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**Whose stories we tell: What factors need to
be taken into consideration in the creation
of a theatrical play text based on a
historical figure?**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of

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CREATIVE WRITING COMPONENT: ONE ACT PLAY

DEAR JANE

(inspired by John Dean's letters and Jane Dean's memoirs)

Characters:

Jane McIlraith/Deans – 25-40, female, in a 19th century dress.

John Deans – 25-45, in a 19th century outfit.

The Man – 25-55, male, in a dark suit and bow tie, to perform various parts: the Guide, the Postman, the Clergyman.

Lights up. Upstage left, in a 19th century lounge, sits a woman in winged chair, in a period dress. She is still.

Upstage centre, a man in a white shirt and dark breeches sits at a small writing desk, with a single lit candle. The man is also still.

Upstage right is a small side table with a large 19th century globe of the world. There are dollhouses on either side of the globe: one is a big mansion on the right, and the other is a small cottage on the left. Next to the mansion is a miniature figure of a woman. Next to the cottage are two male figures.

The lights brighten as the GUIDE appears. Sound: cheerful birds' tweeting.

The GUIDE, a man in formal clothes, is conducting a tour around Riccarton House in Christchurch, New Zealand.

GUIDE: *(to the audience)* Welcome to Riccarton House, ladies and gentlemen – this elegant room is known as the Fine Dining Room, and was added to the House in 1874 to celebrate the 21st birthday of Jane's son, John Deans the Second. The furniture is made from local oak. Isn't it beautiful? You can easily picture Jane sitting in that chair, in her dark dress – she preferred wearing dark colours after her husband John died so early and tragically.

JANE *(quietly)*: I did not.

GUIDE: *(not hearing Jane)*: As you can see in the photos, where she always wears dark colours...

JANE: *(quietly)*: The photos are black and white. I like colours. Blue suits my eyes.

GUIDE: *(continuing)*: And even in her pre-wedding photograph, later made into the portrait that you can see over there *(points off stage)*, she looks very solemn,

wearing, once again, her dark dress as if to foreshadow the terrible tragedies in her life.

JANE: (*louder*): And I am also wearing my best white lace! I had to sit still in front of that tiresome contraption for what felt like hours, with our departure only a couple of weeks away. With so much to do, what a waste of time. We had to pack everything, even nails! Oh no, we forgot the nails. Most vexing.

GUIDE: (*continuing*): Marrying John Deans, the fearless New Zealand settler, was akin to marrying the unknown. The tall dark stranger from a mysterious far-away country... You can see his wax figure over there, at the writing desk (*points at the figure*).

JANE: Goodness, I am so glad John can't see *that*! In my day, only kings and villains were exhibited in such a scandalous fashion. A wax figure indeed! I am just thankful it is not stuffed.

GUIDE: (*continuing*): A landowner, and a gentleman farmer with excellent prospects. He and his older brother William were among the first highly successful Canterbury settlers, universally respected and loved.

JANE: John Deans. A stranger I hadn't seen for ten years. The event I'd been waiting for a decade was finally happening! I was so happy I thought I could fly. Fly all the way to the far-away land, light and free - but instead, I was destined for five months of sea sickness... *That* was even more vexing than forgetting to pack the nails.

GUIDE: ... Stern and humourless but sentimental, she remained in mourning for her husband for many years, and is rumoured to have haunted this house ever since her death in 1911. There have been several sightings...

JANE (*angrily*): You ignorant fool!

She raises her hand and the Guide stops talking. He freezes, as if suspended in time. The birds' tweeting stops.

Jane gets up.

JANE: I do not haunt this House. I *am* the House. I belong here. Am I a ghost? I don't know. It sounds like a rather inappropriate occupation for a lady. But I belong here. And I will never leave Canterbury. But... did I really leave Scotland? I don't know either. I am forever divided... But I don't think I am a ghost. It sounds so undignified and ridiculous. People are fools. And I do like bright colours... The bright green of the Canterbury bush. The bright blue of the Scottish sky and the spring carpet of flowers in Auchenflower... back home, in Riccarton. The Scottish Riccarton.

Lights fade. The man who played the Guide takes off his bow tie, and puts on a postman's hat.

MAN: Miss McIlraith?

JANE: Pardon? No, I am Mrs. Deans.

MAN: Oh. Sorry, Ma'am. But this is Mr. McIlraith's property?

JANE (*looks around, bewildered*): I believe... Yes, I believe it is.

MAN: I have a letter here for Miss Jane McIlraith.

JANE: That's me... I mean, I will pass it to Miss McIlraith (*she smiles*) I know her well.

MAN: Thank you, Mrs. Deans.

He turns to leave.

JANE: Actually, I am not...

But he is already gone.

JANE: (*completing her sentence*)... not Mrs. Deans yet. (*looks at the letter*) From John. Mr. Deans. At last...

Upstage centre lights up on a man writing at a small desk. He comes to life.

JOHN (*at first talks as he writes, but after the first sentence raises his head and speaks to the audience*) Dear Miss McIlraith. It is a pleasure to report... good health... crops... cattle... excellent price per head... William says... several hundred acres...

As he writes, the Man returns. He comes to the cottage dollhouse and picks up one of the male figures. It is the figure of John.

JOHN: (*continues*)... profitable... new arrivals...

MAN: (*looking at the figure of John in his hand, as if giving him his cue*): William thinks...

JOHN: (*repeating after the Man*) William thinks... dearest Miss McIlraith... my arrangement... hope you will find agreeable... please understand the importance...

MAN: William says...

JOHN: William says... I can't leave the farm now... highly inconvenient... crops... cattle... new arrivals... yours forever.

The Man smiles and picks up a woman's figure. It is a figure of Jane. He looks at the two figures in his hands during the dialogue.

John and Jane are talking to each other, but they are facing the audience.

JANE: I am a terrible sailor.

JOHN: It is a much bigger ship than you ever travelled on. I am sure you will enjoy the voyage and laugh at the danger.

JANE: I will not be prevailed upon.

JOHN: I cannot leave this colony for 12 months at this time. Please understand – William needs me! Too much is at stake.

JANE: It is not proper for a lady to travel unmarried and unaccompanied. And Mr. Deans, I *am* a terrible sailor.

JOHN: But surely, the protection of some respectable married couple... The Bishop of Lyttleton and his lady! They will be accompanying you. Surely...

JANE: The Bishop of...?

JOHN: Lyttleton. Very proper.

JANE: But you don't understand. I must marry you here, from my father's house. I want to travel with my husband. And I am *such* a terrible sailor! It is too embarrassing for words.

JOHN: But the Bishop...

JANE: No.

JOHN: But William says...

JANE: No.

JOHN: But...

JANE: My decision is final.

JOHN: Please listen! I can't...

JANE: I won't go on my own. I won't go. I won't!

The Man smiles to himself looking at the figures in his hands.

JOHN: *(back to his writing desk)* Dear Miss McIlraith. There is a heavy burden on my mind...

MAN: *(suddenly turns to John, loudly)* Is she worth the trouble?

JOHN: *(after a beat)* I need a wife. A household. A family...

MAN: Is William not enough? You are happy, aren't you? And he is happy too.

JOHN: I am different. And I promised Jane...

MAN: Bah. She was merely a child. And not even a pretty one.

JOHN: (*turning away*) It's not true! And I remember her laughter... Her eyes...

MAN: Yes? Do you remember their colour, perchance?

JOHN: (*frustrated*) It doesn't matter!

MAN: (*approaching John*) Aren't there any suitable girls in Canterbury?

JOHN: (*incredulously*) In Canterbury?! Hardly. I will need to go looking for a wife in other parts of the colony, maybe even Australia. And Miss McIlraith... Jane. (*firmly*) I'd like to see her again. Yes. I'd really like to. New Zealand would suit her. Us.

MAN: But you don't want to travel back home.

JOHN: Home?

MAN: Scotland.

JOHN: Home is here. William is here. The estate is here... Oh, why won't Jane just be sensible? I can't abandon my brother at this time.

MAN: At this time, or ever? And how will she fit into your life here with William? It's so stable, so predictable, safe...

JOHN (*almost shouting*) William likes her! They've met! He approves...

MAN: And does he approve of your travel to Scotland?

JOHN: (*very annoyed*) I am not asking Jane to do anything impossible! Just to come *here*!! (*takes a breath, calmer*) I can't leave William. Maybe if I wait a little longer, she will...

MAN: (*almost into his face*) How much longer? She must be 29 now. Withering, slowly. And, by the way, if you want any children...

JOHN (*covering his ears*) I will just wait a little longer... William says...

MAN: And what if it's a trap? What if she makes you stay in Scotland?

JOHN (*his ears covered*) I will just wait a little longer...

MAN (*coming very close, talking into John's face, slowly*) By all means.

Beat. The Man walks away from John, who returns to his letter.

JOHN: Dear Miss McIlraith. There is a heavy burden on my mind... If I travel back to Scotland to marry you, will you not raise some other objection for leaving Scotland? I cannot stay there. I need to know what your desires are. It's been two years now since we started this argument... I mean, this discussion about the terms of our engagement. I need to know. Please...

He waits expectantly for a beat but Jane is silent.

JOHN: *(slowly and formally)* Dear Miss McIlraith. I have been very much perplexed at not hearing from you. I have not had but one letter from you though I wrote a good many... *(Beat. He looks at the audience)* I do not know what to think.

The Man puts John's figure back. The light on John fades, and focuses on Jane. The Man looks directly at her now.

JANE: *(echoing John's last words)* I do not know what to think or do. It's too far away. New Zealand. My letters travel there in 6 months, sometimes longer, and his answers to my questions arrive a whole year later. And by that time I have so many other questions, unanswered. New Zealand...

MAN: Five months at sea. On a ship. Down and up... Heave, surge, sway.

JANE: *(her hand flies to her mouth)* Heave...

MAN: The thought alone makes you queasy.

JANE: And afraid. I never told it to anyone, but I am so *so* afraid.

MAN: But not of the sea sickness.

JANE: No.

MAN: Of leaving everything and everyone you ever knew behind. Of never seeing them again. Ever. Your father. Your family. Your childhood friends. Your home. Your hills and dales. Are you prepared for loneliness, for isolation? Do you understand the word "Never"?

JANE: *(turning away)* My world is very small but it is mine. Loneliness? I have never been alone in my whole life. "Never"?... It is too big for me to comprehend. I am too small for "never". And for "forever".

MAN: And what about Mr. Deans?

JANE: Mr. Deans?

MAN: That young man who decided that this 17-year old girl would do for New Zealand.

JANE: Oh yes... The picnic in Auchenflower.

MAN: It smelt of grass, and happiness, and hope.

JANE: As if I was finally released, given a purpose, the one I craved so much.

MAN: To become the heroine of a story?

JANE: To test my strength! To fly free!

MAN: And to leave everything and everyone behind. Forever.

JANE: Forever. To leave the comfortable, the familiar and the boring. (*thoughtfully*) “You would do for New Zealand”, he said.

MAN: That boarder in your father’s house...

JANE: John Deans. So solemn and confident. Like a clergyman. But he promised me an adventure.

MAN: And only months later, he sailed away on a ship. Heave, surge, sway...

JANE: (*her hand flies to her mouth again*). Heave... Surge, sway.

MAN: Leaving you with great hopes and no formal engagement to be married.

JANE: It was too early. Too uncertain. He needed to make his fortune first, to establish the farms, to settle.

MAN: But it’s a long time since you were 17.

JANE: Would I really do for New Zealand?

Lights fade on Jane, who sits back into her chair. Meanwhile, the Man replaces his bow tie becoming the Guide once again. He stands next to the table with the globe.

GUIDE: (*sweetly*) It is such a romantic tale. Picture this, ladies and gentlemen – a young lady waiting for her fiancé for 10 years, cherishing her hopes and memories! Sighing over dried flowers and perhaps some ribbons and other signs of romantic affection customary in those days! Picture her fiancé thinking of her constantly, anxious to bring his bride home! (*he gives the globe a gentle spin, and watches its movement*) Think of an undying, deep, passionate love divided by cruel geography, in an era when letters travelled half a year one way. Imagine, ladies and gentlemen, two lovers separated by oceans and continents, with their feelings unchanged and stronger than ever! (*he sighs with sentimental happiness*) And now I will tell you a most touching story of this beautiful pair of gloves – in the cabinet over here (*points off stage*). This is John’s parting gift to Jane. She never wore them because she loved him too much, and his gift was too precious to her heart...

Lights fade off the Guide and focus back on Jane. She is shaking her head bitterly, holding a pair of white leather gloves in her hands. As Jane speaks, the Guide takes off his bow tie transforming into the Man. He is watching Jane.

