

THE  
EDWARD STREET  
BABY  
FARM

STELLA BUDRIKIS



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**PART 1:**  
**HOW IT CAME TO THIS**

## One: A Perth Sensation

*“You might be surprised to know that she used to be a soft hearted woman. It’s them babies that has made her callous.”*

John Sweeney, quoted in *Truth*, 20 April 1907<sup>1</sup>

The woman in the dock sat motionless, her hands clasped in her lap, her shoulders braced against the hostile glares from the gallery behind her. At the time of her arrest for the murder of little Ethel Booth, one newspaper had described her as elderly. Others, taking their lead from the police records, said she was forty-six years old, born in Western Australia, a Wesleyan, able to read and write. Now, at the end of a draining trial, she looked weary of all her fifty-two years. Her name was Alice Mitchell.

It was late in the afternoon of Saturday, 13 April 1907. Alice, like everyone else in Courtroom Two of Perth’s Supreme Court, was waiting for the jury to deliver its verdict on the charge of wilful murder. After a week of hearing evidence, Justice McMillan had insisted that the lawyers push on to finish the case that day. When he sent the jury out to deliberate, the light had already begun to fade from the windows high in the courtroom walls, and the skylights in the checkerboard ceiling.

An hour later, the twelve men, many of them young enough to be Alice’s sons, signalled that they were ready to return. The trial had been an ordeal in every way, and they were eager to get it over with and go home. Mr Justice McMillan had just resumed his seat on the judge’s bench. The sense of anticipation was as palpable as the stale, muggy air of the courtroom.

At this hour, most Perth citizens would be eating dinner. But the public gallery above and behind the prisoners dock was crammed with people keen to hear whether Alice would be found guilty of the murder of baby Ethel Booth. The “baby farming horror” had riveted the attention of Perth’s population from the beginning. Each new disclosure kept their fascination with the case alive, and the courtroom packed with spectators.

During the preliminary coroner’s inquest into Ethel’s death, they had heard that, over the past six years, no less than thirty-seven infants had

died in Alice Mitchell's care—perhaps even more. The jury at the inquest concluded that Ethel Booth had died as a result of wilful starvation. That verdict sent Alice to the Supreme Court to be tried for her murder.

Lack of evidence would have made it difficult to charge her with the deaths of the other infants. Their bodies had all been passed to the undertakers without the coroner being notified. But during the trial, the circumstances surrounding their deaths had certainly been used to establish the case against Alice. Witness after witness had told dreadful tales about what went on in the Mitchells' home.

The medical evidence had been against her too, except for the self-serving rhetoric of children's specialist, Dr Ned Officer. But would the jury be willing to find her guilty and send a woman to the gallows? Only two women had ever been executed in Western Australia. The second of these had been hanged nearly forty years earlier.<sup>2</sup> If the jury found Alice Mitchell guilty of murder, would Justice McMillan make her the third? Many sitting in the public gallery thought that hanging her for the death of one child would hardly be penalty enough for watching over the deaths of dozens.

Still, some whispered to each other as they waited, perhaps her family connections would save her. Others muttered that Doctor Ned Officer, called as a witness for the defence, had been let off very lightly by the judge in his comments, all things considered. After all, the doctor had signed so many of those infants' death certificates, without raising any alarm. As for the so-called health inspectors of the Perth Local Health Board, they all deserved to be sent packing. Especially the incompetent lady inspector, Miss Lenihan.

In the area reserved for the press, reporters for the weekend newspapers checked the clock on the wall above the prisoners dock incessantly and gloomily. It was too late now to get their copy into print for tomorrow's papers. News of the verdict would cap two months of sensational stories, but the dailies would be ahead of them by nearly a week.

Behind everyone's fascination and horror at what had become known as "The Baby Farming Case" lay the question: "How did it come to this?" How could so many infants die in the care of one woman without anyone becoming concerned? The press around the country were already touting Alice Mitchell as perhaps Australia's worst serial killer. How could such ignominy fall upon the state of Western Australia? How could such a thing happen in a small, conservative community like Perth? And who was to be held responsible?

Dr Officer was not in court to hear the verdict, but no doubt he too was eager for the case to be over. His reputation had taken a battering from his association with the Mitchell woman. Still, this wasn't the first time he'd had to face down tough opposition. He was confident he could come out on top.

