

ANDY KERR

(1867-1955) Arguably the best-known Australian bookmaker of his era Andy Kerr immigrated to Australia from Scotland in the mid-1880s, becoming involved in the racing industry around the turn of the century. He earned the nickname "the Coogee Bunyip" through his love of swimming at the popular beach and further cemented his association with the suburb by taking over the management of the Boomerang Theatre in 1917. That same year he also became manager and co-publisher of *Australian Variety and Show World*. In 1918 Kerr briefly partnered Harry Sadler as a director at the Gaiety Theatre (Oxford St) and following Sadler's death in 1919 he formed a partnership with Harry Clay to run the theatre. Kerr's other business interests included a Sydney city jewellery shop and a nightclub/casino at Bondi. He was ruined financially as a result of the Depression, and although he later became a commission agent, he never regained his position as the "Leviathan of the Australian Turf."

The son of lath-splitter Dickson Kerr and his wife Catherine, Andy Kerr was born David McFarlane McLachlan Kerr on 30 December 1867. He came to Australia as an eighteen-year-old footman in the service of Lord Carrington, the newly appointed Governor of New South Wales. According to Kerr, prior to taking up this position he had spent some three years, from the age of twelve, working as a telegraph operator for the North British Railway. He remained in Australia after Carrington returned to England in 1890 and initially set up a grocery business in Newtown. It later expanded to the nearby suburbs of Marrickville and Erskville. On 8 February 1893, he married Sydney-born Annie Elizabeth Butler, the daughter of a school teacher, at St Thomas's Roman Catholic Church, Lewisham. The couple later had six children, three sons and three daughters. Although Kerr reputedly showed an interest in Labor politics during his early years, any possibility of attempting a career in that direction was put aside after he began to establish a career in bookmaking.

Kerr's interest in the racing industry is believed to have developed in his teens, but it was not until his late twenties that he began to pursue a career as a bookmaker. He started out as a fledgling bookie at Sydney's pony tracks, before being accepted in 1903 as an "Outer" bookie at the major metropolitan racecourses. He eventually graduated from this unenviable position to the "Flat," then to the "Ledger," and finally to the "Paddock," where he achieved considerable fame and fortune. According to a number of newspaper accounts from the period, Kerr revolutionised betting in Australia by offering £100 to £1,000 to 1 straight-out on a pony event. By 1915, he had a small army of clerks, bag holders, and bodyguards, and in 1916 at Flemington, the *Sun* recorded that in doing a "roaring business... it was impossible to get near him. Sight-seers obstructed those who wished to speculate."¹ John Ritchie further records in Kerr's *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry:

He established his reputation by offering to take bets on any sporting event, whatever and wherever, and his style earned him the title, which he adopted as his slogan, the 'Longest Odds Bettor on Earth'. He once laid a bet of £300 to nothing and another of £50 to a cigar and won them; in the 1913 Melbourne Cup he laid odds of 1000 to one against Golden Shore and bet the punter who accepted £10 to £1 that the horse would run last; it finished second-last. In 1923 he paid out £15,000 to £45 on the Epicure-David Doncaster-Sydney Cup double. His betting stand resembled a sideshow: his bagmen bore his name emblazoned in bold block letters on their leather satchels and, bedecked in straw boaters, his team of clerks noted the bets while Kerr walked among the punters engaging in badinage while laying the odds - he teased female punters for being 'pests personified'. He had a rule that on taking silver or gold in payment of a wager, if he missed when he flipped the coin into the assistant's bag the crowd might scramble for the money (574).

Andy Kerr's position as the top bookmaker in Australia was apparently rivalled only by Albert Sluice (recognised as the longest odds place bettor in Australia). Sluice was also well-known as the brother of comedian Roy "Mo" Rene. In 1916, Kerr and Sluice operated their stands at Randwick, numbers 72 and 48 respectively.² Both also received much publicity through the vaudeville industry's leading publication, *Australian Variety and Show World*. Kerr's reputation by 1920 was such that he regularly advertised that "Kerr, Coogee" was the "sufficient and only [postal] address" required.³



Australian Variety (Sydney) 27 Sept. 1916, n. pag.

