‘Splendid opportunities’: Women traders in postwar Hong Kong and Australia, 1946–1949¹

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In late March 1946, University of Melbourne graduate and long-time Hong Kong resident Elma Mary Kelly (1895–1974) gave an interview to Melbourne’s *Argus* newspaper. Released from Stanley prison camp in August 1945, Kelly had recently landed in her hometown after a brief sojourn in London. It was her great desire, Kelly told the reporter, to ‘go back to the East’, where she thought there would be ‘splendid opportunities, especially for Australians’, who she believed flourished there because of their ‘poise’ and ‘liking for the life’.² Kelly travelled on to Sydney to meet with old friends before returning to Hong Kong in May 1946. On her return, she embarked on an extraordinary venture. In partnership with her fellow Stanley internee Dorothy Gordon Jenner (the journalist ‘Andrea’ of Sydney’s *Sun* newspaper) and a Sydney friend, Isobel (Belle) Robilliard (1895–1975), Kelly set up the Austral-China Trading Company, an import–export business.

This article examines this unusual trading company, asking what drove the women to launch the business in challenging circumstances, how it operated and why it failed. It is based on a collection of 39 documents, including 23 letters and three telegrams written by Kelly to her friends Belle and Tom Robilliard of Bridge End, Wollstonecraft, in north Sydney, between 8 May 1946 and 7 January 1949.³ The majority of the letters are addressed to Belle Robilliard—nine sent in 1946, seven in 1947 and three in 1948. Four letters are addressed to Tom Robilliard (1892–1978), Belle’s husband (one in 1947, two in 1948 and one in 1949). The collection includes eight documents from distributors (letters, invoices and receipts), two copies of documents relating to Kelly’s Sydney exhibition in 1946 and three telegrams.

The Robilliards were old friends from Kelly’s girlhood in Melbourne. Belle (née Raisbeck) was born in the same year as Kelly and was raised in Flemington, so it is possible the women knew each other from early childhood.⁴ The Robilliards

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1 My sincere thanks go to Malcolm Robilliard for entrusting his grandparents’ letters to me, and to Stuart Macintyre and Kate Darian-Smith for reading an earlier draft.

2 ‘From Hong Kong Prison Camp’, *The Argus*, [Melbourne], 30 March 1946, 14.

3 Belle’s replies have not survived and their contents can only be inferred from Kelly’s letters.

4 Births, Deaths and Marriages Victoria, www.bdm.vic.gov.au/, Reg. no. 6684.

married at St George's Church of England, Royal Park, in May 1916 before moving to Sydney, where Tom worked as an accountant and later as principal of Stott's Business College.⁵ A daughter, Joan, was born in November 1916.⁶ Their first son, Peter (born 1918), was killed in New Guinea in August 1942; their second son, Richard (born 1920, and known as Dick), saw active service with the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF).⁷ Dick married in 1947 and subsequently managed hotels across New South Wales before working for the Australian Mutual Provident Society (AMP). Their third son, Joseph (born 1922, known as Joe), graduated as a medical doctor, marrying a fellow doctor in 1948.⁸

The Robilliard letters show the ways that two Australian women navigated this transitional period, looking back to their lives before the war, hoping to recapture the security and privileges they had once enjoyed, and at the same time, looking forward to a new postwar order that promised them, and privileged white women like them, more autonomy than they had ever had before.

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Born in 1895 in Melbourne, Elma Mary Kelly was the youngest child of Catherine (née Kildahl), a feminist activist, and William, an Irish-born barrister and local politician. In 1919, Kelly graduated with a Bachelor of Science from the University of Melbourne. After a successful career as a chemical analyst, she travelled to Shanghai in October 1931, in pursuit of a married lover, a naval officer. Soon after her arrival, she commenced work for Frank Millington, the proprietor of a successful European advertising agency in China. By 1935, she was living in Hong Kong and managing the Hong Kong and Canton branches of Millington's business. There is no evidence that Kelly was engaged in the import–export business before the invasion of Hong Kong by the Japanese in December 1941, but her advertising work (which included printing and publishing) probably provided her with an extensive business network across southern China.⁹

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5 'Marriages', *The Argus*, [Melbourne], 20 May 1916, 13; 'Gaiety of Youth: Stott's Students Dance', *Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers Advocate*, [Sydney], 1 October 1936, 6.

6 'ROBILLIARD JOAN B', NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, familyhistory.bdm.nsw.gov.au/lifelink/familyhistory/search/result?4, No. 44964/1916.

7 'Pilot Officer Peter Thomas Robilliard', Australian War Memorial Collection, Canberra, www.awm.gov.au/index.php/collection/P10320115; ROBILLIARD P T, 5244870, National Archives of Australia [hereinafter NAA], Canberra, NAA: A9300; NAA: A9301, 432571, 5549713; 'Family Notices', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 December 1946, 24.

8 'Weddings', *Daily Telegraph*, [Sydney], 14 September 1948, 12.

9 Jackie Dickenson, *Australian Women in Advertising in the Twentieth Century* (London: Palgrave, 2016), 40–49, doi.org/10.1057/9781137514349.

