

NEWTOWN THEN  
**1929-1939**

JIM CONWAY

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**Front cover**

*Newtown Bridge* – City of Sydney Archives

**Back cover**

*Newtown Railway Station*

NSW State Records Office (NRS17420\_2\_29 photo 880\_10a)

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## CHAPTER ONE

# 1930



Newtown was a community of serene people, when a mist of change drifted over them and they had to survive it or perish. It was the 1930's depression.

On a Saturday morning Mugsy was cleaning the shop. The window display was cleared, the chopping block was scrubbed and he raked the sawdust across the floor.

His mind as usual was on his next fight. Meanwhile in the street a paper-boy was yelling out his forlorn cry. A horse drawn waggon was rolling down the road when it was overtaken by a green and yellow tram. A few late shoppers scurried along the footpath.

Inside the shop, Mugsy was vaguely aware that he was not alone. He looked up into a dark pair of eyes, belonging to an Aboriginal youth. He had black curly hair and a large ugly scar running down his left cheek. He also had a wiry slim build. Mugsy thought, this one could move fast. The lad stared into his face and said, "Are you Mugsy Bone?"

"Yeah, that's right," said Mugsy with confidence.

"I'm Darky Moran from Erco, 'ave ya 'eard of me?"

"Yeah, I have an' how are ya?"

"They say you're a good fighter, is that right?" said Darky ignoring the greeting.

"That's right," replied Mugsy without modesty.

"Do ya wanta 'ave a go at me?"

"Yeah, why not?"

"Will now be o'right?"

"Righto, I'll just close th' shop."

The two young men adjourned to a back lane and began a bloody gruesome duel.

There was no animosity and no prizes to be won. It was done in the name and glory of sport.

They both stripped to the waist and circled each other slowly. It was a cautious start with both of them waiting for an opening. Mugsy knew by reputation that Darky was tough and fast, it was what he didn't know that troubled him. Darky had seen him fight in the ring and knew this would be a hard fight. Mugsy's advantages were his wider experience, longer reach and he was a bit heavier. Darky was all street fighter and this was his medium. He decided to wait for his opponent to move and he aimed to counter it. Mugsy gradually closed in and feinted twice and drove a hard right into Darky's jaw, who responded too late with a wild right swing, which Mugsy ducked but was stopped by a short straight left.

Mugsy threw a flurry of punches at Darky's head. They were fast light blows aimed at flustering him and seeking faults in his defence. Darky backed off taking these punches on his arms and shoulders. Then he counter-attacked by unleashing two round arm swings, which Mugsy ducked but was caught by a heavy right cross which shook him. He had to avoid that punch it was dangerous. Mugsy increased his speed, danced around his adversary and peppered him with a variety of punches and combinations. This was Mugsy the boxer and it put Darky on the defensive.

As Mugsy slowed down, Darky sped up and took the offensive. He used many round arm punches which Mugsy easily avoided by ducking and weaving. Then he adopted his antagonist's tactics by joining in a slug-ging match, in this way the street fighter emerged from Mugsy. Most physical damage was done in those few minutes. They shared numerous cuts and bruises. Both had split lips, bloody noses, sore joints and painful ribs.

Mugsy switched his strategy from leading with his left to leading with his right. This confused Darky, Mugsy sensed this and closed one of his opponent's eyes.

The battle slowed down, they had been at it for forty minutes and they were tired. Nevertheless they both believed they could win. Mugsy was planning a knock-out, when Darky caught him with a heavy right and it put him down. Mugsy slowly dragged himself up from the hard lane and prepared for an onslaught. Darky threw everything at him, but Mugsy back peddled and ducked and weaved his way out of the danger. Then he caught Darky with a powerful punch, followed by a combination of blows which put Darky down and out.

Mugsy staggered over to a paling fence which he leaned on. He stood there for a full minute, gasping for breath, then he went over to revive Darky. Who shook his head, wiped blood from his eyes and said, "You'll do me mate, you're good, bloody good, how about a drink?"

