

## C. J. DE GARIS

Entrepreneurial businessman, publisher and founder of the *Sunraysia Daily*, Clement John J. De Garis's started out his career in the Mildura region of Victoria. His interest in the arts saw him collaborate with Reginald Stoneham on the musical comedy *F. F. F.* (1920) and he later wrote and published several short stories, a novel and an autobiography, *Victories of Failure* (1925). Charged with fraud but exonerated in the mid-1920s, De Garis committed suicide in 1926.

### 1884-1919

Clement John (Jack) De Garis was born in Melbourne on 22 November 1884, the eldest son of Elisha De Garis, a former Methodist clergyman who left the pulpit to pioneer irrigation farming in Mildura (Victoria) and in 1877 founded a prosperous auctioneer, real estate, dried-fruits brokerage and finance business in the town. Reportedly described as "sickly in appearance, of stunted growth... with the impression of retiring modesty and bashfulness that was almost girlish," young De Garis was an above-average student at Mildura State School. At the age of nine, however, his father obtained an exemption certificate allowing his eldest son to leave school in order to assist the family business (ctd. Sellers, n. pag.). In his entry on De Garis in the *Unofficial History of Brighton Cemetery*, Travis M. Sellers further records:

In the challenging role of rent-collector he was successful as he was unconventional and people soon endeared to his irresistible boyish qualities found it difficult to refuse payment; he also developed a knack of solving troublesome problems that earned him the role of town conjurer. But his general knowledge was limited, and on his father's urgings he attended Wesley College in Melbourne (1899-1901) as a boarder (nicknamed 'Soowy'); after a difficult induction he rose from last to dux of his class, became somewhat of a legend with his affectionate smile, and excelled in sports notably cricket and football ("easily the smallest boy who had ever played in Public School football") where his lack of height (4 feet 11 inches) and weight (6 stone 11 pounds) confounded both his coaches and the opposition earning him taunts from rival schools (Scotch College - "Swat that fly!").



*Green Room Sept. (1920), 18.*

De Garis returned to Mildura at the end of 1901, aged 17. Seven years later his father moved to Melbourne to establish a selling agency for the business. As the company's new General Manager, Jack was also charged with increasing the sales figures and reducing the business's £6,000 overdraft. Within 18 months his lucid grasp of business fundamentals, combined with entrepreneurial acumen, effervescent charm, and supreme confidence saw him not only repay the loan but put the business some £15,000 pounds in credit.<sup>1</sup> This early success boosted his self-belief to such an extent that he went on to achieve a great deal more over the next twenty years. It also set in motion, however, a train of events that ultimately ended in monumental failure and suicide.

Beginning in 1910, De Garis expanded the family business rapidly, initially borrowing heavily to establish a packing shed Sarnia Packing Pty Ltd. This later became part of Sunbeam Foods Group. He borrowed again three years later in order to purchase the 10,009 acres (4,050 ha) Pyap Village Estate, a farm-produce settlement situated near Loxton, South Australia.

In 1919, a shortage of shipping space hit the dried fruits industry. Highly dependent on British markets at that time, the Australian Dried Fruits Association realised that it needed to expand its local market, and offered De Garis the position of publicity manager. He immediately put in motion an Australia-wide American-style marketing campaign that increased domestic consumption beyond expectations. His approach was to exploit every opportunity. He devised the term 'sun-raysed,' incorporating it into pamphlets, recipe books, children's books, cartoons and music (the "Sun-Raysed Waltz"). He even arranged to have the slogan blazoned across the skies over Melbourne by a skywriter and opened a Sunraysia Cafe in Melbourne. His publicity highlighted the fact that cafe was staffed by young women from Mildura, all of whom were "raised on Sunraysia raisins. He also organised free screenings in the capital cities of a film about Mildura. Even the Spanish influenza epidemic of 1919 was fodder for promotion:

I fear no more the dreaded flu,  
For Sunraysed fruits will see me through.

<sup>1</sup> Theatrical entrepreneur Claude Kingston once described him as the "prince of ballyhoo" (ctd. McCalman)

De Garis also saw himself as a patron of the arts. In 1919 F. W. and Niven and Co published his *Sun-rayed Children's Fairy Story Book*, a collection compiled by De Garis from prize-winning entries in the Sun-rayed competitions of January 1919. Later that year he launched the Great Australian Novel Competition.<sup>2</sup> The winner, Frank A. Russell had his novel, *The Ashes of Achievement*, published by the newly founded C. J. De Garis Publishing House in 1920. Other works to be published over the next few years included J. M. Walsh's *The Lost Valley* (1919 prize runner-up), Hansell, Harold's *The Everlastin' Ballads: Ballads of Empire* (1920), Ethel Morris's *The White Butterfly and Other Fairy Tales* (1921), and Ada Holman's *Sport of the Gods* (1921).

