

## INTRODUCTION

My father was a jovial sort of bloke, an incorrigible raconteur who enjoyed a joke even at his own expense. There was no pomposity about him, although he did tend to round his vowels when talking on the telephone. He was an unlikely looking spymaster, or agent master as ASIO likes to call them. A large man with a well-cultivated corporation. I always remember the story he told about his secret mission to Singapore just before the Japanese occupation. The Qantas people had to off-load two passengers to accommodate Colonel Wake who had a priority military booking. In those days they used to weigh people before they boarded; the weight of the payload was seen as a critical factor for a safe flight.

Robert Wake, better known as Bob, but also as “Hereward” by some of his security colleagues, was such a hail-fellow-well-met sort of bloke that it came as something of a shock when I discovered that there were people out there who detested him. Former ASIO colleagues described him as a fake and there were the horrendous charges of the Army’s Commander-in-Chief who claimed that Colonel Wake was “not a fit and proper” person to hold the job as head of internal security in Northern Command. There were others, of course, who saw him as the salt of the earth — former operatives who admired his strength of character and purpose, his dedication and depth of knowledge about security matters. And there was the opinion of the British Naval Intelligence officer, A.M. Pooley, often quoted by my mother, who said that my father, in his day, was one of the finest security officers in the British Empire.

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There was one quality for which there was dramatic evidence. He had a remarkable discipline of mind and body. For the duration of World War Two he refused to take an alcoholic drink. He did not want to be caught with a befuddled mind during an emergency. Instead he drank gallons of Coca-Cola, an American import, which my mother believed was a contributory factor to the diabetes that eventually killed him.

There was no denying some of his achievements. The friend and confidant of politicians on both sides of the political divide, he had that remarkable gift for a security officer of gaining the confidence of the Labor ministers. It was no secret that the Australian intelligence community distrusted the Labor ministry both in war and peace. Once the Labor Government took office in the early war years, Military Intelligence took steps to ensure that its most precious secrets, the illegal tapping of MPs' phone calls for example, were never revealed to the Minister for External Affairs and Attorney General, Dr. H.V. Evatt. Dr Evatt in turn took steps to curb the machinations of Military Intelligence and with the agreement of Army Minister Forde gave Colonel Wake extraordinary powers, which alienated Military Intelligence and made Colonel Wake the target of a well-orchestrated disinformation campaign. The conduct of the intelligence community in Australia during World War Two would lead the casual observer to wonder who the real enemy was. Colonel Wake was star chambered by his enemies and suffered the slings and arrows of the Army's vendetta even after his death.

In evidence before the judicial inquiry into Colonel Wake's competence during 1943 his boss and head of the Security Service, Brigadier Simpson, said that Colonel Wake's job was his hobby. He had no other interests. The brigadier, who was a cultivated man and enjoyed a good port with his cigar after dinner, found Bob Wake a bit of a bore, but there was never any doubt in his mind that Bob Wake was the right man for

the job. His dedication, shrewdness and deep patriotism made him a superb counter intelligence officer.

There are published sources that claim that Bob Wake was blackmailing Bill Simpson. Anyone who reads Brigadier Simpson's evidence given to the Reed Inquiry about Bob Wake's work record will soon see the lie in that allegation.

But why did Bob Wake arouse such strong feelings and wild allegations? More than twenty years after Bob Wake's death, the Army still refused to recognise his overseas war service and there were still stories appearing in many worthy publications that suggested that the man was a fraud. <sup>1</sup>

I embarked on my own investigation with few preconceptions. I did not know my father all that well. I left home when I was twenty, intent on seeking fame and fortune in foreign parts. At the time, as far as the rest of the family were concerned, I did not know about my father's first marriage or the existence of my half sister. I returned for a brief six-year period in the 60s and did not return to Australia permanently until my retirement some forty years after I originally left.