"Yeah, righto, let's go," said Mugsy as he squinted through the sweat.

Like two old men they trudged stiffly out of the lane towards the Victory hotel. Where they washed from a tap at the back of the pub and Mugsy bought a couple of bottles of beer. As an Aborigine, Darky was not allowed in the pub, a fact which neither of them wanted to

discuss. They sat on a narrow footpath running beside the lane and praised each others pugilistic skills. They had become firm friends as a result of their ordeal. This relationship was based on mutual admiration. To them the fight was a test of their strength and stamina and they felt they had gained from it.

A lone policeman strolled down the lane and kept a watchful eye on the two gladiators. He knew both of them by name and reputation. As he passed he grunted, "G'day." He thought of pinching them for drinking in a public place. However he reconsidered, he would need half of the local force to bring those two in. The Constable opted for a quiet life, so he whistled as he strode along the lane. Darky and Mugsy looked at each other and they laughed until their sore ribs hurt.

Another fight was brewing in Newtown, this was a battle for survival in the coming depression.



After the First World War, the large introverted continent of Australia, began to look beyond it's shores towards the outside world. However with the growing economic malaise of the twenties and the thirties, the Nation turned in on itself in response to its developing problems. Australia was tightly entombed in a self-made cocoon of its own isolation and xenophobia. This held it away from the rest of the planet. Its only link with the outside was through the eyes of Austro-Britons.

It had been a long day for Jeff who finished work and was walking home. As he did a poem slipped into his mind. It was inspired by the 1890's depression, written by Henry Lawson and called 'When your pants begin to go'.

*When you wear a cloudy shirt that isn't white  
and you can't sleep for thinking how you will reach  
tomorrow night.*

*You may be a man of sorrow and on speaking terms with  
care but as yet unacquainted with the demon of despair.  
For I rather think that nothing heaps trouble of your mind.  
For the knowledge that your trousers badly need  
a patch behind.*

Jeff worked at the car factory for two years. His job was a bit of a bore, but occasional changes made it tolerable. He was a tall thin man and expected little of life.

Jeff married Jean in the mid-twenties, little Harry came along soon after and another baby was on the way. His weary legs shuffled him along Homewood Street, towards a small semi, which was home. It was about six on an Autumn evening, cool and becoming dark. Illusive cooking odours tantalised his nostrils. There was grilled sausages as well as fish and chips.

Several children were engaged in a boisterous game of French Cricket. They happily played in the middle of the broad street. Their noisy protestations gradually diminished as Jeff move away.

It was Friday and he patted the pocket with his pay envelope. This made him feel secure. As he approached his place he felt hungry and thought about his tea. It would be fish of course, it was always fish on Friday. An unexpected voice brought him away from his thoughts.

"G'day, Jeff."

"Oh, hello Bob, how are ya?"

"Not too bad."

"How's th' wife?"

"She's much better," said Bob knocking his pipe on the fence.

"That's good," replied Jeff, who walked on.

He moved towards his little brick home. It had five rooms, a slate roof, verandah and an iron picket fence. He passed through the squeaky gate, trod silently across the porch, keyed the front door and let himself in. Jeff crept along the hall, beyond the archaic hat stand to the ailing aspidestra and as he neared the lounge room a clamorous outcry broke out. Toby the foxy raced towards Jeff, barking wildly, contradicting its ferocity with a wagging tail. Little Harry was close on the dog's heels shouting loudly, "Daddy, daddy." The din was deafening.

Jeff scooped up the small boy into his arms and strode through the lounge room. Jean poked her head round the kitchen door, blew him a kiss and commanded quietness. Toby scuttled under the table but his tail still betrayed his joy. Harry lowered the volume of his voice and began to relate with breathlessness his adventures of the day. The child's ceaseless chatter gushed along in short phrases which tended to trip over each other. Jeff, the centre of the boy's attention, made appropriate sounds like 'yeah' and 'really'. Harry finished his exhaustive tale and Jean ordered him to wash before tea.

