

*The Biography of Adelaide de la Thoreza: Fact or Fiction?*

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**Abstract:** This article centres on the first part of James Cameron's 1878 biography of Adelaide de la Thoreza, entitled *Adelaide de la Thoreza: A Chequered Career*, in order to briefly discuss the problematics of biography as a literary genre, but in particular to reveal what appears to be a reconstruction of identity in the figure of Adelaide. Although the discussion will leave many questions unanswered due to the lack of documentary evidence, this very lack of evidence will allow for a series of "reasonable doubts" to cast their shadow over the veracity of Cameron's text.

**Key Words:** Biography, Australia, Convicts, Spanish, Madrid, London, Botany Bay.

This article takes as its departure point the biography of the Spanish convict Adelaide de la Thoreza, transported to Australia in 1829. As will be seen, the first part of the biography, authored by the Reverend James Cameron, is profoundly problematic given that no records can be found to support any detail of Adelaide's life before her trial. As I will discuss, the first part is, to all intents and purposes, fiction. Before engaging with Cameron's text I will briefly look at some of the questions that biography raises as a literary genre and argue in favour of the sub-genre of "fictionalised biography" as a terminology well-suited to Cameron's text. So, just some general questions that emerge in discussions on biography: what is it; how do we place it, how reliable is biography as a genre in literature?

In his review of Nigel Hamilton's 2007 edition of *Biography: A Brief History*, Scott Stossel points to the complexity of the polemics that such questions raise regarding biography:

Biography, in our contemporary understanding of it, has a capacious range, embracing everything from Plutarch's "Lives" and the New Testament to St. Augustine's "Confessions" and the E! television network's "True Hollywood Story". But a tension has haunted the biographic impulse from the very beginning. Is the primary function of biography to idealize and commemorate figures in order to provide models for emulation? Or is it to capture the warts-and-all essence of an individual human personality in a

way that engages the sympathy and deepens the self-understanding of those who encounter it? This in turn generates another tension, one that has particular currency today: to what extent must biography, to be worthy of its name, be based on knowable fact, and to what extent does a full picture of a human personality depend on speculation, symbolism and fictionalization? (2007)

Stossel touches on the very nerve ends that surface even today in a discussion regarding biography.

If we use the term in its widest sense, then biography covers a gamut of media from writing, art, theatre, film, blogs, Facebook and the inevitable “new media”. Regarded in this sense, which I consider justifiable, then humanity began the art of biography with rock art and other ancient manifestations of “self”. As Nigel Hamilton has argued, biography was long eschewed from academic study as trivia and yet it plays a fundamental part in understanding the individual and his/her world both in the past and in the present (2010). Discussions have raged over the reliability of biography as textual narrative when, in fact, it is no more reliable, or not, than any other text in any written genre. The notion of reliability and truth affect both fiction and non-fiction.

Within the genre of biography a sub-genre has emerged: “Fictionalised Biography”. This genre certainly releases much of the pressure on the biographer to reflect only the truth of events in a life within the narration. Alyona Savenkova is one of many who have quite clearly defined what this genre is and where it lies with regard to biography:

The books in this category belong to biographical literature only by courtesy. Materials are freely invented, scenes and conversations are imagined; this class often depends almost entirely upon secondary sources and cursory research. Authors have created a hybrid form designed to match the appeal of the novel. (2013)

Intentionality becomes a key in biographical narratives as multiple elements have to be factored in. Who is writing the biography, what is their intention in doing so, on interviewing people regarding the object of the biography how reliable are they, and how do they position themselves and does the biographer slant questions to their own agenda and purpose? If the person about whom the biography is being written is alive, something which is becoming more frequent as “premature” biographies appear, what is their intention and how do they influence both the biographer and the answers they may give to such questions? What does a biographer and or the subject of a biography choose to exclude, include and why? Such questions are inevitable but in answering them I am led to agree with Jay Parini who, at a Key West Seminar, said: “All biography is a work of fiction. It's an illusion of a life that may relate to reality” (2013). After all, each and every one of us lives out our own personal fictions on a daily basis whether we are conscious of it or not.