JANE: People can be such fools. What *do* they know? It wasn't passionate long-lasting love. It was long-lasting stubbornness. Those gloves... They were beautiful. Expensive. White.

She puts on one glove, briefly admires the effect then takes it off again.

MAN: Too good to wear? Or too good for you?

JANE: Not *sensible* to wear (*she gently touches the glove*). Easy to stain, to tear, to damage... (*defensively*) I could have worn them on Sundays to show to the world that I was not a spinster left on the shelf!

Jane impulsively gets up.

MAN: Were you not?

Jane does not answer, looking down, nervously toying with a glove.

MAN: And did you even remember his face? His voice? The years...

JANE: The years... Too many of them for comfort (*she touches her own face, worriedly*)

MAN: And when you looked at yourself in the mirror, you did not recognise the girl who had been told she would "do for New Zealand"?

The Man comes closer. They stand face to face now.

JANE: (*defiantly*) Mr Cordy, father's neighbour, showed some interest in me.

MAN: Yes, he singled you out at a tea party once. It was six years ago. You are not exactly a beauty, you know.

JANE: I wouldn't have married him anyway.

MAN: (*sarcastically*) Of course you wouldn't. You'd rather stay on your father's estate forever as an old maid. Watching your younger sisters and childhood friends marry and manage their own households.

JANE: I have accomplishments! Talents! Education! The headmistress of my school in Edinburg said so. She said I could easily get a position as a teacher there! And... and...

MAN: And what? Your father would never allow it to happen – and besides, do you really fancy such a miserable life? School mistresses cannot be seen in any male company except close relatives. It is improper. Locked away in your bedsit for life, between

never-ending classes and lonely nights, in an overcrowded dirty city – what a brilliant prospect!

JANE: (*running out of ideas*) Well, I could help looking after my father's farm...

MAN: Women don't manage estates. You have brothers to do the job.

JANE (*desperately thinking*): I could...

MAN: (*forcefully, looking straight into her face*): Look at you, Miss McIlraith. You are 29, with no other offers of marriage, destined to stay at your father's house for the rest of your life no matter what your talents or inclinations are.

JANE (*passionately*) It is not true! I'll do anything, go anywhere – but I won't fade away here as an old maid, no matter how safe "here" is!

MAN: (*quietly*) And what about the word "never"?

JANE: (*covers her ears and turns away from the Man*) It does not exist!... Mr. Deans.. Mr. Deans.... John!! (*she takes a deep breath and speaks calmly*) I may not remember your face or your voice but I will be true to my word. I will not cross the world as a single woman but, Mr. Deans, the moment our local clergyman pronounces us man and wife, I guarantee there will be no further delay on my part. The danger of the sea voyage will not stop me.

MAN: Heave, surge, sway... Never to be seen home again. Ever.

JANE: Will. Not. Stop. Me!!

Lights are on John. While he is speaking, the Man picks up the other male figure by the cottage – William Deans.

JOHN: (*writes*) Dear Miss McIlraith, I am exceedingly glad to hear from you...

MAN: (*interrupting*) So you are going after all.

JOHN: I may wait just a little bit longer, but yes indeed, I am determined.

MAN: And what does your brother say?

JOHN: (*with less certainty*) William will look after the farm while I am away.

MAN: Will he? And if anything happens to him, what then?

JOHN: God protects us all. Everything is His will... And as soon as William has landed the sheep from Sydney, I will start making my travel arrangements. William and I will consult on the matter shortly, and I am sure he...

He stops abruptly. The funeral tolling of the bell.

JOHN: Dear... Miss McIlraith, I am... I...

JANE: Mr. Deans? John...? John?!

John slowly gets up as the lights fade on him, focusing on the Man. The Man gives the globe a gentle spin, then drops the figure of William down onto the floor. Then he deliberately readjusts the figure of John in front of the cottage and stops the globe with his hand. It is still now.

The sound of the funeral bell fades. The lights are back on John. He is sitting again, his face in his hands.

MAN: The sea is a hungry beast. Ships. Sails. Winds. Pretty, aren't they? So romantic. Forward, forward, sway, surge... Storms. Dark waters. Deaths. What the sea takes, it never gives back. Remember the word "never"?

Beat.

JOHN: It's William.

JANE: What... ?!

MAN: *(cue for John)* He is...

JOHN: ...Gone. William is gone.

JANE: How?

JOHN: Gone.

JANE: John?..

JOHN: I don't know how to... how to...

JANE: John?

JOHN: ... how to live without him.

He pauses, looking around as if not knowing what to say or do. He helplessly slumps down on his chair by the desk.

MAN *(coming closer, giving a cue)*: It is with a sad and heavy...

JOHN: *(raises his head, slowly and formally)* It is with a sad and heavy heart that I sit down to write you the melancholy intelligence of the death of our dear William... On the fatal morning of the 23rd July...

MAN: The shipwreck. His body was never recovered.

JOHN: The terrible news reached me on the 20th August...

MAN: A month later. He did not know of his brother's death for a whole month. The news travelled slowly from Wellington to Canterbury...

JOHN: When I have in some measure recovered from the shock, I will write you a longer letter.

MAN: Not a single portrait of William was ever made. Not a single photograph.

JANE: I met William several times, almost twelve years ago... At that picnic in Auchenflower. Him, and John.

MAN: The smell of grass, and happiness, and hope.

JANE: William was to be my only New Zealand family. Now there is only one Mr. Deans in that part of the world. And he needs me.

JOHN: *(keeps writing)* I think a change of scene and a sea voyage will do me good. I have secured services of a capital person to look after the estate and farms. You can expect me by August. I have booked the next available passage from Auckland...

MAN: And the cheapest one, too.

John leaves his desk and comes to the table with the globe. He gives it a spin. The sound of the sea surf.

JOHN: The sea is a hungry beast. First class or third class passengers are alike to it. It devours all without mercy.

He watches the globe spinning, while the Man takes the figure of John and holds it.

MAN: And what about trivial illnesses?

JOHN: I am 32, young and strong, and do not suffer from sea sickness. *(he coughs a little)*

MAN: I did not mean sea sickness.

JOHN: Oh yes, that accursed fever. I barely remember passing Gibraltar because of it. But I am quite recovered now! *(he coughs again)* I don't have time to be sick. What will my bride think of me?

MAN: What indeed?

He plants the figure of John next at the big dollhouse, placing it next to Jane's, and stops the globe.

The sound of the surf also stops.

John approaches Jane's chair. He stops.

Pause. They appraise each other from a little distance. Jane gets up.

JOHN: (*nervously, coming closer*) It is good to see you again, Miss McIlraith... Jane.

She offers her hand and he shakes it, awkwardly. They intently look into each other's faces as if trying to recognise each other again, and yet attempting to hide it.

JANE: Mr Deans. John.

Their handhold breaks, and John looks away. He clears his throat.

JANE: (*politely*) Welcome back. I hope you had a smooth passage.

JOHN: Oh yes, indeed. Thank you.

Another pause.

JOHN: It has been a while since our last meeting, hasn't it?

JANE: I am not sure I want to count the years...

JOHN: (*half joking but vulnerable*) I hope now that you see me again, you will not change your mind. You must have had plenty of other offers.

JANE: (*smiles*) I will not change my mind. You look a little different but I still recognise you. As if time has been reversed, and I am a young girl again.

JOHN: Well, I must have aged... Farming. The sun, the wind. Then... William.

JANE: (*sadly*) William.

JONH: Such was God's will (*impulsively*) I am so glad to see you again, Jane! And (*politely*) you don't look a day older.

JANE: Don't be foolish. I am looking my age and I am not even pretty (*looks away*). But I am a good judge of cattle and horses.

JOHN: (*laughs*) I did not cross the oceans to marry the estate manager! (*After a beat*) I missed you. And the sound of your laughter.

JANE: I am very glad to see you, too! I really am. It was such a long journey...

John takes both her hands.

JOHN: Miss McIlraith, will you do me the honour...

JANE: Yes (*she laughs suddenly and happily, like a young girl*) Yes! Since we have so many guests coming to our wedding in two weeks time, I might as well say it.

John laughs too, then coughs.

JANE: That cold won't leave you be?

JOHN: It's nothing – almost gone! And I have no time for it, I have my own wedding to attend!

JANE: And a household to pack!

They both begin pacing excitedly, in different directions.

JOHN: (*talking faster and faster*) Must not forget furnishings, victuals, apparel and such – I'll leave it to you, Jane – materials (*he coughs*), tools, seedlings and tree cuttings, maybe a couple of good Scottish lads to work on the land – oh, and nails! Must not forget to pack the nails. A trifling matter but so important. I hope she reminds me after the wedding... Carpentry, glassware...

John finally stops, with his lips still moving as if trying to memorise what else to do and pack. He coughs a little from time to time. Jane stops next to him, while speaking in the same feverish manner.

A wedding hymn begins to play.

JANE: ... Glassware, carpentry, bolts of clothes, wallpaper, pins and needles, threads, lanterns, hats, shoes... Oh, John said to pack absolutely everything, even nails...

JOHN: Boxes, crates, barrels... nails! Jane, remind me...

They join their hands, facing the audience.

The Man stands next to them, like a priest.

MAN: We give thanks to God for the gift of marriage and the special gifts bride and bridegroom bring to each other.

JANE: Pots and pans, chests of tea, tree cuttings, flowers seedlings... especially roses. What kind? What kind?!

MAN: We ask for God's grace for them that their marriage be enriched.

JOHN: Maybe a tooth-spike harrow and a new grain drill...

MAN: Wilt thou, John Deans, have this woman, Jane McIlraith, to thy wedded wife, to love and cherish from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health?

JOHN: I will.

MAN: Wilt thou, Jane McIlraith, have this man, John Deans...

JANE: I will.

The church bells begin to ring gaily.

MAN: By the power vested in me...

JANE (*in urgent whisper*) John – did you remember to pack the nails?

They are looking at each other while the hymn and the bells sounds first swell, then fade out.

The light is still on Jane and John, standing together. Jane speaks to the audience.

JANE: I am so glad to be busy. Packing my life into crates and boxes, receiving felicitations and saying goodbyes... and there are so many goodbyes. Will I truly never see these faces again? The safe, the familiar... the lovely?

MAN (*from the shadow*): You know the answer.

JANE: “Never” is too big for me... It feels like my wake rather than wedding. When I am gone from home, will it be the same without me? When I am gone forever? “Forever” is too big for me too... The sun will rise here – will it be the same sun setting in that far-away impossible land I am going to? I have to cross the oceans...

As she speaks, the light focuses on her only. John leaves her side.

JANE: I have heard that the stars in the sky are different there. As if we are no longer on God’s earth. Maybe I am leaving God’s earth as I am leaving home... But surely, not with all these crates and boxes! What a silly creature I am. And I am sure I am forgetting something...

The ship bell rings.

MAN (*from the shadow*): Mrs. Deans.

Jane does not react.

MAN: Mrs. John Deans!

JANE: (*realises*) Ah!

MAN: Are you ready?

JANE: Yes... And fare thee well.

She comes to the globe and gives it a strong spin.

The sound of the sea surf.

Jane picks up both hers and John’s figures from the table and holds them tightly in one hand, together. Then, as if the spinning globe makes her dizzy, she shields her face with her other hand.

John crosses over and gently embraces her. Jane impulsively responds, clutching to him as her only mean of physical support. Gently, John leads her to the chair by the writing desk.

JANE: *(sitting down)* I told you I was a terrible sailor.

John moves the winged chair next to the writing desk.

JOHN: We are landing in Lyttleton tomorrow and by God's grace, it will be over soon *(he coughs a little)*.

JANE: The stars *are* different here.

JOHN: Such was God's design.

JANE: Then it must be right... I wish it was God's design to make me better suited for sea faring. *(she holds her hand at her mouth)* I am so weak and confused... All those exotic countries I never got to see because of my accursed sickness. Those palm trees in the distance – was it a dream or a nightmare? I would never dare to undertake the return journey.

JOHN: You will not have to; this land is beautiful.

JANE: *(giggles suddenly)* But we forgot the nails...

JOHN: *(smiles)* It was God's will, Mrs. Deans!

JANE: Do you still think I will do for New Zealand – this poor sick creature that is your wife?

JOHN: *(seriously)* Admirably. And I adore your giggle.

She laughs. He looks at her fondly. They hold this pose for a beat, while the Man picks up the two figures and places them next to the cottage.

The ship bell rings again. The sound of the surf fades.

MAN *(smiling mockingly)*: Welcome home, lovebirds.

John looks up. At this moment he and Jane look like a traditional Victorian couple on a photo: the wife is sitting with her hands folded on her lap, her husband is standing next to her with his hand on her shoulder.

JANE *(voice ringing with tension and excitement)*: Home!

She gets up. Then suddenly stops as if seeing something unexpected.