Harriet Lenihan, the health inspector who had shouldered the task of monitoring Alice Mitchell's home for the past six years, waited more anxiously for the outcome of the trial. Regardless of whether Alice Mitchell was found guilty, the verdict on her own future had been all but settled by the disclosures of the past few weeks.

She, too, might have wondered how it had come to this. In the past, her musical skill and masterly registration on the pipe organ had earned her praise. Now she was pilloried in the press for her incompetence at filling out office registers and inspecting drainpipes and washhouses. This was not the life she had imagined for herself when she arrived in Perth nearly ten years earlier.

## Two: The Inspector-In-Petticoats

*“[Mr Quinlan, MLA,] believed it would be a valuable acquisition to the council to have a lady inspector to visit places where women were engaged, and, besides, women had good noses.”*

Reported in *The West Australian*, 17 November 1900<sup>1</sup>

It was on Saturday, 27 November 1897 that Harriet Lenihan stepped out of the shade of the Perth central railway station and found herself in a broad, unpaved open space. In front of her, horse-drawn taxi cabs waited for fares beneath a row of tall eucalypts. Across the road, beyond the trees, the entire frontage of Boan Brothers department store hosted a fading banner bearing the slogan “Greetings to her Most Gracious Majesty”.<sup>2</sup> The Queen might be nine thousand miles away in London, but her diamond jubilee was still a cause for celebration in this, the most British of her colonies.

Harriet, a woman in her early forties, had arrived alone in Western Australia from Melbourne aboard the coastal steamer *Bullara*. The journey out of Bass Strait and across the Great Australian Bight had been a stomach-churning, nerve-racking experience. Even Captain Lockyer, a veteran sailor on that route, was rattled by the wind that struck them off the Victorian coast. He described it later as “terrific. It almost seemed it would blow the steamer out of the water.”<sup>3</sup> The passengers had breathed a prayer of thanksgiving as they entered the calm waters of King George Sound on the south coast.

After off-loading mail and goods in Albany, the steamer had continued on to Fremantle, arriving early on that Saturday morning at the passenger terminal in the recently constructed Inner Harbour. The port, at the mouth of the Swan River, exuded an air of confidence and vitality. The streets were bustling with prospectors, many carrying the gear they had brought with them from the Victorian goldfields. Some had families in tow. All were hoping to try their luck on the Western Australian fields. The discovery of gold in the Murchison region and Kalgoorlie, hundreds of kilometres to the north and east of Perth respectively, had spared

Western Australia from the economic depression being experienced in the rest of the country.

The overcast sky and warmth of the early summer sun threatened a sultry day to come. But as Harriet looked about her, she had reason to feel a renewed sense of optimism, despite the uncertainty of her future. She too was a prospector of sorts. Melbourne had fallen deep into recession and for some time Harriet had been struggling to make enough money to live on. She hoped some of the newly rich goldminers in Western Australia might want a piano teacher for their children. Or perhaps, with the rapidly growing population in Perth, there would be an opening for her as a language teacher.

Perth was a small town compared to Melbourne. But, as Harriet made her way across the city centre, its prosperity was immediately evident. The buildings that lined the busy streets showed evidence, in their freshly painted facades and the dates emblazoned below their roof lines, of having been only recently completed. Some were elegant, others tiered and decorated like wedding cakes.

Carts, carriages and bicycles dodged each other along the roadways. Wide awnings and overhanging balconies provided shade to pedestrians in the main shopping streets, while the many coffee houses and tearooms offered refreshment to weary shoppers. Wooden poles, topped with up to fifteen crossbars, punctuated the footpaths, festooning the air with telephone wires like a spider's web.

Hotel accommodation was out of the question for Harriet, being far too expensive for her limited means. Instead she relied on the fame of her father's name, her sister's religious profession and her own Catholic connections to secure temporary shelter with the Sisters of Mercy on Cathedral Hill.

As she reached the convent, built on a slight rise behind St Mary's Catholic cathedral, she could see the broad, steely curve of the Swan River just a couple of blocks to the south. Far to the east, a dark blur of low hills marked the limit of the coastal plain and the edge of the Darling Scarp.