Kelly was interned in Stanley camp from late January 1942.¹⁰ The Japanese had invaded in mid December 1941 and Hong Kong was surrendered at Christmas.¹¹ Two weeks later, the citizens of Allied countries were ordered to go to the Murray parade ground from where many were forced to move into Chinese hotels and brothels while the internment camp was prepared.¹² During this interim period, Kelly arranged for her possessions, including her business ledgers, to be stored safely, possibly with local staff from Millington's agency. Some 3,000 civilians were imprisoned in Stanley from the end of January 1942; most were British, but there were also Americans, Dutch and 102 Australians.¹³ Facilities were rudimentary: it was common for 'five or more' people to share a room and bathroom facilities (women and men together).¹⁴ Food and other necessities were scarce and a black market soon developed in which the Japanese, their Chinese, Indian and Formosan guards and the majority of the interns participated.¹⁵ It is hard to ascertain the extent to which Kelly was involved in black market activities (it is improbable that she became what Emerson calls an 'internee-trader'),¹⁶ but she would certainly have witnessed and been affected by their operations.¹⁷ As one former internee recalled:

There were internees who were mixed up in the soulless practice of trading with the Japs on the black markets and the ultimate victims of the high prices were fellow internees.¹⁸

After her release, Kelly sailed to England on the *Empress of Britain*, intending to reunite with her lover, but stayed only briefly before returning to Hong Kong in January 1946.¹⁹ In March, she flew to Melbourne before moving on to Sydney,

10 Bernice Archer, "A Low-Key Affair": Memories of Civilian Internment in the Far East, 1942–1945', in *War and Memory in the Twentieth Century*, eds Martin Evans and Ken Lunn (Oxford: Berg, 1997), 45–58; Christina Twomey, *Australia's Forgotten Prisoners: Civilians Interned by the Japanese in World War Two* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 146–49; Nicola Goc, 'Tabloid Journalist as POW: The War Diaries of Dorothy Gordon Jenner', *Media History* 19, No. 3 (2013): 322–35, doi.org/10.1080/13688804.2013.820107.

11 Gwen Priestwood, *Through Japanese Barbed Wire* (London: George Harap, 1941), 33, 34. Priestwood fictionalises Kelly as 'Grace Brown' (pp. 48, 49, 53, 59).

12 Priestwood, *Through Japanese Barbed Wire*, 33, 34, 47.

13 In her camp diary (Jenner Papers, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales), Jenner recorded 92 Australians in Stanley. Twomey, *Australia's Forgotten Prisoners*, 33; 'Australians Freed at Hong Kong', *Newcastle Sun*, 4 September 1945, 5.

14 'Conditions in Hong Kong Prisons', *The Mercury*, [Hobart], 25 May 1943, 3; 'Sexes Mixed in Rooms at Stanley Camp', *Evening Advocate*, [Innisfail, Qld], 21 September 1945, 1.

15 Geoffrey C. Emerson, *Hong Kong Internment 1942–1945: Life in the Japanese Civilian Camp at Stanley* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 151; 'Proprieties Ignored at Jap Camps in Hong Kong', *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 21 September 1945, 3.

16 These were usually Cantonese speakers; the extent of Kelly's proficiency in the language is unknown.

17 Emerson, *Hong Kong Internment*, 152.

18 Emerson, *Hong Kong Internment*, 154; 'Internee Black Markets Flourish in Hong Kong', *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 20 September 1945, 2.

19 Dorothy Jenner, *Darlings, I've Had a Ball / [by] Andrea; as told to Trish Sheppard* (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1975), 220, 236.

where she stayed with Dorothy Jenner.²⁰ The pair organised an exhibition of Kelly's private collection of Chinese objects d'art, including 'ivories, bronzes, porcelain' and 'lacquers'.²¹ These objects were for sale in support of the Food for Britain Relief Fund, but the exhibition was also conceived as a marketing opportunity for the women's new trading business, which was 'designed to show the class of embroidered linen, silk underclothing and silks that Austro-China [sic] Trading Co. Ltd., Hongkong [sic] can supply to buyers in the trade in Australia'.²²

The circumstances that brought about the Austral-China business venture are unclear. In Stanley, access to the black market determined in some cases whether an inmate lived or died.²³ Kelly and Jenner (especially) had enjoyed successful careers before the war, but their camp experiences must surely have informed the decision to embark on their trading venture.²⁴ Jenner's version appeared in her autobiography 30 years after the events they related and reflect what Nicola Goc described as a gossipy, tabloid approach to relating her experiences.²⁵ Jenner related that Kelly had been kind to her in Stanley, sharing fat for cooking when she was able. Despite this, her recollections were unkind. A former Hollywood actress and renowned beauty, Jenner found her former colleague crude and unglamorous, referring to her repeatedly as 'the water buffalo'. Kelly, Jenner explained, was 'a very shrewd businesswoman of the go-getter variety', but 'she was not at all my type of woman'.²⁶

Kelly was back in Hong Kong by the end of May 1946 and began rebuilding her life there.²⁷ She moved first to resurrect the prewar advertising, printing and publishing business. Her association with Millington had come to an end and she reported 'skirmishing' with his firm's headquarters in Shanghai over leave money she had been owed 'when the balloon went up'; they agreed to pay her six months' salary.²⁸ After reuniting with two or three loyal staff from before the war, Kelly formed her own advertising business, Cathay Limited, with her Chinese lawyer as co-director. The ledgers she had stored when the Japanese invaded enabled her to collect money owed.²⁹ 'I am agent for all advertising on Trams', she wrote to Belle Robilliard, 'and

20 Jenner, *Darlings, I've Had a Ball*, 236. Jenner kept a diary while in Stanley, which is now in the State Library of New South Wales. Twomey, *Australia's Forgotten Prisoners*, 10–11; Bridget Griffin-Foley, 'Jenner, Dorothy Hetty Fosbury (Andrea) (1891–1985)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography. Volume 17* (Canberra: National Centre of Biography, The Australian National University), adb.anu.edu.au/biography/jenner-dorothy-hetty-fosbury-andrea-12697/text22889.

21 'Exhibition of "Things Chinese"', 16 April 1946. Malcolm Robilliard collection.

22 'Exhibition of "Things Chinese"'.
 23 Emerson, *Hong Kong Internment*, 82.

24 'Internee Black Markets Flourish in Hong Kong', *Townsville Daily Bulletin*.
 25 Goc, 'Tabloid Journalist as POW', 325.

