

The Chapters: Humans of 1930s Melbourne

Tess McLaughlan:

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The sky is overcast on a bitterly cold morning, the crowds of workers shuffle towards the tram in 1930s Melbourne, a time where we find the city in the depths of the crippling Great Depression. Sitting on a wooden stool outside the Royal Bank on Collins Street is a tiny old lady in a dazzling hat. She has a pile of matchboxes on her lap and she holds one out to every passerby, hoping to make a sale. Lonely and tired, proud and independent. A newspaper blows past, caught up in the cold gust of wind that whistles through the buildings. It bounces and flutters along the footpath until a foot violently stops its movement. The foot belongs to a tall man with a scarred face and a leather jacket. He picks it up and looks at it briefly, then tosses it aside.

His name is Starlight, one of Australia's last bare knuckle fighters. Now old and retired, he still cuts an imposing figure on his walk to the tram. As he climbs up onto the tram, he hears a voice pierce through the crowd. The sweet sound of a woman's Irish brogue singing an Irish song is coming from the tram tracks ahead. A woman who goes by the name Killarney Kate is standing on the tracks, blocking the movement of the tram, singing a song. The tram staff know her well, so they don't bother trying to stop her. Some people stop to listen and applaud, some drop coins in her hat, while others just join in. Maggie Malone with her matchboxes, the imposing boxer Starlight, and the boisterous Killarney Kate. These are just three of the many street characters that populated Melbourne in the 1930s, but what was it actually like in 1930s Melbourne? And what made these people so unique?

Welcome to *The Chapters*, a show from State Library Victoria, all about the incredible stories of some of Victoria's unsung trailblazers. Now you probably know about State Library Victoria's beautiful reading rooms and galleries. You may have even come to see Ned Kelly's armour on display. But this show is about the stories that are hidden

at the Library, the ones that you may never have heard of, and the librarians who discover them. I'm your host, Tess McLaughlan, and I'm lucky enough to spend my days exploring State Library Victoria's rich collection and in partnership with our talented librarians, bring its stories to you.

When you walk around the streets of Melbourne, you can't help but imagine the past. Walking down Collins Street with all the wonderfully preserved facades, it's not too hard to envision yourself back in the 1930s. But what was life actually like back then? In today's episode, I'm joined by Kylie Best, one of the librarians at State Library Victoria. Kylie wrote an article on the library website about the humans of 1930s Melbourne, based solely on a series of seven mysterious portraits taken by a photographer named Eric Rowell. After a lot of digging, Kylie was able to uncover the stories of these characters and they have some really incredible tales to tell. So, let's open another chapter.

Kylie, welcome to the show.

Kylie Best:

Thank you, Tess. It's really great to be here.

Tess McLaughlan:

So, in today's conversation, we're going to explore a few different stories, but all the people in these stories are from Melbourne in the 1930s. Can you help us imagine what Melbourne would've been like back in the 1930s?

Kylie Best:

So, the 1930s were really characterised by quite a lot of economic and social upheaval. We've got the Great Depression, we've got really high unemployment rates, and it was a time when life was actually really hard for quite a lot of people. There wasn't necessarily a lot of government assistance available, and there were charitable organisations that tried to provide assistance to people, but they were very overwhelmed with the amount of people who needed assistance.

Tess McLaughlan:

To start out today, we'll look at an imposing figure from 1930s Melbourne, a bare knuckle fighter with a fascinating backstory. Born in 1852 in British Guiana, he was once a champion. Edward William Rollins, or better known as Starlight.

Kylie Best:

Starlight was born in British Guiana, which was on the mainland part of British West Indies on the Northern coast of South America. And he was one of the last famous

bare knuckle boxers in Australia. He's quite interesting because he had quite a life of adventure before he came to Australia, and he actually didn't start his boxing career until quite late in life. He was about 34 when he first started boxing professionally, and he lived his later years in Melbourne and died in Melbourne. At the time, our photographer took a photo of him in front of the Tivoli Theatre in Melbourne, he was probably in his 80s by then, and he was a very well-known figure in the boxing circles in Melbourne and just quite well-known because he would often take his daily walk around Melbourne, everyone knew who he was.