**£40 Won  
£110 Cash  
Yet  
Untouched**

**LATEST NEWS.**

Three Competitors have forwarded correct solutions.  
The first S represents the word "SUNRAYSED," the Third "STUNT"  
Leaving  
**ONE MAGIC LETTER**

**£40 Won  
£110 Cash  
Yet  
Untouched**

**SUNRAYSED B STUNT**

B represents the commencing letter of  
**ONE OTHER SIMPLE, BUT MAGIC WORD**

A First CASH Prize of £15 and a Second Cash Prize of £10 will be paid to the individuals in each State of the Commonwealth who are the first and second from their State to say correctly

**WHAT THE ONE MAGIC WORD IS**

There still remains:—Four First Prizes of £15 CASH (one for each of Four States)  
Five Second CASH Prizes of £10 (one for each of Five States)

Specially Note—The word represented in B . . . . is in everyday use in every home, and is very appropriate to the stunt we will be releasing

**No Entry Form Needed—Just send your idea of the Three Magic Words and your full name and address with 1/-, for which we will post you full value in the form of**

Sun-Rayseed Waltz (5 pages of music) and Kettle Holder—or Sun-Rayseed Waltz and Recipe Book—or Sun-Rayseed War Medal Souvenir. For 2/- we will post you Sun-Rayseed Children's Book (68 pages) and you will have TWO entries—A Fine Gift for the youngsters.

A Hint—It is in connection with the 1920 Campaign to popularize SUN-RAYSED FRUITS.  
You can send as many solutions as you like, each to be accompanied by 1/-, for which we will post you full value in SUN-RAYSED side lines.  
If you always eat SUN-RAYSED FRUITS and the GOOD LITTLE NORMEY "LOLLY" they will give you the necessary inspiration.

**CONTEST CLOSES 31st MARCH, 1920.**

Entries should come in at once, as THE FIRST CORRECT ONES WIN the £150 CASH.  
**We are determined that the prize shall be won by somebody.**  
Results will be advertised on Saturday, 10th April, the same day as the THREE MAGIC WORDS will be revealed.  
**We will advise at once when a competitor in any State successfully solves the problem.**

Address Entries to—  
**C. J. DeGARIS, DIRECTOR OF PUBLICITY, A.D.F.A., MILDURA, VICTORIA.**

*Green Room Mar. (1920), n. pag.*

Also in 1919, De Garis exposed an American con-man named George Henry Cochrane (1880-1933). Recently released from prison for forgery and uttering, Cochrane had written for the *Bulletin* as Grant Hervey. He fraudulently presented himself to the Mildura public as American, Hervey G. Madison, and after holding an audience of 2000 spellbound with his oratory for 90 minutes he sought financial backing for a fraudulent scheme to secede from Victoria and form the new state of Greater Mildura under his leadership. £5 subscriptions began to flow but De Garis revealed Cochrane's true identity and criminal record after he was recognised by a local.

### 1920-1926

In 1920 De Garis expanded his publishing concerns by buying three local newspapers, the *Mildura Cultivator*, the *Mildura Telegraph* and the *Merbein Irrigationist*. He then merged them into the *Sunraysia Daily*, a paper which employed almost 100 staff. That same year he also purchased a 47,325 acre (19,000 ha) property at Kendenup, Western Australia. The plan was to build a settlement there which would grow apples, potatoes and other farm produce. He raised £23,000 for this venture by breaking up and selling the moderately successful Pyap Village Estate. De Garis subdivided Kendenup into blocks ranging from 10 acres (4.0 ha) to 60 acres (24 ha) and set up two companies - the De Garis Kendenup (W.A.) Development Company and the Kendenup Fruit Packing Company. The latter firm operated a dehydrating factory to process vegetables and fruit grown by the 350 settlers which he had encouraged into the area. He also built cottages for some 80 employees undertaking this work and provided the small community with a school, library and entertainment centre.

<sup>2</sup> The competition was also known as the "C. J. De Garis Prize."

It was around this same period that De Garis, decided to try his hand at writing for the stage. In collaboration with composer Reginald A. A. Stoneham, he wrote the libretto for a musical comedy, *F. F. F.* It premiered in Adelaide in 1920. Unfortunately the musical's credibility, and the possibility of a successful Australian tour, was hampered by the public's scepticism over the premiere's timing, which coincided with an advertising campaign for Sunraysed fruits. Following the Adelaide season *F. F. F.* was staged in Perth and Melbourne. A proposed Sydney production never eventuated due to financial difficulties. Despite the failure of the show, it did at least provide two hits songs, "Murray Moon," and "Sleepy Seas."

