In 1892, Frederick Bailey Deeming was convicted of the murder of his wife Emily Mather, whose body he disposed of by concreting it beneath a hearthstone of a rented cottage in Windsor, Melbourne. This was not his first murder. The previous year, he had killed his first wife and their four children, and had similarly concealed their bodies beneath a concrete floor in another rented house in the English village of Rainhill. Although tried in Australia for the second murder only, extensive contemporary press coverage of both events meant that Deeming was popularly viewed as a serial murderer, a monster of depravity operating within the familiar territory of ordinary nineteenth-century suburban life: marriage and the home. His history was characterised by an astonishing mobility, as he travelled between England, South Africa and the Australian colonies, assuming different identities, classes and occupations in his pursuit of financial and personal gain. Six contemporary cheap print accounts of Deeming’s life and crimes were published in 1892, three of these accounts in more than one edition, as well as a published lecture, The Criminal’s Ascension or From the Gallows to the Golden Streets!, and a play, Wilful Murder, of which only a record of the playbill survives. With contemporary newspaper articles chronicling the detection, trial and punishment that attended the Deeming murders, the 1892 cheap print redactions of the Deeming crime narrative form a “publication event” through which cultural questions ancillary to that narrative are addressed in a textual network of exchange, imitation and contest (Cohen, 7).

Partially because of the richness and diversity of these textual responses, the Deeming narrative has received some critical attention, particularly in Rachel Weaver’s illuminating monograph The Criminal
of the Century. Weaver mines the contemporary representations of the case to document the shifting late-nineteenth century discourses surrounding “criminality, danger, popular culture and everyday life” in metropolitan Australia (Weaver, 3). The focus of this article, however, is on the role the 1892 texts themselves played in producing this discursive phenomenon. They form a rich and fascinating archive, not only at the originary moment of their first production and circulation as individual texts, but also as an interrelated network of redactions and reproductions. This article uses recent developments in the theorisation of book history to foreground the material qualities of these texts as standing in a formative relationship with the local circumstances of the case itself and broader questions of literary and cultural history circulating in the final decade of nineteenth-century Australia.

This is especially important because these are texts that historically have not been read with any specificity, overlooked as pulp in favour of the ‘literary.’ While the Deeming case can tell us much about attitudes to normative and transgressive subjectivity at the fin de siècle, close attention to the material texts themselves and the systems in which they operated can also tell us much about the ways in which such social knowledge was produced by popular literature in local textual and historical contexts.

Recent work in the history of the book has moved away from isolated studies of single authors and texts to thinking about the ways in which texts functioned in relation to one another, in networks facilitating publication, circulation and textual exchange. In his fascinating and original monograph The Networked Wilderness: Communicating in Early New England, Matt Cohen develops an alternative basis for book history. It situates texts within broadly defined and full material contexts of production, combining the particular material condition of an individual text with its cultural and historical context. In Cohen’s terms, the material qualities of a text, such as images and typography, are “treated as standing in a mutually constitutive relationship with language, literary history, the immediate conditions of production of a text, and things like ideas, belief, and tradition” (6–7). Further, rather than a single original act of publication, he analyses what he terms the “publication event”, emphasising the performative elements as well as the provision
of information in publication, and extending a text’s publication to its retransmissions subsequent to the original publication moment, some anticipated by the participants and some beyond their control (7).

Used in *The Networked Wilderness* to break down traditional divisions between European American and Native American textual production, this approach offers a productive way of framing the kind of popular publishing phenomenon generated by the Deeming case. Rather than static instances of single publication, each instantiation of a text operates both discretely and “in terms of its relation to simultaneous and past representation in other media” (Cohen, 7). The ways in which these texts might relate to one another range from imitation to subversion. The relational emphases of this model open up a way of approaching the anonymous, sometimes ephemeral and highly redactive texts that are generated by true crimes, both as distinct individual texts and as part of a self-reflexive archive. It is an approach that places the material text at its centre, not as a transparent source allowing access to complex and shifting cultural discourses, but as a site in which such discursive complexity is produced by the material qualities of the text in relationship with its cultural context, both within individual texts and across a broader textual network.

