

THE HUNTING OF THE LARRIKIN: LAW, LARRIKINISM, AND THE FLIGHT OF RESPECTABILITY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY SOUTH AUSTRALIA

They sought it with thimbles, they sought it with care;
They pursued it with forks and hope;
They threatened its life with a railway-share;
They charmed it with smiles and soap.

Lewis Carroll, *The Hunting of the Snark*

HAD you been checking the form at the Broken Hill races on 3 January 1888, carrying 6 stone 9 pound in the *Tramway Handicap* was the 'Larrikin'. As part of Australian language the larrikin is unique. The word was lifted out of obscure English dialect into popular use. Partridge defines the larrikin as a "generally young street rowdy".¹ This is a common definition.² In current usage the word connotes a character, usually 'lovable' (the alliterative temptation is overpowering), often working class, who defies convention.³ During the constitutional crisis of 1975 the *Bulletin* recorded that Gough Whitlam, "under the shock of his dismissal, revealed some of those characteristics which seem to lie so close to his urbane exterior. The larrikin came out in an unseemly attack on the Governor-General."⁴

The larrikin was an anti-authority figure, a brash egalitarian, and a natty dresser to boot, emerging in the second half of the nineteenth century and appearing in literature in the 1890s. Louis Stone's *Jonah* and Ambrose Pratt's *The Great Push Experiment* firmly rooted the larrikin in Australian

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1 Partridge, *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (Routledge, London 1937) p470.

2 Simpson & Weiner (eds), *The Oxford English Dictionary* Vol VIII (Clarendon Press, New York, 2nd ed 1989) p664.

3 "One who acts with apparently careless disregard for social or political conventions": Hughes (ed), *Australian Words and their Origins* (OUP, Melbourne 1989) p303.

4 *Bulletin*, 22 November 1975 p30.

cities. Ethel Turner wrote the *Little Larrikin*, while Edward Dyson in his introduction to *Fact'ry 'ands* claimed for them that "they are the true types of a pronounced Australian class not previously exploited for the purposes of modern fiction".⁵ The best known fictional larrikin was CJ Dennis' *Sentimental Bloke*. The book was for a time more popular than any other Australian book had been. It sold 67,000 copies in its first year and Dennis was acclaimed 'laureate of the larrikin'.

We find an early glimpse of a flash larrikin in an *Adelaide Punch* poem of 1878 entitled "Mary to her Young Man (a Gushing Effusion)".

So trick yourself in garments fine,
And get your usual shave,
And we will dawdle at the Bay,
My William and his slave.

Put on your frills and emerald tie,
It is your loveliest far,
And don't on no account forget,
Your threepenny cigar.

And bring the sweetest songs you know,
'Tom Dodd' and 'Nora Creena',
And we'll sit beneath the jetty boards,
And play the concertina.

Put on your highest high heeled shoes,
For dear you know full well,
That with your feet cramped up a bit,
You won't be half a swell.

Do come! But if you can't let's meet,
On the well-known Rundle pavey,
And give the swell's that's there a treat,
You and lovely slavey.⁶

5 Quoted in Green, *History of Australian Literature* (Angus & Robertson, Sydney 1962) p573.

6 *Adelaide Punch*, 14 September 1878. This description accords with Stone's portrait of a larrikin, "for the larrikin taste in dress runs to suprising neatness": Stone, *Jonah* (Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 3rd ed 1965) p74