It was apparent to Harriet why people from the other states called Western Australians "sandgropers". Wherever the ground was not covered by buildings or sealed roads, grey sand abounded. Carts travelling along the unsealed roads outside the main city block left ruts and sent up clouds of dust. In places where excavations were being made for new buildings, what passed for topsoil rested on yellow sand rather than bedrock. Perth, it seemed, was a city built on sand.

Harriet had left many of her belongings in Melbourne, but amongst those she brought with her were precious letters of introduction. One, from the Catholic archbishop of Melbourne, Thomas Carr, was addressed to Bishop Matthew Gibney of Perth. She hoped that with the archbishop's endorsement and encouragement, the bishop might help her to find a position.

It may have been from the nuns at the convent that she learned that Bishop Gibney had recently been overwhelmed with letters of introduction like hers. She reluctantly decided not to bother him with another.

Seated in her simply furnished room, she took several sheets of cream unlined paper and penned a letter to someone within the government education service. She had found his name in a newspaper account of the recent opening of a new school in the Perth satellite town of Subiaco.

"Sir," she began, "You will not, I hope, think me impudent to write."<sup>4</sup> She explained her reluctance to approach Bishop Gibney as she had planned, before rushing on with a breathless paucity of punctuation:

As I left home (Ireland) to help my mother, whom through financial losses my father who was the oldest and best known of Irish journalists and Author of the History of Limerick, Editor of the English paper called Notes and Queries antiquarian journal, left totally unprovided for. I have since his death (2 years since) been able to send her every month regular remittances until affairs got so bad in Melbourne that it was impossible to even support myself.

It would have surprised many who knew his name that Harriet's father, Maurice Lenihan—newspaper owner and editor, historian and mayor of Limerick, friend of the great and famous—should have left his wife in such hardship.

Maurice was a devout Catholic, loyally Irish, and committed to the repeal of the *Act of Union* between England and Ireland by constitutional means. Famous Irish patriots and politicians such as Daniel O'Connell, Thomas Francis Meagher and Michael Doheny were numbered amongst his friends. So was the temperance reformer, Father Mathew, who had persuaded Maurice to lifelong teetotalism. Maurice Lenihan's newspaper, the *Limerick Reporter*, was influential among moderate Irish nationalists.

His monumental *History of Limerick*, five years in the writing, had earned him a place in the Royal Irish Academy and a letter of

commendation from the pope himself, as Harriet liked to remind herself. She had grown up hearing the stories her father collected from books and rare manuscripts, academics, the elderly, church inscriptions and graveyards. Yet the book's publication, at great expense, had delivered no financial reward.

Her father, though still socially and politically active into his old age, had been gradually reduced to poverty by his debts. From time to time he wrote pleading letters to old friends such as Dr Kirby, the rector of the Irish College in Rome. At Christmas in 1889 he begged his friend for "a little aid at this great coming Festival" to ease what had become "a severe and trying struggle."<sup>5</sup>

Maurice, who had been much older than his wife, died at the age of eighty-four, leaving nothing. Several of Harriet's eight siblings had predeceased him. Her older and only surviving brother, James, was in frail health. Two of her older sisters were still alive, but Anastasia was mother superior at the convent of the Faithful Companions of Jesus at Bruff and had taken a vow of poverty. Margaret, unmarried, also proved unable to share the burden of caring for their mother. Maurice's death left Harriet responsible for supporting her mother financially.

Her letter to the unnamed gentleman continued:

I have been educated in London and in Paris, where I spent six years at school. I do not know if there is any where I could apply to get into the government service, where my knowledge of languages would be useful. I am also a very advanced musician.

Harriet, the most adventurous of the Lenihan children, had inherited her father's curiosity about the world, along with his strong physical constitution and his love of music. Her parents, far from limiting her activities because of her gender, encouraged her to cultivate her gifts. When her talents as a pianist and organist were recognised, she was sent to France to continue her musical education, where she enrolled at the Conservatoire de Paris.

The French had long welcomed Irish expatriates, based on their shared enmity with England. Over the years, a thriving community of Irish intellectuals and seminarians had grown up in Paris, many of them known to her father. The nuns of the Faithful Companions, her sister's order, also had their headquarters in the city.<sup>6</sup> By the time Harriet left France, she had many friends there and was able to speak French fluently.

