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Pater Biggs

Tasmanians, having been granted self-government, celebrated their ties to the Mother Country more than did any of the Mainland Australian states. Tasmanians boasted that their climate was like England's; they built houses in imitation of those back at a 'Home' many had never seen and never would; they planted gardens with English flowers and English trees and lined fields and roads with hedgerows. Georgian and Victorian England provided the templates for Tasmanian architecture until the Australian Federation-style emerged in the 1900s.

Scottsdale was a hotbed of such outsourced patriotism. On the Coronation of King George V in June, 1911, the citizens of Scottsdale held sports events, a patriotic concert and a ceremony involving the planting two English oak trees at the gates of the Recreation Ground and formally naming them 'King George' and 'Queen Mary'. Brid Street, where Walter lived, was renamed George Street, and Main Street renamed King Street. In 1913, the design of a postage stamp was changed, inspiring one patriotic citizen to write to the *North-Eastern Advertiser*: 'Every truly British subject throughout the Commonwealth of Australia will be pleased to see that the Postmaster-General has decided to do away with the unsightly kangaroo postage stamp, and have a new stamp struck, featuring the King's head.'¹

In 1902², when the Biggs family arrived, Scottsdale was a community well on the road to prosperity. The rich chocolate soil was known to be very fertile – single potatoes of twenty one pounds weight had been grown. Hitherto, the chief industries in the area were gold and tin mining, and timber. Access to the area was by sea to Bridport or Boobyalla, or by very rough roads that in wet weather become bogs in which horses sank up to their bellies. But when the rail link from Launceston was opened in 1889, and expanded over the next thirty years to include Branxholm, Ringarooma and Herrick, the agricultural potential of the area was realised. In 1909, Scottsdale's *North-Eastern Advertiser* was founded, its politics 'Liberal, Progressive and Fearless'. The first edition stated that with mining in decline, 'it is our desire to cater for the man "on the land" and assist him in the liberation of the wealth lying beneath the soil.'³ That liberation did indeed create the wealth of the region for most of the twentieth century, dairy farming and dairy products and vegetables, principally potatoes, peas and hops, and dehydrated vegetables.

¹ MacFarlane, op. cit. p. 183

² Or 1903. Records and memories are at variance.

³ MacFarlane, W. H. *History of North-East Tasmania*, edited by John Beswick, Scottsdale: The North-Eastern Advertiser, 2007, p. 150.

In Walter's day, farming and retailing were symbiotic; people depended on each other and strong community feeling developed. In 1910, Walter joined the Executive Committee of the newly formed Scottsdale Floral Art and Industrial Society, and kept catalogues of their annual exhibitions. The events provided something for everyone to get involved, with sections on Photography, Music, Literary, Gardening, Fancy Work, Cookery, with such specific events as 'Irish Songs', 'Best Ironed and Starched Shirt', 'Best Local Joke', 'Best Plaited Whip', 'Chip Carving' and for the under eighteens, 'Best Decorated Bicycle', 'Reading at Sight'. Walter was made a Justice of the Peace in 1900 (which later made him the oldest JP in Australia), he was a pillar of the Mechanics Institute, as had been his father; was Returning Officer in parliamentary elections, he spent a term as Warden of Scottsdale, he was President of the Amateur Club in 1915, and he was a leading light in the Rifle Club, the Golf Club and Dorset Masonic Lodge. He was a man who did his civic duty.

Walter was also a stalwart of the Scottsdale Branch of the Royal Society of St. George, which was dedicated to spreading the knowledge of English history, traditions and ideals and to combating all activities that might undermine the strength of England or of the British Commonwealth. The Scottsdale Branch, the first in the Australian Colony, was formed in 1900, three years before Walter arrived there. The secretary of the new Branch wrote to the secretary of the London Society requesting information about membership and other rules. He received the following reply:

Your lovely island is by general consent more than any other colony like the old home. The names of your counties – your Devon, Cumberland, Kent, Sussex, etc. – must ever seem to remind you of the cradle of your race ... It is indeed gratifying to hear of so many going from your little town to fight the Empire's cause in South Africa.⁴

As the last President of this shining beacon of patriotism, Walter inherited a large folder comprising a history of the formation of the Scottsdale branch and 'a very handsome jewel'; a rose in fine enamel and gold filigree, encircling the badge of St George slaying the dragon. The jewel and other memorabilia of the Society are now in Launceston's Queen Victoria Museum.⁵