Like Carroll's Snark, the larrikin has grammatical potential both as a character and a concept. There are figures who were truly members of a historically definable 'larrikin' class, and there is the concept of 'larrikin' in the sense of trait or personality. This brings out the two senses of larrikin, as noun and as adjective. The two are really inseparable within larrikinism as a phenomenon, although it is important to remember that designating larrikins as an *ism* is a function of the historian. The larrikins of Melbourne and Sydney have been the subject of at least one previous study and this provides a good point of departure for the South Australian larrikin.⁷ This study is in two sections. First the characteristic pastimes of the Adelaide larrikin will be identified. It emerges that these are of a different nature to 'large' colony larrikins. Then the legal reaction to larrikinism in South Australia as compared to laws passed in New South Wales and Victoria will be examined. In this way the study is comparative, showing how larrikins were perceived and provoked certain reactions in South Australia and comparing this process to larrikinism in other colonies. The important point throughout is that in looking at press reaction, laws and parliamentary debate we are doing more than identifying larrikinism. It was the respectable middle class in South Australia which defined larrikin crime. Thus we get an insight into the cult of respectability, as larrikins were what middle class legislators and educationalists were not. The emergence of larrikinism encouraged definition, either by identification or difference.

It is this insight, namely that a phenomenon such as larrikinism could affect how South Australians saw themselves, which makes it plausible that the rise of larrikinism was somehow connected to the nascent sense of nationality in the twenty years preceding Australian federation. Larrikinism in both its nominal and adjectival sense helped Australians to define themselves. Other factors were involved in this process and it is widely recognised that, in their search for identity, Australians first turned their gaze to the bush. A growing affinity with the hostile Australian environment was expressed in verse, painting and fiction. The Heidelberg School made large scale pastoral subjects enormously popular. The artists' apotheosis of the bushman reflected this search for the unique, for the quintessentially Australian. As a nation of city dwellers it is not surprising that the outback myth was so powerful. Yet the urban environment produced another uniquely Australian creature in the larrikin, the character

and concept of which may be more than a figure for idle historical inquiry.⁸

THE PROBLEM: INSULT, VILLAINY AND OUTRAGE

Eastern colony larrikins were involved in a range of nefarious activities; from trivial street offences, through criminal assaults and gang activity to involvement in burglary and murder. This section compares these activities to the offences with which South Australian larrikins were associated. They excelled in the area of trivial street crime; from profanity, drunkenness, petty larceny, gambling, vandalism, stone-throwing and generally disturbing the peace, to a vendetta against the Salvation Army - all offences against respectability.

Disturbance of the peace was a particular joy of larrikins.⁹ In April 1882 an indignant letter to the *Adelaide Observer* called attention

to the fact that this gigantic evil and nuisance is still absolutely unchecked. Last evening in Norwood, I had to interfere in a case where three hulking youths of the larrikin class were pursuing one of their characteristic pleasantries by encouraging a big dog to worry a sobbing, almost hysterical woman.¹⁰

Trams were an irresistible temptation to larrikins. In June the paper reported that "the managers of the Hindmarsh Tramway Company have been very much annoyed by a number of larrikins who have travelled on the cars and behaved most offensively to passengers".¹¹ According to *Adelaide Punch*, these larrikins were almost as much of a nuisance as the tram conductors, who were described as "limbs of satan".¹² In January 1885 "four young men of the larrikin type were charged with interfering with the comfort of passengers riding on the Henley Beach tramcar ... the evidence [being] that they got onto the car and started singing an objectionable song". When someone did object "he was treated to a round

8 This is not to criticise idle historical inquiry. However, the worst sin that can be committed by a historian is to laugh at the objects of a study. I will try to avoid the historical *hubris* of casual flippancy but the picture emerging from the sources often resembles a comedy of manners; this is an indication not to take things too seriously.

9 Murray, *Larrikins, 19th Century Outrage* p176.

10 *Adelaide Observer*, 29 April 1882.

11 *Adelaide Observer*, 3 June 1882.

