

A Tale of Minnie Dean: the Wilton Baby-Farmer

Frances Kelly

(The University of Auckland, New Zealand)

Editors' Note

Contemporary culture displays an enduring fascination with re-visiting high profile Victorian murder cases, as evident from the copious 'true crime' studies available on the period. Besides the plethora of modern-day investigations into Jack the Ripper, these include works like T.A. Critchley and P.D. James' *The Maul and the Pear Tree: The Ratcliffe Highway Murders 1811* (1971), Kate Summerscale's *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher* (2008), adapted for television in 2011 (dir. James Hawes), and even a comic book series by Rick Geary, *A Treasury of Victorian Murder* (1995-2007). Unsurprisingly, neo-Victorian literature evinces a similar trend, with a distinct subcategory emerging within the genre's bio-fiction, concerned with re-imagining the lives of nineteenth-century convicted or suspected criminals, as well as those that, quite literally, got away with murder. Some of the better known works on such subjects include Beryl Bainbridge's *Watson's Apology* (1984) and Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996), while the historical figure of Lizzie Borden has attracted not just fiction writers like Angela Carter ('The Fall River Axe Murders', 1985; 'Lizzie's Tiger', 1993) and Elizabeth Engstrom (*Lizzie Borden*, 1991), but also filmmakers and composers of the musical, ballet, and opera.

Many of these texts share an evident interest in the intersection of familial traumas and environmental factors, particularly gender discrimination and social exclusion, their combined impact on murderous psychologies and their contributing role to acts of violence. These foci seem to override writerly interest in the sensational and sometimes also salacious aspects of the crimes themselves, which dominated the Victorian public imagination and made crime a staple of the period's popular fiction, newspapers, and melodrama. Frances Kelly's tale of the New Zealand baby-farmer Minnie Dean works within a much more contemplative, even subliminal vein, concentrating, as do many neo-Victorian bio-fictions, on

female protagonists and their crimes, especially those committed against children and hence violating the supposedly ‘innate’ maternal and feminine ‘caring’ instincts of the accused. Perhaps more than any others, such seemingly incomprehensible actions continue to compel public attention in the present also – one might think of demonised ‘monstrous mothers’ involved in abuse and child murder cases throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, such as Andrea Yates and Casey Anthony in the US, Tracey Connelly in the UK, and Lindy Chamberlain in an antipodean context. Accordingly, neo-Victorian bio-fictions of criminal femininity stage implicit interventions in the mythology of both nineteenth-century and contemporary maternity and gender politics. Simultaneously, they underline the tenacity of essentialist gender constructions in spite of postmodern gender theory focused on performativity and coercive feminine ‘scripts’.

A New Zealand academic and long-time reader of neo-Victorian fiction, Kelly has also produced critical work on the subject, including sections of her PhD thesis on A.S. Byatt and papers on neo-Victorian fiction by New Zealand and Australian authors. This is her first creative piece of neo-Victorian writing, intended as part of an eventual collection. Her other research area focuses on Higher Education, and she is currently working on a project combining the two strands in an analysis of neo-Victorian fiction’s engagement with nineteenth-century ideas about education, the concept of *bildung*, and the inception of the doctoral degree.

(MK and EH)

Author’s Preface

A museum in Dunedin contains a room of austere photographic portraits of early settlers to the Otago and Southland areas; one of the subjects depicted is Christian Kelly, my ancestor, who came out to New Zealand from Scotland in the 1840s. My father’s research into Christian Kelly brought to my attention the fact that she was the aunt of Minnie Dean, one of the country’s most notorious criminals. The only woman ever hanged in New Zealand, Minnie Dean was executed in 1895 for the murder of several infants in her care.

