

1895

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(Hood, L., 1993)

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### Dean, Williamina

1844–1895

Baby farmer, convicted murderer

This biography was written by Lynley Hood and was first published in the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography Volume 2, 1993

Minnie Dean was born Williamina McCulloch on 2 September 1844, at West Greenock, Renfrewshire, Scotland, the fourth in a family of eight girls of Elizabeth Swan and her husband, John McCulloch, an engine driver with the Glasgow, Paisley and Greenock Railway. Of her life between the death of her mother of cancer in 1857 and her arrival in New Zealand nothing is known. She appeared in Invercargill in the early 1860s as Mrs McCulloch, a widow with two small daughters. Her neighbours believed that she had come from Tasmania where her physician husband had died. No evidence of her marriage, the births of her children or the death of her husband has been found.

On 19 June 1872 Williamina McCulloch married Charles Dean, an innkeeper, formerly of Tasmania, at his home in Etal Creek, Southland. During the 1860s Etal Creek had flourished as a wagon stop on the four-day journey from Riverton to the Central Otago goldfields, but by 1872 the goldrush was over – Etal Creek had become a backwater. In 1878 Charles Dean turned to farming. In 1882 his rabbit-infested 300 acres, on which he ran 150 sheep, were valued at £1,200. In 1884 the land boom collapsed and Charles went bankrupt. He was discharged six months later, but by then the Deans were destitute.

Both Williamina's daughters had married and left home by this time, but in 1880 the childless Deans had adopted a five-year-old girl, Margaret Cameron. About 1887 Minnie, Charles and Margaret moved to Winton where they took possession of The Larches, a two-storeyed, seven- or eight-roomed house on 22 acres a mile out of town that had been abandoned to the mortgagee two years earlier. The house

burned down soon after they moved in. On the site Charles built a two-roomed

cottage with a lean-to. He then began raising pigs, and his wife began taking in unwanted babies for payment.

The practice of 'baby farming', as it was known, was a necessary evil in Western countries at this time. Effective contraception was not widely available, abortion was dangerous, unmarried mothers were ostracised and little provision was made for the care of their offspring. Many desperate women replied to Minnie Dean's discreet newspaper advertisements: 'respectable Married Woman (comfortable home, country) Wants to Adopt an infant – Address, Childless, Times Office'. A legal agreement was signed for most of the babies she took in; some were taken for 5s. to 8s. a week, others were adopted for lump sums of between £10 and £30.

The New Zealand infant mortality rate at this time for children of European descent has been estimated at between 80 and 100 for every 1,000 live births. With up to nine children under the age of three living at The Larches at any one time, that there would be some deaths – whether through illness, accident, neglect or maltreatment – was perhaps inevitable. In October 1889 a six-month-old baby died of convulsions after a three-day illness. In March 1891 a six-week-old infant died of inflammation of the heart valves and congestion of the lungs. The medical witness at the ensuing inquest reported that the dead infant and the other children at The Larches were well cared for and well nourished, but that the premises were inadequate. The coroner exonerated Minnie Dean but advised her to reduce the number of children living at The Larches and improve conditions. Apart from a small reduction in numbers she continued as before.

The inquest provoked community outrage, which was inflamed by another death six weeks later. In the public imagination Minnie Dean became linked to baby farmers in Britain and Australia who had been convicted of murdering infants for financial gain. No more deaths were reported, but rumours abounded of children mysteriously disappearing. Minnie Dean became increasingly furtive. Most of her dealings with parents were carried on under assumed names, and when a boy died in her care in 1894 (according to her own account, by drowning) she buried him in the garden to avoid the scandal of another inquest.

The police were deeply suspicious. They kept her under surveillance, but their investigations were frustrated by inadequate child welfare laws: they had no right to enter or inspect the Dean property, and Minnie Dean was not required to keep records or answer questions. In August 1893 the proprietor of a Christchurch boarding-house called the police when he noted that a woman, later identified as Minnie Dean, had acquired a three-week-old baby during her stay. The detective concerned had no hesitation in removing the baby: 'I believe this woman would have killed or abandoned this child before she got to Dunedin, if it had not been taken from her,' he wrote in his report.

