



Remembrance Day 11th November 2009

Alison Halliday on John Busby and Sydney Kirk

I wish to begin by commending the work of Arthur Delbridge. It was his original curiosity and inspiration that began these talks and he has set a standard over the last few years that is impossible to copy. In his talks he has shown impeccable research, as one would expect, and a great tact and sympathy for the stories of the men he chose to investigate.

For some, hearing about these men may be a reminder of what you already know but, for many of us, I suspect that we are actually engaging in a process of making memories. This whole endeavour is rather like doing a complicated jigsaw with a group of people and no-one is positive as to what the finished picture is...

Why these two men? ... Well, Arthur said that he had already 'done the easy ones', and I had my own reasons for choosing them. I am lucky enough to have known Syd Kirk, who lived next door to my parents' house, and I chose John Busby for no more reason than the name Busby is familiar to me and would be so to anyone with knowledge of the history of the founding families of Bathurst.

Sydney Kirk

Of the early years, we know very little. Sydney William George Kirk was born on 27 January 1889. He was the eldest of seven sons and two daughters of Sydney and Mary Kirk (née Marceau). His father lived on *Yengo* and worked for Jesse Gregson first as an assistant gardener and then as head gardener and caretaker.¹ Sydney (senior) and Mary Constance Marceau had married on 29 December 1887 when she was 16 years old. They had her father's permission.²

Syd's father (as one of the 'parents and residents') signed the petition of 1893 requesting that the local provisional school³ be kept open, so perhaps by then his son Syd was attending this school. The Department's recommendation was that it remain open only to the end of the month unless 'the requisite average of twelve pupils [be] maintained'.⁴ The next nearest school was at Mt Victoria, a distance of about 18 miles.

The application to create 'half-time schools' (two schools sharing one teacher) at Mt Wilson and at Bell shows that Sydney Kirk lived a quarter of a mile away from the location of the Mt Wilson school and that the name of the child to attend was 'Sydney Kirk'. He is shown as being of Church of England religion and listed as five years old. However, the name is crossed out, presumably because he was under the age of six.⁵ Permission for the half-time schools at Mt Wilson and at Bell was granted in January 1894.⁶

The photo of the Kirk family on the following page, dated about 1900, shows the then six children (three more were to come) outside the little slab-sided cottage.⁷ There is a fence around the cottage and what looks like a flourishing garden inside. Syd looks a well built young man, dressed in adult clothes and standing independently to the left of his father, while the younger five children cluster around their mother, Mary.

His war record book describes him, on enlistment, as having the occupation of 'teamster'. This suggests that the Kirk family had already been felling timber for a number of years and this, if not for local use, was being taken to the railhead by bullocks. Syd may well have been responsible. I remember

Tom, his youngest brother, saying how he was sent out as a boy to burn spot fires between Mt Wilson and Bell to provide feed for the bullocks. The first timber mills on the mountain were set up in the bush and were more or less portable, being moved to where the timber was felled. The timber in these earliest 'mills' was pit-sawn, and it was this type of timber that was used to build the first tiny cottage at Wynstay. I have no accurate date for the creation of 'Syd's mill' but it certainly existed when his father died in c. 1922.⁸ I remember him saying that as a young man the bullocks had to be shod with crescent-moon shaped shoes because the road was so stony and rough. Which road this was I don't know but it is reasonable to assume that it was the access road leading off Wynnes Rocks Road down to



the mill. So before enlisting we know that Syd had gone to school (but we don't know for how long), that he was still living at home with his parents and that he was able to give an occupation of teamster.

Syd joined up on 5 April 1916. He was 27 years old. He was not married. His father, listed as next of kin, is described as living at 'Yengo'. The recruiting office was at Bathurst. Syd is described as 5 foot 8 ½ inches tall, with

an identifying scar on the back of his right leg. He had grey eyes, black hair and a 'medium' complexion. He weighed 150 pounds with a chest expansion of 36 inches.

Syd took the oath on 17 April and became part of the 5th reinforcement for the 45th battalion. This battalion had been raised in Egypt on 2 March 1916 as part of the *doubling* of the AIF. Approximately half of its new recruits were Gallipoli veterans from the 13th Battalion, and the other half were fresh reinforcements from Australia. Reflecting the composition of the 13th, the new battalion was composed mostly of men from New South Wales. Syd embarked from Sydney on 24 August 1916 on the *Anchises*.

