

Remembering Camperdown Lodge

James Tyrrell's Reminiscences

The life of **Eliza Emily Donnithorne** [1826-1886], Australia's most famous jilted bride, has been a source of fascination for generations. Jilted in 1846 she became a celebrated Sydney recluse many believe inspired Charles Dickens creation of Miss Havisham in his novel '*Great Expectations*'. One of the most popular and often cited accounts of her life was written by renowned Sydney bookseller, publisher and antiquarian **James Tyrrell** in his 1952 biographical tome '*Old Books, Old Friends, Old Sydney*' which detailed his early life and experiences as an independent bookseller and publisher. A distinguished man of considerable achievement who counted "among his acquaintances booksellers Angus, Robertson, George Robertson of Melbourne, William Dymock and Fred Wymark; writers such as Lawson; visitors to Sydney like Mark Twain and Robert Louis Stevenson; artists and illustrators including Norman and Lionel Lindsay." [1]



"James Robert Tyrrell (1875-1961) was born on 3 July 1875 at Darlington, Sydney, son of George Tyrrell, dealer, and his wife Mary, née Colgan. He attended the Pigeon Ground (Public) School at Balmain and Petersham Superior Public School; the Tyrrells moved to Newtown during his boyhood." [1] Living in close proximity to Camperdown Lodge in the last years of Eliza Emily Donnithorne's 40 years of seclusion, her forlorn house proved irresistible to the young paper boy, he would later write:

"In my day in Newtown the cemetery was still in use, but it was already a ghostly old graveyard ... The visitor to the cemetery [today] may see the graves of Judge James Donnithorne and his last surviving daughter, Eliza Emily, who is shown as having died in 1886. In my day the Donnithorne residence, Cambridge Hall*, in what is now King Street, came under the wide designation of "haunted", and I was still young enough to keep to the other side of the road in passing it, especially at night. Still, I would glance fearfully over to its front door, which, by night or day, was always partly open, though fastened with a chain." [2]

"It was probably not till some years after that I heard the story of Cambridge Hall*, and longer still before I knew of the supposed link with Charles Dickens. Presumably it was haunted by the forlorn ghost of Miss Donnithorne, whose story was practically identical

with that of Miss Havisham, of Satis House, in *Great Expectations*. The reader of that superb Dickens novel will be unlikely ever to forget the room in Satis House and Miss Havisham as Pip first saw them: "I saw that the bride within the bridal dress had withered like the dress, and like the flowers, and had no brightness left but the brightness of her sunken eyes. I saw that the dress had been put upon the rounded figure of a young woman, and that the figure upon which it now hung was loose, had shrunk to skin and bone. The supposed link, as I have heard it, is that Dickens, with his master touch, thus dramatized the story told to him of Miss Donnithorne. I have heard of this being denied by Dickensians; at all events, the original story was that all preparations had been made in the Donnithorne home for Miss Donnithorne's wedding: the bride dressed, the house gaily decorated, the room for the wedding breakfast all arranged. But, through some cause that is variously given, no groom came. Thereafter, all the wedding decorations were kept as they had been arranged, and, except for doctor and solicitor, the house was locked against all visitors. At the time when I used to dodge past the old house its reputation of being haunted was a strongly held Newtown belief. I fancy it was then unoccupied; it was quite gloomy enough, with the chain across the partly open door, to confirm that belief. It might have been Satis House itself. Dickens wrote *Great Expectations* in 1860, and I willingly leave it to Dickensians to decide on the relationship, if any, between the fictional Miss Havisham and the factual Miss Donnithorne". [2]

James Tyrrell lived a fascinating life, met many of the notable figures of his generation, which has made '*Old Books, Old Friends, Old Sydney*' perennially popular, his account of the life of Eliza Emily Donnithorne is arguably his most sought after story of colorful



Sydney identities he came into contact with. As fascinating as the published story has been to generations of readers it's the tip of the iceberg in regards to his experiences at Camperdown Lodge, the briefest summation of what he told friends and family. Amongst them Bill Bradshaw, proprietor of '*W. F. Bradshaw Antiques*', one of the few surviving friends and business associates of the late James Tyrrell.

