

Daisy May Bates

(1859 - 1951)

“The Great White Queen of the Never-Never”

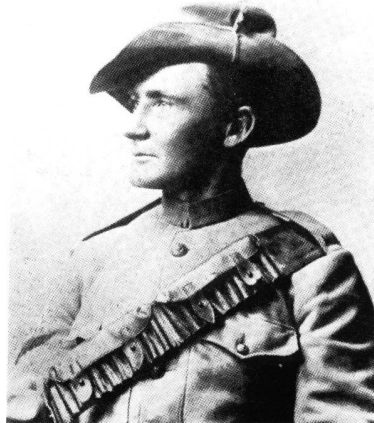


**Sydney Nolan, *Daisy Bates*, 1972,
National Archives of Australia**

Daisy May Bates was born Margaret May O'Dwyer, on the 16th October 1859 at Roscrea, County Tipperary, Ireland. At the age of twenty-four she set sail in the *Almora*, bound for Townsville, Queensland. As an orphan (and giving her age as 20) she was able to come to Australia for only £1 (instead of the normal £40 passage), as “a single Catholic girl between 15 and 21”. She stayed first with the Bishop of North Queensland and later with several family friends who had migrated previously.

Daisy found employment as a governess on Fanning Downs Station. At Charters Towers on 13th March 1884 she married Edwin Henry Murrant, better known as Breaker Morant,. However, Morant’s habit of incurring debt and either failing to pay or issuing valueless cheques, together with occasional bouts of stealing led the strong-minded Daisy to end the

relationship. Morant eventually enlisted in the Second Contingent of the South Australian Mounted Rifles and sailed for South Africa and the Boer War on 26th January 1900. His story while he was there has become part of Australian folklore.



Henry "Breaker" Morant

Shortly after, Daisy moved to New South Wales. By all accounts devastatingly attractive, she was very popular and soon engaged to Philip Gipps. However, Gipps died before they could marry and Daisy married instead John Bates, an Australian-born a bushman and drover on 17 February 1885. Only four-months later she went through a bigamous form of marriage with Ernst Clark Baglehole. Daisy clearly had a somewhat casual attitude to the institution of matrimony.

Her one and only child, a son, Arnold Hamilton Bates was born in Bathurst on 26 August 1886. (One assumes Bates was a tolerant fellow.) However, none of her marriages were a success. Daisy soon became bored. She travelled extensively, often visiting inland towns or stations as far south as Tasmania. At first fairly well off financially, she lost most of her money during the bank crashes of 1892.

Virtually penniless, in February 1894 Daisy Bates returned to England, where she found a job as a journalist. In 1899 *The Times* published a scathing account of the cruelty of West Australian settlers to the aborigines. Daisy approached the newspaper, offering to return to

Australia, investigate the situation and report back. Her offer was accepted and she returned to Australia in August of that year.

On her return voyage to Perth she met Dean Martelli, a Catholic priest, from whom she gained an insight into the conditions being experienced by Australian aborigines. Daisy invested what money she had with the idea of providing for her old age, bought note books and supplies and left for the North West to gather information on Aborigines and the effects of white settlement on them.



Daisy Bates in the fieldwork outfit she wore on her Western Australian expeditions.

Photo: *National Library of Australia*

Daisy Bates, now thirty-six, had found her life's work, and began it at the Beagle Bay Mission near Broome. Her accounts of what she found were published in *The Times* but more significantly in anthropological and geographical journals in Australia and overseas. While at the mission she compiled a dictionary of several local dialects, comprising some two thousand words and sentences. It has generally been held that her work with aboriginal language/dialects was her greatest, some even claim only, achievement.

In 1904 she was appointed by the Western Australian government to research the tribes in the State. The next year this task was temporarily narrowed to a study of the Bibbulmun tribe on the Maamba reserve in the south-west, where she conducted her first concentrated period of field-work while living in a tent among them. She recorded wide-ranging data on language, myth, religion and kinship. It took six years to compile the data.

By 1910 she had completed a substantial manuscript. However its publication was seriously delayed by the arrival from Britain of an expedition led by Professor A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, to study the social anthropology of Aborigines of the north-west. Because of her experience Daisy Bates was appointed to the expedition as a "Travelling Protector" with a special commission to conduct inquiries into native conditions and problems such as employment on stations, guardianship and the morality of native and half-caste women in towns and mining camps. Later Radcliffe-Brown was to publish some of Daisy Bates' findings as his own.

Moved by the miseries she saw among the aborigines on the expedition she decided to concentrate in the future on welfare rather than science. She was especially distressed by the plight of the sick and elderly Aborigines enforcedly exiled on the islands of Bernier (the males) and Dorré (the females). Her anthropological knowledge told her that to the physical distress was added the mental agonies of unnatural juxtapositions of tribe and kin. She claimed that it was this group of aborigines who gave her the affectionate name 'Kabbarli', meaning grandmotherly person.

