

Wowser Adelaide at the time of the First World War

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Many amusing stories are waiting to be written about Adelaide in the early twentieth century. In the period leading up to the First World War and for the first few months after it began, I came across two separate stories which involved a dance and fashion show, and a painting. My interpretation of what I found in the sources has, I hope, produced a humorous account of the local populace struggling to embrace elements of the modern world flooding in from 'out there'. This was the period of 'amusing gadgets, scientific marvels and diverting ideas' but such imports affected people in different ways. In writing about modernism through the theme of *Dance Halls and Picture Theatres in Sydney*, JJ Matthews writes that the 'great international movement of things, people and ideas' as a 'dynamism of this global process was wonder, excitement and fear'.¹ These elements of emotion could be applied to my story.

The period of the First World War, when the city's population was peaking at around 43,000, was the era of the big stores of Birks, Marshalls, Miller Anderson, Moores, the Peoples Stores, John Martins, Cox Foy's and Harris Scarf. For many, visiting the city was a regular event because there were no big shops in the suburbs and travel was made easier by the introduction of electric trams in 1909.

At the time of electrification, the shocking condition of city streets was being partly alleviated by wood blocking of the main streets. The city was unbelievably dusty in the summer producing about 70 tons of dust in the street each day, while in the winter many roads were like quagmires. Conditions were made worse by the rising numbers of motor cars with their rubber tyres which sucked up the dusty road metal and scattered it. At the same time horse carriages with metal rims churned up the macadamised roads so that the sound of metal rims on these gritty roads kept people awake at night. Added to this noise pollution, dried horse manure in the summer was blown airborne together with the dried spit that caused TB. Daily, more than 500 horses deposited 1100 litres of urine and 5 tons of horse manure onto the streets. Crude oil, seawater, tar, creosote solutions which were sprayed over the surfaces to keep the dust down which was to no avail, ruined shoes and stained clothes.²

Woodblocking was seen as the answer to combat these problems when it was laid between 1908 and 1925. It didn't glare in the sun, it was kind to horses' feet and could cope with wear and tear. It cost a fortune to put down and was being laid at the same time as the electrification cables. But no sooner laid, it was taken up to be replaced by liquified asphaltic concrete which was manufactured at the Halifax Street Destuctor site owned by the City Corporation.

After the First World War, the city population slowly declined and those that could moved to the suburbs. The city, away from the main streets, languished, and many streets contained houses that were no better than slums because so much of the residential areas of the city were out of sight and out of mind. Of course the toffs still lived on the ridges at North Adelaide, Park Land frontages and along North Terrace.

But even along North Terrace there were dramatic changes taking place in this period. An Adelaide doctor had bought one of the mansions and demolished it to make way for the Verco building. This promptly began a trend in lofty buildings. Following the Verco Buildings, others such as the Liberal Club, the Shell and Goldsborough Mort buildings soon followed and residential North Terrace became the place of the medical fraternity.

This was the setting in which Adelaide was experiencing a wowser era. This was five years after banning new barmaids serving in front bars and three years before six o'clock closing at the pubs came into force. During this period one of the risque elements of modernism to scandalise Adelaide was the visitation of the tango. The sensuous nature of the tango caused much controversy around the world when it first appeared outside Argentina sometime after 1910.³ Both the Kaiser and King George condemned it, as did the Federation of Womens' Clubs in the United States.⁴ Churches protested and some newspapers insisted that the tango was destroying the morals of the generation. The tango was the first Latin American dance to achieve international fame. It was said to be one of the first where partners danced cheek to cheek, with legs and arms pressing against each other in an erotic embrace. When the tango reached Adelaide for the first time in 1913 in the form of dancing lessons, followed by public demonstrations in 1914, several outspoken critics who condemned it, including Congregational Minister, the Reverend Selwyn Evans.

