HARRISVILLE'S LINK WITH THE KELLY GANG

By ALAN QUEALE

Read at a meeting of the Society on 26th February 1976

Early in 1883 a young man named James Wallace was appointed to take charge of the Harrisville State School in Queensland. Born of respectable parents at Collingwood in the Colony of Victoria, he was a teacher by profession, a Presbyterian by religion and had been one of sixty-two witnesses examined on oath before the Royal Commission held in 1881 to inquire into the circumstances preceding and attending the Kelly Outbreak.

During the period the Kellys were being pursued, Wallace was teacher at two part-time schools, Bobinawarrah and Hurdle Creek, in the heart of the Kelly country. He travelled between the schools on horseback, and at the latter place also carried out the duties of postmaster.

Nicolson, Assistant Commissioner of the Victorian Police organising the pursuit of the Kellys, had informed Wallace that the country looked to him, as a teacher and as a respectable member of society, to render all possible assistance to suppress murder and robbery. Wallace said that he would assist in the interests of society and, using six aliases, he communicated information to Nicolson over a period of about seven months and was paid about £80, which sum he regarded by way of expenses rather than for work done or information supplied.

Wallace knew Dan and Ned Kelly. He was a friend and former schoolmate of Joe Byrne and also of Aaron Sherritt who was shot dead by Joe. He claimed that, years before, he had practised mesmerism on Sherritt but did so no longer, declaring that Aaron willingly supplied him with information. Assistant Commissioner Nicolson had suggested to Wallace that he play the role of a Kelly sympathiser in order to obtain evidence which would lead to the apprehension of the gang.

Whether Wallace was play-acting or not can never be determined, but it is not improbable that he was playing the rather dishonourable role of a double-agent. He made no admissions or denials as regards his association with the Kellys, but it was suggested that he might have been the stranger, the mysterious

Mr. Alan Queale, a member and former Councillor of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland, is one of the best-read contemporary authorities on Queensland history.
fifth person who was riding with the gang late in 1878 during the school holidays when they held up and robbed some hawkers near Beechworth — but never at any time was there one vestige of evidence adduced which might have implicated Wallace with this or any other bushranging episode. However, Captain Standish, Chief Commissioner of Police and the Hon. J. H. Graves, M.L.A. for the district, formed opinions, based on rumour only, that schoolteacher James Wallace was associated closely with the Kelly Gang.

By January 1880 Assistant Commissioner Nicolson objected to making further payments to Wallace as he considered that the intelligence supplied had been manufactured to raise money on. Nicolson also complained that Wallace had been slow in coming down after returning from the bush after his Christmas holidays.

**ACTIONS SUSPECTED**

A short time before the destruction of the Kelly Gang, Thomas Bolam, Inspector-General and Acting Secretary of the Victorian Education Department, had an interview with J. H. Graves, M.L.A. Both held strong suspicions that Wallace was assisting the outlaws and that he possessed the facilities for doing so by reason of the fact that he was postmaster at Hurdle Creek and that contacts were possible when he was riding between his schools. Upon the matter being reported, Ramsay, Minister for Education, suggested Wallace's dismissal but Bolam had no evidence implicating Wallace and, in fact, stated that Wallace had been considered worthy of promotion. The department solved its dilemma by appointing Wallace to the school at Yea, beyond the bounds of the Kelly country, a transfer which he accepted reluctantly.

It was during the period he held the appointment of teacher at Yea that James Wallace gave evidence before the Royal Commission. He admitted before the Commission that he was the author of a number of articles which appeared in the Wangaratta Despatch one of which was called “Christmas in Kelly Land” and one which criticised the rank and file of the Victorian Police for not carrying the pursuit to a successful termination sooner. The Commissioners had little faith in Wallace as a witness but some of their questions were provocative and induced Wallace to give flippant answers. Whether he overtly or secretly assisted the bushrangers at any time we shall never know, but certainly the evidence of the other sixty-one witnesses did not implicate him in any way with the activities of the Gang.

One of the Commissioners, realising the futility of obtaining evidence from Wallace which might incriminate him, addressed Yea’s teacher as follows:— “I think there is one question you should answer candidly — have you supplied the Police with one
particle of evidence that you think upon mature consideration helped to catch the outlaws?"

Wallace in reply stated he believed he had done so but the interrogating Commissioner, holding contrary views, continued: "I have read your correspondence over, and I confess I cannot find any information. I have read it until I am weary. It is a perfect deluge of writing with not one particle of information in it. I may tell you that the members of this Commission are strongly of the opinion that the information in no way contributed to the success of the capture (of the Kelly Gang) and was from the first unreliable."

To this the young schoolmaster had no reply. Harsh words they were, and from them one might infer that James Wallace was not prepared to give evidence against his mates who had departed from this planet by hangman's rope or gunfire, or to disclose anything which might be deemed derogatory to himself.

**DISMISSED FROM SERVICE**

In their report to the Colony's governor, the Marquis of Normanby, the Commissioners made their point clear by declaring: "That in consequence of the reprehensible conduct of Mr. James Wallace, the State School teacher at Hurdle Creek during the Kelly pursuit and his alleged complicity with the outlaws, together with the unsatisfactory nature of his evidence before the Commission, your Commissioners think it is very undesirable that Mr. Wallace should be retained in any branch of the public service. We therefore recommend his immediate dismissal from the Education Department."

Such was the judicial capacity of these Commissioners that they recommended punishment without evidence of guilt and recorded, on suspicion only, what was tantamount to a conviction.