Walter also subscribed to British Israelism, which claimed that the British and some European royal families were descended from the Lost Tribes of Israel and that, somehow as a consequence, only white people can enjoy God's favour.⁶ Another claim is that during the problematic gap in the life of Jesus, between the ages of twelve and the late twenties, Those Feet in ancient times really did walk upon England's mountains green. Walter saw that as self-

⁴ MacFarlane, op. cit. p. 131

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Israelism.

evident: Where else could He possibly have wanted to go but to England's green and pleasant land? England would have taken preference over even Scottsdale.

Although, like his parents, Walter took no active part in politics – except for performing his civic duty as Returning Officer – his Anglican religion, his profession as a businessman, his ardent monarchism and his intense conservatism, possibly even the very Scottsdale air that he breathed, saw him firmly ensconced on the right side of politics.

In 1914, Herbert Heaton, a university lecturer in economics, delivered a lecture in Scottsdale on the war in Europe in which he claimed that both German and English sides committed atrocities. There were calls in House of Assembly that Heaton be never permitted to lecture again in Tasmania; *The Mercury* demanded his immediate dismissal. A.W. Loone, a Scottsdale local historian and member of the Legislative Council – and a commercial rival of Walter – unwittingly supported Heaton's argument by recommending that Germany be wiped off the face of the earth and the German people torn limb from limb.

A Labor member suggested that the only mistake Heaton had made was to have given the lecture in Scottsdale where, as historian Marilyn Lake puts it, 'the people appeared unable either to comprehend or appreciate him.'⁷ Labor Senator J. Guy, an anti-conscriptionist, in 1916 tried to address a meeting in Scottsdale. The chairman, a Mr. McCarthy and a conscriptionist, continually interrupted the Senator. Senator Guy not unreasonably asked the Chairman to desist, and when he did not, told him to stand down and he would conduct the meeting himself 'but the chairman remained and continued to provide amusement.'⁸

When World War I commenced, the young Colonial cubs joined enthusiastically in the 'fierce joy of battle', as the common phrase had it, in support of Mother British Lion against the evil Hun. Two such cubs were Walter's sons, Len and Reg, who found themselves in the trenches of Flanders and France, living hells of boredom, mud, filth and carnage. Len and Reg survived but both suffered severe deafness as a result of the artillery thundering so close to the trenches wherein they crouched. Both moved back productively into civilian life, unlike many who were so badly traumatised they were unemployable. But while Len was quiet about the horrors of the war, even to his own family, Reg returned loudly critical of Mother Lion. His patriotism, like that of many Australian diggers, had become badly frayed because of the arrogance and incompetence of the British high command; they were outraged that they were ordered over the top into almost certain death under Turkish and then German fire.

⁷ Lake, M. *A Divided Society: Tasmanians during World War I*. Melbourne University Press, 1975, p. 25.

⁸ MacFarlane, op. cit., p. 216.

Some veterans became fiercer hawks than when they had entered the war, but other one-time hawks flew home as sobered doves. Reg, a sobered dove, returned home via North America. He was in a troop train at a station in Canada, the troops waiting to be called on parade for a Royal Inspection. Anticipating a long wait, Reg went to the nearest toilet. He opened the door and inside he found HRH Edward, Prince of Wales, later the Duke of Windsor, thrusting into one of the local girls with such urgency he hadn't bothered to lock the door. This was a vision that did not enhance Reg's already tarnished image of Royalty.

Walter was deeply put out when Reg returned from doing his bit for King and Country as an anti-monarchist and wearing a red tie to prove it. Yet Reg later became Secretary for the Tasmanian 40th Battalion, eagerly returning, year after year, to the now gentle fields of Flanders to visit the very places where he and his cobbers had suffered so much.

Walter's Scottsdale business flourished, no doubt being well oiled by his keen participation in all these community activities. He went into partnership with Lawrie Leech: Biggs & Leech became a major supplier of groceries and general goods throughout the North-East region, with six retail outlets. Walter took over sole control after a minor scandal in the Leech family. Leech had bought his son Reg a farm, but Reg augmented his herds with stolen cattle. One day, he foolishly put some up for auction in the local sale yard. The auctioneer asked Reg whether he would accept the last bid, to which Reg shouted 'Yes!'

