

The Pyap School

Stephen Orr

‘Daisy, please.’

‘Mrs Bates.’

The two police officers were tired. They’d driven all the way from Nuriootpa. Gone without tea, trawled the back-tracks of the back-blocks of the winding river, damaged their suspension, given up on uniforms and had to stop to herd pigs from the road. So, when they arrived at 11 p.m., they weren’t in the mood for any business. Daisy Bates or not, the old girl would comply.

They’d been warned. About her moods, her sharp tongue, how she’d use an umbrella or shit-shovel to stop them. But they just, didn’t, care.

‘Daisy, please, be reasonable.’

‘Have we been introduced, Constable?’

‘No.’

‘Then it’s “Mrs Bates” to you.’

Daisy Bates, senior citizen, ethnographer, mother-mild to the Aborigines she hadn’t found (apart from a few bones) in the Riverland. Kabbarli, grandmother, carer and soother-towards-extinction, nurse, teacher, scribe and Australian Everywoman. Daisy, miracle worker, icon, a non-sufferer-of-fools, especially junior constables.

‘Why exactly?’ Daisy asked.

‘We weren’t told,’ the male constable, the older of the two, replied.

‘Then why should I go?’

The constables waited.

‘I’m under no obligation to listen to you. Arriving at my campsite at ...’ She checked her fob-watch. ‘Well, close to midnight.’

‘We wanted to arrive earlier. We had troubles.’

Daisy was sitting on a camp-stool in front of her dying fire beside the river. The officers could hear but not see the water lapping on the bank. There was no one for miles. Just Daisy, and her tent, and her Dickens novels, and her starched collars and ribbon tie and fly-veil. ‘I’m not going,’ she said.

‘We’ve been told you must.’

She looked at them indignantly. ‘Must? This is Russia?’

‘No, Mrs Bates, but you can’t stay here any longer. You know that.’

‘Why?’

‘It’s ... impractical.’

‘I’m doing perfectly well. I’ve had friends visiting.’

The young constable stared into the tent. ‘In there with you?’

‘Yes. Up at five, damper, tea, sweep out the floor. I’ve been doing it for thirty-five years, young man.’

‘I know.’

‘Well?’

There was a long, difficult pause. Then the woman constable said, ‘Listen, Mrs Bates, we can’t go back without you. How about we pack up, take you to town, see what this is all about and ... we could bring you back?’

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Transnational Literature Vol. 8 no. 2, May 2016.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

Daisy smiled at her. 'You could? You will?'

'Well, if it's allowed.'

'Exactly. Now, it's late. I don't like being woken, so I'm off to sleep.'

Daisy was wearing a rough gown over her nightshirt. When they'd woken her, flashing their torches in her face, she'd crawled from bed, grizzling, slipping on a pair of canvas shoes. She stood, and turned to go into her tent.

'Mrs Bates,' the young woman said.

'You can tell them I refused. Tell your *inspector* that people in Australia can still choose to live the way they wish.'

The male constable stepped forward. 'Mrs Bates.'

She looked at him.

'We were told to bring you, regardless.'

Daisy almost laughed. 'Regardless?'

'Yes.'

'Which means?'

'Forcibly, if required.'

'And you would ... force me?'

Arthur Jacobs took a moment. 'We wouldn't want to do it. I mean, I've got my own gran.'

'You wouldn't want to. You won't. So, I'm off to bed.' She walked into the tent.

'Mrs Bates,' the young woman, Alvis Brooks, began.

Daisy looked out. 'Yes, Constable?'

'Brooks. If you could just see it from our side? Neither of us wants to ...'

Daisy smiled.

'Fine, neither of us would drag you out.'

'Of course.'

'But ...'

Daisy took a moment, sighed and emerged from her tent. 'Now we have a sensible conversation,' she said. 'No one comes to my home, my place, and threatens me. It just, isn't, done.'

'Of course.'

Daisy returned to her stool.

