

Croker Prize for Biography

Entry 1404

**Uncovering Secrets of the Past: The
Blackest Family Member (Herbert
Smith)**

Uncovering secrets of the past: the “blackest” family member...

The problem with life is that you can only live it blindly, in one direction. Memory has its own ideas; it snatches elements of story from whenever, tries to put them together. It comes back at you from all angles.

Anna Funder *All that I am*, Penguin, Melbourne, 2011, p. 259

Working in the railway workshops in Sydney after the Second World War, Dad had a special annual pass to take our family by train to visit our grandparents – either to Condobolin, where my brother, sister and I were born and where our maternal (widowed) grandmother lived, or to Tambaroora (Aboriginal for ‘place of the ibis’¹) in the Hill End district to the home of my father’s mother and her second husband Herbert (“Bert”) Smith.²

As city suburban children, we looked forward to these holidays. My older brother Bob was allowed to go by himself to Pop and Gran Smith’s place. Pop, a miner and carrier in the Mudgee district at the time,³ would meet Bob either at Bathurst Station or Mudgee. Each day, Pop, Gran and Bob would spend time together working hard in their extensive vegetable garden. Bob would also go with Pop when he was required to transport goods here and there in his truck. At the end of each day, according to Bob, Pop would ask him to rub his aching knees with ‘stinkin’ Horse liniment’ that made Bob very squeamish – leftover ‘war injuries’, Pop claimed.⁴

Not long before my brother died in late 2010, he recalled these holidays with great affection and wondered when and how Pop had been wounded. His Attestation and Enlistment Papers for war service held in the Australian National Archives revealed all.⁵ **Herbert Ernest Smith**, born at Molong NSW in 1896, enlisted twice in the First AIF: November 1915 and March 1916. He had absconded, probably along with many others, from training at Casula,⁶ Liverpool barely three months after first signing that he would ‘truly serve’ King and Empire ‘until the end of the war’. This desertion presaged what was to come.⁷ On board HMAT *Ascanius* en route to the battlefields, he was absent from parades and guilty of abusive language. Joining his battalion in France, he stayed for a month as they moved towards the Front.⁸ And then he disappears, is apprehended 6 weeks later, tried ‘in the field’ and sentenced ‘to suffer death by being shot’. This was commuted to ‘15 years penal servitude’.⁹

So Pop did not rejoin his battalion. He spent the rest of the war in confinement after being arrested – in prison or in hospital. His nominated next-of-kin, his mother Emily, received word that he was ‘suffering from alcoholism, serious’. Later, a stay of three months in a V(enereal) D(isease) Hospital was not reported to his mother. Military officials often withheld such sensitive information from the family. Pop escaped from the prison in Le Havre and was placed in another prison in Rouen on his arrest a month later. Five days on, he was in No 10 General Hospital with **synovitis of the knee**.

A Court Marshall held at Abbeville on 21 January 1919, charged him with being absent from duty; losing regimental ‘necessaries’; committing ‘robbery with violence’; and shooting himself in the right knee. Found guilty, he was sentenced to three years penal servitude with stoppage of pay and then transferred to Portland Prison, Southampton.¹⁰ Even on the return sea journey to Australia, he escaped from the ship’s guardroom and absconded into Cape Town.¹¹ After his arrest, he worked his way back to Melbourne as a stoker on HT *Ceramic* arriving in October 1919. He was dishonourably discharged in August 1920, ‘automatically forfeiting war medals and ineligible for war benefits’.

Aged 24, he settled in Auburn and delivered blocks of ice from Five Dock to other Sydney suburbs,¹² including Mascot where he met Ada Harvey (née Vass) who was living with her two young sons, Edward (“Eddie”) and Charles (“Jim” – my dad). Mr and Mrs Herbert Smith moved to Condobolin about four years later when Bert obtained a job on a sheep station at Roto (some 230 km away) as a cook, with his step-son Eddie as his assistant, and later in Condobolin as a General Carrier.¹³ Jim had to stay in Mascot for two years to finish his schooling.

Now Bert Smith was ‘a nice bloke’, but Ada was ‘a dragon’.¹⁴ Electoral rolls of the Cudgegong Shire show they moved from Condobolin to Tambaroora near Hill End in 1943 after the boys had grown up and were married with their own families.¹⁵ And it was this old gold-mining area we explored while holidaying in their two-bedroom corrugated-iron shack until Pop’s death in 1950. On Pop’s request to look after Gran until she found suitable accommodation, she moved in with our family and stayed for fourteen years. The first few years were fine, until, for a now-unknown reason, mother and son stopped talking to one another.

