

George Lewis Becke

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George Lewis Becke (18 June 1855 – 18 February 1913) was an Australian short-story writer and novelist.

George Lewis Becke was born at Port Macquarie, New South Wales, where his father was clerk of petty sessions, on 18 June 1855. He was the youngest of six children and soon showed a disposition to wander. He has stated that before he was 10 he had twice run away from home. The family removed to Sydney and Becke was educated at the Fort-street school.

He began his voyages in the south seas at a very early age and there are two accounts of these beginnings: one by the Earl of Pembroke, who presumably obtained his information from Becke, which is prefixed to *By Reef and Palm*, and the other written by Becke and printed in the Red Page of the Bulletin on 27 February 1913. It is difficult to reconcile them, and all that is certain is that Becke spent many years on vessels trading in the Pacific islands.

In 1874 he was in Australia on the Palmer River goldfields, and later on unsuccessfully tried to settle down as a bank clerk. He returned to the south seas as a supercargo and trader, and during the middle seventies voyaged with the notorious "Bully" Hayes. The accounts of Becke's connexion with Hayes given in *Neath Austral Skies*, *The Strange Adventures of James Shervinton* and other volumes, must, however, be read with caution as the boundary between fact and fiction-writing is not clear. This life continued for many years and provided most of the material for Becke's stories.

During a visit to Australia in 1886 he married Bessie Mansell, daughter of Colonel Mansell of Port Macquarie. In 1892 he returned to Sydney and encouraged by Ernest Favenc and Jules Francois Archibald began to contribute stories to the Bulletin. A collection of these, *By Reef and Palm*, was published in England in 1894, followed by *The Ebbing of the Tide* in 1896.

Becke went to London about the beginning of this year, helped by Archibald and William MacLeod of the Bulletin who advanced him £200, and he remained in Europe for about 15 years, during which time a large number of collections of short

stories and a few novels and stories for boys were published. He was fairly paid by the magazines for his stories, but he always sold his books outright and never on a royalty basis. He went to Auckland, New Zealand, in 1910 and lived there for about a year. He was in Sydney again in the middle of 1911 and died suddenly there on 18 February 1913, working up to the last. About 30 of Becke's books are listed in Miller's Australian Literature with six other volumes written in collaboration with W. J. Jeffery. He was survived by his wife and a daughter.

Becke said himself that any literary success he had achieved was due entirely to the training received from the editor of the Bulletin (J. F. Archibald) "who taught me the secrets of condensation and simplicity of language". Once having learned this Becke had a wealth of experience to draw upon and, though there was inevitably some monotony of theme, he wrote a very large number of stories of incident that can still be read with interest, and show him to have been a writer of considerable ability.

Reference

- Serle, Percival (1949). "Becke, George Lewis". *Dictionary of Australian Biography*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson.

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- Sally O'Neill, 'Becke, George Lewis (Louis) (1855 - 1913)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Volume 7, Melbourne University Press, 1979, pp 238-239.
- Dirk HR Spennemann (2000). Louis Becke (1859-2000). A biography.
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