'So, this is how I see it. Old woman, not looking after herself, looking for Aborigines in need of ... succour (which, I might add, I'm yet to find). Your *inspector* has been told by certain people that I'm no longer able to look after myself. But he hasn't visited, and looked, and seen.'

Daisy indicated her camp-site: clean, orderly, swept.

'Nonetheless, he thinks it best to help me help myself. So, what does he do? Finds the two most junior constables at hand and gets them to do his dirty work. That's what you're doing, children – dirty work. How do you feel about that?'

Brooks was unsure. 'We have a job to do.'

'Piffle. You have to act without thinking, don't you?'

'Sometimes.'

'Which is why you're here?'

Arthur Jacobs was growing impatient. It was close to midnight, and the inspector wanted her back by morning. 'We have a job to do,' he repeated. 'We're tired and we have to get it done.'

'You're threatening me again, Constable?'

'I wouldn't call it a threat.'

Daisy stood to return to her tent.

'No,' Jacobs said. 'We won't ... I won't be forcing you to do anything, Mrs Bates.'

Daisy sat down. 'Good.'

'But if you won't come, I'll have to lay down over there, under that old river red, and sleep, and wait till you're ready.'

Daisy looked at Brooks. 'And you?'

'I can sleep in the car, I suppose.'

Daisy was still very unhappy. But she'd won, she guessed, and there was this inspector fellow to deal with in Adelaide. So, it was best to get it done. 'Righto, give me ten minutes,' she said. 'I'll need to get changed.'

I had to be removed, physically taken away from my tent, at 11.30 at night by two gangsters, a male and female, compelled to dress in city garb and compelled bodily into a vile car, bundled in just as I had been caught up by a huge beast and thrust anyhow into a corner of the car, my feet doubled up by my neck. My tent and all its little gadgets just left scattered all about ...

Daisy sat comfortably in the back seat of the police car. She searched the night for lights but there were just a few shadowy swamps avoiding moonlight. She studied the back of the woman's head, and the young man's closely shaved scalp and uneven sideburns. What did the inspector really want? What had he heard, and from whom? She hadn't been doctoring or caring for anyone. She hadn't found a single native (any shade of grey would do). So, to fill her days, she'd started writing her memoirs (tentatively titled 'My Natives and I').

Daisy still needed to do good. She longed for company. She decided to turn her attention to the children at the Pyap School.

It'd become a weekly ritual. Thursday morning: up at 5 a.m., breakfast, ablutions, clean dress (courtesy of the Schuberts, living on the largest of the Pyap fruit-growing blocks, visiting once a week to make sure all was well, fetching her groceries from Loxton, washing her clothes, buying her books). Then she'd march along the river towards Pyap, past the pumping station and the boats, using her umbrella to clear the scrub that threatened her little bush path. Her heels sinking in the sand (not that that would stop her). Onto the road and up the hill, past the Lehmanns and Lieberts, gathering a small tribe of eager kiddies as she went.

'Mrs Bates, what are you going to tell us about today?'

'Wait. Patience, Carl.'

She marched, sure-footed and determined, on the bitumen. The kids caught on and marched beside her, until there was a little regiment coming up the hill towards the school. The teacher, Mrs Knoke, would be waiting. 'Good morning, Mrs Bates.'

'Good morning, Mrs Knoke. I noticed Charlie wasn't with us this morning?'

'He's gone to town, for his sister's operation.'

'Good-o. Shall we begin?'

The teacher would line the children up, bring them in, stand them behind their desks and make them sing the national anthem. There was no *Deutschland über alles* here, although it got an airing in the homes around Pyap. Each of them full of leftover Barossa Lutherans, forsaking the vine for the mandy. The schoolroom was Victoria and Edward the Unfortunate, the flag and St George climbing the wall beside times-tables recited and memorised every afternoon between 1.00 and 1.18.

