Women, birth, life and death: from the fictionalised diary of Mary Dean

[extract]

Biographical note:
Donna Lee Brien (BEd, Deakin; GCHE, UNE; MA (Prelim.), USydney; MA, UTS; PhD, QUT) is Professor, Creative Industries, and Head of Creative and Performing Arts Research at Central Queensland University. Widely published on specialist genres of creative nonfiction, with an emphasis on biography and memoir, her biography, John Power 1881-1943, the standard work on this expatriate Australian artist. A Past President of national peak body, the Australasian Association of Writing Programs, Donna is currently Commissioning Editor, Special Issues, TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses, and a member of the Editorial Advisory Board of The Australasian Journal of Popular Culture and Aeternum: International Journal of Contemporary Gothic Studies. Current research includes projects on a taxonomy of memoir, speculative and experimental life writing sub-genres, and the Contemporary Gothic. Her most recent book is New Directions in 21st Century Gothic: The Gothic Compass (Routledge, New York and London, 2015) with Lorna Piatti-Farnell.

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Introduction

In the mid-1890s, the so-called ‘Dean Case’ caused a sensation across Australia. George Dean was a 27-year-old Sydney ferry master, a handsome, moustached hero who had been awarded a gold watch for his dramatic rescue of two drowning female passengers. In March 1895, on the day of their first wedding anniversary, George was arrested for the poisoning and attempted murder of Mary, his 20-year-old wife and mother to their 10-week-old baby girl. During the trial it was not George, as the accused, whose actions and motivations were probed; instead the behaviour, habits, personality and character of his wife was minutely analysed and criticised. This climaxed in defence counsel arguments that Mary had poisoned herself, but the jury still found George guilty and he was sentenced to hang – the mandatory punishment for attempted murder at that time. Despite the jury’s unanimous verdict, a public outcry resulted in an inquiry and a royal pardon for George Dean. When it was revealed that he had, however, confessed his guilt to his lawyer, George was returned to gaol on perjury charges, although he never faced justice for the violence he perpetrated against his young wife. Accounts of the case since 1895 largely repeat these facts, perpetuating a focus on George Dean and the notable political and judicial figures involved in the scandal. Mary Dean’s story has mostly been forgotten and ignored. This is, however, far more interesting and, like many women lost to Australian history, the details of her life can help cast light on some current prevalent attitudes and behaviours.

From the (fictionalised) diary of Mary Dean

1 April 1935

My birthday. Always a day that starts me thinking about the past. Ma used to say I had my papa’s eyes and his hair, but she never told me much about him except that he had been some kind of dealer and had left us. Sometimes I missed having a father, but I never thought about him much and later, when I saw how some of my friends’ fathers went on, drinking and knocking everyone around, was glad we were on our own. Not that we ever were really – not with all those lodgers and uncles living with us.

I can also recall Ma telling me that when I was born, she said, then and there, No more babies. And, like everything my mother set her mind to, there weren’t. Years later I found out that she had given birth to another baby girl more than twenty years before me, which means I have an older sister, a half-sister as it turns out, who I have never met. I have never been able to find out is she is alive or dead, but I pray we will meet, either here, or in the hereafter.

I must have been only four or five when we packed our things and moved up to Sydney. I can’t remember where we lived at first, but by the time I was seven we had moved into a boarding house in Surry Hills. Ma could not find work. She tried as a barmaid, a waitress and a shop assistant, but the employers all wanted single girls, and young pretty ones to boot. Going out as a servant, taking in sewing or washing or the low kind of jobs many women had to do – like working in a butchers only to be
paid in scraps of meat – was not for her. So, she put everything we had in hock and took out a lease on a house not far away in Riley Street. She set up a small greengrocer’s shop in front where there had been a tailor’s, and put out a sign for lodgers.

Surry Hills was fast filling up with long strips of narrow terrace houses and most everyone had big families, so I had plenty of friends my own age. Despite the building going on all around, there were still empty lots full of long grass and wildflowers and some had horses in them. We would stand on boxes and feed those old horses crusts and bits of carrot and rub their noses and torn ears. They worked hard, pulling heavy carts through the city streets, but they still let us pet and kiss them, and sometimes you would see them cantering around the paddock like ponies.

