

## **CQUniversity, Australia**

### **Donna Lee Brien**

### **First loves**

#### Biographical note:

Donna Lee Brien is Associate Professor of Creative Industries at CQUniversity, Australia. Founding Editor of *dotlit: The Online Journal of Creative Writing* (2000-2004) and Assistant Editor of *Imago: New Writing* (1999-2003), Donna is currently on the International Editorial Board of *New Writing: International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* (UK), *Coolibah* (Spain) and the new food studies journal, *Locale*. The Immediate Past President of the Australian Association of Writing Programs, Donna is widely published in the areas of writing pedagogy and praxis, practice-led research, creative nonfiction and collaborative practice in the arts, and has been writing biographies and about the form in academic and more popular publications since the 1980s.

#### Keywords:

Creative nonfiction – biography – Mary Dean – George Dean

This part of my life is hard for me to write about—but I am going to put it all down as plainly as I can. Florence, you should know that your father, Benjamin William Bridge, is not the man you were born to. I know the accident of birth is worth nothing compared to a lifetime of care, but the fact is that your natural father is my first husband, the infamous George Dean. He is, as I write, in prison for perjury, but he should be rotting there for his whole life for trying to murder me.<sup>1</sup>

Ma warned me about boys from the time I was a little girl, saying I was to *save myself*—although I did used to wonder how you could pick that right one from all the others. I liked lots of boys but had only one serious suitor before I met George. In those days Frank Brereton was as wild as a young kangaroo, but a few years later he was married and holding a job steady. I was a fool for spurning him, but I was as green as grass when I met George.<sup>2</sup>

That was the autumn of 1893. I had just turned nineteen and thought I was wild about Frank, but forgot about him the moment George asked me to dance. We were at a picnic at Cabarita Beach and all mad for dancing then. It didn't matter how tired you were, as soon as you heard the music you felt as light as air. I loved whirring around, my dress swirling, the boys blushing when they asked you, them smelling of pomade and soap and us girls wearing as much scent as we thought we could get away with.

George took my hand without an ounce of hesitancy. I was dazzled by his looks and his fine clothes, and especially the way his fingers caressed his lips as he smoothed back his moustache. His skin was so fine, almost transparent, and when he was hot, or angry, or excited, you could see his veins pulsing blue. The first time I saw him completely unclothed, I was taken aback, his flesh was so pale he seemed to glow against the sheets.

One of my friends told me he was that ferry captain who, a few years before, had leapt into the harbour and saved two women from drowning. It had been in all the papers—how the steamer cast off from Circular Quay but, for some reason, the women had tried to jump back onto the jetty and fell into the oily water. Although the night was very dark, George went straight in after them. With one clutching 'round his neck and holding the other up under her arms, he somehow got them both across to the jetty. Then he had to dive back in and swim out to the ferry, which had drifted some distance from the wharf. The passengers all cheered him on and George was the toast of the town. A public collection was made, and he was presented with that gold watch he was so proud of.<sup>3</sup> He had, my friend went on, performed a number of rescues since, and he seemed such a brave and romantic figure. I have often thought about how those acts contrasted with his murderous heart. But, that day, as we danced, all I thought about was how he was the best-looking man this side of Parramatta. He smiled at me while we twirled and pranced, but he never made any sign that he wanted to see me again.

Then, about a month later, he walked into the fruit shop one afternoon. He was flushed and hot and did not recognise me until I reminded him about our dance. He wanted some lemons and when I fetched them I thought he was going to take the bag and leave, but instead he told me he was cycling down to Coogee for a swim with some of his friends. I remember thinking how nice that would be, to please yourself

about what you did. Later, George testified I kept him talking until he agreed to visit me again. I admit I did like the look of him, but he never hid his own interest after that day in the shop and was soon visiting me regularly. It only took him ten minutes to cycle down from his lodgings in Woollahra and, if he wasn't keen, why would he have always stayed with me until it was time to take charge of the night boat down at the quay? It was me who was trapped behind the counter or at home.<sup>4</sup>

George was never much of a talker. It was only with the greatest reluctance that he told me anything about his early life and, when he did, he painted himself as some kind of character in a novel, pluckily fighting against the most adverse of circumstances. At the time, I soaked up his hogwash like a sponge, but now I see he always put the most positive slant possible on everything. That was when he wasn't telling out-and-out lies.