The tango reached Adelaide with the arrival of a Monsieur De Brun who gave free lessons at the Tivoli Theatre (now known as Her Majesty's) daily at noon. As many as three dozen eager men and women attended each lesson.⁵ Of the dance it was insisted that 'it was not only a dance ... but it is a style ... to master the tango one must master its style and absorb its atmosphere...'⁶

Although many attended the dancing classes, the wider public had to wait another seven months before the tango came to Adelaide in the form of a vaudeville show called Tango Teas at the New Tivoli Theatre. It was considered risque for Adelaide, and the X-ray underwear fashion show that went with it of corsets, peg-top petticoats and other feminine finery, didn't help matters. Segments of the fashion show were seen as daring as the tango and caused an outcry among the more prudish citizens.

In the afternoon of 2 March 1914 an afternoon vaudeville organised by Hugh D McIntosh at the Tivoli was packed with curious men and women for Adelaide's very first Tango Tea which included 'that much discussed and much abused dance.'⁷ The audience included a number of especially invited members of the Adelaide establishment who sanctioned the occasion as a respectable form of entertainment.⁸ The *Advertiser* reported that 'society has of late years gone mad in respect of the tango ... The craze has possession of the civilised earth'.⁹

Miss Vivien Talleur who demonstrated the tango with Fred Reade, was frocked in a 'charming confection of shimmering silver tissue, showing an underskirt of white silk net, slit up and caught at the left side with a pink rose and tunic draperies of soft yellow silk bordered with black fur'.¹⁰

The tango 'Tit-Bits' were followed by 'sensational turns' with a parade of girls advertising peg-top petticoats. The very latest design in underskirts were modelled in

dainty shades of satin with lace and frills. One model had a split skirt 'that revealed shapely limbs beyond the knee, and made the masculine observers seated on a lower level than the platform gasp'.¹¹ The men 'held their breath' when one by one eight ladies pirouetted across the stage and out over the raised platform for the purposes of exhibiting some of the more intimate articles of apparel seldom seen by adult males.¹² Some of the gentler sex were heard to complain that it would have been better if their male companions had been outside, even if they peeped through a screen.¹³ It was said of the corset parade that 'rather a thrill went through the audience at the sight, which was a novel one for Adelaide'.¹⁴ The general opinion about the afternoon's entertainment was that 'one could not believe one was in Adelaide, the scene was far more like what one imagines Paris or London to be'.¹⁵

But it was those who were not present who took the most exception to the Tango Teas. In a letter of complaint to the *Register* one person believed that this kind of entertainment 'must appeal to that black drop in our veins – that sensualism which whether apparent or suppressed, Woman has not the strong passions of man, who is busy enough at times conquering itself; therefore it is unfair to inflict corset parades upon the rising male generation'.¹⁶ Even the *Observer* stated that the graceful models dolling their negligees should 'not again be presented to a mixed audience'.¹⁷

One protester signing himself 'Squatter' admitted 'there may be but little harm in the tango itself' but he warned 'surely it does not need a high grade of intellect to appreciate dances which would be more appropriate to the savage races? ... Let the hideous claws of sensualism get its grip upon us, and we are done for as a nation ... I do not wish to pose as purist, but nobody can convince me that a show of female undergarb when worn upon the person is decent, or ever will be.'¹⁸

The Reverend Mr Evans of Stow Congregational Church denounced the tango from his pulpit, 'in their pleasures and amusements, perhaps more than anything else, people accepted a lower standard'. The tango

certainly broke away from all dancing conventions. It was the latest heresy in dancing. The old time dignity and decorum were abandoned in the tango. But one thing was quite obvious, that it was voluptuous and sensuous, too amorous and familiar ... Confined to the stage it might not do too much harm; but in private and public dancing places, it might be calculated to do great injury ...

