

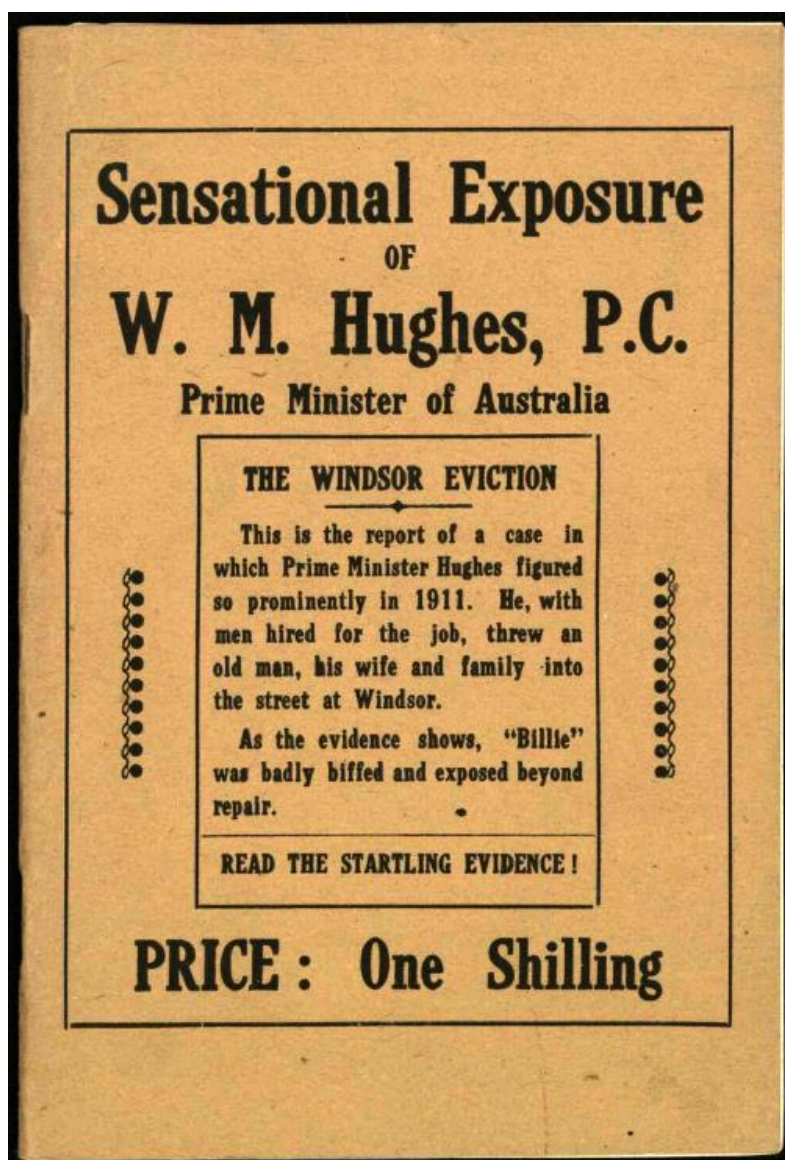
CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2023

2315 Exposure!

by Wendy Pryor

Exposure!

I grew up believing that my Bellenger ancestors were intrepid explorers. Explorers who gave their name to the Bellinger River and town of Bellinger, NSW. That my great-grandfather Richard Bellenger was a folk hero, the archetypal Aussie battler who prevailed in a David and Goliath-like battle with Attorney General and later Prime Minister, Billy Hughes. This incredible story, written to discredit 'Little Billy' as a bully and a disgrace to the Labor movement, was recorded in a battered monograph¹ in our family archives.



Monograph cover. The 'old man' refers to Richard Bellenger.²

The first myth was easy to dispel. Bellingen derived from the Aboriginal word 'billingen', meaning 'clear water'. The river's name resulted from a cartographer's spelling error.³ Our Bellengers came from England and settled in Tasmania,⁴ having nothing to do with Bellingen.