Despite this, Mum (Jim’s wife) devotedly looked after Gran in every way. Mealtimes were tense with conversation strained. The ‘dragon’ side of Gran’s nature revealed itself and worsened as Bob, Robyn and I grew up and started bringing friends home. She could be heard throughout the house unjustly criticising the friends in her bedroom. And if they stayed overnight, as John often did before we married, the insults came thick and fast. Those years were extremely miserable for us and I am sure the situation intensified my father’s anger – for he was an angry man. A few years before she died in 1968, Gran moved into a Housing Commission flat in the nearby suburb of Birrong and mellowed towards us. She was buried with Pop in Mudgee Cemetery.¹⁶

Life’s experiences tend to shape our personalities, but are not always responsible for our reactions to them – that lies within the individual.

My mother told a medical social worker in 1950 that Gran (Ada) had remarried when Jim was 7 years old and that she [Mum] had no information about ‘his real father, he died when patient [Jim] was a baby’.¹⁷ This was not true. For Gran married Pop in 1947 after her first husband died. On Edward Paul Harvey’s death certificate was added details of his first marriage – in Column 12: Waterloo, Sydney, 25 [22] years, Ada Vass; in Column 13: Edward J. 38, Charles R. 33 living & one female deceased [Kathleen Ellen]. So my **bigamist** grandfather left behind a distressed wife and three children: [married] son Francis aged 31, Ellen B. [Nun/St Joseph’s Convent] 25 & Kathleen [Giumelli] 22,¹⁸ none deceased. The additions had to be countersigned by his second wife on 5 January 1948.¹⁹

I can only imagine her distress on discovering that her marriage was illegal and her three children were illegitimate. This second family, my half-uncle and aunts, was a religious one; the ceremony having taken place in St Mary’s Cathedral, Sydney [1918 – Francis was born in 1915].²⁰ The first was a ‘mixed’ marriage between a Catholic and an Anglican in St Silas Church of England, Waterloo. Their marriage certificate contains a few details that differ from other records, giving rise to conjecture on the personality or memory of the groom who supplied the information.²¹ Another supposition for the marriage breakup centres on the tragic early death of their daughter.²² At the time, my grandmother was expecting another child, my father. My grandfather used the names he had given his first daughter for the two daughters of his second marriage – Ellen and Kathleen.

The question remains: Who would be the ‘blackest’ family member of these three?

Is it Herbert Ernest Smith – the young man who was not suitable for military authoritarian rule and unable to face frontline fighting in the horrific trenches of France in the Great War? In civilian life, he became responsible for the welfare of a single mother and her two young sons, providing them with security and being an interesting and pleasant step-grandfather.

Or is it Ada Smith (Harvey, née Vass) who gained the reputation from others outside the family as being harsh? A malicious side of her personality became apparent when she shared our family home after her second husband's death. Memories of this are unforgettable.

And then there is my paternal grandfather, Edward Paul Harvey!

For me, Edward Paul Harvey is the “blackest” member of the family. After deserting his first family, he made no contact with his two surviving sons (and their children). He prevented us knowing him and consequently members of our extended family. Such a lie – that my grandfather had died when my father was a young boy – deprives people of knowledge of the past and results in lost experiences.

by xxxxxxxx [edited by SAG] born xxxxxxx [edited by SAG], Condobolin NSW, in “The Laurels”, a private hospital established by Nurse Madline Floyd.²³



¹ Hill End & Tambaroora Gathering Group, <www.heatgg.org.au>.

² Herbert Smith is registered on the 1943, '46 & '47 Electoral Rolls for the Cudgegong Shire in the Gwydir district as being a miner, NSW State Library.

³ The disused gold diggings provided us children with hours of imaginative fun. At the time, we were unaware that the famous Australian artist Donald Friend was also living in the area, see *The Diaries of Donald Friend*, Vol. 2, edited by Paul Hetherington, National Library of Australia, Canberra, 2003, pp.543-642.

⁴ Personal reminiscences of Herbert Robert James (“Bob”) Harvey, in conversation with me (sister), Redlands Qld, 2010. When he discovered the truth, Bob reacted with affectionate humour: ‘If I’d have known I would have told him to rub his own bloody knees!’

⁵ National Archives of Australia (NAA), SMITH, Herbert Ernest, No 6187, War Service Record, digitised (58p.), <www.naa.gov.au>.

⁶ Report of the 1915 Royal Commission into the Administration of the Liverpool (/Casula) Camp/s revealed reasons the newly-enlisted men were extremely unhappy. They rioted in mid-February 1916 and, without permission, made their way to Sydney by train to voice their complaints to the authorities. Several never returned. ‘1916 AIF Mutiny Strike’, <<http://trove.nla.gov.au/list?id=16432>>.