26 Jenner, *Darlings, I've Had a Ball*, 237.
 27 Kelly to Belle, 27 May 1946.

28 Kelly to Belle, 8 September 1946.
 29 Kelly was interviewed for Radio Television Hong Kong's 'Time to Remember' program on 30 June 1968,

mmis.hkpl.gov.hk/coverpage/-/coverpage/view?p_r_p_-10780556564_c+QF757YsWv58JCjtBMMIqojLr%2BwjKp773&_coverpage_WAR_mmisportaltportlet_log+Y&tabsi+CATALOGUE.

if could get them to paid [sic] would be in clover. But can't get that started yet.'³⁰ With continued rationing, limited shipping and disrupted trade, the advertising business grew only slowly; in 1948, Kelly recorded that advertising remained 'a very long term [prospect] with the sea mails as bad to England as they are, for the carrying of vouchers'.³¹

More immediately promising were the opportunities offered by the fissure in prewar trading norms and, in the short term, Kelly chose to trade her way back to financial security.³² Australia's sea trade with China resumed in April 1946, while Kelly was in Sydney for her exhibition.³³ Hopes were high in Australia that the country could take advantage of new opportunities in Asia, and there were numerous newspaper reports of the opportunities Hong Kong in particular offered.³⁴ Given this coverage, it is unsurprising that Kelly, Jenner and Belle Robilliard resolved to embark on their business venture. But the women might also have been aware of the reports from journalists such as Peter Russo (for *The Argus*) that tempered the favourable view of trade with Hong Kong with warnings of the impact of organised crime there, which dominated the black market in the colony and kept the cost of living high. Where organised crime stopped and legitimate trade began was murky; Russo reported the difficulties caused by 'the alleged willing cooperation of British, as well as Chinese, firms with black marketeers'.³⁵ The risks of dealing on the black market were high and, if they were caught, firms could have their trade licences revoked, or be heavily fined or imprisoned.³⁶ The place of the Austral-China Trading Company on the spectrum between legality and illegality is difficult to ascertain but, as we will see below, Kelly would prove more than willing to fudge licences and permits, as well as to make use of the black market, if that meant trade could be facilitated.

Australian factors also affected Austral-China's trade. Shipping had resumed with Asia, but from Hong Kong, this must have seemed limited and unreliable in the immediate postwar years, not least because of the Australian press's exaggerated

30 Kelly to Belle, 8 September 1946; Kelly interview, 1968.

31 Kelly to Belle, 7 June 1948. These vouchers were most likely ration coupons printed in and issued from Britain.

32 Barrie Dyster and David Meredith, *Australia in the Global Economy: Continuity and Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 152–55, doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139197168; Dr Emery Barcs, 'US Control in Pacific Can Help Us', *News* (Adelaide), 18 November 1946, 2.

33 'Hong Kong Trade', *Daily Mercury*, [Mackay, Qld], 20 December 1945, 1; 'Resumption of Sea Trade with China', *Daily Telegraph*, [Sydney], 24 March 1946, 4.

34 'Australia's Export Trade', *The Canberra Times*, 8 January 1946, 3; 'Rehabilitated Hong Kong is Hungry for Trade', *Townsville Daily Bulletin*, 15 March 1946, 4; Alan Dower, 'Trade Doors Open in Asia: Chance for Us', *Herald* (Melbourne), 4 April 1946, 2; Peter Russo, 'Marketing Goods in Asia', *The Argus*, [Melbourne], 10 October 1946, 11; 'US Control in the Pacific Can Help Us', *News*; 'China's Hoarders Caught but Still in Trade Battle', *The Argus*, [Melbourne], 27 November 1946, 2.

35 Peter Russo, 'Hong Kong Fighting Black Market', *The Argus*, [Melbourne], 27 June 1946, 2.

36 Russo, 'Hong Kong Fighting Black Market'; Russo, 'Hong Kong's Economy Disrupted', *The Argus*, [Melbourne], 23 July 1946, 2.

coverage of industrial unrest on Australia's waterfront.³⁷ Kelly kept a close eye on the movement of shipping between Hong Kong and Australia and knew the masters of a number of ships that sailed between the ports. Indeed, her letters were replete with references to naval officers and their wives; Kelly's social circle in Hong Kong was most likely based on this group because of her own long-term clandestine relationship with the married naval officer.³⁸

Belle Robilliard invested £500 into the Austral-China Trading Company, and Kelly matched that amount to purchase their first batch of goods for sale in Hong Kong.³⁹ Kelly's first letter to Robilliard (on 8 May 1946) revealed that this was to be a women's business venture. Writing from the boat between Sydney and Hong Kong (the letter was posted in Townsville), Kelly lamented that Tom Robilliard had not 'gone in' with the women; she had wanted him to travel to Hong Kong with her.⁴⁰ She told Belle:

He got faint hearted at being associated with women. More fool he. Never mind you and I will endeavour to get a little going on the side and I will help you with any good line by giving you good agents elsewhere.⁴¹

Besides working on the family farm, Belle had not previously been in formal employment, so why would she join Kelly in this rather speculative venture? Malcolm Robilliard recalls being told that his grandfather, Tom, 'made a disastrous investment in a farm outside Sydney around 1940, just as a major drought hit'. Tom left Stott's Business College around the same time and, by 1946, the Robilliard family was strapped for cash; the couple would never be 'financially secure again'.⁴² The all-in war effort had led many married women to join the workforce for the first time and, though many withdrew to the domestic sphere once the men returned from the war, others remained in the workforce and the stigma attached to a married woman working was reduced. Her grandson believes that Belle, by then aged 50, 'would have appreciated' the opportunity to work with Kelly and contribute to the family income. It is also possible that Kelly embarked on this speculative business venture (rather than focus on her advertising business) to help out her old friends.

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37 'Resumption of Sea Trade with China Next Month', *Daily Telegraph*, [Sydney], 24 March 1946, 4; Tom Sheridan, *Division of Labour: Industrial Relations in the Chifley Years, 1945–49* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1998), 95, 104–05. See, for example, 'Double Dumped Wool', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 May 1946, 4; 'Waterside Workers and Miners Decide to Continue Strike', *Daily Mercury*, [Mackay, Qld], 22 June 1946, 1; 'Sydney Waterside Strike Threatens', *Daily Telegraph*, [Sydney], 16 October 1946, 4.