He said he was born in the country, in Albury on the great Murray River, but didn't live there long, as his family moved north to Narrandera, a very remote town on the Murrumbidgee, five hundred miles from Sydney. He never spoke of his father and once, when I pressed him, he did his block and stormed out, slamming the door so hard all the windows shook. I used to think his dad must have skived off, but later found out he was a policeman who had blown his brains out after letting a prisoner escape. After this, the mother was left to raise six young children on her own. George was the eldest boy.

George also never told me that he had a sister who lived with his mother in Narrandera in very straightened circumstances. I only found out about them from what was in the papers, and I have no way of knowing how much of that was true. I see now it was more shame on George that he took no interest in their welfare but, shame on me too, I know I would have resented him sending them any money. He also had a brother, another shadowy figure who got into trouble in Sydney and was put on the *Vernon*, a prison ship for wayward boys moored off Cockatoo Island.<sup>5</sup>

George's mother married again while he was still a boy. This Finch was no great shakes as a husband, and within a couple of years skipped off to Sydney. Nothing surprising in that—a constant man is the exception to the rule—but what was different about old Finch was that he took his twelve-year-old stepson with him. But then Finch proved not to be that unusual, deserting George almost as soon as they arrived, leaving him with a blacksmith in Woollahra. Maybe, though, this had always been the plan, for George said the smithy was a good man who not only taught him a trade, but gave him a decent roof over his head as well.

George stayed there until he was sixteen, but when he got a job as a deckhand on a harbour ferry, he began boarding with German friends, the Konneckes, also in Woollahra. The father, Fred, was a butcher who had ten children, six of whom were daughters. George used to go on and on about those girls, to the point where I got quite jealous and wondered why he did not go wooing one of them. In court, Konnecke later said that George was like a son to him and that he never had a moment's concern about leaving him alone with his daughters. George introduced me to the whole family, but only told them about our marriage a fortnight afterwards.<sup>6</sup>

By the time he was twenty-one, George had qualified for his harbour master's certificate. He had only the slimmest of schooling, and found completing the examinations a real challenge. But he passed, and a few months later was put in charge of one of the company's night boats, a position of considerable trust.<sup>7</sup> He did well and his salary was raised to three pounds a week. This was when, he said, that he started putting some of his wages by. He was a saver, I'll say that about him. His lawyers made much of the fact that he usually gave me two pounds a week, but that was to feed both of us and look after the house. There was nothing left for the bits and pieces I needed with a baby coming, let alone to buy myself any scrap of clothing.<sup>8</sup> I know we were lucky compared to some, for times were hard and getting worse with the bank crashes, but George kept a pound all to himself and I wanted to know what he spent it on.<sup>9</sup>

Most of the married women I knew were unhappy, yet as a girl I was like my friends—mad to be married, dreaming of being rich and posh and beyond all trouble. Although I was not unhappy at home, I hated working in the shop. We started at eight in the morning and stayed open until seven or eight every night, except Saturday when we never closed up until after nine.<sup>10</sup> A nice little house, money of my own, a decent husband and a baby whenever one came along seemed a far more attractive proposition.

George said in evidence that my mother bailed him up that Christmas, 1893, when we had been courting more than six months, and asked him *if he didn't think it was about time we got married?* In court, he said she badgered him until she got her way, but it was me who was not completely convinced.<sup>11</sup> He was, as I have said, handsome with a strong physique, but I never felt as overcome when we were alone as I had with Frank. In spite of that, I was impressed by how steady he was, working for the same ferry company for ten years, and knew I did not want to be stuck behind a counter my whole life. So, I accepted his proposal and we set the date for early March.

Once I almost broke it off. We were sitting in the little parlour behind the shop, as we often did after I closed up. It was hot and I wanted to go out, take a tram to the city, perhaps go to Paddy's and look at the hats or just walk down to the harbour and watch the other people. But George would not budge. Ma was out and he kept kissing and touching me. I was trying not to hurt his feelings, but he was getting more and more het up and I didn't like it. It wasn't like when I first met Frank and had to tear myself away from his kisses, and would then lie in bed stroking my skin to imagine how I felt to him. Usually I would let George kiss me until I thought he'd had enough and then try to distract him. But that night, I knew what he wanted. And he knew I knew, and wouldn't take no for an answer. But I told him to get off, and I meant it. I told him I was scared of getting into trouble and having to hurry the wedding, but the real reason was that I did not feel a strong passion for him.

