

Bea (Bee) Miles



Bea Miles, c. 1946, photographer: Gordon King, State Library of NSW

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, Gladesville 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 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 Aub Laidlaw responded that there was no grass for the sheep Bea responded that the sheep didn't want to eat, just sunbathe.

Graham 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 co-operating 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.

Her 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.

Bea's 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."

Published by Waverley Library from Local Studies source material, 2009.

