

G. Cohen: The Possibly True Story of Martin Gardiner, Halstead Press, 2022.

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REVIEWED BY CLIFFORD GILMORE

This historical novel is inspired by the curious life of the Irish-Australian mathematician Martin Gardiner. The protagonist left an intriguing paper trail during his lifetime, that ranged from mathematical publications to judicial proceedings. However, very little is otherwise known about the man himself. In this work, the author Graeme Cohen takes the verifiable events from Gardiner's life and weaves the extraordinary tale of a driven researcher who became embroiled in political scandals, ill-fated business ventures and salacious liaisons.

Gardiner was born in Dublin around 1833 and studied at Queen's College Galway, before he dropped out of his engineering course after two years. He arrived with his wife and two small children in Melbourne in 1856, and it is in Australia where he left his mark. His mathematical passion was in the area of geometry, a topic on which he published over a dozen research articles. Although his publication record exceeded those of contemporary mathematicians in Australia, he struggled to secure the academic position that he felt he deserved.

Having to eke out a living as a surveyor or as an occasional mathematics teacher, his professional frustration was compounded by his propensity for workplace conflict, where he considered his superiors and colleagues his intellectual inferiors. This bitter cocktail led to a turbulent career, where the luckless protagonist never lasted very long in any position before the inevitably acrimonious parting of ways.

Cohen develops the plausible character of a conceited mathematician and malcontent, whose awkward personality frequently obstructed his own ambitions. However, this is not the simple story of a tortured genius battling against the world. Indeed, Gardiner's single-minded pursuit of mathematical research impacted on his personal life, where he revealed a less palatable dimension to his character.

In the genre of historical fiction, it is natural to wonder how much of a story is based on fact and how much is fiction. Fortunately for us, Gardiner teasingly left traces of his movements and activities through letters written to newspapers, advertisements placed offering services as a maths tutor, public challenges made to the mathematicians of Australia, and parliamentary and court proceedings. His legacy is highly unusual; thus it is unsurprising that Cohen became interested in the story of this eccentric character. So, in the spirit of the oft stated Irish adage of not letting the truth get in the way of a good story, the author takes these data points and masterfully performs an act of interpolation to link them via the engaging narrative of our antihero.

Set against the backdrop of the daily struggles of early colonial Australia, the author paints the picture of a brilliant researcher and a flawed character. Moreover, the technical aspects of Gardiner's research are kept to a minimum, so this novel can easily be enjoyed by readers that do not possess deep mathematical knowledge. Cohen has thus

done an excellent job of candidly bringing Gardiner's story to life, so I fully recommend this as a highly entertaining and sometimes shocking read.

Editor's note: see also Graeme Cohen's *Letter to the Editor* in Number 92, Winter 2023, and his article *Martin Gardiner: the first Irish-Australian mathematician* in Number 85, Summer 2020.

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