12 *Adelaide Punch*, 7 September 1878.

of abuse".¹³ Those responsible for the commotion were later labelled "offenders against the public order".¹⁴

Petty larceny was another constant source of annoyance. In Port Adelaide "four of a gang were fined for invading melon patches; and becoming obtrusively impudent over their robbery, they subsequently had the pleasure of paying the value of the melons".¹⁵ The Botanic Gardens Annual Report of 1883 railed against the "thefts of flowering plants - pansies, hyacinths, and anemones are taken out by the roots and the best ones are selected".¹⁶ Vandalism was a perennial problem, the Director reporting that "the Garden still suffers from the vulgar practice of cutting the seats, carving names on trees, and the grave annoyance of writing indecent sentences on the pedestals of statues".¹⁷

The Salvation Army was also a favourite target of larrikins. In 1883 George McCabe was gaoled for two months for assault, as reportedly "while the Army was marching along the road near the Governor Hindmarsh Hotel the defendent, with a number of other larrikins, began throwing nightsoil mixed with dust".¹⁸ This is but one example, yet perhaps the most interesting thing was the public acceptance of larrikin attacks on the Salvationists. For instance in Clare, a town in the State's mid-north with a staunchly Roman Catholic population, leading members of the community supported the formation of a parody 'Skeleton Army'. When it was asked to move on, one policeman was hit by an egg.¹⁹

There was righteous outrage over the filthy language of larrikins. A letter in 1880 bemoaned larrikins who "scour the streets competing for the choicest profanity".²⁰ In 1882 Lawrence Lawson, a youth, was fined 20 shillings for using profane language, a hefty penalty. Minor street crime and petty offences were thus clearly associated with larrikinism in South Australia. In a long editorial in 1880, the *Observer* noted these "destructive pranks" to be "peculiarly provoking" and "wanton".²¹ The Police Report of 1883 followed a similar line, remarking that "common

13 *Adelaide Observer*, 10 January 1885.

14 *Adelaide Observer*, 16 May 1885.

15 *Port Adelaide Advertiser*, 6 March 1880.

16 *Adelaide Observer*, 7 April 1883.

17 As above.

18 *Adelaide Observer*, 10 February 1883.

19 Clyne, *Colonial Blue - A History of the South Australian Police Force, 1836-1916* (Wakefield Press, Adelaide 1987) p191.

20 *Port Adelaide News, Shipping and Commercial Advertiser*, 31 January 1880.

21 *Adelaide Observer*, 18 December 1880.

assaults and petty misdemeanours, such as larrikins delight to commit, are on the increase".²²

Drinking was always a favourite of the larrikin class in eastern colonies. Twopeny, in his classic *Town Life in Australia*, reported drunkenness as a problem of epidemic proportions.²³ The *Sydney Quarterly Review* of 1884 blamed alcohol as the first cause of larrikinism and identified "a ridiculously large number of public houses in every city".²⁴ The statistical register of South Australia supports this picture with a dramatic increase in arrests for drunkenness around 1880. There were 1,390 convictions in the Adelaide Magistrates Court in 1872, rising to 2,890 in 1877, and peaking at 5,298 in 1881. Sly-grog selling was also rife. In February 1884 police raided several premises on Hindley Street and the *Observer* commented drily, "[i]t is to be hoped the action taken will prove a salutary lesson to this class of lawbreakers, who would seem to be flourishing in that part of the city".²⁵ Surprisingly however, it seems larrikins were never officially associated with drunkenness or sly-grogging in South Australia.

Investigating whether South Australian larrikins were ever involved in more serious offences is problematic. Several sources make extravagant claims about the organised nature of larrikin activity in Sydney and Melbourne.²⁶ Ritchie wrote of the larrikin: "his delight is to join himself to a gang of twenty or thirty".²⁷ Similarly, Stone's fictional account of the Cardigan Street 'Push' (a gang of larrikins) described it as being "composed of thirty young men of the neighbourhood ... a social wart familiar on the streets of Sydney".²⁸ Ambrose Pratt's hero thought that "pushes were gangs of vicious young men and boys, banded together in more or less organised societies ... whose objects were the seeking of amusement, the perpetration of paltry crimes, and then protecting themselves from the consequences thereof".²⁹

There is some evidence of this kind of push or gang activity in Adelaide. In a feature article of 1880, a journalist recognised that it was impossible for one constable "to cope with a gang of larrikins who may be bent on

22 *Adelaide Observer*, 1 September 1883.