38 'Delayed Cargoes Destroy Trade Opportunities', *Queensland Times*, [Ipswich, Qld], 9 February 1946, 5; Kelly to Belle, 28 November 1946; Kelly to Margaret Jaye, [copy], 15 March 1947.

39 Kelly to Belle, 27 May 1946.

40 Kelly to Belle, 18 April 1947.

41 Kelly to Belle, 8 May 1946.

42 M. Robilliard, Email message to author, 5 October 2018. The sale of the farm seems to have occurred in mid 1946: Kelly to Belle, 17 August 1946.

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The letters reveal the intricacies of the women’s business transactions, including pricing, profit, trade restrictions and shipping details, as well as the networks of women and men in Hong Kong, Australia and beyond that Kelly utilised to facilitate the trade. There are brief mentions of family events, items of gossip and the weather.⁴³ Kelly writes in clipped, businesslike sentences; she is often uncomfortably bossy but tries to temper her assertiveness with humour and muted apologies. There is a note of drama in many of the letters. Everything ‘shatters’ Kelly—when the balloons she required could not be procured, when there was a mix up over cable addresses and when some unspecified problem with ‘purchases’ arose.⁴⁴

Despite the very real drama of her life between January 1942 and August 1945, there was little in these letters about Kelly’s time as a prisoner of the Japanese, beyond references to her ‘camp memory’ and a comment about ‘a spot of mould’ on a cake that Belle sent her, which she dismissed as ‘nothing after camp’.⁴⁵ The dramatic tone of some of the letters might indicate some sort of post-traumatic stress; Kelly received no debriefing on leaving Stanley and had been pushing ahead ever since, with little time for reflection. The social, economic and political situation in Hong Kong and southern China must also have been a cause of concern, but it received little attention in the letters. On her return in late May 1946, Kelly was too focused on starting the business to dwell on the instability in the region in these immediate postwar years, although her first letter from Hong Kong (on 27 May 1946) gave some sense of what it was like for the returning expatriate. ‘There are problems in Hong Kong’, Kelly wrote: ‘It is not safe on streets ... [it] is certainly not a nice place at the moment.’ She was struggling to secure accommodation; it seems those who stayed ‘or came back in a month’ had snapped up the best homes.⁴⁶ Analysis by Polish economist Edward Szczepanik supports this. When the occupation ended, he noted in 1958, the previously thriving economy was in ruins; the prewar population had fallen by two-thirds (the population in 1945 was 800,000, 97 per cent of whom were Chinese); trade and industry were at a standstill and many of the homes had been destroyed or were significantly run down.⁴⁷

Kelly made no further comment on the political situation in the region until the end of January 1948. Meanwhile, the tenuous truce struck between the Chinese nationalists and the communists after the Japanese surrender broke into all-out civil war during 1946. At the end of the Pacific War, nationalist troops and the communists’ guerrilla forces were both within striking distance of Hong Kong,

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43 Kelly to Belle, 28 January 1948.

44 Kelly to Belle, 16 November 1946; 28 November 1946; Telegram, 19 November 1948.

45 Kelly to Belle, 17 August 1946.

46 Kelly to Belle, 27 May 1946.

47 Edward Szczepanik, *The Economic Growth of Hong Kong* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 3, 15.

but the leaders of the opposing forces had more pressing problems than resolving the ownership of Hong Kong. Britain considered granting Hong Kong its independence (as it had with Singapore) and returning the colony to China but, with the support of the Americans, it eventually settled for reoccupation. The territory resumed its previous incarnation as a port of entry into China and continued to display all the features of a colonial outpost. As the civil war intensified during 1947, the nationalists remained a threat to the security of Hong Kong.⁴⁸ At the end of the year, Kelly noted: 'World, or British Empire still seems a troubled place!'⁴⁹ Two weeks later, on 16 January 1948, Chinese nationalists rioted on the island of Shameen (now Shamian), 130 kilometres north of Hong Kong in Canton (Guangdong), torching the British consulate there.⁵⁰ These events dominated Kelly's letter to Belle of 27 January 1948:

Wasn't it [the Canton unrest] infuriating? And I can just hear you saying, that's what I said [would happen]. Everyone here is furious but not other sentiments. Annoyed that T.V. Soong [the Governor of Guangdong province] didn't see it couldn't happen. Only two small bridges lead into Shameen. Two machine guns on each could have fixed it ... As far as we are concerned, that means nothing.⁵¹

Some letters hinted at Kelly's political views. In her youth, she had been a committed feminist activist, although on the conservative side of the movement. Given her business interests, this conservatism was unsurprising, though she was not blind to the inequalities of life in Hong Kong: 'It is so hard for anyone who hasn't been here to visualize it. Extreme wealth and extreme poverty.' She was able to put any qualms about such inequality to one side, however, and continued to exploit the cheap labour provided by the colonial economy.⁵² As Szczepanik notes of the printing and publishing business in Hong Kong in this period, cheap labour and good craftsmanship attracted orders from abroad, and Kelly benefited personally from the skilled work of underpaid Chinese workers.⁵³

Kelly's first letter to Belle Robilliard from Hong Kong reiterated her disappointment that 'Tom is not in [the business] with us', but she reassured her that they would average 25 per cent profit on 'our £1000 that I bought [sic]. Not so dusty is it?' She encouraged Belle to get started on their enterprise. There was a patronising tone to her instructions; she was clearly going to take the lead in the business: 'If you

48 W. Roger Louis, 'Hong Kong: The Critical Phase, 1945–1949', *American Historical Review* (1997): 1052–84, doi.org/10.2307/2170629; Information Services Department of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, *Hong Kong Yearbook 2017* (Hong Kong, 2017), www.yearbook.gov.hk/2017/en/.