Some of the boarders were keen on my mother and like uncles to me, but some were strange and I was scared of them. My mother ran a tight ship and if anyone let out a flamin’ this or blasted that or called someone a silly bugger, they would look sheepishly across to us and apologise, saying it came from being with men all day. Some of the young blokes were what Ma called fast, and I found out later that they were members of the gangs who roamed the city looking for trouble. Ma much preferred to have older men in the house – they stayed longer and were better at paying their rent. There was one old fellow who always wore his braces and hat in bed, which was funny, but he slept with a shotgun beside him, and Ma was worried it was loaded and would cause someone an injury. Then there was Sam who we found with three hens in his room, Ned who never – and I mean never – washed, Jerry who was arrested for bookmaking and old Patrick who, despite his decrepitude, was always trying to smuggle women in, or out, of his room.

My mother liked men, I knew that, but never trusted them. She always had a sweetheart in those days, some Johnny hanging on, and I know now she found her solace where she could. She could have married many a time, but she used to sweep me up and whisper in my ear, Just you and me, my little chick, just you and me. We don’t want any nasty old rooster telling us what to do, do we? She often told me that her goal was to live independently, needing no one. If this century is really going to be different from the last, perhaps women, and others like her, will finally be given some respect for surviving as they did. As we did, despite everything.

Once, when things were really tight, we had to rent out my room and I slept with Ma in her big wooden bed. I had to go up quite early and in summer, when it was still light, I would look at all the different fabrics in her old quilt, dreaming of the dresses I would have when I grew up. I wanted all the trimmings too, hats and lace and parasols and little bags to hang from my wrist. Being a widow, Ma always wore black. She had her rings and a man’s gold watch she wore inside her waistband. She popped those rings more than a few times, but we always got them back. The watch was our last ditch security it was only pawned when we were absolutely desperate. It was our insurance, and Ma always used to say our luck was on the turn when we rescued it back out of hock.

The lodgers meant the washing and cleaning was never-ending. I helped when I had to, but was glad when Ma would shoo me out of the house. Sunday was not exactly a
holy day of rest in Surry Hills, but at least we never did housework, although we would open the shop if someone wanted something. The pubs sold drink through the back door and was drunk in our house, but I must say my mother always made me get tidy for church and sometimes would curl my hair in papers. I went to Sunday School from the time I was very little and loved the pretty teacher who was never cross. We used to get a prize if we learnt our verses, usually a card with a picture and a motto on it. I won one that we stood on our mantle and it burned itself into my brain. *Blessed is the man whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.* I never understood it. I do not believe it is fair that all criminals are forgiven. I don’t see that their victims are ever blessed or otherwise compensated for their suffering.

4 April 1935

More rubbish from the men today. Dulcie’s granddaughter, little Amy, is pregnant and the stupid doctor told her not to tell anyone. Not her mother, her sisters or her other close relatives, not her girlfriends or women neighbours, his reasoning being that we’d give her contradictory (and necessarily, to his mind, idiotic) advice. As if this isn’t the exact time when a girl needs all the support and advice she can get. What I would have done without dear Ma during my terrible time I just do not know. I thought I was going to die, and the only advice George could offer me was to get an abortion.

I must have fallen in the first month we were married, and although I wasn’t completely sure, I told George what I suspected. His reaction stunned me. I thought he would be happy, instead, he shouted at me, ordered me to get rid of it. They were the exact words he used. Get. Rid. Of. It.

He had heard talk, he said, of the various ways. He heard everything on the ferry. Women sat there and spoke in front of him as if he were invisible, as if somehow because he was working his ears weren’t. There were medicines, he told me, regulating tablets. Well, I knew all about them. Sal had tried about a dozen different ones. She was sick as a poisoned dog but she still had her baby. I said there was no way I would touch any such thing, nor the Chinese herbs Madame Rose got for her girls when they got caught, foul mixtures which used to make their stomachs gripe so badly I could hear them crying from across the road. *Don’t let that happen to you*, Ma would say, and I didn’t. Anyway, I was married, so a baby was meant to be a joy.

But George wouldn’t stop. He told me how back in Bathurst the girls would ask their men to hit them in the belly, or stomp on them, how they would bathe in freezing water or jump off tables trying to jolt the baby loose. I couldn’t believe it, my own husband was sitting beside me, and urging me to throw myself from a tram or go to one of those dirty old witches, those so-called ‘nurses’ down in Woolloomooloo. But I wouldn’t. I wanted my baby, even if he didn’t.

