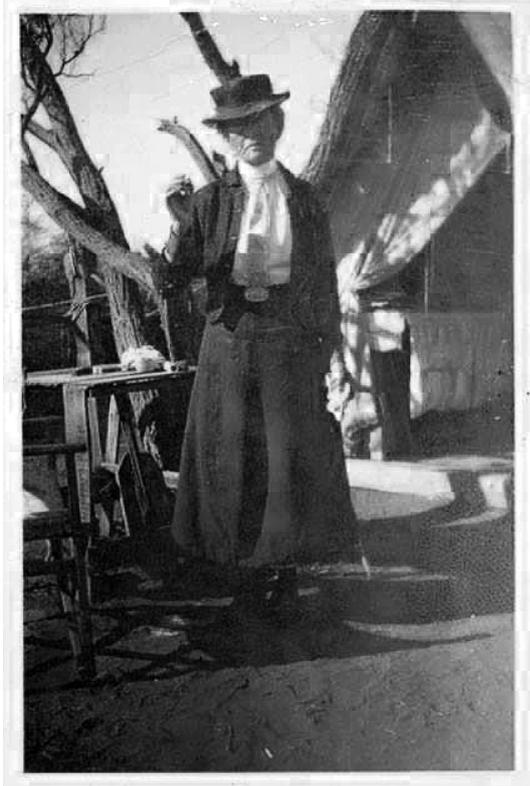


Daisy Bates

by Joe Coughlan



This is the extraordinary story of a native Roscrea woman who left town as a poor orphan, fooled people into believing that she came from landed aristocracy, wrote books on the lives and customs of the aborigines, spent nearly 40 years of her life helping to feed them and fight for their rights while living in a tent alongside them. In 2005 she was nominated as one of the world's greatest travel writers. Her story is on the curriculum in every primary school in Australia. She even had an opera written about her.

Margaret Daisy Dwyer was born to James and Bridget Dwyer of Main St. who had a boot and leather shop beside where Madden's Chemist is today. Along with her sister Kathleen they were educated in the Sacred Heart Convent School. After their term finished both Daisy and Kathleen were kept on as monitors at the secondary school which was a boarding school for girls of

privileged families. Here they learned the ways of the aristocracy which was to become an asset in later life.

In 1864 their mother died and their father turned to drink. After seven months he married Mary Dillon from Derrymore who had been hired to look after the children. James and Mary decided to immigrate to America leaving the children with family members. Shortly after arriving James died and was buried in a pauper's grave in Virginia. After spending some time in Ballycrine with their grandmother, Daisy and Kathleen returned to Main St when Mary Dillon came back from America.

Daisy and Kathleen did not get along with their new stepmother and they soon left Roscrea and went to Scotland. Here they led people to believe that they were from landed gentry. They said their father was James Dwyer of Ashbury House. They would have known the Bridge sisters from Ashbury House as they would have met them in the boarding school and they would have been familiar with their lifestyle.

Her sister Kate as she called herself then met and married Robert Browning a Scottish aristocrat who was told the tale of her privileged background. Daisy met and fell for Ernest Baglehole who was a ship owner and his family were wealthy land owners. Earnest's family rejected Daisy out of hand as being an unsuitable match and if he married her they would disinherit him. After this humiliating experience Daisy decided to go to Australia.

Daisy Dwyer arrived in Queensland on January 14th 1883 she claimed that she travelled first class when she actually travelled in steerage on the Almora under the assisted passage scheme. When she arrived she misled people into thinking she had come from gentry and began to mix in some of the highest society at the time. She went to Tasmania where she again claimed that her father was James Dwyer Esq. of Ashbury House and that she came from a long line of aristocracy. She attended society functions and balls and with her education mixed easily amongst them.

Daisy left Tasmania after 6 months and went back to Queensland to Charter Towers a prosperous gold mining town, where she met with an American Arnold Calquhoun whose parents had emigrated from Scotland to America where they had made their fortune. Arnold became spellbound with Daisy but when she found out that he suffered from syphilis which was an incurable disease at the time, she refused his proposal of marriage and he committed suicide. She then went to work as a governess with Fredrick Hamilton in Fanning Downs and kept up the pretence of being an Irish protestant aristocrat.

Here she met Edward Morant who also from a working class background won a scholarship to a middle class school in England and was also able to pass as upper-class. He had left England after leaving numerous debts and passing dud cheques. Daisy fell for and married Morant but things went downhill straight away when Daisy found out that Morant had paid for the wedding, the engagement ring and the minister with dud cheques. Morant fled shortly after this and ended up breaking horses and became famous for writing ballads. Before joining the army and fighting in the Boer War where he was executed after shooting 9 prisoners. A film was made in 1980 about his life starring Edward Woodward as Morant called *"Hero or Villain the legend of Breaker Morant"*. Daisy moved away again and reverted to her maiden name Dwyer. She went to Sydney to work as a housekeeper for Catherine Bates.

Daisy met Catherine Bates' son Jack and within a few weeks married him though she was still married to Morant. After the wedding Bates went away on a cattle drive and when he came back they bought their own piece of land with the money that he had earned and the bonus for delivering the cattle ahead of time.

Within months of the wedding Earnest Baglehole came to Australia to look for Daisy and she left Bates and married Baglehole. This was her third marriage within 2 years without any question of divorce. Baglehole who also had a wife and family in England, left Daisy to return to England by ship. He never arrived and his death remains a mystery, possibly dying at sea. Daisy then went back to Jack Bates. She soon discovered that she was pregnant but the big question was who the father was. A son was born and called Arnold Hamilton Bates.