23 Twopeny, *Town Life in Australia* (Elliot Stock, London 1883) p98.

24 Quoted in Murray, *Larrikins, 19th Century Outrage* p44.

25 *Adelaide Observer*, 2 February 1884.

26 These are faithfully reproduced in Murray, *Larrikins, 19th Century Outrage*.

27 Crowley, *A Documentary History of Australia, 1875-1900* Vol 3 (Nelson, Melbourne 1980) p290.

28 Stone, *Jonah* p25.

29 Pratt, *The Great Push Experiment* (Grant Richards, London 1902) p17.

giving play to their destructive propensities".³⁰ In the same year the unfortunate Charlie Ah Looey encountered one such mob. It appeared from the evidence that "he was attacked by about fifty larrikins". He reportedly suffered bruising to the face and was badly cut over one eye. Endeavouring to defend himself he swung his cane and one boy fell over and fractured his thigh. The "Chinaman" was promptly arrested on a charge of assault which was later dropped, albeit only "at His Honour's suggestion".³¹ A similar case occurred in 1881 when Chung Hee "was set upon and maltreated by a crowd of larrikins". A nearby witness reportedly "deserved great praise for the fearless manner in which he stopped the crowd from further harming one whose race was so disliked by his aggressors".³²

The newspaper reports, of course, would not reveal every larrikin gang. Sidney Baker claims knowledge of a push in Adelaide called the 'Swifties' in 1888.³³ This is certainly possible as there are reported hints of a push in Thebarton in 1883:

The evidence showed that the defendant (whose demeanour in Court was very impertinent) in company with some other larrikins threw stones at a house where a party was being given. On some of the inmates coming out to see who the authors of the disturbance were, the assailants ran away and did not stop until a large number of their brother hoodlums came and assisted them. According to the constable stationed at Thebarton, (the defendant) is the leader of a gang located in the neighbourhood.³⁴

While these tantalising accounts show that larrikin pushes existed in Adelaide, it is very difficult to link them to any serious crime. Common assault was another crime which peaked in 1880. In that year there were 885 convictions in the Magistrates Court, compared with 430 in 1872 and 383 in 1884. Assaults were rarely put down to larrikins although they often bore the hallmark *modus operandi* of the eastern colony larrikin. In 1880 five men were found guilty of assaulting a bushman after befriending him. The judge, in passing sentence on one of them whose criminal record was a catalogue of larrikin offences,

30 *Adelaide Observer*, 18 December 1880.

31 As above.

32 *Adelaide Observer*, 19 February 1881.

33 Baker, *The Australian Language* (Currawong, Sydney 1966) p124.

34 *Adelaide Observer*, 17 March 1883.

said he was determined to punish crimes of this description with severity. Nicholson also had been convicted frequently of drunkenness, riotous behaviour, abusive language and such offences.³⁵

In June 1880 poor James Ford "indulged too freely in liquor, and in some public house in Thebarton got into the company of two or three men and a woman. He went home with the latter, and shortly after was assaulted by the men, who knocked him down and kicked him."³⁶ Kicking was a special larrikin skill, and their uniform included remarkable boots "fitting like a glove, with high heels and a wonderful ornament of perforated toe caps".³⁷ In neither of these cases were the serious assaults associated with larrikins or a larrikin push.

In the eastern colonies an inevitable element of sensationalism crept into most contemporary accounts of the "terrible strength and power of criminality possessed by these secret societies".³⁸ However, of the most serious crimes like burglary, murder and garrotting there is no evidence at all in South Australia. Of course, it is possible that larrikin activities of this sort simply went undetected in South Australia, but for the purposes of this study the important fact is that larrikins were not at all associated with such serious crimes as were reported. A spate of outrages excited Adelaide in 1884 but were never attributed to larrikins. Port Adelaide women suffered four rapes in a month and larrikins were never mentioned. This contrasts to the Mount Rennie case in Sydney in 1886 where nine men of the Waterloo Push were sentenced to death for the rape of a sixteen year old domestic servant.

