

The Life of Bee Miles

“I am an atheist, a true thinker and speaker. I cannot stand or endure the priggery, caddery, snobbery, smuggling, hypocrisy, lies, flattery, compliments, praise, jealousy, envy, pretence, conventional speech and behaviour upon which society is based”. Bee Miles. (Barlow, Voyage of ‘The City of Brisbane’ 1862, 2001, page 131)

Beatrice Miles was born in 1902; she preferred to be called Bee.



Bee aged 29, after a morning swim at Coogee.

Bee was from a wealthy, conservative family. Bee’s father WJ Miles was a well-known controversial nationalist who was pro Aboriginal and anti-British. Bee had a love hate relationship with her father, but took on many of his nationalistic ideas and values. Like her father Bee was fiercely patriotic and loved Sydney and Australia.

Bee was an atheist and *“believed religion was the cause of so many wars and so much misery that she didn’t want any part of it.”* (Barlow, *Bee Miles’s Attitude to Religion*, Sydney Morning Herald, 1994, page 12)

Bee attended Abbotsleigh, the exclusive private girls’ school. Teachers described Bee as *‘original and high spirited’*. At 12 years old Bee wore a ‘No Conscription’ badge to school during the referendum in World War I.

In another incident Bee was disgusted when she was severely marked down for an essay about Gallipoli, which she described as a ‘strategical blunder’ rather than a ‘wonderful war effort’.

Bee enrolled in Arts at Sydney University but discontinued after a year because *‘they didn’t teach enough Australian stuff’*. (Radi, 1988, page 218) Shortly after leaving university Bee contracted encephalitis, a serious disease that can cause brain damage. After the illness Bee’s behaviour became more eccentric and considered by some to be ‘anti-social’.

Bee was part of the ‘Bohemian crowd’- the intellectuals, poets and artists of Sydney. According to old newspaper reports, Bee was more widely known than the Prime Minister in pre-war Sydney.

Bee became a famous Sydney personality because of her outspoken criticism of

political and social authorities and her larrikin and eccentric behaviour. Bee was well known for jumping onto bonnets of moving cars. She would also ride bicycles and motorcycles through the city in an evening dress.



However she is most famous for jumping into taxis, refusing to leave and refusing to pay.

In a Sydney bank Bee used to cheekily smoke cigarettes below a sign that read '*Gentlemen will refrain from smoking*'.

Bee was a good swimmer she swam from Coggee Beach to Wedding Cake Island with a sheaf knife strapped to her leg to protect her from the sharks. When Bee was on holidays at Palm Beach a young boy went missing in the surf. Bee swam out to look for him even though the lifesavers had given up the search.

When Bee was 21 her father admitted her into Gladesville hospital, then known as the lunatic asylum. Bee hated the mental institutions. She wrote about her time in there in an article titled "Advance Australia Fair." There are conflicting stories about Bee escaping the asylum with the help of '*Smiths Weekly*' a widely read tabloid. '*Smiths Weekly*' published a front-page story that campaigned for her release from the asylum - "*Mad House Mystery of Beautiful Sydney Girl.*" Stories say Bee met the writer from the tabloid in the asylum. Conflicting stories say the writer was part of the bohemian crowd. It is not clear if Bee escaped from the asylum or was allowed to leave. There are reports of her staying with journalists for 28 days, and according to laws at the time if a person was away from the asylum for 28 days they were free.

Bee was in and out of hospital and prison most of her life. She had 200 convictions against her "*80 I deserved but 120 were unfair and malicious*". (Barlow, *Voyage of 'The City of Brisbane' 1862*, 2001, page 131)

Bee lived in the streets and parks despite the income she received from her grandmother's estate.

Bee was famous for reciting Shakespeare in public places for money. She had signs around her neck advertising the price. For example: "*Shakespeare sonnets 6d, Soliloquy 1/-*". Bee often recited Shakespeare at the State library where she read up to 3 books a day until she was banned.

In a famous incident in 1955 Bee was driven by a female cab driver to Perth. The journey took 19 days and cost her 600 Pounds. Bee stayed for 3 months studying the wildflowers and returned to Sydney by ship. John Benyon, her favorite taxi

driver and friend, drove her to Hobart and Adelaide.

Bee was seen frequently wearing a tennis eyeshade. She had a declaration of sanity by psychiatrists and 1-pound notes pinned inside her jacket.