He kept saying it wasn’t his, and I thought about how once when I was still quite little I heard Mrs. Lee telling Ma about how the lady she worked for had been taken to the asylum at Rozelle – the madhouse she called it – for having someone else’s baby. She said Mrs. Browne was a nymphomaniac. I thought this sounded dreadful although I
had no idea what it was. We found out later that this poor woman had inherited a large sum when her father died and her husband spread the most awful lies about her throwing herself at every man who came her way. Mr. Browne had taken to locking his wife in her room, but when she tried to climb down a tree to escape, he called the doctors and had her taken away.

Lucy lived in Balmain for ages and she used to say that when the wind blew a certain way it carried the inmates’ cries across the suburb. I know they used to do terrible things to you to try to get you back to normal, pull your teeth out, cut out your women’s organs, force you to lie in cold baths for hours. Occasionally, I wonder if poor Mrs B. ever proved her sanity, or was locked up her whole life, or at least until her husband spent her fortune. She had three small children when she was committed. Heaven’s knows what became of them.

5 April 1935

The first dead body I ever saw was Liza’s. They brought her back from hospital and put her in the front room in a little coffin propped up on the tea table. I really didn’t want to look but her Nan made me. Liza’s little face was scratched up and her lips were swollen and strange. She had cotton wool in her nostrils. Auntie Jenny said I should kiss her goodbye, but I touched her cheek and it was stone cold.

That must have been around my eighth birthday because I remember being sad that Liza missed the party Auntie Jenny gave me. Jen was my mother’s older sister and came all the way from London to visit and lived with us for quite a while, a year or maybe more, but I never knew exactly why. She had long red hair which she dressed in ringlets around her face and always wore the brightest colours. I can see her laughing with the lodgers, thinking back on it now I’m sure she was after a husband, but if she was she should have looked in flasher circles than ours. The men we knew were always broke, or in the process of drinking or gambling away what money they did have.

Auntie Jenny talked a lot about back home, I think she pined for the cool and the way they did things there. In the end, there was some misunderstanding between her and mother over Uncle Tom and she left. For years we didn’t even get a card from her. But then they started arriving again, fancy gold printed birthday and Christmas cards, usually posted from where she lived in Cheapside, with the odd one from Brighton or some other seaside town. She always wrote that mother should send me out, but she caught a bad cold and it settled in her chest and she died not long after I married George, so that was that.

When I was ten or eleven, Sarah Kennedy came to the door one morning. Her mum’d had a baby in the night, but it was dead and she needed something to put him in. Ma found a little wooden soapbox and I went back to help. The baby was lying on a pillow on the washstand. He was like a little doll, but tiny, too tiny. Sarah and I lined the box with a bit of soft wadding and then Mrs Kennedy got out of bed and put her wee baby in it and fastened the lid down. She was crying all the time and gave us a letter and told us to give it and the box to the gravedigger. It was a long way to the
cemetery but we didn’t talk. We found the man, gave him the letter and waited while he read it. He told us to take the baby over to the church porch, and put it in the corner with the other parcels. I asked him what he was going to do but all he said was, *Tell your mum it’ll be alright*. I remember how sweet the box smelt from the soap and us packing the wadding in so as wood wouldn’t scratch his tender skin and how carefully we carried him up the big hill to the cemetery.

Most of all, though, I remember that pile of dead babies on the porch.
Research statement

Research background
Violence against women/girls has a long history in Australia (Summers 1975). After 31 women were killed in the first 15 weeks of 2015, calls were made for national action. This speculative life writing, using facts from a case from the late 19th century, is based on previous research that suggests that incorporating conjecture into biography can produce engaging and thought-provoking historical narratives (Brien 2015).

Research contribution
This extract from a speculative biography of a victim of extreme domestic and societal abuse highlights the potential of creative writing to bring attention to the unacceptability of violence against women (Brien 2000; Joyce 2014) and contribute to social change (Jasper 2008).

Research significance
The concept that drives this work has already attracted wide interest, with the author achieving national and international scholarly publication on fictionalised biography and its expressive potential. Of key significance here is the use of fictionalised historical biography to explicate a contemporary subject, delivering information in an engaging form, to highlight the issue and prompt reflective thought.

Works cited
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