

The rise and fall of Daisy O'Dwyer

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A while ago I gave some thought to becoming a 'blogger' but in the event settled for the less ambitious project of an e-diary with occasional memoirs intended for an audience of family and friends. The editor of *Australian Aboriginal Studies* thought the following entry might be of interest to a wider circle of readers, and I shall be pleased if he is right.

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In the entry of 18 November I mentioned that I had lunch at Betty Meehan's place, with fellow guests Bob Reece and Isabel McBryde. Bob is a leading scholar in the field of Aboriginal colonial history and a few days previously at the National Library had presented a thought-provoking paper on Daisy Bates. After lunch Betty produced some witty pictures Rhys Jones had taken of her as a DB look-alike during her 1970s fieldwork at the Blyth River (see Figures 1 and 2 for two of them).

Daisy Bates died in 1951 at the age of 92. I don't know how much people know about her these days, but she was certainly a celebrity during the inter-war years. In 1919, after a long association with Aborigines in Western Australia, she set up a camp at a siding called Ooldea on the South Australian side of the Nullarbor Plain and stayed there for the next 16 years. In that vast emptiness the sight of an elderly lady outside her tent in full Edwardian uniform must have been a truly singular experience for travellers on the trans-continental railway.

Arthur Mee (1938:xi), editor of *The children's encyclopaedia* which sanctified my own childhood, described the scene like this:

On the fringe of the vast island continent of Australia live a few million white people; in the vast desert regions far from the coast live a few thousand black people, the remnant of the first inhabitants...The race on the fringe stands for Civilization; the race in the interior stands for Barbarism. Between them a woman has lived in a little



Figure 1
Betty Meehan at camp on Blyth River, 1978 (photograph by Rhys Jones, courtesy of B Meehan)



Figure 2
Betty Meehan, as Daisy Bates. Blyth River, 1978 (photograph by Rhys Jones, courtesy of B Meehan)

white tent for more than twenty years, watching over these people for the sake of the Flag, a woman alone, the solitary spectator of a vanishing race. She is Daisy Bates, CBE, one of the least known and one of the most romantic figures in the British Empire.



Figure 3
'At my tent' (Bates 1938, facing p.186)

It seems that one reason why the native race was vanishing was that the women were eating their own babies. A caption in Daisy's handwriting appears beneath a 1908 photograph of eight young Aboriginal women of Western Australia: 'Every one of these women killed and ate her new-born child, sharing it with every other woman in her group'. Her book *The passing of the Aborigines* is replete with such statements; for example, 'When the frightful hunger for baby meat overcame the mother before or at the birth of the baby, it was killed and cooked regardless of sex'. Even the worthy Arthur Mee (1938:xiii) lapses into cannibalistic mode: 'I shall never forget her writing to me', he says, 'that a woman she had had for tea had eaten her own child'. It comes as no surprise that Daisy was quoted 60 years later by Pauline Hanson as an authoritative source for her own slurs on Indigenous people.

What inspired this noble lady to sacrifice so much of her life for people she believed to be compulsive baby-eaters? According to Mee it was the belief that,



Figure 4
Daisy Bates (Bates 1936)

having brought to their land the Civilization that destroyed them, England owed them something. As they would not be around long enough to enjoy material compensation of any magnitude, the best that could be done was to ensure that they died off peacefully. 'Smooth the dying pillow' thus became the pious prescription for a Christian nation; and to minimise the mess left to clean up after the funeral, every effort should be made to 'keep the dreaded half-caste menace from our great continent' (Bates 1938:243). Daisy rejoiced that no fruits of miscegenation were ever begotten in any of the camps she presided over (1938:243). What the remnants of disintegrating tribes need most is 'the governance and fatherhood of the Empire-makers, men of the sterling British type that brought India and Africa into our Commonwealth of Nations—a Havelock, a Raffles, a Lugard, a Nicholson, a Lawrence of Arabia' (1938:238). In the final chapter of her book she speaks of her dream that a 'King's man' would be appointed as High Commissioner to



Figure 5
'At the time of Presentation to the then Duke and Duchess of York in Perth, 1901' (Bates 1938, facing p.10)

carry on the work she had pioneered, someone to apply the 'King's Law' throughout the Australian interior with no limit to his discretionary powers or interference with his benevolent supervision of derelicts (1938:237–8). Needless to say, it didn't happen.

In her 1971 biography of Daisy Bates, Elizabeth Salter described her subject as 'a daughter of privilege'. Born Daisy O'Dwyer in Ashberry House, County Tipperary, Ireland, she had a family tree dating back to William O'Dwyer, created Baron of Kilnamanagh by Edward III. At some stage her forebears became Protestants. After her mother died, she became a foster-daughter of Sir George Outram, a hero of the Indian army buried with full honours in Westminster Abbey. By the time she returned to Ireland as a young woman, she had acquired an English accent and fantasies about serving Queen Victoria and the



Figure 6
'With H.R.H. the Duke of Gloucester at Ooldea' (Bates 1938, facing p.186)

Empire. She spent time at her father's exclusive Kildare Street club, 'imbibing more of the prejudices of these Protestant anglophiles'.

Salter based this account on Bates's own statements in the 1930s, written for various newspapers with the help of the novelist Ernestine Hill. Later in the 1970s Isobel White, a Canberra anthropologist, began work on Bates's papers in the National Library, and within a few years the story of her upper class Protestant origins and distinguished English connections was in tatters. Daisy O'Dwyer was born into a poor Catholic family named Dwyer. Both her parents died before she was five, and along with her brothers and sisters she was left in the care of relatives. For a while she lived in England with the widow of an Anglican clergyman. After returning to Ireland she received a good secondary school education and later worked in England, probably as a governess. Ashberry House, a noble lineage, fosterage by the Outram family—all these, like much else, were figments.