¹ Ctd. *Australian Variety* (Sydney) 12 Apr. 1916, n. pag.

² The front cover of *Australian Variety's* 13 May 1920 issue indicates that Kerr's stand was then no. 104.

³ *Australian Variety* (Sydney) 13 May 1920, n. pag.

In April 1917, Kerr became involved in the variety industry as co-manager and publisher of *Australian Variety and Show World* with [Martin C. Brennan](#) (editor). Sometime later that same year he expanded his interests in entertainment by becoming managing director of the Boomerang Theatre, Coogee, a 1500-seat venue presenting both film and vaudeville, which also employed a full orchestra. The following year, in early December, he joined forces with [Harry Sadler](#), taking on the role of director at the [Gaiety Theatre](#) in Oxford Street, and being heavily involved in the theatre's renovations. It is understood that Kerr looked after the business affairs while Sadler involved himself in the day-to-day running of the theatre and the organisation of the artists.

**Australian Variety
and
Show World.**

ANDY KERR, Manager
MARTIN C. BRENNAN, Editor

Office: Banking House,
228 Pitt Street, Sydney (1st floor)
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Following Sadler's suicide in July 1919, Kerr took over the management of the Gaiety on his own for some several months. With little experience at managing the entertainment side of a vaudeville business, he arranged for [Harry Clay](#) to provide artists for the theatre, and in November that year they formed a partnership, whereby Clay ran the entertainment and Kerr managed the theatre. Clay is also known to have been supplying Kerr's Boomerang Theatre with artists from as early as mid-January 1918.⁴ While Clay's association with the Gaiety is the best known, the theatre was in fact known for several years as Kerr's Gaiety. He continued his role as a more-or-less silent partner in the Gaiety Theatre's operations until Clay's company ended its operations there ca. 1927. Kerr's association with *Australian Variety* is believed to have ended when the magazine merged with *Everyone's* in 1921.

Australian Variety (Sydney) 30 May 1917, n. pag.

Apart from his varied business interests, which included a jewellery store in Market Street in the city and the Bondi Casino nightclub, Kerr is said to have supported many charities. *Australian Variety* records in this respect that "his beneficence [was] a by-word within the Sydney community... For the war and patriotic funds alone he has given close on £1,000, and he has never yet been known to turn a deaf ear to any legitimate appeal in the cause of charity."⁵ He is also known to have on occasion graced the stage in cameo appearances, one such event causing *Australian Variety* to report that "Mr Kerr nightly receives an ovation. And he deserves it!... His little part is done without the least affectation. He comes on keenly, speaks clearly, and moves easily and naturally."⁶



**BOOMERANG
THEATRE
COOGEE**

The above new Theatre is absolutely the finest Suburban house in Australia. It has seating accommodation for 1,500, carries a full orchestra and a change of programme nightly.

Showing Triangle, Paramount, Worlds, Vitagraph, Mutual-Chaplins, and independent features

ANDY KERR, Managing Director

Vaudeville de Luxe every Thursday.

Australian Variety (Sydney) 25 Jan. 1918, n. pag.

As Australia's foremost bookmaker, Kerr was also renowned as a natty dresser, resplendent in three-piece suits, with winged collars and striped ties. He is described as being blue eyed, 6 ft. 3 in. (191 cm) tall, slim, and clean-shaven with spruce fair hair. He smoked cigars, flaunted diamonds in his tie-pin, ring, and cuff-links, and was a member of leading social establishments such as the Tattersall's Club. Away from his business pursuits, he also enjoyed cricket, fishing, and motoring.

⁴ *Australian Variety* (Sydney) 25 Jan. 1918, 15.

⁵ *Australian Variety* (Sydney) 19 April 1916, n. pag.