JANE: But...

JOHN: Beautiful, isn't it?

JANE (*to John, with forced certainty*): It... is. Yes, of course it is! A bit wild but... yes, beautiful.

JOHN: You are too weak to cross the hills tonight. I'll meet you at the cottage later! (*he coughs*).

John steps away from Jane's side. The light focuses on Jane.

MAN (*from the shadow*): One vast open plain, without a road or fence or house or garden or tree.

JANE: I crossed the oceans to get here.

MAN: Tussock grass and ferns on dry ground, and flax in the boggy places. Many, many boggy places.

JANE: I will learn to love it. I just need to get home first (*she crosses her hand over her face*). Home.

The sound of the wind.

JANE: This fierce hot wind is called the Nor'-west, they tell me. It gives the sky such an ominous dark colour... And it makes one feel so oppressed. Unwelcomed. (*she laughs uncertainly*) But it is just an idle fancy! I am sure the Nor'-west has its purpose.

MAN (*cue*): John says...

JANE: John says everything is God's will. (*moves downstage, to the audience*) And so I am mounted on a white horse with one eye to travel over a large flax swamp, so soft and boggy that in many places it would not carry the weight of a sheep or cow.

The sound of horse's hooves moving slowly.

MAN: And then you saw Christchurch.

JANE: We passed about half a dozen houses... Among the high tussock grass and swamps. I *will* learn to love this place. I will do for New Zealand. And... for John.

The sound of the horse's hooves stops. The creaking of a large gate opening.

MAN: Mrs. Deans, this is home.

JANE: It looks rather... dark. (*she shivers*) I am sure the new wallpaper and curtains will entirely transform it. I only wish...

MAN: What?

JANE: I wish... I wasn't so sick! And...

MAN: And...?

John re-enters and comes up to Jane.

JOHN: It's a bit dark but I am sure the new furnishings will make it much brighter. Do you like it here? *(he coughs a bit)*

JANE: Of course!

JOHN: I have a gift for you. A cow. I named her Jeanie. After you.

MAN *(sneering)*: How romantic.

JANE: How kind! I crave fresh milk so badly.

JOHN: And there is cheese! The visitors brought it as your welcome gift. *(cheerfully)* I forgot to mention – William and I used to keep open house, and the folk from around here often come to visit. You do not have to worry – they are happy to sleep on the floor and sometimes pitch a camp on the grounds *(proudly)* Sometimes as many as 150 men a day! *(he coughs)*

Jane's hand flies to her mouth.

JOHN: My dear, are you not feeling better yet?

JANE: 150 men a day... On the floor... Heave... swell... surge... a cow called Jeanie... wallpaper...

JOHN: My dear?

Beat.

MAN: Tell him.

Beat.

JANE: A glass of milk will set me right.

MAN: Tell him.

JANE: The visitors... If I was strong and well, I would be proud and happy to receive them. But I am weak, and they are all strangers... And...

MAN: Tell him!!

JANE: *(almost in a whisper)* And I am with child.

JOHN: Oh!

JANE: Oh?

JOHN: We must celebrate. A big party! And I will get you a second cow!

JANE: I'd rather...

But John is striding off stage, coughing as he exits.

MAN: He won't turn the visitors away.

JANE: He is a hospitable man! And they have traditions. And who am I to...

MAN: You are his wife.

JANE: Exactly, and I will prove myself worthy!... Tomorrow, perhaps. Or in a week. Or two.

MAN: (*hinting*) There is nice shady spot by the river.

JANE: I'll hide there 'til they're gone and then venture out...

MAN: Venture out as far as the garden. Your Scottish world was small, you crossed the oceans, and how big is your New Zealand world now?

JANE: The cottage and the gardens, and the shady spot by the river.

MAN: Can't you walk around as you used to? Walk all over hills and dales like you did back at home? Your *real* home?

JANE: The voyage deprived me of strength. I am trapped in this cottage. And the baby is growing inside me, making me so weary and slow.

MAN: But are you the only one deprived of strength?

John crosses the stage, at a much slower pace than before, coughing heavily.

JANE: (*to herself, watching John*) Crossed the oceans... surge and sway... (*to the Man, passionately*) It is not fair!

MAN: (*sweetly*) But isn't everything God's will?

JANE: This can't be God's will!

MAN: So you know then? When did you realise?

Beat.

JANE: (*quietly, the fire gone out of her*) We had only been a fortnight here when one morning, looking out of the window, I caught a glance of him standing there... in

pain. And then I knew he could never recover. The cold he caught on his way to Scotland... But I didn't want to believe.

MAN: You were the one who insisted on his trip to Scotland. You refused to travel alone. Remember? So why blame God?

JANE (*struck with horror and guilt*): Everything is God's will...

John comes back. His movements are unsteady, and Jane helps him to sit into the winged chair.

JOHN: (*with difficulty, breathing heavily. He speaks as if dictating a letter*) Dear James, horses are greatly in demand this season...

MAN: What did the doctor say?

JOHN (*continuing*): Good draught horses have brought 70 and 80 pounds and in a few instances even 100 pounds...

JANE: Consumption. He is young, why him?

JOHN: (*to Jane*) Everything is God's will, my love.

JANE: The doctor said that riding would do you good. Some exercise and fresh air...

JOHN: Jane, we must talk...

JANE: And blackcurrant jam. The doctor said it would help. I made a large potful. I will make another one tomorrow. I borrowed a large enamelled pot from Mrs. Cass...

JOHN: Jane, my dear, we should...

JANE: The building of the new house is going well. I can't wait till we move out of this cottage. Our family needs a bigger place, with many bedrooms. Who knows how many children...

JOHN: Jane, please listen...

JANE: Let's join the merrymakers at the harvest! It has been so good this year, everyone is very happy. The new mill... and cattle... New arrivals... There will be dancing and singing till daylight! You like the visitors, and besides...

JOHN: I am dying, Jane.

Beat.

JANE (*forcing herself not to hear*): Yesterday the large lamp fell off the table straight into the jam pot, mixing the jam with the whale oil...

Longer pause.

JANE: I know.

The light focuses on Jane.

JANE (*forcefully*) Why? Why?!

MAN (*from the shadow*): It is God's will.

JANE: No!!

She rushes to the side table and with one movement swipes everything onto the floor – the globe, the dollhouses, the figures.

Pause.

JANE: In August, I gave birth to my son. I called him John... John Deans.

MAN: In defiance?

JANE (*almost savagely*) It was *my* will! I watched as John struggled to hold the baby at the christening...

MAN: While everyone else pretended not to notice?

JANE: I was determined to remain cheerful and calm. What else could I do?

She turns away.

JOHN: (*dictating*) "The barley is all sold and delivered, the oats are reduced to three stacks of about 120 bushels each. Newly landed riding horses..." (*coughs, can't talk any longer*)

JANE: Every day he seemed weaker, yet he would not take any help. I dreaded to see him walk across the room...

MAN: Your strong and solemn young man. The smell of grass at the picnic in Auchenflower. Will *he* do for New Zealand now?

JANE (*with steel in her voice*): It. Is. God's. WILL!

JOHN: (*dictating, with difficulty*) May 10th, 1854. Dear Father. I have very little news to write about...

JANE: Last night I was so exhausted that I lay down on the floor next to his bed in the sitting room.

MAN: But he did not like that.

JANE: No, he did not. So I lay down by his side. Terribly improper but I didn't care. It was... as if time had been reversed again. We dreamt of that picnic years ago. Of tall grasses, and happiness, and hope.

As she speaks, she comes to John's chair and puts her hand on his shoulder. He covers her hand with his, creating an inversion of the traditional Victorian photo pose.

JOHN: I missed you so much! I crossed the oceans.

JANE: And you lied to me, you said I didn't look a day older!

JOHN: I adore your giggle.

JANE: *(smiling)* And then we forgot the nails.

JOHN: I was so... happy.

Jane smiles, dreamily, as if from far away.

They stay still for a beat.

The Man comes close to them.

MAN: It's time.

JOHN: I was so...

The Man slowly raises his hand and touches John by the other shoulder. John looks up, rises from the chair and exits the stage.

Jane remains where she was, staring in front of her, expressionless.

MAN: The funeral ceremony was very well attended. Quite an event. So many people, so many condolences. Surely you couldn't complain?

JANE: *(as if from far away)* It had been raining. The smell of grass...

MAN: Twelve years of waiting. You crossed the oceans. And then a simple farm dray took his body away.

JANE: *(still lost in her world)* The smell of grass, and...

MAN: ...happiness and hope?!

JANE: Time can't be reversed.

MAN: And so you became the heroine of your story? You tested your strength and flew free?

Beat. Jane doesn't answer.

MAN: (*taking out a letter from his pocket; mocking Jane's voice*): "May you never know what it is to be left alone, a stranger in a strange land among strangers, let them be ever so kind". This is very touching. Tell us more.

Jane gives a brief tight smile, shaking her head slightly. She doesn't speak.

MAN: (*with sudden frustration*) Why DON'T you complain?!

JANE: That winter day. John's funeral. It smelt of rain and wet decaying leaves. Maybe it was then that I became a ghost... But no, I am talking nonsense. I had John's estate to manage. Ghosts don't manage estates.

Jane slowly takes the candle from the desk, readjusts it, then sits at John's writing desk, staring in front of her, unseeingly. The Man is watching her.

MAN: (*resignedly*) Very well. As you wish. (*seeing that Jane is not moving, gives a cue*) House... Crops...

JANE : Crops... Very satisfactory cattle. Excellent price per head...

She begins to write.

JANE: Land is increasing in value very fast here... The borders of the estate... the produce of 100 acres...

She keeps muttering as she writes at John's desk.

The Man puts on the bow tie and becomes the Guide.

GUIDE: Jane Deans outlived her husband by 50 years. She became his estate manager. Then a grandmother. Then a great-grandmother... She outlived her son, many of her grandchildren, and many others who were dear to her heart. She never travelled back to Scotland and never saw her Scottish friends and relatives again. Her spirit is rumoured to have haunted this house ever since her death in 1911.

Jane gets up and faces the audience. The light focuses on her.

JANE: I always wanted to belong. To prove that I would do for New Zealand. To prove that I would do for John. I nurtured my sense of belonging like one of the Deans' oak trees. I had picnics with my family by the stream... In the grass of the Deans' estate which smelt of past happiness. Am I a ghost? I don't know. I am forever divided between now and then, between home and home, between the bright green of the Canterbury bush and the bright blue of the Scottish sky. It must be God's will.

MAN: Or yours...?

JANE: Or mine.

The lights fade.

THE END

CRITICAL COMPONENT: WHOSE STORIES WE TELL

Research Question: What factors need to be taken into consideration in the creation of a theatrical play text based on a historical figure?

Background: Why Jane?

In 2002, three days after my arrival in the city of Christchurch, New Zealand, I entered the grounds of Riccarton House. A new immigrant fresh from the plane that brought me from my native Ukraine, I barely spoke English and knew no one in my new country. And the first friend I made was Jane Deans.

I entered a tiny cottage next to the grand Deans House, and glanced at a modest museum display. On the wall, there was an enlarged copy of an old letter written in a neat and firm hand: “May you never know what it is to be left alone, a stranger in a strange land among strangers, let them be ever so kind”. Next to the writing was a sketch of a woman’s hand resting upon a window curtain, as if unwilling to draw it away and see the world outside. Jane Deans knew all about the trauma of immigration.

Many years later, in my capacity as a theatre-maker, I was in charge of producing an immersive themed ghost walk through Riccarton House – which by 2016 had become a museum of the Deans family. The house was rumoured to be haunted by Jane Deans’ spirit – a rumour enthusiastically supported by the museum staff – and I jumped at the opportunity to create a new theatre show which had nothing to do with spiritualism and everything to do with travelling back in time to tell a tale that was so personally relevant to me.

In the course of my research in developing the tour’s concept and script, I frequently visited Jane’s bedroom, furnished as it was during her life. The space was minimalistic but equipped with all of the modern conveniences of the time, achieving as much privacy in a large household as possible. The air of emotional restraint was, perhaps, unsurprising in a Victorian widow such as Jane Deans, who was also represented as a staunch Scottish Presbyterian. The room was austere, without any sign of overflowing Victorian frills and cute clutter. Looking at it, I tried to imagine the woman who wrote those words about isolation and loneliness that resonated so strongly with me upon my own arrival in New Zealand. I wanted to see the *real* Jane Deans whose presence could still be felt in this uncommunicative personal space.

During our theatrical Riccarton House tours, whilst the audience walked in the twilight around the grounds, I stayed in the big dark house, wearing a Victorian mourning dress, with only a candle for company. My part in the show was to play Jane Deans' ghost which was, in a strange way, very fitting. Members of cast and crew kept asking me – half-jokingly and half-serious – whether I had seen Jane's ghost, and whether I was afraid of it. Every time I answered "No", with perhaps a little regret. The truth is: I did want to talk to that woman. She fascinated and puzzled me.