The interior of the house was both simple and basic. The wooden floors were covered with linoleum. The lounge room was bare except for two aging box lounges and several family photos on the mantel piece. The kitchen had a plain wooden table, with four chairs which were painted mid-green. There was a gas stove with a Kookaburra transfer on the oven door. A white porcelain sink, cream coloured dresser was balanced by Jean's proudest possession, a white ice-chest.

Jean was a petite brunette, with dark eyes and short



wavy hair. She wore a high neck floral dress and a full, but plain apron with crocheted edges.

Jeff stepped up to her and gently kissed her on the lips. As he was tall and she was short, they strained to perform this act of love. As they parted Jeff patted her tummy and said, "How is number two to-day?"

"OK, the little bugger hasn't started kicking yet." At this point Harry appeared with an imperative question. "Hey dad, have we got Lions in Australiya?" To Harry, his dad was the fountain of all knowledge.

"Well, yes, Harry." He gave Jean a sly wink and said, "We have clothes lines an' tram lines an'.

"Ah dad, complained Harry, I mean Lions what go grh an' growl an' look like big pussies."

Both parents laughed at this description.

Jeff explained to Harry, that the only Lions in Australia were in zoos or circuses. Harry would not be put off and he said, "Can we go to a circus one day?"

"Yeah, we'll go someday," answered Jeff.

"Oh, ya beaut," exclaimed the excited boy.

An hour later the family were in the lounge room. Jean was knitting, Jeff was reading a newspaper and Harry was playing on a frayed mat in front of a coke fire. Jeff was talking, "They're collectin' old clothes an' settin' up soup kitchens for those out-of-work."

"My God, what's goin' ta happen to us?" Her eyes welled with tears and her voice sounded distressed.

Jeff, who was distracted by the newspaper said, "I dunno luv, but things seem ta be gettin' worse b'cos jobs are scarcer."

"Are they gonna put men off at th' Six?"

"Well, er, no, not yet at least." He said with uncertainty.

"What will we do if ya lose ya job?"

"I dunno, I suppose we'll have ta battle on like th' rest."

The adult became silent and thoughtful while Harry played on quietly. Jean stared at her child pensively and abruptly ordered him off to bed. He offered no resistance, her tone warned him not to. As she tucked in her four-year-old, her anxiety for him and number two increased and a cloud of worry creased her brow. Harry didn't notice it, his mind was on lions, motor cars and chocolates.

Jean returned to Jeff and he said, "Roy got put off last week an' old Burt got put on short time."

Jean avoided comment and said, "Like a cup of tea, luv?"

"Yeah, thanks Toots," he said. Jeff raised his voice to her who was in the kitchen.

"It looks like another election is coming."

"Who do ya think'll win?"

"Labor ough ta win, but I don't think th' politicians can sort out this mess."

"I hope ya wrong, Jeff," she said with tears in her eyes.

"Yeah, so do I," replied Jeff.

Meanwhile Harry was having a nightmare. A big green dragon was coming down from the north, to eat up Australia. His dream was like a fear often held by older people, a sort of racial memory. Jean was having her own nightmare, only she was wide awake and her fear was about the uncertainty of the future and how her family may fare.

Jeff was fixing a spring to a car, when he saw a gangling youth stroll along the factory floor. He was a blue-eyed lad with straight black hair. He seemed older than his nineteen years, as he wore a serious countenance. Lennie

who came from the bush was a clumsy awkward young man. Jeff saw him and called out, "Hey Lennie how is th' billy goin'?"

"Th' smoko will be on in a minute, Jeff."

"Thank Christ, I thought it would never come."

"Did ya see th' footy game on Sund'y?"

"Yeah it was a beaut game but those bushies are big cheats."

"Get away," protested Lennie. "Th' bushies know how ta play th' game."

This friendly banter was typical at the Six car factory. A newcomer was often teased, if he didn't get upset, he was accepted and if he did he would have his leg pulled all the time. It was a form of initiation and it relieved the boredom. Both of them went off to the tea room joking all the way. Then Len lowered his voice and said in a serious way, "Jeff, how do ya get ta know th' girls down here?"