Let me now turn to the biography under analysis here: *Adelaide de la Thoreza: A Chequered Career*. This is the only extant biography of a foreign woman convict transported to Australia that has surfaced so far. Convict transportation to Australia began in 1788 and a significant number of female convict biographies have been written

by members of the Female Convict Research Centre Inc. and will be published in 2016. Transportation to Australia gave both male and female convicts the chance to adapt their own biographies to their new circumstances. As a result, we find many who state on arrival that they are single when document research proves otherwise. Others state on their arrival a trade or skill which in fact they did not have. Certain trades or skills could give them the chance for a better assignment within the colony. Others mention no family members in England or a last address at which they had lived. The list of small deviations regarding their own personal biographies is long and proves the extent to which many saw transportation to be the gateway to a new beginning where a new fictionalised "self" could, to a certain extent, be constructed. The authorities seem to have cast a blind eye to reconstructions of self-regarding statements that an individual was single and thus a number of bigamous marriages were undertaken. After all, in order to check back on a convict's statement of civil status would have involved a search among parish registers across England. The whole point of transportation was not only the setting up of the colony but also populating it with both free settlers and convicts, whether still under conviction or free, and their offspring conceived in the colony.

Finding Adelaide's biography was quite fortuitous and exciting. I was actually looking to see if I could find the first free Spanish settler in Australia at the La Trobe University Library as, at the time, I was interested in tracking down nineteenth century free Spanish and Portuguese settlers and detailing their history. A name popped out of the card index: Jean Baptiste Lehimas de Arietta, Spanish, settled in New South Wales. The card referred me to a microfiche where there was a list of Lehimas de Arietta's assigned convicts one of whom was Adelaide de la Thoreza from Spain. Little did I know that half an hour later I would actually have Adelaide's published biography in my hands.

The more often I read Cameron's narrative the more skeptical I became. I sought the advice of Prof. Lucy Frost and her reactions to the text mirrored my own. Together we took on an extensive project, which lasted over years, to document every possible aspect of Adelaide's life and those mentioned in the biography together with the author.

It was at this point too that I began over twenty years of research into foreign convicts transported to Australia which has taken me into many interdisciplinary areas such as Sephardi Jewish history, the transcription of surgeons' journals during the long voyage to Australia, the kinds of plants used in medical therapies on board the vessels, convict transport shipwrecks and so many more areas that I still work in.

*Adelaide de la Thoreza: A Chequered Career* was penned by the Rev. James Cameron, a Presbyterian Clergyman of note in New South Wales, and published posthumously in 1878 after his subject's death on 26 December 1877. What was it that attracted Cameron to Adelaide who did not even belong to his church? Indeed, Adelaide attended both the Methodist Church and the Presbyterian and must originally have been a Roman Catholic as, according to her, she was born in Madrid. Cameron's first encounter with her does not reveal a very attractive figure according to his narrative, but he suspects that there is more to the elderly ex-convict than meets the eye:

A pastor, in mingling with people of all classes, has many opportunities of listening to strange experiences. In the course of pastoral visitation in the

pretty little town of Richmond, I, several years ago, found in a humble cottage an elderly female who received me courteously. Her figure was bent, as if from spinal injury, her face wrinkled, and her teeth gone, rendering her utterance somewhat indistinct. Her appearance was, altogether, by no means very attractive to a stranger. There was, however, a gleam of intelligence in the smile with which she received me, and a courtesy of manner which led me to conclude, that, in her case, to look upon the outward appearance would probably be the surest way to misjudge her. (Cameron 3-4)

On subsequent visits, Cameron finds Adelaide to be eloquent in English and able to quote from "...our standard poets..." with great effect. Most importantly, he discovers that in spite of her command of English Adelaide claims to be Spanish and to have been born in Madrid in 1808. By now Cameron is fascinated and strikes lucky when

On one occasion, having been seized with a sudden and alarming attack of illness, I was sent for to visit her. While speaking of her state and feelings, there were incidental allusions to circumstances in her past life, which only increased my curiosity to know something more regarding her previous career than she had yet unfolded to me. I expressed to her the desire I felt to get a full account of her history, and asked if she would at some convenient time give me a sketch of it. At first she hesitated. She said her life had been a fated one, and that hitherto she had not divulged the secrets of it to any. At length, however, she agreed to accede to my request, and on subsequent visits she gave the sketch I asked for; and what follows is the substance thereof. (Cameron 5)

Adelaide's story, as Cameron supposedly recounts it, is a straight forward narrative which can easily be summarised though, for the purpose in hand, I will only refer to that part of the biography which deals with her life in Spain and England before her sentencing to transportation to New South Wales. The reason behind examining only this part of her life is because we have found absolutely no documentary evidence to support any of the claims made about Adelaide during that period of her life. What we are clearly dealing with here is a fictionalised recreation of identity either by Cameron or Adelaide. Regarding the second half of the biography, most of the people and events in Adelaide's life can be corroborated by documentary evidence.