The evidence consistently shows the South Australian larrikin as a petty offender, a nuisance, an outrager of public dignity, but not a serious criminal. A police report of 1884 commented:

[T]o the credit of young South Australians ... such acts of wanton larrikinism as have disgraced the youth of Melbourne and Sydney have rarely found any parallel here ... the juveniles of Adelaide, although they are bad enough,

35 *Adelaide Observer*, 21 February 1880.

36 *Adelaide Observer*, 5 June 1880.

37 Stone, *Jonah* p51.

38 Pratt, *The Great Push Experiment* p235.

have not those criminal propensities which mark the roughs of Sydney and Melbourne.³⁹

In this way we can begin to understand how the adjective 'larrikin' in its modern usage more closely resembles the South Australian model. In a more humorous vein "Pleeceman X" of *Adelaide Punch* wrote:

We're supposed to guard the guvnor
But what from the dickens knows,
Taint as if the sity 'arboured
Turkish spies or Russian foes.

C' guards us, for if it wasn't
That 'is 'ouse was near at 'and,
We'd be chiaked at and 'umbedged
By a dirty urchin band.

THE LAW: "CAN YOU TELL ME IF THERE IS A LAW TO PREVENT THIS KIND OF THING?"⁴⁰

The Sentimental Bloke was redeemed from larrikinism by the love of a pure woman who worked in a pickle factory. They married and retired to a berry farm. In South Australia redemption was attempted on a good deal more practical level. It was the first colony to legislate directly to counter larrikinism. In 1872 the *Juvenile Offenders Act* (SA) was passed. The *Justice's Procedure Amendment Act* 1884 (SA) and the *Offenders Probation Act* 1887 (SA) were also responses to larrikinism. The Juvenile Smokers Bill of 1882 failed to become law. Outside the criminal law a new *Education Act* 1875 (SA) was perceived as, at least partially, a reaction to larrikinism.

The *Juvenile Offenders Act* 1872 (SA) was introduced because "it had been found that the law was not sufficient to protect respectable people from insult and various annoyances to which they are exposed within the city".⁴¹ The new law applied to boys under sixteen and made certain offences punishable by flogging, including riotous and indecent conduct, using indecent language, assaulting women, exposure in any public place, singing obscene songs, playing with deleterious drugs, being a rogue or vagabond, throwing stones, blocking railways, and larceny from the

39 *Adelaide Observer*, 18 December 1880.

40 From a letter to the editor of the *Port Adelaide Advertiser*, 24 January 1880.

41 Speech of Hon T English, SA, Parl, *Debates* LC [1872] at 2827.

person with violence. The number of strokes at each whipping was not to exceed twenty-five with a birch rod. It is not hard to tell who the legislature was targetting with the new provisions:

Previously public attention in the Press and in other ways had been drawn to the increasing prevalence of what was called the larrikins. The 'gamins' of Paris were wild, and the arabs of London were what was known as cheeky, but he thought it would be admitted that both of these classes would be beaten by the Australian youth.⁴²

There was considerable debate over whether older offenders ought to be included in the provisions. That no change was made indicates that the short, sharp shock was intended only for young larrikins. The Legislative Council proposed an amendment to include "the offence of damaging windows, which boys were sometimes guilty of from mere love of mischief and delight in hearing the sound of smashing glass".⁴³ This was a typical larrikin offence which makes the House of Assembly's refusal interesting on the grounds of it giving "too great a power to Justices to order whipping in case of wantonly throwing a stone at a pane of glass; and because the Bill attempts to deal only with more serious offences".⁴⁴ Clearly the other offences provided for under the Act were considered 'serious' larrikin offences. This view is supported by press comment on the legislation that "some of the acts mentioned, for instance 'riotous conduct', which may be taken to include a display of innocent boyish hilarity in the parklands ... scarcely deserve to be placed in the category of offences coming within the meaning of the Bill".⁴⁵ Larrikins were not considered serious criminals. The *Criminal Law Consolidation Act 1876* (SA) brought together twenty-three colonial and five imperial statutes. That the *Juvenile Offenders Act* was not included in this consolidation goes some way to indicate that outlawed larrikin activities were not considered truly criminal.⁴⁶