"Why don't ya go to a dance?"

"Yeah well, which one do ya think?"

"St Georges' Hall has a good one on Friday nights."

"Oh yeah," said Len with interest.

"It's a well conducted dance, with a good band and plenty of girls."

"Hey that sounds great," replied Len enthusiastically.

"Have ya got a suit?" People generally dressed formally on such occasions.

"Yep," replied Len.

"Then ya better go along an' see how it goes."

"Righto Jeff, I will, er, do you an' th' wife go dancin'?" Jeff sensed that Len wanted some company.

"We can't with th' baby on the way, ask around among th' lads."

"Yeah, I'll ask around, thanks Jeff." The smoko whistle sounded and ended the conversation.

Lennie prepared for the big event all of that week. He spruced up his suit, got a friend to iron a shirt and spent a long time polishing his shoes. Unfortunately he couldn't find anyone to accompany him, so he braved the event alone. He arrived at the venue early and went in. The hall was a large spacious place with high ceilings and a raised stage at one end. It was festooned with colourful streamers and balloons. The orchestra wore tuxedos. Like him all of the men wore suits and ties and the women had long evening gowns and some of them wore long white gloves. Lennie felt he had entered a new glamorous world.

Lennie checked his attire in a mirror and he looked OK. He wore a navy blue pin striped suit with large lapels and wide trouser cuffs. He also sported a pair of blue braces, a plain white shirt and a broad blue tie. In fact he looked very much like the other men. His shiny black hair was held rigidly in place by vaseline. He vaguely resembled *Valentino*, a film hero of a decade earlier. Len hadn't seen such a flash dance before. He walked carefully along the highly polished floor to the refreshment table and surveyed sandwiches, sausage rolls, cakes and soft drinks. All booze was banned, however a few smuggled it in and others arrived with a skinful.

The hall quickly filled with excited groups of people, many of whom knew each other, it was not unlike a family reunion. He felt alone in this throng as he knew nobody. Len stood back and looked appreciatively at the ladies, then he took the plunge and danced with several of them. He missed a dance as he was unsure of the

steps and joined in the following one as it was a Barn dance. This allowed him to circulate and meet briefly many partners.

He found her in the middle of the Barn dance. She was a tall blond with blue eyes and an upturned nose. They were attracted to each other instantly. They met, appraised, approved and quickly passed onto the next partner. The next time around he asked for her name and she said, "I am Dulcie and I am sitting with my cousins, next to the orchestra." As a pair they won a spot prize and she called him her lucky partner. He said, "Can I have the next dance?" and they had the next three together.

They clicked so naturally and easily and they were surprised and delighted by it. He went off to dance with other ladies, as etiquette required, then he returned to her as she knew he would. They danced together for the rest of the evening.

After the dance, Dulcie's cousins, both girls, walked on ahead so Dulcie and Len could walk alone. They had much in common. Both had been orphaned and were living with relatives.

"Is th' dance always that good?" said Len.

"Not always, but it was fun wasn't it?"

"Too right it was."

They remained silent as they crossed the road, he gently took her arm and said, "Do ya like th' pictures, Dulcie?"

"Oh yes, I think they are wonderful."

"There's a good one on at th' Hub on Wednesd'y night, would ya like ta go?" She hesitated at this and said, "Yes I would Len, but aunty is very strict an' she doesn't like us girls goin' out at night, too much." She sensed his

disappointment and quickly said, "I'll be there Lennie an' I'll meet you on th' inside." They parted at the corner, so that aunty wouldn't see them together.

Dulcie could rely on her cousins to keep mum about Lennie. Aunty was a Christian lady, who was always concerned about the morals of others. To the three girls, her home had an air of oppression about it. The girls, who wanted more freedom, formed a united front against her tyranny. When Dulcie's parents died in an accident, she went to live with aunty. This woman was strict, rigid and inflexible with the girls. So they lied to her and generally did as they pleased.