And then I thought of how it would be when we were married, and him coming at me like that night after night. I was about to end it, then and there, when he pulled a little box out of his pocket. It was a brooch, all silver and sparkling. He held it to my shoulder and said such nice things to me that, in the end, I gave in. I have never told this to anyone, but I thought of Frank and it wasn't that bad.<sup>12</sup>

From that moment, I was his and the die was cast. How different my life might have been if I had got up and left him alone in that dusty parlour. A rocky courtship does not always doom a marriage, but I think it did ours. There is always a period of adjustment in the early days of matrimony, a time when you get used to each other, but it seems to me a great many people never resolve their differences. We certainly never did.<sup>13</sup>

## Endnotes

Mary Dean, who changed her surname to Bridge after she divorced and remarried, was repeatedly poisoned by her husband, George Dean, in 1895. Unless otherwise stated, the story Mary recounts in this fictionalised memoir is based on documented historical evidence including the legal sources listed below. Mary Dean is not a fictional character, and as there is no evidence that she ever penned a memoir of her experiences, I have constructed her biography from the historical sources, and written it in the first person from her point of view.

1. In 1896, after a legal scandal of monumental proportions, George Dean was gaoled for perjury for giving false evidence while on trial for poisoning his wife of one year, Mary.
2. Mary met George Dean at a picnic at one of Sydney's most popular beauty spots, Cabarita, an Aboriginal name meaning 'by the water', on the Parramatta River in 1894 (*1911 Edition Encyclopaedia*). Dean noticed Mary while he was dancing a set of Lancers (a kind of quadrille) with the girl he had gone to the picnic with. Mary was then 'an attractive young woman ... of average height or a little below it, oval faced, fresh complexion, dark haired, trim figure, mobile featured with clear, bright eyes'. Dean, at some 5' 7½", was a little above average height and universally thought handsome (Pearl: 85)
3. Dean's rescue from the *Millie* was reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (20 April 1891: 7), eulogising his 'pluck' and courage, despite his being in 'indifferent health'. On being hauled out of the water, one of the women was 'suffering severely from the effects' but both later recovered. George performed rescues on two later occasions, jumping off *Millie* again, and then from the *Possum* of which he was then master, after which he was widely known as 'Possum Dean'. Even without these exploits, Dean's profession made him a romantic figure, ferries having been central to the life of the harbour city since the boats of the First Fleet were used as passenger ferries. As evidenced from representations from those on tourist posters to works of high art status, Sydney Harbour's ferries and those who run them continue to occupy a central place in local, national and international imaginings of Sydney (Colbert 2003).
4. George testified that Mary kept him talking in the shop and proposed that he visit her again. I recount the version that Mary gave in her evidence (*Regina v Dean* 1896).
5. Cockatoo Island, the largest island in Sydney Harbour, housed a prison since 1839. In 1871, this gaol became an industrial school and reformatory for girls. Henry Parkes, then Minister for Education, organised the purchase of 900 tonne sailing ship, *Vernon*, and its conversion into a similar institution for boys. Some 500 boys were accommodated on the *Vernon* until it was replaced with the 2,000 tonne *Sobraon* in 1890 (Kerr 1984; SHFT 'Cockatoo Island'; NAA 'Cockatoo Island dockyard').
6. Konnecke gave evidence that he had 'a very high opinion of' George Dean and 'no hesitation' about leaving him alone with his daughters (*Regina v Dean* depositions 1895).

7. By the age of 21, Dean had learned a considerable amount about ferry navigation in practice but only qualified for his harbour masters' certificate by perseverance. Once certified, Dean was appointed Master of an all-night steamer, the *Possum*, working the section of the harbour now spanned by the Sydney Harbour Bridge between Circular Quay and the North Shore. This was, the director of the North Shore Sydney Ferry Company told the *Daily Telegraph* in April 1895, a 'position entailing skill, sobriety, courtesy to passengers, trust and punctuality'. Dean requested a transfer back to day service, but the company felt he was 'irreplaceable' and so kept him on night duty (*Regina v Dean* depositions 1895).
8. Under oath, George declared that Mary repeatedly asked him what he did with his money and, on one occasion, he had 'strong words' with her on the subject (*Regina v Dean* 1896).
9. During the 1880s, prices for urban land rose to unsustainable heights in a number of Australian cities due largely to speculative investment, much from Britain. When, in 1891, investors began to withdraw funds when a number of building societies collapsed, twelve banks failed, leaving only five still trading. Thousands of small depositors lost their life savings and many farmers who had purchased land in the 1870s and 1880s lost their farms. Economic depression followed.
10. Mary's working hours are those usual such small businesses at this time. There is no evidence that anyone except Mary and her mother regularly worked in the shop, although it is probable that friends and acquaintances may have helped out from time to time.
11. George later claimed that Mary's mother pressured him into proposing to her daughter, but both Mary and her mother denied this (*Regina v George Dean: Report of the Royal Commission*).
12. The scene where Mary resists, and then gives into, George's attentions is invented, but supports one of the theories later suggested for why he poisoned her (see, *Regina v Dean and Meagher*). This proposed that he was much more interested in sex than his wife. Once she became pregnant, she denied his 'conjugal rights' completely and he looked for a way to be rid of her. This motivation was never proven.
13. Mary's musings about couples resolving their differences is derived from Grossberg (1996).