In 1912 she established the first of the harsh, isolated camps for which she became renowned. She camped at Eucla amongst the remnants of the Mirning tribe on the southern fringe of the Nullarbor Plain, becoming the first woman ever to be appointed by the government as an Honorary Protector of Aborigines. In 1914 she was invited to attend meetings in eastern capitals of the anthropological section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. To attend, she crossed of 250 miles (402

km) of the southern Nullarbor Plain in a small cart pulled by camels. When the meetings were over she returned to her desert Aborigines.



The railway sidings at the Ooldea crossing. It was here that the then Prince of Wales (later Edward V111) stopped on the first trip across the new trans-continental railway to watch a presentation by (or rather of) the 'Natives' of South Australia. Daisy Bates organised the display, gathering a couple of hundred of the local Anangu tribe to present traditional art, music and dancing. By all accounts, the Prince was fascinated and stayed for some hours.

The white stone is the memorial to Daisy Bates whose camp (tent) was in the dunes a couple of kilometers to the North

In September 1919 Daisy settled down to full time welfare work at Ooldea in South Australia. She pitched her tent and lived and worked among these Aborigines for the next sixteen years. She never tried to change, teach or convert them, preferring to see them retain their own way of life. She is on record as seeing them as a "dying race." and sought to keep them away from white influence and to encourage them to retain their own way of life. She claimed that during her time at Ooldea "no more half-cast children were born, nor was any half-cast ever begotten in any of my camps".



Daisy Bates and a group of Australian indigenous women, c. 1911

In August 1933 the Commonwealth Government invited her to Canberra and sought her advice on aboriginal affairs. A year later she was awarded *The Order of Commander of the British Empire* (CBE) and set about getting her work in print. With the help of noted journalist Ernestine Hill she produced a series of articles for leading Australian newspapers under the title *'My Natives and I'*.

At the age of seventy-one she walked every day to her office at the *Advertiser* building in Adelaide to work on her articles. Later the Commonwealth Government paid her £2 a week to collate all her papers and notes and prepare them for publication. However, without any other income it was impossible for her to stay in Adelaide so Daisy Bates moved to the Village Settlement of Pyap on the River Murray where she once more pitched her tent and worked at her typewriter in the peace and freedom of the Australian bush.

When her book *The Passing of the Aborigines* was launched she moved back to Adelaide. In the book she once again expressed the view that the aborigines were a dying race. According to her, while aborigine *beginnings* were obscure, "there would be nothing obscure about his *extinction* two centuries of white rule had seen to that."

Daisy wrote some 270 newspaper articles about aboriginal life, valuably sensitive accounts of cultures customarily presented in the press at that time as unintelligibly bizarre. However, her repeated, emphatic assertions concerning Aboriginal cannibalism aroused much controversy. She strongly opposed miscegenation and wrote in a newspaper article in 1921 that "with some exceptions, the only good half-caste is a dead half-caste." Her firm belief that Aboriginal full-bloods would become extinct unless segregated from Europeans was to be proved wrong by the population statistics of subsequent years.

As a result of those opinions, Bates – once viewed as a saintly figure, and a heroine of the British Empire – gradually fell from grace. When she died in 1951, she was still a staple feature of the Australian school curriculum. By the 1970s, when indigenous groups became politically assertive, she was seen as an embarrassing eccentric. Nevertheless her widely read defeatist views helped prod governments into action in the areas of medicine and child care. At the time her anthropology, especially her anthropological method of living with one's subject, was seen as subjective and non-scientific. Her papers lay dormant for three decades, although lately they have received some scholarly attention.



Daisy Bates meeting the Duke of Gloucester, taking a break from his journey on the Trans-Australian Railway from Perth to Adelaide to witness an aboriginal corroboree at Coldean in 1934

The word eccentric was coined for such as Daisy Bates. She was always immaculately turned out in stiff Edwardian suits and petticoats, despite the searing desert heat. Susanna de Vries, author of *The Many Lives of Daisy Bates*, writes: "She was always immaculate, in a snowy white blouse, with every hair in place." White gloves and parasol completed the image. However, although the train brought mail and clean clothes, Bates thought the railway a disaster because it facilitated contact between white men and Aboriginal women living in previously inaccessible areas. In fact, according to Bob Reece, an historian at Murdoch University in Perth, she moved to Ooldea for that very reason: "to prevent white railway workers from having sex with Aboriginal women and girls". Dr Bob Reece, the author of *Daisy Bates: Grand Dame of the Desert* (207) writes: "She was Australia's greatest woman eccentric, and its first female anthropologist, a self-taught woman of science. She was a woman of great courage and physical strength. Ultimately her achievements were overshadowed by her retrograde views. But among Aborigines she had powerful status."

Daisy May Bates died almost penniless in an old people's home on 18th April, 1951. She is buried in the North Road cemetery, Adelaide.



Daisy's grave, with a headstone erected in her honour by the Commonwealth Government of Australia.

Sources.

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