Tess McLaughlan:

So Starlight, as you said, was born in South America, how did he make his way to Melbourne?

Kylie Best:

He was an adventure seeker and the library's really lucky; we actually have an autobiography he wrote that was published in Melbourne in 1928 called *The Life of Starlight*, and in his autobiography he writes about how he just wasn't suited to school or home life. He just wanted to go on an adventure. His mother died when he was about nine, and a few years after that is when he decided he wanted to leave British Guiana and see the world. He got a job as a sailor on a boat, and that was the beginning of his adventure. He spent time in New York, he spent time in Glasgow, he ended up in London, and eventually he realised he wasn't very well suited to be a sailor. I think he suffered a lot from seasickness, but he still stayed on ships. He got a job as a cook on ships, and that's how he got around. Eventually that led him from London to come to Australia where he arrived in Sydney.

Tess McLaughlan:

And what did Starlight say about leaving British Guiana?

Kylie Best:

So, in his autobiography, he said, "The wanderlust sees me early and I could never submit to the discipline of school or home life. I took my hat and coat, for I had no boots. The sea called me irresistibly and I longed to see the strange lands beyond it."

Tess McLaughlan:

So, can you share the story of how Starlight's boxing career began?

Kylie Best:

So, Starlight had been in Australia for a little while. He'd been doing various jobs and he got a job as a cook on a coastal steamer that he had a passenger on the

ship who was basically being a jerk, I think he was drunk. He was saying racist things, and Starlight basically had enough of him. In his autobiography he talks about being a gentle giant, not the sort of person that would harm a fly, but this man just really provoked him, and so he punched him and knocked him down, and that was basically when he realised he had a talent for boxing. So he ended up in Brisbane and he worked on his boxing skills. And his first professional bout was basically a glorified street brawl that had been organised and his opponent was called Moonlight, and he was outweighed by Moonlight, but he did win the fight. Because he fought someone called Moonlight, that's how he got his nickname, his boxing name as Starlight.

Tess McLaughlan:

And you actually have a quote from Starlight's autobiography about the moment his boxing career began, did you want to share that?

Kylie Best:

Yeah. So, he says, "I was a big raw-boned young chap who usually wouldn't hurt a worm, but I was very angry that day. I cracked him and that started a great old shindig. After that, I had a smack at every punching ball I came across and I began to take an interest in the fighting. I became Starlight."

Tess McLaughlan:

So later in life he became a bit of a Melbourne icon, can you expand on this a bit?

Kylie Best:

He moved to Melbourne sometime in the 1890s. So, he'd arrived in Australia in the 1880s and he stayed in Melbourne until his death in his 80s. He married, had a family, but he was always very much a big part of the Melbourne boxing scene. So, during his boxing career, he was a contender for middleweight champion of Australia. His last professional match was in his 50s, I think, when he fought the middleweight champion, Australian champion Dan Creedon in Melbourne. But even after he retired, he worked as a boxing instructor, and he also often boxed for charity events and things like that.

Tess McLaughlan:

Ellen Cahill, better known as Killarney Kate, was a well-known street singer for more reasons than one. Born in 1863, her life had many ups and downs, but one constant was her love of music. Killarney Kate was famously known to stand on the tram tracks and block travel just to sing a few numbers.

Kylie Best:

Killarney Kate was a really well-known personality in Melbourne. It was said in one newspaper article that she was better known than Flinders Street Station in Melbourne, and everyone knew about her and she was familiar to a whole generation of Melburnians. Her real name was Ellen Cahill, but she was known as Killarney Kate because she was a street singer, and her favorite song was Killarney Lakes. She was from Killarney and she had the propensity to break out into Killarney Lakes basically wherever she was. She had regular parts of Melbourne where she would sing, but she would also get onto trams and sing. She would stand on tram lines and block trams until she'd finished her performance. She was just a real character and everyone knew who she was.

