

## Sorting out Alfred

‘Please, Captain Sir, it says here that the *Sir John Rae Reid* is a barque of 326 tons. Pray, Sir, what is a barque?’ Eight year old Alfred pointed to a brass plate that was affixed beside a doorway leading into the interior of the ship. He looked up earnestly at Captain Haig.

Captain Andrew Haig recalled the jocular warning by one of his passengers, the Wesleyan preacher Abraham Biggs. ‘Young Alfred is just one big question-mark,’ Abraham had said. ‘Pray do not hesitate, Sir, to send him on his way, should he bother you with his eternal questioning.’

Truth to tell, the Captain was impatient to return to his cabin, to pore yet again over the plans for his new house in Knopwood’s Point – *Narryna* he thought he would call it. This was his last voyage and he was looking forward to his retirement and to convivial times with old friends, particularly with his future neighbour, the Reverend Bobby Knopwood. ‘Reverend!’ That lecherous old soak! Why, he could remember ...

‘A barque, Captain Sir. What is a barque, please?’ Alfred repeated his question.

With a start, Haig reluctantly came back to the present. He looked down at the little beggar, so serious with his long face and steady, unsettling gaze, his straight hair flopping over his high forehead. He looked like a starving Shetland pony, desperate for information instead of oats.

‘A barque, young Sir? This ’ere’s a barque – why, the *Sir John Rae Reid* herself!’

The look on Alfred’s face reproved him for patronising him so.

Haig went on hurriedly, ‘Well, as you may see a barque be a ship of 300 hundred ton or so. She may be a three- or a four-master, but rigged in a special way. See here lad,’ he placed a hand on Alfred’s thin shoulder, turning him to face the masts, the sheets taut as they heaved, full with wind, ‘the aftermost mast has them triangular sails whilst the other masts have square sails, see, with their own yards. That’s what makes a barque different from other ships. It be the rigging.’

Alfred nodded, pleased now that he’d been treated seriously. ‘But how do they weigh the ship, please Sir, to conclude that she weighs 326 tons? How could a ship as bulky as this fit on a set of scales?’

‘Ha! Them 326 tons ain’t the weight of the ship ’erself, lad! That be the weight of the water she displaces. That be a question of volume, not of weight, like how far she settles in the water, if you take my meaning.’

Alfred chewed this over, frowning. ‘But then, Captain Sir, when the ship is unloaded, she is higher in the water, is she not? So is she 326 tons when she is loaded or when she is unloaded?’

‘Unloaded, lad. Empty.’ Captain Haig replied shortly. He was impatient to check those plans.

But Alfred hadn’t finished. ‘Well, Sir, if she is empty and displaces 326 tons of water, what would happen if you filled her with 326 tons of water? Would she sink or would she remain afloat?’

Captain Haig experienced a brief and extremely unwelcome image of the *Sir John* under 326 tons of water. ‘She’d sink, lad, to be sure. She’d sink like a stone, stout ship though she be.’

He turned to leave, but Alfred touched his arm. ‘No Sir, begging your pardon, but how can that be? Is it not like a balance scale, with 326 tons on one side and 326 on t’other? Why then she’d stay on the surface, or only a trifle below.’ He giggled and looked around him to see if anyone might overhear. ‘But if you tipped the scales, as would happen if you did a wee on her, why then she’d sink, Sir!’

Captain Haig had to smile. Touching his cap with his palm outwards in a salute that Alfred solemnly returned, he turned away. That young whipper-snapper’s too clever by half, he thought. The local lads in Hobarton would soon sort him out. He was already feeling sorry for the poor little beggar.

Captain Haig needn’t have worried. It wasn’t the local lads who tried to sort Alfred out but various officials who Alfred managed to cross.

But that was many years later.

*Forty years on, Alfred Biggs was master-in-charge at Campbell Town school and an amateur astronomer of note ...*

One afternoon in August, 1874, there was a furious knocking at the Biggs front door.

‘Who on earth could that be, dear?’ enquired Harriet.