Bee slept on park benches. The police, according to law, could not arrest her while she was on a seat so they tipped her off and took her in to Central Police Station.

Bee spent time sleeping in or around local Churches. The situation had advantages for Bee but tested the patience of the good-humoured priests. Bee enjoyed the “hymn singing” on Sunday and the free meals; she joined in the dinner conversation when it suited her. Bee went to bed early and got up late so the priests had to walk around her.

In 1964 Bee, who had diabetes, arthritis and poor health, was offered a place at the ‘Little Sisters of the Poor Home for the Aged’ in Randwick. Bee said, *“I live in a home run by Catholics because there isn’t one for old people run by atheists. But don’t think I’m unappreciative- the nuns and sisters here are wonderful people.”* (Barlow, *Voyage of ‘The City of Brisbane’ 1862*, 2001, page 134)



Bee died of cancer on the 3rd of December 1973. There is conflicting evidence about whether she repented on her deathbed and became a Roman Catholic; those who knew her well were very skeptical. Bee said of death *“I’m not afraid to die, I’ve had a good and full life, and now I’m getting old. When it comes, it will be the end. I don’t believe there will be anything after.”* (Barlow, *Bee Miles’s Attitude to Religion*, Sydney Morning Herald, 1994, page 12)

At her funeral Bee had Australian Wildflowers placed on her coffin along with a ribbon that read *‘One who loved Australia’*. A jazz band played *‘Waltzing Matilda’* *‘Tie me Kangaroo Down Sport’* and *‘Advance Australia Fair’*.

Author Kate Grenville wrote *‘Lillian’s Story’* which was based loosely on the life of Bee Miles. The book was later made into a movie starring the late Ruth Cracknell.

Bee’s writings are in the State library, some in her own handwriting, they are: *‘Dictionary by a bitch’*, *‘I go on a wild goose chase’*, *‘I leave in a hurry’* *‘For we are young and free’* *‘Notes on Sydney Monument’* and *‘Advance Australia Fair.’* The

manuscripts are very interesting and are a good example of Bee's strong views and larrikin nature.

B.Miles Women's Housing Scheme was named after Bee Miles but is not and never was funded by Bee Miles or through her estate. The scheme provides medium term support housing for women with a mental illness.

Completed by Nina Blundell

Tafe Welfare student August 2002

Thankyou to Randwick District Historical Society for the pictures on pages 2 & 3.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barlow, Bill. 2001, *Voyage of 'The City of Brisbane' 1862*, Southwood Press Pty Limited, Marrickville.
- Barlow, Bill. 30/06/94, *Bee Miles's Attitude to Religion*, Sydney Morning Herald.
- Daniels, Kay & Murnane, Mary, 1980, *Australia's Women: A Documentary History*, St Lucia : University of Queensland Press.
- Ellis. Rose, 1988, *For we are Young and Free: The Writings of Bee Miles*.
- Kidd, Courtney, 02/03/01, *In lunacy's dark shadow*, Sydney Morning Herald.
- Lamont, Leonie, 12/05/95, *'Film brings back memories of Sydney eccentric'* Sydney Morning Herald
- Lewis, Berwyn, 23/4/92, *The incredible lightness of Bea*, Sydney Morning Herald.
- McGuiness. P.P, 02/12/97, *Sydney's Push*, Sydney Morning Herald.
- Miles, Bee. *'Dictionary by a bitch', 'I go on a wild goose chase', 'I leave in a hurry' 'For we are young and free' 'Notes on Sydney Monument' and 'Advance Australia Fair*.
- Payne, Pamela, 03/05/92, *'Miles of taxing Charm'*, Sydney Morning Herald.
- Radi, Heather, 1988, *200 Australian Women*, Broadway, RedressPress.
- Rodd, L.C. 1972, *John Hope of Christ Church St Laurence*, Alpha books.
- Smith, Margaret, 19/4/96, *'Bee and Bill a Sydney Story'* SydneyMorning Herald
- Stephens, Tony, 10/07/97, *Australia First and the first Australians*, Sydney Morning Herald
- Yates, Skye, 24/06/2000, *Miles out of the ordinary* The Daily Telegraph
20/06/94, *Bee Miles was one of the great eccentrics* (letter to editor), Sydney Morning Herald,
- 11/03/1928, *Has Manly Girl got Sharks Scared*, Truth.
- Bee [aka Bea, Beatrice] Miles*, author unknown

'A thought on Bee Miles' (letter to editor) Sydney Morning Herald