

Sairey Gamp: generating fact from fiction

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Australian midwives today are generally employed by maternity hospitals as obstetric or maternity nurses and specialize in only one area of the childbirthing process, under the umbrella of medicine. This is quite different to the provision of midwifery care in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Australia, when childbirthing took place within a home setting, with a community midwife in attendance under the umbrella of the household. Australian midwives are now attempting to regain some of the autonomy that they believe was possessed by midwives of the past by being professionally accredited to operate as independent midwives. The de-institutionalization of childbirthing cannot simply come about by giving midwives accreditation to operate as autonomous practitioners, as the forces that led society to institutionalize childbirthing practices, as well as the avenues for change, are complex. This paper examines one of the forces behind that change: the denigration of the image of the community midwife by the medical and nursing professions, through the character of Sairey Gamp created by Charles Dickens. By examining the historical terrain and the historical influences that led to the demise of the community midwife, we can provide answers for debate on the present status of the midwife.

Key words: Charles Dickens, community midwife, new profession, safety, Sairey Gamp.

INTRODUCTION

With the increase of medical scientific knowledge in the late nineteenth century there came calls for more education in health-related professions including medicine, nursing and midwifery. Medical men sought to achieve regulation for themselves to differentiate themselves from unqualified practitioners, especially in childbirth. This resulted in the *Medical Registration Act 1862*.¹ Nursing also sought to establish itself as a bona fide profession by seeking self-regulation and standards of education and practice. In the last two decades of the nineteenth century nurses in Australia had begun to organize themselves into pursuing the ideals of a profession, and in 1899 established the Australasian Trained Nurses Association as part of their pathway to professionalization.²

At the same time, the traditional or community midwife continued to practise independently and informally

throughout Australia. The community midwife, who was also referred to as a nurse, was a woman who operated her own independent midwifery practice within a community locality and had not completed formal nursing or midwifery training. She may well have been educated by experience, or by knowledge being passed from one woman to another or from generation to generation. She may have received current medical midwifery knowledge through the local general practitioner with whom she worked and from whom she often received a certificate or testimonial to proclaim that she was a suitable person to be a midwife. She may have also undertaken other nursing activities within the community apart from midwifery. She was mainly a middle-aged to elderly married woman or widow with a family of her own and often, as a result of the death or disability of her spouse, she relied on her work to support the family.

This ordinary, middle-aged maternal image of the community midwife was considered to be unsuitable for the new profession of nursing and led to a subtle campaign to discredit the community midwife. Under the guise of pro-

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fessionalism and safety, medicine and nursing combined to marginalize the community midwife. Ideologies that directed this campaign can be identified in articles published in medical and nursing journals from the 1880s to the 1920s. This move to discredit the community midwife came from two directions. The first claimed that child-birthing with the medical profession was safe, while child-birthing with community midwives was unsafe. The second approach, which will be explored in this paper, created an unfavourable physical image of the community midwife and this was done by aligning her to Charles Dickens' character, Sairey Gamp. Sairey Gamp first appeared in 1843 in the novel *Martin Chuzzlewit* and she became one of Charles Dickens' most popular characters. Sairey Gamp came 'alive' to the Victorian reader and this 'existence' gave the medical and nursing professions a perfect antithesis to the saintly image of Florence Nightingale.

SAIREY GAMP: A WEAPON AGAINST THE COMMUNITY MIDWIFE

... the 'contemporary' image of the nurse was of 'a trim, educated, highly skilled self-reliant woman', a woman who was 'primed with quite a vast store of medical and surgical knowledge'. By comparison, the mental image of the nurse of the past's unsightly and unwieldy form could be described in two words, 'Sairey Gamp' (p. 113).³

On Friday 30th June 1905 the members of the Australasian Trained Nurses Association in South Australia held a pleasant evening with their colleagues and friends. The entertainment for the function was in the form of 'tableaux vivants'.¹ The most popular tableau was a scene from Charles Dickens' novel *Martin Chuzzlewit*. The scene was entitled 'Sairey Gamp Propogues a Toast' representing the category of 'Nurses Past and Present'. A feature of this character was the way in which she mispronounced words such as 'propogues' for 'proposes' and 'impoge' for 'impose'. It was this humorous trait in her speech that was much loved by the admirers of Sairey Gamp. The anonymous writer happily expounded the success of the scene, 'with the aid of a feather pillow and false nose, the representation was complete'. The writer closed the contribution with 'the "present" Nurses in their neat and simple indoor uniform made a pleasing contrast'.⁴