As part of the 12th Brigade of the 4th Australian Division, the 45th Battalion arrived in France on 8 June 1916, destined for the Western Front. It fought its first major battle at Pozières in August, defending ground previously captured by the 2nd Australian Division. After Pozières, the battalion spent the period until March 1917 alternating between duty in the trenches and training and rest behind the lines, first around Ypres in Belgium, and then in the Somme Valley in France.

In January 1917 Syd went from Havre to England due to illness, and then developed pleurisy. In April that year he went back to France. He was described as being in good condition but had lost two stone in weight in six months.

The 45th Battalion was heavily engaged during the battle of Messines in June, and suffered commensurate casualties. On 7 June 1917 Syd was wounded in the field. The official notification to his father on 24 June 1917 reported 'Private SWG Kirk slightly wounded'. He was one of the lucky ones.

The focus of the AIF's operations had now switched to the Ypres sector in Belgium and the 45th took part in another major battle near Passchendaele on October 12. Conditions were horrendous and the operation was hastily planned—resulting in failure.

Like most AIF battalions, the 45th rotated in and out of the front line throughout the winter of 1917–18.

In early 1918 Syd was granted 14 days leave in England and this was followed by a further two months illness in hospital from February to April 1918.

In the spring of 1918 the 45th played a crucial role in turning around the last great German offensive of the war when it defeated attacks aimed at breaking through the British front around Dernancourt. The Allies launched their own offensive on 8 August with the battle of Amiens. On the first day of this battle the 45th Battalion captured 400 German prisoners, 30 artillery pieces and 18 machine guns. The day became known as the Black Day of the German Army and initiated a retreat back to the formidable defensive barrier known as the Hindenburg Line. The 45th Battalion fought its last major action of the war on 18 September 1918 around Le Verguier to seize the outpost line that guarded the approaches to the main defences. The battalion was out of the line when the war ended on 11 November, and was disbanded on 2 May 1919. Syd seems to have *celebrated* the war's end by being AWOL for two days at the end of May; he was fined two days' pay.

Syd left England for Australia on 1 July 1919 on the *Frankfurt* and disembarked on 20 August 1919. He was discharged on 5 October 1919 with 'nil incapacity'. He was issued with the Military Star, British War Medal and Victory Medal.

On the corner of Wynnes Rocks Rd is the cottage *Coolangatta*. It was Syd's home for nearly 50 years. The title of the land passed to Syd from David Robert Hall on 11 April 1925. Syd married Lizzie Clark on 8 June 1926, and in the same year the title of the land was passed to her. It may be that her employee, Dick White⁹, gave or contributed to Syd and Lizzie obtaining this 'cottage on the mountain'.¹⁰

Lizzie Clark was from Carnoustie, Scotland. She came into the White household when Patrick was about three years old as his *nursie*. Patrick White commented that Syd Kirk 'showed me the lyre birds, the wombat tracks, zircons in the trickle of a creek; he taught me to unravel bush silence'.¹¹ White described, in a childhood poem, running 'Down to the saw-mill in the sassafras'.¹² Syd and Lizzie had one still-born baby.

From this point, between the wars and later, we come to Syd's life through a pattern of *real* memories offered by several people still on the Mountain as well as through the written sources. I have not indicated the origins for every piece of information but I would like to thank all those who talked to me and shared their memories of Syd.

Like so many returned soldiers, Syd was reluctant to ever again leave his mountain home. Once he rode his horse overland (not on the road) to Mt Tomah, but after a few days he got homesick and had to get back as soon as possible.

Syd may have been a church warden and the official bell ringer between the wars, but he did not continue after WWII.

His longest official contribution to the Mountain was through the Mt Wilson Sights Reserve Committee. Syd had been on the Sights Reserve Committee since at least 1930¹³, and if the 'nearly 50 years' is correct, probably since before WWI. During his tenure he had acted as joint treasurer and secretary, and as assistant secretary and treasurer, sharing these positions with another trustee and, more importantly, held the position of Works Officer for many years until his retirement. In this capacity he, along with the then Chairman of the committee, often inspected the Reserves so that necessary work, for example on shelter sheds, dangerous trees and maintenance of fire breaks, could be determined. From 1930 until his formal retirement he did not miss a meeting. On the 12 November 1960, when he officially retired, the Committee noted:

The Trustees regret that it is necessary under the relevant Act for Mr S Kirk to retire from the Trust. The Trustees desire to [show] their appreciation of Mr Kirk's long service to the Trust which extends over a period of nearly fifty [years]. During this time Mr Kirk has brought to his work an irreplaceable knowledge of the areas of the Reserves.

The Trustees suggest that it would be graceful and appropriate if the Minister for Lands felt disposed to recognise Mr Kirk's services in a letter to him conveying appreciation.