49 Kelly to Belle, 29 December 1947. See Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: Britain's Asian Army and the War with Japan* (London: Penguin Books, 2005) for a persuasive account of the Europeans' inability to reestablish the prewar order in Asia.

50 Louis, 'Hong Kong', 1071.

51 Kelly to Belle, 27 January 1948.

52 Kelly to Belle, 12 April 1947.

53 Szczepanik, *The Economic Growth of Hong Kong*, 125.

never start, you won't get anywhere will you', she told Belle, who had found a source of 'dry fruits'. Kelly encouraged her to send up a 'small lot', as they 'would do very well' in Hong Kong, where cans of fruit were snapped up quickly:

Why not send 100lbs of each ... I will agree to take that amount on your recommendation that it is good quality ... add 5% for yourself ... Try your hand as a shipping clerk with that amount and if it is alright I'll send down a decent order with cash. And so you get started.⁵⁴

She advised that

quick turnovers are the secret of success ... If you have enough turnovers in a year you can afford to do it on a small profit. All of which you know.

The Commonwealth Disposals Commission sales were an important source of goods for the women's business.⁵⁵ These sales of Australian surplus defence equipment and materials were intended to generate income, and those held in Darwin aimed to further the development of the Northern Territory.⁵⁶ They began late in 1944 and, in the peak years of 1946 and 1947, represented the largest commercial enterprise in the Commonwealth.⁵⁷ Dealers with 'plenty of ready cash' were 'making fortunes buying lines in bulk at Disposals Commission auction sales, and retailing them to the public'.⁵⁸ The sales continued through until 1949, when the commission was closed.⁵⁹

Belle's son Dick travelled to Darwin for the disposal sales, accompanied on at least one occasion by his father.⁶⁰ He bought a truck and a trailer at the sales, as well as women's clothing and blankets, which would become a recurring subject in the letters. Kelly was interested in buying them from Dick, because, although there were many available in Hong Kong—from 'all the disposal areas, from Okinawa and China and the Phillipines [sic]'—these were too short for the expatriate market.⁶¹ She had 'sent down' for a long list of items, mostly clothing, to be bought at the sales and 'has hardly had a nibble yet for the blankets'.⁶² Dick had driven to Darwin for

54 Kelly to Belle, 27 May 1946.

55 This letter is undated (the stamp has been torn off) but appears to have been written in early October 1946.

56 'Surplus Materials: Development of NT', *The West Australian*, 24 April 1945, 4; 'Disposal Sales Successful: NT Development Stimulated', *The Advertiser*, [Adelaide], 15 September 1945, 9.

57 S. Butlin and C. Schedvin, *War Economy, 1942–1945* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1977), 282, 769, 794–98.

58 'Disposal Profits', *Smith's Weekly*, [Sydney], 26 January 1946, 5.

59 'Overflow Buyers in Darwin Army Camp', *Sunday Times*, [Perth], 20 October 1946, 12; 'Disposal Sales', *West Australian*, 24 March 1947, 12; 'Disposal Board to Close', *The Argus*, [Melbourne], 29 July 1949, 5.

60 Robilliard, Email message to author.

61 Kelly to Belle, 17 August 1946, 1; 6 November 1946.

62 Kelly to Belle, 17 August 1946, 1.

the November 1946 disposal sales and, in mid December, Kelly wrote: 'Re Blankets ... I cabled you the other day in case Dick has arrived back. If he has and you can ship at 16/- FOB then I take them.'⁶³

The blankets did not arrive (perhaps Kelly's price was too low) because the following April, she informed Belle that she no longer required them: the weather was too hot, and she was sending her own blankets into storage. 'There are now to be disposal sales up here of all those items', so she was no longer interested in Darwin sales.⁶⁴ But then, in a telegram (9 December 1947), she asked Belle to quote the best price for a 'hundred thousand good quality grey blankets'.⁶⁵ Later in the same month, she wrote:

Re Blankets. Got quotes for 10,000 then another 10,000. Not much when they asked for 100,000–500,000. We think it is for the Chinese armies ... If the Disposal Boards [sic] has orders for $\frac{3}{4}$ million should think that just washes us out. Shall tell them [the Chinese] that.⁶⁶

The shipment of 20,000 blankets arrived in January 1947 but Kelly was unhappy because 'they are neither clean nor unstained'.⁶⁷ A year later, she wrote ruefully: 'Blankets. One firm was able to supply 100,000. Not through me unfortunately. At 15/- landed here.'⁶⁸ In typical Kelly fashion, however, she refused to give up. In a telegram on 3 December 1948, she directed: 'Will take all blankets must ship immediately catch December's boats.'⁶⁹ The last letter in the collection (January 1949) contains no reference to blankets and we are left to wonder whether Kelly ever received the December shipment.

Dorothy Jenner's involvement with the Austral-China Trading Company was short-lived. In November 1946, Kelly told Belle she was 'going to be fairly short of money for a while. I'm buying Mrs Jenner out. She thought us too slow.'⁷⁰ In her autobiography, Jenner claimed the women had intended investing in 'plastic manufacturing' in Hong Kong.⁷¹ Though Kelly never mentioned the venture, it makes sense that she would have viewed plastics as an opportunity. As we will see, influential Australian designers were predicting that plastic would be the material of the future, and although the industry had not existed in Hong Kong before the war, by 1960, it was firmly established.⁷² Jenner implied that Kelly had inveigled

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63 Kelly to Belle, 12 December 1946. FOB is the acronym for 'Free on Board Shipping Point', which means the buyer takes delivery of goods being shipped to them by a supplier once the goods leave the supplier's shipping dock.