This reference to Sairey Gamp also referred to as Sara or Sarah Gamp, has been a familiar and often-used description of the community midwife of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Australia. Indeed, this character from Dickens is now firmly established as a metaphor for the community midwife of the nineteenth century. Her

name has been used by doctors and nurses to discredit the community midwife and to replace her with the trained obstetric nurse. References to her incompetence were made regularly by 'modern' nurses at the beginning of the twentieth century to argue for changes in midwifery practice and for the need of regulation and registration of midwives in Australia.

Thus many references to Sairey Gamp can be found in the *Australasian Nurses' Journal*. A trained nurse Sarah Toohey wrote in 1906:

In 1843 'Martin Chuzzlewit' appeared, and the great novelist [Dickens] with a few deft touches of his magic pen stirred public interest in the nursing question. Henceforward the reform of the Nurses' calling became a public duty (p. 246).⁵

And henceforward the words 'Sairey Gamp' became synonymous with the perceived 'black' side of midwifery and nursing: obesity, dirtiness, drunkenness, incompetence, garrulousness and stupidity. All these characteristics were forever transformed into the one fictitious person Sairey Gamp and became a metaphor for all midwives who did not fit into the new reformed nursing movement.

An editorial in the *Australasian Nurses' Journal* in 1905 had attempted to put the question of Sairey Gamp into perspective and argued that never before in history was there an instance of such radical change affecting a large body of people as the new status and education of nurses. The most remarkable aspect of this, according to the editorial, was that the leaders of this radical change were 'schooled under the old régime'.⁶ However, the editorial continued, the 'real Nurse' who came before the trained nurse could be found in every hospital serving the poor:

although she had the noblest qualities that a woman could possess it was not her fault that she was unskilled as there was none to teach her (p. 348).³

The editorial urged its readers not to complacently pride themselves on being the antithesis of Mrs Gamp but to take her good points and compare favourably with them. Despite this, nurses continued to use Sairey Gamp as a model for all that they should not be.

Medical men also found Sairey Gamp as a useful term to describe the community midwife. Dr James Graham told the Royal Commission on Public Charities in New South Wales in 1898 that the Women's Hospital had tried 'to displace these dangerous Sarah Gamps by giving the public a supply of intelligent and properly instructed obstetric nurses' (p. 199).⁶

This use of the term Sairey Gamp as a metaphor for the midwife continued to be commonplace in the first decades

of the twentieth century in Australia, and was still in use in the 1920s. It was reported in *The Australasian Nurses' Journal* in 1921 that Dr Helen Mayo in Adelaide criticized the mid-wifery system by saying:

... any old Sairey Gamps could attend the prospective mother, and often did so without medical attendance ... South Australia was extremely backward in that regard for the training of the midwives was not insisted upon (p. 163).⁷

R. Marshall Allan in 1927 discussed the future of obstetrics and the furtherance of specialist obstetric care by medical men in an oration delivered to the South Australian Branch of the British Medical Association.⁸ In his discussion he referred to the problems and difficulties of private practice and the application of the principles of asepsis. He asked why it was that the average women would willingly enter hospital for a surgical operation but:

obstinately refuse to leave her home for an act [child-birth] which, though it may be normal, is fraught with graver possibilities than many an abdominal operation? (p. 914)⁹

In answering his own question he went on to say that:

The 'Camp' and the handywoman seemed to exercise a spell over many women to the detriment of the trained nurse. Too many men [doctors] work with 'Gamps' when skilled help is available (p. 915).⁸

Every community midwife in Australia who was not a part of the professionalization process of the new 'modern' nurse became a 'Camp', even those community midwives who had the respect and support of the local doctor and the community.

WHO WAS SAIREY GAMP?