When Lennie left Dulcie he skipped down the road like a small child. He had been bitten by the oldest bug in the world, he was in love. He didn't know what love was, but he did know that he longed for her touch, the sound of her laugh, the vision of her pretty face and he was always thinking of her. As he did he was always happy. He whistled his way through the next few days and impatiently waited for their next meeting. Jeff noted Len's high spirits and enquired about the dance, Len hinted that he met somebody and Jeff knew.

The pictures were an ideal haven for young lovers. This was especially so with the privacy of the back stalls. The younger kids sat in the front stalls, sorting out their short-lived crushes, holding hands and looking starry-eyed. Meanwhile their elder brothers and sisters got into the serious acts of lovemaking. The rules of this game were laid down by the players and their limits were enforced by the girls.

Len and Dulcie met as arranged and proceeded to the back of the theatre. Lennie noticed Dulcie's cousins with boys several rows away. As new lovers Dulcie and

Len began by simply holding hands. Then he put his arm around her and she rested her head on his shoulder. At this point they wanted to go further but they were inhibited. However he caressed her arms, hips and waist and she liked it but said nothing. He pushed things further by kissing her cheek and neck. She turned her head so he could kiss her lips.

By interval they were hot and flushed with excitement. He bought some potato chips and drinks, while she compared her campaign of love with others in the ladies room. This was a period of inaction, as darkness was essential for lovemaking, especially for those who didn't want to show these emotions to others.

The second film was boring to much of the young audience, so the lovers centred on their amorous activities. Then the film broke down and cast the place into complete darkness. The front stalls broke out into a cacophony of howls, whistles and foot-stamping. Meanwhile in lover's row, action intensified. Deep kissing, heavy sighing and breast caressing began. Then suddenly, the lights came on and embarrassing hands were removed and light petting was resumed.

Our lovers gained much from this experience and became aware that their affair had bloomed into a serious relationship. What followed over the next few weeks was a frantic round of social events, which they attended together. It was as if they were competing with time for stolen moments of pleasure. They enjoyed it so much and to them their love seemed unreal.

They soon became aware that their rising sexual frustration was at odds with their sense of morality. This was especially so with Dulcie who believed that good girls didn't do that sort of thing. The thought of

pregnancy was not an issue as both of them were blissfully ignorant. The idea of marriage had occurred to her, but she knew that her aunty wouldn't approve as she was underage.

The lovers were walking home after a football match and Len decided to show her where he lived. Eventually they stood outside of a terraced house which was his home.

"Look up there at th' winda, that's m' room," he said.

"Oh, is it." she replied.

"Yeah, come on up an' I'll show ya." At this point he propelled Dulcie across the road and up to the door. She resisted and said, "Len I don't think we oughta."

"Ah, why not Dulcie, nobody is home?" He opened the door, stepped inside, pulling her in behind him. She sensed danger and resisted. He embraced and kissed her long and passionately. She felt a mixture of desire and fear. He spoke to her softly. "Come on darling." He slowly led her up the stairs with his arm around her. It was the first time for each of them, a curious mixture of fear, pain and joy. A clumsy, messy and disappointing event as first encounters often are, but it cemented their love.

Dulcie fell pregnant within a few months. For them to have a child out of wedlock was unthinkable. An abortion, something neither of them knew much about, appeared to be one option. One cool afternoon they met to discuss their predicament. Lennie said, "Dulcie, ya know I wanta do th' right thing an' marry ya."

"I know Len," She gave a deep sigh. "Aunty wont let us get married." They looked into each others strained and concerned faces. "Dulcie are ya sure ya know what ya doin'?" Then he said as an afterthought, "Ya can't hurt y'



self can ya?" They were considering an abortion. She had similar concerns but decided to go ahead with it.

"It'll be oright luv," she said without conviction. Then she added, "I know a girl at work who knows all about it." Then she glanced at him and said thoughtfully, "Ya will have ta be a bit more careful, ah, we'll have ta use something'." Dulcie blushed.