The 1892 publications generated in response to the Deeming murders present a particularly intensified example of the kind of publication event outlined in Cohen’s methodology. They formed part of a burgeoning cheap print industry in nineteenth-century England and Australia, instituted by technological innovation, new distribution networks and shifts in social policy encouraging literacy (Springhall, 567–8). This industry produced a variety of new literary forms, including the penny blood, the penny dreadful and the shilling shocker, ephemeral accounts dealing with fictional and non-fictional crime and published in the related forms of serial and book, many cheaply available for a shilling or less and multiply reissued according to market and readership (Dunne, 133–4; Brake, 82; Bode, 34–5). The network of contemporary redactions of the Deeming case consists of shilling shockers in the forms of history and biography: *The Windsor and Rainhill Tragedies: Wholesale Murders and Robberies in Australia, England, and Elsewhere*; *The Windsor and Rainhill Murders: The History of Two Notable Crimes*;
The Criminal of the Century: The Windsor and Rainhill Murderer; The Complete History of the Windsor Tragedy; The Life of Deeming; The Life of A.O. Williams, the supposed Rainhill murderer; The Murderer of Women and Children and Biography of Frederick Bayley Deeming: A Romance of Crime. Six of these redactions are discussed here, as one, The Complete History of the Windsor Tragedy, currently cannot be located in the archive by the librarians at Old Melbourne Gaol, and the biography The Life of A.O. Williams was only acquired by the State Library of Victoria while this article was in press.

The repetitiveness of the titles in this archive contributes to these texts’ apparent homogeneity. They seem interchangeable, appropriating or reusing the same narrative materials and indistinguishable by conventional markers such as author or date of publication. Yet each text produces a distinct narrative from the case, dependent upon diverse generic mixing, from the gothic romance of the sixpenny Biography to the encyclopaedic collation of contemporary newspaper reports, drawings and photographs of the shilling Windsor and Rainhill Tragedies. My aim here is to examine this group of texts as an archive, attending to how its individual texts make meaning as well as how that meaning is generated by the relationships, material, literary and historical, between these texts. The idea of publication event could be expanded outside this particular archive, which is delimited by the form of cheap print and the year of publication, to the newspaper coverage from which the texts built their narrative and to later redactions such as Frank Clune’s The Demon Killer or J.S. O’Sullivan’s A Most Unique Ruffian. In order to attend in detail to the material texts themselves, however, my focus is restricted to the contemporary cheap print texts dealing directly with the crime published in 1892, as a case study for the ways in which Cohen’s methodology might be applied to a small archive of true crime redactions.

The Deeming case was a sensational and compelling story of deceit, intrigue and violence, played out across three continents over a period of twenty years. Deeming’s criminal history was unfolded through contemporary newspaper reports in the separate Australian colonies, and the press formed an important part of the investigation at key points in the narrative of detection. News of the case first began to
circulate on the fourth of March 1892. The previous day, the smell of decaying flesh led to a police investigation at 57 Andrew St, Windsor, in inner-city Melbourne. Police uncovered a decomposing body cemented beneath the hearthstone of the small terrace, and over the following week disclosed its identity: the body was that of Emily Williams, recently arrived from England with her husband Albert. Albert Williams, aka Frederick Deeming, was the chief suspect as her murderer, but had disappeared. He was recognised, however, on the street in Sydney in January and was subsequently apprehended at the Southern Cross goldfields in Western Australia where he was using the alias of Baron Swanston. During his journey from Melbourne to Sydney to Western Australia, Deeming had committed a number of frauds, and had also successfully courted and become engaged to a new partner, Kate Rounsefell. Rounsefell, while travelling from Bathurst to join her fiancée at Southern Cross, recognised his picture in the newspaper as that of the murderer Albert Williams. She immediately contacted the police, and subsequent interviews revealed that gifts she had received from him had belonged to his murdered first wife.

