

# The Audacious Mr Duck



By Julie Poulter

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**Dedicated to  
my grandmother Connie and her half-sister Ivy.**



*88-year-old Connie meets Ivy, aged 95 for the first time, 2002.*

## Foreward

From the time I was a teenager, I can remember being curious about the lives of my grandparents and those that came before them. I would often sit with both of my grandmothers when I visited them and listen to their stories. My maternal grandmother Connie was a particularly good storyteller. I've not inherited her talent for this, however I did inherit her interest in our ancestors and the sort of people they were. Connie was a talker. In an hour of conversation, you'd maybe get a few sentences in, the rest was her storytelling. She spoke more readily of the past than the present, particularly of the years of her youth, a time she lived in London with her mother's family. A time of joy and happiness, of freedom, of family. In 1947, not long after the end of the second world war, Connie and her mother Ada returned to Australia to be with her brothers Jack and Syd, who had also returned after growing up in England. The three children had been born in Australia and this book tells their story, and that of their father William Richard Duck and the calamitous events that occurred here in the 1910s. My grandmother never knew her father. She knew of him, from the stories her mother told her, but she had never seen a photograph of him, nor met him in person. In a strange irony, Connie and her father lived just 16 miles from each other for a number of years in London in the 1920s.<sup>1</sup> But Ada had severed all ties with William and his family many years before so their whereabouts were unknown to each other.

So from the mid-1990s, I started following the trail leading to William Richard Duck. I spent time in Connie's beloved England in 1994-1996 and 1998 and walked the same streets she did, saw where she lived growing up and scoured registry offices for documents. Over the years, many more documents have come to light as additional records have been digitised and released to the public. This book has been 25 years in the making. And it is time the story was told. I deliberately waited until all of William Duck's children had passed away before seriously considering writing this book and I was then busy finishing my history degree for a few years after that. Now in possession of many of the facts of this story, I debated whether to write a biography style book or a historical novel. I have chosen the latter after much deliberation. I feel a novel is the best way in

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<sup>1</sup> William Duck lived at 41 Swaffield St, Wandsworth, South London in 1937 whilst Connie lived with her mother and uncle at 11 Wigston Road, Plaistow, east London.

order to convey the emotional content of the story. However, being in possession of the facts via the documents and also parts of the story via Connie and her half-sister Ivy, does not mean I know everything that occurred or why. Hence, in creating dialogue for the characters, I have supposed conversations based on what I believe may have happened. I struggled with conveying the story in this manner, as it is incredibly important to me that stories are told truthfully. But this story, to my mind, deserved better than a strict family history lesson.

The introduction to this book is a piece of biographical writing I produced for a university assignment on creative writing. I think it introduces the crux of the story well. The rest of the book is written as a novel. I have however included a timeline in the appendix, so that readers may use this to interpret the story for themselves and to keep track of what happened when. For William Duck's descendants, I hope this book goes some way to explaining how our family came to be and heal some of the long term physical and emotional effects William's actions had on his children, and beyond. I have often thought about how I feel about William. Do I think he was a bad man, a player or a victim of circumstance? I think he was certainly perceived as a player by not only his wives, but also military authorities, court officials and newspapers of the day. My mind is not made up. I think I would have had to have met him in real life to truly know how I feel about him. I often feel guilty about being handed this incredible character of my past to uncover. As a historian, he is a gem in a riverbed of less colourful stones. But ever mindful of the devastation he caused, I have struggled with not only how to write this story, but if I should at all. In the end, I believe in truth telling and my grandmother never hid her father's story from me or our family so tell it like it was, I will.