"Ah, er, that, yeah I'll ask th' married blokes at work." Then he said, "As soon as we are old enough we'll get married."

"Too right we will an' nobody is goin' ta stop us." She turned to him and said in a serious tone, "Ya will have ta give me a couple of weeks ta sort this out."

"Righto Dulcie an' ya be careful." They had a long farewell kiss and she left. He wondered if he would ever see he again, then he put this horrible thought aside and sauntered down the street.

One night Dulcie met a man and a woman, dressed in white coats, in a deserted warehouse. A local was administered, a procedure quickly done, soon after she left and went home and waited. It began about 3.00 am, she had what seemed to be hours of blood, sweat and extreme pain and then it was over. After this she was exhausted, alone and depressed.

Dulcie couldn't go down to breakfast and her cousin Violet, was sent to get her. The girl was horrified at what she saw. Blood stained bed clothes were sprawled across the room and Dulcie's naked body was lying on a red-stained mattress. This terrible scene of carnage sent Violet screaming hysterically to aunty. Much later a doctor reported that, 'The girl was pregnant, I suspect she was aborted, but I shall be discreet.'

Aunty was stunned and outraged. She sent her

daughters to the pictures and in a cold fury went to interrogate Dulcie. "Well, my girl, you have a lot to answer for, who was the father of the child?"

Dulcie responded slowly from her sedation and focused on the glaring eyes of aunty. Then she said weakly, "Aunty I'm sorry about this, but I won't tell ya who he is."

Her aunt replied vehemently, "You've broken God's law, you're a shameless harlot and you should go to gaol for this."

Dulcie gave way to an overpowering feeling of guilt and remorse. She cried long and hard. then she composed herself and said, "Aunty please listen, th' father an' me wanta get married."

"Over my dead body," screeched aunty. Then she said, "Arn't you sorry for your wicked ways?" Dulcie felt exhausted, confused and found it difficult to explain her situation. "I'm sorry th' baby died, but I luv th' father an' will go on lovin' him."

"You ungrateful trollop," yelled aunty with zeal. Dulcie burst into tears again. It was a cry of the injured and forsaken. Aunty ignored her and continued, "I took you in when my sister died and this is how you repay me." Then she said with deliberation, "You have broken the law, you're unrepentant and you must be taught a painful lesson."

Dulcie had paid a painful lesson, an event which no female could ever forget, which was apparently oblivious to aunty. She abruptly left the room and took her Christian charity with her. She contacted the Welfare and the Police. Within days Dulcie was spirited away to a reformatory and her name was not to be mentioned in Aunty's house again. Her neighbours snubbed her for

dobbing in the girl to the Welfare, they said she should have helped the girl in her hour of need.

None of this was known to Lennie, who became alarmed when Dulcie didn't contact him. One day he spoke to Violet in the street and it all tumbled out of her. "Dulcie made th' baby die an' then she got sick an' th' welfare her away ta a home for bad girls." Violet drew in her breath and continued, "It was your fault Lennie, b'corse ya made her pregnant."

"Where did they take her?" he said ignoring her remark.

"I dunno," she replied and ran off crying.

Employment had deteriorated at the Six factory and Len was put off. He went onto the pitiful dole and searched for work, in vain. He made many enquiries about Dulcie's whereabouts but without success. Weeks dragged into months and he became depressed. He couldn't forget her as his friends said he would. He thought of her constantly. He became obsessed with his guilt for not helping her more. His adopted family were also on the dole and this intensified the pressure on him. Len stopped meeting his friends and withdrew deeply into his self.

Some months later a local newspaper reported: 'An unemployed youth was found with his throat cut. He had personal problems. He was very depressed. Police found no suspicious circumstances.'

The Newtown Council moved a motion, several months later:

'The Government should set up a committee to deal with women, married or single, approaching childbirth who are forced to place themselves in the hands of unscrupulous persons. The Government should accept responsibility to relieve potential mothers of worry.'