64 Kelly to Belle, 18 April 1947.

65 Kelly to Belle, Telegram, 9 December 1947.

66 Kelly to Belle, 29 December 1947.

67 Kelly to Belle, 27 January 1948.

68 Kelly to Belle, 27 January 1948.

69 Kelly to Belle, 3 December 1948.

70 Kelly to Belle, 6 November 1946

71 Jenner, *Darlings, I've Had a Ball*, 237.

72 Szczepanik, *The Economic Growth of Hong Kong*, 120.

financial support for this venture under false pretences: having convinced Jenner and her family to invest in the business, Kelly then wrote to say 'she had taken some of our money to buy herself a car'. Jenner's brother-in-law 'had [Kelly] stopped' and 'got our money out': 'Another unsuccessful business venture', lamented Jenner.⁷³ Kelly's account of the car purchase was rather different: she had ordered the car in London, before her agreement with Jenner.⁷⁴ Now she had to pay for it and her advertising business was yet to commence: 'All means cash is fairly tight and I'm sure I don't want to buy goods I have not already sold here.'⁷⁵ Jenner was leaving Australia for Europe, and Kelly asked Belle to find out

whether she has any coupons of me [sic] ... there has been a great delay in settling with [Jenner] entirely due to her lawyer in Sydney though I am probably blamed.⁷⁶

The letters were dominated by requests for the precise costs of items, concerns about shipping delays and missing goods and the problems caused by rationing and trade restrictions. Shipping strikes affected the women's trade; unrest on the Australian waterfront prompted Kelly to write: 'Australia seems to have gone to the pack from all accounts. Terribly hard to get anything out.' She anticipated more strikes in 1947.⁷⁷ Later, she sent two pairs of stockings to Belle, but these were 'now off the market, partly due to control and partly due to American shipping strikes'.⁷⁸ She was willing to flout the rules to facilitate the women's trade:

I had to sign a document that [the wool] was a present to me!! Wool is now rationed. Everyone may have one lb. at a controlled price on their rice ticket.

A friend in Japan was sourcing artificial fishing gut for the Robilliards to sell in Australia, but this was 'all very complicated. All such deals are strongly Governmental at present. However we are doing best believe me.' Kelly offered advice on how to subvert restrictions on trade with China:

Your trade is with Hongkong no matter where I buy [the handkerchiefs], not with China, hence all inside sterling block. What asses the Customs men [sic] are to say, 'Reason for refusal was non sterling origin'. Rubbish but you must say Hongkong not China.⁷⁹

Goods failed to arrive: material for bed covers Belle had sent over (supplied by her brother) had been 'pinched', either in transit or from Kelly's office.⁸⁰ The smallest error could disrupt the trade: 'the Christmas order' was 'a nightmare' because of the mix up over a cable address. In the New Year, Kelly was successful in her efforts

73 Jenner, *Darlings, I've Had a Ball*, 237.

74 Kelly to Belle, 6 November 1946.

75 Kelly to Belle, 6 November 1946.

76 Kelly to Belle, 18 April 1947.

77 Kelly to Belle, 17 August 1946; 12 December 1946.

78 Kelly to Belle, 16 November 1946.

79 Kelly to Belle, 27 November 1946.

80 Kelly to Belle, October 1946[?].

to import the Japanese fishing gut into Australia, with the help of Hong Kong's Department of Supplies and Industries.⁸¹ Kelly wanted 10 per cent, but told the Robilliards that, even with her cut, this would be a good deal for them.⁸² She also requested a range of children's books to be sent from Australia ('Add on 5% to everything you send which is for re-sale').⁸³

Friends and family members were drawn into the operations of the Austral-China Trading Company—for example, Kelly turned to her cousin Ned (the barrister E.C.W. Kelly, who had chaired the 1924 Victorian Royal Commission on the High Cost of Living) to chase money she was owed.⁸⁴ Her long association with the advertising industry meant her friends included artists and designers, some of whom she marshalled to help with the business. The Australian artist Arthur J. Lindsay was one example. Lindsay worked for Kelly before the war and was interned in Shanghai between 1943 and 1945, before returning to Melbourne.⁸⁵ He had trained at the George Bell School (Rupert Bunny was his mentor) and was a member of the Victorian Artists Society.⁸⁶ Lindsay left Melbourne in June 1948 to reside in a monastery in southern China and Kelly took advantage of his journey to import some goods.⁸⁷ 'Have just had a cable from Arthur Lindsay ... saying he is on [the ship] "Soochow"', she tells Belle: 'So I cabled him at great length to go see Miss Jaye.' 'Miss Jaye' was Margaret Jaye, the renowned interior decorator and proprietor of an influential gallery in Rowe Street, Sydney. An English-born entrepreneur, Jaye was the first trader in Sydney to be listed as an interior decorator and was renowned for her 'modern' approach to interior design.⁸⁸ Indeed, she had predicted in September 1945 that plastic manufacturing would revolutionise furniture design and materials and, as Jaye was 'a great friend of Mrs Jenner', she was surely behind Kelly and Jenner's intention to invest in plastic manufacturing in Hong Kong, where labour was cheaper than in Australia. Jaye ordered round woven trays from Kelly to sell in her gallery shop, but Kelly found her 'an extremely touchy lady' and, after a problem over permits to import the trays into Australia, Kelly struggled to secure payment from Jaye.⁸⁹ When Lindsay visited Jaye in Sydney, 'Miss Jaye tried to get off from paying Customs', Kelly reports: 'What a dame. Asked Arthur Lindsay to smuggle all he could for her.'⁹⁰

81 Kelly to Belle, 3 February 1947.

82 Kelly to Belle, 3 February 1947.

83 OPC Distributors to Belle, 10 February 1947.

84 'Cost of Living Inquiry', *The Argus*, [Melbourne], 27 February 1924, 18; Kelly to Belle, 29 December 1947.

85 'Pootung POW Camp', Australian War Memorial Collection, Canberra, www.awm.gov.au/collection/ART92955/; Kelly to Belle, 7 June 1948.

86 *Arthur J. Lindsay, 1912–1990: Retrospective*, [Exhibition catalogue] (Castlemaine, Vic.: Castlemaine Art Gallery & Historical Museum, 1991).