'Whoever it is, he's damnably rude, rapping on the door like that.' Alfred strode to the door and flung it open.

Reverend Doctor Basil Tudor Craig stood there, Rector of St. Luke's Church of England, in black cassock, a crucifix attached to his girdle, black biretta on his head. He was carrying a brick in his left hand, the index finger of his right hand was raised accusingly, his fleshy face barely suppressing a fierce anger.

'I, Sir, have just found this, *this*,' he almost pushed the brick into Alfred's face, 'on the floor of my Sunday School Room and *your* School Room.'

'Wh-what ...' Alfred stuttered, totally taken aback by this extraordinary outburst.

'And you, Sir, *you*, are responsible. Your ill-disciplined rabble is out of control!' Craig's voice was precise in his fury.

'How dare you, Sir!' Alfred was barely able to contain his rage. 'That damage was not performed during school hours. The roughs removed the bricks during a Public Meeting on Sunday that you allowed. The repairs are your responsibility.'

'Oh no, Sir, this brick and several others were dislodged by your larrikins. If you devoted your energies to running the school instead of stargazing ...'

'Stargazing? You, offensively dressed as if you are the pope himself, you dare talk to me about *stargazing*? Confound you, Sir ...'

'... you have allowed the school run to rack and ruin!' Craig ploughed on. 'If you refuse to do anything about this damage, I shall write to the Board of Education informing them that it is their responsibility to repair it. Good day to you, Sir.'

And so saying, the Reverend Basil Tudor Craig turned and strode down the path towards St. Luke's Rectory.

'What a dreadful man, and a clergyman too,' Harriet murmured. 'Tis said he refuses to bury parishioners when they die from drinking to excess.' She turned to her husband anxiously, 'Do you think he will write to the Board?'

'I doubt that very much. He knows full well that the matter is his responsibility, in the matters both of the cause of the damage and of its repair. He knows the proper course is to bring any complaint before the Local School Board – who will of course take my side. That will put an end to Craig's nonsense.'

But Craig did not go to the Local Board. A couple of weeks later, while perusing *The Mercury* of the 21<sup>st</sup> August, Alfred's jaw dropped, for this is what he read:

#### CAMPBELL TOWN SCHOOL

A letter was received from the Rev. Dr. Craig forwarding resolutions adopted at a meeting of the church wardens, requesting the authority of the Board for making certain repairs and alterations to the school premises, and setting forth that the present schoolmaster, Mr. Biggs, was not fitted for the management of the school. It was agreed to obtain a general report from the Inspector on both matters.

'This is unmitigated slander!' Alfred cried, passing the newspaper to Harriet. 'I shall write to the Board forthwith. I must defend my reputation!'

'Perhaps it would be better first to discuss the matter with the Inspector when he comes. He can tell you what was actually said.'

'Hmmm, yes, very possibly. Not that I thought much of him when we met last June. Bumptious fellow.'

Stephens, the Chief Inspector of Schools, had already visited Alfred the previous June, before Craig had complained about the damage to the church hall. He had arrived unannounced on a Monday morning. No doubt he recalled Alfred's detailed correspondence prior to his taking up the Bothwell appointment and Abraham's part in that.

Again Alfred stood on his right. 'This is not a suitable time to inspect my school, Mr. Stephens. The school has been closed this week past on account of my illness, from which I have not

yet fully recovered. I scarcely need to remind you, Sir, that the Board requires that notice of a visit for examination be given one or two days previously.'

'Oh, that is of no consequence,' Stephens had assured him, and continued with his inspection.

Stephens didn't pay a second visit *in re* Craig's complaints, and although the Reverend Craig lived just a short walk away, Alfred didn't trust himself to speak with the fellow on the matter. So Alfred remained ignorant of the details of his alleged mismanagement.

