

The Greatest Menace Review

Living with Shadows of the Past

By Adrien McCrory, Australian Catholic University

Patrick Abboud and Simon Cunich's podcast, [*The Greatest Menace*](#), is a compelling work of investigative journalism into a difficult piece of Australia's history. It is also a moving piece of storytelling that guides us as listeners through Abboud's own history, family and experiences living as a gay man in Australia today and the stories of the people with whom he comes into contact during his research, consistently reminding us that the past is often not as far behind as we might think.¹

The Greatest Menace explores the history of the Cooma Gaol which, from 1957, operated as a prison designated for housing homosexual prisoners—the podcast asserts it to be seemingly the only such prison in the world. These days operating as the Cooma Correctional Centre, the prison no longer has this specialisation and is reticent about its past. Throughout the podcast Abboud digs through historical records, interviews ex-prisoners, family members of those who worked at the old Cooma Gaol, subject-matter experts, residents of the town and many others to bring to light this uneasy story of a small New South Wales town.

Although it is not *quite* a secret that Cooma Gaol used to operate as a homosexual prison, the topic is under-researched and under-explored. While some Australian historians such as Garry Wotherspoon, Lisa Featherstone and Andy Kaladelfos have discussed the topic,² *The Greatest Menace* dives into new depth and brings to light valuable first and second-hand accounts of what life was like inside Cooma Gaol and what the prison—and the experiments conducted there—meant for the authorities operating them.

In line with Abboud's investigative style, *The Greatest Menace* weaves together the processes of research and storytelling. We join him in uncovering these histories, from whisperings of the existence of the prison, to deep dives into archival records, asking around town, interviews with

¹ *The Greatest Menace*, Audible 2022, 8 x episodes (c. 35-50mins) plus bonus episode (48mins) Audible 2023. Listen at <https://www.audible.com.au/pd/The-Greatest-Menace-Podcast/B0BT7X4S9R> Further information: <https://www.thegreatestmenace.com/>

² Garry Wotherspoon, *Gay Sydney: A History*, ed. Ebscohost (Sydney: New South Publishing, 2016); Lisa Featherstone and Andy Kaladelfos, *Sex Crimes in the Fifties* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2016).

historians and public figures. We hear the rustling of papers as he flicks through court records at the New South Wales state archives, the sounds of doors opening and the murmurings of people talking in a pub, cats meowing in the background of homes. As listeners, we are guided from scene to scene by the soundscape of the episodes as Abboud moves from location to location, hunting for information and talking with those he meets.

In the first few episodes, Abboud struggles to find any information on Cooma Gaol's history as a homosexual prison. At first, every lead he follows—former New South Wales police, the New South Wales State Correctional Services Gaol Museum and even just asking around town—seems to lead to a dead end or a denial, and we are left feeling like, despite taking place less than a century ago, the evidence that Abboud is searching for might have been lost. Similarly, it feels like the attitudes and beliefs that led to the creation of a homosexual prison could also be a thing of the past. The podcast begins in the context of the 2017 plebiscite, which led to the legalisation of same-sex marriage, a fresh turning point for LGBTIQ+ rights in Australia. There is a moment in the first episode when Abboud searches through archived court transcripts in the New South Wales state archives, and he can't help but laugh at the dark humour and the absurdity of what has been recorded: a judge asking a police officer to describe, in excruciating detail, the sexual acts taking place between the two men he had arrested, in an Abbott and Costello-esque back and forth. It is jarringly anachronistic to modern ears. However, as Abboud points out, the humour quickly evaporates when you remember that being dragged through the courts frequently meant humiliation, loss of employment, loss of family support and possible prison time for those involved.

The Greatest Menace reminds us that the homophobic beliefs and attitudes that led to the establishment of the homosexual prison at Cooma are still around us. One early interview has Abboud sit down with an ex-police officer named John Bond. Bond says his greatest achievement was 'doing good'. He views himself as a man of integrity: for instance, he recounts a story of intervening with other officers to prevent the unjust arrest of an Aboriginal man. But the tone of the interview shifts when Abboud starts asking about Bond arresting gay men at beats. When asked if he believed these arrests were moral, Bond states that 'in those days' the law was different, and that these men were criminals, by the standards of the time, and when

asked about his present-day feelings, he states: ‘I think God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve’. Similar interactions take place throughout the series.

This is paralleled throughout by the slow trickle of information about Abboud’s own past and family background. As he researches this story, Abboud frequently speaks to his mother, updating her about snippets of what he has been finding, and where he has been visiting. His own past is intertwined closely with the locations he visits—the home he grew up in was only a short distance from the State Archives, his extended family ran a ski-lodge business in Cooma (now closed and boarded up), which he had frequently visited throughout his youth, unaware of the obscured history of the town. These conversations and Abboud’s reflections around them shed light on his own experiences of coming out to his family, experiencing rejection, his mother’s attempts to find a way to ‘cure’ his homosexuality, his experiences of moving to Lebanon to try and ‘fix’ himself and instead finding a gay community and falling in love. These experiences are paralleled with the histories of the Cooma Gaol: attempts from those in power to treat or cure the prisoners’ sexualities, snippets of those incarcerated finding love while in prison or tamping down their own sexuality for decades to come out of fear and trauma.