Born William Frederick Bradshaw on 16 April 1922, the only child of Ruby Florence & William Edward of Allison Road, Randwick, to survive into adulthood. Completing his education at Marist Brothers College his love of history and antiquities saw him embark on a career as an antiques dealer, going on to become one of Sydney's most respected dealers and noted specialists on the Regency era with a host of high profile customers including former Prime Minister Paul Keating. Sitting down with him recently at his Woollahra home he reminisced about James Tyrrell, the memories he

recounted of growing up in Newtown and its most celebrated resident Eliza Emily Donnithorne, Australia's most famous jilted bride.

"I first met James Tyrrell when I was very young, a boy of nine, and he was an elderly man of around 60", Bill recalls, "I think he had his Tyrrell Bookshop on the top in George Street near Hunter Street. My parents often shopped there, bought me presents there for birthdays and Christmas, I started buying things from him too at an early age".

"He was a very nice gentleman, being well known to him he helped me open my first antiques shop in Market Street, giving my mother and self a lovely reference. I was just 18 at the time and couldn't hold a second hand dealers license so my mother had to hold that for me until I came of age, but luckily she was interested in antiques and helped me with the business for a number of years. I also presented Mr. Tyrrell's reference to the estate agent to hire the little building that I had in Market Street in 1941, I afterwards owned that then sold it to buy my current shop, where I am going to live until I die".

"I knew Mr. Tyrrell from the age of nine until his death, was a regular customer for about 30 years, he didn't just sell books he sold antiquities too, sold antique flint lock muskets and things like that and the occasional music box, I still have a musket and a music box I bought from him".

"James Tyrrell was born near Newtown I believe and lived there as a boy," Bill recalls, "he knew the area well, when he was young he was a paper seller on the trains, he started from Macdonaldtown Railway Station, which is not far from Camperdown Lodge, before sunrise. He was always interested in people and their lives. Eliza Donnithorne was someone who interested him when he was young because she had turned day into night, lived in her house in darkness lit by candle light".

"He used to know where Eliza Donnithorne lived, in this lovely neglected place, he told me that when he was a boy he sometimes crept up to it, opened a shutter to look inside, sometimes saw her moving about. But this legend that Charles Dickens wrote about that she lived in a wedding dress is incorrect, she didn't live in the wedding dress like Charles Dickens told in the story Great Expectations she wore ordinary clothing, but the house was dark and she lived by candle light, she turned day into night, was eccentric in that respect but nothing more than that. He believed Dickens used her in his book but exaggerated the story, Mr. Tyrrell knew a lot about books and writers, he was a scholar."

"He told me that the whole house wasn't in ruins only the Dining Room, when he looked through its window he could see the remnants of the wedding banquet that had been set out on the table, dusty and crumbled as was the furniture, but the rest of the house looked alright just blanketed in darkness, she lived by candle light. She had two servants, sisters who took care of her and when she died she left them money to buy a cottage, I think Mr. Tyrrell knew them or had met them later visiting friends in the area, Bailey was their name, when reporters asked the two old ladies for information they would say 'we know nothing, we are not going to talk about our mistress!'"

“Mr. Tyrrell didn’t talk very often about Eliza Donnithorne, he wasn’t that interested in that, which is probably why he didn’t write much about her, it was just a passing thing in his life. When he told me about her I was fascinated like he was by how she had turned day into night, lived in the dark all the time because she was jilted, I think the young man who did it went to India and was killed, he was never heard of again. When I heard her headstone had been vandalized not long ago I was quite angry, it’s an historic headstone, I was only too pleased to make a donation to help it be restored and the minister of St Stephens Church in Newtown sent me a lovely thank you note”.

Newtown had a special place in James Tyrrell’s heart, not only was he born nearby and spent formative years there “he married Matilda Bourne, daughter of a museum curator, on 17 August 1898 at St Stephen's Anglican Church, Newtown” [1] a stones throw from the grave of the suburbs most famous former resident.

John Godl

Scores and notes:

1. Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 12, Melbourne University Press, 1990, pp 300-301. W. S. Ramson.
 2. ‘Old Books, Old Friends, Old Sydney’, by James Tyrrell. (1952) pp 21-23.
- * Camperdown Lodge was renamed by subsequent owners Cambridge Hall after EED died in 1886.