This tale of Minnie Dean constitutes a self-consciously revisionist piece, in that it offers a perspective on an historical event that differs from the well-established version, which portrays Minnie as a callous and uncaring murderer, who killed small children in her charge after collecting money for their care. It is not, however, solely an attempt to ‘right the wrong’ done to Minnie Dean, a task already ably undertaken by Lynley Hood in *Minnie Dean: Her Life and Crimes* (Auckland: Penguin 1994), a historical reconstruction of the events leading to the so-called baby farmer’s arrest and hanging. Although I intended her story to be plausible and, where relevant facts could be established, historically accurate, I was not particularly interested in endowing my biofictional Minnie with a fully realised interior self that wholly accounted for her actions. For to some extent the past’s attraction lies in its mysteriousness as a realm in which our always partial knowledge invites imaginative supplementation and intervention – not just on the part of writers but readers also. That mystery also rightly belongs to individuals’ inner lives. There are gaps in the known facts about Minnie Dean, as Hood has shown, and there is an undeniable gulf, which should be respected, between what we in the twenty-first century experience of life – and death – and what our nineteenth-century forbears experienced.

A TALE OF MINNIE DEAN: THE WILTON BABY-FARMER

1895. The children kick along in the dust that the wheels have thrown up. Approaching the site, a nine-year-old girl catches sight of a seller of dolls who holds a figure aloft by the neck, calling out for ten shillings, ten shillings a baby. As she watches, a grown woman in stiff black comes forward to purchase a doll. The girl is close by now, and can see that the doll is a baby doll, frilled and trussed as if for church. She pauses to watch as the seller places the doll in a hat box, and catches him saying, ‘Just so ma’am, they lay just so in their garden beds’. The woman is grimly attentive. The girl cannot understand why she would buy a doll with so little pleasure.

Her mother calls to her to follow, then, catching sight of what she watches, comes to grasp her wrist impatiently and pull her on.

The town is thick this day with people who have come, hoping to watch. Outside the goal walls large numbers have taken up position, though it is unlikely they will see anything over the high prison walls.

It could have begun with a grassy knoll, evidently growing, possibly with flowers, although legend has it that no grass grows on her grave. Eight feet deep she lies. Legend has created something out of that too, though in fact it was a common practice to bury the first deceased spouse deep, to leave room for the next to lie above.

Or it could begin earlier that year in the garden of The Larches, where Minnie works to clear the rough ground. The strong roots reluctantly give up the earth bit by bit as she pulls. Soon she has a pile of white and green shoots and the dirt is dark and rich where she has cleared. Here she plans to plant pinks, for it is a sunny patch and she thinks they will do well. A neighbour has promised to give her some cuttings but even if he doesn't, she will buy some from the nurseries that sell all manner of seed shipped from home.

For now she plants the bulbs that she has kept from the snowdrops that grew in her Aunt Christian's garden in Invercargill. She makes hollows, drops in the bulbs and covers them over. Later she will stoop to peer at the dark earth, imagining the warmth and the wet working its magic on the seed below.

That night, she lies, crowded in bed, listening, and imagines the bulb deep in the dark earth. She will not know when it has thrust its first spears out into the soil, seeking its way down and up, seeking life. Some seeds lie dormant for hundreds of years, she has heard, but Minnie hopes that she will see these snowdrops, come spring.

All through the night she listens, whether she sleeps or wakes, noting every grunt and snuffle in that tiny makeshift wooden house, every sucking gurgle, every snore. She tries to think of the seeds, also in their dark beds, picturing their small sharp shoots breaking the shell. For sleep is not her refuge. If she falls, the new baby follows her, making its sounds, but also reproducing its touch in her dreams so that she holds it all through the night, and wakes with tired empty arms that have gripped at nothing for hours.

Minnie's garden grows according to a logic few recognise. In 1895 *The Southland Times* reported that Minnie had boasted of her blooms, though her Wilton neighbours only wonder at the whimsical nature of the planting at The Larches, and why she creates such a disorderly riot of colour in her beds. There is no trim border, no height gradation to a tall hollyhock at the centre and although she grows the popular flowers, the roses and chrysanthemums, Minnie's garden makes no sense, even to those who might know better. In the Wilton parsonage is a book that the reverend's wife purchased while still in Newcastle, in a moment when she was caught by a fear that all her traditions would be lost once she started out by sea. Although she had never herself done much gardening, she felt sure that she would do so in the new land, and so carried the book all that way, only to leave it disregarded on a shelf after a single reading. Fortunately, there turned out to be plenty of hands to work in the garden in New Zealand and so the reverend's wife has forgotten that she once learned, however imperfectly, the language of flowers. If she recalled it, she might have observed that in Minnie's garden loss, pure love and memory bob between strands of mourning.