Although the Trustees understand that Mr S Kirk cannot sit on the Trust as a voting member of the Trust, they wish to have the benefit of his services and so desire to request Mr Kirk to be an Honorary Adviser and to be present in this capacity at meetings of the Trustees.¹⁴

Syd knew all the tracks, fire breaks and bush paths across the mountain, showing Keith Raines' father where the original track ran down to the Wollangambe River. He also claimed to have found a white waratah near Crab's Creek, but could not find it again.

Some of you may remember a very large eucalypt beside the road outside *Overcote*. Running right up the tree were a series of L-shaped spikes hammered into the trunk. The young Syd had put these into the tree in order to view the city of Sydney from high in the top branches; he may have been watching the fireworks when Sydney (the city) was visited by the American fleet very early in the 20th century. The tree was cut down about 10 years ago. After the war Syd returned home with a telescope that had been made in Britain, captured by the Germans and then re-captured; he used it to watch the Harbour Bridge being built.

Syd would walk down to his mill along Syd's track from just below his bottom fence, cutting



diagonally through the rainforest to the top of the mill paddock (then a great source of blackberries and rabbits) and down the slope to the mill. His younger brother Albert came to work at the mill but Syd always regarded it as *his* mill. The photograph (left) shows Syd at the bench in the mill. The mill originally ran with a steam engine, so a small dam had been built on Waterfall Creek and a pipe run down to the mill. Apparently, during a dry time, Mr Gregson liked to go down to this dam and have a bath. Syd was not at all impressed because the water was also used for drinking and making the morning tea. Syd made his feelings very plain.

Sometimes Syd had to drive rather than walk to the mill. He did not have a licence and the truck was an old co-op one with no brakes and a piece of downpipe for the exhaust, making the trips down and back exciting. He sometimes stalled on the uphill homeward trip, so at the bottom of the hill he would unhook the log hanging off the back on two chains and drag it behind. When the truck stalled it would run back against the log, rather than right down the hill, and then Syd could

practise his hill-starts.

The mountain children loved walking down to the mill and Syd would scare them by telling them about the snakes that lived in the huge mound of sawdust. The timber cut was often coachwood, used for rifle butts and for making ply. Syd always commented that he was saving a special coachwood for his coffin, and the tree is still there on the slope below *Merry Garth*. Syd knew every tree on those southern slopes and he would often spend all day walking through the forest deciding what tree to cut (to his brother's exasperation at times). It would then be felled with minimum damage to the surrounds. The Kirks certainly knew what sustainable forestry was. When the American *world champion* axeman came to Mt Wilson, Tom and Syd took him down to the mill to try his hand on Australian timber. He was using a double-bladed axe like a large tomahawk and the Kirk brothers thought he must only be pretending to be not very good. Instead of leaving him they hid in the bushes and could not believe, as they watched him, how out-classed he was going to be.

Either at the mill or on the verandah of his house, Syd would cut the hair of the men and boys on the Mountain, from Colonel Wynne to Peter Valder. In the vegetable garden he grew potatoes, berries and illegal tobacco. His old coat smelt of tobacco and Lizzie would not let him wear it inside the house. He was equally thrifty with his paddock fencing; described by my father as 'Syd's knitting', it had a rare straight wire in it, being cobbled together with any spare or stray piece of wire, barbed or plain. However, it did keep in his cow. As well as his black horse, which he named Donkey—an example of Syd's wry and very dry humour.

His garden had a paling fence, still there, onto Wynnes Rocks Road. The nails in it have never been fully hammered in, Syd was waiting for the timber to dry out and shrink, when the palings would have to be moved closer, before completing the job. Wet weather was no hindrance to jobs to be done and Syd then wore an old hessian bag with the corner tucked in to protect his head and shoulders. Carrying a scythe, he looked from a distance like old Father Time.

At the Mountain's centenary dinner the cake was cut by Syd and by Wendy Smart as the oldest and youngest residents.

Syd died 26 November 1971, aged 82. He is buried with Lizzie in the churchyard, beside his brothers.

John Busby

It is not surprising, although I did not know it when I started, that there is a link between Syd Kirk and John Busby... as I have said, Syd's father worked for Jesse Gregson, and John Busby's mother Grace married Jesse Gregson's elder son William.

But let me go back a bit into the earlier times of the Busby family.