In this context, it is not surprising that I have chosen to write a play based on her life story as the creative component of my Master's thesis in Creative Writing. "I was coming to a land where no one would know me" – wrote the woman whose ancestors spent 400 years farming Scotland's soil. The sentiment was very familiar. But while I knew my own reasons for leaving my country forever, Jane's motivation remained a mystery: was it the selflessness of love? Despair? Sense of duty? Sense of adventure? The answer, however, could not be easily found. My quest for finding the "real Jane" as well as "my Jane" became a complex balancing act between documented research, personal experience and creating fictional narrative suitable for the stage. The set of problems I encountered became the basis for the critical component of my thesis.

This essay analyses the process of translating the documented materials into a theatrical play and the factors that influence the creation of a fictional text based on a historical figure. It discusses the difficulties associated with creating a fictional narrative while using primary documents such as letters and diaries as well as secondary sources – biographies, historical non-fiction, museum tours notes, and other relevant pieces.

The critical component of the thesis consists of three chapters. The first chapter, "In Search of Jane", focuses on the background historical research and its treatment by a playwright. The chapter provides an outline of my own research of the documented sources on which the play *Dear Jane* is partly based. As mentioned above, the sources include primary documents such as Jane Deans' memoirs *Letters to my Grandchildren* and collected letters of John and William Deans written to a variety of correspondents from 1848 to 1854, and other documents later used in *The Deans Family: 1840 – 1990*, *Sequential Commemorative Booklet* publication.

The chapter also discusses the public representation of Jane Deans in a number of biographies and historical non-fiction written throughout the 20th century. It draws on the secondary critical sources that analyse the function of biographies and auto-biographies in

the Victorian society and culture. From this perspective, *Letters to my Grandchildren* is viewed as an example of a typical Victorian biography/memoir - a work that is aimed at forming/constructing a Victorian role model. This, in turn, leads to a brief discussion of the historical facts that are often manipulated in biographies and memoirs to suit a particular social or political agenda, which firmly situates *Letters to my Grandchildren* as an example of this.

The second chapter “Re-Imagining Jane” is focused on my reflection of the creative processes involved in the writing of the play, including my own manipulation of the primary documents, questioning of the facts and filling the gaps. It discusses the final quest for creating *my* Jane and breaking free from the bonds of everything previously written about and by her. The chapter discusses practical problems faced while structuring the play and finding the right style, and the problem of liberating creative expression through departure from documented sources.

The third chapter, “Time-travelling: There and back again”, looks at the techniques and devices used by other playwrights when working with documented sources. These techniques include retrospection, creation of historically accurate settings, and the introduction of time-travelling characters that connect “then” with “now”. While writing the first draft of *Dear Jane*, I found that I was instinctively using the techniques and devices previously utilised in such diverse plays as *Daughters of Heaven* by Michaelanne Forster, *Eugenia* by Lorae Parry, *Amadeus* by Peter Shaffer, and many others.

And yet, there are times when some of these devices would not be applicable. When it comes to the depiction of the events in the immediate past, with many contemporaries and witnesses potentially available for commentary, a playwright may modify this approach. The chapter “Time-travelling: There and back again” primarily discusses two contrasting plays: the acclaimed *Amadeus* by the American playwright Peter Shaffer and *Bright Star* by the New Zealander Stuart Hoar. Both plays are based on documented sources, and the chapter investigates the different set of problems faced by playwrights when dealing with the distant past (the 18th century Vienna) and very recent past (1974, the United States), and the different approaches used to create an intense self-contained fictional narrative.

Throughout the discussion, the essay will draw on relevant plays by both New Zealand and international authors that feature historical figures, investigating the complex relationship between art, creative writing and history. In his foreword to *Daughters of*

Heaven by Michaelanne Forster, Elric Hooper mentions Michelangelo's (alleged) response to the accusation that his statue of Lorenzo de Medici bears very little resemblance to the real man: "in a hundred years no one would know that", responded Michelangelo, "but everyone would be convinced that this marble image was how such a noble person ought to have looked". "Such is the aspiration, arrogance and sometimes the magical metamorphosis of art" (Hooper, 1992, p. 9).

Chapter 1: In Search of Jane

Writing about a historical figure is a perilous task, and one must proceed with caution, gathering as much factual information as possible. The obvious first step in my quest was to discover all I could about my subject – Jane Deans, nee McIlraith – which included any documents written by her as well as John Deans, and any person who knew either of them. My initial goal was to carefully investigate every scrap of information related to Jane Deans’ personality, no matter whether accurately or inaccurately represented. It would then be up to me to decide how much of this information I would use in creating my own narrative for the stage.

It is not uncommon for playwrights to merge several historical figures into one, telling a story of a particular type of character in a particular social/cultural situation. Lorae Parry, for example, in her play *Eugenia* (1996) combines the stories of several women who chose to live as men in the early 20th century. The main theme of the play is gender diversity and discrimination, and though it is narrated as a story of one particular Italian immigrant, the playwright makes the following statement: “This play does not purport to be a factual record of real events or real people. For purposes of dramatisation, characters have been created, names have been changed and incidents have been devised or altered” (Parry, 1996, p. 6).

Similarly, Michaelanne Forster in her *Daughters of Heaven* (1992) writes about the stifling atmosphere of 1950s Christchurch with its bigotry and hypocrisy. Her story, however, focuses on two very real historical figures: Pauline Parker and Juliet Hulme, and makes extensive use of factual sources. Forster directly quotes Pauline’s diary entries as they appear in court report (Forster, 1992, p. 14). According to Hooper, the playwright also interviewed the survivors of the tragedy – those who agreed to discuss the matter (Hooper, 1992, p. 8). The rest of the play is, however, structured and narrated in a style suitable for the stage, with one of the major supporting characters being entirely fictional.

As a playwright, I had to make a choice: if I wanted to tell a generalised story of a 19th century female European settler, I could use several historical accounts and merge them into, say, a Jane Smythe – thus letting go of Jane Deans, John Deans and the house in Riccarton. I also had an advantage of temporal distance between myself and any 19th century character I would choose; an advantage that Michaelanne Forster, whose play was

set in 1954, and especially Stuart Hoar who depicted the events of the 1970s, did not have. Exploiting the distance in time between my heroine and myself, I could potentially give Jane Deans any disguise I wanted. I could liberate myself from the restriction of factual documents in many ways. Yet, the pull of Jane's charisma and her story was too strong, and the decision was made: my main character's name was Jane Deans, and I started a thorough examination of her biography.

Historical biography is a highly ambivalent genre. "What are your historical facts; still more your biographical? Wilt thou know a Man, above all a Mankind, by stringing-together beadrolls of what thou namest Facts?"— exclaimed Thomas Carlyle in 1834 (as cited in Nadel, 1984, p. 5), and his opinion is still applicable to a number of biographies written well after his time. Biographical facts have always been widely manipulated to suit political, social and cultural agendas. And, as further discussion shows, autobiographies and memoirs are not exempt from this rule.

The starting point in my research was Jane Deans' memoirs *Letters to my Grandchildren* (1885-1887). As Johnson (2008) puts it, "memoir is by definition a vehicle for subjectivity" (p. 18), propelling readers towards a certain interpretation of the writer's life. Therefore, memoir as such does not (at all) necessarily count as factual evidence; it is merely the way one represents oneself to contemporaries or/and future generations. In many cases authors of memoirs and biographies are simply "making memory" (Freedman, 2008, p. 182) in a way which often equates to creative writing or wishful thinking.

Letters to my Grandchildren is not just a memoir; it is a Victorian memoir written in accordance with the tradition of its time. Law and Hughes in *Biographical Passages* (2000) state that Victorian memoirs were "in the business of writing exemplary lives" (p. 5), as if exclaiming with each paragraph "Look at what I have done! And what have you done?" (p. 1). A typical Victorian memoirist or biographer, through presenting their account of past events, is establishing and promoting a set of fundamental values relevant to their contemporary society. Written in a florid and sentimental style, *Letters to my Grandchildren* is, in fact, a carefully constructed memory that promotes Victorian values for future generations.

At the time of writing her memoirs, Jane was in her sixties – which means that the described events of her arrival in New Zealand and loss of her husband were already distanced from her by thirty or more years. It is also important to keep in mind that those were private memoirs for a very special audience – Jane's grandchildren. Read from this

viewpoint, it is unsurprising that Jane's account of the events often offers more questions than answers. She rarely alludes to her life in Scotland, focusing only on her life as an early settler, stressing the qualities particularly valued at the time: resilience, hard work, dedication to family and religious devotion. While her first unfavourable impressions of Canterbury and her dismay at her husband's illness and death sound very genuine, there are very few personal details that give clues about the history and nature of her relationship with John Deans. Readers learn a lot about the couple's (and early European settlers' in general) practical difficulties and inventiveness in overcoming them, about awe-inspiring transformation of the farm which was achieved by their hard work, and yet, a multitude of questions remain – what did these people feel? Were they ever overcome by homesickness and nostalgia? Did they have regrets? What was the real extent of their immigration trauma?

Such documents as *Letter to My Grandchildren* would rarely provide any answers. In the best tradition of Victorian memoirs, Jane Deans' well-written account often combines proper sentimentalism in regards to proper occasions (weddings, births) with extreme reticence as far as grief, doubts and trauma are concerned. Just like many other biographies and autobiographies, *Letter to My Grandchildren* – using Nadel's definition – is a meticulously constructed “historical product” rather than a record of actual events (Nadel, 1984, p. 1).

Letter to My Grandchildren created a persistent echo which dominated the accounts about the life of Jane Deans for over a hundred years. The most prominent example is *The Deans Family* (1989). Chapter 1 “The First Generation” describes the lives of Jane and John Deans and is “adapted from an essay written by Neil Deans while at school” (*The Deans Family*, 1989, p. 11). This can be viewed as a symbolic response from Jane's direct audience – her grandchildren – while still at school, with no significant life experience to process the memoirs of their ancestor at a mature level. And yet, this product was presented to the public and is easily accessible through local libraries. It continues the Victorian tradition of creating semi-fictional historical figures: thus, we behold the image of Jane, created by Jane's narrative, mirrored through the writing of her great-great-grandchild.

What does this particular Jane look like? She is a female born into a family of the well-respected Scottish laird and magistrate James McIlraith. Her family ancestry dates back to 1602, but, despite the apparent wealth of her father, Jane grew up in a situation of

strict economy. She was the eldest daughter amongst many children, and lost her mother at the age of nine. Soon afterwards she was sent to the Scottish Academy for Young Ladies in Edinburgh. Back home, her life was dedicated to nursing her ailing grandfather and mending her father's shirts (*The Deans Family*, 1989, p. 2). A staunch Scottish Presbyterian, she rejected physical comforts, which was "one of the most necessary requisites for a happy, contented colonial life" (Jane Deans, as cited in *The Deans Family*, 1989, p. 1).

Young Jane's social life was restricted to occasional summer picnics; it was at one of those picnics, at the age of 16, that she met John Deans. Two years later he emigrated to New Zealand, and thirteen years after their first meeting he finally come back to marry Jane. Jane's life and activities up to the point of her marriage at the age of 29 are covered in several short paragraphs in *The Deans Family* chronicle, while John's adventures in New Zealand occupy the rest of the chapter. Jane spent ten years "managing the dairy and meticulously handsewing her father's ruffled shirts 'with no more than two threads to a stitch'" (a mixed quotation from Neil Deans, Ruth Deans, and Jane Deans herself as presented in *The Deans Family*, p. 2).

Most of the other biographical sources remain equally reticent about Jane's life in Scotland. She does not refer to that chapter of her life in her own memoirs, focusing almost solely on her life and work in New Zealand before and after her husband's death. It appears as if Jane McIlraith simply did not exist until she became Mrs Deans, lost her husband after 18 months of marriage and started managing the Deans' properties. Readers can see a grieving wife who watches her husband's slow decline, then a widow who resolves to stay in New Zealand and manage the estate on behalf of her son, and then a successful business woman. But the real Jane remains a mystery; it is hard to imagine the young woman with the "rebellious nature" (as confessed by a much older Jane at the end of her memoirs) who lived many years in her native Scotland diligently sewing her father's shirts, like some sort of a princess imprisoned in a high tower. By the age of 29 Jane's personality must have been fully formed, and she must have had some life experience – this part of the story, however, is determinedly absent from most officially published sources about Jane Deans. The true portrait of the woman whose words struck such a deep emotional chord with me on my own arrival in New Zealand, remained vague and elusive.