From Paris she moved to London, where she attended the London Academy of Music. By now she was an accomplished musician and linguist. But being a young, single Irish woman, even one with a broad education, didn't give her much standing in England. She found work as a governess in Hammersmith. If she developed any romantic attachments in these years, she left nothing about them in writing.

In 1886, frustrated, but independent and courageous, Harriet sailed to Melbourne in the hope of finding work as a musician. She was thirty years old.

In Melbourne she advertised her services in the city newspapers. "A young lady, lately arrived from England, seeks position as ORGANIST in Catholic Church. . . Understands church music perfectly". To play—to run her fingers deftly over the manuals of a great pipe organ while her feet danced across the pedalboard, producing the music of earth and heaven—that was her primary ambition. But failing that: "Also desires pupils for French and music. Is a member of the Paris Conservatoire of Music and Academy, London."<sup>7</sup> Who would not want their child educated by such a well-qualified teacher? She gave Nicholson's Music Warerooms in Collins Street East as her address for replies.

Harriet had some success in Melbourne. The Catholic community, being mainly Irish, welcomed her as the daughter of the famous Maurice Lenihan. She found her way into the musical and literary circles of the city, played the organ for weddings and no doubt taught a few students.

After her father died on Christmas day in 1895, she took on the role of supporting her mother. For two years she managed to send money regularly to Ireland. But by 1897, it was clear that she would have to leave Melbourne and move elsewhere if she wanted to earn enough to support herself and her mother. That brought her to Perth, and the point of her letter: "Perhaps sir you could tell me if there were any chance of my getting into some government situation." Then in what must have seemed a severe case of name-dropping, she listed her references:

I should mention that I have letters from Lady Loch, whose husband was Governor of Victoria, also Lady Carrington, and the late Cardinal Manning of Westminster, all of whom knew me personally.

This was an impressive trio of referees. Lady Loch, born Elizabeth Villiers, was, as Harriet stated, the wife of the governor of Victoria, Sir

Henry Brougham Loch, who held that post from 1884 to 1889. Lady Cecilia Carrington was the wife of Charles Robert Carrington, the Governor of New South Wales between 1885 and 1890. And Cardinal Henry Edward Manning was a high-flying Church of England cleric who converted very publicly, and controversially, to Catholicism in 1850. By 1865 he had become archbishop of Westminster, head of the Catholic church in England, and in 1875 he was created a cardinal.

Harriet was probably not exaggerating when she claimed to know these people personally. Her father's name, and his church and political connections, had opened many doors for her. Her own gifts and accomplishments opened others. She was not averse to casually claiming friendship with people in high places, in fact she made a life-long habit of it. But it was her need to find work in order to support both herself and her impoverished mother in Ireland, rather than a desire to impress, that motivated her now.

She concluded her letter to the government official in Perth: "Awaiting and hoping an answer, I am Sir, Yours faithfully, Harriet Lenihan." Despite its formality, her letter was a heartfelt plea from a woman desperate to find work. The unnamed recipient filed it away and replied to Harriet using a printed form. No position was available.

Harriet gradually established herself in the social and musical world of Western Australia. She would have found the musical life of Perth rather thin and poorly nourished compared to Melbourne. World-class musicians who visited the eastern colonies were seldom willing to add an extra two-thousand-mile journey, across the desert or hazardous seas, to perform in Perth. Several local musical societies, choirs and orchestras did their best to fill the gap, supported by the military bands. But even the resident music critic for the *West Australian* newspaper often described their performances as lacklustre, notable more for the enthusiasm of the performers, and their kin who made up the audience, than for their musical polish. He frequently filled his "Musical Notes" column with tantalising tidbits about the musical feasts being dished up in Sydney, Melbourne and Europe.

Because of the very nature of her instrument, Harriet was best suited to being a soloist and had few opportunities to demonstrate her skills. Those larger city churches in Perth which could boast a pipe organ already had well-established organists, all men. From time to time, Harriet performed as a pianist for social "musical evenings" and fundraising

concerts. Eventually she gathered enough private students to maintain her frugal living standards.