But a farmer had recognized his own cattle under the hammer.

'No bloody fear you won't!' he yelled.

The farmer proceeded to charge Reg with stealing, but Leech Sr. settled the matter financially. In shame, Lawrie decided the family would have to leave Scottsdale. He sold his share in the firm cheaply to Walter.

Yet despite his own personal thriftiness, which he rigorously imposed upon the family, Walter was a soft touch where bad debts were concerned. Ada used to complain to her children: 'Pa was too soft to be a businessman!' This was after the Great War, when the disastrous soldier settler scheme was floundering. Returned servicemen were offered land grants on the emotive rationale that as they had fought for their Country, they had earned a piece of their Country. Often those pieces were not sustainable, particularly when those working them knew nothing about farming. Through no fault of their own, collapses were common, many a settler's wife trying to soften the hearts of those to whom they were indebted.

Walter's heart might have been soft to some of his customers yet his business thrived. In 1920, when he was aged 55, he decided to sell it to local businessman George Dinham in 1920.

Walter bought rental properties in Scottsdale, in part with the proceeds of the sale, the family income then deriving from the rents and from banking.

In 1919, in readiness for retirement (of sorts), he bought a large block of land opposite his rambling house in George Street to build a new house; included was a quaint Victorian cottage, still in place, with an imposing front that had once been used as a shop. Just the thing for a bank, Walter thought. The following year, he approached the manager of the Launceston Bank for Savings – the bank in which his father had been employed while forging his real careers in astronomy and seismology – proposing that he open a Scottsdale Branch using that cottage to which the Launceston manager agreed. Walter converted the cottage, installing mahogany counters and a massive steel safe, and rented it to the LBS. He ran the Scottsdale Branch of the Bank for the next eighteen years, his daughter Winifred his assistant for a while.

Beever's *History of the Launceston Bank for Savings* is very complimentary about Walter's work with the bank, in contrast to the way he referred to Alfred (p.). Beever said that Walter had a special talent with half-yearly reports earning 'the rare honour' of being congratulated on their quality:

Biggs' reports reveal all the optimism and happy exuberance which made him one of the most popular and well known figures in the north-east. ... On a rise in the price of tin, he wrote "the tin miners' earlier depressed countenances are changed to broad smiles and high hopes for the future." When in one particularly depressed year there was a record number of withdrawals, rather than hang his head in shame and make excuses as others might have done, Biggs regarded it as wonderful that "the beneficence of this Institution,- enabling persons to keep their households going, little by little, who in many cases, would *not* have saved at all without easy accessibility for storing their surplus cash,- is being appreciated in their time of stress." Always there was a silver lining.⁹

There were two other branch banks in Scottsdale, but Walter's was the only one at the time to offer interest bearing savings. He'd struck the right note. Further, Walter encouraged his customers to deposit their savings but strongly discouraged them from making withdrawals, which pleased Head Office no end. Such paternalism earned him the title of 'Pater Biggs', which lasted long into the collective memory of Scottsdale, but it also saved the bacon of many customers.

Walter saw thriftiness as a virtue to be proselytised with an Abraham-like zeal. He thought children should be trained early in life to be thrifty, as no doubt he was required to be in his formative years, given the uncertainties surrounding Alfred's employability at Campbell

⁹ Beever, E.A. *Launceston Bank for Savings*. Melbourne University Press, 1972, p. 173-4.

Town. In 1926, the headmaster of Scottsdale High School, W.C. Morris, and Walter worked out between them a 'penny banking' system for the local school. It was adopted by the Hobart Bank for Savings and by the Education Department, who implemented the scheme throughout the State as the 'District School Thrift Account'.

In 1978, his grandson – the author – checked in to Kendall's Motel in George Street, opposite *Burville* and next to the site of the house in which Walter had first settled in 1902. As I filled in the motel register, the proprietor, a Scottsdale lady, noticed my surname.

'Are you related to the Scottsdale Biggses?' she asked.

'Yes, my grandfather built the big house opposite.'

'Well, fancy that now. I remember his daughters. Miss Lillie, Miss Winnie, and Miss Blanche, weren't they? Now that Miss Blanche, didn't she go to foreign parts as a missionary?'

The spirit of Pater Biggs lived on.