It is particularly difficult to decipher a personality at a distance of more than 150 years. And any attempted help from a modern biographer can easily turn into a hindrance,

echoing the same Victorian narrative over and over again. The overwhelming majority of the published stories dedicated to “the first Deans of Riccarton” in a variety of historical non-fiction follow the same pattern. For example, in McBride’s *Riccarton: The Founding Borough*, the chapter about Jane Deans stresses Jane’s strong religious beliefs and her regard of the Bible “as her guide”, “a strong sense of duty”, and sound judgement of stock (McBride, 1994, p. 10). It is yet another echo of Jane’s self-representation from *Letters to my Grandchildren*. While this information *may* be somewhat accurate, it still presents a carefully constructed Victorian portrait of a virtuous Scottish woman.

This Victorian image of Jane Deans was questioned only very recently, when *Riccarton House and the Deans Family: History and Heritage* by Joanna Orwin was published in 2015. Orwin uses a different account – also written by Jane Deans but not addressed to her grandchildren, not officially published, and “refreshingly direct for the times” (Orwin, 2015, p. 82) – to dispel the myth about John’s and Jane’s perfect romantic love from the first sight. The romantic tale was created by no one else but Jane herself: “On the hill we formed our first impressions of each other ... I [thought] he looked like the head of a family, so staid and quiet” (Deans, 2016, p. 11). Orwin discloses that after the famous picnic at Auchenflower, John Deans, aged 19, indeed proposed to 16-year old Jane but was firmly rejected. Jane at the time was hoping to marry another young man (who, in her view, was much more handsome), and John, unruffled by her refusal, almost immediately proposed to Jane’s cousin Jeanie Gibson, “the beauty of four counties”. Jeanie also refused John’s proposal. In fact, this sequence of events makes him look more like Mr Collins from Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* than the virtuous romantic hero depicted by Jane in *Letter to My Grandchildren*.

According to Orwin, in her memoirs Jane heavily edited a number of events from her earlier life to create a narrative more “seemly for the youngsters she was now writing for” (p. 82) – that is, a narrative more suited for a traditional Victorian memoir. In her earlier (unpublished) account, Jane reported that she had been “both dismayed and horrified” when her father accepted John Deans as a cadet and lodger on their family farm. In fact, she questioned whether her father “was losing his senses” to act so indelicately. She ended up developing a sisterly feeling for John Deans, and though there was a certain degree of affection between them on his departure from New Zealand, Jane was not prepared to be engaged to him at the time.

Thus, as if by a sleight of hand, the prim Scottish lady vanishes, and the nature of her internal conflict becomes more apparent. As I was reading through various accounts of Jane's life, the same question returned to me over and over again: why would such a spirited young woman put her life on hold for ten long years? With no career prospects offered to females in her era, was she simply not lucky or pretty enough to secure a husband earlier in life?

In her book, Orwin continues to "untell" John and Jane's romantic narrative. She states that there is no evidence of any communication between Miss McIlraith and Mr Deans for the ensuing eight years. John finally started writing to Jane and her father in mid-1850s proposing a marriage – with no reply from either of his addressees for many months. When Jane finally responded, it was a very cool and careful "yes", with several conditions – one of them was for John to come and marry her in Scotland as she could not agree to marry someone she had not seen for such a long time. While very understandable, this response poses more questions for someone who tries to understand Jane's personality: why would a strong-willed young woman like herself agreed to a marriage she was not certain about? Was it a gesture of despair? A marriage of convenience?

Another fact carefully glossed-over in *Letters to my Grandchildren* as well as *Pioneers of Canterbury: Deans Letters* was a serious relationship crisis between William and John Deans after John's decision to marry Jane McIlraith. William, who never showed any interest in women, saw John's impending marriage as something akin to betrayal. He announced that in the event of John's marriage, he would depart from their shared Riccarton estate (founded by William). The relationship between the brothers was very tense at the time of William's sudden death on his way to Australia. John, who carefully avoided any mention of his argument with William in his letters to Scotland, was devastated. William was the closest and the most important person in his life, and they parted in anger. Orwin was the first biographer to openly mention the conflict, and to reveal an extra layer of emotional complexity of the relationship between the three major participants (up to 1851) of the Deans drama/romance.

John Deans' letters do not help unravel any human mysteries in this story. Very formal and non-sentimental, they are as emotionally uncommunicative as Jane's room in Riccarton museum. Cattle, horses, current market, resource management – one can only guess the extent of John's pain in the opening lines of his letter announcing his beloved brother's death to his father. The acute pain is almost palpable. The dead formality of the

opening lines “It is with a sad and heavy heart...” is copied directly from the letter that informed *him* of William’s death. The rest of the letter is very brief and conveys bare facts only. It concludes with: “when I have in some measure recovered from the shock I will write you a longer letter” (Deans, 1997, p. 213). John’s genuine loss for words speaks volumes. It took John a whole week before he could bring himself to write even this brief message (Orwin, 2015, p. 88).

There are no (published) letters addressed directly to Miss McIlraith, and yet again, we are kept guessing as to what truly happened between those two people 150 years ago. In my attempt to read between the lines, I collected many pages of direct quotes from Jane’s memoirs and John’s letters, and still my questions remained unanswered. Slowly, it dawned upon me that this lack of information was a joyous find – I had many gaps to fill. And for this, I could use my imagination and personal experience.

As I was going through the volumes of biographical and historical information about the first Canterbury settlers, I began to feel chained to the facts – as if I was forced to write another predictable piece of historical research rather than a stage play. It was a relief to discover so many missing answers and contradictions. At that point, I could finally stop being a biographer and become a playwright. I had gathered enough information – and learnt enough about the *lack* of information – so that the facts could give way to fiction.

Chapter 2. Re-Imagining Jane

With the memories of my Riccarton House tour production still fresh, the tone and style of the play were set almost instantly. The first scene of *Dear Jane* is set in Riccarton House of the present day, at the Deans museum. Jane's ghost, ever present but invisible, comments on the pompous opening lines of the Museum Guide, annoyed with his affected and sentimental speech. Jane's comments are full of irony, hinting at the gaps that exist in public knowledge about her life and the falsehood of her constructed historical image. So far, I had achieved the right level of theatricality and found *my* Jane's slightly sarcastic voice – but keeping up with this style had suddenly become very difficult.

I was too firmly attached to my historian's persona – and as I kept working on the first draft of the play, I felt that I was dealing with wax figures rather than complex characters, accompanied by the voice of an ancient Victorian biographer monotonously dictating dates, events, outcomes, and occasionally adding a platitude or two about the characters' personal feelings.

In the very first draft, immediately after the introductory scene with the Museum Guide, Jane started telling her story in a form of a very long monologue. This monologue, to all intents and purposes, completely destroyed the playfulness of the opening scene and dragged the play into the dimension of a boring biographical narrative. My thorough historical research was not serving my playwriting style well.

I badly needed a dramatic conflict; I urgently needed my theatrical Jane to argue with someone about her decisions and choices; to turn her monologue into a heated debate, to introduce the moments of silence and hesitation. Initially, I envisaged the play as a “two-handler”: one (female) actor playing Jane and another (male) actor playing the rest of the characters in the story, including John Deans. I believe such an idea was inspired by Jeffrey Hatcher's play *Turn of the Screw* (1997), which I greatly admire and acted in shortly before I started planning *Dear Jane*. However, during the early stages of creating *Dear Jane*, I realised that the figure of the Museum Guide had a great potential in its own right, and he must assert this right as an autonomous character. His shapeshifting and mocking nature would allow him to transform into a postman, a clergyman or any other character required by the narrative – but his essential function would be that of the Provocateur, the Devil, Truth and Time itself. He represents the doubts and fears of the characters, drives their inner conflicts and stirs them into action. Like a puppeteer, he

attempts to control his puppets – and observes their reactions. He bears the abstract name “The Man” in the script.

The Man as the Museum Guide also served as a reference to the phenomenon of the constructed memory, providing my Jane with an opportunity to fight against her image as an exemplary Victorian woman which was established by numerous biographies. It was my chance to use the echo chamber of *Letters to my Grandchildren* and manipulate it the way I, as a playwright, needed and wanted to.

In a way, the character of The Man was somewhat similar to the character of Bridget in Forster’s *Daughters of Heaven* – as Forster herself explained, she felt the need to use the figure of an Observer. This Observer (the servant girl Bridget) is in a unique position to eavesdrop, watch, and comment on the characters’ choices and behaviour. Her ultimate purpose is to represent public opinion as well as to drive the dramatic action: “The character of Bridget gradually grew stronger with each draft as her preoccupation with trying to find a meaning ... began to be mine as well” (Forster, 1992, p. 10). Similarly, The Man in *Dear Jane* also helps us to discover the truth about the characters throughout the whole story, and his part became increasingly more prominent as I kept working on the play.

Once The Man’s function and constant presence were established, the theatricality of the stage narrative began to flow more smoothly. The story was set in many locations: Jane’s father’s house and its surroundings, a Scottish church, a British sea port, onboard a large ship, a port of Lyttleton in New Zealand, the early Christchurch settlement, and, finally, Deans’ cottage and grounds, and the Deans museum. Such geographical and spatial diversity would have been a good choice for a film, but perhaps not a good choice for the stage – if one intends to depict all locations realistically.

The beauty and the magic of the theatre, however, is its ability to inspire the suspension of disbelief. In fact, sometimes stepping away from a realistic setting can instigate effective stage choices. Having started the story in a museum (easily represented by a winged chair, a “wax” figure and the Guide’s references to the imaginary exhibits), only a strictly minimalistic set became necessary. In *Dear Jane*, the stage space is clearly divided into three symbolical areas: a winged chair on the left represents Scotland and Jane’s father’s house; a desk and a simple wooden chair in the middle is Deans’ cottage in New Zealand, and a side table with a globe and dollhouses on the right is the space of The Man. He is the Puppeteer who possesses a supernatural power over the space/globe, the

dollhouses and the figures that represent the characters of the story. Depending on the chosen style of direction, these three separate spaces can be utilised differently in different productions. The use of the space, the set and the props are symbolic rather than realistic, and therefore provide a wider scope for creative theatrical choices.

Another device that helped to create evocative visuals and enhance theatrical narrative was the use of puppets – or, to be more precise, the tiny figures representing the three key characters of the story. Those included Jane herself, John Deans and his brother William (though he never actually appears on stage as a character). Confined to the side table, together with the globe and two dollhouses, the three figures are entirely at The Man’s mercy. This device works at dramatic as well as symbolic levels, highlighting the helplessness of the characters before the god-like, chaotic and malevolent power represented by the Man.

The seemingly absolute power of The Man over the characters and his “puppet-play” keeps driving the tension to the critical point until Jane, as well as the audience, can stand it no longer. When Jane is struggling to face John’s terminal illness and imminent death, The Man, mockingly echoing John’s earlier words, comments from the shadows, “It is God’s will”. Instead of answering him, Jane rushes to the side table (The Man’s realm) and with one movement swipes everything onto the floor – the globe, the dollhouses, the tiny figures. She defies the rules of the game. She can’t reverse time and she can’t save John but she can still rebel against the power of The Man – or fate.

It was crucial to find a fitting way for the characters to verbally express themselves. I found a way to use the formal style and brief quotations from John Deans’ letters as a contrast to his conversations with The Man – showing John’s doubts, fears, procrastination and indecisiveness. The Man’s constant attacks and judgement of John’s actions (or inaction) finally turns John Deans into a three-dimensional character, breaking away from his image as a perfect early settler: formal, cold and duty-driven. Ironically, this perfect Victorian image fitted the wax figure of John Deans displayed at Riccarton museum: idealised but lifeless.

The action in *Dear Jane* brought out a different version of John Deans, and his weaknesses somehow made him more likeable. It took a significant effort to discover John Deans’ unique voice in the play and to find a way to show his vulnerable and insecure side through his conversations with The Man and Jane (“It is God’s will”) – both through his letters to her, and in person. His letters to Jane gave the play its current title.

While initially hindering my progress of the narrative development, my detailed historical research into the life of the early settlers became useful in creating the atmosphere of the key scene of the play – the wedding. The worries and anxieties associated with a multitude of practical considerations in packing and transporting a 19th century household and farming equipment added a humorous touch to an ostensibly grand occasion. It allowed me to recreate some of the idiosyncratic details of the time – and was also something that a present day audience could easily relate to. The mundane worries, small failures and frustrations made the Deans couple particularly endearing and alive. In her memoirs, Jane repeatedly mentioned how hard it was to obtain everyday items in the colonies. The (real life) museum guide in Riccarton House stressed that even such a simple building necessity as nails had to be shipped to Canterbury from Wellington, so the Deans were determined to bring their supplies with them from Scotland. However, in the rush of packing the nails were overlooked – and this small failure helped to make the setting and the characters more rich and believable.