Tess McLaughlan:

And you said she was a street singer; is that a job that people had at the time?

Kylie Best:

I think certainly street performers or buskers, they've been around forever. They were common in Melbourne at that time. Street performers were often associated with people who might've been living rough for itinerant lifestyles, perhaps a little bit unfairly. I think for Kate, it wasn't a formal vocation. It was said that she'd actually come from a well-to-do family and that she was classically trained. She was said to have sung in charity concerts and at her parents' pub when she was younger, and she would've also probably received money from people who were walking past. There's certainly a lot of accounts of her singing in pubs for a drink as well.

Tess McLaughlan:

Kate was quite beloved among the staff on the trams. So they would give her a bit of leeway. This was important because she would often perform on the trams, like you said. Can you talk about some of the places Kate would commonly sing?

Kylie Best:

She really liked singing outside the Town Hall. She would often sing at Queen Vic Market. She was also known to sing at the Homeopathic Hospital, which was on St. Kilda Road and there'd often be patients that are convalescing on the veranda and she would go and sing and serenade them. Sometimes she matched her songs to where she was singing. She used to stand outside a dentist and sing a song about happy times. I don't know if it was ironic, but the people coming out of the dentist would hear that, and she would also often sing outside pubs and hotels sometimes inside them as well.

Tess McLaughlan:

Speaking of tram staff, I believe you have some quotes from what they've said about Kate over the years.

Kylie Best:

Yes. So, one quote from a tram worker, "One passenger I recall well was Killarney Kate. What a character she was. One day we were having a drink at the Royal Mail Hotel and were near two other fellows who had ordered pots of beer. One of them put his down on the counter. Killarney Kate walked in, picked up the pot of beer, drank it behind his back, and walked out. A roar of laughter broke out when the fellow turned around to have a sip from his pot, only to find it empty. She would sometimes stand on the tram lines and start singing. If a tram came along, she would not shift until she had finished her song. She had a very good singing voice."

Tess McLaughlan:

So, when you reflect on Kate's legacy, what stands out to you the most?

Kylie Best:

It's just interesting how many people knew about her and how many lives she touched. There were always rumors about her that a failed romance had led her to the life that she was leading. So, there's a little bit of mystery about her, but also when she passed away, because she had no means, she would've had a pauper's funeral. But there was actually quite a well-known female theater personality, who was unnamed in the newspapers, who actually paid for her funeral. And on the day of her funeral, about 300 people actually congregated at the corners of Russell Street and Little Lonsdale Street to commemorate Kate, and a lot of them were elderly women. A number of them hummed Killarney Lakes at her graveside, and in addition to her funeral being paid for, there were about 20 anonymous funeral wreaths of flowers that were donated to Kate with various little notes about how she touched people's lives. Even though she got up to a lot of antics, everyone just had a lot of fondness for her and sympathy for her, I think, and loved her songs, loved her singing.

Tess McLaughlan:

The article that Kylie wrote about the Humans of 1930s Melbourne is a really great read. It's based on a series of photos that Kylie uncovered and researched, but not every photo in the article leads to stories quite as detailed as Starlight and Killarney Kate. But even those with short stories are fascinating. So, there were two people I just had to know more about. First, I asked about the matchbox seller in the beautiful hat. Her name was Maggie Malone.

Kylie Best:

Maggie Malone was a very well-known feature of the Royal Bank corner on Collins Street and she was a matchbox seller. So, she was a little elderly lady and she had a stool that she would set up on the corner and she would sell matchsticks. The newspapers used to say that she was worth cultivating for an hour to get five minutes conversation out of her. She had come to Melbourne from Ireland as an 18-year-old, and she'd seen a lot of changes in Melbourne's history during her life. She'd seen Melbourne go from a boom town full of speculators and immigrants to a bustling city in the 1930s, and she used to talk about how much Melbourne had changed with all the trams and all the people as well.