On my return I was surprised to find that there were books being published about my father's work. I knew how careful he was about keeping his name out of the papers. His entire career had been devoted to the notion that no security officer should be photographed or named when carrying out his duties. He was equally discreet about what was recorded about Security Service and ASIO operations. The rash of books that appeared after Bob Wake's death in 1974 would have surprised him. The works I read did not ring true. They certainly did not sound like my father and even some of the

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<sup>1</sup>*Australian Spies and their Secrets* by David McKnight, published by Allen and Unwin. *Breaking the Codes* by Desmond Ball and David Horner, published by Allen and Unwin. *The Intrigue Master* by Barbara Winter, published by Boolarong Press. *The Petrov Affair* by Robert Manne, published by Pergamon.

facts were wrong. Some sources had my father in Naval Intelligence during the war when he was working for the Commonwealth Security Service; others had clearly no knowledge of his career in security before he joined ASIO. These ASIO-focused writers scoffed at the notion of my father running agents. But the record clearly showed that he had been running agents since the mid-30s when he joined the Commonwealth Investigation Branch and took over the Brisbane office.

It was my father's work at ASIO that mostly concerned these writers. Yet ASIO represented the last two years in a career that spanned nearly thirty years in security. How could you understand what happened during ASIO's foundation years if you ignored the thirty years that had gone before? How important was VENONA, the US decrypts of Soviet codes, in assessing Bob Wake's performance, and why after the Menzies Government was elected was Bob Wake sacked?

There's no doubt that my father let his heart rule his head when making hard political decisions during the postwar period. Simply stated, he was too close to Bert Evatt. When Dalziel, Evatt's private secretary, was suspected of leaking information to the Soviets based partly on information supplied by VENONA, Bob Wake should have been less circumspect and more calculating in deciding where his and the nation's best interests lay. He was in a difficult position. The Attorney-General, his boss, was intensely loyal to his own staff and had little time for the random ramblings of the new security service. It was unlikely that Evatt had access to the VENONA material but he did believe in the right-wing conspiracy. My father also believed in the right-wing conspiracy, especially the Catholic Action attempt to subjugate the left-wing elements of the ALP. It was this belief that resulted in the undoing of one of Australia's leading jurists and internationalists and also one of the country's most experienced counter-espionage officers.

Why should readers bother to rake over the coals yet again

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and try and make some sense of these conspiracy theories that have dominated Australian politics since the start of federation? There are a number of reasons. First and most importantly is the amount of incorrect information that is currently in circulation. I believe it is also necessary to give the next generation some sense of continuity and purpose. There has been so much revision of Australian history that it is difficult to understand how it all started. I hope this work will in some small way produce a better understanding of what happened and how that in turn might affect our future prospects.

## 1: THE GOLDEN LEGACY

When my wife and I first drove to Bendigo in central Victoria I had little idea how important this former gold mining town was to the story of my father. An elegant town with garret roofs reminiscent of a European provincial town, Bendigo had all the hallmarks of a place where people took a pride in their surroundings — the splendid post office clock tower, the imposing law courts, the pleasant public gardens, the Beehive Stock Exchange, the well-cared-for churches and the prosperous family homes on tree-lined streets. These features all spoke of a well-found community, a far cry from the roaring days of its mining beginnings.

I knew very little about Bendigo. Ballarat was better favoured in the Australian history primers. It was Ballarat where the miners rebelled in 1854 and erected their Eureka Stockade and Eureka flag to oppose the colonial administration's imposition of an exorbitant miner's license. But Bendigo had anticipated these great events twelve months earlier with its own protest. In August 1853 some 20,000 Bendigo diggers took part in the Red Ribbon Rebellion, which should have given the colonial authorities fair warning that there was trouble ahead.<sup>2</sup>

If any of my ancestors supported the Red Ribbon Rebellion there is no record of it. Indeed, the only Wake in the immediate vicinity at the time was on the side of law and order. He was one Philip Augustus Wake, the scion of the Wakes of Northampton, one of England's oldest titled families. The Wakes of Northampton had ruled the roost at Courteenhall since the

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<sup>2</sup> *The Forrest City*, Ken Arnold, Crown Castleton Publishers, p 5.

