

Croker Prize for Biography

Entry 1408

**Babe gets her name in the Paper (Ida
Muriel Pender)**

The blackest sheep in my family's flock was *Babe* - Ida Muriel Pender, born on 28 April 1905 at Elsternwick, Victoria.¹ Ida's mother, Grace Lillian Pender (nee Smith), gave her the nickname.² Her father, David Galloway Pender, tried to give her a good start to life but he died when Ida was young.³

By her own admission in a newspaper interview in 1923, Ida disliked school, her first lessons being served up to her at Brighton Kindergarten. She simply did not bother much with academic learning even though she gained certificates for swimming and first aid later at school in Elsternwick.

Ida was only too keen to live at the beach – her happy days as a child. Living in the water gave way to serious learning of the millinery trade which Ida admitted gave her insight into what hats would suit her best. She quickly and early in her teens became a dedicated follower of fashion. She loved clothes, dancing, skating and attending dance halls and cinemas.⁴

Ida's dancing prowess derived in part from her lessons taken with Miss Lillias Smith of Prahran. Ida starred, in concert with her fellow-pupils, in the *Classic and Character Dancing* entertainment at the Prahran City Hall on 30 July 1919. Lillias Smith's program of dance by her company of young amateurs included items performed by Ida Pender, including Irish dancing, song and dance and ballet. The fourteen-year-old Ida gave a display described as "extremely fine" in the *Malvern Standard* at the time.⁵

Ida was destined to dance her way through her black-sheep years; she chose to make herself an outsider. Family folklore has it that as a teenager, barely sixteen years old, she became adept at escaping her home at Elsternwick to catch a cab or tram to night spots at St Kilda, Carlton or Fitzroy. During one escapade she made her way to the *Palais de Danse* at St Kilda where she met a brash young man named Leslie Taylor; from there she went from bad to worse.⁶

Consorting with Taylor was to become Ida's way of life at least for a few highly-charged years. Her newly-minted companionship with Leslie Joseph Theodore Taylor, or *Squizzy* to his friends and foes alike, was already making her a person of interest to the police and the press in Melbourne and interstate. Ida was now to have her moment in the cold, hard spotlight of criminal behaviour and its consequences.^{7 8}

Ida was again drawn into the creative arts when, in 1922, she starred with Squizzy in a "sporting comedy drama". The film was titled *In Emergency Colours* and played on Squizzy's previous experiences as a jockey to portray Ida as the lady love and Squizzy as the heroic figure. The film was banned in Victoria due to the criminal activities of the leading man and lady but later had some exposure in Brisbane and Sydney.^{9 10}

Squizzy and Ida were a couple even before he was divorced by his then wife.¹¹ Ida became one of many who were seduced by Squizzy. She did not let his ways with women dissuade her from being with him, protecting him and remaining silent for him. Repeated charges of vagrancy meant she was always being questioned by the police just to get information on Squizzy.^{12 13} On one occasion in 1923 she was charged with having been "and idle and disorderly person".¹⁴

"5'4" with shapely legs"; that was Ida, according to one police report.¹⁵ That description did not make it onto the marriage certificate on 27 May 1924 when Squizzy and Ida married at The Manse, St. James Church, Fitzroy.¹⁶ Leslie Taylor had made "an honest woman" of Ida Muriel Pender, at least in one tentative sense. Ida Muriel Taylor was now even more

committed to follow the criminal path. She could no longer go back to being the “white sheep” by becoming the outcast of criminals.

Charged, remanded, bailed, interrogated and frequently in police custody, Babe was stoic.^{17 18} She always had a ready bondsman available with Squizzy’s cash to gain release from custody. She lied for her husband and his cohort; she disappeared from police view when she needed to; she visited her dearly-beloved in Pentridge Prison when Squizzy was once again in major trouble.

On one famous occasion Ida visited Squizzy in prison by joining a concert party that had approval to enter the high walls. This episode went as far as the Chief Secretary and then to the Minister; Ida was banned from visiting before the incident and most certainly doubly unwelcome after it.¹⁹

Ida had class and a sense of humour in addition to her loving nature – in the case of Squizzy. In 1922 the police had searched for months for Ida to question her concerning the whereabouts of her bail-jumping man. When they finally caught up with her and expressed their frustration about how long it had taken to locate her she quipped that they must have used a lot of petrol just to find her; she laughed when questioned and refused to make a statement.²⁰

In the early days of the short but sweet love saga, Ida’s photograph and description were posted in the press and placed onto posters. Her appearance was a talking point and as time flowed she became known for her dress sense, jewellery and attractive appearance.^{21 22 23 24}

The romance of the underworld created Ida’s reputation and Squizzy’s wealth aided her ability to show off her class. She arrived at court gowned for the part in Melbourne’s finest taxis driven by liveried chauffeurs. Once described as “Melbourne’s super-flapper” she met all of the requirements for the red carpet.²⁵

There is some evidence that Ida did not drink or smoke.²⁶ She did, however, commit break-and-enter, theft and occasionally lied through her teeth to the police. After all she was in love. In love enough to adopt an alias for a time; “Pearl Harvey” did not really exist but Ida used this name on occasions to evade police.²⁷

Why did Ida love Squizzy? She chose to become the “black sheep” of the family. She stuck to Squizzy in spite of his womanising, his criminal behaviour, his ruthless colleagues and his legally-enforced separations from Ida when charged and convicted.^{28 29 30} Was Ida, in some way, hypnotised by Squizzy? Why was he often looked upon as some kind of demi-god? What kind of demi-god would bash a witness, alter evidence, bribe a jury or a judge and threaten police?

1927 was to be the fatal year for Squizzy; Ida became a widow on Thursday 27 October 1927 following a gun battle at Barkly Street, Carlton, in Melbourne’s north.³¹ Ida gave her evidence at the coroner’s inquest into the death of Taylor and his probable killer John Daniel “Snowy” Cutmore. Ida stated that her husband had not been in fear for his life on the day of his death; he had left her at home that afternoon saying that he would return to her that evening. He died in St. Vincent’s Hospital, Fitzroy of gunshot wounds.³²

Squizzy Taylor’s funeral included what one newspaper described as “a disgraceful display of morbid curiosity”. The burial was at Brighton Cemetery but the cortege was delayed by an unruly crowd of onlookers; the police were called to disperse the crowd. At the burial another crowd, mostly well-behaved women, gathered.³³

Ida Muriel Taylor then dropped out of sight for some time. Her romantic and marital aspirations did not cease – or were these aspirations cynically for survival? In 1928 Ida married George Thomas Lewin.³⁴ They soon separated and were divorced in 1932 on the grounds of his desertion.³⁵ Her marriages to Francesco Antonio Labattaglia in 1933 and to John Neil McDonald c1953 followed.³⁶³⁷

Ida Muriel McDonald died at Fitzroy, Melbourne on 22 April 1971 aged sixty five years, although her death certificate records that she was fifty five years old; telling lies about her age? ³⁸ Married at nineteen, widowed at twenty three, married again three times, deserted and divorced, the black sheep of the family, “Babe”, the Elsternwick girl, the lover and wife of Squizzy Taylor, sadly has no known public grave.³⁹

Why am I so enamoured with Ida? Was she simply too creative or just attracted to the dignity of risk-taking. No matter; my first cousin, twice removed is too interesting to ignore, like so many black sheep.

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