

WAVERLEY COUNCIL

BEA MILES: SYDNEY CHARACTER

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Local History Fact Sheet



MADHOUSE MYSTERY OF BEAUTIFUL SYDNEY GIRL

Five Doctors Declare Her Sane

THREE TIMES "BEE" MILES ESCAPED AND THREE TIMES SHE WAS RECAPTURED

CONDEMNED to a lifetime in a madhouse — Beatrice Miles, a beautiful vivacious Sydney girl of education and refinement, at the age of twenty-four.

Condemned on a routine police-court verdict, in face of the evidence for her sanity of five specialists, including two leading psychiatrists.

AND behind the obvious tragedy, a strange background of battle between opposing wills, the true history of which may never be told.

IN all cases involving conduct out of the strictly humdrum, normal alienists to-day search for "repression."

Repression is the true "motif" of the drama of Beatrice Miles.

A high-spirited child, "Dee" Miles from infancy became the family "hard case." And, like so many high-spirited children, she was "taken in hand."

But repression did not tame her; it stiffened her will. She insisted on being a "young lion," and the despair of her schoolmistress. She grew out of school-days a complete rebel against her environment. To the horror of her respectable Sydney suburb, she smoked, smoked the company of poets and artists, frequented trunk cafes, and generally lived that essentially mild existence labelled "Bohemian."

CONDEMNED TO ASYLUM

Side by side with this instinctive revolt, she attempted to parallel a career of strenuous study, including the Arts course at Sydney University.

A nervous breakdown followed. And then a catastrophe.

Two doctors were found, who quite naturally, in accordance with the "history" given them, the record of her escapades, and her mental condition as they saw her, were ready to "sign up" Beatrice Miles to a mental hospital as hopelessly insane.

To wake to the horror of a madhouse would realize for a weaker will

They had been notified of her escape and traced her. At the critical moment, her brother burst into the presence of the Registrar, shouting the familiar forbid-the-banns formula of "just cause and impediment!"

A stormy scene followed. The pair were hustled to a lawyer's office, where they were confronted by the head of the family. The Lochinvar capoled, threatened, intimidated, and finally, persuaded that his actions were liable to land him in the hands of the police,



Wife: Isn't it lucky I put on my new garters Doh?

retaliated his claim and saw the girl hustled back to Gladenville. Three months later she escaped on her own initiative.

an ingenious plan of her own making, broke from confinement once more, misled her pursuers, and got to Melbourne unobserved, leaving a message for her friend to follow, wire money, and generally give her a hand.

According to his own account, he sent no money, but threw up his job, hurried to Melbourne, and secured lodgings for his fiancée, first at an hotel, and later at a quiet East Melbourne boarding-house. The girl made use of this brief respite to consult a leading Melbourne physician, Dr. Denton Fothergill, on her mental condition. This physician has since reported:—

"RATHER NEUROTIC AND A LITTLE EXCITABLE, CERTAINLY NOT INSANE. I should say that a madhouse was the very last place for her. He characterized her as one of the most widely-read women he had ever met, and expressed his belief that six months' treatment would cure her of her neurosis. "WHICH WAS THE DIRECT SEQUEL OF ATTEMPTS TO REPRESS AN UNCONTROLLABLE CHILD."

It was of no avail. That unfortunate temperament brought about the girl's recapture.

UNFORGIVABLE SINS

Already, in Puritan Melbourne, her freedom of conduct had drawn the attention of her fellow-lodgers. Two unforgivable sins were smoking cigarettes openly and visiting the bathroom without shoes.

"Then one morning a quarrel broke out in the boarding-house between Miss Miles and her friend, in which voices were raised angrily.

The next-door boarder phoned the police, who listened in a bored way to the usual tale of a squabble in "apartments."

But the words "a girl from Sydney" galvanised them into activity. They had notification that a girl patient had escaped from a Sydney mental home. A plain-clothes man slipped down "on beat" day, and arrested Beatrice Miles on a charge of "offensive behaviour."

And came the final scene in a Melbourne Court, where Mr. A. A. Kelley, police magistrate, was confronted with one of the most delicate problems of his career.

Before him, on the unmeaning charge of "offensive behaviour," was brought a pretty, blue-eyed, brunette girl, who answered all his questions in a quiet,

Beatrice ('Bea' or 'Bee') Miles (1902-1973), a bohemian rebel and renowned Sydney eccentric, was born on 17 September, 1902 at Ashfield. She grew up at St. Ives and was educated at the private girl's school Abbotsleigh where she graduated with Honours in English. An inheritance from her grandmother allowed her to escape her unhappy home life. She studied medicine, then arts at the University of Sydney, but she discontinued her studies before graduation.

She suffered encephalitis at this time and some social commentators say her behaviour became more eccentric after this, speculating that she may have had some long-term effect of this brain disease. Her father responded to her on-going conflict with her family over her lifestyle and her ideas of sexual 'freedom' by

having her committed to the Hospital for the Insane, Gladsville in 1923. She remained incarcerated until media publicity led to her release two years later.