## Introduction

Three small notices appeared in the New South Wales Police Gazette, in January, February and March of 1914. William Richard Duck, a 32-year-old British citizen, had failed to appear at the Sydney Quarter Sessions on a charge of absconding from his bail.<sup>2</sup> William had last appeared in court in December of 1913 charged with committing bigamy against Ada Mary Drew.<sup>3</sup> William's marriage to Ada in 1910 came eight years after his marriage to first wife Minnie Slater in their native England.<sup>4</sup> Wooing Ada proved easy for a man as sure of himself as William was. An engineer by trade, he had spent years sailing back and forth between London and Sydney, living part of his life in the manner of a single man. After falling in love with the pretty young auburn-haired Ada in Sydney, William made one final journey back to England aboard the S.S. Morea, in early 1910 to see his family. He already knew what he was about to do when he re-boarded that same ship in March, arriving back in the arms of his beloved Ada on the 6<sup>th</sup> April 1910.<sup>5</sup> Four days later they were married by Minister Richard Heffernan of St Paul's church in Canterbury. Ada was none the wiser as to William's deception, believing that he was in fact a widower.<sup>6</sup>

Now in early 1914, William had disappeared into thin air but not before descriptions of him were circulated amongst the police community. Last seen wearing a blue serge sac suit and black soft-felt hat, he was noted as being 5 feet 9 inches tall with a stout frame and dark clean-shaven complexion. This depiction created an image of a well-dressed middle-class man, someone who would not particularly stand out in a crowd. His release from custody on bail of eighty pounds until his next court appearance had presented William with the opportunity to flee Sydney as the pressure became too much

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<sup>2</sup> New South Wales Police Gazettes, notice for arrest of William Richard Duck, dated 28 January 1914, 18 February 1914 and 25 March 1914, [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)

<sup>3</sup> 'Story of Two Wives: An Immigrant Arrested', *Evening News*, 6 December 1913, [www.trove.nla.gov.au](http://www.trove.nla.gov.au)

<sup>4</sup> Marriage certificate, William Richard Duck and Minnie Slater, 1 February 1902, Registration No. 200, [www.gro.gov.uk](http://www.gro.gov.uk)

<sup>5</sup> Immigration record, William Richard Duck, 1<sup>st</sup> Refrigeration Engineer, S.S. Morea, arrived Sydney 6 April 1910, [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)

<sup>6</sup> Marriage certificate, William Richard Duck and Ada Mary Drew, 10 April 1910, Registration No. 4541, NSW Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, [www.bdm.nsw.gov.au](http://www.bdm.nsw.gov.au)

for him. Initial information obtained by the Sydney Water Police indicated that he may have fled to Newcastle, where his second wife Ada had gone to stay with her friend Marian.<sup>7</sup> By February however, further indications were that he had left New South Wales altogether. With no further information forthcoming, William must have dared to believe he had escaped a gaol sentence. Then on the 4<sup>th</sup> August 1914, Australia joined Britain and her allies in declaring war on Germany and just three weeks later, on the 26<sup>th</sup> August, William re-appeared in South Australia, enlisting in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Light Horse regiment.<sup>8</sup> War had become William's ticket out of the marital predicament he had got himself into.

William's foray into the military was not to last long however. Just a month after enlisting, trouble was brewing. On Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> September 1914, two Adelaide civil police officers, Constable Slade and Detective Whittle, travelled to the Morphettville Light Horse camp in the late afternoon and on being directed to William, asked him to confirm his identity, which he did without question. Detective Whittle let William know that he was there to charge him with failing to appear in court to answer a charge of bigamy and warned him that what he said could be used against him in a court of law. At 5.30pm William Richard Duck was arrested and it was then that William took the opportunity to state his defence to the police officers present.<sup>9</sup>

'I am the man,' William confirmed. 'I got into a mess, but I did my best to support them and I am now making arrangements to leave my pay behind for their benefit.' If indeed this was true, there appears to be no documentation contained in William's Australian Infantry Force (AIF) file to support it. The AIF were indeed able to direct a percentage of a soldier's pay to the next of kin nominated, but William's enlistment attestation papers dated August 1914 tell a different story. Providing the name of his next of kin as his sister Alice Smith in Tunbridge Wells, England, he clearly had no intention of providing money from his army wages for either of his wives.<sup>10</sup> To list either of them