Having discovered that the Williams couple had recently married in the English village of Rainhill, a journalist interviewed Emily Williams’ mother, Mrs Mather, and made her aware, for the first time, of her daughter’s death. As Deeming’s image became more widely circulated, further stories of his deceptions were reported to the police and the newspapers. He had spent time in the Australian colonies and South Africa in the 1880s, operating under multiple aliases and committing a number of frauds. Two earlier marriages emerged as part of these histories: one to Nellie Matheson, in 1890, quickly annulled, and an earlier marriage that had produced children during the 1880s. When rumours of Deeming’s first wife and family reached Rainhill, alongside press speculation that Deeming might be “A Modern Bluebeard”, the villagers realised that he had been visited in his time there by a woman with four children whom he claimed was his sister. Deeming had rented a house on the outskirts of the village and carried out some building works there. When the recently concreted floor of his rented Rainhill property was dug up by police, the bodies of his first wife, Marie James, and their four children were found beneath it. As the
serial nature of his murders became clear, it was even speculated in the newspapers that Deeming had returned to England from South Africa in either 1888 or 1889 to commit the Jack the Ripper murders in Whitehall. The criminal history summarised here was developed in instalments through newspaper journalism over a period of months beginning with the discovery of Emily Mather’s body at Windsor and concluding with his trial and execution for that murder in Melbourne. These reports form part of the true crime publication event surrounding the Deeming case, which the cheap print accounts appropriated, imitated, contested and reimagined.

Appropriation and reproduction marked the narrative strategies of the first of the redactions under consideration here, *The Windsor and Rainhill Tragedies*, published in three editions by South Australian newspaper publisher Frearson and Brother. It describes itself as a “pictorial history of the tragedy” and juxtaposes original text retelling the narrative of crime and detection with excerpts from contemporary newspaper reports, summaries of those reports and an enormous variety of images. These included reproductions of photographs of the victims, detectives and of Deeming himself, photographs of the scene of the crime, letters and objects such as the murder weapons, as well as ink sketches again from contemporary newspaper accounts. Inviting the reader to take the role of detective, this bricolage gathers together into a single compendium the largely Melbourne-based newspaper coverage of the Deeming case for the South Australian reader. The publisher employed a “special artist in Melbourne” to document the crime scene and related ephemera, in print, photograph and sketch (72–3). The artist also took upon the role of detection, as his special notes describe:

I happened to turn over one of the heaps of burnt material in the fireplace at 57, St. Andrew-street, and, strange to say, the only piece of unburnt material I found was the enclosed piece of newspaper. It utters almost a prophesy on the one side, where it refers to ‘the gibbet,’ ‘Marwood,’ ‘black bag,’ &c., &c. To my mind it is a remarkable find. (72)
The narrative of discovery and signification outlined here is mimetic of the magpie methodology of the text as a whole, which links found evidence with passages of third-person narration to form a chronological narrative of events. The reader is guided through the narrative by headings in larger bold type, often taken from the sentence structure itself, highlighting particularly scandalous or noteworthy information. Such titles provide an invitation to skim, to jump to sections of interest, whether motivated by sensation or by the desire for additional detail, and to attribute significance to certain objects, characters or actions as amateur detectives piecing together, alongside the reporter, their own version of events. Of all the redactions, the *Tragedies* is most firmly located in the everyday world of metropolitan Melbourne and reproduces the material objects, bodies and environments of the crimes and their detection in a way that draws the reader into that world in intimate connection with the lives of the criminal, his victims and the detectives who investigated the crime. The candid photograph it reproduces of Deeming as Baron Swanston and his arresting officer Constable Williams playing draughts is one of multiple examples of the text’s orientation of its narrative within the domestic world of its readers. This emphasis on quotidian detail and corresponding interpretative openness and volatility means that the *Tragedies* avoids overt explication; the text concludes with a matter-of-fact account of Deeming’s execution and sums up his “career of deceit and crime, craft and hypocrisy” as both unparalleled and unrepeatable (103). Yet the impression the text gives of the criminal as neighbour, acquaintance and companion generates the opposite sense: of criminality’s omnipresence and potential for repetition. It mirrors Deeming’s own manipulation of the institutions and forms of everyday life in rituals of dress, courtship and marriage, by supplying the physical and material detail of the tools of those manipulations. In doing so, the text replays, in intimate detail, the ways in which such institutional matter and practice might be divorced from their commonly understood meanings. As readers pore over images of the murder scene, the murder weapon or a simple bill of sale, they are repeatedly confronted both by their ubiquity and their particular and brutal signification in this case, in a way that imbricates Deeming’s crimes in the reader’s life as simultaneously normal and aberrant.
If the South Australian *Windsor and Rainhill Tragedies* offers a sense of immersion in a world both familiar and transgressive, the *Windsor and Rainhill Murders*, published in Melbourne by Walker, May and Co., works very differently. It ostensibly distances readers from its third-person version of events, imposing an external order on a narrative that it first summarizes in a nine-page introduction, then repeats in dilated and structured form across five distinct sections, from the Windsor Murder to the Supreme Court Proceedings. Compared to the jumble of often unrelated images and text of the *Tragedies*, the *Murders* seeks to contextualise, order and explain the events of the Deeming narrative. The introduction opens with a competitive claim that the history of the Windsor and Rainhill murders is internationally significant in the scope of its “cold-blooded atrocity”. Introduced as “unfathomable” and inexpressible – “Words fail to describe the inhuman and worse than brutal butchery of which this wretch were guilty” – the narrative instantly exposes this claim as rhetoric, quickly listing his crimes and situating them in legal and moral debates surrounding the defence of criminal insanity (i–ii). While the Deeming murders themselves are wholly describable and linked to broader issues of social policy in this account, the underlying subtexts that they activate are less clearly resolved. The text points to Deeming’s success in a “dastardly career of imposition and crime” as a marker of other undetected criminality, asking “if the idea ‘murder will out’ is a popular delusion” (ii–iii). Even as the introduction concludes by linking Deeming with the Jack the Ripper murders, it both casts doubt on his involvement and finishes with the inexplicable detail of the words “John Cleary is a fool” supposedly chalked by the murderer on the wall above the victim’s body (ix). This tension between the expressible narrative of events and the problematic meanings that might be ascribed to them underwrites the detailed, chronological account that makes up the main section of the text. Just as the introduction ends with the criminal’s own words, the *Murders* ends with Deeming’s long statement to the jury at the conclusion of his Supreme Court trial.

Claiming he had been tried by the press rather than the law, Deeming rails at the injustice of his trial, and veers between protestations of his love for his wife, objections to specific pieces of evidence,
and tales of his lack of fear and bravery: “I have gone into lions’ caves and brought out a lion alive” (135). The inchoate logic of his account disrupts the orderly narrative which frames it, and allows access to the troublingly inexplicable at the same time as it is controlled. The Murders digests the facts of the Deeming case for a middle-class reader, as the material traces of ownership of copies held at the Mitchell Library in Sydney indicate. One, a first edition, contains an engraved bookplate indicating its ownership by Alfred Lee; its Latin epigram “Forte non ignave” and specification of case and shelf number for the volume suggests a reader of some means. The Tragedies encourages the reader to make sense of the pieces of evidence making up the case, while the Murders encourages the reader to be persuaded of its digested narrative version of the case and its analysis of its social implications. Both, however, are haunted by unresolved tensions that frustrate closure and produce a sense of the criminal and criminality as an unrecuperated presence within the private and public structures of everyday life in Melbourne.

