

## AUSTRALIAN WOMEN FACT FILE

### TILLY DEVINE (1900 -1970)

#### Prostitute, Bordello Madam, Petty Criminal, Colourful Character

- 1900 Born Matilda Mary Twiss, 57 Hollington Street, Camberwell, London  
8 September 1900
- 1912 Left school to work in one of the many factories in the area  
Aspired to middle class riches
- 1914 Became a prostitute
- 1915 First entry in Bow Street Court
- 1916 Met James Edward Joseph Devine, a sapper in the Fourth Tunnelling  
Company of the Australian Imperial Forces
- 1917 Married Jim Devine
- 1920 Arrived at Circular Quay. Began working as a prostitute immediately
- 1921-25 Arrested 75 times for whoring, obscene language, offensive behaviour and  
fighting
- 1925 Bought a slum cottage in Palmer Street, Sydney and opened her first  
brothel
- Late 1920's Owned 18 thriving bordellos. With Jim paid 1650 pounds for a house in  
Maroubra. Lived there till late 1930's then rented it out
- 1930 Sailed for England
- 1931 Returned from England
- 1940 Jim took his own flat in Darlinghurst after his release from gaol
- 1942 Planned a spectacular 25th wedding anniversary party. It ended with a  
fight. Jim split Tilly's head open. She spent 3 weeks in hospital
- 1943 Charged for wounding one of her workers
- 1944 Divorce granted. Trial followed by 6 months in gaol
- 1945 Married Eric Parsons. Moved back to Maroubra house
- 1948 Went to England to see her ailing father
- 1950 Tilly turned 50 and celebrated with a grand party provided by Eric
- 1953 Went to England for the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II
- 1955 Taxation Department ordered her to pay more than 20,000 pounds in  
unpaid tax and fines. Had to sell her assets to pay
- 1957 Eric Parsons died of cancer
- 1958 She owned only one shabby brothel in Palmer Street. The Taxman got her
- 1960's Jim Devine believed to have died
- 1970 Tilly died of cancer in Concord Hospital

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**Tilly Devine** was born into poverty in South London. As a young girl she would observe in the art galleries and theatres in the neighbourhood that some people had a different life to the one her family and neighbours led. She determined that she would find a way out

of poverty to enjoy the luxuries that others obviously had. By the time she was 14, she was selling the only thing she had, her body, to achieve her dream. At 16 she met and fell in love with a sharp-talking Australian soldier, Jim Devine. At 17 she was married to him. Far from seeing marriage as a way to end the life of prostitution she had begun, this continued, with the full support and encouragement of her husband. Before leaving England she had a baby daughter who died in infancy and a son, who was a baby when she was to leave for Australia as a War Bride. Her mother said she was too young to look after a baby properly, so her parents kept the child and raised him as their own son.

Tilly was attractive and could be the life of the party, but she had a vile temper and was frequently arrested for assault and foul language. It is said that no Australian woman ever went to court as often as Tilly Devine. Sometimes she won. She lost 204 times, but she always turned on a spectacular performance for the gallery. Jim also had a short and violent temper. Apart from living off Tilly's earnings, he involved himself in whatever shady dealings came his way. He was a womaniser and abusive. Tilly suffered much physical abuse from him. But she must have truly loved him, for she endured more than twenty years of his violent and physical abuse before she finally left him. They apparently had stunning fights that entertained friends and neighbours alike.

Tilly indeed rose above her poverty-stricken beginnings. As a bordello madam running 18 brothels she could afford flashy clothes, furs and jewels. However, in the 1950's, having enjoyed a life of relative luxury for more than 30 years, if often on the wrong side of the law, the taxman finally caught up with her. She was forced to sell her brothels to pay the taxes she had till then successfully avoided paying.

Tilly, the Queen of the Night, died in 1970, struggling to make ends meet on the aged pension, lonely and largely forgotten by the media and those she had for so long scandalised in earlier decades.

### **Sources**

\*Blaikie, George *Wild Women of Sydney* Rigby Publishers 1980

Writer, Larry *Razor: A True Story of Slashers, Gangsters, Prostitutes and Sly Grog* Pan Macmillan 2001

\*Held in JSNWL

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