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<sup>7</sup> Personal recollection of William Richard Duck's daughter Constance Andriske, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> Australian Infantry Force file of William Richard Duck, Attestation Paper dated 26 August 1914, <http://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/scripts/Imagine.asp?B=3523826>

<sup>9</sup> 'Morphettville Volunteer Pretended', *Daily Herald*, 25 September 1914, [www.trove.nla.gov.au](http://www.trove.nla.gov.au)

<sup>10</sup> Australian Infantry Force file of William Richard Duck, Attestation Paper dated 26 August 1914, <http://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/scripts/Imagine.asp?B=3523826>

risked placing him in the precarious position of having to provide answers to what were awkward questions for him.

It would seem fanciful to believe that William was going to direct money to his sister in England, who was then going to send it back to Australia to support his two wives. In his defence however, William claimed that he had 'letters to that effect in the house of my wife's sister in Prospect.'<sup>11</sup> If indeed they did exist, these letters containing William's offer of support for his wives were just words on a page, falling far short of the official documentation required to do so. There is no way to know exactly how the police tracked William down to the army camp at Morphettville. If he was indeed staying with first wife Minnie's sister Lillian Steer and her husband Henry in Adelaide, either one of them could have tipped off the police.<sup>12</sup> Lillian may have written to Minnie to tell her of William's arrival on their doorstep. A third possibility is that Ada informed the police, as it is known from family history handed down that she was aware of his in-laws in Adelaide. At the time of his arrest, William was just four weeks away from embarking on the *HMAT Port Lincoln* and a date with the action at Gallipoli.<sup>13</sup>

The following week, on Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> October 1914, William appeared at Adelaide Police Court on the charge of being a person who failed to appear at the Sydney Quarter Sessions on a charge of bigamy.<sup>14</sup> Dressed in his khaki Australian army uniform, he cut a fine figure in the court room. William's solicitor, Mr Charles Mortimer Muirhead advised the court that he was vehemently opposed to the charges brought before his client. Muirhead said that his client had advised him that his two wives were now living together in New South Wales and that he was actively supporting both of them. The original warrant for William's arrest arrived from Sydney in early October and on his second appearance in the Adelaide Police Court on Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> October, William was shown the warrant to which he replied, 'Yes, that is right. I want to get back to Sydney and get it

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<sup>11</sup> 'A Charge of Bigamy', *The Advertiser*, 25 September 1914, [www.trove.nla.gov.au](http://www.trove.nla.gov.au)

<sup>12</sup> Australian Infantry Force file of Henry George Steer, Attestation Paper dated 25 November 1914, <http://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/scripts/Imagine.asp?B=8093809>

<sup>13</sup> 3<sup>rd</sup> Australian Light Horse Regiment Unit History, Australian War Memorial, [http://www.awm.gov.au/units/unit\\_10553.asp](http://www.awm.gov.au/units/unit_10553.asp)

<sup>14</sup> 'Alleged Bigamy', *The Advertiser*, 2 October 1914, [www.trove.nla.gov.au](http://www.trove.nla.gov.au)



over.’<sup>15</sup> William’s solicitor Mr Muirhead again stated that the two wives were living together, that William had put an order on his pay to provide for them both and that both women were satisfied with this arrangement. Upon hearing this, Special Magistrate Thomas Gepp joked, ‘He is like Brigham Young!’ Laughter filled the court room at the reference to the notorious Mormon President who collected fifty-five wives over his lifetime.

By now, Minnie had moved herself and her four children from the boarding house room in Woolloomooloo they had first occupied after fleeing to Sydney to a house in Emmett Street, North Sydney.<sup>16</sup> Ada had made a new home in Newcastle with her three children, finding work as a solicitor’s parlour maid. Whilst the two women supported each other immediately following William’s desertion of them, they soon pursued their own separate paths in order to put the pain of their experiences behind them.<sup>17</sup> William’s concocted story of his two wives recent companionship was an audacious attempt at portraying for the court that the situation was far more amicable than it really was.