As already mentioned, Adelaide was born in Madrid in 1808 the only child of Julian de la Thoreza, a member of the nobility who held a prominent position in government, and whose father, grandfather and great-grandfather had all "... been ministers of state." From the biography we glean that de la Thoreza was of liberal persuasion for which he and his family would later pay a heavy price. Her mother's family name was de la Vega. Though there is no given name for her in the biography, Cameron states that she came from "... an ancient and honourable house" (Cameron 5-6). As already mentioned above, there are no records that bear witness to these facts.

Adelaide had a happy early childhood even when she was placed in a convent for her own safety. This event appears to have taken place sometime between 1814 - 1815 and probably had something to do with the restoration of Ferdinand VII in 1814 and the

abolition of the first written Spanish constitution promulgated on 19 March 1812 by the Cortes de Cadiz which was supported by most liberals in Spain.

At the convent she learnt English Language and Literature. The inclusion of the acquisition of English sounds somewhat incongruent given that well into the mid twentieth century French was always the preferred second language. A touch of fantasy perhaps on whichever of the authorial voices? During her time in hiding, Adelaide also became the favourite of the Mother Superior, as Cameron points out

There were special reasons for this fondness. The abbess in her younger days had a lover, to whom she had been betrothed. The young couple loved with all the fervour of youthful hearts. The nuptials had been arranged, but in the meantime her betrothed became involved in political troubles, was impeached, condemned to suffer an ignominious and cruel death. With a barbarity worthy of such a country, his affianced bride was compelled to be present at the execution to witness the expiring struggles of the object of her affections. To a sensitive nature, the shock, as we may well conceive, was overwhelming. Life was no longer life to her. To take the veil, and devote herself to convent life, was the natural course for one in her position. (Cameron 7-8)

Apart from the comment on the barbarity of Spain, the narration has taken on the shape of an almost Gothic-Romance story. A narrative tone that will become further heightened as Cameron continues to recount Adelaide's story.

Adelaide's time in the convent came to an abrupt end when her family fled to Italy as her father's liberal convictions and political power had led to his persecution. Once safe in Italy Adelaide falls in love with a young Italian. Tragedy ensues.

Being of engaging manners and of good family, he was approved by the parents, and an engagement was the result. In two months more she would be fourteen, and then her marriage was to be consummated. I must not omit to mention, that while yet a child, she had, according to a vile custom of the country, been betrothed to another child. The usual formalities had been gone through, and she was taught to look upon him as the destined partner of her life. But as she grew up, instead of feeling any affection for him, she hated him, and wished to escape from him; and now that she had quitted the country, she hoped and expected that her wish had been attained. She could not, however, thus easily throw him off; for although she detested him, he had an ardent affection for her. Unknown to the family, he had followed them into Italy, and there could see without being seen. One evening, Adelaide and her lover were having a moonlight walk, in the public gardens of the town in which she resided. It was the evening before their marriage day, and their thoughts were on the happy event that was to make them one. They talked of the ceremony, of the arrangements connected therewith, and the part to be played by the different actors; and when they came to the putting on the ring the enthusiastic bridegroom pulled it from his pocket to place it by anticipation on the finger of his betrothed. But lo! When in the act of putting it on, a gleam as of lightning dazzled her sight. It was the

gleam of glittering steel, and that steel was being plunged by a vengeful hand into her lover's bosom. (Cameron 9-10)

Adelaide herself had a cut on her hand and she apparently showed the scar to Cameron. In the only extant image we have of Adelaide, she is sitting in an armchair and her hands are covered by lace gloves so it is impossible to verify the existence of the scar mentioned in the biography. The Gothic-Romantic tone is now well to the fore in the narrative and what must be Cameron's view of Spain and its customs asserts itself again with the reference to the "vile custom" of a country which betrothed young children in marriage. Such comments resonate with stereotypical views of Spain prevalent at the time the biography was being written.

The family were to remain in Italy for three years in all, returning to Madrid when Adelaide's father again became an eminent figure in politics. Their return to Spain was not long before their daughter's fifteenth birthday which was to be celebrated in great style with a ball. On the eighth of December, Adelaide's birthday, Julian de la Thoreza left for the "Senate House" but as

[t]he evening came; the guests had assembled; the music had begun; and Adelaide was waiting for her father's arrival, to open the ball. Of a sudden, a confused noise was heard in the great square. Her mother rushed to the window to ascertain the cause. A sorrowful sight burst upon her view. A bleeding corpse was being borne toward her house. It was her beloved husband, struck down by the hand of an assassin. The hand that smote was that of one whom he had befriended—one high in office—one whom pure political rancour had goaded on to perpetrate the base and cowardly act. The shock was more than his devoted wife could bear. She fainted, and lay unconscious for many days. (Cameron 14-15)