He ended by saying 'the popularity of the tango was one of the most disquieting symptoms of the present day'.¹⁹

The tango did have a positive effect locally in the retail trade, for a buyer at a West End store saw that 'the tango has had a very distinct influence on the fashions, as almost every skirt is now slashed'.²⁰ But of more interest, it was pondered 'whether the tango will revive the glories of the garter?' as it was said to be 'almost a necessity for the woman who dances the tango'. Perhaps many a man at that time was also pondering and hoping this would be the case.²¹

Only a couple of months later the wowsers of Adelaide were in for more shocks. From the evening of 26 June 1914 until February 1915, Adelaide was titillated in a way that it has rarely been so since.²² In those few months half the population of South

Australia paid a special visit to the Art Gallery on North Terrace to stare upon the most scandalous picture ever to hang on its walls up to that date.²³ Its reputation attracted the curious from every class of people imaginable. When the picture arrived in Adelaide from England, it was meant to form part of an exhibition that opened the Art Gallery for evening viewing. Its purchase was commissioned by the Board of Governors of the Public Library, who then controlled the Art Gallery. Responsible for choosing the painting in England was Miss Rose Macpherson, a local artist, who bought two paintings by celebrated British artists. Electric lighting was installed for the new opening hours and it was indeed an important occasion for the cultured who were invited to share the event with the governor.

However, the occasion passed without incident because the painting in question by artist Sir William Orpen, and already the subject of differences of opinion since its arrival some weeks before, was not hung until the next day. But the word was already out about this painting known as ‘Sowing the seed’, draping the gallery’s walls. Its full name was *Sowing New Seed for the Board of Agriculture and Technical Instruction for Ireland*. It was not long before the dribbles of viewers visiting the art gallery over the next few days to see the William Orpen painting, grew into long queues over the next few weeks.

Costing £700 through the Elder bequest, the picture in a new but unfamiliar style quickly upset art novices not acquainted with art trends then sweeping Europe. Apart from its suggestive title, the painting itself was one of impressionism and ‘not of true images as would be taken by a camera’. The most important detail, however, was that the painting portrayed a young naked female with boldly painted pubic hair. Gallery gazers who liked ‘good honest and homely’ pictures were so upset at the exhibition of an indecent picture that many began to question whether Adelaide could rightly be known any longer as a city of culture.

In essence, the picture can be likened to the story of the Emperor’s new clothes, where those not in on the secret, missed the point altogether.²⁴ The picture depicted a half-naked woman, a clothed man and woman, two small naked children, a bird in a tree, a pond and a pig. It was meant to ‘symbolise the new Sinn Fein movement which was a revolutionary society and movement founded in Ireland about 1905 to establish political and economic independence and for reviving Irish culture. The naked girl represented the spirit of Sinn Fein in 1913, ‘sowing the seed’.²⁵

Before an easily understood explanation of the picture was made public and so that no one was left in any doubt about what it symbolised, mis-information about the ‘three nudes and a scowling parson’ led to a stampede to the tiny narrow public art gallery. At the end of the seven month viewing period, half the population of South Australia had turned out to see the painting. The art gallery experienced a year’s visitation in just one month. In 1913, 110,519 people visited the gallery but in only 24 days of July 1914 the number was 87,445.²⁶ Given the effort taken to travel to the city to see it, the lengthy queues and the awkward jostling through the clicking turnstile, there were expectations of either being shocked and disgusted, the pleasant experience of titillation and amusement, or high acclaim by a public ‘who sought to join the exciting maelstrom of modernity’.²⁷

The painting was soon referred to as 'Orpen's Shocker', 'Orpen's little joke' or simply 'the picture'.²⁸ The general lack of understanding the painting saw it labeled as 'essentially an artist's picture'.

Before the display of Orpen's painting, Holman Hunt's 'Light of the World' drew one of the largest crowds ever attracted to the gallery, but even this was pipped by the travelling display of J.J. Lefebvre's 'Chloe' that has been hanging in Young and Jackson's Prince's Bridge Hotel opposite the Flinders Street station in Melbourne since 1909. But 'Orpen's Shocker' drew an even larger crowd which dwarfed these two picture visitations to insignificant dimensions.