One of the most persistent challenges was finding and keeping the voice of *my* Jane consistent with her first appearance in the introductory scene in the museum. Intuitively, I felt that the slightly sarcastic, clipped, matter-of-fact tone was just right for my protagonist. And yet, the many pages of direct quotes from *Letters to my Grandchildren* also seemed to be very important, waiting to be included in the dialogue. I was trying to find a compromise between those two Janes of my narrative, but the wordy and sentimental Jane from the Victorian memoir simply didn't match the clipped decisive tone of the Jane from the opening scene – and that Jane, I felt, was the *right* one. Throughout many drafts of the play, the long passages from Jane's memoirs were either drastically reduced or entirely deleted. Even the lines that were particularly dear to me, the ones that incited my deep interest in Jane when I first saw them in the Deans cottage back in 2002, eventually had to go. The sacrifice was necessary in order to make *my* Jane completely consistent with *my* narrative.

Finding the right final scene for the play was another difficult task. In the end, I was in for a surprise when, during her final dialogue with The Man, Jane refused to follow my initial plan of lamenting the years wasted in her prolonged wait for John. And when, after John's funeral, The Man was gloating over his (perceived) victory, urging and provoking Jane to break into a self-pitying speech, she refused. Continuing to show the same streak of rebellion which was passionately expressed in a scene where she physically

smashed the tiny puppet kingdom of The Man, and contradicting the passage from *Letters to my Grandchildren*, Jane remained silent, quietly taking over John's writing desk. She refused to discuss the past, saying to The Man who, it seems, controlled Time itself, "Time can't be reversed", and the Man was forced to accept her decision. He did not exactly bow to her will – he bows to nothing and no one – but he reluctantly admitted that Jane's will is at least as strong as his, and cannot be manipulated. This is highlighted by the last lines of the play: as Jane reflects that her powerful instinct for survival must be "God's will" – echoing John's words - The Man queries "Or yours?" and Jane agrees with him, perhaps for the first time: "Or mine".

We leave Jane Deans in a space of semi-reality: she confesses that she is a creature forever torn between Scotland and New Zealand, past and present, but possessing enough free will not to be manipulated by anyone or anything, be it time, public opinion, or her constructed "museum" image. Displaced and grieving, she becomes a creator of her own world – the world of the Deans' oak trees, the Deans' estate, and the Deans' family picnics that smell of grass and past happiness.

Chapter 3. Time-travelling: There and back again

Historical events and figures inspired countless works of fiction, including stage plays and films. The distance in time and the gaps in documented sources often provide an excellent opportunity for adding extra layers of theatricality and complexity to a story. Playwrights and scriptwriters frequently use retrospection for giving the audience a sense of perspective, and separating “then” from “now”. Since many audience members will be aware of “how it ends” (history is notorious for being predictable in that matter), the main focus shifts to how it *happened* rather than how it *ended*.

While working on the first drafts of *Dear Jane*, I instinctively followed the trend which I later discovered in such diverse plays as *Daughters of Heaven* by Michaelanne Forster, *Eugenia* by Lorae Parry, *Amadeus* by Peter Shaffer, and many others. I actively used retrospection and shifts between “then” and “now”, morphing past into present and back again. The museum setting of the Deans’ house has always fascinated me, and I utilised it in the opening scene and throughout the play. Two characters out of three – The Man and Jane – can be described as time-travellers: Jane, as a ghost, relives the memories, and The Man, as her Guide, attempts to manipulate them. Apart from adding a layer of theatricality to the story, this approach serves to provide varied viewpoints, looking at the events from different angles and adding yet another layer of complexity to the stage narrative.

As I was analysing other relevant plays, I realised that playwrights often use the opening scene to introduce the element of time travel – or, in other words, the “once upon a time” framing of the story. *Daughters of Heaven* opens with Pauline’s and Juliet’s diary entries written from prison, with Pauline praying for forgiveness: “Oh God, I am heartily sorry...” and Juliet still strong in her defiance: “I want you to remember Paradise. It was ours once (...) I will never regret” (Forster, 1992, p. 17). This short scene is followed by Bridget the Observer’s direct speech to the audience, briefly outlining the main event, the murder of Pauline’s mother:

The ‘domestic tragedy’ was how Mrs Hulme referred to it after. That and ‘Juliet’s illness’ as if wickedness was something you caught from breathing bad air. But I didn’t blame her. Not much. In the beginning we were pals (Forster, 1992, p. 17).

After these points of view – Pauline’s, Juliet’s, Bridget’s and even Mrs Hulme’s – are established, the events of the past, for the purpose of the story, become “now”. The opening scenes invite the audience to time travel and conduct their own “crime investigation”, so to speak. It also establishes the rhythm of the play: the flashbacks to the events from a seemingly normal life, the girls’ relationship with each other and their families, and the dry tone of the court proceedings. As 15-year old Juliet makes Pauline swear to follow her “to Hell and back if I command it”, and Pauline answers “Where you go, I go also” (Forster, 1992, p. 46), the audience’s sympathy, directed and manipulated by the playwright, sways to the side of the murderers. By travelling seamlessly between past and present, fictional dialogues and documented court proceedings, Forster achieves a complex multi-layered stage narrative that is both emotional and thoughtful.

In *Eugenia*, the first scene is set as a tarantella dance with all six actors dressed in costumes from 1916. As they sing *Bella Ciao*, an Italian folk song, Eugenia discards her female outfit, revealing man’s clothing underneath. While the references to the time period and the cultural background of the protagonist are very clear, this scene is timeless and universal. The characters discuss Eugenia in past tense, reflecting that “He was bella”, “He knew what it was like to be a woman”, “He was a very confused young woman”, “She was the most romantic man I ever knew” (Parry, 1996, p. 11). After that first scene, the action keeps switching between 1916 and the present day using the same six actors who portray fourteen different characters. As with *Daughters of Heaven*, the narrative is akin to a crime investigation – with a very wide definition of what a “crime” entails. The main focus of the investigation, however, is not whether Eugenia is guilty of murdering her wife Violet, but whether Eugenia’s choice to lead a man’s life is a crime. Gradually the past begins to sip into the present, showing that the painful problems of gender diversity and acceptance are still as acute as hundred years ago. Time-travelling is a device used to stress the timeless relevance of the issue – as well as to provide a wider scope for the theatricality of the play. The fact that *Eugenia* is merely inspired by the lives of several women but not based on any documented biography as such gives the playwright more creative freedom.

Creative freedom of plot, however, can be achieved even within the limitations and constraints of a well-researched factual biography. Peter Shaffer’s *Amadeus* is a prominent example of this. Shaffer begins the play in a visually striking, almost expressionist style, utilising time-travelling as a theatrical device. The first stage direction is “Darkness. Savage whispers fill the theatre”. There are only two words that are heard distinctly,

overlapping, and repeating over and over again: the loud “Salieri!” and, “barely distinguishable”, “Assassin!”. A crowd of actors dressed in period costumes surround a lonely old man in a wheelchair, with his back to the audience – this is the silent Salieri (Shaffer, 1981, p. 13). As the lights brighten, the immobile figure is approached by two characters called “Venticelli” (the word which originates from Italian operatic terminology). They are “purveyors of fact, rumour and gossip throughout the play” who speak “with the urgency of men who have ever been first with the news” (Shaffer, 1981, p. 13).

The author is clearly establishing his figures of Observers, so frequently used in plays based on documented sources. In this case, however, they are not eye-witnesses but the bearers of scandalous and (probably) malicious gossip. In a very intense, fast paced overture-like scene, the two Venticelli keep demanding the answers: “Why on earth would he do it?”, “Did he do it after all?!” (Shaffer, 1981, p. 17). The tension culminates with Salieri swivelling his chair to the audience and staring directly at them, squinting to see through the bright stage lights: “Ghosts of the Future! Be visible. I beg you. Be visible. Come to this dusty old room – this time, the smallest hours of dark November, 1823 – and be my Confessors!”. As the old Salieri “invokes” Ghosts of the Future, the house lights go up and the audience becomes clearly visible. The illusion of the fourth wall is broken, and Salieri triumphantly exclaims “There. It worked. I can see you!” (Shaffer, 1981, p. 19).

As was demonstrated throughout many successful productions of *Amadeus*, this device never fails to work, delighting and surprising the audience members with the effective theatrical time-travelling trick: the character on stage departs from the distant century and connects with the “now”. From this point on, the audience serves as a reference point for all Salieri’s confessions and explanations. During the opening scenes, Salieri does not only travel to the present day but takes the audience back to the days of his youth and tells the story of his musical career, existing simultaneously in the future and in the past. At the end of his passionate speech he mockingly announces: “And now – Gracious Ladies! Obliging Gentlemen! I present to you – for one performance only – my last composition, entitled *The Death of Mozart* or *Did I Do It?...*” (Shaffer, 1981, p. 21).

Yet again, we are faced with a criminal investigation in which the audience is invited to participate. The narrative is deliberately set up as a detective story – and sarcastically presented by the main suspect, Salieri. The opening scenes firmly establish

that the substance of the accusation is gossip: the gossip spread by the crowd, by Salieri's peers, and the strange behaviour of Salieri himself.

Shaffer is not innovative in choosing his subject matter. It was Alexander Pushkin, a 19th century Russian poet and writer, who first cast Salieri as a murderer in the short play *Mozart and Salieri* (1830) as part of his famous dramatic cycle *The Little Tragedies*. The drama was published only 7 years after Salieri's death, and 40 years after Mozart's death – relatively soon after the depicted events. In the play, Salieri poisons Mozart on stage, trying to resolve the agonising psychological and philosophical conflict that is deeply rooted in his jealousy and his conviction that through murdering Mozart, he avenges all hard-working musicians truly dedicated to their art. In Pushkin's play, Salieri is protecting the world against the creative chaos represented by Mozart in a bid to save the order and the justice of the Universe. Pushkin's made no pretence about portraying actual events; the story here is serving as a poetic allegory.

The bitter rivalry between the two 18th century Vienna-based composers was only alleged, and, in fact, may have never existed. Nevertheless, the rumours flourished, and Pushkin's drama (followed by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's opera on the same subject) did little to dispel the gossip (Burton-Hill, 2015). In *Amadeus*, Shaffer offers his interpretation of what many historians labelled as the slanderous rumour against Salieri, a well-respected Viennese composer of Italian origin (von Tunzelmann, 2009).

The purpose of fiction, however, is not to create a historically true account of past events. Shaffer's interpretation of the slanderous rumours went "well beyond a simple dramatisation of the juicy gossip" (Gianakaris, 1992, pp. 107-108). The playwright conducted a substantial historical research and used the knowledge of the period setting to manipulate the factual events from Mozart's and Salieri's lives. It resulted in an engaging, meaningful and, from a historical perspective, controversial narrative. Shaffer's depiction of Mozart caused a major stir among both historians and musicologists, though, according to Gianakaris, the portrait of Mozart is based on plentiful factual biographical material (Gianakaris, 1992, p. 108). "I was struck by the contrast between the sublimity of his music and the vulgar buffoonery of his letters" – confessed the playwright (Shaffer, as cited in Burton-Hill, 2015). *Amadeus* shatters the carefully constructed idealised image of Mozart, showing instead an arrogant, immature and socially inadequate person who expresses his romantic endearment along the lines of "Poopy-peepee!" (Shaffer, 1981, p. 92). As his wife

Constanze scornfully tells Mozart, his father Leopold “kept you a baby all your life” (Shaffer, 1981, p. 90).

In this respect, it must have been much easier for the playwright to deal with the image of Salieri: with very few historical accounts available, the life and personality of this mostly forgotten composer remain, to a large extent, unknown (Gianakaris, 1992, p. 108). Gaps in history are a gift and a blessing for any writer, and Shaffer was free to fill them as he saw fit, taking as much creative licence with *Amadeus* as he wished. After familiarising himself with the available documented sources, Shaffer chose only those bits and pieces that were suitable for his purposes of creating a deeper dramatic and philosophical conflict in the play. “Like any good dramatist, he identified the things that suited his story – mining Mozart’s letters for scatological baby talk to his cousin, for example – and left out the things that weren’t” (Burton-Hill, 2015).

At the same time, the playwright makes the full use of his research of the historical era. Shaffer uses his protagonist Salieri’s mocking voice to comment and reflect on the political intrigue, betrayal, lust, sexual harassment, violence and other features of the culture of the 18th century Viennese court. Breaking the romantic stereotype that many associated with the setting and the era, Shaffer yet again connects “then” and “now” through showing that human behaviour remained unchanged over the past two or three hundred years.