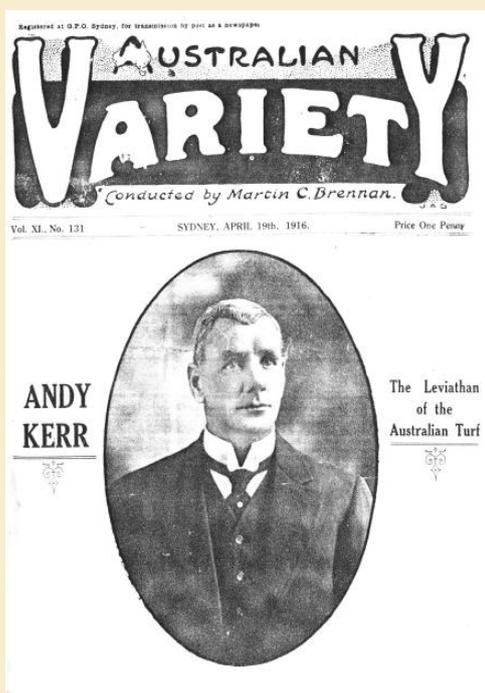
⁶ *Australian Variety* (Sydney) 9 May 1917, n. pag.

Although the extent of Kerr's personal wealth during his bookmaking career (ca. 1903-1930) cannot be estimated, it is believed to have been significant. His fortune largely disappeared, however, as a result of the Depression. He later became a commission agent. Although he never regained his place as a dashing leader of Sydney's turf world, John Ritche notes that he nevertheless retained his dignity and wit, adopting the philosophical attitude that "Lady Luck" could give "a lift or a raspberry" (575).

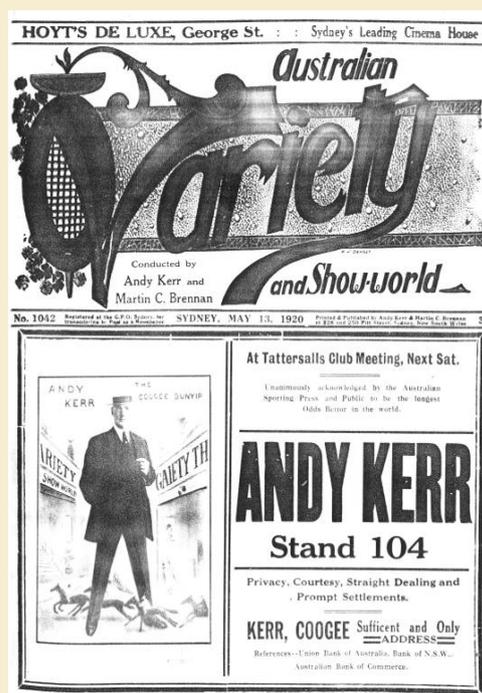
Kerr wrote a series titled "Random Reminiscences" for the *Sydney Truth and Sportsman* in 1941. Following the death of his wife, he married Charlotte Elizabeth Weston-Campbell, née Parker, a widowed cake-shop proprietress, on 6 April 1942. He died on 9 October 1955 at the Kirribilli home of one of his granddaughters, having also survived all of his children, and was buried in the Presbyterian section of Northern Suburbs cemetery.

SEE ALSO

- [Harry Clay](#)
- [Gaiety Theatre](#)
- [Australian Variety](#)
- [Martin C. Brennan](#)



Australian Variety (Sydney) 19 Apr. 1916



Australian Variety (Sydney) 13 May 1920

HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. *Australian Variety's* front covers record that the magazine was being "conducted by Andy Kerr and [Martin C. Brennan](#)," with inside publications details indicating that Kerr's position was as manager, while Brennan acted as editor. Fine print details on each cover further record "Printed and published by Andy Kerr and Martin C. Brennan at 228 and 250 Pitt Street, Sydney, New South Wales" (ctd. 13 May 1920).
2. The reference to Andy Kerr's ring by comedian [Jack Cannot](#) (see below) relates to an incident in June 1915 when Kerr allegedly lost possession of a £550 diamond ring (ctd. *Theatre Magazine* July 1915, 51).

ANDY KERR'S PUBLICITY and MISCELLANEOUS QUOTATIONS

The following list comprises quotations relating to Andy Kerr that were published in various newspapers and magazines. A number of these were, however, reproduced within *Australian Variety*.