Then they'd sit down and Mrs Knoke would give the usual introduction. 'We are very lucky to have Mrs Bates here today. Mrs Bates is known across the country, the world –' as she turned and smiled at the old woman, 'for her work with Aborigines. And now, Mrs Bates has promised to show us some artefacts from her time in the desert.'

Daisy would come forward with her box and open it. Then there'd be a flint or axe-head, a mortar or thigh bone, and once, the skull of a boy who'd died of diphtheria (as he lay in her arms, looking up at her pleadingly, his mother – she explained to the children – off with some bloke and his grog). The kids would be amazed, and the artefacts would be passed around the room as she told them about her years, her decades at Ooldea Siding, caring for her natives, shielding them from the Trans-Continental Railway, with its twin diseases of pox and civilisation.

Constable Alvis Brooks turned to her. 'We've heard all about you, Daisy.'

Daisy shrugged. 'What have you heard?'

'Living in a tent, by yourself, in the middle of nowhere.'

Daisy didn't like this little Hitler-in-a-dress. Fascism reached everywhere, it seemed. And no matter where, it couldn't see itself as dangerous, intrusive, un-Christian. 'It wasn't the middle of nowhere.'

'A siding, on the Nullarbor?'

'For the natives, it's as busy as Rundle Street. Their ancestors are everywhere.'

Jacobs looked back at her. 'Yeah, but they're dead.'

'Not at all.'

Neither constable saw the point of pursuing it. Once Daisy had decided. Jacobs tried again. 'Where did you get your food?'

'The train knew what to bring each week.'

'And you cooked for yourself, and them?'

'Them?'

'The Abos?'

Jacobs knew he was in trouble.

'The Aborigines, or natives.'

'Sorry.'

Daisy glared at him. She felt vindicated. 'I cooked for whosoever came to my camp. Sometimes they were off, and sometimes they needed help.'

Brooks was still intrigued. 'And you did this for years?'

'Over thirty years at various places. Mainly Ooldea.'

Daisy was tired. 'What was the rush to see me?' she asked.

'Not sure, Mrs Bates.'

They settled into silence, and the hum of rubber on the road. Daisy closed her eyes. She was standing in the Pyap schoolhouse, and her children were waiting for her to speak. 'There were many diseases, and I cured what I could. But the mortality was often high.'

One boy raised his hand and Daisy looked at him. 'What's mortality, Mrs Bates?'

'Death, son. Many of them died because they weren't used to our diseases.' As she was taken back to her tent, and the little boy, looking up at her through gluey eyes. She could remember cleaning his face and feeling his cold body. She could remember wanting to hold him, to hug him, to kiss him. But she could remember him dying the next day, and his small body, unclaimed for a week, before she got Alfred, the old man, to help her bury him, and sing hymns over him, and invoke St Paul. 'When there was no one to care for them, I cared for them,' she

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said, slowly, and Mrs Knoke realised she was descending again. She always had a few tears. Every Thursday, just before recess. And the children would wait, silently, as the old lady walked out of the desert into their little classroom. Their parents had told them about Daisy Bates, and how she was a great woman, a great Australian, every bit as famous and loved as Bradman, Curtin or the Little Battler (as they stared longingly at portraits of the Little Corporal, hung above Silesian stop-organs).

‘Didn’t you get bored?’ Brooks asked.

Daisy had to think. ‘No, never. I was too busy. And I had my novels.’

‘Or need someone to talk to?’

‘Oh, I had that. They had their spirits and I had mine. One always talks, in one’s head. One is never lonely. Loneliness is just ... for books.’

Jacobs looked at Brooks and rolled his eyes. A fox ran in front of the car and he braked suddenly. Daisy fell forward, but corrected herself. ‘At this time of night,’ she whispered. ‘I think, perhaps, you’re taking me to a gulag.’

‘No gulag, Mrs Bates,’ Brooks said.

I fell out of the car which was being driven I think over a by-road so that no white person could see or question ...