The first John Busby to come to Australia was an English engineer who was appointed, in March 1823, to take up duty 'in the management of the Coal Mines, in supplying the Town of Sydney with water, and in objects of a similar nature'.¹⁵ All with free passage, Busby with his wife and family sailed from Leith in the *Triton* and arrived at Port Jackson in February 1824. He is best remembered for creating the plans for, and then supervising the building of, the water supply pipeline from what became known as Busby's Bore in the Lachlan Swamps of Centennial Park to the city of Sydney.¹⁶

The Busby family was not adventurous with names—eldest sons were called alternatively either John or George. John's eldest son, George, followed later on after completing his medical studies in Edinburgh. He settled and worked in Bathurst and many of the present-day Busbys are his descendents. John's second son, James, a viticulturist, came to Australia with his parents and in the 1830s he went to New Zealand in an unofficial quasi-diplomatic position in which he was expected 'to check outrages by Europeans against the Maori', to protect 'well-disposed' British settlers and traders,

and to seize escaped convicts. He was also to assist the Maori, if possible, to establish 'a settled form of government'.¹⁷ He seems to have been a man of high opinion and uncertain temper and his successes were mixed.

The John Busby on the War Memorial in Mt Wilson is the first John Busby's great-great-grandson. As we would expect, his father was named George. George, born in 1863, had married Grace Ranken in 1894 and then died in 1908 leaving her with four children: Harriet was born in 1895, John in 1897, Winifred in 1899 and George in 1904. John, the older son, was the odd-man-out being born in Nyngan instead of Bathurst or the surrounding district. The Busby property at Nyngan was called *Moonagee*, and it still exists.

In 1812, John's mother Grace married Jesse Gregson's older son William, who was then aged 35 (20 years older than his stepson John). We learnt last year of Willie's sad war history, and it is one of many similar stories that he did not survive. Yet his stepson did. John's own descendents believe that his stepfather went to war to keep an eye on his stepson. Both joined the 7th Field Company Engineers and left Sydney on the *Suffolk* in December 1912. John had had to get his parents' permission to enlist, which he did at the Victoria Barracks in Sydney. The letter said 'this is to certify that my son, John Busby, has my full consent to enlist' and it was signed by both his mother Grace Gregson and his stepfather W.H. Gregson.

John was described as 'fit for service' being 18 years and 3 months and 5 feet 10 ½ inches tall with a fully expanded chest measurement of 36 inches. He weighed 142 pounds, had a fair complexion, brown hair and hazel eyes. He is described as being a clerk, living in Roseville, Sydney, with his mother, and his religion as 'Presbyterian'. His mother's contact address is given in England so she must have travelled there to be closer to her son and her husband. His rank was 'driver'; this at the time meant, of course, of horse (or mules). His grandchildren remember him as being very good with

animals and loving horses.



The 7th Engineers travelled to Africa and then onto Marseilles. Like many of these recruits in early 1916 John suffered from influenza. A couple of months later, in France, he was found guilty of 'driving a horse at a pace faster than a walk' and docked 3 days pay. He had the usual short periods of leave in England, and was on extended sick leave over December 1917 to January 1918 suffering from German measles. He

had two weeks special leave in Paris in early 1919, and he left to return to Australia in May 1919 on *Ypringa*, disembarking in July. Like Syd, he was awarded the Star, the British War Medal and the Victory Medal. During his war service he had been tested for deafness, and in 1939 he had dental work done, which was paid for by the Repatriation Commission.

I am not going to trace a summary of the war history of the 7th Engineers because Arthur did that last year, but I thought you may be interested in what the engineers, and thus the drivers, actually

did.¹⁸ Anything that was built was the responsibility of the engineers, from cooking tins to bridges, they often planned it and certainly sometimes made it. For anything that was moved to or from the *dumps* (part of every major camp, from the front line to the Brigade headquarters) to somewhere else, a driver and crew did the work.

So, for example, in July 1916 the engineers were constructing and doing repair work on parapets, dugouts, machine gun placements, trenches, duck walks as well as general repairs to communication and drainage. They were also doing new work building fire trenches (40 yards long and 5 feet deep), a traffic trench (300 yards), a firing bay, a shell proof dugout signal office as well as dressing stations, emergency ration stores and bomber dugouts. Conditions often made work extremely slow and difficult. At the end of July the notes comment: 'work seriously interfered with during whole of week by bombardments and unfavourable weather. Total progress very small and work largely restricted to repairing works damaged by shell fire'. It is not uncommon to find that 'Infantry assisted sappers, but troops went astray and communication not always possible'. The diary entries for the 7th Engineers are surprisingly complete and at Pozieres (in the battle for the Somme), Busby is listed as a 'driver' in the mounted section, one of 36 drivers under a Sergeant Rogers, a Corporal, a 2nd Corporal, and 3rd Lieutenant Corporal. On the 18 November the whole entry reads:

Transporting new material to Turk Lane – 12 sappers. Marking new trench 200 yards long, for purpose of straightening front line and securing better position, completed under heavy machine-gun fire. Lt. Filder wounded during the operation. Sapper Burgess completed the work and made reconnaissance of work done and state of trenches.