It is not many who can read the garden's message, so plain to its maker. Some days, it seems that only the dark will shut it out and give her peace. The dark, and the sweet kiss of laudanum's breath on her mouth.

Minnie's love of flowers dates from the time she worked in her Aunt Christian's garden in Invercargill, while her wee girls, Ellen and Isabella, played near. Sometimes, as Minnie dug and weeded and trimmed, mourners walked by. If she saw them, Minnie would pause and watch the procession as they passed. If she learned a funeral was to take place that day she would spend the morning waiting, half an eye on the road, mechanically pulling weeds or shepherding the girls until she saw the mourners shuffle into view. Then she would stop, stand by the fence, and watch. It is respectful to watch, and to stop life's ticking, just for a few minutes, to heed the dead. If she was tired, or the day was hot, it seemed to Minnie that the mourners danced. She heard the steady beat and saw their steps as moves, a sashaying of skirts in time, slightly swaying. The men who carried the coffin kept the beat, their even pace steady although sometimes she fancied she saw a slight

skip between beats. She noted the impassive faces, the swish of black, the tramp of boots and saw a dance. A mourner's dance.

Years later, at Ellen's own funeral, Minnie had been unable to put it out of her head that the coffin bearers danced. She shut her eyes, knowing it was ridiculous, blocking out the image of her daughter's and grandchildren's coffins swung back and forth by the men as they tapped heels and skipped.

Why did she do it? At the trial it was established that she acted out of greed, killing the children so that she could spend on herself the money given to her for their care. It was held against her that she had been seen buying bolts of fabric on the day two babies died. Some shivered to think they had been so near to a source of taint. Many of them who had paused by Minnie's garden to admire the disorderly flowers grew ill at the idea of the little bodies buried there, beneath the sweet smelling blooms, their very decay feeding the plants' roots.

On the morning that she was purported to have killed the two girl babies and carried them back to The Larches in a hatbox, Minnie Dean left a hotel in Mataura. The wife of the hotelier later gave evidence that Mrs Dean had admired the flowers on her dining room table, and that she had made her up a parcel of pansies, Canterbury bells, Muscovy roses and carnations to take home with her to Wilton. It was only later that the hotelier's wife realised what else Minnie Dean had carried with her that day, stuffed into the hatbox while she took tea.

Why did she do it? Who can tell? She had, after all, successfully raised her own girls to adulthood and several others in her foster care as well. Why not these? Perhaps, by then, her husband's bankruptcy and their grinding poverty had made her desperate, careless of herself and those around her. Perhaps she loved the children and could not bear to see them suffer. Perhaps she willed them all to an easy sleep as she herself sometimes slept, deep in the chambers of laudanum's great, safe house. Waking came like death itself to that place of peace. When Minnie went, did she take the children with her? And if she came back to find that some had remained there in the cool chambers while she struggled with the glare of the surface, perhaps she didn't mourn.

I would like to say she dug their little graves with care, lining their makeshift coffins with soft wool blankets from their own beds tucked

around them, as if to keep them warm while they slept. But she did not. Eva was buried in the earth completely naked and Dorothy Edith was wrapped only in an old oil cloth.

The policemen and Wilton neighbours assumed it was an attempt to hide her crime that caused her to press into the soil above the bodies a bunch of cut flowers. Pansies, Canterbury bells, Muscovy roses, carnations. Thoughts, acknowledgements, alas! For my poor heart, refusal, disdain.

1872. Minnie sits high up and looks over the land before her, which is flat, with little pockets of hills or bush here and there, and few houses. There is scrubby planting that gives the landscape an aged look, as if it has lost its lustrous hair and is left with only a few rough tufts. But the trees are young and the farms newly established. The patches of trees are the beginnings of orchards, with spindly fruit saplings just finding their feet.

