



# BRUCE WILLIAMS

## BOATING IN AUSTRALIA, OR PERCY AND MARY AT BYRON BAY

*Oh Thou who plumed with strong desire  
Would float above the Earth - beware!  
A shadow tracks thy flight of fire -  
Night is coming!*

SHELLEY

The famous lovers were two small people.

Apparently (and as usual I got the story half chewed), His Lordship phoned the owner of the Casa Magni, telling him to get it ready for two small people. At least, that's the story.

I'd heard of them. Percy was the really famous one. Mary had written 'Frankenstein', and even now I couldn't name you a thing Percy had written, but I knew that he was really the famous one. Not as famous as His Lordship, but famous in a small way. In two small ways.

So, a couple of squatters got the boot from the Casa Magni, floor boards were nailed down and windows were puttied up. The famous lovers arrived by bus from Brisbane. He looked pleased with the place. So did she.

A week or so later, Jane and Edward Williams arrived from Lismore. Then there were four.

Percy got into the habit of swimming naked in the morning, before the crowd arrived. He'd walk out up to about his chest, just the depth where keeping your feet becomes difficult, and jump up and down screaming, losing his footing, coughing and choking, and screaming.

He'd stay out a long time or a short time, depending on how long it took to get some seaweed in his hair. Coming out of the bay, seaweed in his hair, his penis all shrivelled and purple, he'd walk up to Mary, Jane and Edward, who'd be on the verandah having breakfast. Then he'd tell them that the sea could liberate their souls and that if their souls were liberated their potential for good in the world would be limitless.

Mary didn't object to that kind of talk - how could anyone - she just didn't think swimming nude would do their reputation with the neighbours much good. She'd say, "Cover up your penis, Percy, it's all shrivelled and purple." Jane would giggle and say, "Shrivelled and purple." Edward would look up briefly from his copy of 'Boating in Australia'.

Percy and Edward, Ned to his friends, went shopping. That's where I came in. They bought a boat from Dad, and hired me as third hand. When the fibre glass boat - plastic boats we call them - was sent up from Sydney by His Lordship, they needed me more than ever. That's what they said: "We need you more than ever."

They were all dismayed to discover that not only had His Lordship written "Don Juan" on the hull, he'd had it printed in big, black letters on the mainsail. For some reason all four of them took this as a gross insult.

In the afternoons, they went for long walks. Jane and Percy enjoyed them more than it was possible to enjoy them, so Edward and Mary generally arrived home first. Edward messed about with the boat, and Mary messed about with me.

"You do know what they're doing," I said.

"I beg your pardon," she said.

I said, croakily, breathing in after a long toke, "You know what they're doing?"

She took the joint and said that she had a pretty fair idea. I asked her if she thought Percy knew what we were doing, and she said she didn't give two shits what Percy thought. Then she blushed and explained that she was usually very well spoken and that she hoped I wouldn't think less of her because of one brief outburst.

Percy and Edward began working on ways to increase the sail on the boat, which they refused to call "Don Juan". They ordered a bigger mainsail and a new genoa. The boat soon ran fast with the wind alright, but in difficult conditions it was murder. They needed me more than ever.

"I've never read it, but I've heard about it." Percy and Edward were ruining the boat, Jane was playing her new guitar, and my penis was neither shrivelled, nor purple.

"It sold well, you know: better than anything Percy has written, even 'The Cenci', and he only wrote that because I told him to."

I asked her about His Lordship, and about that summer on Lake Geneva, and she said. . . .

"Have you seen 'Gothic'?"

"Yes, but not because I wanted to. Some friends wanted to see it. They said they'd heard it was even better than 'Tommy'."

"Then you know most of it already - the storm, Claire's nipples, playing devils. Percy has always liked frightening girls. In Geneva he

decided to frighten me and Claire by raising his own ghost, bringing it out of its world and into ours. You could say he murdered it."

"Where is it now?"

"Not far. He wants to frighten Jane."

She took a long toke and turned her head to avoid blowing smoke into my face. Her neck was white. She didn't like the sun. I took her breasts in my hands and eased them towards each other, then apart.

"I don't think he expected it to work."

The Not Don Juan, once a really classy little number, was turning into some kind of sampan. The entire hold was needed just to stow the sail. Percy and Edward began talking about a trip up to Brisbane to visit His Lordship and to buy the latest kelvar sail cloth cut to Edward's latest design. This time they really needed me.