- You know your old pal ANDY KERR / At Melbourne he's sure to be there / If your down for the Cup / You must look Andy up / For his long odds will make you all stare! (*Australian Variety* 28 Oct. 1914, 16).
- His long odds prices up to as much as 2000 to 1 on a straight-out pony event makes the Grabbing Tote blush (*Mudgee Guardian* - ctd. *Australian Variety* 31 Mar. 1915, 2).

- The [Melbourne] bookmaking fraternity was reinforced by a strong contingent from Sydney, one of whom (the Coogee Bunyip) quite eclipsed the local talent by laying odds against outsiders, reminiscent of record prices in the Totaliser. He had a small army of clerks and bag holders, the layer's bodyguard (*Age* - ctd. *Australian Variety* 31 Mar. 1915, 2).
- When a heavy dividend is paid out on the Tote, it is well reported, and much made of the fact. It is thus only fair to tell of a heavy stake being won at the outlay of a few pounds from a bookmaker, which happened on Wednesday at Rosebery races. When Playtile won the second division of the Rosebery handicap, very few laid anything against him. However, one of the layers (Kerr of Coogee) is noted for long odds, and backers go to him. In this case he laid about 500 to 5 against the winner, of which 200 to 2 went to the stable, and the other 300 was distributed among small punters (*Evening News* - ctd. *Australian Variety* 31 Mar. 1915, 2).

99	<p>"Prince of Turf Accountants." AGE.</p> <p>"As safe as Bank of England." SUN.</p>	99
<p>"By far the most liberal Turf Accountant in Australia."--REFeree. "As sure to be there on Settling Morning as the Sun to set."--FAIRPLAY.</p>		
<h2>KERR, COOGEE</h2>		
<p>Unanimously acknowledged by the Australian Sporting Press to be the Longest Odds Bettor on earth, will be operating at RANDWICK on</p>		
<h3>Stand 99. Under the Big Tree in Centre of Betting Ring</h3>		
<p>The Coogee Bunyip has received more unsolicited commendation from the combined Sporting Press and Public of Australia than all other Turf Agents combined.</p>		
<p>"The Coogee Bunyip raised the old 10 to 1 limit to 1000"--ARGUS</p>		
99	<p>"The only man in the world who lays and pays £1,000 to £1 straight-out on day of race."--SPORTSMAN.</p> <p>Solid Cash Guarantee: £25000</p>	99

Australian Variety (Sydney) 8 Sept. (1915), 16.

ANDY KERR

OF COOGEE,

Wishes his friends all over the Commonwealth a Happy and Prosperous New Year.

PRESS OPINIONS.

The Sun.
"The Sydney Bookmaker Andy Kerr was the centre of attraction in the Padlock at Flemington on Saturday on account of the way he bet. He did a marvellous business, and it was impossible to get any bets. Bookmakers surrounded those who wished to operate. He laid 100 to 1 against the horse who had won in the Maiden Plate 100 to 10 Grand Marchal, who has been said to be the Derby 100 to 1 the four outsiders. He is the sink of the seas."

"Fairplay"
"Kerr, of Coogee, is the longest price bookmaker ever, and as sure to be there on settling morning as the sun to set."

Melbourne Argus.
"The long bookmaking fraternity was reinforced by a strong contingent from Sydney, one of whom (the Coogee Bunyip) quite eclipses the local talent by laying odds against outsiders, reminiscent of record prices in the Totaliser."

Table Talk.
"The man from Coogee did an enormous business. He told the punters that any money he misses throwing into his men's bags they could have. Needless to say, he missed nothing."

Melbourne Guardian.
"The Coogee Bunyip's long odds of 200 to 1 on a straight-out bet never makes the grabbing Tote blush."

Reference.
"Kerr, of Coogee, is the most liberal, as well as one of the most reliable turf accountants in Australia."

Cooperator.
"Kerr, of Coogee, laid £1000 to 1 Totante, who just got beaten in the V.P. Flying Handicap. Told about the Tote, this takes some knocking out!"

Melbourne Argus.
"The price that the man from Coogee offered, backers were astounding. Nothing ever seen like it in Victoria before."

REPRODUCED FROM "AUSTRALIAN CELEBRITIES," 1916.

The Coogee Bunyip is unanimously acknowledged to be the Longest Odds Bettor on earth, and has received more unsolicited commendation from the Combined Sporting Press of Australia than all other Turf Agents combined.