The truth about Richard was more complicated. Something didn't stack up. If he was such a hero, why did my grandfather never mention him? Why did my mother not know until recently that her grandfather was buried in a small churchyard near her childhood home?⁵

Richard Bellenger
1850-1919
Gone but not forgotten

"Poor man, he *was* forgotten", said my mother as she laid a posy upon his grave.

It turned out that Tasmanian-born Richard,⁶ tenth child of Thomas Bellenger, Chief District Constable of Marlborough,⁷ was an enigma who invited both admiration and trouble wherever he went. A family photograph portrays him as a dapper fellow with a surly expression.

Richard's wife Isabella was from the well-to-do Fergusson family of Tinderbox Bay.⁸ With their four children, the couple made a curious move to the remote town of Wairio in New Zealand's Southland. Perhaps because Isabella's sister had just borne a son to Richard?⁹

In Wairio, Richard was acclaimed as president of the local cricket club,^{10,11} raconteur,^{12,13} and a founder of the new school^{14,15} and the Farmers' Progress Association.¹⁶ Meanwhile, he dishonestly obtained land grants from the Wairio Waste Land Board in the names of Isabella and the children.¹⁷ He illegally built upon the land, failed to pay creditors,¹⁸ and went bankrupt.¹⁹ A magistrate described Richard's actions as 'an unmitigated swindle'.²⁰ Richard left behind friends and enemies when the family left Wairio in 1886.²¹ They now had seven children.

For several years, the family lived in inner Sydney where Richard was a sub-water inspector.²² Two more sons, including my grandfather,²³ were born there.

Next stop Wagga Wagga. Here Richard did some farming and embarked on his litigious career, instigating a legal stoush following a petty dispute over a broken wagon wheel.^{24,25}

In 1900, leaving Isabella on her death bed in Wagga Wagga,²⁶ Richard took his two youngest sons to Bucca Bucca in Northern NSW.²⁷ As self-appointed founder, treasurer and secretary of the Bucca Bucca Progress Association,²⁸ Richard campaigned for improved mail services²⁹ and construction of the North Coast Railway.³⁰ He organised sporting events,³¹ attempted to establish a dairy cooperative,³² supervised a 21-gun salute to celebrate the opening of the first Federal Parliament,³³ and stood unsuccessfully for election in the state seat of Raleigh.³⁴

Richard was involved in further petty and vexatious court cases over such matters as 'detained blacksmiths tools'³⁵ and slander.³⁶ He made a bitter enemy of Chas Julius, his arch-

rival counterpart of the Bucca Creek Progress Association,^{37,38,39} but somehow garnered effusive praise at his valedictory dinner when he left Bucca Bucca in 1904.⁴⁰

In 1905, aged fifty-five and a farmer in Richmond,⁴¹ Richard married thirty-year-old Charlotte Oxby, known as Lottie.⁴² As the new family grew, a series of short-lived farming arrangements led some to believe that Richard had developed a methodology to profit from deals gone awry.⁴³

In one shady deal with a gullible man named Hough at the local pub, Richard attempted to sell some timber cut from the grounds of Hawkesbury Agricultural College.⁴⁴ He intended to settle a debt with another man. The college principal rightfully intervened to prevent the timber from being collected, but somehow Richard managed to sue Hough for dishonouring the deal.

Richard's next ambiguous arrangement was something he described as a 'share farm' in Windsor with politician Billy Hughes. But as far as Hughes was concerned, Richard was an employed farmer, and an incompetent one at that. When asked to vacate, Richard defiantly refused, threatening to sabotage Hughes' political ambitions. An angry Hughes brought a pack of henchmen to evict Richard and his family, including Isabella's two youngest sons. A nasty scuffle broke out with fists and clubs. Richard, the sons, and Hughes were battered and bloodied.

Richard was forced to leave by night with his pregnant wife and children. A subsequent claim for £1000 against Hughes for assault and wrongful eviction found a verdict of £255 in Richard's favour. The affair was widely reported by journalists with varying perspectives regarding then Attorney General Hughes and the innocence or otherwise of Richard Bellenger.^{45,46,47,48,49,50,51,52,53,54} My guess is that there was thuggery on both sides.

