

Croker Prize for Biography

Entry 1410

**A First Class “Bounder”:
gone but not forgotten
(Eric Robin Wark)**

Eric Robin Wark, although not a close relative to me, was a rare one in our family of unassuming, slightly introvert, law abiding citizens. He was a “bounder” who disappeared into thin air after causing great havoc and embarrassment but is well remembered. Many say he should have been made the proverbial skeleton in the cupboard. This story can only now be written that his son, who spent many years researching his wayward biological father, has passed on.

Eric Robin Wark was born in Wagga Wagga in 1884 into a family originally from Glasgow, involved in the production of Gas, firstly in New Zealand then Tasmania, Tamworth and Bathurst. The family of civil engineers arrived in Sydney from New Zealand on board the ship *Hero* in 1868.¹ Eric had one brother, Alan, who forged a career form himself as a solicitor with Norton Smith; a delicate position in view of the following events.

Eric enters the scene during a Robinson family holiday in the Blue Mountains. Eric Wark and Jessie Robinson married 21 June 1917 in Ashfield according to the rites of the Baptist Church² and we believe with pressure from the family as their only child was born in December that year.³ Jessie, born 1889 the daughter of Richard and Hannah Mary Robinson and affectionately known as “Oovie”, was a graduate of Sydney University with a BA in 1912 followed by Teacher training the following year. Her first permanent position was as a Latin and Mathematics teacher was at Parramatta High School.⁴ As was the custom, as a married woman, Jessie resigned in June 1917 but takes up a temporary position in the Bowral district following her son’s birth in December 1917, in February 1918 where she spent three years before moving on to Sydney Girls High School in July 1921 the Hornsby Girls High School in January 1931 until retirement in 1949.⁵ Meanwhile information was in the newspapers about Jessie’s divorce from Eric and his subsequent misbehaviour.

In the *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miner’s Advocate*:

Another case of alleged imposition came before Mr Payten, S. M. at the Paddington Police Court yesterday when Eric Robin Wark, aged 33 was charged with having falsely represented himself to be a returned sailor. The accused pleaded not guilty. The hearing was adjourned till Monday next bail being allowed.⁶

The tale is continued in the *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miner’s Advocate*.

The case in which Eric Robin War, 33 years of age, was charged with having falsely represented himself to be a returned soldier, was continued before Mr Payten, S.M., at the Paddington Police Court yesterday. It was alleged accused

¹ Research by Blair Wark 1994.

² Sydney Morning Herald 19 November 1921 p. 9

³ Notes from son John Mervyn Wark.

⁴ *Phoenix* 1963, p. 8

⁵ Department of Education.

⁶ *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miner’s Advocate* 14 December 1917, p. 4

had stated that he had taken part in the Jutland battle. The defendant Wark, in his defence, described himself as a mechanical engineer, and denied having told anyone that he had taken part in the battle of Jutland or that he was a returned sailor, nor had he led anyone to believe that he was a lieutenant in the Royal Navy. Accused admitted that he had not done any work for two years since the time he was discharged from the ship Cape Corso. He stated that he had £530, £200 of which he had expended on the purchase of his father-in-law's interest in a mine. Wark further denied that he ever proposed marriage to Miss McPhail. He had never told her that he was in the Jutland battle. He admitted that on the occasion of his trip to the mountains with Captain Little he had his letters addressed to Lieutenant Wark and Captain Wark. In reply to further questions the accused stated that he had never been in the navy. The uniform he wore was not a naval uniform, but a mercantile marine uniform.⁷

The *Northern Times* added the following information:

At age 33 years he told Mr Reginald Lake that the accused had spent 22 years in the Navy, had been at various stations and that he was entitled to wear more than one decoration... he said he had had special service in the East and that the Admiralty thought so much of him that he was put in special schools and that he was now Master of Engineering and Bachelor of Science. Accused had told witness that he was on HMS Shark...⁸

The *Maitland Mercury* took up the story:

The recognisances entered into by Eric Robin Wark who was recently charged with wearing a sailor's uniform under false pretences were ordered to be forfeited by Mr. Payten, S.M. at Paddington Police Court last week. Wark failed to appear when his name was called. The court was informed that the house which belonged to his mother-in-law had been sold by him as sole executor and that since then he had absconded. A warrant for his arrest has been issued.⁹

The *Police Gazette* of 1918 detailed the issue of a warrant and went on to describe the offender;

...5 feet 6 inches high, well set, ruddy complexion, brown hair inclined to be fair, hazel eyes, clean shaved, two slight scars on forehead, generally dress in a navy blue sac suit and grey soft felt hat. Lately resided at "Jesmond" George Street Marrickville and at Lawson. Can be identified by Sergeant Murdoch , Garrison.

While on the run the following appeared in the *Police Gazette* on 23 February 1921.

⁷ *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 18 December 1917.

⁸ *Northern Times* 29 December 1917, p. 5

⁹ *The Maitland Mercury*. 19 January 1918.

There was also stolen about 11.30 am on 4th inst. The same time as a gold watch and triangle pendant (1921-264) watch now described as having been made by Fairfax and Roberts with a gold buckle on a strap and a pendant, filigree lozenge shape with an amethyst in centre from the residence of Alan Wark, 63 Yeo Street Neutral Bay, the property of Dorothy Donaldson. A lady's old fashioned open gilt face key winding watch, then chased cast, and lady's gold band ping cameo ring (lady's head design) claw setting. Also the property of Amy Donaldson. A gold band bracelet, set with a number of pearls on top, centre ones missing; a gold flexible basket pattern bracelet; a gold safety pin brooch; turquoise heart, with pearl leaves on each side; a gold fine curb, link short, muff chain; and a pearl and turquoise earring. Also the property of Evelyn Wark (Eric Robin and Alan Wark's mother) a curb link chain brooch with a very fine gold curb chain with a small knob on one end, underneath pin missing; and two plain gold shirt studs, total £37.

The entry went on to give a description of two men, one was the same description of Eric Wark in the 1918 Police Gazette.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* of 19 November 1921 gave a list of those "In Divorce" before Mr Justice Gordon.

WARK v WARK

Jessie Wark, (formerly Robinson) sought divorce from Eric Robin Wark, who she charged with desertion. The parties were married at Sydney in June, 1917 according to the rites of the Baptist Church. Mr. D. S. Evans (instructed by Mr. E. R. M. Newton) appeared for the petitioner who was granted a decree nisi, returnable in six months.

Jessie never re-married and spent her life teaching and bringing up her son who went on to gain a degree at Sydney University¹⁰, marry and after a short stint in the army¹¹ spent his life in the Commonwealth Public Service in Canberra (for which he received an OBE in 1978¹²) enjoying his cricket and golf. He did not have any issue.

As for Eric Robin Wark, up until 1935 he was receiving money bequeathed to him under a will by an aunt. It was about 1935 that Eric turned up at the residence of Jessie and her son at Homebush. Mervyn was not at home at the time but his aunt also saw the visitor at the front door. Mervyn recorded that he was sure they recognised Eric but apparently decided not to alarm me. They said it looked like him but perhaps it was just a co-incidence.

¹⁰ <http://Calendar-archive.usyd.edu.au> 1942

¹¹ www.recordsearch.naa.gov.au. NX190679. Accessed 17/8/2013.

¹² www.london-gazette.co.uk/issues/47550/Supplements/6264/page.pdf. 3 June 1978 Accessed 8/4/2014.

I only met Mervyn, a distant cousin, in his retirement years in Canberra about 1994 when he was trying to follow up on his memories. Hand written letters, now a thing of the past, went back and forth, and were a regular occurrence following my expression of an interest in research and offered to follow up what I could. Each long letter contained more information and thoughts. One of his later epistles expressed a PS that he was going to patent the mystery as a cure for insomnia. Despite my efforts at State Archives, Society of Australian Genealogists and the Mitchell Library (then without the benefits of Trove) it was to no avail. We failed to find out what happened to Mervyn's elusive father. If anyone does know, I would be delighted to hear.

John Mervyn Wark passed away quietly on 26 August 2010.