

Review of the *City of Shadows* Exhibition:

Photography as History, Photography as Art

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The *City of Shadows* photographic exhibition, displayed from 19 November 2005 to 11 February 2007 at the Sydney Justice and Police Museum, consisted of a collection of prints from the museum's early twentieth-century archive of negatives. Peter Doyle, an author, historian and curator, was commissioned to review this forgotten archive, and the exhibition is the product of his research. Broadly it consists of two types of photographs: crime-scene depictions and official portraits of criminals for police records. Within the limited confines of the exhibition space, Doyle has used the material with sparing efficiency, allowing the photographs to speak for themselves with a display of some of the most interesting prints and a series of slide shows. He has also published a wider selection of photographs in a book linked to the exhibition, titled *City of Shadows: Sydney Police Photographs 1912–1948*, which includes short essays on Doyle's research. Discretion, in every sense of the word, is Doyle's style, but this is entirely appropriate since the photos themselves are so compelling that they require no background narrative. Regardless of any attempt to historicise, the accompanying case notes and police files have been lost so that, in most cases, the crimes and criminals are unknown. But the value of this exhibition is in its possibilities; it is strangely exhilarating to wander amongst these relics of past crimes, knowing that each photograph has its own story waiting to be told.

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A woman lies upon a lumpy bed in a small cluttered room, her eyes closed, one hand resting on her belly, the other dangling over the edge of the mattress. Beside her legs is a pillow soaked in blood, matching the stain on her blouse. One cannot help but feel a voyeuristic shudder at being drawn so intimately into this unknown murder of an unknown woman. The eye is drawn first to the sordid details: blood on her hands, her stockings rumped about her knees, the unnatural twist of her shoulder. Yet it is the very intimacy of the scene that ultimately makes it enthralling, the domestic quality of this lived-in room, the little incongruous details of a life that, whilst we cannot know, we instinctively understand. In the

left foreground a coat-hanger and a folded doily sits upon a deal table, covered with a cloth; in the right is a leather armchair with an unmatching cushion that blocks the fireplace. On the mantle-piece is a large wooden radio, beside it an ornate clock, turned so that the time cannot be seen from the bed. Hanging from the wall, there are two framed photos that look like landscapes, an ugly light with an uncovered bulb, and a small hand-sized American flag. The final touch, tossed casually on the armchair, is a glossy magazine, *True Confessions*; its by-line: “I was the Town’s Bad Girl!”



Fig 1: Female murder victim, c.1940s, details unknown. © Historic Houses Trust of NSW.

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There is a long history behind the question of truth and photography. When photography first began in the 1840s, it was seen by early practitioners as an objective record of reality, and thus an improvement upon earlier techniques for representing the world. The photograph was supposed to be an accurate record of a single instant of time from a specific point of view. Gradually, this concept of photography came under sustained attack. Critics pointed to the inevitable choices that went into any photograph, of subject matter, angle, and exposure among others; a photograph was thus only a view of reality. But this criticism had profound implications: the photographer could now be regarded as an artist, who used the medium to represent their subject in a way that would affect the viewer.

Without delving deeper into this complicated critical history, we can see that two broad views of photography present themselves: photography as objective record and photography as subjective artwork.

Today these questions seem to have a greater relevance precisely because of the ubiquity of the photographic image. Everywhere we look we are confronted with images that represent themselves as reality. Of course, we understand that these images can be, and often are, manipulative to some degree, but there is still a level of instinctive trust in photography precisely because it so closely replicates the appearance of reality. Hence we find people using their photo collections as memories, investing these images of moments in their lives with their life story. There may well be nothing wrong with this form of self-deception, but for a historian trying to understand the past, this makes the photograph a very dangerous piece of evidence. Both photo and memory are unreliable witnesses. They have a quality of truth to them that is too strong, too heady, too powerful. Each can be an excellent historical source, but each must be used with caution. But it is precisely the seductive verisimilitude of photography, its resemblance to memory, which gives it such power over our emotions and hence makes it an effective artistic medium.

We might illustrate this point with another example. One of the few photos in the exhibition with a reliable provenance (because the case was important or sensational enough to make it into the newspapers) shows E. Falleni, well dressed in suit, shirt, waistcoat, tie, hair neatly parted, staring mournfully at the camera. Hotel cleaner Harry Crawford was arrested for the murder of his first wife, whose disappearance was supposedly occasioned by her elopement with another man. In fact, she had been murdered for discovering Harry's secret: he was actually a woman named Eugenie Falleni, who had been living as a man for two decades! The photo thus suggests the fundamental instability of the photographic record. If Peter Doyle had failed to connect the picture to the story, it would probably not have entered the exhibition because superficially there is nothing remarkable about it. Furthermore, it also shows where the true interest of this exhibition lies. Whereas the photo of E. Falleni is only of interest once we understand its history, our unknown woman in her poky room immediately enthralls us with her universal humanity, a quality that might well be destroyed if we knew the facts of her case. Trapped in a frame, ripped out of time, a photograph is compelling precisely because it is not reality but a comment upon it. The most compelling

photographs do not require an explanation to interest us because they are artistically rather than literally true.