"The first time we made love was on my mother's grave."

I took this with a grain of salt at the time, but I've since looked through a couple of biographies and her story checks out. Wow!

"He was the kindest person on earth. He was only ever bad to people who didn't understand how kind he was."

"He almost always says please."

"And he would never willingly betray anyone."

"No-one."

"Anyone."

Surprisingly enough, the first leg of the trip worked out fine. As a send off, Jane played us a song she'd just learned - something about a little neighbour boy who said, "Nothing is revealed." She sang it. He said it.

When we arrived in Brisbane we were disappointed to hear that His Lordship had been gone a day or two. The new sails were beautiful, though. Percy and Edward left the old sails in a heap on the marina. I'd expected this and had already sold them to the care-taker. No harm done.

The day before we left the bay, Mary's eyes were reddish and moist. Both she and Jane had been having dreams. She said she'd see Percy at the door, seaweed in his hair, and penisless in the dark. She said she'd wake from the dream and follow him out of the house, wake again, and find him gone. In a fright she'd run to Percy and find him in bed and asleep. It was the same for Jane, she said.

She said, "If he tells me one more time how well Jane plays the guitar, I'll cut off that silly purple dick of his and shove it up his ass."

I coughed, losing a whole lungful. She went red again. She began to cry. I realized how young she was - these days a girl like that would be just out of university.

I told her I'd be wearing my life jacket day and night on our trip up the coast. I kept that promise.

It was bad weather when we put out on our return journey. A storm was coming up behind us. The jib was set and the genoa poled out. We were carrying too much sail already, but Percy kept saying, kept yelling, "The spinnaker, please, the spinnaker!" and Edward, "The spinnaker!" And Percy: "This is a golden opportunity!"

Other boats, on their way to shore in a hurry, signalled us, warned us. We were abused over the radio. Once, I said we should come about, or at least ease the sail. Percy said, "No, no, tighten the sail, please." Edward cried: "The spinnaker!"

They set the spinnaker by themselves. Bugged if I was going to help. The wind was gusting, so setting a spinnaker had to mean trouble, even if they set it properly. But they didn't.

One of them, Percy or Edward, stuffed up with the spinnaker brace. A gust tore it loose and sent the spinnaker twisting into a kind of hour-glass shape. We had to cut it down. Percy's eyes lit up. "Cut it down!"

He had a stainless steel shackle key around his neck, complete with knife and bottle opener. He took it off, stuck it between his teeth and started up the mast. This was a golden opportunity.

The sea was really big now, and the boat bucked like a horse. The spray made it hard to speak, or even breathe.

I told Edward to ease off the spinnaker sheet while I worked the tiller. Edward got the wind out of the sail, but he let the sheet come loose and it flicked and snapped like a whip of hard nylon. Percy was up the mast hacking away at hundreds of dollars worth of the wrong sail. I thought we might make it.

Then I felt the boat lurch and the tiller was wrenched from my hand. I saw the spinnaker sheet tight as a wire, water fizzing off it. It must have caught itself around something I couldn't see. The spinnaker snapped out full. We capsized.

They were both drowned. Edward and Percy. You never see my name on the death-list, although I must have been there - they couldn't possibly

have handled that monstrosity by themselves. I don't mind; though, because I survived (although none of the biographers, from Blunden to Holmes, had any way of knowing).

Edward at least got a grab at his life jacket, and for a while it looked like he'd hold onto it. Percy was shot ten metres through the air and just flapped about in the water as usual. The weight of the keel righted the boat soon enough, and I climbed back on. The mast was bent and the safety rail most almost entirely torn away.

I saw Percy bobbing up and down, his arms slapping the waves, like some water-logged bird. The current dragged him in close. He might even have made a grab at the trailing spinnaker sheet.

With one hand on a wobbly piece of safety rail, I leant dangerously over, gave him a good, hard kick, and let the bastard drown.

## ANNE KELLAS

Night comes to me  
it stands there, brandishing long sticks  
walking on the ears of crickets  
on the pin points of dew  
it shaves the grass as it comes  
swathes the moon  
brushes away everything  
with the blood-intimacy of the dark.

Like the hob-goblin stars  
in the interstices of the sky  
I hide my weakness from the dynamo in the night.

Monkeys torment each other in their cages  
in silence, mouths open, screaming from withdrawal pains.  
The night goes by, with its eyes averted.