This textual generation of the everyday and the monstrous is also represented by the material qualities of the third redaction under
consideration here. *The Criminal of the Century* presents as what Brake has called a heteroglossic text, between newspaper and novel, situating its narrative of criminal insanity, murder and fraud between advertisements for Cross’s Indigestion Drops and Canadian Club Whiskies (Brake, 27). Published in Sydney, it registers its status as a shilling shocker with a lurid cover in black and red depicting Deeming in the Windsor cottage immediately after the murder, red blood pooling from the victim’s neck, smudging the walls and dripping from the title. The same red backs an image of Deeming in respectable suit and tie in the style of a framed portrait. This image of the middle-class Deeming registers a central anxiety arising in the text’s narrative of the Windsor and Rainhill murders. Deeming’s ability to mimic the dress, manners and behaviour of the middle class not only enabled his crimes to be carried out, especially in procuring the wives he later murdered, but called into question the stability of class markers for middle-class readers themselves. His shape-shifting was facilitated by a new mobility enabled by advances in transport and communications, and at times by a metropolitan anonymity, but worked equally as well in a small village such as Rainhill in England as it did in the colonial city. While the narrative of *The Criminal of the Century* details this mobility in practice, it does so by marrying the genre of true crime with that of detective fiction. It newly mediates between the events of the crime and their narrative representation by focusing on Detectives Considine and Cawsey as the agents to bring Deeming’s extended history of criminality under textual and institutional control. They are represented as “not men easily daunted or willing to acknowledge themselves beaten”, and Considine in particular is seen as practical, orderly and able: “piece by piece he wove the net of evidence that at last he enmeshed the murderer and brought him to the gallows” (5). *The Criminal of the Century* summarizes the copious and detailed history of Deeming’s murders and his criminal past, expanded in such detail in the *Tragedies* and *Murders*, into fifteen short chapters. Its foregrounding of the successful detection of Deeming’s crimes in Australia and England under the guidance of Considine and Cawsey means the emphasis in this text is upon Deeming’s containment. It concludes, like the *Murders*, with his speech to the Supreme Court jury, but here his appeals
for justice and protestations of innocence are rendered relatively futile because they have no effect on the primary generic frame of successful detection, prosecution and execution. As in the other redactions, the spectre of the unrecuperated Deeming, seemingly respectable but brutally violent, is still in play in this narrative, but to a lesser extent because of its debts to detective fiction. This is not the case, however, in the two biographies that form part of this archive, which borrow from the genre of romance to focus specifically on Deeming at the centre of the text.

As the covers indicate, the biographies of Deeming indicate an interest in Deeming’s character as dangerous individual, rather than his mode of operating as focused upon in the other accounts. The Life of Deeming is a short prose text with no illustrations, save the cover image of Deeming in red, depicted holding an axe and staring wildly at the reader, his thumb testing the edge of the axe as though in preparation for his next victim. Behind him, light streams to illuminate in silhouette the scaffold, the hanged criminal and two observers, one distinguished by the class marker of a top hat. In line with the cover’s focus on the criminal individual and his fate, the narrative focuses on Deeming’s character largely through his relationships with women. These range from his first wife, Marie, seduced in this account from his
brother, to imagined encounters with female criminals on the street such as Eve, nicknamed “the Pigeon” (19). These relationships of seduction which quickly move to abuse are played out in intimate conversation, as this exchange with his first wife indicates:

“Why, then, did you marry me, if I am so ugly and ignorant?” she asked.

“I think it must have been an act of charity,” he responded, “or, perhaps, I wanted a wife the direct opposite of myself – dull, brainless, unattractive and without a spark of spirit, and I found her in you. Why, you ass, I could beat you black and blue, I could break your bones, I could twist your fingers off, and you wouldn’t even dare to scream,” and he leered at her as though he would like to put his hideous threats – they sounded like threats – into practice. (7)

The third person narrator here functions as an invisible witness to the exchange - “they sounded like threats” – with whom the reader is also aligned, as no position outside the interpretation of Deeming’s statements as threats is possible. The text uses a number of such rhetorical strategies in the Life to bring the reader into the intimate daily life of the household as vicarious witness to Deeming’s psychological and physical sadism, emphasising the particular grounds of his criminal territory as marriage and the home. Deeming used marriage both as a mechanism to justify his murders – the death of his first wife and children enabled his marriage to Emily Mather – and as a way of procuring new victims, applying to Holt’s matrimonial agency for a new prospective wife as soon as a week after his murder of Mather in Melbourne. All accounts document his successful manipulation of the discourses of romance as a way of effecting his seductions and converting them to marriage; yet the Life dramatizes what is otherwise represented as reportage in the intimate detail of conversation. As Rachel Weaver has argued, it is Deeming’s “commitment to the ritual of marriage” that forms the most striking and inexplicable features of the case (134). By mimicking the sentiments, forms and rituals of marriage, Deeming exposes their artificiality, as well as women’s
vulnerability to their manipulation; his criminal history not only suggests that the language and forms of romance might be detached from real emotion, but that the institution of marriage itself in practice might not be the ideal celebrated by church and state and endorsed by middle-class society. The Life details both Deeming’s seductions and his brutality within marriage in ways that are intimately recognizable to the reader as witness; it brings home, as it were, the moral ambiguities and inequities of power within marriage that were beginning to be questioned in late nineteenth-century Australian society. These cannot be closed off with Deeming’s conviction and death. The detail and dilation of the conversations in the Life, combining a recognizable banality of casual insult with a transgressively physical brutality, creates a kind of ineradicable supplement that leaks from the confines of the Deeming household into the reader’s own everyday experience or conception of marriage.