In the autumn of 1899, she lost her appetite and began to feel a lethargy that was unusual for her. Her temperature rose alarmingly, her head pounded, her whole body ached. Soon she was feeling so unwell that a doctor was called. The doctor diagnosed typhoid fever and admitted her to the Perth Public Hospital.

For several weeks, Harriet was unable to do anything but lie in bed. She was no doubt aware that for every ten people who came down with typhoid, one would die as a result. Youth and vigour were no protection. The disease had struck down countless fit young men on the goldfields, as well as their wives and children. In this era before antibiotics had been discovered or intravenous fluids became available, skillful nursing was the only treatment. Her future depended on the nurses who cared for her, and providence.

She was alarmed enough to wonder what would become of her mother if she died. On 3 May, while still in hospital, she called for John Horgan, an Irish Catholic solicitor, and made a will. It was very simple. She left everything she had to her mother, or, if her mother predeceased her, to her sister Margaret. A diamond brooch would go to a friend, Hanna Brodie.<sup>8</sup>

On 12 May, feeling that she was now recovering, she asked someone to put a notice in the newspaper, letting her students know that she was progressing favourably and would soon be able to leave hospital. As she regained her strength, she had plenty of time to watch the nurses, in their long-sleeved, high-necked dresses, starched white aprons and caps, as they went about their work among the patients. She listened with curiosity to the doctors' discussions around the patients' beds, which were often carried on in what seemed almost another language.

It was an exciting time for the medical profession. Scientific knowledge about diseases was growing exponentially and the old empirical ways of treating illnesses were being replaced by new scientifically proven methods. Sometimes this led to conflict between those trained in the old methods and those who had graduated more recently. The more progressive argued strongly for better public health measures, to prevent regular outbreaks of diseases such as typhoid, smallpox and even bubonic plague. Harriet no doubt listened and observed what went on around her with her usual curiosity.

When she had fully recovered, she returned to teaching. By May the

following year, she had coaxed and coached her students long enough to put on a concert in the Municipal Hall in Leederville, close to where she was then living. A reviewer described the evening's programme as "perhaps, somewhat ambitious considering the tender age of the performers". Nevertheless, the young musicians had rewarded their teacher with a performance that showed "how excellently they had profited by the good teaching received from Miss Lenihan".<sup>9</sup> It was a fine advertisement for her skills.

Harriet concluded the evening by playing a piece herself by Alice Charbonnet-Kellermann, a composer, concert pianist and music teacher living in Sydney. Alice Charbonnet had studied at the Paris Conservatoire in the 1870s and may well have been one of Harriet's contemporaries in Paris. She and her husband, Frederick Kellermann, were well connected. Possibly it was they who introduced Harriet to Lady Carrington, the governor's wife, when Harriet visited Sydney.

In December 1900, Harriet and her students put on another concert, which was equally ambitious and much applauded. But teaching private students was an unreliable way of earning an income and could be a little tedious. In her mid-forties, an age which many at the time would have described as bordering on elderly, she was ready for a new adventure.

Western Australia itself was on the verge of a new era. During the previous year, thousands of acres of new farmland had been opened up in the agricultural south of the state, and nearly eight million acres had been granted as pastoral leases in the vast outback areas to the north and east. Good rains in the winter had produced a bumper harvest. Success for the farmers meant increased prosperity for all. Only the traditional owners of the land that was being generously granted to pastoralists saw no reason for optimism. They found themselves being dispossessed, driven by necessity into camps on cattle stations and the margins of country towns.

Late in July 1900, Western Australians had voted, by a margin of two to one, to join the Federation of Australian States and to approve the proposed constitution.<sup>10</sup> In an historic first, women were included among the voters. The large number of 'tothersiders' living in Western Australia after the gold rush had boosted the 'yes' vote. So had the promise of federal funding for a railway line to link Perth to the other states. Goods and people would no longer have to hazard the dangerous sea voyage that Harriet had experienced when she travelled from Melbourne. (The promised railway line would not be opened until 1917.)

People around the state celebrated Commonwealth Day on 1 January 1901 with unprecedented zeal. In the city, banners and flags festooned the streets. Parades, church services, speeches and a gala concert in the evening were all well attended. Children taking advantage of free rides for the day packed the city trams.