87 Kelly to Belle, 18 April 1947; 'Prefers Life in a Monastery', *Courier-Mail*, [Brisbane], 2 June 1948, 4.

88 Peter McNeil, 'Decorating the Home: Australian Interior Decoration Between the Wars', *Art and Australia* 33 (1995): 222–31.

89 'Plastics Could Brighten Modern Homes', *Daily Telegraph*, [Sydney], 23 September 1945, 9; Kelly to Belle, 15 March 1947, 7 June 1948.

90 Kelly to Belle, 14 August 1948.

Belle's work for the Austral-China Trading Company seems to have been predominantly administrative (as 'a shipping clerk'). She dealt with suppliers, distributors and stockists in Australia and arranged for parcels to be sent to Kelly's friends and acquaintances in England, Singapore and Hong Kong, and then chased up these parcels when they failed to arrive.⁹¹ She acted as a kind of 'personal shopper' for Kelly, who instructed her on the clothing items ('Ask her to increase the waistline') she wanted made for her by Sydney dressmakers.⁹² She sent over Sydney papers and Australian magazines—the *Sunday Sun*, *Smith's Weekly*, *The Woman* and the *Australian Women's Weekly*—no doubt so Kelly could keep abreast of business trends in Australia.⁹³

The Robilliards were also expected to act as impromptu tour guides for the stream of Kelly's friends and acquaintances who visited Sydney: 'Would be grateful if Dick could take Wilfred Edge for an inland tour. He would love it and is quite a good scout'; Jean Ackery, 'a Naval Officer's wife', will be 'taking the odd stocking soon. Should turn up in about one month from now ... pleasant ... staying in Manley [sic], only knows one girl'.⁹⁴ The visitors were all Europeans and Kelly described their backgrounds, personalities and appearances. This contrasted strikingly with her representation of her Chinese employees, including her sales team and her contacts on the mainland. These were shadowy figures in the letters: 'the Chinese in his cable'; 'the Chinese I spoke to'; 'the Chinese who lent [the book] to me is most upset'; 'will discuss with the Chinese'; 'My Chinese artist's flat'; 'And the Chinese are out on it now'.⁹⁵ With the exception of T.V. Soong, not a single Chinese person was named in these pages.⁹⁶

This silence around Kelly's Chinese friends, colleagues and employees reflected her desire to maintain the racial hierarchies that had operated in the colony before the war and to reclaim the social position—and the privileges it delivered—she had enjoyed as an expatriate. In the lead-up to her first Christmas back in the colony, her attempts to import items required to mount a jolly Christmas were poignant but telling. The Christmas order she had placed through Edwards Dunlop became 'a nightmare'.⁹⁷ 'Christmas novelties' and crepe paper arrived, but there were no balloons to be found in Australia. She could not sell the Christmas trees; the Christmas cards arrived too late.⁹⁸ The confetti she had ordered never arrived. Shipping delays, trade restrictions, rationing and high prices kept getting in the way of this reconstruction of the prewar 'high life'. Despite these obstacles, however, Kelly continued to throw large and frequent cocktail parties, which no doubt doubled as

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91 Kelly to Belle, 8 September 1946; [?] October 1946; 28 November 1946; 27 January 1947.

92 Kelly to Belle, 16 November 1946; 'Counter Points', *Daily Telegraph*, [Sydney], 4 August 1949, 17.

93 Kelly to Belle, 5 December 1947; 29 December 1947; 14 August 1948.

94 Kelly to Belle, 17 August 1946; 7 June 1948; 14 August 1948.

95 Kelly to Belle, 27 May 1946; 17 August 1946; 15 March 1947.

96 Kelly to Belle, 18 April 1947.

97 Kelly to Belle, 28 November 1946.

98 Kelly to Belle, 27 January 1947.

networking opportunities: 'Last Monday had 42 for drinks and 17 for Irish Stew afterwards', she wrote to Tom. 'Liquor is what is dear.' Her guests drank five bottles of whisky at HK\$15 a bottle—that is over a pound Australian'.⁹⁹ In April 1947, she confessed to dissipation, recording day after day of parties, drinks and dinners. 'This is a peculiar place', she wrote, 'still think people from here [by this she meant British and Australian expatriates] would find it difficult to settle down anywhere else.'¹⁰⁰

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Kelly's advertising business picked up gradually during 1946 and, by mid 1947, her printing press was up and running.¹⁰¹ 'It's a good thing the advertising pays', she wrote in January 1947: 'It clears up the messes of the Austral-China Trading Co. Ltd.'¹⁰² The business was not going well; Kelly admitted to being 'chaotic' and warned Belle that the cheque she had sent her might bounce. As the economic life in Hong Kong recovered, there was a discernible shift in tone: 'Can get anything here now', Kelly wrote: 'Must be really one of the luxury places of the world.'¹⁰³ Trade with Australia started to fall away as the disposal sales wound up and Kelly wrote to Tom offering him a job. 'Jump on a boat', she told him:

The view from my balcony tonight with a full moon on the Harbour and fires on the distant hill like circles of light hanging in the sky is of a beauty to be seen to be believed. Come quickly. Cheerio.¹⁰⁴

Cathay Limited was doing well (there was no mention of the Austral-China Trading Company), but her 'good Australian Assistant has got married ... her husband does not like her working and wants her to stop'. Kelly could make Tom a partner: '[G]ive me an answer soon because if you are not interested I am going to get someone soon. Male. Sick of these either love sick or marrying females.' Tom must have replied almost immediately, declining her offer. He seems to have expressed concerns about the cost of living in Hong Kong, as well as the political instability that continued in the region. 'Pity. But there it is', Kelly writes: 'Don't believe all you hear. Actually accommodation is the quay [sic]. If one has that everything is easy. Hong Kong is cheap.' She now had 25 employees 'or thereabouts'; the advertising business turned over £214,360 'in just 12 months' and she expected the next six months to be 'better still'.¹⁰⁵

The first letters of 1948 show Kelly moving to wind up her trade with Australia. 'Trade with Australia from here virtually dead', she told Tom in a letter dated 16 January but posted later in the month because of the Shameen bridge incident.

