

Book review: “*The Possibly True Story of Martin Gardiner*”

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Graeme Cohen, 1 August 2022

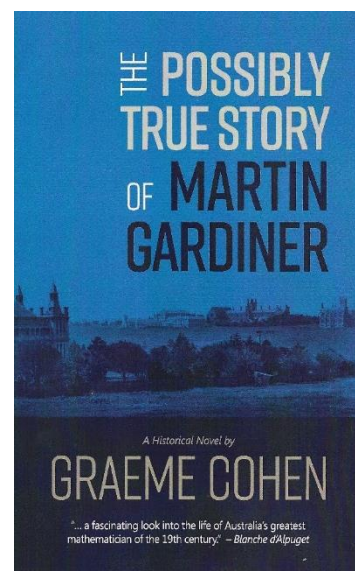
The Possibly True Story of Martin Gardiner

Sydney, NSW: Black Mountain Books (Halstead Press)

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AU\$ 34.95 | Contact the publishers for international postage costs

This historical novel is by Graeme Cohen, a former colleague of mine for many years, and a number theorist whose work, particularly with various aspects of perfect numbers, will be well known to many readers of this journal. Graeme is also a historian of mathematics, author of the acclaimed *Counting Australia In: the People, Organisations and Institutions of Australian Mathematics* with a foreword by Lord Robert May of Oxford, Halstead Press, Sydney, 2006.



Here is some information about this Martin Gardiner in Graeme’s own words:



He had completed just two years’ study at Queen’s College, Galway, and then four years on the railroads in Montreal as an assistant surveyor, when he arrived in Melbourne in 1856 with his wife Bridget and their two children. He was then just 23 years old. This is all verifiable, as is a great deal of my account of Gardiner’s subsequent erratic and sometimes ugly life as a teacher, civil engineer and surveyor.

Most intriguing, for me as a mathematician, was Gardiner’s brilliance in geometry and the theory of trigonometric surveying. Self-taught once he left Ireland,

and maintaining regular correspondence with the best English mathematicians, he published articles in the *Proceedings* of the Royal Societies of Victoria and New South Wales, and in a number of British journals. He has subsequently been described as Australia's greatest mathematician of the nineteenth century, exceeding the output of the seven university professors of mathematics that had been appointed around the country in that period.

There were, however, many aspects of that erratic and unfulfilled life that I could not account for, and so I simply made up those bits – the 'possibly true' parts of the story. Read about Gardiner's wives, his liaisons, his nine children (or was it ten?) and his persistent arguments with family, colleagues, employers and government. Decide for yourself if today he would be classed as on the autism spectrum. ”

Mathematicians will enjoy the mathematics, especially in relation to teaching, and particularly in today's milieu to the passing references to Asperger's Syndrome and mathematicians on the autism spectrum.

Gardiner was elected to the newly founded London Mathematical Society in 1867. The Society was established on 16 January 1865, the first president being Augustus De Morgan who was succeeded by James Joseph Sylvester. Gardiner's election to membership in the society was seconded by Arthur Cayley from the University of Cambridge and Thomas Archer Hirst from the University of London. Gardiner also had a paper accepted in the second volume of the *Proceedings*. It concerned the simplification of a process of William Rowan Hamilton of Trinity College Dublin relating to the inscription of polygons in quadric surfaces, so there was no question of Gardiner's status as a serious mathematician.

While I had read drafts of Professor Cohen's book before its final printing, I can attest to the human as well as the mathematical interests in this book: a story of life in a new, very large and sparsely populated country during the nineteenth century, a country whose geography, geology and landforms puzzled the European settlers and inland explorers at those times. The book is also a good example of the rapidly developing genre of historical fiction novels. At a more general level, we see signs in the book of the nineteenth century emergence of professional mathematical societies and professional mathematicians, as distinct from rich lawyers indulging their mathematical hobbies – very often very successfully it must be said!