



THE LAST WOMAN HANGED IN NSW:

CASE CLOSED?

Or, how Kathryn Cass discovered the extraordinary case of Louisa Collins...

Working in a library is not only great but, very often, educational. And sometimes it can lead to discovering some amazing stories. That's what happened to me in 2009. I was working as Local Studies Librarian at the City of Botany Bay, in Sydney's south-east, preparing for the History Week theme of *Corruption, Crime and Scandal*.

I thought I'd do something on the so-called 'Botany Bay Poisoner', Louisa Collins. I expected it to be pretty straight



Louisa Collin's prison record (Image courtesy of State Records New South Wales)

forward, maybe getting enough information to do a small exhibition, or, if I was lucky, a presentation. But once I started researching, I discovered that this was not an open and shut case. Although she was executed for the murder of her husband, Michael Collins, there seemed to be some doubt about Louisa Collins' guilt.

How did I get to this point? My initial research included checking newspaper articles from the National Library's Newspaper Digitisation project on *Trove* and the few clippings we had in the local studies collection. I also did a good old internet search and stumbled across a family history noticeboard, where a descendant of Louisa Collins was looking for relatives and wanting to talk about their ancestor. This contact provided me with a CD full of photographed images of the trial notes taken on a visit to the NSW State Records office and it was while I was glancing over these photos that I found a letter from one of the prosecutors doubting that Louisa Collins was guilty.

Well now my interest was most certainly piqued. So I began to research in earnest, taking in topics that included 19th century law in New South Wales, the women's suffrage movement, how sheep skins were processed during the 1880s, and delving into each of the individuals involved in

the two inquests, four trials and one appeal to which Louisa Collins was subjected. I discovered diaries and letters to the editors of major Australian newspapers all had something to say about Louisa Collins – some good, some bad.

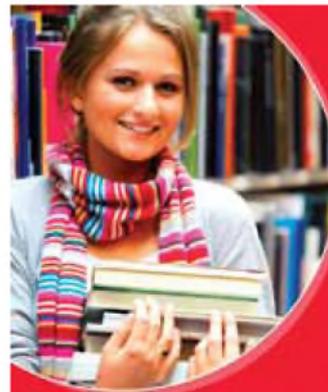
I ended up presenting an hour-long talk titled *The Last Woman Hanged in NSW - The Extraordinary Case of Louisa Collins*. I allowed my audience to make up their own minds as to her guilt or innocence.

The case has piqued the interest of others too. I have now given two interviews about Louisa, one to ABC 702 Sydney's Deb Cameron, and there have even been a few journalists and television producers contacting me about the case, wanting more information.

Researching history in the library can sometimes lead to much, much more. If you ever get the opportunity to do some original historical research as part of your job, I would say jump at the chance. You never know where it might lead!

Kathryn Cass

Coordinator, Library Operations, Marrickville Library and History Services
kathryn.cass@gmail.com



Study
anywhere...
anytime...

LTSA Students can:

- Study whilst continuing to work
- Enhance skills with the most up-to-date courses on offer
- Enjoy the benefits of frequent contact with friendly, experienced Trainers who will mentor and support you throughout your course
- Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for existing skills and study
- Receive assistance in exploring funding opportunities for courses
- Enhance career prospects

National recognised qualifications



Library Training
Services Australia

1300 17 15 60

www.ltsa.edu.au