One of many examples of Shaffer’s ability to create a powerful metaphor inspired by historical sources is his treatment of the story of Mozart’s Requiem. The composer’s last piece, commissioned shortly before his death, was for a long time surrounded by mystery. This mystery, later dispelled, is attributed to Mozart’s first biographer Franz Niemetschek who created a thrilling Gothic story about an ominous stranger dressed in gray (Pushkin dressed him in black and called him the Man in Black), materialising on Mozart’s threshold and ordering a Requiem Mass. Niemetschek was the first to give a sentimental account of how the sinister stranger’s commission had been weighing on the composer’s spirit. Mozart’s wife Constanze added to the tale, mentioning that after accepting the commission Mozart started talking about his approaching untimely death (as cited in Borowitz, 2003, pp. 185-186). This romantically coloured account created a powerful “echo chamber” in Mozart’s biographies for many years to come. Even after the rational explanation had become widely accepted, the story kept finding its way into modern biographies:

Around July of 1791 (...) Mozart received a visit from a tall, grave-looking stranger dressed completely in gray. The stranger presented an anonymous letter commissioning Mozart to compose a Requiem as quickly as possible at whatever price the composer wished to name. It is now accepted that the commission had a very prosaic explanation (...) Mozart accepted the commission, but put aside his work on the Requiem when he received an offer to write an opera, *La Clemenz di Tito*, for the coronation of Emperor Leopold in Prague. Just as Mozart and his wife were getting into the coach to leave for Prague, the messenger appeared, it is said, ‘like a ghost’ and pulled at Constanze’s coat, asking her, ‘What about the Requiem?’ (Borowitz, 2003, p. 186).

This perfectly Gothic story about the Death himself sending a messenger to the great composer has, it seems, an eternal appeal. The fact that the piece was commissioned by Count Walsegg-Stuppach whose identity was known to Mozart, and who, by some accounts, was hoping to pass the Requiem as his own work (von Tunzelmann, 2009) is irrelevant in the context of creative fiction – and Shaffer proves it in *Amadeus*.

In the play, Mozart, on the verge of financial and mental collapse, confides in Salieri that he is hounded by bad dreams about a faceless stranger in grey beckoning to him. After Salieri completes Mozart’s social and professional ruin, a delirious Mozart receives a visit from the Figure in Grey: “And this time it spoke to me! ‘Wolfgang Mozart – you must write now a Requiem Mass. Take up your pen and begin!’” (Shaffer, 1981, p. 94). And thus *Amadeus*’s Mozart begins his manic work on the Requiem – realising that he is writing a funeral mass for himself – in loneliness, poverty and despair. Still unable to comprehend Salieri’s cruel intrigue, he shares the secret about the Requiem and the Grey Figure with Salieri. In response, Italian composer hatches an ingenious (and monstrous) plan:

My friends – there is no blasphemy a man will not commit, compelled to such war as mine! I got me a cloak of grey. Yes. And a mask of grey – Yes!... and appeared myself to the demented Creature as – the *Messenger of God!* I confess (...) I walked empty Vienna in the freezing moonlight for seven nights on end! (...) Every night I showed him one day less – then stalked away (...) *I was in his dream!* (Shaffer, 1981, pp. 98-99).

Having literally entered the other man's nightmares, Salieri (in his guise of the Grey Figure) accepts Mozart's invitation to come in, and they re-enact the final scene from Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni*, where the protagonist invited a stone statue to dinner. Faceless, dressed in a grey cloak and mask, Salieri finally achieves his goal: tortured by the mixture of dreams and reality, Mozart descends into complete madness until his heart stops. This deeply theatrical scene has a very powerful dramatic effect.

The only solid fact that inspired Shaffer to create this outstanding sequence is that Mozart, already seriously ill, mentioned to his friends that he felt as if he was writing the Requiem mass for himself. Shaffer used this piece of documented evidence to amplify the narrative of Mozart's demise: the sinister cloaked figure becomes a symbol of Salieri "murdering" Mozart by masquerading as the figure from his nightmares and slowly walking under his window. Needless to say that historical Salieri never did such a thing, but Shaffer creates his own history: Salieri is Mozart's killer, but only metaphorically, through his cunning intrigue and betrayal caused by obsessive jealousy.

Despite the unprecedented success of the play on stage and, later, on screen, Shaffer's bold creative choices in regards to representing Mozart's life and personality had their repercussions. Many historians and musicologists criticised *Amadeus* for "distorting Mozart's unhappy life" (Billington as cited in Gianakaris, 1992, p. 184). A historian Alex von Tunzelmann, writing for *The Guardian*, gave *Amadeus* (a screen version of Shaffer's play) a history grade D+, or, in other words, a fail: "A deadly rivalry that never was (...), [Mozart operas'] flops that were hits in reality ... even getting Mozart's toilet humour right cannot redeem it" (von Tunzelmann, 2009). The historian went even further in criticising *Amadeus*, the film:

Salieri opens the film by cutting his own throat. This is based on a rumour spread by Ludwig van Beethoven's nephew, Karl, but there is no evidence for it – meaning *Amadeus* gets its first inaccuracy in before the opening credits. Salieri did reportedly sustain a minor knife wound to his neck after being committed to Vienna's general hospital on suffering a breakdown in 1823. In his deranged state, he was also said to have confessed to killing Mozart – though, when he regained some of his senses, he denied it (...) Some fine research into Mozart's annoying personality doesn't really make up for the fact that the entire premise of this film – that Salieri loathed Mozart and plotted his demise – is probably not true (von Tunzelmann, 2009).

This judgement was one of many, and it was symptomatic. The playwright's creative victory and the completeness of his philosophical concept encapsulated in the narrative had ironically enraged Mozart purists who viewed the play as "sacrilegious and scurrilous for depicting a supreme prodigy as a ruffian" and a misguided "attack on the composer" (Gianakaris, 1992, p. 111).

In their analysis, the critics of *Amadeus* were missing the crucial point: it does not matter whether there was any real rivalry between Mozart and Salieri. The playwright chose to cast these two historical figures as his characters, and the characters act and exist at a symbolical level; it is not a history lesson; it is a work of art. Creative licence includes editing and exploiting history and documented sources in any way that is appropriate for composing a self-contained, thoughtful, theatrical narrative. By showing the human weaknesses of a previously idealised genius (and, to add to the offensive, weaknesses backed up by historical sources), Shaffer enhanced the dramatic potential of the play, making it a fascinating spectacle.

The negative reaction to *Amadeus* shows the common misconception that a work of fiction must be fully compliant with documented sources. Breaking the mould of an accepted (idealised or otherwise) public image of a historical figure upsets some audience members and subverts their expectations. The fact that the resulting work of fiction – a play, in our case – is ingenious in its own right does not appear to grant it an amnesty; it is somehow expected that creative writing should also serve as a history textbook, confirming and reaffirming the existing historical narrative. Shaffer's disclaimer that "obviously *Amadeus* on stage was never intended to be a documentary biography of the composer" (Shaffer as cited in Burton-Hill, 2015) was never acknowledged by the outraged community of history purists. Shaffer was not forgiven. Perhaps, any playwright drawing on documented sources for creating an independent narrative should be prepared for a similar drawback.

Burton-Hill, a writer for BBC, remarked that in many difficult cases those who either personally observed the described events or had their relatives negatively portrayed on the screen or stage would loudly protest against such liberty. However, relying on the events of more distant past is safer. "In *Amadeus*' case, there are no known descendents of Salieri to come out fighting his corner. But let's be honest: nobody seriously thinks Salieri murdered Mozart. And for all the academic imperfections of *Amadeus*, the essence of the film is irrefutable" (Burton-Hill, 2015).

Even for those who travel farther in time, the theatrical journey may not be entirely safe. And even more pitfalls await those who create a work of fiction based on events only a couple of decades old. *Bright Star* by Stuart Hoar is a contrasting example to *Amadeus*: the depicted events are very close to the present day, with many participants of the story and friends of the protagonist still alive. A thorough research and abundance of factual materials leave practically no gaps to be filled by a playwright. And yet, *Bright Star* presents a self-contained theatrical narrative. How is it achieved?

The play based on the life of the prominent astronomer Beatrice Tinsley was originally commissioned by Circa Theatre in Wellington, and first produced in 2005. Beatrice spent most of her earlier life in New Zealand, and graduated from the University of Canterbury in Christchurch. Later in life she moved to the United States, Dallas, and published a series of ground-breaking research articles in cosmology. Struggling in the male-dominated world of science, especially in Dallas, she was forced to leave her husband and children to accept a position at Yale University in 1974. Professor Tinsley died of cancer in 1981, barely 40 years old. While the real-life story presents a fascinating material for a play, the distance in time is dangerously short. The “once upon a time” approach could not be used, and any playwright would find it hard to escape the trap of creating a documented biopic rather than a work of fiction.

In 2004-2005, the main published biographical source about Beatrice was her father’s memoir, *My Daughter Beatrice* (1986). Like Jane Deans’ *Letters to my Grandchildren* it should be approached with caution. Edward Hill’s memoir bears all hallmarks of a traditional Victorian biography: it glosses over the emotional/psychological aspects of the story and concentrates on the socially acceptable behaviour and achievements. Even the title itself - *My Daughter Beatrice* – speaks of the fatherly pride. We do not need as much as to open the book to safely guess that Beatrice was, so to speak, a “good girl”. The book is based on Edward Hill’s personal memories and Beatrice’s letters home from the United States. As Beatrice’s biographer Cole Catley explained in 2006, “what I did not discover until later was that Beatrice’s letters home conveyed only a part of what she really was thinking, feeling and doing. There was so much she felt she could not say to her parents because it would cause them pain” (Cole Catley, 2006, p. 10). Beatrice’s story was a complicated one; in fact, so complicated that Cole Catley had to wait until Beatrice father’s death to complete and publish the book, in order to avoid hurting his feelings (Cole Catley, 2006, p. 11). Cole Catley’s biography was published in

2006, after *Bright Star* had already premiered at Circa. It is reasonable to assume, however, that the playwright had access to similar documents – letters, interviews with the friends and family – which were utilised by Beatrice Tinsley’s biographer later.

Stuart Hoar’s play seems to be centred around one particular passage from Beatrice’s letter about her desperate attempt to stay in Dallas with her family, and work at the University of Texas, quoted in *My Daughter Beatrice*:

[U.T.D] had reduced me to the state of mental anguish. Hard to explain! I am a good scientist, and among my peers treated like I am full and respectable person and feel of *worth*. U.T.D. has kept me at the nearest possible level to nothing and there is *no one* who knows enough about astronomy to care in the least about my work. (...) To be rejected and undervalued intellectually is a *gut* problem to me, and I’ve lived with it most of the time we’ve been here... (Hill, 1986, p. 76).

So, instead of stretching the narrative over many years and using the theatrical time-travelling device, Hoar condenses the events of the play around Beatrice’s breaking point in 1974. He emphasises her state of mental anguish and inability to carry on complying with being patronised and treated like a Texan housewife.

In order to intensify this conflict, Hoar approaches biographical materials selectively – doing, in other words, what Shaffer did with Mozart’s letters. The playwright manipulates time, placing all trigger points within the same brief period at the end of 1974. In the play, all events that had been contributing to Beatrice’s “mental anguish” happen almost simultaneously. Hoar uses biographical evidence as a base for his dramatic jigsaw-puzzle, with separate biographical pieces finding their way into *Bright Star* to be re-assembled into an independent fictional narrative. “Ingeniously inverting Beatrice’s quest to expand, the play compresses her story into late 1974, when huge life-changing choices are confronted” (Smythe, 2005). Even without retrospective scenes, *Bright Star* engages the audience in a “crime investigation” of sorts. It shows how and why Beatrice comes to the decision to leave her husband and adopted children – which, for a female, is an ethical crime in the eyes of the society. As was the case with other plays discussed above, the focus of the story is on *how it happened* rather than *how it ended*. The audience is to judge Beatrice’s life choices for themselves.

The play offers no added levels of theatricality, no retrospection, no time travel. The number of characters is reduced to five: Beatrice, her “antithesis” Andrea, her husband

Brian, her father Edward Hill and Professor Furstmere from the University of Texas. All these characters have a strong symbolic meanings and functions: Beatrice is surrounded by three male characters and one female character who are trying to keep the protagonist within the acceptable social norm: be a wife, a mother, a keeper of the house. Andrea, a fellow housewife, is the figure of Observer; she appears to be the only fully fictional character. While complaining about the nightmare of her own marriage, she expects Beatrice to prioritise her own family above everything. She is part of the system that is trying to grind the protagonist down. Brian is something of a Salieri to Beatrice's "Mozart": he wants a housewife, not a colleague, and in a passive aggressive way opposes Beatrice's academic ambitions. Her father Edward Hill, an Anglican vicar, is added to the list of Dallas characters though he was in New Zealand at the time. And, finally, Professor Furstmere represents another incarnation of Salieri, oily but malicious, undermining Beatrice at every turn. This character is not entirely fictitious, most likely based on a senior academic from Dallas, Dr Ivor Robinson, whom Beatrice described as "evidently English, huge, gesticulating – with a plum in his mouth" (Hill, 1986, p. 44).