When Arnold was 6 years old Daisy placed him in a boarding school and made a return trip to Ireland. She stayed with her brother Jim Dwyer who by now had taken over the premises on Main St. Short of money by this time she went to England to find work. Her sister Kate introduced her to William Steed – a famous media baron of the time – who was a well known campaigner for social justice. Steed took her on and when she was going back to Australia he persuaded her to send him some stories on aboriginal life.

When Daisy eventually returned to Australia with a large sum of money which remains a mystery where she got it, she bought a lease on a large farm and several hundred head of cattle. She named this farm Glen Carrick after the area where her grandmother lived in Ballycrine.

On the ship back to Perth she met an Italian priest called Father Martinelli who devoted his time to helping the aborigines and he told her of their plight and how they had been exploited by settlers. When she arrived in Perth she approached the governor of Fremantle who encouraged her to make a study of them.

Her first paper called "*Marriage Laws and Customs of the Aborigines*" was sent to the papers in both Australia and London. The money she made from these she donated to schools for orphans. She went to Broome which was an area rich with pearls. Here she learned of the plight of many aborigines were used as slaves to dive for pearls and their women were traded for alcohol. These women usually died of diseases caught from the traders such as leprosy and syphilis. She then took up the fight for these people and got this practice outlawed. With what little money she had she set up a mission and helped to feed and clothe these people many of who suffered from malnutrition. It took a while but the aborigines came to trust her and began to call her Kabbarli or grandmother. In 1965 an opera was released called "*Kabbarli*" based on the life of Daisy.

Word spread of her great work and when the Duchess and Duke of York (the future King George of England) arrived in Perth she was invited to meet them. She introduced herself as Daisy Dwyer of Ashbury House Roscrea. As she was talking to him she dropped her parasol, he stooped down and picked up and handed it back to her. She carried it with her everywhere she went for the rest of her life and considered it her lucky charm.

She began to write articles for the newspapers on aboriginal life which funded her studies on them. She spent the next 40 years recording their culture and traditions. After he lost all her cattle and her land drinking and gambling she eventually left Jack Bates. About this time Breaker Morant was executed by the army after a controversial court marshal in which he was supposed to have shot prisoners of war. Daisy managed to survive by writing articles as a freelance journalist many of these were exaggerated to suit the readers.

In 1904 Daisy was commissioned by the Australian government to document the different languages of the tribes. She bought a small tent and camped with the tribes. She could be seen with her hat covered in lace to keep out the flies and her by now famous parasol. What money she made went to feed and nurse the aborigines, many of them during fever epidemics and became competent in their language. In 1907 she was made a fellow of the Royal Geographic Society and also had a peak in Western Australia known as Mount Daisy Bates called after her. Her manuscript called "*The Native Tribes of Western Australia*" was not published till after her death.

She eventually went to live permanently among the tribes in an 8 x 10 tent and in 1912 she was given the title of Honorary Protector Of Aborigines by the south Australia Government. Her second book was called "*The Passing of the Aborigines*" which wasn't published for many years.

She highlighted the practice of selling girls of mixed race as young as ten, who were considered even of a lower class than the aborigines to traders. When food became scarce these children were at the bottom of the chain, even the dogs were fed before them and many of these children were left to starve. She helped to get many of these children into a mission and helped to protect them from these horrible practices. She crossed 1600 miles of desert in a cart with two camels to highlight her work at a scientific conference in Melbourne to highlight this and the work she was doing.

During the First World War she became the matron at Myrtle Bank, a home for sick and wounded soldiers coming back from the war many suffering with TB. She worked here till the war was over along with doing her work with the aborigines. In 1919 Daisy received word that many of them were dying of starvation in central Australia due to a drought that had lasted for a couple of years. She enlisted the help of several rich families in the area and loaded a train with supplies and headed out to Oldea to help. When she arrived she discovered that many of the native had measles and mumps. These they had picked up from second-hand clothes which had been sent by well meaning people. The aborigines had no immunity to these diseases. She spent what money she had on buying new clothes for them.

She set up her tent near Oldea Railway Line and soon she became a bit of a tourist attraction. She made the most of this and got the aborigines to start selling carvings and trinkets to tourists. Once a week she sent her laundry to Canberra and had her mail collected. Even though many of the dresses she had were getting old and gone out of style she was always impeccably dressed and always carried her famous parasol.

In 1923 when the Prince of Wales arrived in Australia she was requested to put on a display of aboriginal dance for him. In 1934 she was awarded a C.B.E by Prince Henry the Duke of Gloucester who had made a special request to meet her on his tour. The magazine "*Sphere*" which would have been a very popular magazine of the time carried a picture of Daisy with the Duke on the front cover. Her book "*The Passing of the Aborigines*" was published in 1938 and became a bestseller worldwide.

By 1944 Daisy was suffering from the early stages of dementia; she also had malnutrition and her sight was failing. Her friend Ernestine Hill persuaded her to go into a nursing home which the Australian Government paid for. In 1947 after 3 years she discharged herself but soon returned after she found that she was unable to cope on her own. When she went out walking she carried her umbrella which was now 38 years old and a bag of pennies with her which she distributed among the children.

In 1951 her book "*The Territory*" was published and she also donated all her papers and writings to the National Library. On April 19th 1951 at the age of 91 Daisy died peacefully in her sleep. In her will she left everything including future royalties from her book to the improvement of conditions for Aborigines.

Her headstone reads:

Erected to the memory of Daisy Bates. Erected by the Commonwealth Government as a tribute to her lifelong work in the interests of the Australian Aborigines.

When first published on "Roscrea Through the Ages" Facebook site in March 2014, this Daisy Bates piece in one week had been read by almost 2,700 people.