Minnie's new husband Charles Dean climbs up beside her and gathers the reins. Minnie tucks her skirts beneath her legs so that the breeze will not lift them high, and off they go, Ellen and Isabella behind them. The neighbour's brood chant as they pass by. *Hickety, pickety, my fine hen. She lays eggs for gentlemen.*

Neither speaks very much on the journey inland from Invercargill. They are not well known to each other, nor is either of them much of a talker. At her Aunt Christian's house, Minnie had met Mr. Dean on several occasions, in the front room called a parlour, where the children had come and gone, and her aunt presided over a teapot. When Mr. Dean visited he had responded with good sense to Aunt Christian's various enquiries, and Minnie found his presence did not ruffle her, in his company she could sit quite pleasantly. And, so, when his proposal came she was content to accept it, given, of course, that her Aunt Christian was also in agreement. This was likely, given the aunt's desire to establish and protect her niece's respectability.

1863. Minnie arrives at her Aunt Christian's house in Invercargill. Aunt Christian, or Granny Kelly, as she is also known, is of the older generation, a venerable personage in the district of Invercargill, having married the first settler to the area. When her young niece, whom she had last seen as a toddler in Scotland, arrives by ship from Australia, alone apart from one small girl and another clearly on the way, Christian Kelly takes great pains

to ensure that a plausible history is put about concerning the tragic death of Minnie's young husband, a doctor, and the father of her two children.

There was no doctor. Or if there was, it is not likely he was married to Minnie. Whoever the father or fathers of Ellen and Isabella were, their identity is unknown to us now. Isabella was born at Christian Kelly's house in 1863, but there is no record of Ellen's birth, in New Zealand or Australia. These details were known only to Minnie.

1860. Minnie on the ship, age sixteen. The exact date is unknown – although she is likely to have left Scotland before census night 1861, as she appears nowhere on a household list. The boards creak and she cannot sleep. It is not the sound that bothers her, nor the motion, she is used to these. Even the stench is familiar enough to sleep through; Heaven knows the stench of Greenock was worse. This night she lies wakeful because the girl next to her is also awake and crying. Sobbing, more like.

Minnie hears her cough and choke. The girl is making herself ill with her own tears, like the child she is. 'Shut it', says a tight voice out of the dark. Minnie would rather sleep, but seeing as neither she nor the girl nor anyone else in the cabin are getting far with that tonight, she goes to see what ails her. She swings her legs off the bed and onto the boards and pads over, driven by a mixture of pity and impatience. Her hair is damp. Minnie tentatively pats it. If she were different, she and this girl might have held each other through these nights, like some of the other women, and that way have kept at bay the loneliness and fear.

Minnie perches stiffly on the edge of the wooden bunk and makes another short jab at the girl's head. Suddenly the girl makes a break and turns to wrap her arms tightly around Minnie's waist, pushing her head against her side. Minnie can feel her hot breath against her leg. She lays her hand on the damp head and lets it rest there. Minnie keeps very still.

Gradually, the girl's breathing slows and her grip on Minnie slackens. After a while Minnie hears snores from the direction of the voice. Once the girl is properly asleep, thinks Minnie, I will move. But when morning comes, hours later, she is sitting there still, with the hot young face peaceful under her hand.

Sydney Harbour glitters the day the ship enters its arms. When Minnie first saw the sea, as the boat pulled from the mouth of the Mersey, she was disappointed to find it a dull grey-green, like the river itself, and not

blue. On the voyage out, she wondered if Sydney held similar disappointments, if the deserts were not red after all, nor the sandstone gold. But on a good day, like the day the *Queen Charlotte* entered the harbour, Sydney's sandstone is indeed gold, so bright that when Minnie stands on deck, she has to cover her eyes from the glare.

Minnie will part from the other women at the Barracks, as each is sent to families in different parts of the city. When Minnie's name is called she must move forward. The throng of women is tightly packed, and Minnie cannot turn to look about at the others she has met on the ship; she must look ahead to the face of the woman who has called for her, who will give her work.