On October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1874, Alfred's jaw dropped even lower on reading in *Tasmanian Tribune*:

CAMPBELL TOWN SCHOOL

A letter was read from the Rev. Basil Craig, on behalf on behalf of himself and his church wardens, praying for a speedy reply to a letter addressed to the Board some three months back. Both boys and girls were using the same water closets there being no party wall and both decency and morality called for an alteration. The Board declined to submit to the terms proposed, preferring to close the school. ...

*In re* Mr. Biggs – MR. STEPHENS having reported that that this gentleman was one of those teachers who required to be under systematic and authoritative supervision, it was decided to remove him to Kangaroo Point School.

MR. SWAN remarked that he had hoped they had got rid of the Rev. Basil Craig, but it appeared that this hope had not been realised. That gentleman was as much in fault as Mr. Biggs.

'The very devil! Stephens has provided the Board with the report on that visit for which I was totally unprepared. This is outrageous. I shall demand to see a copy of Stephen's ill-timed and irrelevant report and of Craig's second letter. At least that chap Swan sees through him. I shall also tell them that Kangaroo Point is injurious to your health and under no circumstance shall we go there.'

Alfred discovered that, after asking the Board to construct a party wall to separate the water closets, Craig had filed the following complaints:

1. That the schools premises have been damaged by unruly schoolchildren who are supposedly in the charge of Mr. Biggs, who is unable to control his pupils and is therefore unfit to occupy the post as teacher in charge of the school;
2. That there is a universal ill-feeling in the township against Mr. Biggs, owing to which the school could never succeed;
3. That Mr. Biggs had expressed an intention of making things as unpleasant as possible for thirty-four free scholars sent by Dr. Craig, and consequently in a matter of a few weeks not six remained;
4. That Mr. Biggs had got his daughters to assist in the school;
5. That his wife had sometimes had her baby in the school;
6. That Mr. Biggs himself was wretched and miserable.

Alfred wrote to the Board in the strongest terms: 'the Reverend Basil Craig has endeavoured in mere wantonness to destroy my twenty-five years' reputation as a teacher. His statements are an unfounded slander, either frivolous or untrue.' He then rebutted Craig at length, point by point. He reiterated that the damage had been done on Sunday, not in school hours; that he was in fact well-regarded by the parents of his pupils, by the Local Board, who had improperly been ignored both by Craig and by the Central Board, and supplying a petition from parents that he be retained; that the school numbers were in fact at their highest since 1868 and that the decline in free scholars was due to normal attrition, the number remaining more than double the six Craig had alleged; that his eldest daughter Lillie, aged eighteen, had indeed assisted Mrs. Biggs in the discharge of her duties to everyone's benefit, including the pupils'. As to (5), he simply commented 'Well really! Perhaps schoolmistresses have no business to have babies!', and to (6) that it was 'a gross impertinence', untrue, and none of the minister's or his church wardens' business. He added:

... As regards my removal to Kangaroo Point, any chance of success there is foredoomed by the circumstances under which it is proposed to remove me. Moreover, my wife's asthma is exacerbated by the atmosphere at Kangaroo Point; it is not a place fitted for her to live at.... But first, I pray that the Board in justice to my character first dispose of the charges by Rev. Basil Craig ...

His request for an investigation of Craig's slanderous statements was ignored, whereupon Alfred threatened to take the matter to the Supreme Court.

The Board then changed its tune. At its meeting on the 19<sup>th</sup> November, the proceedings of which again appeared publicly in *The Mercury* and the *Tasmanian Tribune* two days later, it had been resolved: that in view of a memorial by a number of residents that Mr. Biggs be retained until 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1875; that the Board relinquish St. Luke's Hall for the school; that Mr. Biggs was labouring under a mistake as to the reason for his removal – he was simply being removed from Campbell Town because the school would be closed at the end of the year; and that he would then be appointed to Kangaroo Point. And Board member, Mr. Wright, opined that he 'did not see on public grounds how the health of a man's wife was to interfere with our arrangements.'