She, in her younger years, actually worked in Castlemaine as a nursemaid for country doctors, but she eventually came back to Melbourne and she used to sell soap door to door. But as she got older, she couldn't do that anymore. Her body just wouldn't let her do it, so that's when she set up her little matchstick stand. When I first saw the photo of her, she did not have a name. I discovered her name by searching for her in the digitised newspapers on Trove, so I was lucky to locate her.

Tess McLaughlan:

And then another really mysterious and interesting person, Bible Joe. Who was he?

Kylie Best:

So, Bible Joe, he was another well-known figure in Melbourne, everyone knew him from the way he used to walk around the city. He was quite shrouded in mystery, he didn't say much. He was well known for carrying a billycan and a Bible and also ancient texts that he would carry around, and he often would read in Hebrew from the Bible. His real name was Robert Surgoy, and it was whispered that he actually was a man of means potentially, or that there was money coming to him from abroad. But he chose to live quite a unique life, I think, really, of being fairly itinerant and he was very happy with that. When he passed away, his passing was remarked upon in newspapers all over Australia. There was an article in a Broken Hill newspaper that mentioned his passing, which just shows how well known he was in Melbourne at least.

Tess McLaughlan:

So, there are a few photos of people who you haven't been able to find. What was it about these that made you want to include them despite not knowing who they were?

Kylie Best:

So, there were three portraits whose subjects I couldn't find anything about. One of them was an image of a ventriloquist and his dog. One was an image of a man

who used to dress up to imitate a silent film actor called Harold Lloyd, who used to apparently haunt coffee houses, and the third man was a man who used to park cars for people, and his nickname was Anzac, probably because he was an Anzac. But I didn't have any luck finding anything more about these people. I still hope I will one day, but the reason I included them in the blog was I felt they needed to be included even though I didn't know that much about them. I guess I hope that maybe someone would recognise one of the images and maybe come forward with some information. I just think the whole process of writing the blog for me was like exhuming these people from the past and I felt that they needed to be in it, their images needed to be part of the blog.

Tess McLaughlan:

You heard Kylie mention that the idea for this article came from some photos she came across. It's amazing that she was able to find so much information about these people just from a few photos, but there are a few people she wasn't able to find anything about. So I had to know, does it haunt her that she couldn't find out who they were? Is she secretly still looking?

Kylie Best:

I do from time to time, when I have the time. I do throw some little searches into Trove because the Trove newspapers are where I found most of the information about the other people. But yeah, I still have my fingers crossed one day.

Tess McLaughlan:

To wrap things up, were there any big challenges in researching and writing this article?

Kylie Best:

I think when I started researching, I did think I might have trouble, but I was really surprised how much information I did turn up in the newspapers. I think newspapers are fantastic as historical sources. They're really democratic because it's not just rich, powerful, privileged people that get mentioned, so that's why I think they're so fantastic as a source of doing biographical research, genealogy research, social history research, and I think like all press media, there's bias there. They often present the prevailing views of society at the time. Sometimes they reinforce them, but they also allow you to see those moments of tension and change as well.

Tess McLaughlan:

Well, Kylie, thanks so much for joining us on the show.

Kylie Best:

It's been a pleasure. Thanks, Tess.

Tess McLaughlan:

You've been listening to *The Chapters*, a show from State Library Victoria, all about the incredible stories of some of Victoria's unsung trailblazers. If you're interested in finding out more about today's topic, you can read the article that this episode was based on, which you can find in the show notes. For more information about State Library Victoria's collections, events, and services, head over to the library's website at slv.vic.gov.au or visit us in person. This show was recorded in the podcast studios of State Library Victoria, and it was produced in partnership with Wavelength Creative. To make sure you don't miss an episode of *The Chapters*, be sure to subscribe to or follow the show in your podcast app, and while you're there, leave us a five-star review. It really helps others find the show. I'm your host, Tess McLaughlan, and I'll see you in our next episode as we open another chapter.

This podcast was recorded by State Library Victoria on the lands of the Wurundjeri People.