Minnie's family is large and has plenty of laundry, which falls to Minnie to do. The small children soil easily and change their clothes quite often. Even so, Minnie does not mind this task as the children's dirt is easily recognizable as soil from the garden, or smears of porridge or milk. It is the older girls' clothing and the mother's that she finds distasteful. Rusty stains that she must scrub and soak, and scrub. They don't care that she handles these items, deals with these marks, which they leave lying on the floor for her to find. If they are careless with their things, she cannot be. Their clothes must be restored to cleanliness, regardless of what is done to them.

On Sundays she does her own laundry. Her white skirt on the line looks like a nun's habit blown inside out. Even on a hot day, the thick pleats won't dry quickly. Minnie holds the fabric close to her face and breathes in the clean moist smell of cotton. Feeling suddenly silly, or lewd, Minnie glances behind her at the disapproving windows. It is her skirt, but empty of her legs it has somehow taken on a life of its own, making her the trespasser on its privacy. Usually it is shaded by a brown overskirt or apron, but on Sundays the skirt is just itself. When Minnie will wear it the next day, she will look down on the flashes of white frothing over the top of her boots and below the hem of her coat and remember the bare feminine thing that basked in the sun. Later still, when it is unhooked and lying humped on the chair by her unlaced boots in the strange room, the skirt will change again, and look wanton to its wearer.

Sydney is not Minnie's final destination. In the Barracks she was told that criminals had once been kept there, slung on the same hammocks in which the women slept. Some claimed to hear their voices in the night. Another woman talked of an asylum for madwomen. Minnie tried, not very

successfully, not to think of the voices of the prior tenants in the night. Or what madwomen might have done to end up in the Barracks. There had been lines of women on the docks where the ship had berthed, some with shorn heads, some manacled, most thin, dressed in loose clothing. ‘What did they do, do you think?’ asked one girl. Minnie shrugged, unknowing, and watched from a distance. Both were appalled by the sight of the tufted heads.

New Zealand has no convict taint. In Scotland, they talked of Dunedin as a new Edinburgh. Minnie’s Aunt Christian moved there, although she had since married an Irishman and had moved to a place with the likewise Scottish-sounding name of Invercargill. Minnie remembers letters describing her aunt’s attempts to recreate home, the seeds she requested to be sent from Greenock by sea.

One day, when she has earned enough, Minnie thinks she may write to her aunt, and book a passage south.

*Its little did my mither think
The day she cradled me
That I would travel sae far frae hame
Or hang on a gallows tree.*

1857. Cardross, across the Clyde from Greenock. Minnie, aged 13, is staying with family after the death of her mother. She wakes to find her cousin shaking her shoulder. It is time. The stone wall gives off a chill as they pass and outside the air hits like a slap. The boys are waiting, tools in hand. One clutches a lantern and gestures with his chin. Up there. The children all climb, their legs thick with cold. They find the stick they had used that afternoon to mark the spot where it fell and the boys begin to silently dig. Minnie holds the box, conscious of the small weight inside. She tries not to move, fearful of feeling the cold body knock against the slight wood in her hand. They should have lined it with something. ‘Minnie’. She looks up. They are finished and watching her, waiting.

The grave is narrow and surprisingly deep. Minnie kneels on the cold earth. Trying not to touch the sides, she lowers the box in, tipping it slightly, making the small body slide sideways and there it is, thump, against her palm. She sees the rounded breast, red dark in the night, and grips the box more tightly. I won’t drop you. I won’t.

Her arm brushes the stale earth wall and her bent face touches the grass lightly. The box touches the bottom at last and Minnie lets the robin go.

They stand around the narrow plot.

The boys start to dig the soil back in, covering the little box. When the yawn in the earth has closed, the children turn to make their way down the hill. Minnie wishes she had something of the robin's to keep, like a soft red feather, but it is too late now, the robin is at rest in his bed in the dark earth, and nothing will disturb him.