Throughout *The Greatest Menace*, the people Abboud speaks with are constantly making sense of their own pasts. More than being about Cooma Gaol itself, *The Greatest Menace* is about the people involved: those who established and oversaw the ‘gay prison experiment’, the prisoners, their families and the people who lived and worked in and around the prison. There is an emotional depth and connectedness to the storytelling. In one episode, Abboud interviews Michael Hayes, the son of Frank Hayes and a member of the Trethowan committee which oversaw the Cooma Gaol project. When Abboud reveals the nature of his father’s work, Michael attempts to align this new information with the image that he has of his father in his memory. In Michael’s memory, he believed the gaol to be a place where gay prisoners were separated from the mainstream prison population for their own protection: an idealised vision of the past. The authorities of the 1950s and 1960s were much more concerned with protecting the mainstream prisoners being lured into homosexuality themselves. Michael describes integrating this new information into his memories of his father as being ‘a new way of remembering’. He says, ‘It’s very hard for us to make a judgement of them’—‘them’ being the people of the past, caught up in their own societal structures, attitudes and stigmas.

The Greatest Menace is often empathetic towards the people who carried out the gay prison experiment, despite the appalling nature of some of the aversion therapies that likely went on within the walls of the prison. It empathises with the idea that people can learn and change. We are shown this first in Frank Hayes himself, who, through his interactions with one prisoner began to change his mind about what needed to happen within Cooma. He began to advocate that gay prisoners needed protection and that guards should be trained to be more sensitive to gay prisoners. Although Frank Hayes himself did not have much power in the committee, over the course of the podcast we are slowly made privy to the information that Professor William Trethowan, who spearheaded and ran the project, might have also undergone a similar shift in his beliefs. In the final moments of the podcast, Abboud reads a letter that his mother wrote to him during the 2017 same-sex marriage referendum. In it, she describes her own process of coming to accept Abboud's sexuality. Like many of those involved in the gay prison experiment, she initially sought some way to treat Abboud, to cure him from being gay. But eventually, like Hayes and Trethowan before her, she came to realise there was nothing wrong with her son that needed fixing.

In the process of conducting this research, Abboud and Cunich seem mindful that this research should be a two-way process of not only extracting information from participants but, where possible, giving back. The most moving example of this is in the bonus episode of the podcast from February 2023, a year after the podcast's initial release. This episode focuses on a former Cooma Gaol inmate, David, now an artist in his eighties, who reached out to Abboud and Cunich after hearing about *The Greatest Menace*. David's story is difficult to hear. He was arrested in a public toilet—a beat—in what reads as a period-typical case of police entrapment. He was sentenced to a year in Cooma Gaol in 1962, and although he was released nine months into his sentence, the experience disrupted the rest of his life. He heard that police were looking for him again sometime after his release, and he changed his name, disguised his appearance and lived as a fugitive for years, running from country to country and eventually settling in America. David never reconciled his sexuality, describing his time in Cooma Gaol as something that 'didn't cure the homosexuality' but which changed and ruined the way he lived for the rest of his life.

During their conversation, David expresses that he had hoped the Australian Government could pardon him, and Abboud offers to help him. Abboud finds David's court records and gets help

from Equality Australia to have David's records expunged. When David sees that his record has been cleared, he is overcome with emotion. He breaks down and cries, and describes the feeling as an 'incredible relief and a release of bottled up emotions that have been inside me for 60 years'. Knowing that he no longer has a criminal record, he reflects that in the future, he might be able to be more open about himself with his friends and those around him.

In *The Greatest Menace*, Abboud and Cunich weave together the past and the present to tell a history that Australians need to hear. The podcast deals with a history that is littered with silences. A gaol that is reluctant to acknowledge its ugly past... Ex-prisoners who would prefer to forget what they were forced to endure but are nonetheless marked by their experiences... Family members of those on the Trethowan Committee who never heard their parents talk about their work. But these are stories we cannot ignore. The effects of the criminalisation of homosexuality linger today and hearing these stories and filling these silences is an essential step towards acknowledging our shared histories and understanding that sometimes opening old wounds can be liberating, even when hard.

References

Featherstone, Lisa, and Andy Kaladelfos. *Sex Crimes in the Fifties*. Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2016.

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Adrien McCrory is a PhD Candidate at the Australian Catholic University. He is a transgender historian, interested in queer histories and histories of gender and crime. His research examines the experiences of trans and gender-diverse Australians in their interactions with the Australian criminal legal system, from the turn of the twentieth century to the present day.