De Garis's final years saw him become an increasingly "colourful" and infamous figure as his extravagant tastes and reckless nature took control of his better judgment. Although regarded by many as a man of the people following his exposure of George Cochrane, his reputation took a severe downturn when he was himself charged with fraud relating his attempt to raise a quarter of a million pounds for the ailing Kenenup venture. De Garis's financial problems had already begun to manifest by late December 1921. It was clear that the settlement had insufficient capital and was foundering because of the uneconomical small lot sizes allocated. De Garis initially moved to Kendenup to oversee the enterprise but after realising the extent of the problems travelled to the United States in an attempt to raise urgently needed capital. Little if any eventuated and within two years only 30 settlers remained. The collapse of the settlement and the possibility of fraud were subsequently investigated in 1923 by a Western Australian Royal Commission. Although eventually exonerated of the charges, De Garis's reputation was by then tarnished. He attempted to re-ignite his financial position but his mental health by this time had become rather unstable. His dire financial situation also forced him to sell the *Sunraysia Daily*. It was initially placed in the hands of a firm of Melbourne-based financiers which kept the paper running until 1924 when Sunraysia Daily Pty Ltd, a consortium comprising Percy Stewart MP, Dr (later Sir) Earl Page and R. D. Elliott (later a senator), took over its operations.

In late December 1924 following another business failure De Garis passed a valueless cheque which led to police action. He subsequently faked his own death on 5 January 1925 by making it look as if he had drowned in Port Phillips Bay. After an intensive investigation police decided that he not drowned and subsequently issued an Australia-wide warrant for his arrest. It was soon discovered that he had been residing at Mortlake for several days under the name Leslie. When a man answering his description was seen travelling steerage under that name on a steamer bound for New Zealand, Auckland police were asked to board the ship when in docked. He was brought back to Australia to face court but was once again acquitted. His sense of failure was too much by this stage, however, and in a state of depression and delusion he gassed himself to death on 17 August 1926 at his home in Mornington, Victoria. His debts at the time were estimated to be around £420,000. De Garis is buried in Melbourne's Brighton Cemetery.



*Green Room* May (1919), 18.

Among De Garis's published works were several short stories, a war drama titled *Ambition Run Mad* (1921), and a largely autobiographical novel titled *Victories of Failure: A Business Romance of Fiction, Blended with, and Based on, Fact* (1925). The book came out some two years after his company had been forced into liquidation. He also wrote pamphlets on the Sunraysia region and Geelong.

## ADDITIONAL QUOTATIONS

- A clever salesman, whose assets were a compelling magnetic personality and a faculty for almost ceaseless industry, Mr Clement John De Garis was one of the most remarkable Australian business men of recent years.... He was possessed of considerable business acumen, which he brought to bear mainly on land investment and development schemes, but his enterprise and imagination several times carried him beyond the safe limits of finance, with the result that many of his ventures ended in considerable financial loss to himself and investors (ARG: 18 Aug. 1926, 21).
- The late C. J. De Garis will be buried to-morrow. Several of Mr De Garis' friends had not seen him for some months. During the last few weeks, however, several city businessmen received pleasant surprises when De Garis walked into their offices and paid in cash the full total of the debts he owed before his insolvency. One such payment was for £1,000. To-day the recipient said that the day De Garis paid him he would have taken sixpence for the seemingly bad debt (DNP: 18 Aug. (1926), 3).
- Officiating at De Garis' funeral, the Rev. Charles Tregear said "Today we are laying to rest the body of no ordinary man. I will alter that, and say he was a most extraordinary man, a man with brains, wonderful vision, courage and business ability. But behind it all he was a kindly and good man" (ctd. Sellers, n. pag.).

## HISTORICAL NOTES AND CORRECTIONS

1. De Garis married Rene Corbould in September 1907. A month after their divorce in May 1923 he married his former private secretary Violet Austin. The couple had one daughter.
2. De Garis often referred to himself as an aviator, and indeed set several interstate flying records. It has been argued, however, that his claim to being an aviator was somewhat overstated. Although he owned several aeroplanes during his lifetime, deemed a necessity for the nature of his many business interests, he did not fly the planes himself but rather employed pilots and navigators. Nevertheless, in an era of pioneer aviation, his frequent involvement was considered relatively dangerous and at one stage he was asked by investors to refrain from use of aeroplanes for transport. In *Victories of Failure* he provides further details regarding this aspect of his remarkable life.