Spurred on by his 'success', Richard took his family to Bourke.⁵⁵ As 'Inspector of Nuisances', he prosecuted residents who dumped nightsoil on their properties.⁵⁶ As Acting Town Clerk, Richard gave himself 'official' permission to do the same on his own land.⁵⁷ After several court battles with various associates,^{58,59,60,61,62} Alderman Bellenger harassed and slandered the Town Clerk, eventually being sued £200 for defamation.^{63,64} Lottie had to surrender her self-funded grocery business and sell her land to bail out her unemployed husband.^{65,66}

Richard and Lottie returned to Sydney and separated. Lottie and her five children had to live in a burnt-out house owned by a son-in-law of Isabella. They had just a kitchen and a veranda.^{67,68} My Gallipoli-veteran grandfather would have been horrified when he returned from his second tour of duty to find his beloved step-mother in this terrible predicament.

Lottie worked hard as a school cleaner⁶⁹ and eventually acquired property. She was always much loved by her family. That was never a myth.

Richard died in 1919 of heart failure.⁷⁰ Was he really a folk hero? Well, my mother said, "I'm sorry I left those flowers. He didn't deserve them."

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- ² *Ibid.* Photograph of the original item held in a private family collection.
- ³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bellingen,_New_South_Wales, accessed 23 May 2023
- ⁴ <https://webarchive.nla.gov.au/awa/20141022032444/http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/136421/20141022-0039/www.heavenandhelltogether.com/index4081.html>, accessed 23 May 2023
- ⁵ NSW Death Registration Transcription, Ref no. 1919/24654
- ⁶ Register of Births in the District of Hamilton, Tasmania, 1851, no. 124
- ⁷ The Courier (Hobart), 1 September 1852, p. 3
- ⁸ The Mercury (Hobart), 25 November 1873, p. 1
- ⁹ Register of Births in the District of Gordon, Tasmania, 1879, no. 306
- ¹⁰ Southland Times, 9 October 1884, p. 3
- ¹¹ Southland Times, 20 October 1885, p. 2
- ¹² Southland Times, 13 June 1882, p. 3
- ¹³ Southland Times, 19 July 1884, p. 4
- ¹⁴ Southland Times, 30 January 1834, p. 2
- ¹⁵ Adams, J & Nisbet, N (eds) East of the Twinlaws: Centennial History of the Wairio School and District, p. 16. Wairio School Committee 1981
- ¹⁶ Southland Times, 16 June 1883, p. 3
- ¹⁷ Southland Times, 16 June 1883, p. 2
- ¹⁸ Southland Times, 26 May, p. 3
- ¹⁹ Southland Times, 7 May 1883, p. 2
- ²⁰ Southland Times, 29 September 1883, p. 2
- ²¹ Southland Times, 25 June 1886, p. 3
- ²² Sand's Directories, Sydney, 1889, 1891 and 1894
- ²³ New South Wales Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, no. 35833/1894
- ²⁴ Bellenger vs Irving and Benson. Wagga Wagga Express, 27 April 1897, p. 2
- ²⁵ Bellenger vs Irving and Benson. Wagga Wagga Express, 11 May 1897, p. 2
- ²⁶ The Mercury (Hobart), 25 June 1900, p. 1
- ²⁷ 1901 census, District 19, Grafton, County Fitzroy, Township Upper Orara, Locality Bucca
- ²⁸ Clarence and Richmond Examiner (Grafton), 26 May 1900, p. 8
- ²⁹ The Raleigh Sun (Bellingen), 7 September 1900, p. 2
- ³⁰ The Macleay Chronicle (Kempsey), 18 July 1901, p. 5
- ³¹ Clarence and Richmond Examiner (Grafton), 18 January 1901, p. 5
- ³² Clarence and Richmond Examiner (Grafton), 21 May 1901, p. 8
- ³³ Clarence and Richmond Examiner (Grafton), 25 May 1901, p. 2
- ³⁴ The Macleay Chronicle (Kempsey), 30 May 1901, p. 5
- ³⁵ Clarence River Advocate, 8 September 1903, p. 3
- ³⁶ Clarence and Richmond Examiner (Grafton), 18 August 1903, p. 8
- ³⁷ Clarence and Richmond Examiner (Grafton), 28 July 1903, p. 8
- ³⁸ Clarence and Richmond Examiner (Grafton), 4 August 1903, p. 8
- ³⁹ Clarence and Richmond Examiner (Grafton), 15 August 1903, p. 3
- ⁴⁰ Clarence and Richmond Examiner (Grafton), 9 August 1904, p. 8
- ⁴¹ Sydney Morning Herald, 1 November 1904, p. 5
- ⁴² NSW Marriage Registration no. 1905/2387
- ⁴³ Sydney Morning Herald. 2 June 1911, p. 5
- ⁴⁴ Windsor and Richmond Gazette, 1 May 1909, p. 10
- ⁴⁵ McCristal, TW. Sensational Exposure of W.M. Hughes, P.C, Prime Minister of Australia: The Windsor Eviction. Published 1922. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-39228063>
- ⁴⁶ Mr Hughes' Farm. Attorney General Bitten and Kicked. Singleton Argus (NSW), 6 June 1911, p. 4
- ⁴⁷ Bellenger vs Hughes: The Freeman's Reach Eviction. Windsor and Richmond Gazette, 10 June 1911, p. 6
- ⁴⁸ The Other Side: Mr Hughes and the Dairy Farm Drama. The Advertiser (Adelaide), 3 June 1911, p. 20
- ⁴⁹ Action for Damages: Verdict Against Mr Hughes. Daily Telegraph (Launceston), 6 June 1911, p. 4
- ⁵⁰ Bellenger vs Hughes. The Dubbo Liberal and Macquarie Advocate (NSW), 7 June 1911, p. 2