Relief for the 7th Engineers was arranged to take place 'about every fourth day'. During the reconnoitre, digging and deepening of front line trench, often under fire, snipers killed sappers as they 'established bombing blocks within 15 yards of the enemy'.

And so it continued. The drivers were responsible for the maintenance and wellbeing of the horses, the building and seemingly endless re-building and repair of stables, cleaning of harness and of course driving. By March 1917 there were various types of vehicles: drays, tip drays, wagons, pontoon wagons, various limbers, trolleys, water carts and ration wagons, and of course vehicles were salvaged wherever possible, including a spring cart and a brewery dray.

In April 1917, after action along the Hindenburg Line, the report specifically mentions that the mounted section 'did excellent work in transport of material to forward dumps'. By May they were 'working on north bank of the Somme River, building [a] POW cage, support line, tunnelling, wiring, deep dugouts, shelters, foot bridges across swamps, stores, baths' and the notes comment that 'Numbers of men killed or sick or moved out growing...'

August 1918 saw the height of the battle of the Somme. John Busby saw a lot of war, and like Syd he was lucky. The photographs of John Busby are from WWI (on this page, John is front right).



John returned from the war with two things. One was a silvery ring carved with the word Somme. The second was a little Australian terrier dog he used to carry about in his greatcoat pocket, but on learning that he could not bring him home he had him killed and stuffed.

In 1923 John Busby married Sylvia Horton, whose father owned a shoe factory in Sydney. He had been awarded a soldier's settlement block in Queensland but was driven out by drought. He returned south to Peats Ridge just west of Gosford and bought an orchard. He had two children, George and Shirley. His daughter-in-law remembers him as being 'the dearest person', a lovely gentleman who was frustrated living on the land and his grand-daughter recalls him as a tall man, over 6 feet, 'a beautiful man ... and very gentle'. He and his wife Sylvia were especially 'great friends' with Margery Sloan (the Busbys and the Sloans were distantly connected) and used to visit her quite often at Mt Wilson after the war.

John and his wife spent time travelling around Australia and he died in his mid-70s in New Zealand, where he had gone to visit the Busby relatives that are the descendents of his great uncle James mentioned earlier. But his ashes came back to Bathurst. Sylvia lived on into her 90s.

There remains one anomaly: in a rather perverse manner the Busby first-born men prided themselves on having no middle name, considering either John or George was sufficient. So the extra B which appears on the Memorial given to *our* John should not be there. Perhaps it arose through confusion with his surname.

Ninety-one years ago, on the 11/11/1918, at almost this exact time, the war diaries for the units of Syd and John noted. For the 45th Battalion:

At about 11am an unofficial message by telephone from Brigade [Headquarters] brought the welcome news that the armistice had been signed at 0500 to take effect from 1100. This message though never confirmed by wire was received with joy by all ranks.

And for the 7th Field Co. Engineers: 'Educational classes, Lewis gun school, cleaning roads. Report of signing of Armistice received'. And in handwriting in pencil is added 'quietly but welcomed'.

Notes

¹ *All But One Went Home: The Marceau Story* by Keven Marceau (1987) p. 115.

² *Ibid*, p. 110.

³ Mt Wilson Historical Society file Mt Wilson school 1893–1895 - Described as 'already in operation as a Provisional school'

⁴ *Ibid*, Dept of Education file '29Aug93*4086'.

⁵ *Ibid*, letter from Inspector Kevin.

⁶ *Ibid*, telegram from Inspector of Schools.

⁷ *All But One Went Home: The Marceau Story* by Keven Marceau (1987), p. 117.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 113.

⁹ Patrick White's father.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 66.

¹¹ *Patrick White – A Life* by David Marr (1991).

¹² *Ibid*, p. 54.

¹³ The earliest extant minute book record is dated 15 March 1930.

¹⁴ Mt Wilson Sight Reserves Minute Book, minutes of 12 November 1960.

¹⁵ *Australian Dictionary of Biography*.

¹⁶ *Ibid*.

¹⁷ *Ibid*.

¹⁸ All the following quotes and information is from the unit's official daily diary, courtesy of the Australian War Memorial website.