If the grounds of the Life of Deeming are those of the domestic world, the cover of the Biography of Frederick Deeming: A Romance of Crime links its analysis of his criminality to markers of national identity. Written as a dialogue between the narrator and the criminal Deeming from his
prison cell, the cover of this text takes random excerpts from Deeming’s imagined account and superimposes them, in an inchoate miscellany, on the map of Australia. The inscription upon Tasmania – “I’m mad” – visually confines and isolates his criminal insanity as both part of Australian nationhood and detached from it. This ambiguity surrounding Deeming’s criminal insanity and its place within nineteenth-century Australian society powers the narrative: from the introduction where the narrator details the visceral identification of the reader with “the Horrible” as manifest in the actions and punishment of the criminal, to the identifications between the narrator and criminal that the narrative insistently draws upon and reviles from. Unlike the Life, however, which dramatizes the domestic sphere, this imagined account takes place in the public realm of criminal justice, the prison, and occurs “between man and man” (7). It gains a powerful sense of authenticity through the brilliant device of dramatizing the case through Deeming’s own voice, which dominates the text as an everyman narrator interviews the criminal Deeming in his prison cell. Much of the narrative is in Deeming’s words, which lends his invented voice an authenticity and directness. Although “Deeming”’s is the dominant voice in this account, presenting his history in long passages with little narratorial interjection, “the prisoner’s story” (12) is intermittently reframed by the narrator. The first three chapters, detailing the prisoner’s desire to have his story told, and the gradual diminishing of his sense of conscience and his respect for the law, is retold in chapter four by the narrator in much balder terms: representing a criminal character with “no moral qualities”, “wholly animal” and consumed by “the grim spectre of insanity” (12). The narrator attempts retrospectively to shape reader response to Deeming, while the text as a whole attributes him a complexity that exceeds such containment. The narrator as Deeming relates in gruesome detail his two sets of murders, as the narrator as interested spectator reacts in revulsion – “I was fit to retch my vitals” – then attempts to rationalise what he has heard – “I brought the horrid phantasy within the limits of my recollection” (29). But these attempts inevitably fail – “my understanding fell short, and the effort was incomplete” – leaving reader and narrator at the text’s end in close companionship with Deeming, brought into a special intimacy by the simulated experience of
vicarious witness: “Through his awful hood I seemed to hear with quickened senses, the muffled tones of his once strident voice” (40).

What marks the individual redactions of this archive is the astonishing ways in which they are distinct from one another. While they map similar anxieties, specifically a concern with the potential for a criminal to go unrecognised and unmarked through a new cultural mobility, and a deeper puzzling of the grounds for such criminality, the different texts employ a wide range of material, narrative and generic strategies to address these questions. They indicate that the cheap print industry of the late-nineteenth century Australian colonies was a source of rich diversity, originality and variety, its range of forms deriving, in part, from the multiple activities of the publishers of these texts, who also published newspapers and serials in multiple genres. This contrasts with accounts of colonial publishing focusing upon elite literary forms, which represent the colonial industry as derivative and secondary in comparison to England (Bode, 47). Considered together, these texts also map an overarching generic context that has been overlooked in current studies of the Deeming case and colonial nineteenth-century literature. I would like to suggest here that all the redactions of the Deeming case activate a range of textual strategies concerned with simulating authenticity, generating truth claims and delimiting reader response that are specific to the genre of true crime, although they do so in different ways and to distinct purposes that mark this archive as a particularly late nineteenth-century colonial manifestation of the genre. This might seem obvious, but it is not the way these redactions of the crime have been read to date, which has been instead in the form of largely decontextualized examples in order to provide evidence for the complexity of the cultural discourses that surround the case, or through alternative genres such as detective fiction and Gothic romance (Weaver, 214–57). Like all genres, true crime is open to generic mixing; indeed, its hybridity is one of the markers of the genre. Yet it also rehearses and produces a body of generic features distinct from other genres and embedded in the genre’s particular relationship to representing the real.