⁷ See John Baxter, Ch. 19, “G’day, Digger”, *Paris at the end of the World. The City of Light during the Great War, 1914-1918*, Harper Perennial, Sydney, 2014. The rate of Australians deserting was ‘four times more ... than from any other Dominion force’, p.173.

⁸ War Diary or Intelligence Summary, 18th Battalion, Australian War Memorial (AWM), AWM4 23/35/20: Date 6.3.17, ‘Bn is now covering three [ruined] villages of Le Barque, Ligny-Thillois and Thillois’.

⁹ War Service Record, 18.6.17, p.10 handwritten & p.52 typed. No Australian serviceman was to be executed without the sentence being confirmed by the Governor-General; see Death Penalty, Peter Dennis *et al.*, *The Oxford Companion to Australian Military History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997, pp. 203-4 .

¹⁰ War Service Record, p.42.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.51.

¹² War Record shows home address as “Barunga” Newton St, Auburn, p.55. Photograph of Bert seated in his horse-drawn delivery cart inscribed with: ‘FIVE DOCK ICE WORKS

H.E. SMITH AGENT FIVE DOCK ICE WORKS PARRA. RD FIVE DOCK ICE TEL [-]5.

¹³ Electoral Rolls, Calare District.

¹⁴ Mr Clarrie Cunningham, who lived next door when young, conveyed his impressions of the family to a cousin in November 2010. He remembered he had worked at the same chemist in Condobolin as our father when young. According to Clarrie, Bert Smith ‘has the distinction of being the first to be hit by a diesel train. Early one foggy morning he was coming down the hill to the railway crossing. He had his windows up and couldn’t hear the diesel’s horn trying to warn him and it hit the back of the truck. ... Bert wasn’t very happy’. Clarrie and his brother Bill witnessed the event.

¹⁵ Lorraine Purcell, Convener, Hill End & Tambaroora Group, by email 17/09/2012: Herbert Smith was first recorded as “a miner” and Ada, “home duties”; ‘they were on the Commonwealth Electoral Rolls up to and including 1950’. In Bruce Goodwin, *Gold and people: recollections of Hill End, 1920s to 1960s* (Bruce Goodwin, 1992), the Smiths are mentioned twice in the appendices: Newcomers to Hill End During the Depression and Post WW2, p.202, as: Bert woodcarter lived Tambaroora & Ada; and on Electoral and other rolls, p.218, as: Ada H.D. [home duties] Tambaroora & Herbert James wood carter Tambaroora.

¹⁶ NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Historical Record, Death 1950/013618; Death 1968/029504; photograph of grave in Mudgee Cemetery.

¹⁷ Medical Social Worker’s report after interviewing wife of Charles Robert Harvey (Army No. N351766), undergoing Sub-coma Insulin treatment, in Concord Hospital, 1950: ‘Step-father “better than a father” to patient and patient is very fond of him. Mother remarried when patient was seven years. ... no information about real father, he died when patient was a baby and seems was not very satisfactory. Patient’s mother never spoke of him’, photocopied documents supplied under the Freedom of Information Act by the Department of Veterans’ Affairs Canberra, March 2012.

¹⁸ NSW Marriage, 1945/004672, between Leslie James Giumelli & Kathleen Edna Harvey, 30 December 1944 with the consent of parents of the bride, Edward & Millicent. A positive email response to a letter sent to three Sydney addresses – with surname Giumelli, <<http://www.whitepages.com.au>> – included a photograph of the bridal party with my grandfather and his son Francis. The Marriage certificate of Francis Harvey to May Edwards, Ref. No 1937/M12565, was not issued ‘because one of the parties was convicted of bigamy’, email from Client Services Officer dated 28/03/2011. At present, this has blocked further research into this line of the Harvey family.

¹⁹ NSW Death, 1947/001323.

²⁰ No marriage certificate has been located, either in NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, or in the microfilmed registers of St Mary’s Cathedral, SAG 203, NSW State Library, Sydney. Information from Death certificate 1947/001323.

²¹ NSW Marriage, 1906/002660; groom registered as Edward James.

²² NSW Death, 1912/009162, Kathleen Ellen Harvey aged 2 on 21 August of tuberculous meningitis; parents noted as Edward Paul & Ada (née Vass). Also Funeral Notices, *Sydney Morning Herald (SMH)*, 2 September 1912, p.7, Trove newspapers, <<http://trove.nla.gov.au>>.

²³ NSW Birth, 46715 issued 22nd June 1989; birth announced in local newspaper XXXXXX [edited by SAG]; advertisement for the “Laurel (*sic*) Private Hospital’ opened in William Street, *Lachlander*, 26 January 1927; *1890-1990 Condobolin Where the Lachlan Flows*, Condobolin Family Group, 1990, p.69.