In fact, Adelaide's mother was to recover only long enough to commit her daughter's safety into the hands of "... an Indian lady of rank, and of English extraction." She was "...the widow of a military officer who had been killed in the Peninsular war." The woman in question was Countess Coutts Trotter. Adelaide was now most definitely in danger as we learn that

the fate of her father, and of uncles, warned them that their lives were no longer safe. Her uncle Adolphus, like her father, had been basely assassinated. Her uncle Alonso had been immured in a dungeon, and on one occasion when he wanted water to quench his thirst, blood was brought to him instead, while the skull of his murdered brother was made to serve the purpose of a drinking cup. It was time to leave a land where political rancour was making blood to flow like water. (Cameron 16)

Countess Coutts Trotter thus took flight to London with her charge. Adelaide spent the next five years in the Coutts Trotter residence in Grosvenor Square. Many young women would have yearned for Adelaide's life style given that Coutts Trotter

was Protestant, and attended to the proprieties of religion. Family prayer was duly observed; but she was withal a woman of the world, haughty,

imperious and especially desirous of cutting a respectable figure in fashionable society. Both she and her charge were dressed in the highest style of fashion: while balls, parties, the opera, the theatre, and all the accessories of high life formed the atmosphere in which they lived and moved. Such a life, we might suppose, must have had great attractions for a young lady like Adelaide — but it was not so. She had no heart for those things. Her tastes lay in an opposite direction; and frequently did she beg herself off from entertainments, which were but a weariness to her, however much relished by others.” (Cameron 18)

One is left to wonder why Adelaide behaved in this manner but things between the Countess and her came to a head when an extraordinarily wealthy Indian Nabob arrived in London setting the society columns alive with speculation. The Countess had met him while in India and came up with the idea of betrothing her Spanish charge to the gentleman. Adelaide refused the betrothal in no uncertain terms, braving the Countess's wrath that promptly turned her out of her house.

Adelaide, now almost twenty-one, was to take refuge in the home of Lady Kirkwall whose life style and household were much more to Adelaide's taste. Lady Kirkwall offered to take Adelaide with her to Scotland, but her charge decided to stay in London. It was arranged that Lady Kirkwall's cousin would stay in the house with her for company. It now transpired that Lady Kirkwall's brother, Major de Blatchford, was a frequent visitor and her cousin was obviously in love with him. Unfortunately for Adelaide, he only had eyes for her much to Kirkwall's cousin's chagrin. The cousin devised a plan of revenge which would remove Adelaide from her life.

A lottery had been publicised and each ticket cost one hundred pounds with a sure return of a three hundred pound win. The household servants were determined to buy a ticket and the only way they could devise to raise the one hundred pounds needed was to pawn silver and valuables from the house which would be returned when the prize money came in. Quite obviously they had fallen into a nasty trap and when they became aware of it, Kirkwall's cousin saw her chance. She lost no time in going to the police to lay a charge against Adelaide and the servants for theft.

Adelaide and the servants were taken into custody, Lady Kirkwall informed, and justice took its course:

In due time the trial came on, and, in consequence of the high social position of the chief of the prisoners, the event excited a more than ordinary amount of interest. The court was crowded. Major de Blatchford was there, and Lady Kirkwall, having returned to town, was also present to witness the proceedings. Her sympathies, as may be imagined, had been deeply stirred, and when a verdict of guilty was returned against the prisoners, Adelaide included, such a shock did this give to Lady Kirkwall, that she fainted, and shortly thereafter expired. The sentence was transportation to Botany Bay. (Cameron 24)

By now, if not before, we can assume that the text is a Gothic-Romantic fantasy. All the ingredients are in the text: unhappy lovers, murder, political persecutions, exile,

executions, the drinking of blood from a skull, betrayal of the heroine by another jealous woman. But nonetheless is purported to be the biography of a Spanish woman of rank demoted to the sad, hopeless situation of a transportee to the antipodes.

It was at this juncture that Lucy Frost and I became totally incredulous and began to wonder just how much of the first part of the biography was true, how much might actually be fiction, and if fiction whose: Adelaide's or Cameron's? It took us some ten years of detective work to actually put the whole of Cameron's biography into perspective and unravel the multiple cross threads of connections that run through the text. Knowing that Adelaide was tried in the Central Criminal Court, Old Bailey, in London we located her trial and were not amazed to find that a network of lies was about to be uncovered. At the time of our research the Central Criminal Court Records were not online and we laboriously went through ledger after ledger for the year 1829 using deductions of dates from the biography. The trial document is as follows.