The script opens with the sounds of a Bach's violin concerto – a reference to Beatrice's dedication and skill as a classical violinist. As the music fades, the sharp dialogue begins, with minimal stage directions. We are introduced to Andrea and Beatrice for the first time: and plunged straight into the heart of the conflict. Beatrice receives the news that she is awarded the Annie J. Cannon Prize in Astronomy, recognising her as the leading woman-astronomer in the US.

The real-life award was actually received after Beatrice and Brian already filed for divorce, but in the play the news arrives when the marriage is still intact, and serves to trigger the adverse reactions from Andrea and Brian. Andrea is not interested in the scientific significance of the prize – "But honey, you don't have a job as an astronomer" (Hoar, 2015, p. 8), yet she cheers at the \$1000 attached to it, and full of helpful suggestions – "Don't spend that money on a telescope, for Christ's sake. Buy a dress, a little black dress" (Hoar, 2015, p. 10). The playwright builds a tense scene reflecting Brian's inability to understand his wife's aspirations, and an instinctive desire to recall her to her household duties. After a brief stunned silence caused, as might be guessed, by his academic jealousy, he starts making his own suggestions as to what to do with \$1000:

Brian: We can have a proper Christmas holiday with that kind of money (...)

Beatrice: I don't want to spend the money on a Christmas holiday.

Brian: Sure. Let's buy some new furniture.

Beatrice: I don't want to spend my money on the house.

A silence.

Brian: Ok, sure. Buy yourself something nice.

Beatrice: A little black dress?

(...)

Beatrice: I've got papers to publish.

(Hoar, 2015, pp. 9-12).

This scene reflects the main conflict perfectly. And it does not matter that in reality, Beatrice never had this discussion with Brian, who at the time was separated from her. She wrote to her father: "Really one can't do much research on \$1000: to publish a long paper in a classy journal costs that much. (...) But I suggested I could use the money for travelling to my far-flung collaborators, which I will do" (Cole Catley, 2006, p. 229). Brian never had a say in the matter – and he was an average scientist who never received any significant awards himself. As Beatrice's colleague once wryly remarked: "There was Brian, fiddling away perfectly adequately in the back row of the second violins, and there was Beatrice out in front of the orchestra" (Cole Catley, 2006, p. 219).

Hoar adds another piece of the biographical jigsaw-puzzle to escalate the conflict: it is known that Beatrice had been very angry with Brian for not telling her that marrying a staff member would prevent her employment with the University of Canterbury, and she would never get an academic job, "not even as a lab demonstrator" (Cole Catley, 2006, p. 207). The playwright "transplants" this situation from New Zealand to Dallas, with Brian explaining that "The faculty are using the Nepotism Rule as an excuse to refuse your request for appointment" (Hoar, 2015, p. 10).

Another piece of the puzzle is brought into the play from a much earlier time, when the Dallas branch of the University of Texas provided Beatrice with a small grant for computing and photocopying (Hill, 1986, p. 62). At the time she was literally working from her kitchen table – however, this situation did not last long. By 1974 Beatrice was working, part-time, at the Astronomy Department of the University of Texas at Austin (Cole Catley, 2006, pp. 222-223), though the position was unsatisfying. She was also

extensively travelling to various universities and research centres around the world to give lectures and participate in short-term projects. The duration of any academic commitment had to be very limited as Brian was the one entitled to long academic and science-related absences while Beatrice was responsible for the household and childcare.

By positioning Beatrice as a full-time housewife, the play reflects her emotional and mental state. Trapped and undervalued, she is reduced to writing her academic papers at the kitchen table and forced to accept Professor Furstmere's grants for photocopying as an invaluable favour. Professor, all the while, insists on addressing her "My dear lady..." and pointedly talks to her only about her children. *Bright Star's* Beatrice Tinsley is very bitter, aggressive and driven to breaking point.

In the opening dialogue with Andrea, Beatrice raises a toast for "not pouring" – the "pouring" being an honour bestowed on a "faculty wife" to serve the gathering with coffee or tea. The ritual was real: at some point in the 1960s Beatrice "caused consternation by refusing to 'pour', when invited to take the teapot at some mixed gathering" (Hill, 1986, p. 48). She did so because she wanted to participate in a scientific discussion that "the husbands" were having. "Apparently the wives didn't like the way the men included her in their sort of talk" (Hill, 1986, p. 48).

Though the episode itself, as described by Edward Hill in his memoir, was almost comic, it showed that Beatrice clearly did not belong in the Dallas community, and, paradoxically, the wives were offended by her behaviour even more than the husbands: Beatrice demonstrated that she did not know her place, and was above the others. Hoar brings this episode and the consequences of "not knowing your place" into the play. At the end of *Bright Star*, Andrea, hearing that Beatrice is leaving her husband, refuses to lend her any suitcases or a car: "You want to leave Brian but he's done nothing wrong to you or the children? (...) You can't be such a... such a... Such a bad mother. (...) If you leave Brian and the children it will be a sin" (Hoar, 2015, pp. 63-66).

Thus, the message from the real-life Dallas community of the 1960s and 1970s is amplified, and Beatrice is basically pronounced "guilty" by Andrea. Although we, as the audience, witness Beatrice's heated argument with Brian who declares: "I will fight you in every court in America!" (Cole Catley, 2006, p. 226), it does not make any difference to the verdict pronounced by Andrea and the society on the whole.

It was a bold choice for the playwright to introduce Edward Hill, Beatrice's father, as a character into the story. He was one of Beatrice's main champions after her death.

Edward Hill became her first biographer, and the one who appealed to Christine Cole Catley to write his daughter's full biography. He was the one who took a photo of Beatrice in 1980, shortly before her death, and inscribed: "My daughter, the professor" on the back (Cole Catley, 2006, p. 253). And it was he who wrote a dedication in his memoir: "To every parent of a gifted child; To every woman who has struggled between family and a career" (Hill, 1986). But as many of his contemporaries admitted, this gentle Anglican clergyman knew very little about life, and it was not until after his death that Cole Catley could publish Beatrice's full biography, and speak the truth.

In *Bright Star*, he is the only male character who, towards the end, shows some understanding of Beatrice. Following his jigsaw-puzzle approach to documented sources, Hoar uses Hill's written impressions of his much earlier visit to the United States, prior to 1974:

It was not an entirely happy visit. I found Beatrice very strung up, as well as extremely intolerant of diverse opinions. (...) Beatrice seemed to regard me as a 'nitwit' and I found Brian much more tolerant (...) I also expressed concern at the way she shouted at the children, though I had to admit that they seemed happy (Hill, 1986, p. 62).

All this can be found in the short and sharp dialogues of *Bright Star*: the bitter arguments, Beatrice's intolerance, even the word "nitwit". But it is through these scenes, now placed in 1974, that the personality and motivations of the protagonist become fully unfolded: she has reached her point of no-return. And when Professor Furtsmere finally reveals his true colours and shouts at Beatrice: "I swear you will never work at this University – or any University when I have finished dealing with your application!" (Hoar, 2015, p. 57), the revelation is heard by her father Edward Hill, too. This is the climax of the play: there is no hope for Beatrice in Dallas, and there is no hope for Beatrice's marriage. Edward finally realises this, and he embraces Beatrice and prays for her, accepting that the universe is a mystery he would never be able to understand.

During her final monologue, Beatrice looks back at the events of her life – the only scene where retrospection is used – and says "Sometimes I think, as a Christian moralist might, that leaving my children gave me cancer" (Hoar, 2015, p. 69). So, in a way, she confirms the "guilty" verdict pronounced by the society and even her own loving father, a Christian moralist. But what is the moral of the story? With her last words, Beatrice simply states: "The moral of my story is that my story has no moral. We live and die. We do our

best and we mess up (...) We fail and yet we love” (Hoar, 2015, p. 69). Like Jane Deans in *Dear Jane*, Beatrice refuses to complain or to express regret about her choices.

On this final note, Hoar completes re-assembling the biographical jigsaw-puzzle into a distinct picture of a woman driven to make harsh decisions to protect her soul and intellect from being crushed by the expectations of society. The events from Beatrice’s life, condensed into one last month of 1974, translate her own innovative scientific theory into a creative metaphor: the unchanging, fixed state of the galaxies gives way to the idea of the open universe, into which Beatrice escapes. The escape costs her dearly, but this is the choice that many women in the modern world are forced to make. “Forty years from Beatrice's time, the same difficulties remain. It’s a human tale that reaches for the stars whilst tugging at the heart strings” (Sutton & Tomic, 2010).

Conclusion

Be it a biography or a work of fiction based on a historical figure, documented facts impose certain limitations on writers in all genres. And yet, historical records always contain gaps, and “onto that blank space writers (...) bring the remnants of the past they select in telling their stories” (Hampl & May, 2008, p. 3). Playwrights are not an exception where working with documented sources is concerned.

So-called “documented” history is often manipulated by historians into a certain shape and mould, depending on many factors such as current ideology, cultural norms and political agenda. Playwrights and fiction writers do the same thing – but they can afford the luxury of telling *their* stories through the stories of the characters, making their tales relevant to their own personal experiences and the experiences of their audiences and societies. Sometimes we have to break free from the hold of the documented events for the sake of clarity and the coherency of *our* narratives, giving the characters stronger, better defined and more consistent voices.

Working on plays based on a historical character(s), playwrights have to rely on their own interpretations of the events as well as drawing on their imagination, actively filling the gaps in historical and factual sources. In my creation of *Dear Jane I*, as a playwright, had to learn about the existing biographical narratives and my heroine’s mainstream public image before making my own creative decisions as to how to use this information. I was relying not only on facts, but also on my own experience as an immigrant and my creative thinking as a writer to build an original stage narrative.

When writing about historical figures, we often invite our audiences on a time-travelling journey, to investigate the characters’ choices and/or alleged crimes, either directly or in a more figurative sense. In such cases the opening scenes are often used to show the end result or to pose a question; the narrative concentrates on the reasons for the protagonist’s choices and actions, and the outcome is already known. Why did Pauline and Juliet commit that murder? Why did Salieri hate Mozart? Why did Eugenia live as a man? Why did Beatrice leave her children? Why did Jane go to New Zealand? Playwrights create fiction, not documentary biopics, and answers to those questions will vary depending on the playwright’s creative choices and interpretations. And while the distant events and the “once upon a time, in a land far away” framework provides much more creative freedom than the constraints imposed by the depiction of recent events, in either

case the playwright can manipulate the biographical jigsaw-puzzle, painting a unique theatrical picture.

In the creation of a theatrical play, the considerations of theatricality, style and finding unique voices of the characters must override the strict adherence to documented facts. Whether based on historical material or not, a play should tell a story that provokes discussions, poses questions and engages the audiences' emotions. To use Elric Hooper's words, "Ultimately the aim of any play, whether based on fact or presented as total fiction, is to present a world, no matter how strange or extreme, which is consistent with itself and convinces solely by itself" (Hooper, 1992, pp. 8-9).

It is my conviction that a play should convey a message layered with meanings, otherwise it will become a piece of propaganda. There are always many more truths than just one and different characters in a play may feel justified in the beliefs that contradict each other. A piece of art does not give right or wrong answers; it does not preach or moralise. It asks questions rather than answers them. "When people ask me now, 'What is the play about?' I find it nearly impossible to answer. Like a crystal, it has many sides to it which all contribute to making the whole" (Forster, 1992, p. 11). In saying this, Michaelanne Forster was reflecting on her play *Daughters of Heaven*, which skilfully combines historical sources and fiction, creating a self-contained stage narrative.

A similar statement would be relevant in regards to my play *Dear Jane*. What is this play about? It is about human frailty and resilience; wrong choices and lost opportunities; and it is about making the best from the worst. It does not judge the characters. Time can't be reversed, and while lost opportunities remain lost, there is not much point in lamenting them: at the end of the play, Jane refuses to lament her fate. She asserts herself as the one responsible for her choices, no matter what they were. To use Beatrice's words from *Bright Star*, "The moral of my story is that my story has no moral. We live and die. We do our best and we mess up" (Hoar, 2015, p. 69).

Jane Deans' ghost may or may not be still walking the hallways of Riccarton House, but her story makes us pause and think about the woman who wrote about her loneliness and isolation 150 years ago. Did she lose or find her way in marrying John Deans and coming to New Zealand? The playwright and the audiences can only guess the answer.

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