Contemporary Victorian attempts to legislate against larrikinism were very different. A Crimes and Offences Prevention Bill was introduced in 1873 and again in 1874. It allowed juveniles to be whipped for merely assembling in company of three or more fellows in any public place with

42 Speech of Mr Boucaut, SA, Parl, *Debates* HA [1872] at 2602.

43 SA, Parl, *Debates* LC [1872] at 2828.

44 SA, Parl, *Debates* HA [1872] at 2873.

45 *Adelaide Observer*, 16 November 1872.

46 Although s407 did maintain whipping for juveniles.

the purpose of "unlawfully causing annoyance to others". Men between sixteen and twenty-one years could be whipped up to forty strokes. Larrikinism posed a great threat in the minds of Victorian parliamentarians. The Hon Mr Simpson declared: "It is not, I believe, safe for the police to appear in certain parts of Collingwood."⁴⁷ Larrikins in Victoria had crossed the line from riot to crime. The Hon Mr Dobson noted that "there is an immense difference between the offences committed by larrikins and outbreaks of a kind which, perhaps, may be committed by youths on their way home from some festivity".⁴⁸ In Victoria the issues were not of schoolboy punishment but deterrence and criminality.

In New South Wales legislation very similar to the *Juvenile Offenders Act* 1872 (SA) was passed in 1882. The relevant part of the Bill was appearing for the sixth time as a consequence of it being part of a lengthy *Consolidation Act* which had never been completely passed. Clause 448 was finally passed in 1883 and dealt with larrikin offences similar to the *Juvenile Offenders Act* 1872 (SA), including unprovoked assault, indecent exposure, profane graffiti, vandalism and cruelty to animals. Any boy under eighteen years was liable to imprisonment, a fine of forty shillings or a private whipping. It will be remembered that in South Australia these were on the serious end of the larrikin spectrum. Yet in New South Wales Mr Dangar "would have been glad to see in this Bill some more serious recognition" of the problem.⁴⁹ Mr O'Connor "thought that the most dangerous class of larrikins would not be reached by the clause, the provisions of which were restricted to youths under eighteen, whereas the worst larrikins were beyond that age".⁵⁰ In New South Wales there was fear that the provisions did not go far enough. In South Australia there was a fear that they went too far.

A consciousness of larrikin activity in South Australia peaked during the 1880s. The *Juvenile Smokers Bill* of 1882 was introduced by the Treasurer, Mr Colson, to make it unlawful for any boy under eighteen years to smoke tobacco in a public place. This Bill could be seen charitably as a visionary public health measure but it was clearly aimed at prohibiting a manifestation of larrikinism. It was argued that a ban on smoking would "strike at the root of larrikinism and the many vicious

47 Vic, Parl, *Debates* LC (1874) Vol 19 at 1548.

48 Vic, Parl, *Debates* LC (1874) Vol 20 at 1916.

49 NSW, Parl, *Debates* LA (1882) Vol 7 at 1403.

50 As above.

habits which all too often follow".⁵¹ The author of a letter to the *Port Adelaide Advertiser* in 1880 complained about "diminutive smokers ... those grimy, puny, profane, precocious children who go about the streets with a dirty cigar or a black cutty stuck between their lips, expectorating abominably, and making a perfect nuisance of themselves".⁵² Despite the grave tone the Bill was treated as a complete joke in Parliament and by the press. Mr Ward "was quite sure that the House would make itself pre-eminently ridiculous in the eyes of the civilised world by placing this Bill on the Statute Book".⁵³ The *Observer* printed a fictional meeting of larrikins to debate the Bill:

Master Tommy Rough, who occupied the chair, said it was all werry well for Mr Colson to chyack them and try to euchre the boys of Hadelaide over their smokin' racket, but a lot of jolly cards in parlyment, wot praps 'ad be'n larrykins theirselves wen they wos kids, wasn't going to see boys sot upon.⁵⁴

Within the derision, which Mr Colson regretted "because it had only made the matter a joke",⁵⁵ there is a particularly good example of the increasing identification with larrikinism. The next piece of legislation was rather more thoughtful but again showed that larrikinism was not perceived as a serious threat. The *Justices Procedure Amendment Act* 1884 (SA) permitted the summary trial of children under fourteen years for indictable offences unless objected to by the parent or guardian. Section 13 provided for a range of penalties including a fine of not more than forty shillings or a private whipping with a birch rod of up to ten strokes. There was very little debate and no opposition to the measure. The Hon J Crozier promised that "if he had to deal with these larrikins he would do something more to them than apply the lash - he would take good care that they never became larrikins again. (Hear hear and Laughter)."⁵⁶ The whole thrust of the Act was to enact the principle "that youngsters should not be sent to gaol, because if they were comparatively innocent before they went in there, they would not be when they came out".⁵⁷ Larrikins were not to be mixed with real criminals, either at trial or under sentence.

51 *Adelaide Observer*, 22 July 1882.

52 *Port Adelaide Advertiser*, 24 January 1880.

53 SA, Parl, *Debates* HA [1882] at 1307.

54 *Adelaide Observer*, 21 October 1882.

55 SA, Parl, *Debates* HA [1882] at 1303.

56 SA, Parl, *Debates* LC [1884] at 2076.

57 As above.

The principle was further strengthened by the *Offenders Probation Act* 1887 (SA). Any person convicted of a minor offence and sentenced to imprisonment for three months or more could enter a recognizance with the condition that the offender be on good behaviour for six months. The Hon J Angas thought the amendment "would prevent juvenile offenders from being brought into contact with criminals".⁵⁸ The Hon Mr Smith in the House of Assembly once again demonstrated an identification with larrikinism:

The greatest sin had been that they [larrikins] had been found out, and he was sure many members of the House had, in their boyish days committed crimes just as bad as those for which boys were now suffering in the hulk.⁵⁹

The perception that larrikins were merely over-exuberant or wild youths is reinforced by an examination of reforms other than those concerning the criminal law. A letter-writer in 1881 opined "that the chief source of the growing evil is the apathy or neglect shown by parents to religious or moral education".⁶⁰ The reform impulse of successive South Australian governments was built on similar sentiments; in particular, those of the prevailing middle class. The State adopted an increasingly interventionist role in social relations. The *Education Act* 1875 (SA) was a manifestation of this role, interceding in the socialisation process partly as a reaction to larrikinism. The *Observer* waged a campaign through the early 1870s in support of compulsory education.

If larrikinism is becoming an institution in this colony it is the offspring of legislative neglect ... For the unfortunate youngsters who know no better, it would surely be far wiser to throw open schools for their reception, and provide teachers for their instruction, than to drive them into the streets, and then to flog them for practising what they necessarily learn in these, the only schools the State in its folly has supplied for them.⁶¹

In 1872 the census indicated that in Adelaide there were more than 7,000 children between five and fifteen years, and that only 3,300 were at

58 SA, Parl, *Debates* LC [1887] at 701.

59 SA, Parl, *Debates* HA [1887] at 1158. The hulk *Fitzjames*, anchored off Largs Bay, was used as a detention centre for young boys.

60 *Adelaide Observer*, 22 October 1881.