According to Salter, Daisy decided to travel to the sunny climes of Australia after a doctor diagnosed a spot on her lungs as a warning of tuberculosis. By

good fortune one of her influential friends happened to be the Bishop of North Queensland, who wrote offering hospitality. She spent the months before departure acquiring introductions and 'a wardrobe luxurious enough to establish her claim to gentility in the Government circles of this new land' (Salter 1971:11). According to White, she arrived by free passage in Townsville in January 1883, then lived for a few months at Charters Towers where she got a job as governess on Fanning Downs Station. There she met a young stockman named Edwin Murrant, better known later as 'Breaker' Morant. Like herself he was a recent immigrant from Great Britain, and in March of the following year they married. Soon afterwards Murrant was sued for pig-stealing, and even though the charge was dismissed the couple separated and apparently never saw each other again.

Certainly, Daisy never mentioned it again. In February 1885 she bigamously married a drover named Jack Bates at Nowra in New South Wales. In her later writings she referred to him as a 'cattleman' with whom she 'travelled extensively in Western Queensland' (Salter 1971:29). In truth she accompanied him on droving trips during the first year

of marriage, but the birth of her son Arnold in 1886 brought this and certain other things to an end. 'I had rather a hard time of it with baby', she recorded, 'and Jack, the best of men, never came near me after that' (Salter 1971:31). For the next seven years, while Jack rode the wallaby track alone, she based herself with friends in Bathurst and cultivated the local squattocracy. When this futile occupation ultimately gave way to boredom, her doctor diagnosed the condition as 'nostalgia' and recommended a trip to England. Jack agreed to pay the fare, and she for her part guaranteed to come back when he had a home to offer her.

There remained the small problem of Arnold, now seven. Daisy decided to put him in a Catholic boarding-school at Campbelltown. His holidays could be divided between his father and his grandmother. With that fixed, she set out to cure the nostalgia problem, first by working as a journalist in London and then as a librarian in Norwich. In 1899, five years after her departure, Jack wrote to say he was in Western Australia with Arnold, ready to look for a suitable property. She decided to return.

Towards the end of her life, Daisy burnt most of her private papers. One document that escaped was an unfinished autobiographical story in the third person in which she records her impressions of her husband and son at the reunion in Perth. Of Jack she says:

This creature with the weak hanging underlip, the man who was to win success for her! This unkempt untidy soul, the man in whom she thought great possibilities lurked!...His very form and features had moulded themselves to his character and had become loose and flabby and common—above all common!



Figure 7
Daisy Bates. From a photograph published in the *Australasian* in 1921 (Isobel White (Bates 1985, facing p.12) wrote that it was probably taken in Perth between 1900 and 1910)



Figure 8
Daisy Bates on arrival in Australia, 1882 (Bates 1936)

And of Arnold: 'The horror of her first sight of him! Dirty, unmothered, neglected, incongruous' (Salter 1971:69).

As soon as she was able to find a suitable boarding house for the unmothered Arnold, she and the man with the hanging underlip headed north in search of the dream home. They found it not far from the Ophthalmia Range in the Pilbara, and, as Isobel White noted (1985:50), Jack generously registered the property in his wife's name. She in turn bestowed upon it the name 'Glen Carrick' in memory of her Norwich lover Carrick Hoare, who had held her presumably un-ringed hand and offered marriage. Twelve years later, sentiment notwithstanding, she sold the property for a substantial sum; and from that time onwards she referred to Jack as her 'late husband' who had bequeathed it to her. Jack, in fact, was alive if not well at Humptydoo in the Northern Territory and survived until 1935.

Meanwhile Arnold had qualified as an engineer and in 1908 decided to move to New South Wales. His mother at the time was engaged on anthropological fieldwork with the support of the Western Australian government, which had issued her with a free rail pass to research locations throughout the state. She requested a free return ticket to Perth to say goodbye, stating that 'this is the first time my son has left me and I am very anxious to see him and attend to his personal belongings' (Salter 1971:133). The request was refused, and whether she made the trip at her own expense is not disclosed. In 1912 Arnold married, and seven years later Daisy heard from her friend, the Minister for Mines, that her son was a fine man of whom she could be proud and that she now had two grandchildren. Subsequently Arnold moved further away to New Zealand, and in her last years his mother came to believe that he was suffering from a loss of memory caused by war wounds.

There was a time when Daisy Bates was hailed as one of Australia's greatest heroines. Her stardom was founded on determination and toughness of a high order in the face of physical hardship, and these remain uncontested. It goes without saying, moreover, that she was a woman in an era of male dominance. But we now also know that to become a celebrity it was necessary for her as well to overcome the

impediment of lowly birth in a class-conscious society. While the accumulated evidence suggests that the stratagems and deceptions she employed were undertaken without much scruple and that some of her actions had more than a touch of ruthlessness about them, it is also true that she was not exempt from remorse. As Julia Blackburn (1994) suggests, at some level Daisy was aware that her narcissism was in conflict with her motherhood; that there was a sense in which, in order to satisfy her lust for acclaim, she had cannibalised her own son. To unburden herself of the crime, she projected it onto a whole race of women for whose redemption she was then prepared to devote the rest of her life.

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Editors' note: Betty Meehan, in approving the use of the photographs made by Rhys Jones, commented: 'I should add that Rhys bought the Victorian skirt and the boater for me when he was in Britain before joining me in the field! I still have them.'

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