On 2 May 1895 Minnie Dean was seen boarding a train carrying a young baby and a

On 2 May 1895 Minnie Dean was seen boarding a train carrying a young baby and a hat-box, and disembarking later carrying only the hat-box. Jane Hornsby, who was found to have handed over her one-month-old grand-daughter, Eva, to Minnie Dean at Clarendon station, was taken by the police to The Larches. There she found clothing belonging to the missing child. Minnie Dean was arrested and charged with infanticide.

After a fruitless search along the railway line the police turned over Minnie Dean's garden. They unearthed the freshly buried bodies of two babies and the skeleton of a boy thought to be about four years of age. At the inquest the older baby, a one-year-old girl later identified as Dorothy Edith Carter, was found to have died from an overdose of laudanum (an opiate commonly used to sooth fractious children). The younger baby, Eva Hornsby, was thought to have died of asphyxiation. The cause of death of the third child was not established. Minnie Dean was publicly branded a murderer by the coroner, and community feeling against her ran high. Charles Dean was also arrested, but at a lower court hearing the charges against him were dismissed.

The Supreme Court trial of Minnie Dean for the murder of Dorothy Edith Carter began in Invercargill on 18 June 1895. A succession of witnesses described how she had collected Dorothy on 30 April at Bluff and had returned to Winton for two nights, before leaving again with the child and an empty hat-box. By the time she collected Eva Hornsby at Clarendon, Dorothy had disappeared and Minnie Dean's hat-box had become suspiciously heavy. When she returned to Winton she had with her only the heavy hat-box and some parcels. Under cross-examination the woman who had handed Dorothy over revealed that, although a financial agreement had been made, Minnie Dean had received no money for the child.

In an impassioned closing address the defence counsel, A. C. Hanlon, argued that the death of Dorothy Carter was accidental, but in his summing up the judge observed, 'It seems to me that the real honest issue is whether the accused is guilty of intentionally killing the child or is innocent altogether.' A verdict of manslaughter, he said, would be 'a weak-kneed compromise'. **On 21 June 1895 Minnie Dean was found guilty of murder and sentenced to death.** Hanlon's appeal, on the grounds of the inadmissibility of evidence of other infant deaths, was unsuccessful. **On 12 August 1895, three months after her arrest, Minnie Dean was hanged at Invercargill gaol.** She is buried in Winton cemetery, alongside her husband, who died in a house fire at Winton in 1908, aged 73.

Minnie Dean never took the witness box at her trial, but while awaiting execution she wrote a 49-page account of her activities. She stated that in addition to Margaret Cameron and Esther Wallis (a 10-year-old girl whom the Deans had adopted in 1890), 26 children, including Eva Hornsby and Dorothy Carter, had passed through her hands between 1889 and 1895. Six are known to have died, and one to have been reclaimed by its family; five healthy, well-cared-for children were living at The Larches at the time of her arrest. The fate of the others is unknown. Dean claimed that seven children were adopted by families who wished to keep the adoptions secret. The police and the public believed that the missing children were murdered

secret. The police and the public believed that the missing children were murdered. The possibility that some may have been secretly disposed of after dying of illness or accident was not considered. In response to public concern aroused by Minnie

Dean's activities and trial, major advances were enacted in New Zealand child welfare legislation, with the passing of the Infant Life Protection Act 1893 and Infant Protection Act 1896.

**Minnie Dean became the only woman to be hanged for murder in New Zealand.** Many convicted murderers have passed from notoriety to obscurity since then, but her name lives on, and around that name has grown a legend. Southland children who misbehave are threatened, not with bogeymen, but with being sent to Minnie Dean. There is a wild-flower in Southland known as a Minnie Dean, which, it is said, should be torn out and burnt if it appears in any domestic garden. It is claimed that nothing will grow on Minnie Dean's grave. Whether the real Minnie Dean deserves her terrible place in New Zealand's folklore is far from certain.



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