So James Wallace, teacher at the Yea State School, was dismissed summarily from the Victorian Education Department without being called upon for an explanation, without being charged with any breach of departmental discipline or with any offence known at law. The seven Commissioners, seeking scapegoats for the Kelly outbreak, adduced no evidence implicating him in any way. Wallace asked for a retiring allowance and this was refused. A request for a board of inquiry was also rejected. Statistically "insubordination" was shown as the reason for his dismissal, but this would not have warranted action so drastic. Members of the Kelly Gang were dead. James Wallace was out of a job.

**APPEARS IN QUEENSLAND**

In those days dismissal from any Colonial civil service, regardless of the cause, invariably debarred a man from entering any other
public service. It therefore was an unusual course that Wallace adopted when, early in 1883, writing from Talgai Station on the Darling Downs, he sought employment with the Queensland Education Department. When producing evidence of his qualifications he declared, quite untruthfully, that he had resigned from the Victorian Service and he must have been amazingly naive if he believed that such a claim would go unchecked. Still, Queensland was seeking teachers with good qualifications. "This man ought to be of use to us" wrote Inspector-General David Ewart, and Under Secretary John Gerard Anderson suggested to Wallace that he visit Brisbane for an interview.

So James Wallace was given a job. Apparently at the interview he had disclosed the facts of his dismissal, and at first his appointment was made a provisional one only, as teacher of School No. 62 for the Ipswich Agricultural Reserve which became the State School for Harrisville. His salary was £96 per annum with a capitation allowance of £42. A day or so before he took up duty Under Secretary Anderson sought information from his Victorian counterpart: "Was the moral character of James Wallace, teacher at Yea, free from blame while in your service?" to which this answer was received: "Was removed upon recommendation of the Police Commission on account of supposed complicity with the Kelly Gang."

"Supposed complicity!" Under Secretary Anderson sought more information on James Wallace's past. "Sufficient is known" he wrote to the Secretary of the Victorian Education Department "from his personal explanation and your official memorandum . . . as to his service to indicate that he was guilty of indiscretion and violation of the generally recognised duties of a civil servant — faults that might fairly be deemed a bar to his retention as a public teacher or his readmission to the office in the Colony of Victoria; but it is not equally clear that in the opinion of the higher officers of his own department he was considered guilty of conduct so immoral and depraved that he was unworthy of any confidence and unfit to be entrusted with the duties of an instructor of youth."

Nothing further was forthcoming from the Victorian Department except the official report of the Commissioners. This, the evidence and the correspondence was read by Archibald Archer, Queensland Minister for Education. "I regret" he wrote "that I can come to no other conclusion than that Mr. Wallace's connection with the Department of Public Instruction must cease and notice must be given him that at an early period he will be relieved of his present charge."

**APPEAL FOR CLEMENCY**

Shortly after, Wallace submitted papers received from Victoria
concerning his case. He declared, among other things, "That having already, by being subjected to dismissal, paid a penalty (frightfully disproportionate to the gravity of the offence) for any indiscretions I may have been guilty of in Victoria, it is unfair that I should again be punished here." And then came the question, almost by way of a challenge "Should earthly punishment be eternal?" and by his pencilled note in the margin, Under Secretary Anderson, son of a Scottish clergyman, agreed that it should not be so.

Wallace continued "... I have the stigma of dismissal to wipe out by a well-directed exertion in the present and the future," whereupon the son of the manse added "I like the tone and form of this appeal."

To those familiar with public service officialese Wallace finished his letter in a manner refreshingly original. "In the words of the poet Longfellow," he wrote: "I solicit permission to

‘Let the dead Past bury its dead,’ and to
‘Act, act in the living Present,
Heart within and God o'er head.’"

James Wallace, dismissed school teacher, was seeking another chance. The Under Secretary admired his appearance, and his honesty and eloquence made a strong appeal to him. John Gerard Anderson seemed to be determined to render justice that had been denied by the Victorian Police Commission. A few days later he submitted the case. "I am reluctant to disguise from the Minister my sympathy with Mr. Wallace," he wrote. "That he has erred is more than probable; that he is likely to repeat his errors is most improbable. I do not think that a bad man could have written this appeal... The facts are correct and the sentiments have my concurrence. We greatly need the services of a man possessing the technical qualifications of Mr. Wallace. But apart from the official point of view, I do think that his pleading is worthy of the kindly consideration of the Minister."

Wallace's appeal, supported by his Under Secretary, was accorded the approval of the Minister, and the appointment was confirmed after a probationary period of twelve months. In the meantime Inspector Daniel C. McGroarty, reporting on the organisation of School No. 62 at the Ipswich Agricultural Reserve and its master, described Wallace as "Energetic, hard-working, industrious and fairly skilful. His earnestness is assuring and refreshing. Methods mostly suitable and applied with vigour." In the year following Mr. McGroarty reported further: "A man of energy and works with animation, so doing useful and lasting work."

It is regrettable to learn that James Wallace, with his high teaching potential, should have severed all ties with the Queensland Education Department before the next report was due.
Records reveal that he did not leave to take up bushranging or any allied profession. A pencilled note against his name in an old Register at the State Archives reads: “Resigned 20th February 1885, Accepted an appointment with the National Mutual Assurance Co.”

Perhaps in the Harrisville district today there are descendants of some who were taught by James Wallace, former school-teacher, who was dismissed by the Victorian Education Department because of his supposed complicity with the Kelly Gang of bushrangers.