The viewers were 'the young and old, the cultured and the vulgar, the well dressed and the shabby ... They arrived in motor cars, on bicycles, trollies and carts. Old men hobble to the gate on crutches, mothers arrived with babies in arms, or pushing the ever-handy perambulator'.²⁹ For twenty minutes during one lunch time the same journalist observed those waiting and jostling in the long queue. It comprised 'a well known sporting man, a couple of cricketers, two detectives, critics, two ladies in the very latest modes, a cadet in full uniform, a mother with a wee chappie in kilts, two or three office boys, half a dozen men of different grades, two or three quietly dressed ladies, some lads from a factory, and a tradesman with a white apron half hidden beneath his coat.'³⁰

The queues could be likened to a string of sausages, because the long series of rooms with only one opening to it became steadily stuffed particularly between 2 and 3 pm on Sunday afternoons by 12,500 people. Over twelve days this reached 41,000 people.³¹

On seeing the picture some viewers at first didn't know how to feel. One woman claimed she saw it about a dozen times before she finally decided she was disgusted by it. Further, she complained that people should not be allowed to see it at all.³² For the art gallery, the sudden influx of so many people was reviewed with much satisfaction and they hoped they would return again in the future.

Over the next seven months about 400 letters of complaint and praise hit the newspapers in letters to editors of the city newspapers. Many believed the painting was an attack on the church and saw it as a libel on the ministry, but it was nothing to do with the church at all.³³

The scantily clad maiden which caused the most outcry was the drawcard to the art gallery. It was the first time that a female nude figure was freely accessible to the curiously deprived public. There was a surprising amount of criticism of the bird which many saw as a deformed Australian magpie, while the tree was viewed as a sick gum tree.³⁴

It was believed cultured and moral Adelaide was at grave risk. One person thought there was enough indecency in our streets without flaunting it in our art galleries. 'I do not think Adelaide was ever in such peril of becoming a harbour of undesirables now that the beloved city has made that weak and indiscriminating mistake of admitting to her shores that black-souled and niggardly production'.³⁵

One protester thought that ‘many a young girl will be sorry they viewed the picture with their male friend’.³⁶ A father wrote that he wanted ‘good, honest homely pictures that every one can understand; pictures of animals and birds (except pigs and magpies) ... then our gallery would be a fit place for our young men to take their sweethearts to on Sunday afternoons’.³⁷

Within a month of its unveiling, the painting was the most talked about topic and the tango was temporarily forgotten. ‘To have failed to view the much-discussed canvas was to be quite beyond the pale.’³⁸ For the chattering classes, not to have seen it was to be left far behind in the conversational race.

Opinions were that it should be ‘relegated to the scrap heap or bonfire’ while another advised it should be presented to the Blind Institution ‘for adornment of its walls’.³⁹ One paper declared that ‘what we say is turn it to the wall’.⁴⁰

With so many people condemning the painting, one of the issues discussed, was just how cultured was Adelaide, and was it cultured at all?⁴¹ Many began to think that Adelaide was not ‘educated-up’ to the new art of the period. ‘We fear there is not enough culture even in Adelaide for the full appreciation of its vaunted beauties’.⁴² One person believed more pictures should be purchased ‘to stir up the dead bones and breathe life into stagnant waters’.

Beyond the gallery city businesses cashed in on the notoriety of the painting by using its image for advertising their own commodities through the pages of the newspapers. *Blossom Tea* used a caricature of the picture by clothing the nude in a long striped ugly bathing costume who was holding a teapot in one hand and a packet of tea in the other.⁴³

The ‘Pav’ cinema in Rundle Street was not quite so lucky with its advertising campaign of their own film sending up the painting. The police’s attention was drawn to the large calico streamer outside the cinema bearing a faithful copy of Orpen’s creation which included showing the ungarbed woman. The management were advised by the police that it would be discreet to remove the streamer if they didn’t want to be prosecuted for indecency. The streamer was given to some enterprising passer-by who began charging sixpence for a peep at his own venue. This was despite free admission to see the real thing at the Art Gallery.⁴⁴