In desperation, both to salvage his damaged reputation and to avoid removal from Campbell Town to a place that put Harriet's health at risk, Alfred told the Board that 'I am able to obtain an eminently suitable alternative to St. Luke's, viz. the top floor of what was known as Kean's Brewery, which would make a most capital school room. This property is in fact owned by my brother Edwin, who is prepared to let it to the Board for the modest rental of £15 p.a.'

In its meeting of the 17<sup>th</sup> December, the Board performed a second *volte face*, reverting to their original reason for dismissing him. They 'agreed to inform Mr. Biggs that it was not in consequence of school accommodation that he was removed, but on account of the inspector's report ...'

*Tasmanian Tribune* in an editorial (December 19, 1875) had a field day over the Board's duplicity:

They coolly turn around and admit that they wrote a letter with the simple hope that dust would be thrown in the eyes of Mr. Biggs, and that he would cease to fight for his imperilled reputation as a teacher. ... What appreciation can there be of the good judgement of a board which one day place the utmost reliance upon the report of an inspector and the next virtually say that it is not worth attention?

This prompted Chief Inspector Stephens, later to become the first Director of Education, to write (*Tasmanian Tribune*, 20<sup>th</sup> December, 1874): '...I have never recommended the removal of Mr. Biggs to Kangaroo Point, or to any other place, in order that he might be under close supervision...' He went on to apologise to Alfred. At the Board meeting in February 1875, he even recommended that Alfred be retained in his present position.

But it was too late. Alfred hadn't been paid for January and February as he was due three months' notice. He wrote to the Board demanding salary for these months but was told – again through the Press – that he had already had three months' notice. He wrote beside the press cutting, his pen quivering with outrage, 'What! from 10 Dec? Then why not pay the salary for those three months?'

Craig's complaint about free scholars damaged Alfred the most. Free scholars were children whose parents could not afford the 9d. a week school fee. Although Alfred produced evidence that Dr. Craig had lied that after a few weeks only six remained out of 34, Dr. Valentine wrote to *The Mercury* (9/11/75) in support of his son-in-law, saying that Valentine had had a casual conversation with Alfred a year previously, reporting Alfred as saying that he would be only too glad if there were no free scholars left, at which 'I expressed my surprise and disapprobation, and told him that such conduct unfitted him for the charge of a school, the primary object of which was to give education to the children of the poor.'

Alfred was cut to the quick. He had been helping his friend rebuild his organ and had worked closely with him on the transit of Venus while the feud with Craig had been roaring. Now his friend was publicly questioning his worth as a teacher. In his reply to Valentine, which appeared in *The Mercury* a week later, he said:

As to the remarks attributed to me by Dr. Valentine ... I must say, with all respect, that distance must have distorted his recollection. ... That the free scholars, as a class, are the most unsatisfactory pupils a teacher has to do with, I have said, the parents not appreciating what costs them nothing. But I do not see why what I may have said (or not said) is to be dragged into the discussion. The question is not words but facts.

Thus ended a good and fruitful friendship. They never made up their difference: Valentine died, just a year later in 1876. In that year too, when the fight had been in progress for two years, Craig was transferred to South Australia.

On receiving his notice of dismissal, Alfred set up his own school in brother Edwin's brewery, the site the Board had refused. This building was known in recent years as the 'Plume' antique shop, and still stands on the eastern side of the Main Road, just south of Campbell Town's famous Red Bridge. The school survived on the ninepences a week of those of the students' parents who could afford it. The other children in Campbell Town who did not attend Alfred's school had no education at all for four years.

Alfred wrote a long letter to *The Examiner* (3/7/1875) rebutting each of Craig's allegations then attacking the Board for their unjust behaviour in accepting Craig's accusations and acting against him before he was allowed to present his case; for its inconsistency in dismissing him on the strength of Stephen's report (which Alfred published in full: it was highly positive both of him and of Harriett!), then on the threat of litigation changing their ground to lack of school accommodation; while Stephen's for his part both recommended his move to Kangaroo Point on the strength of this positive report, then denied he'd ever said it ... an extraordinary story of individual and collective incompetence and dishonesty, if not of actual malice.