‘You comfortable, Mrs Bates?’ Jacobs asked, as they crossed the Blanchetown Bridge, and the silhouettes of river reds and black box.

‘Yes, thank you.’

He looked back at her in his rear-vision mirror. ‘So, you had a hospital set up out there?’

Daisy almost laughed. ‘No, the government wasn’t interested in paying for that. I just nursed as best I could. Of course, it’s not something I was trained to do, so I improvised. But supplies from concerned people arrived on the train and generally that was enough.’

Silence. Daisy’s head drooped.

‘You alright, Mrs Bates?’ Brooks asked.

But Daisy was busy. She was helping the girls make damper as the boys built a fire in the back yard of School 324: Pyap. ‘Right, girls, that’s a good consistency. Now, into the camp oven.’ She watched as the girls placed the dough in the oven she’d carried up the hill that morning from her camp. ‘You must all come and visit me,’ she said. ‘You know where my tent is.’

‘Dad told me not to,’ one boy said.

‘Don’t worry about your dad. Come up on Saturday and I’ll read you *David Copperfield*. He was about your age when he got started in life. Now ...’

The boys came over and took the camp oven. They carried it back to the coals and lowered it and Daisy said, ‘Now, cover it up.’

The boys fought for the shovel and soon it was covered in coals and Pyap dirt.

‘Thirty-five minutes,’ she said. ‘In the meantime, we can head back inside and continue planning our Coronation Pageant.’ She looked at Mrs Knoke. ‘Edward the Eighth. What do you think, Mrs Knoke?’

‘I can’t wait.’

Two weeks later, two dozen parents in the school-house, as St George, the dragon and a succession of cardboard and crepe-paper kings and queens danced the dirty floorboards to an accordion rendition of *Rule Britannia*. Daisy led the children on and off, in and out, changing

costumes, marching at the front of the Grand Royal parade as Hitler and Goebbels were expunged from the collective consciousness (although Daisy knew what these people were like, and where their allegiances lay – and wanted nothing more than to stop and tell them who was in charge.)

‘We often cooked damper,’ Daisy said to the constables.

The officers looked at each other, and then at the old girl, lost in memories in the back of their car. ‘Who did?’ Brooks asked.

‘My children and I ... my Natives.’

‘Was it any good?’ Jacobs asked.

Daisy didn’t reply. For the next hour they travelled in silence. The constables thought she was asleep, but she wasn’t. She was remembering the wording of the article she’d written for the school newsletter.

I wanted the love and respect of those poor cannibals of Central Australia who came to me out of their wild areas and who learned through my ‘ways’ with them that there were two kinds of white women: our flotsam and jetsam with whom they had contact on the eastwards line, and ‘Kabbarli’.

At 4 a.m. they pulled up in front of Nuriootpa Train Station. Daisy woke and looked around. ‘Where are we?’

‘There’s a train in a little while,’ Brooks replied.

‘A train? I thought ...’

‘No,’ Jacobs said, getting out and opening her door. ‘The inspector is going to meet you at Adelaide Station.’

‘I, think, not. I only agreed because I was told – ’

‘Come on, out you come, Daisy.’

‘Excuse me!’

‘Mrs Bates. We’re all tired. Let’s just get this finished. The station’s open and the fire’s on. We’ll wait with you.’

Alvis Brooks came around to Daisy’s open door. She looked at her colleague. ‘How about you go in and get the kettle on?’

Jacobs just looked at her. He shook his head.

This is just part of the horror. My back had been doubled up, my feet going on either side of my head!! I’ve had the doctor here and I now know the back muscles, tendons etc. had been overstretched by the position I was lying in while being carried so wildly.

Jacobs went inside. ‘Good luck,’ he said. ‘It’s nice and warm inside, Daisy.’

‘Mrs Bates!’

Daisy looked at Brooks. ‘I’m not used to being threatened.’