Before Mr. Recorder.

1286. ADELAIDE DE THORAZA was indicted for stealing, on the 28th of April, 6 sheets, value 15s., the goods of Martha Davis.

MARTHA DAVIS. I live at No. 15, Finsbury-street, Finsbury-square. I am single, and am a dress-maker - the prisoner was a servant at my house for fifteen months and a fortnight; she was there I believe at the time the sheets were stolen - she was the only female servant in the house; it was her business to mind the bedding and the bed-room; a butcher came to me to ask for a sum of money which I did not owe - I then went and searched the prisoner's box; I found a sheet and a night-gown belonging to me - I knew the sheet was mine, it had been worn a little, but was not dirty - it was a sheet from her own bed, but it was mine; I examined her bed soon after, and both the sheets were gone - this was on the 28th of April; I never saw the corresponding sheet; the officer produced some duplicates, by which we found six sheets; I knew them to be mine, as I had assisted to spin them, and made them up myself.

SUSANNAH PERRY. I live at No. 7, Camden-court, Grub-street, Chiswell-street. I had known the prisoner for about a fortnight before she went into this service; she brought me a pair of sheets and a bolster one evening, some months before she was taken up - she said she was tired, that the bailiffs had come into her mistress' house, and she had got a bed out and pawned it - she had a pair of sheets and a bolster in her apron; she asked me to go and pawn them on her mistress account - I pawned them in my own name, at Mr. Upsall's, in Barbican; Christopher Deer advanced me 8s. - I gave the 8s. to her.

CHRISTOPHER DEER. I am in the service of Mr. Upsall, of Barbican. I know Perry by visiting the shop; I cannot speak positively to her pawning these sheets, though I have reason to suppose she did, by her name and address being on them; I gave this duplicate - they were afterwards claimed by Davis.

MARTHA DAVIS. These are my sheets, they are marked with my name; the prisoner had no authority to pawn them - I never authorised her to pawn a bed; I had an excellent character with her.

THOMAS BROOKS. I am a pawnbroker. I have four sheets pawned at two different times, one pair on the 19th of February, in the name of Eliza Wilson, No. 8, Camdenscourt, a lodger, for 3s.; I did not take them in - this duplicate was given; I do not know who pawned them - the other pair was pawned on the 2d of March, in the name of Winson; I suppose the person who took them in did not rightly understand the name; I do not think Davis swore to these because they are not marked.

JOHN BEE. I am an officer. I was sent for to take charge of the prisoner - she was not at first accused of stealing sheets, but was afterwards; I found two duplicates of Mr. Brooks', Whitecross-street, and one other duplicate on her.

COURT to MARTHA DAVIS. Q. Look at these four sheets, and tell me what reason you have to claim them as yours? A. I made up part of them - some of them were kept in a cupboard and some in a box, they are both kept locked; I never sent the prisoner to take the sheets out; I always do that myself. GUILTY. Aged 23.

Transported for Seven Years. (The Proceedings of the Old Bailey, London's Central Criminal Court, 1674 – 1913, Reference Number: t18290611-289)

Brief though the printed transcript is, a close reading of its details tells us quite a lot about Adelaide's circumstances in London on a spring day in April when she was arrested. This is not the glamorous story Cameron told of love, intrigue, and betrayal in the fashionable world of titled aristocrats in London. From her trial Adelaide is unveiled as working for a seamstress, often a front for a brothel at that time, and was arrested as a common thief. Her crime: stealing sheets. One doubt remains. How did Adelaide de la Thoreza get from Madrid to London, or was she actually born in England? Was her father a Spanish soldier, seaman, merchant, servant in London? What is a fact is that Adelaide's Gothic-Romantic-Tragic life as depicted in the biography will not sustain scrutiny.

I set out to find any record I could pertaining to Adelaide's family in Madrid or elsewhere in Spain and also Italy. Later, Lucy and I tramped London and the relevant parts of New South Wales camera and notebooks in hand, consulted maps of the time, found descendants and talked to them, gradually drawing the threads of Adelaide's true story together. The question mark that still hangs in the air, however, is: who is responsible for the fiction of Adelaide's early life? Adelaide herself or the Reverend James Cameron? Suffice it to say that what we are dealing with in the first half of Cameron's *Adelaide de la Thoreza: A Chequered Career* is indeed a clear case of fictionalised biography even if the identity of the authorial voice remains unknown.

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