19 years, was beyond help.

In giving evidence at the inquest held the following day, Ada stated she had known John Ashman for two years, from the time when she was licensee of the Prince of Wales Hotel in Collingwood. She had been licensee of the Football Club Hotel in Pitt Street Carlton since March 1909 and had employed Ashman, a bootmaker by trade, as a barman and "general". He was described as a heavy smoker, but not a heavy drinker, and was not known to have suicidal thoughts, though he was considered "sensitive". After considering the evidence the coroner, Mr. J. Buzolich, returned a finding of suicide by hanging and further added that the deceased's habit of smoking six packets of cigarettes a day may have contributed to his death.^{1,2}

Ada held the licence of the Football Club Hotel for another four months after John Ashman's suicide. She was charged with Sunday trading on 10 October and, as it was her second breach of the act, she was fined £10. Her licence was transferred to Josephine Kenny the following month, on 16 November 1909. Ada was licensee of the Football Club Hotel for less than a year, but the memories of her time there were to haunt her a few years later, when her husband, actor Alfred Scarlett, accused her of behaving improperly with John Ashman.^{3,4}

Ada and Alfred were married in happier times. Ada Mary (Marie) Murray was born in Mendooran, New South Wales, in 1874. She married English actor Alfred Scarlett, from Shields in Northumberland, in Sydney on 23 October 1900. The newly-married couple travelled to Melbourne and lived at various locations in Victoria and New South Wales over the next few years. But their married life was characterised by frequent absences of Alfred on tour with Bland Holt's Dramatic Company, both interstate and overseas, and this may have contributed to its breakdown.^{5,6}

Alfred petitioned for divorce on 14 August 1912 and his affidavit painted a damning picture of married life with Ada. He alleged that she was addicted to drink and was often in an intoxicated state. After the death of John Ashman, with whom Alfred claimed Ada was behaving improperly, Alfred alleged

that Ada had herself attempted suicide twice and had called out Jack's name in her sleep. She also, he alleged, threatened to kill him and on one occasion she cut his face with a table knife when he intervened in a fight with a barmaid.⁷

Ada was not represented in the divorce court and so her side of the story has not gone on public record. Given Alfred's frequent absences for months at a time, it is possible that she may have sought comfort elsewhere. Then again, the suicide of John Ashman would have been a traumatic experience for Ada, regardless of whether or not they were romantically involved. Had she been represented in court, Ada may have been able to challenge the validity of her husband's affidavit on the basis of an obvious error in the date of their marriage, stated by Alfred as 23 October 1890 instead of the registered date of 23 October 1900. In the end, the court decided in Alfred's favour and a decree nisi was granted in November 1912, ironically on the grounds of desertion by Ada.⁸

Now a single man, Alfred wasted no time in finding a new bride. He married his second wife Barbara Constance (Connie) MacDonnell, described as "a pretty young actress", on 7 June 1913. Their son, Alfred John Richard, was born 9 months later on 4 March 1914 at St Aidin's private hospital in St Kilda. With the outbreak of World War I, Alfred joined the Australian Army and rose to the rank of Lieutenant. Once again, Alfred proved to be chronologically challenged and his army record shows two different dates of birth - 31 December 1871 and 31 December 1873. He may also have understated his age as 42 years at the time of enlistment in 1915, compared to the age of 44 years in his divorce affidavit of 1912. The latter age places his birth date in 1868, or possibly 1867 if he was born on New Year's eve. Were Alfred's age variants a series of clerical errors or did he, as an actor, change his age to suit the part he was playing?^{9,10,11,12}

Ada waited 21 years post-divorce before marrying her second husband Patrick Carroll in 1933, and the marriage was registered under her maiden name "Murray". Whether Ada and Patrick married for love or companionship, they were together for the next 11 years until Ada's death at Caritas Christi Hospice in Kew on 23 Aug 1944, aged 69. Ada was buried in the Healesville Cemetery, near her home at Narbethong, thus ending the colourful life of a feisty woman.^{13,14,15}

Ada's pub, the Football Club Hotel, began its life as the Glen Castle Hotel at 22 Pitt Street Carlton and was first licensed to Michael Fitzgerald on 15 March 1870. Fitzgerald lost his licence in June 1871, following a domestic violence charge for threatening his wife. Liquor licensing records show regular license transfers, with some licenses held for less than a year, and several convictions for Sunday trading. The hotel building was damaged in a heavy storm and lightning strike on Christmas Day in 1893. According to newspaper reports "two chimneys were demolished, and slates were torn from the roof and hurled all over the street". Fortunately, nobody was injured, but two upstairs rooms suffered extensive damage.^{16,17,18}

The Glen Castle Hotel became the Newhaven Hotel on 23 June 1896, and the Football Club Hotel on 17 August 1898. The final licence transfer application was advertised in September 1915, from Edward John Willis to Mary Eileen Willis. By that time, the Football Club Hotel's days were numbered. The Licensing Act allowed for the reduction of hotel licences where the statutory number had been exceeded, and the Football Club Hotel was among several Carlton hotels "deprived of their licenses by the Licensers Reduction Board" in 1915. The hotel owner was paid £470 and the licensee £130 compensation from the Licensing Fund, which was funded by revenue from licence fees and fines.^{19,20,21,22}

When advertised for sale in November 1915, the delicensed hotel building was described as "a brick two-storied building, containing 10 rooms and conveniences, on land having a frontage to Pitt Street of 32ft. by a depth of 75ft". It was demolished in the late 1920s and replaced by a single storey brick factory and warehouse. The building later served as a youth drop-in centre, appropriately named "The Warehouse". As of 2014, this warehouse building is being redeveloped as a private residence.²³

CCHG thanks Naomi Kalogiros for sharing the story of her great aunt Ada Scarlett