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99 Kelly to Tom, 16 January 1948.

100 Kelly to Belle, 18 April 1947.

101 Kelly to Belle, 18 April 1947.

102 Kelly to Belle, 27 January 1947.

103 Kelly to Belle, 15 March 1947.

104 Kelly to Tom, 29 December 1947.

105 Kelly to Tom, 16 January 1948.

She was highly critical of Australian workmanship, business acumen and political nous; her criticisms reeked of cultural cringe. 'Australian stuff so shoddy', she wrote early in January 1948: 'My refrigerator just about finished and looks so awful. Rust coming through enamel everywhere.'¹⁰⁶ Later the same month, she wrote: 'Trade seems most difficult. Chiefly because bulk of Australia just lousy in business. And they are so insular.' Her evidence for this was the current outrage over the order by the Australian Minister for Immigration, Arthur Calwell, that Australian women working with US forces in Tokyo and Manila should return to Australia: 'Caldwell [sic] has just made himself a complete laughing stock up here saying these girls must go home.' Another example of Australia's alleged incompetency was its management of the Australian War Crimes Court in Hong Kong.¹⁰⁷ Since it had taken over from the English War Crimes Court, Kelly wrote, 'the Jap defence bureau is in all the papers' saying that 'no provision had been made for them' and 'they have had to sell watches, clothes etc. for food. That's a nice advertisement.' 'Bit fed up myself at the moment,' the letter finished: 'Been working too hard, I think. Cheerio. Better come for a trip.'¹⁰⁸

Ships seemed 'very irregular', Kelly told Belle and asked her to chase up any unsold goods the pair had with Anthony Hordern's department store: 'I really feel I should clear up all my bits and pieces.' She remained fed up: 'I must say I have learnt my lessons on trade the hard way.'¹⁰⁹ In June 1948, Kelly told Belle that she had 'just completed my second year of business' and had made a profit 'about equal' to what she put in (£3,000, handwritten) and was thinking of buying a house.¹¹⁰ In a letter to Tom (7 January 1949), she objected to his nickname for her ('the Tycooness'), then suggested he meet with Mike Kendall, a Manila executive for Philippine Airlines—one of Kelly's 'biggest advertisers' and 'a very coming company'—who would be visiting Sydney and might have openings for Dick and Tom, as a pilot and accountant, respectively:

When the flights get going they'll do well and if you are in the doldrums should think this is fine chance, anyway for Dick. They always rather have people with air knowledge. Will want accountants also.¹¹¹

This is the final surviving letter between Kelly and the Robilliards, so there is no way of knowing whether Tom met with Kendall, but we do know that neither Tom nor Dick would ever work for Philippine Airlines. The Austral-China Trading Company was deregistered in 1951. Kelly concentrated on her advertising business and, over

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¹⁰⁶ Kelly to Tom, 16 January 1948.

¹⁰⁷ Georgina Fitzpatrick, 'The Trials in Hong Kong', in *Australia's War Crimes Trials 1945–51*, eds Georgina Fitzpatrick, Tim McCormack and Narelle Morris (Leiden: Brill Mijhoff, 2016), 623–24, doi.org/10.1163/9789004292055_019.

¹⁰⁸ Kelly to Tom, 27 January 1948.

¹⁰⁹ Kelly to Belle, 28 January 1948.

¹¹⁰ Kelly to Belle, 7 June 1948.

¹¹¹ Kelly to Tom, 7 January 1949.

the next decade, built Asia's first advertising agency network. When she sold Cathay Limited to the Australian advertising giant George Patterson (acting as proxy for the New York advertising firm Ted Bates), the network had branches in Kuala Lumpur, Manila, Singapore, Bangkok and, of course, Hong Kong.¹¹²

Conclusion

What had Kelly meant when she told *The Argus* that Australians flourished in Hong Kong because of their 'poise' and their 'liking for the life'? By poise, she meant perhaps the calm and pragmatic resilience stereotypically displayed by Anglo-Celtic Australians in the face of (for them, at least) a challenging environment. Their 'liking for the life' can only mean that their expatriate status and resources gave them access to the privileges provided by the exploitation at the heart of the colonial economy: the cheap labour that meant the expatriate—Australian or otherwise—could enjoy a standard of living not available to them at home. Interviewed by Hong Kong radio in 1968, Kelly made it clear she could not contemplate returning to live in Australia because she would be expected to manage without 'a boy and an amah'.¹¹³

In 1946, it was by no means certain that the life she and her fellow expatriates had so enjoyed before the war could ever be resurrected. Kelly's pugnacious and engaged letters were written at a time when the global economic order was being remade (and the British Empire was struggling to maintain its trading privileges), when shipping and trading permits were difficult to secure and when the future of East Asia was uncertain to say the least. These letters show the determination of a white, middle-class, educated, expatriate Australian woman to rebuild the social and economic privilege she had enjoyed in the British colony before Japan's invasion. They show the ways this woman combined with other privileged white women across vast distances to take advantage of the rupture the war had caused in previous business processes and networks. They show the goods these women valued (nylon stockings, handkerchiefs and jewellery) in this time of rationing and austerity.

The letters reveal little, however, about life in Stanley prison camp or the experiences of war more generally, beyond the occasional reference to the difficulties faced by returned servicemen in Australia. This silence is in itself significant, as Kelly was intent on rebuilding for the future rather than wasting time reflecting on the recent past. Another silence is equally significant: present by omission throughout these letters are those Chinese workers whose skilled but grossly undervalued labour facilitated Kelly's business achievements and made possible the lively social life she enjoyed so much.

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112 Dickenson, *Australian Women in Advertising*, 46.

113 Kelly interview, 1968.

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