61 *Adelaide Observer*, 16 November 1872.

school. In 1875 the new *Education Act* compelled children between seven and thirteen to attend school and established a centrally controlled network of state schools. Compulsory education served the unashamed social purpose of keeping children off the streets and teaching the values of obedience, deference and the certainty of punishment should they transgress those values.⁶²

Despite the legislative development of education and punishment, a classic carrot and stick, by the start of the 1880s the larrikin problem had not abated. This led to the fine tuning of the punishment legislation which has already been considered and also the emergence of an emblematic debate in Australian education. The secular education of South Australian children was seen as insufficient to prevent them turning into larrikins and so, in 1881, Bible reading in schools became an issue. A correspondent to the *Observer* wrote that "a great many people seem quite shocked at children not being made to read the Bible in public schools and this is the cause of so much swearing, larrikinism, and disrespect for old age".⁶³ The Bible In State Schools Association argued that "larrikinism is mainly attributable to the absence of Bible reading in such schools over the last five years".⁶⁴ The opponents of Bible reading in schools did not so much disagree with the criminological premise that the Bible might help. Rather, the problem they stressed was that which might be caused by denominational teaching in a mixed society. Again, that these views were popular indicates that larrikins were seen as youthful products of under-socialisation. Larrikinism was merely youthful excess to be channelled and controlled. One correspondant even advocated gymnastics:

Why was it that at Athens, for instance, the most costly statues were erected at public places without any injury done to them? Because the Athenians received in their boyhood a physical as well as mental education at the Gymnasium ... What is larrikinism? It is only the outburst of bodily vigour, unfettered and untaught.⁶⁵

62 Davey, "Growing Up In South Australia" in Richards (ed), *Flinders History of South Australia* Vol 2 (Wakefield Press, Adelaide 1986) pp389-393.

63 *Adelaide Observer*, 10 September 1881.

64 *Adelaide Observer*, 5 November 1881.

65 *Adelaide Observer*, 13 May 1882.

CONCLUSION

A correspondent to the *Port Adelaide Advertiser* in 1880 complained that "the aval that's goin-on is perfectly distressin' to a filly-aunt-throw-fist".⁶⁶ This statement captures the essence of the larrikin phenomenon on many levels. First, there was undoubtedly an 'aval' associated with larrikins. This was an evil defined by, and which helped to define, an earnest middle-class and its elected representatives in South Australia. Second, the legislative response to larrikinism was characteristically philanthropic.⁶⁷ Larrikins were to be given a short, sharp shock, separated from true criminals, and educated. Last, and most significantly, the tone of the complaint is one of pathos and humour. The South Australian larrikin was harmless enough and his character certainly more closely approximates the modern adjectival usage of larrikin than the violent, organised criminal of the eastern seaboard. Mark Twain opined in 1897 that "in the larrikin he will not be able to discover a new species, but only an old one met elsewhere".⁶⁸ He is not unique to South Australia, or even to Australia, and cannot be limited to this time. It is just that from the 1870s to the turn of the century he became a phenomenon.⁶⁹

All of these findings reflect the tension between identification with larrikinism, and difference from larrikinism. However, the inter-colonial dissimilarities between the reconciliation of this tension during the latter part of the nineteenth century make it less likely that larrikinism played any definitional role in the movement towards federation. As Ambrose Pratt correctly assessed, "there is, after all, very little difference between larrikins and gentlemen; gentlemen are more noisy, impertinent and better educated, but less brutal; that is all".⁷⁰

66 *Port Adelaide Advertiser*, 28 February 1880.

67 Perhaps 'filly-aunt-throw-optic'.

68 Quoted in Crowley, *A Documentary History of Australia, 1875-1900* Vol 3 p288.

69 It is worth recognising here that the use of 'he' is conscious; larrikins were male. So, the argument that larrikinism in some way helped to shape our national identity must acknowledge that this identity was a male one. This is still true; the 'public' figures who represent us and recreate this identity remain almost exclusively male.

70 Pratt, *The Great Push Experiment* p104.