In January 1842 Dickens had made a journey to America and it was during this time that his ideas for a new book *Martin Chuzzlewit* were formed.⁹ The theme of this story was to be about the fortunes of a family's money and inheritance and, according to Dickens' friend John Forster, was to show 'the number and variety of humours and vices that have their root in selfishness' (p. 391).⁹ This was to be Dickens' first novel written with a moral purpose. While Barickman, Macdonald and Stark argued that *Martin Chuzzlewit* was the first novel to confront Victorian readers with family values, Dickens' purpose was to confront them with examples of family selfishness.¹⁰

The first few chapters of *Martin Chuzzlewit* were published in serial form. It was not an immediate success and Dickens earned less than he anticipated. One of Dickens' publishers, Messrs Chapman and Hall, inferred that they would reduce Dickens' contracted pay from £200 to £150 per month, which incensed Dickens.⁸ So Dickens added humour to the novel by creating the character of Sairey Gamp, midwife, night nurse and layer-out of the dead.

Mrs Gamp repelled and delighted the Victorian reader and became one of Dickens' most admired creations. According to AE Dyson, the idea for Sairey Gamp was created after Dickens was told about a nurse hired by Lady Angela Burdett-Coutts (a friend of Dickens) to care for her friend Miss Meredith.¹¹ The character became so successful it led Dickens to remark many years later to Lady Burdett-Coutts that 'I do wish you could introduce me to another Mrs. Gamp' (p. 133).¹²

The myth of Sairey Gamp was created from a tangible, ordinary old woman who, according to Dyson, was both a 'social scandal and a hope for humanity'.¹² Barickman *et al.* argued that Mrs Gamp was everything the Victorian wife should not be. She refused to be subservient to her husband 'alive or dead' and she was economically independent as a midwife who assisted women in the face of men's helplessness in this basic life situation. She would not be dominated, coerced or ignored or, to put it into her words, 'impoged upon'.¹⁰ This dichotomy in her character was much recorded. She both disgusted and attracted readers as an old woman who had lived a hard life and had survived. She had a work ethic, she attended well to her business and never let her patients down. She was an expert in the sordid ways of the world, yet she portrayed an optimism of human endurance. Her character may assail our 'proper' senses but she was authentic and believable.

Mrs Gamp became a regular feature of Dickens' public readings and in his public presentation of her she became real, yet grotesque. Although much loved by Dickens' admirers there were many who criticized the character. After a public reading by Dickens, *The Bradford Observer* in October 1858 commented that 'Mrs Gamp could distress the nice-minded, in both her professional capacities' (p. 83).¹³ It is through such characters as Mrs Gamp that we make contact with the reality of the poor in London that repelled and fascinated Dickens at the same time. Arthur Clayborough argued that the blowsy figure of Mrs Gamp, whom he likened to the picture on a comic postcard, could provide a release from the 'repression of moral idealism and the canons of respectability',¹⁴ but such characters in Dickens's literature were intended to be satirical. With Mrs Gamp, Dickens may have been making a social statement

about nursing or he may have been merely drawing attention to eccentricities of behaviour and speech that were seen to be absurd in Victorian England.¹⁴

MRS GAMP: SOCIAL COMMENT

Critics, in their attempt to explain why Dickens created Sairey Gamp, have applied sociological and psychological meanings to her character. Louis Cazamian credited Dickens with initiating great social change when he described Mrs Gamp as 'coarse, bibulous, unconscientious', and utterly cynical in her exploitation of sickness and death.¹⁵ He attributed Dickens with bringing about the subsequent private and public unity in nursing reform. David Smithers also credited Dickens with arousing public conscience about the need for nursing reform, by describing Mrs Gamp as a 'horrific example of the one-time nursing profession' (p. 41).¹⁶ To Margaret Ganz, Mrs Gamp was at best heartless, and at worst depraved.¹⁷ However, Ganz also acknowledged that despite her many vices Mrs Gamp was a humorous character like Falstaff. Yet Ganz provided no explanation for Mrs Gamp's qualities of earthiness, pride in her work, her capability, all coupled with humour, for which she was so admired.

Michael Slater argued that Dickens developed Mrs Gamp from masculine fears.¹⁸ As a midwife and a nurse she was the performer of those gruesome tasks surrounding birth and death that are the dread of the male. In portraying Mrs Gamp, Slater argued, Dickens included all the aspects of life that were female concerns and turned them into a grotesque joke, a matter for laughter.¹⁸ Veronica Kennedy made a similar point when she described Mrs Gamp as the eternal symbolic female and a 'monstrously comic personage'.¹⁹ Kennedy saw Mrs Gamp as both mother and midwife and her work as both profession and avocation, a woman who was the great mother possessor of much good knowledge and lore yet also of evil witchcraft. Kennedy suggested that Dickens, in his creation of Sairey Gamp, perhaps 'exorcized' his own demons.²⁰