At the end of the court session William was remanded in custody and ordered to return to Sydney to face trial for bigamy. He was transported from Adelaide under arrest on the steam ship S.S. Katoomba, arriving in Sydney on Monday 12<sup>th</sup> October 1914.<sup>18</sup> It took another three and a half weeks for the case to be heard in court during which time William was held in custody. The time spent in gaol gave William a valuable chance to reflect on his actions, leading to his pleading guilty to bigamy at the next hearing, held on Monday 2<sup>nd</sup> November.<sup>19</sup> Later that same week, on Friday 6<sup>th</sup> November 1914, William Richard Duck was found guilty of committing bigamy with Ada Mary Drew in 1910 at the Sydney Quarter Sessions. Judge Rogers sentenced William to twelve month’s hard labour in Goulburn Gaol.<sup>20</sup> However, the judge took into account his excellent military record

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<sup>15</sup> ‘Law Courts’, *The Advertiser*, 9 October 1914, [www.trove.nla.gov.au](http://www.trove.nla.gov.au)

<sup>16</sup> Personal recollection of William Richard Duck’s daughter, Ivy MacLeod, 2002.

<sup>17</sup> Personal recollection of William Richard Duck’s daughter Constance Andriske, 2002.

<sup>18</sup> Immigration record, William Richard Duck, passenger, S.S. Katoomba, arrived Sydney 12 October 1914, [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com)

<sup>19</sup> ‘Quarter Sessions: Remanded for Sentence’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 November 1914, [www.trove.nla.gov.au](http://www.trove.nla.gov.au)

<sup>20</sup> ‘Quarter Sessions: Sentences’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 November 1914, [www.trove.nla.gov.au](http://www.trove.nla.gov.au)

and the fact he had no prior convictions and suspended the sentence, instead placing William on a good behaviour bond for twelve months. This was made possible under the First Offender's Act.

Much was made of William's prior war service in the South African Boer War, where he informed his counsel that he had been awarded medals and clasps for his bravery. The fact that he had enlisted to fight again, this time with the Australian Light Horse, gave his defence a much-needed reinforcement, enhancing his preferred status as an honorary man. Six weeks after his release from custody, William travelled to Wodonga, on the New South Wales and Victoria border, where another Light Horse training camp was situated. William went back to what he knew best, a military environment, enlisting in the 13<sup>th</sup> Light Horse Regiment on Tuesday 29<sup>th</sup> December 1914. He was assigned the role of Sergeant Major, probably due to his disclosing upon enlistment (fallaciously) that he had served twelve years in the Queen's regiment in the United Kingdom as a sergeant instructor.<sup>21</sup> William had slipped his wives' clutches again and used the continuing war in Europe as an excuse to distance himself from the difficulties he had self-manufactured.

The story of William's and his two wives was great fodder for the papers and in December 1913, a central western Queensland newspaper picked up on William's story and exercised an opinion of it.<sup>22</sup> 'If a man likes to take upon himself the expense of keeping more than one wife and the resultant family, why shouldn't he do so?' the author asked. William had asked the same question of the law, stating in his final court appearance that he hoped the fact that he had been trying to keep both wives supported 'would be taken into consideration.'<sup>23</sup> If only it was that simple, but the fact remained; in the eyes of the law, taking two wives at the same time was a crime for which, sadly, William himself may not have received the worst punishment. That hardship had been reserved for his deserted wives and children.

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<sup>21</sup> Australian Infantry Force file of William Richard Duck, Attestation Paper dated 29 December 1914, <http://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/scripts/Image.asp?B=3523826>

<sup>22</sup> 'Notes and Comments', *The Western Champion and General Advertiser for the Central-Western Districts*, 27 December 1913, [www.trove.nla.gov.au](http://www.trove.nla.gov.au)

<sup>23</sup> 'I'm keeping them both', *Tamworth Daily Observer*, 7 December 1913, [www.trove.nla.gov.au](http://www.trove.nla.gov.au)