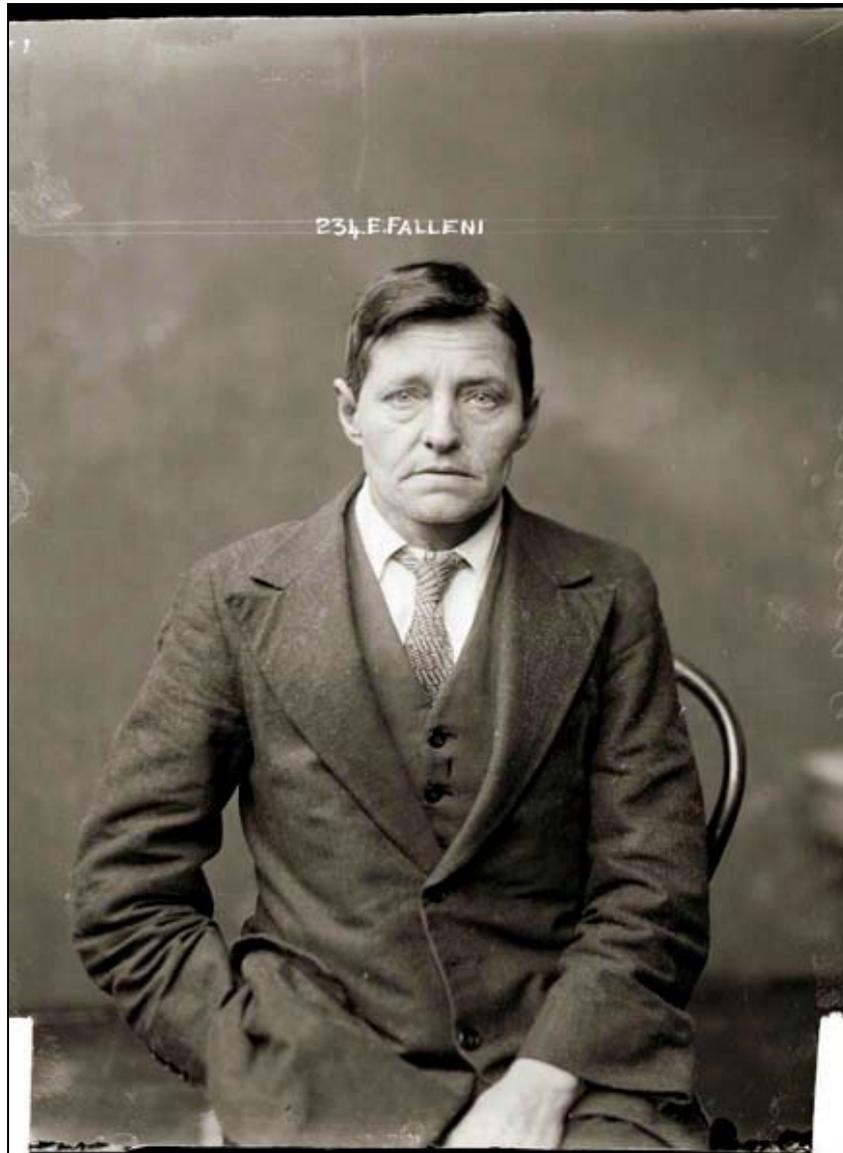


Fig 2: Eugenie Falleni, c.1920, Central cells. © Historic Houses Trust of NSW.

De Gracy and Edward Dalton, photographed sitting together in the Central Cells c.1920. There are no records in the *Police Gazette*, the official monthly journal that recorded details of crimes, arrests, trials and hearings, and so their crime, alleged or actual, remains unknown to the historian, as are the men themselves. They sit side by side, left leg folded over right, suits, hats, tightly tied ties, mouths without expression, steely stares. De Gracy is slightly hunched, his arms are crossed, three-day growth on his drawn cheeks with high cheekbones, his full lips

slightly pouted, his hat tilted on an angle with his head in quarter profile so that the shadow covers his staring eyes, eyes of a translucent blue that stare right through the camera and into the beating heart of the spectator. He looks like a man who could kill without thought and without emotion. He looks like he is incapable of emotion.

Dalton sits up straight, left arm across his thigh, the right tucked up behind it, his tie nonchalantly bursting from his waistcoat, his collar perfectly clean and starched. He stares with dark eyes like a young Kevin Spacey, his lips drawn into a tight line. A scar runs the length of his face from beneath his right eye to the centre of his lips as if his face had been slashed open. His hands are large with squat fingers and broad nails.

For all we know, these anonymous men could be police officers posing as crooks, or business men pulled into the cells for drunkenness, by far the largest category of charges in any era of NSW policing. Yet I am already spinning a story around them: Dalton the crime boss, De Gracy his hired killer, pulled in on a dressed-up charge and staring wryly at the police photographer as they wait for their lawyer to bring the brown paper bag with the bribe.



Fig 3: Photograph of De Gracey and E. Dalton, c.1920, Central cells. © Historic Houses Trust of NSW.

For me, this image and my reaction to it sums up why photography is such unreliable historical evidence and conversely why it can be such powerful art. Even if we did know the story behind these men, the photo would do very little to help us understand it in a historical sense. We know how they dressed and how they looked in a single moment in the police cells. Maybe the next moment they were laughing or bursting into tears, begging for lenience. On the other hand, the photo viewed as an artwork is eerily entralling, almost hypnotic; it seduces the viewer with its narrative possibilities. A picture like this certainly tells a story but it should never be confused with history.

All images are supplied courtesy of the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales. Philament wishes to thank the Historic Houses Trust for permission to reproduce images from the City of Shadows exhibition, published in Peter Doyle's City of Shadows: Sydney Police Photographs 1912-1948 (Sydney: Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, 2005). See the Historic Houses Trust website for more information: www.hht.net.au/shops/publications.