CONCLUSION

Whether Sairey Gamp represented immeasurable influences of social corruption or simply was created to liven up the story to increase sales, what is made of the character such as Sairey Gamp is up to the reader and the reader's interpretation. Dickens' intention for Sairey Gamp in the end becomes irrelevant; it is the interpretation and application of the name and its meaning to the subsequent reader that is relevant. The use by doctors and nurses of

the term 'Sairey Gamp' in debate about the competence of the community midwife at the beginning of this century were medical discourses that were mainly only appreciated by those who were a party to the debate. Wendy Selby argued that medical discourse about Sairey Gamp was just that: constructions within discourses.²⁰ To the medical and nursing profession, every midwife in Australia who was not trained under the new rules became a 'Gamp', even those community midwives who had the respect and support of the local doctor and the community.

The exaggeration of the character of Sairey Gamp was perceived by the medical and nursing profession to represent all midwives who did not and could not fit into the criteria for a profession. She became a useful tool in the campaign against the community midwife. Eventually the emphasis on Sairey Gamp changed from being a tool to discredit the community midwife to a term that described the community midwife, still derogatory in meaning but now taking a commonplace part in speech, as illustrated in the following excerpt from Dr Sydney Morris:

Further, in the less populated States it is impossible to arrange for the training of midwives entirely in the larger centres and in consequence the course of lectures and practical training are given as capably as local conditions will allow. This is not an ideal arrangement and does not tend to raise the standard of training, but it is often the only means of supplying a district with a resident midwife, thereby eliminating the untrained handywoman.

The whole circumstances interact in a vicious circle, the outcome of which is certainly not the replacement of the 'Sarah Gamp' type by an adequate number of well trained and efficient substitutes (p. 331).²¹

Throughout this century medical men have still referred to Sairey Gamp as illustrating the midwife of last century. Grantly Dick-Read in his book *Childbirth without Fear* did not mention Sairey Gamp's name, yet the meaning was quite clear. Women, he said, were 'deserted' by the expertise of men in childbirth, and he argued that in many countries it was a crime for men to attend women in labour up until the sixteenth century.²² He further argued that with the advent of men into the midwifery profession and the abolition of the 'gin-drinking reprobates found in great numbers in hospitals and among midwives', women were once again safe and saved in childbirth (p. 3).²²

This message has prevailed despite findings by Wendy Selby that in Australian country communities a community midwife was generally highly regarded. Stories of 'caring, attentive, skilled, untrained midwives greatly outnumbered stories of Gamps' (p. 95).²⁰ Selby also found that there was a bond between the midwife and the childbirthing mother, and without exception the childbirthing women inter-

viewed for her thesis told of fond memories of their midwives who became part of the childbirthing woman's household, undertaking light housework duties and giving total care to the recently confined women. Selby argued that even those midwives who owned nursing homes took on the mantle of carer of the woman's household, and it was not uncommon for the childbirthing woman's other children to stay with her in the nursing home and for the midwife to take on domiciliary work.²⁰

Yet this profile of the community midwife of last century is still largely ignored by the medical profession, and reference to Sairey Gamp is inferred when contemporary obstetricians warn of the dangers of childbirthing outside of the safety of the obstetricians, the obstetric nurses and the hospital. Currently in South Australia the government, supported by the obstetrician, is seeking to further control and legislate childbirth by declaring that the county hospitals established in the early twentieth century are now not safe for childbirthing. Obstetricians are tightening their control over the provision of midwifery care by not only bringing women into their place of work, the hospital, but by bringing them to their area of practice, the city. The use of medical discourse to effect this further control is still evident today as obstetrician Professor Alastair MacLennan warned in 1993 that women would have to deliver their babies at home with the 'standards of the last century' if they did not come into the metropolitan area for childbirthing.²³ In 1995 he further warned that: 'Australians might have to deliver their own babies with lay midwives, uninsured and untrained' (p. 7).²⁴ Sairey Gamp wasn't mentioned, she did not have to be; 'lay midwives' and 'standards of the last century' was sufficient. Sairey Gamp has been transformed from the lovable Dickens fictional character, who disgusted some and amused others, to a simile and then to a metaphor. The metamorphosis of Sairey Gamp is now complete.

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