

The Gun Alley Murder

Crime & Tragedy: short stories

For the sheer drama as one of the truly great sensational murders in Australian criminal history, few could match the rape and murder of 12-year-old Alma Tirtschke (1909-21) on the afternoon of 30 December 1921. Described as slightly built, 4 feet 10 inches in height, freckled faced and with long dark auburn hair, quiet disposition and studious habits, Alma lived with her paternal grandmother Elizabeth Tirtschke *née* Le Maitre (d 1939) at 10 Jolimont Road, Jolimont. Alma was a well-behaved, popular and above average student who attended Hawthorn West High School where she was dux of her class; her mother Ellen (Nellie) *née* Alger (1878-1914) died when she was a young girl and her father was a builder and contractor working at Maffra in country Victoria where Alma was about to live permanently.

It was on this fateful hot summer afternoon that Alma, dressed in navy blue box-pleated overalls with a white cambric blouse, black shoes, stockings and a white leghorn hat was asked to collect a parcel of meat from "T. K. Bennet and Woolcock's" of 154 Swanston Street in the city where her uncle worked for delivery to her aunt, at Masonic Chambers of 31 Collins Street. After leaving the shop at 1:30pm, Alma was in no rush to deliver the parcel and took her time to marvel at the shops along the way. Witnesses reported seeing her at various locations along Little Collins Street, Bourke Street and the seedy Eastern Arcade then a popular haunt for the prostitutes, pimps and petty criminals who frequented the area. She was last seen just before 3:00pm near Alfred Place at the southern entrance of the Arcade.

The following morning, an unemployed veteran of the Great War, Henry Errington accompanied by his daughter were looking for empty bottles in Little Collins Street, when around 6:00am they spotted the body of a naked girl in a cobbled laneway off Gun Alley just south of Exhibition Street. It was an ideal place to dispose of a body. Narrow, unlighted and seldom used, it ran parallel to Little Collins Street providing access to the rear of the shops. A post mortem revealed marks of violence on her face though no evidence that she had been strangled. Her body was washed before being disposed in the alley. No sign of her clothes were ever found.

From the outset, Senior-Detectives John Brophy and Frederick Piggott, who were the two most experienced homicide detectives of the era were baffled with few promising leads. With the city outraged and the press in a state of emotive hysteria ("The thought that so base a wretch may remain free to enjoy life is utterly repugnant to all decent citizens"), they were under enormous pressure for a speedy arrest and all the resources of the C.I.B were assigned to the case. By 10 January, the police were feeling the strain and the first signs of public criticism were aired. The newspapers began to raise questions, suggesting that the detectives had few tangible leads even though every house bordering Little Collins between Russell and Spring Street had been searched in vain. In the hope of a breakthrough, the Government increased the initial £250 pound reward to £1,000.

Two days later, Colin Campbell Ross, the licensee of the Australian Wine Saloon located at the entrance of the Arcade was arrested at his mother's residence *Glenross* - Ballarat Road, West Footscray and taken to the Russell Street police station where he was later charged with murder. News of his arrest spread through the suburbs like wildfire. At the coroner's inquest (25 January) and subsequent trial (20 February) before Mr Justice (William) Schutt (1868-1933) with [Hugh Macindoe](#) (q.v.) prosecuting, Ross never once wavered from his evidence while maintaining an "air of bravado". He stated he left home at lunch time after feeling unwell on the day of Alma's disappearance and between 2:00pm and 3:00pm remembered seeing a schoolgirl matching Tirtshcke's description outside his salon. At 4:00pm a friend, Gladys Wain arrived and they were together on and off for the rest of the evening before Ross arrived home shortly before midnight.

But evidence was heard against Ross from an assorted mix of shady characters with questionable motives: David Alberts verified seeing Ross outside the salon at



(above) Monumental headstone to Alma Tirtschke's paternal grandparents where Alma was originally interred ([enlarge image](#))



(above) Monumental headstone to Alma Tirtschke where she was reinterred ([enlarge image](#))

about 7:30pm; Ivy Matthews a street walker formerly employed by Ross who received the largest share of the £1,000 government reward, testified seeing Tirtschke in a private room in the salon, that Ross was known to harbour young girls and tellingly, that he had confessed to the assault the following day; Sydney Harding, a habitual thief and proven liar who admitted making false statements against two warders also testified that Ross confessed his guilt while on remand at the Old Melbourne Goal; but the most telling piece of evidence was strands of hair similar to Alma's being found on blankets at Ross' home that were previously kept at the wine saloon. This, with the evidence of the State Government analyst, Charles Price sealed Ross' fate and he was found guilty "to be hanged by the neck until you are dead". Right until the end when he met his fate on the gallows on 24 April 1922, Ross vehemently protested his innocence; but this mattered little when a conviction at all costs was demanded. Against the formidable forces of a police force under political and public pressure from an outraged city, a press with a 'lynch mob' mentality, questionable evidence from shady characters, and use of hair analysis to secure a conviction for the first time in Australian criminal history it remains improbable that Ross was guilty. Most tellingly, tests on the strands of hair 75 years after the crime showed the two were not from the same scalp.

Nor did the Tirtschke family find peace - nearly a month to the day after Alma's disappearance, her father Charles Henry ("Harry") Tirtschke (1876-1922) was accidentally shot by his nephew in a bush paddock eleven miles from Maffra and was buried on 31 January 1922.

Source:

Morgan, K., "Gun Alley. Murder, lies and failure of justice" (2005).

Sharpe, A., "Crime and punishment. 50 crimes that shocked Australia" (1997).

The Argus 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 20, 25, 26, 27 & 31 January 1922, 1 & 11 February 1922.

The Age 24 April 1922.

The Herald 24 April 1922.

The Sunday Age 5 March 2000.

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