One could only see the painting at the gallery which made it difficult for those in isolated country areas to understand what all the fuss was about. Reading about the painting, country people felt deprived for there were no copies circulated. The board refused to consider any reproductions. The Art Gallery Board believed, that none would do the picture justice as it was contended ‘being a poem in colour and highly decorative, its dominant characteristic would be lost’. For as Matthews states of the prevailing view ‘reproduction of art devalued it; its mass reproduction made it vulgar; marketing it as a commodity made it corrupting’.⁴⁵

Following the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914 organisers of patriotic funds, set about raising funds for ambulances and the like. They wanted to reproduce 100,000 postcards of the painting to raise money for field ambulances. The organisers believed as the picture’s fame had reached all parts of Australia, they saw an

opportunity to 'kill two birds with one stone'. They thought a copy of the painting could be posted inside each ambulance, so that poor wounded soldiers could forget their hurts and pains on the way to hospital. All these suggestions the Art Gallery refused.⁴⁶

Meanwhile, by November the exhibition of the painting had become too much for some, for the glass was broken and the picture vandalised with an indelible pencil.⁴⁷ Adelaide had had enough. The painting was removed and stored away until after the war. There it stayed until 1920 but there was to be no reprieve for the painting. It was disposed of by deportation. One person wrote that its impending departure was 'one act necessary to ensure the salvation of South Australia against further disaster'.

About this time the painting's reputation and the tales of the many viewers who complained about it in Adelaide reached the English media. Sir William Orpen lamented 'I'm afraid some of them don't quite understand it'. But then he quipped 'I'm not quite sure that I do myself'.⁴⁸

After the war it was voted that the picture be forwarded to the Agent General in London where it could be swapped for another or part payment for something else. So it was shipped back to England on the *SS Indarra* in February 1920. On arrival in England the whole sorry Adelaide wowser saga was featured in a daily newspaper where it was reported that 'the diggers broke the glass, repainted one of the figures, threw the picture into a dark room, and then deported it. But it was going off next to Pittsburgh, USA where apparently they can stand anything over there ... Thank heavens it's going to a place where it can do no harm.'⁴⁹

Where is the picture today? Surprisingly, it was shipped back to Australia in 1927 when many of Orpen's pictures were bought by Senator R.D. Elliott of Melbourne. Years later the collection, which was bequeathed to the City of Mildura, was installed into the Mildura Arts Centre to form the nucleus of the gallery's collection.

However, that was not the end of the viewing of Orpen's 'Sowing the Seed' in Adelaide.⁵⁰ In 1957 the picture was lent to the Art Gallery for a month. 'It brought no more than a passing glance from the majority' stated the *News* for 22 April.

Then in 2004 the painting was hung in the SA Art Gallery as part of the exhibition, *The Edwardians*. When I offered an article about the painting's past to the *Adelaide Review*, the offer was turned down because I was assured one was being written to cover the exhibition, presumably mentioning the Orpen painting. However, when the article appeared there was no mention of William Orpen's 'Sowing the Seed' and not one hint about the painting's notoriety. If ever a great publicity opportunity was lost, it was over this painting. It is doubtful if but a dozen people knew that this painting had a dark past that once showed up Adelaide for being wowser.

¹ JJ Matthews, *Dance Halls & Picture Palace*, pp 1-2.

²Peter Morton, *After Light: A history of the City of Adelaide and its Council 1878-1928*, p 210.

³ History Today - Cross Current - First Tango in Buenos Aires, January 1992; L Ellfeldt, VL Morton, 'The Argentine Tango' in *This is Ballroom Dancing* 1974, p48.

⁴ *Advertiser* 3 March 1914, Tivoli, Tango, and Tea - A parade of corsets.