The enthusiasm for Federation was mirrored in intensity not long afterwards by an outpouring of grief at news of the death of Queen Victoria, on 22 January. As Harriet sat browsing through the Saturday edition of the *West Australian* on 26 January, she found its pages peppered with responses to the Queen's demise. Shops postponed their sales and sporting clubs announced the cancellation of planned events.

Apart from the queen's death, news from overseas consisted almost entirely of reports from the war in South Africa's Transvaal. Harriet skimmed through an article by a clergyman on "the White Man's Burden" and another by a woman discussing the "shocking breach of the rules of good taste" shown by English women who canvassed with their men during election campaigns.

Then, on page three, among advertisements for patent medicines, real estate sales and municipal notices, she spotted an advertisement which sparked her imagination:

APPLICATIONS will be received at the City Council Office, Perth, until noon on Wednesday, 30th January, 1901, for the POSITION of LADY HEALTH INSPECTOR, at a salary of £2 2s. per week. All applications must be in writing and endorsed "Lady Inspector".<sup>11</sup>

A salaried job, even if not lavishly paid, would provide her with a steady income, enough to live on comfortably and support her mother in Ireland. Though the advertised salary was far less than that of a male health inspector, it still offered a comfortable and reliable living compared to teaching music privately. In 1902, a music teacher in Perth with thirty students claimed to be earning "nearly £100" (one hundred pounds) annually when he or she advertised their business for sale.<sup>12</sup> Most music teachers, and female school teachers, earned less than that.

Harriet had no qualifications or experience in the sort of work carried out by health inspectors. Did her recent illness and experiences during her hospital stay prompt her interest in the position? Perhaps friends or acquaintances who knew her situation encouraged her to apply. Whatever the case, she placed her application letter in an envelope,

carefully marking it “Lady Inspector”, and sent it to the council office. Then she waited.

The idea of employing a female health inspector had first been raised in the Perth City Council in 1895, when a Mrs Cummings offered her services to the council as an assistant health inspector. While the mayor and one councillor thought it a good idea, Mr Charles Smith, one of the health inspectors at the time, joked that the only reason a lady’s services might be required would be to nurse him when he got sick.<sup>13</sup> His quip got a laugh from the councillors, the lady’s application was referred to a subcommittee, and the idea was forgotten.

The council’s medical officer of health, Dr O’Connor, reintroduced the idea in December 1900, when he recommended that the council employ a female inspector. This time the councillors agreed, though without discussing what exactly the lady inspector’s role would be, or what conditions would apply to her employment. It was left to the works committee to determine her salary.<sup>14</sup>

The advertisements for the position were equally silent about what qualifications were required and what duties the lady would perform. These omissions were noted and criticised by several writers of letters to the editor, and by the newspaper editors themselves.

One letter writer, A. Mack, suggested that, since no qualifications were listed, “probably an incompetent person will get the position through influence”. He or she pointed out that when a similar post was advertised in Melbourne, the advertisement specified that applicants had to be trained nurses and below a certain age.<sup>15</sup>

“A lady inspector! What kind of an official will she be?” asked the *Daily News*. “What will she have to do? How will she do it? Why has she been introduced to municipal life? These are questions which need some answering. At present there’s a deep mystery surrounding the inspector-in-petticoats that is to be, and as the citizens have been conjuring up all sorts of visions of ‘the new woman,’ and the duties that she will have to perform, the City Council might throw some light upon the matter.”<sup>16</sup> The council offered no illumination on the mystery.

Forty women applied for the position. Harriet’s application was successful. Her appointment was announced in the *West Australian* on 11 February 1901 (naming her as “Henrietta Lenihan”) and her appointment was confirmed at the next meeting of the Central Board of

Health, which had oversight of the local health boards.

One of the other applicants, Mrs Tracey, claimed that the appointment committee had deliberately excluded her in favour of Miss Lenihan. She aired her grievances at a public meeting, protesting that Dr O'Connor and the acting town clerk, Mr Bold, had set up the selection process in Harriet Lenihan's favour.<sup>17</sup> But Mrs Tracey was well known in Perth as an eccentric whinger, and her complaint was publicised by the *Daily News* with some amusement. Perhaps had Harriet known what her future as the lady inspector would hold, she would have gladly left the role to Mrs Tracey.