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- ⁵² Bellenger vs Hughes. Clarence and Richmond Examiner (Grafton, NSW), 7 December 1911, p. 5
- ⁵³ Action Against Acting Prime Minister: £255 Damages Awarded. National Advocate (Bathurst), 6 June 1911, p. 2
- ⁵⁴ Acting Prime Minister: Verdict Against Mr Hughes. The Border Morning Mail and Riverina Times (Albury), 6 June 1911, p. 2
- ⁵⁵ Government Gazette of the State of New South Wales, 16 April 1913, p.2357
- ⁵⁶ Western Herald (Bourke), 4 July 1914, p. 4
- ⁵⁷ Western Herald (Bourke), 9 May 1917, p. 2
- ⁵⁸ Western Herald (Bourke), 10 March 1917, p. 2
- ⁵⁹ Western Herald (Bourke), 19 May 1917, p. 2
- ⁶⁰ Western Herald (Bourke) 9 March 1918, p.2
- ⁶¹ Bankruptcy file of Charlotte Emily Bellenger, 1919, NSW State Records item no. 21643
- ⁶² Western Herald (Bourke) 26 October 1918, p.2
- ⁶³ Western Herald (Bourke), 27 March 1918 p. 2
- ⁶⁴ Country News. Sydney Morning Herald, 27 March 1918, p. 9
- ⁶⁵ Western Herald (Bourke), 16 November 1918, p. 2
- ⁶⁶ Bankruptcy file of Charlotte Emily Bellenger, 1919, NSW State Records item no. 21643
- ⁶⁷ Sydney Morning Herald, 7 March 1919, p. 1
- ⁶⁸ The Sun (Sydney), 28 December 1915, p 3
- ⁶⁹ Military service record of Frederick Raymond Bellenger, 1926, National Archives of Australia, series B4747, No. 926360, <https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Interface/ViewImage.aspx?B=9263601>, accessed 24 May 2023
- ⁷⁰ NSW Death Registration Transcription. Ref no. 1919/24654