Following this letter, both *The Examiner* (6/7/1875) and *The Mercury* (13/11/1875) published outspoken editorials condemning the Board of Education for their incompetence and obstinacy, both calling for enquiries into the matter. *The Examiner* undertook a review of the whole case, from Craig's allegations – 'for the life of us we have not been able to restrain a hearty laugh at some of them – But Mr. Biggs disposes of them all in his letter'. They reserved their main attack for the Board itself: 'We cannot understand such a mass of inconsistencies and contradictions.' The editorial ended with a request for a Parliamentary enquiry into the Board's actions.

*The Mercury's* editorial focused on the fact that this wealthy and important town had no government school, concluding: 'Should the Central Board turn, as heretofore, a deaf ear to reason and the wishes of the community, Government should not only be appealed to but importuned.' This may have moved the Board to action. Since January 1875, when refused St. Luke's Hall, the Board had not opened a new school, even citing Alfred's school as pre-empting the need for another. However, a new government school was opened in 1878.

In August 1875, Alfred appealed to his Excellency the Governor for an investigation of the case, for unpaid salary, and for compensation. He was told his request would be forwarded to the Governor-in-Council, the advisory body to the Governor, and he would receive a reply from them. After a year, on receiving no reply, he wrote to the Colonial Secretary, Mr. Reibey, who promised to look into the matter. He wrote again in May 1877, in October 1877; still no reply. In desperation, Alfred personally addressed the Governor, outlining his previous requests, whose Private Secretary wrote to exactly the same effect as he had previously: it would be referred to the Governor-in-Council! Finally, in October 1878 Alfred wrote to the Government with 'a definite proposal': one year's salary as compensation in final settlement of his grievances.

Alfred related these experiences in another long letter to *The Examiner* (27/1/1879), who published it under the banner headline: WHAT MAY HAPPEN IN TASMANIA. He pointed out that in all these requests, apart from two acknowledgements of receipt by the Governor's Private Secretary, he had received 'not a single scratch of a pen in reply'. Four days later, *The Examiner* published a blistering editorial, concluding: 'We recommend Mr. Biggs to persevere. Let him renew his appeal to successive Administrations: it will have one good effect if no other – namely, it will show to the community the claims of those who arrogate to themselves the character of gentlemen.'

Alfred finally got his Parliamentary Enquiry over eighteen months later, on 24<sup>th</sup> September, 1880: the only question under consideration was whether he should receive his compensation. Dr. Butler, member for Glenorchy and Chairman of the Board of Education throughout the whole saga, was on the defensive:

It is certainly a fact that when Mr. Biggs was at Campbell Town, and previous to that, when he was at Bothwell, there was some complaint as to the mode in which his school duties were conducted. I have no doubt that Mr. Biggs is a man of high moral qualities, and a man with a large amount of learning outside his profession, but he was a man who insisted upon taking his own course, irrespective of those who were placed over him.

On the matter of his refusal to go to Kangaroo Point, 'he was simply a very intractable man':

... it was news to me that Kangaroo Point was such an unhealthy position as to be detrimental to the health of people residing there. ... medical men frequently sent patients for change of air. ... But if Mr. or Mrs. Biggs desired to renew their position under the Board, I feel sure the Board would agree to it.

A debate followed, at first focusing on the inconsistencies in Butler's statement, but opinion eventually hardened against Alfred. While Mr. Dobson thought the matter sufficiently complex to refer to a select committee, Mr. Keach 'thoroughly disapproved of Mr. Biggs attempting to dictate to the Board as to where he should go', likewise thought Mr. Douglas of Mr. Biggs' 'defiant spirit'; Mr. Balfe stated that Mr. Biggs 'was not entitled to any compensation'. However, the Colonial Treasurer urged the House to take a generous view and pay Mr. Biggs £20 instead of £100, if someone would so move. Mr. Dobson so moved; the motion was passed.

Alfred had received £20 for lack of payment of salary, his unjust treatment by the Board, and public defamation.