Her high profile eccentricities were legendary, but she was highly intelligent and well-read. Despite the money from her grandmother's estate Bea was usually homeless, living in the streets and parks of Sydney. A housing scheme, B. Miles Women's Housing Scheme, was named after Bea, but is not funded through her estate.

TAKING A TRAM TO BONDI
She was renowned for hitching rides in taxis and refusing to pay the fare, but she was also determined to extend this to free rides on other forms of public transport. One local incident has Bea boarding a tram to Bondi. When she

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refused to pay the driver got off the tram, refusing to go on until she paid her fare. Bea took control of steering wheel and took the tram through to the beach, stopping for passengers on the way.

AUB LAIDLAW, THE SHEEP AND BONDI BEACH

When Aub Laidlaw, a legendary Bondi Lifeguard apprehended Bea bringing a sheep onto the beach one day, Bea responded that although there was a sign saying 'no dogs' on the beach, there was nothing about sheep. When Laidlaw responded that there was no grass for the sheep Bea replied that the sheep didn't want to eat, just sunbathe.

GRAHAME THORNE KIDNAPPING CASE

Sydney was transfixed and horrified by the kidnapping and murder of 8-year-old Bondi boy Graham Thorne. His father had won the Opera House lottery, a popular lottery held to finance the building of the Opera House. At that time winners of the major prizes were identified in the media, including a listing of their full

name and home address. Graham was held to ransom for the prize money. Despite cooperating with the kidnapper and agreeing to pay the ransom Graham was killed. His case gripped the public imagination and was extensively reported in the media. When the killer, Stephen Bradley, went to trial the public gallery was packed, and included Bea Miles. When he was eventually found guilty Bea called from the gallery "Feed him to the sharks" or "Feed him to the sharks at Bondi". This echoed Bradley's threat to the Thorne family, "If I do not get the money I will feed him to the sharks."

Bea was also aware of the menace of sharks. She was a good swimmer and was seen at Bondi Beach, often with a sheaf knife strapped to her leg which she said she kept there to protect her from a shark attack. There are unconfirmed reports which have her swimming from the headland at North Bondi to the Icebergs club at South Bondi, which if true would make her the first woman to swim across Bondi Bay.

THIS week, during an evening peak period (or is it pique period?), we observed that fabulous identity, Bee Miles, strolling unconcerned ly down the middle of George-st. just outside Wynyard. She was reading a highbrow magazine, unconcerned by the traffic's snarl or the stuttering squeal of applied brakes. She smiled nicely at a traffic cop, who said, "Hy-ya, Bee." Bee strolled on. It wasn't until an approaching tram came to a shuddering standstill a few inches in front of her that Bee looked up from the article.



She smiled at the driver and clambered on to the footboard just beside his compartment—her favorite spot. At Hunter-street a second traffic cop saw her climb from the tram and stand in the middle of George-street, while she thumbed through the magazine in search of another article. He told her to get off the road and stop holding the traffic up. She looked at him disdainfully, clambered aboard another tram. She perched nonchalantly on the footboard and looked right through the policeman. A third cop knew the drill.

He approached her courteously, said he hoped "the good lady will make herself comfortable in a seat inside the tram." Bee flashed him a radiant smile, climbed inside, sat down, and opened her magazine. The tram rattled off.

And the funny thing is that hundreds of workers who'd missed their trains to watch Bee for 10 minutes all went home as happy as Larry.

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Images from top:

Bea Miles, ca. 1946,
photographer Gordon King.
Image courtesy of the SLNSW.

Smith's Weekly Sydney, 19
March 1927, page 1. Article
regarding Bea Miles'
incarceration in asylum.
National Library of Australia.

The Sun, 6 May 1948, page 13.
Excerpt from Sydney Diary
column. National Library of
Australia.

Portrait of Bea Miles,
individualist and bohemian,
Sydney, ca. 1960. John
Larkins, *The Great Australia
Book of Nostalgia*. Image
courtesy of the National Library
of Australia, from the Bruce
Howard Collection.

BEA'S FINAL YEARS

The final years of her life were dogged by ill health, and in 1964 she entered the Little Sisters of the Poor Home for the Aged at Randwick. In old age she reputedly claimed:

"I have no allergies that I know of, one complex, no delusions, two inhibitions, no neuroses, three phobias, no superstitions and no frustrations."

After renouncing her lifelong atheism and receiving Roman Catholic rites, she died of cancer on 3 December, 1973 and was cremated.

THE STORY LIVES ON

Since her death Bea has been seen in several Australian works of literature. David Mitchell's play *Better* known as *Bee* and writer Kate Grenville's book *Lilian's Story* (1997) both use Bea Miles life as an inspiration. *Lilian's Story* was made into a film starring Ruth Cracknell.

In an interview about her book Kate Grenville said of Bea Miles:

"What I found interesting in her story was not so much the real woman herself, but more the idea that, in a time when women were supposed to be the passive objects in the stories of men, she wrote her own story on the blank pages of her city."