His first plane was a Boulton Paul P.9 which he acquired in June 1920. It was flown by pilot Lieutenant A.L. Lang. (AFC). Later that same year he purchased a Sopwith Gnu for £1,800 after the P.9 had crashed. He then employed Lieutenant F.S. Briggs as his permanent pilot. De Garis' first major interstate flight was undertaken between Melbourne and Perth (a distance of 2,169 miles or 3,491 km) and made in his third plane, an Airco DH.4. It was the first time anyone had flown across Australia from east to west, thus setting the first record of 19 hours and 10 minutes. De Garis, Briggs and their mechanic Sergeant Stoward were subsequently given a mayoral reception on their arrival in Perth. A few weeks later (14 Dec.), the trio flew from Perth to Sydney, a distance of 2,462 miles (3,962 km) in a time of 21 hours 30 minutes. Other notable flights were undertaken in January 1921. These included Mildura to Sydney in 5 hours 30 minutes; Sydney to Brisbane in 4 hours 50 minutes; and Brisbane to Melbourne in 10 hours 30 minutes (ctd. Wikipedia).

3. Another De Garis film, *Western Australia, the Land of Opportunity* was also screened several capital cities in 1920.
4. Papers relating to De Garis's Kendenup venture are held in the J. S. Battye Library, State Library of Western Australia (MN831).

## MUSIC THEATRE WORKS

1920: **F.F.F.** [musical]

## FURTHER REFERENCE

"Big Stunt, The." GR: May (1919), 18, 19.

"[C. J. De Garis Found Dead in Gas-filled Room.](#)" SMH: 18 Aug. (1926), 15.

"Death-bed Finance of C. J. De Garis: How and Why he Influenced Capital." SW: 21 Mar. (1925), 3.

"[Death of Mr C. J. De Garis: Found with Mouth Over Gas Jet.](#)" AA: 18 Aug. (1926), 17.

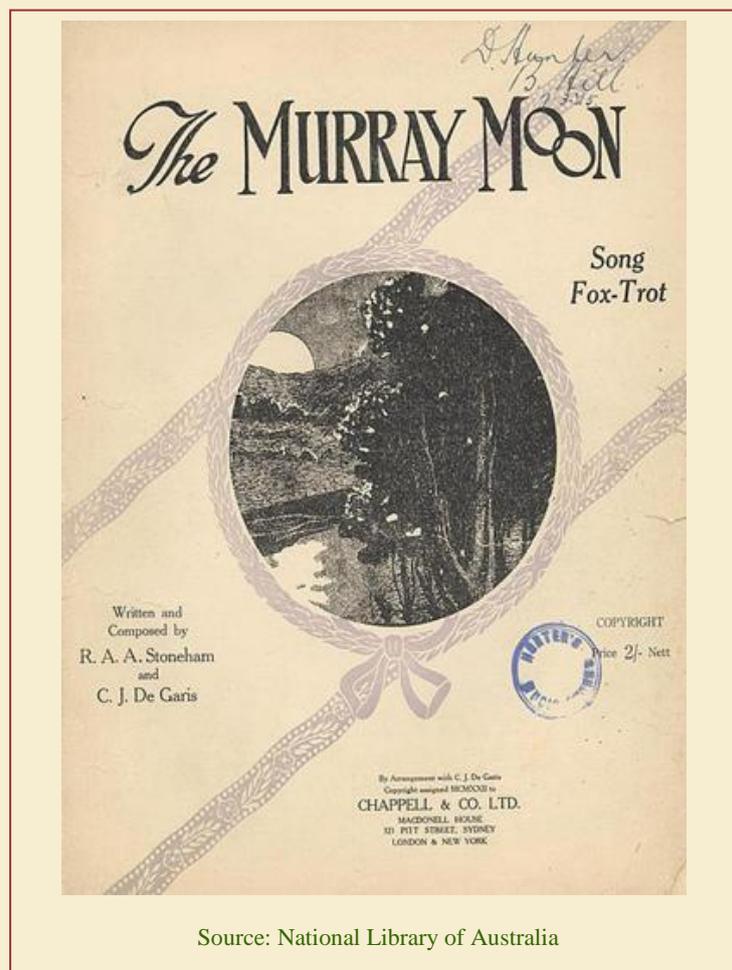
"[De Garis Financial Troubles: W. A. Oil Venture.](#)" DNP: 18 Aug. (1926), 6.

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"De Garis Mystery: Latest Maheno Development - Detectives Await Boat's Arrival." A: 12 Jan. (1925), 9.  
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 "Why *Smith's* Exposed De Garis: Comment Not Stifled by Advertising." SW: 17 Jan. (1925), 11.

**See also:**

**A:** 18, 19 Aug. (1926), n. pag.  
**ARG:** 8 July (1920), 6.  
**MH:** 13, 14 Jan. (1925), • 17, 19 Aug. (1926), n. pag.  
**MP:** 15 Jan. (1925), n. pag.



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Expanded and updated from Clay Djubal, "What Oh Tonight." Ph D Diss. U of Qld (2005), Appendix D.

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