Solid Cash Guarantee: £25,000.

Will Jack Murfayne, Cook and Handman, Jamie Kelly, Merlin, and others kindly keep their hands off.

Australian Variety (Sydney) 17 Jan. (1917), n. pag.

- Jack Cannot** in the [Tivoli] Follies hands Isabelle D'Armond a £150 diamond ring. She threatens to keep it. "I will tell you," says Mr Cannot going down on his knees and tearfully pleading for the return of it, "a little story. It might touch your heart. That ring is not mine. It is Andy Kerr's. So do, oh do give it back." Needless to say it is good for a great laugh for a variety of reasons (*Theatre Magazine* July 1915, 35).
- The only man in the world who lays and pays £1,000 to £1 straight-out on day race (*Sportsman* - ctd. *Australian Variety* 8 Sept. 1915, 16).

The Coogee Bunyip

King of the fielders is he,
Odds that are longest he'll lay.
Gets through his work in a trice,
Finds it a pleasure to pay.

Andy's a mighty fine "sport,"
Foremost in doing good turns.
Sticks, like a brick, to his pals,
Just go and ask Charlie Byrnes.

Randwick will find him this week,
Look for his stand - ninety-nine.
Where he'll do business with all-
Taking your quidlets and mine.

That's why the Bunyip's well-liked,
Friends he has got in galore.
May he keep going as now,
Each week will bring dozens more.

(*Australian Variety* 29 Sept. 1915, n. pag)

- The man from Coogee did an enormous business. He told the punters that any money he misses throwing into his men's bags they could have. Needless to say, he missed nothing (*Table Talk* - ctd. *Australian Variety* 12 Apr. 1916, n. pag).

- He writes tickets and handles money faster than any man seen in Victoria. The clients round his ring were often ten deep (*Judge* - ctd. *Australian Variety* 12 Apr. 1916, n. pag).
- The man from Coogee did an enormous business. He told the punters that any money he misses throwing into his men's bags they could have. Needless to say, he missed nothing (*Table Talk* – ctd. *Australian Variety* 12 Apr. 1916, n.pag).
- What the May issue of the *Theatre Magazine* says of the "Coogee Bunyip" as an actor: Andy Kerr in his few lines has simply to be Andy Kerr. Whilst Mr Kerr is the on the stage you realise more fully than ever how completely Mr MacDonald fails to get the sporting touch.... Mr Kerr nightly receives an ovation. And he deserves it! He is giving his services, wholly out of friendship for Mr Drew, and with no other object than helping along a good cause. His little part is done without the least affectation. He comes on keenly, speaks clearly, and moves easily and naturally. Mr Kerr is just giving a study that would be the despair of many a professional actor (*Australian Variety* 9 May 1917, n. pag.).
- The Sydney Bookmaker, Andy Kerr, was the centre of attraction in the Paddock at Flemington [Melbourne] on Saturday on account of the way he bet. He did a roaring business, and it was impossible to get near him. Sight-seers obstructed those who wished to speculate. He laid 1000 to 4 against St Bees, who ran second in the maiden Plate, 1000 to 10 Grand Marshal, who ran third, and in the Derby 100 to 1 the four outsiders. He is the talk of the town (*Sun* - ctd. *Australian Variety* 12 Apr 1916, n. pag).
- The Tote cannot give the "Bunyip" any start; his long odds stands alone without rival (*Recorder* – ctd. *Australian Variety* 12 Apr. 1916, n. pag).
- The Coogee Bunyip says he has a solid cash guarantee of £25,000, and if that runs dry he can fall back on the Bunyip's village' (*E.S. Advocate* - ctd. *Australian Variety* 12 Apr. 1916, n. pag).



Smith's Weekly (Sydney) 13 Mar. 1920, 7.

FURTHER REFERENCE

Djubal, Clay. "Kerr, Andy." *AustLit* (2006).

Ritchie, John "Kerr, David McFarlane McLachlan" *Australian Dictionary of Biography* 9 (1983), 574-575.

Some additional information for this has been sourced from John Ritchie (1983)

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