The most distinctive features of the genre are its combination of an immersion in the quotidian nature of “lived experience”, repro-
ducing the facts of the case, and an activation of powerful cultural subtexts beneath this detail, which use myth, rumour and story to invest certain crimes with cultural significance (Biressi, 16). To use just one example, when the Windsor and Rainhill Tragedies reproduce a photograph of the house at Windsor or an axe found there, it makes a claim for the authenticity of its narrative account through its access to the material detail of the case, and simultaneously invests these everyday objects with a mass of suppressed stories destabilising the façade of suburban respectability and domestic harmony within the household. Normalcy is simultaneously deployed as truth claim and stripped away as “a fiction”, exposing its conventions of innocence (Seltzer, 41). A text’s recreation of “what happened” might be rhetorical or visual, as the diverse redactions surrounding the Deeming case show, part of the strategies of truth claim that also mark the genre. True crime texts engage in often competing accounts of authenticity, claiming to be a true history from exclusive sources or a particular access to the criminal or victim, as illustrated in the Biography’s fiction of interview within the prison cell. The genre’s grounding in lived experience and material detail gives it an immediacy that separates it from fiction: it strives to give an illusion of proximity to the crime, and forces the reader into a kind of sympathetic participation from which there is no definitive release (Sweeney, 149).

Despite true crime’s insistence on presenting the facts and recreating the experience, the genre is also marked by an often metafictional acknowledgement of the elusiveness of truth. Memory is unreliable, and interpretation unstable. While the genre strives towards a corrective account of the facts, its grounding in lived experience means that the resolutions afforded by other genres such as romance or detective fiction are unobtainable. The most significant marker of the genre is its lack of resolution, its emphasis on process rather than closure. The result of this emphasis is that the meaninglessness of crimes intrudes even as their meanings are explicated or motivations are provided to the criminal, and the effect of this is to keep the stories alive, to invite redaction and repetition as a way of sustaining the reader’s sympathetic participation in these accounts. Reading the Deeming redactions as true crime illuminates their distinct narrative
strategies – recreating the scene of the crime, the manner of Deeming’s pretensions, the conversations within his marriage and his behaviour in the prison cell – as truth claims produced through investments in detail, producing an intimacy that ultimately leads to irresolution, the imperfect release of the reader back into their own world. Taken together, these separate redactions produce true crime as an active and distinct genre in late nineteenth-century Australian literary culture, alongside other popular genres, such as Gothic romance, that have recently received critical attention (Gelder and Weaver, 1–9).

Like the multiple aliases of Deeming himself, each different from the other but containing elements of the previous, the print redactions of the case exist in relation to one another. Read together, as discrete texts forming part of a network, each can be seen to revisit the same source material in individually distinct ways, revealing a complexity and diversity in cheap print that might shift the boundaries of how we understand and value late nineteenth-century colonial publishing. Such distinctions are unrecognisable if cheap print is mined for its content to the exclusion of the forms that produce that content. Yet an attention to form does not only show the differences between these texts, but also highlights their shared narrative strategies, which here illuminate the operation of the genre of true crime. Surprisingly, this is a genre that been little considered in relation to nineteenth-century Australian literature. While critical work on true crime in America and England trace distinct articulations of the genre in the nineteenth century, even studies of specific nineteenth-century crimes in Australia approach these texts outside their primary generic context. Reading the Deeming archive as publication event shows the way in which the production of discourse in the period intimately depended on form’s mediation of content, both within individual texts and across a textual network.
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