⁵ *Sunday Mail* 12 July 1913 - The Tango dance will be popular, p3

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- ⁶ Green Room November 1914.
- ⁷ *Adelaide Chronicle* 7 March 1914 - Tango Tea.
- ⁸ *Adelaide Chronicle* 7 March 1914 - Tango Tea.
- ⁹ *Advertiser* 3 March 1914, Tivoli, Tango, and Tea - A parade of corsets.
- ¹⁰ *Adelaide Chronicle* 7 March 1914 - Tango Tea.
- ¹¹ *Advertiser* 3 March 1914, Tivoli, Tango, and Tea - A parade of corsets.
- ¹² *Advertiser* 3 March 1914, Tivoli.
- ¹³ *Advertiser* 3 March 1914, Tivoli.
- ¹⁴ *Observer* 7 March 1914.
- ¹⁵ *Observer* 7 March 1914
- ¹⁶ *Register* 12 March 1914 - Corset and Pyjama Parades.
- ¹⁷ *Observer*?
- ¹⁸ *Register* 12 March 1914 - Corset and Pyjama Parades.
- ¹⁹ *Register* 16 March 1914.
- ²⁰ *Green Room* March 1914.
- ²¹ *Green Room* March 1914.
- ²² P Sumerling, 'Sowing New Seed: A Question of Propriety' in *Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia*, No 20, *JHSA*, 1992, pp 125-135; Archives of the SA Art Gallery are held by State Records GRG19/70 - Newspaper Cuttings of the SA Art Gallery.
- ²³ The picture known as *Piss Christ* is another example of a controversial picture shown in Adelaide in more recent times.
- ²⁴ *Register* 10 July 1914 - Chiar Osura; *Register* 18 July 1914 Anti-Futurist.
- ²⁵ *The Mail*, 20 June 1914 - Problem picture or cartoon?
- ²⁶ *Register* 20 June 1914 Problem Picture, *Register* 25 July 1914 - An Art Gallery Record.
- ²⁷ JJ Matthews, *Dance Halls & Picture Palace*, p 12.
- ²⁸ *Register* 10 July 1914 - Chiar Oscura; *The Mail* 11 July 1914 - True Blue; *Register* 18 July 1914 - Bertha F Thyer; *The Bulletin* 23 July 1914.
- ²⁹ *Register* 22 July 1914 - Watching the Orpen.
- ³⁰ *Register* 22 July 1914 - Watching the Orpen.
- ³¹ *Register* 13 July 1914 - Unparallel Public Interest.
- ³² *Register* 21 July 1914 - The Orpen Attraction.
- ³³ *Register* 9 July 1914 - Country Visitor, EF Scott Broad; *Register* 10 July 1914 - Patricia Brown; *The Mail* 11 July 1914 - Sowing the Seed - the utmost for the highest.
- ³⁴ *Register* 15 July 1914 - In Doubt.
- ³⁵ *Advertiser* 8 July 1914.
- ³⁶ *Advertiser* 20 July 1914 - Harry Darlington.
- ³⁷ *Advertiser* 22 July 1914 - A Father of 42 (my age).
- ³⁸ *Register* 22 July 1914 - Watching the Orpen.
- ³⁹ *Advertiser* 14 July 1914 - Virtuoso.
- ⁴⁰ *Register* 17 July 1914 - Father of Four Girls; *The Critic* 22 July 1914 - More about the Orpen.
- ⁴¹ *Register* 4 July 1914; 16 July 1914 - Humane; *Advertiser* 10 July 1914 - Catch-Line;
- ⁴² *Advertiser* 11 July 1914 - SPG.
- ⁴³ *Advertiser* 21 July 1914.
- ⁴⁴ *The Mail* 1 August 1914 - Attention by the police' *The Daily Herald* 21 July 1914, Advert by the Pav Cinema.
- ⁴⁵ JJ Matthews, *Dance Hall & Picture Palace*, p18.
- ⁴⁶ *Register* 29 May 1915 - FS Wallis, 1 June 1915 Harriett Thompson.
- ⁴⁷ *Register* 21 November 1914 - Improving on Orpen - Notorious picture disfigured and restored.
- ⁴⁸ *Register* 9 July 1915 - Sowing New Seed.
- ⁴⁹ *Sunday Express* 5 February 1922 - An Orpen Shocker; *Advertiser* 12 March 1922 - Orpen's Shocker - artist unrepentant.
- ⁵⁰ Angus Trumble, 'The Elliott Collection, Orpen and Sowing New Seed' in Catalogue of Mildura Arts Centre, 1999.