

# **Belonging**

**Gundagai's Dr Louis Gabriel**

**A Fictional Biography**

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PART ONE: 1887–1888

The Black Doctor

*The people of Gundagai watch with a jealous eye the attempts of 'new blood' to make a start here, and the customary gloomy forebodings are freely indulged in...*

*'it is a pity someone is not here to shake this valley of dry bones and cause an interest to be taken by people in things outside their offices and shops.'*

*The Gundagai Times, 26 January 1886.*

From the north you can hear the clanking beat of the steam train tunnelling through the night mist, past stone cottages, expansive pastures and solitary crossings, heading for the station. On either side of the driver's compartment two lanterns like a giant's eyes, pierced the darkness. Only when the locomotive pulled closer to the station did its black form emerge from the grey glow.

On the platform, the stationmaster held his flags by his side, his figure outlined against the train's plume. Moving closer, he waved the huffing beast and its long blue carriages to a halt. Two railway men near the hot copper urns had faces wet with the whirl of mist, coal-fired smoke and the urns curling vapours. The train's high-pitched screech echoed across the valley.

A momentary silence before the Clap! Clap! Clap! of opening doors released the train's weary passengers. Amongst them, a gentleman in a dark suit stepped on the crunching gravel, arched his lithe body and threw out his arms. Resting his hat on his leather bag, he reached for the back of his neck, stroking it with vigour. His youthful face with its darkish complexion shone in the night air.

So here I am, he thought, halfway to Gundagai, the task ahead. A medico, seeking a home.

People gathered around the tea urn for hot drinks, speaking in hushed tones. They formed a queue or crossed paths at the water tank.

'Apples, mister?' ventured a young lad. 'Socks, shoelaces, scarf?'

'Ah,' said Louis Gabriel, seeing a boy about ten years old, selling assorted wares.

Midnight, and he's wearing no shoes 'Aren't you cold?'

'Shoelaces, mister? Socks. Scarves. Apples.'

'Show me the laces then.'

The boy came forward, favouring his right foot.

Ah! Poor lad. A case of Club Foot. Talipes Valus.

'What happened to your foot, laddie?'

'You want som'tin? Laces? Penny an apple.'

'Apple then. Make it an apple. And another penny if you'll see the doctor about your foot.'

'Yer. Sure enough,' and he grabbed the two pennies.

All aboard the fire-bellied engine.

Louis dashed back to the train, its clunk and screech harrying him to jump aboard, buccaneer-like, as the train pulled away. It gained speed, and he stood on the brink surveying

the nothingness before him, the sweep of wind beating his forehead, the great wheels under his feet carrying him to Gundagai.

His father was a fire-bellied engine, huffing and puffing, starting the day slow and early. He prepared his pot of tea and might muse over last night's reading from a tattered Homer's *Odyssey*, or grandfather's copy of Rousseau's *Confessions* signed in Napoleon's hand. He would sit on the east porch, building up a head of steam, conversing with Mother on the day ahead. At full throttle by eight-thirty, he announced the day a success to anyone who'd listen, exclaiming to citizens that 'not an hour should be lost', and followed up with an afternoon siesta, a practice the Scots of sub-tropical Kempsey found so unlike a train stop for tank water.

Father's life savings sent Louis to Edinburgh where he found a commitment to medicine that would stay with him all his days. His lecturers embodied his father's learned manner Kempsey citizens thought eccentric was born and bred in the college. They were people of knowledge infused with the spirit of science. This was Edinburgh, home of modern surgery, Lister's University.

But what happened when I returned to New South Wales? Fourteen tedious months at Sydney Hospital surrounded by bastardy. Instead of putting my skills to good use, the Chief Medical Officer treated me as unworthy. Amongst my equals, they made my work impossible.

'Take heart,' father said. 'In smaller places, you're more valued. Remember your granddad. Without him, you and I would still be mending nets in a Martinique village.'

His father never let him forget. When France's doctors followed the aristocracy, escaping the revolution's excesses, they left the nation with a grave shortage of medicos. Under the banner of 'Liberty, Equality and Fraternity', Napoleon brought the most talented colonial boys to France, granddad amongst them, training them as medical practitioners for his army.

Our family lived there for forty years, Granddad encouraged Father to take up medicine. When he could not afford to complete his studies, he served on merchant ships, travelling back and forth to the French-Pacific colonies. He endured terrible hardships until he jumped ship, and settled in frontier Kempsey.

What a chance he took, adopting this land with little English, though he saw it as destiny.

It's been my good fortune. How many of my generation managed to complete medical studies in Edinburgh, work in its hospital, and return to Sydney?

Now he would be his own fire-bellied engine. Modern medicine and the new surgery were his parallel rails, Gundagai the end of the line. He'd practice there and hope that his Sydney experience would not repeat itself. In Edinburgh, my bronze skin lent me the allure of the exotica found in ports, and the university itself. With his classmates, it brought a pleasing curiosity.

I'll brook no nonsense. I have my family's support. I have some money. I will be generous.

He wriggled in his seat, a prickly sensation running down his spine. His face grew tight and moist so he wiped away the perspiration.

I'll worry, tomorrow, and strive the day.