## Works cited and legal sources utilised

- 1911 Edition *encyclopaedia* 2002, Austin (Texas): Pagewise at <http://31.1911encyclopedia.org> (accessed 11/03/2010)
- Colbert, Françoise 2003 'The Sydney opera house: an Australian icon' *International journal of arts management* 5: 2, 69-77
- Grossberg, Michael 1996 *A judgment for Solomon: the d'Hauteville case and legal experience in antebellum America*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Kerr, JS 1984 *Cockatoo Island: penal and institutional remains*, Sydney: National Trust of Australia
- National Australian Archives 2000 'Cockatoo Island dockyard' at [http://www.naa.gov.au/Publications/research\\_guides/guides/dockyard/chapter01.htm](http://www.naa.gov.au/Publications/research_guides/guides/dockyard/chapter01.htm) (accessed 11/03/2010)
- New South Wales Supreme Court 1896 *New South Wales law reports* 17, Sydney: Government Printer, 35, 132, 224
- Pearl, Cyril 1958 'Interlude: lemon syrup mystery', in *Wild men of Sydney*, London: WH Allen, 84-109
- Regina v Dean* [depositions and other documents, incl. Judge's notes] 1895, Sydney: New South Wales Parliament Legal Association, Government Printer

*Regina v Dean* [cases at law] 1896, New South Wales law reports, 17, Sydney: Government Printer, 35-45; *Regina v Dean (no. 2)* [cases at law] 1896, New South Wales law reports, 17, Sydney: Government Printer, 224-44

*Regina v Dean and Meagher* [cases at law] 1896, New South Wales law reports, Sydney: Government Printer, 132-56

*Regina v George Dean: Report of the Royal Commission, Appointed seventh day of May 1895*, 1895, Sydney: Government Printer (reprinted in New South Wales Legislative Assembly 1895 *Votes and proceedings*, Sydney: Government Printer, v2: 753-1333)

*Registers of criminal indictments 1890-1920*, held Archives NSW, 9/2630-9/2635

Sydney Harbour federation trust 2001 'Cockatoo Island' at [http://harbourtrust.gov.au/topics/sites-\\_cockatoo.html](http://harbourtrust.gov.au/topics/sites-_cockatoo.html) (accessed 11/03/2010)

## Research statement

### *Research background*

‘First Loves’ is part of a creative nonfiction memoir which seeks to balance creative nonfiction’s range of authorial positions—the ‘diligence of a reporter’ with the ‘shifting voices and viewpoints of a novelist’ (Gillen 2007)—to ethically use an invented first person voice in biography. This recognises that creative nonfiction is a form wherein ‘the presentation of information ... is paramount’ (Gutkind 1997).

### *Research contribution*

This work explores the extent to which fiction can be used in a creative nonfiction text and still obey nonfiction’s truth-telling tenets (Brien 2006). This creative work showcases an invented first person voice in the memoir of an historical personage: every assertion made is based on documented evidence, but a fictional voice draws inferences from the documented materials that suggests certain behaviours and feelings. Such investigation is necessary because reducing a biographical life story to the bare facts distilled from available documentation sometimes results in a chronicle of events that is unrepresentative of life as it is lived.

### *Research significance*

This work represents a series of the available facts around the famous Australian 19th century George Dean poisoning case from Mary Dean’s point of view, inviting readers to think about this material in new ways. It has been accepted for publication in an ERA A ranked journal.

## Works cited

- Brien, DL 2006 ‘The Power of Truth: Literary Scandals and Creative Nonfiction’, in T Brady and N Krauth (eds) *Creative Writing: Theory Beyond Practice*, Brisbane: Post-Pressed, 55-63.
- Gillen, S 2007 ‘Synge’s *The Aran Islands* and Irish creative nonfiction’, *New Hibernia Review* 11: 4, 129-35.
- Gutkind, L 1997 *The Art of Creative Nonfiction*, New York: John Wiley.