She closed her eyes and remembered. She was standing in the Pyap school house. The pageant had finished and the children had gone home with their parents, but she’d been called back by the little Nazi, Miss Knoke. ‘You don’t want me coming at all?’ she said to her, as she removed the tri-colour crepe from her dress.

‘No.’

‘Why?’

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The teacher said nothing, but Daisy knew. The children were looking up to *her*, they were following *her*, listening to *her*. They *respected* her. Therefore, this little fascist, who demanded (but didn't earn) respect, was annoyed. She had declared war. She was telling Daisy she'd crossed too many borders.

'The children want me here,' Daisy said.

'You have made it difficult for me,' Knoke replied.

'Nonsense. How?'

But the teacher wouldn't be drawn. 'I appreciate what you've done, but ... it's just me, by myself, and I must maintain authority.'

Daisy thought she could see the girl's little moustache.

'Well, then you shall have *authority*.' She turned and walked from the schoolroom, forgetting her umbrella, her coat, her box of artefacts.

'Mrs Bates? Mrs Bates?' Brooks repeated.

'Yes?'

'Ignore him. He's just a man. He has no understanding, really. Just gets the job done.'

Brooks, A. (Const.) Report on Bates, D. (Riverland)

She refused to get out of the car and sat glaring at me. It distressed me to know that I would have to use force, when suddenly I noticed her precious umbrella lying along the back of the seat of the car. I grabbed up the umbrella and fled to the train steps. 'Where are you going with my umbrella?' said she. 'The umbrella is going to Adelaide and if you want it you must come too.'

At five a.m. they were sitting in the train station. Daisy was nodding. 'Why, then, did we have to leave so early?' she asked.

The station officer looked at her curiously. 'Saw you in the paper,' he said. She didn't respond.

'We're here now,' Brooks replied.

'Thirty-eight minutes,' the officer said.

Daisy descended, again. She closed her eyes. She didn't see the need for all this nastiness. She'd only ever done good, or at least tried to, and now she'd have to explain it all again to the inspector. Why, she wondered, was it so? Why did people always think the worst? Like the nursing sister who'd visited her, and later written to a newspaper: 'The only 'nursing' thing I can recall Daisy telling me, was how she'd take a long stick and scrape away the filth from under and around the sick as they lay in their wurlies ...'

But this *woman* hadn't been there, for all those years, when she'd brought the children into her tent, when she'd washed them and fed them, when she'd held them in her arms, as they died. No one knew the minutes and hours, days and weeks and years she'd worked to help them. No one: the inspector, Knoke, the Sister, the papers, the constables, Harry Morant (promising, but refusing love). Even her own son, living as far away from her as he could, lost in a New Zealand denial.

'I never claimed I could cure gonorrhoea,' she said.

'Pardon?' Brooks asked.

'They claimed I said I could cure it, with cod liver oil, but I never said that. They just wanted to make me look bad.'

The constables and the station officer waited.

They got it from the fettlers, you see. The gins were full of it, and I couldn't help them.'

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Daisy was in her tent. Carl had come to visit. He wanted to hear the next chapter of *David Copperfield*. They read into the afternoon, and evening, and after a time she took him in her arms as she described London, Kent, and Ooldea. And he settled, and thought of her as the grandmother he'd never had.

Author's note:

The Pyap School is based on a real incident (which didn't happen in the South Australian Riverland, although Daisy Bates did live for a time camped along the Murray at Pyap). Bates was always a controversial figure in Australian history, but was also admired by thousands prior to her death. As she aged, two junior officers were sent to bring her into town to 'seek help', as many believed she was becoming unstable. This is an imagined exchange between Bates and two officers sent to fetch her. Daisy's words in italics have been taken from a letter she wrote telling a friend how she'd been picked up by two constables and taken to Port Augusta for treatment.

Stephen Orr lives in Adelaide and is a writer of literary fiction, essays and other non-fiction. His novel Time's Long Ruin was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and longlisted for the Miles Franklin Award in 2011.