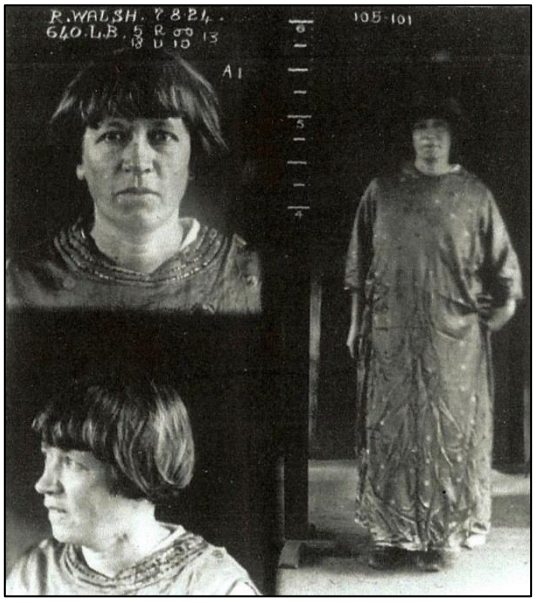
Teresa Taylor – pickpocket and property tycoon



Teresa Taylor in Long Bay Reformatory, 1924

Teresa Alice Taylor was born on Christmas Day 1884 at Braidwood NSW, the youngest of nine children of farmers John and Hannah Taylor[1]. She moved to Sydney in about 1900 to work in domestic service with an older sister who was already there. The two sisters bought small blocks of land in the suburbs from their savings and sold them at a profit. In time, she acquired a great deal of housing property in the poorest parts of Sydney, mainly Surry Hills, Redfern and Woolloomooloo[2].

From about 1910, Teresa embarked on a life of crime as a thief and a pickpocket, and used aliases to try and confuse the police. Her first court appearance was on five charges of theft in October 1910 after a two month spree in which she stole a wide range of homewares from her employer in Mosman, and several of his neighbours. She was convicted of stealing a great deal of table and bed linen, clothing, crockery, cutlery - and a rat trap[3]. Perhaps she decided to fit out a new house for free by helping herself to whatever she could get her hands on. For this, she was sentenced to nine months light labour in Long Bay Reformatory for Women, the first of several visits she would pay to this institution[4].

Then in May 1914, she served six months hard labour for stealing 2,000 feet of Baltic pine boards, 72 feet of dressed Oregon and 21 feet of skirting boards from a building site at Artarmon[5]. She earned the name "Timber May" from the police in the early days of her career, when they suspected that she stole enough timber and other materials from houses under construction to build her own cottage in North Sydney[6]. Her convictions were mainly for theft, but occasionally she branched out: in 1917 she was convicted on two counts of fraud under the Maternity Allowance Act[7].

But her specialty was picking pockets, and a newspaper report on her last trial in March 1924 gave some details of how she operated. Drunken sailors were her favourite victims for a time – they did not stay long in port, and she knew that by opting for trial by jury, the only witness had gone back to

sea by the time a jury was empaneled and the case would collapse[8]. She was cunning enough to be more than a match for judges, police and Crown law officials for a number of years. Whenever she landed a good haul, she invariably paid a deposit on some house she coveted. She specialised in buying slum properties, claiming that she got a much better financial return from them than in any other part of the city[9].

A method she devised, and which became her trademark, was to replace a roll of bank notes with a roll of brown paper in the victim's pocket, so the theft wasn't discovered until she was off the scene. But this modus operandi became her undoing, because in 1924 she robbed a ferry engineer named Hubert Brown of a very large sum - £105, (worth $7,500 today)[10] and he reported the theft and the method to police. They knew it was her, and tracked her down collecting rents in Surry Hills.

She must have known she was in a lot of trouble this time, because she desperately tried to disguise her appearance before appearing in a police lineup. She rubbed her hands in the asphalt in the police yard and smeared her face, pinned up her hair, took off her outer dress, then got some brown paper and pushed it up her nostrils. Despite this elaborate camouflage, when Brown walked along the line, he placed his hands on her, declaring "this is the woman who got my money. I'd know her hide in a tannery!" She was sentenced to eighteen months in Long Bay, although the judge said this would be reduced if she paid the money back[11]. She eventually served about nine months.

She featured in most editions of the annual *NSW Police Gazette* from 1910 to 1924, and because her expanding range of aliases made identification difficult, a physical description was often provided: she was 5' 3 ½" tall, with fair complexion and hair, medium build and blue eyes[12]. She may not have been tall, but she wasn't easily intimidated: in 1922, she was sentenced to one month's hard labour for punching a police constable in the mouth while being questioned in the police station. At the trial, the police inspector said "she had a shocking record for one so young"[13]. At an earlier trial in 1920, the magistrate was told that "although she had considerable means, including house property, she had a frightful criminal record"[14].

She was convicted 13 times, with a total sentence of seven years, four of which were spent in gaol. She used an amazing number of aliases in her career, starting with May Taylor, Myra Bray and Annie Smith, then adding to the list with Ida Taylor, Ivy Jeffries, Ivy Smith, Amy Wilson, Amy Rose Wilson, Alice Rose Payten, Rose Whatton, Rose Lewis, Rose Walsh, Ira Bray, Grace Long and Amy Winter. The police generally knew her as Rose Walsh, as this is the name on the photograph taken in Long Bay in 1924[15].

She died at age 40 of ovarian cancer at the Glen Ayr Private Hospital in Paddington in May 1925, a few months after coming out of Long Bay[16]. She left no will, and her fortune was valued at £23,329 (nearly $1.7 million now). Because there was a possible husband as well as other relatives, the Public Trustee delayed the sale and distribution of her assets for two years in order to locate all the people with valid claims on the estate. In property conveyancing documents, she claimed she was married to a Reginald John Wilson, ship's fireman[17], although there is no record of this marriage in New South Wales[18]. He was never located, and she presumably invented him to facilitate the process of property purchase.

In January 1927, the Public Trustee advertised the sale of the 48 houses she still owned in Surry Hills and Darlinghurst. The largest group consisted of 32 stone cottages and terrace houses in McElhone

Place and Marshall Street, purchased not long before her death. The other properties were 143-153 Crown Street, 6-8 Burnell Place, 1-3 Mackey Street, and six houses in Wilson's Terrace, off Hart Street[19]. These properties brought in a total rent of £42 per week (over $3,000 now). Once the houses were sold, the Public Trustee announced a court inquiry to locate all claimants to the estate, prior to the distribution of the assets[20]. The mysterious husband was never found, and the estate was distributed to three brothers, a sister, a nephew and a niece.

To the police, Teresa Taylor was an enigma. A detective once asked her why she took the risk of imprisonment when she had enough money to live comfortably for the rest of her life and did not have to roam the streets stealing from men. She told him her ambition was to own a hundred houses, and then she would be satisfied and go straight[21]. On another occasion, she said she wanted to own enough property to return her an income of £40 per week. She had just reached this figure when she died. In an article on her life in 1928, she was called "the greatest, shrewdest and most businesslike pickpocket Australia has produced"[22].

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