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Norman Conquest. Philip was the fifth son of the tenth baronet, Sir Charles Wake.<sup>3</sup> A sickly lad who died at thirty-three, Philip was sent to the colonies to prove his worth and maybe get rid of his weak chest. He rode with the local constabulary on gold escort duty to Melbourne and was bailed up by local bushrangers who got away with the gold but were arrested later. Philip wrote a highly coloured account of the incident for the London *Times*. There are some in my family who would like to think that Philip was directly related to the Bendigo Wakes who were about to become a part of the mining community. He may have been a distant relative but any direct connection is difficult to prove. Philip left the goldfields in 1856, the same year that Charles and Margaret Wake and their three children arrived from New Zealand to occupy a quartz lease in New Chum Gully, Sandhurst, later known as Bendigo. Charles and Margaret Wake were Bob Wake's great-grandparents.

It sounds simple enough to say that now, but the investigation that led me to this conclusion was long and tortuous. My father claimed that his great-grandfather once owned half of Auckland. I did not put much credence in the story at the time; my father in his later years had a tendency to romanticise the past. But my father was partly right. Charles Wake was a successful butcher in Auckland. After boarding the immigrant barque *Westminster* at Portsmouth he arrived in Auckland in March 1843. In Auckland the butcher business prospered and in 1848 Charles Wake married Margaret Wilson, a Londoner. The following year their first born, a son, Robert was born. A second boy, John, was born ten months later.<sup>4</sup>

It is not clear if Charles Wake, butcher, of Auckland had extensive land holdings in Auckland. If he did he did not stay long enough for the property to make him any money. In 1853

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<sup>3</sup> *The Wakes of Northampton*, Peter Gordon, Northampton County Council, 1992, p. 190/191.

<sup>4</sup> Department of Internal Affairs, Births, Deaths and Marriages, Central Registry, Auckland, New Zealand.

Charles, Margaret and the two boys shipped across the Tasman to New South Wales. In 1856 Charles was registered in the Sandhurst Council rate book as the leaseholder of crown land mined for quartz. He paid an annual rent of four pounds. Sandhurst was where the Bendigo diggings were located. Sandhurst eventually changed its name to Bendigo in 1891.<sup>5</sup>

By the time Charles and Margaret Wake were established in Sandhurst there were three children, Robert, John and George. These were quickly followed by Charles junior, William, Mary and Lucy. Three children died in infancy. Charles Wake worked his lease and made a modest profit. The eldest boy, Robert, who was Bob Wake's grandfather, followed in his father's footsteps and started working underground. At the time Sandhurst was the location of some of the richest and deepest mines in the British Empire. The Bendigo gold rush had attracted diggers from Europe and America. Some of these diggers gave up mining for more profitable occupations using their professional skills as architects, photographers, chemists and brewmasters. By the 1860s Bendigo was beginning to acquire some of the airs and graces of an established community. The large number of German-speaking people in Bendigo had resulted in the foundation of a German language school.

In 1864 a young couple, Jacob and Ellen Young, arrived on the Bendigo diggings. According to their marriage lines Jacob originally came from Kingston-upon-Hull, Yorkshire and Ellen from Castletown, County Cork, Ireland. They brought Ellen's brother Daniel with them.<sup>6</sup> These were Bob Wake's maternal grandparents. There was something odd about Jacob. He did not sound or look like a Yorkshireman. He was able to converse freely with the German mine owners and businessmen in their own language. Within two years of arriving on the diggings Jacob Young was running his own business, a quartz crusher mill at Kangaroo Flat.

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<sup>5</sup> Bendigo Regional Genealogical Society

<sup>6</sup> Colony of Victoria Certificate of Marriage No. 38 13 July 1860

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In the early 1870s Robert Wake, miner, of Auckland, met and married Elizabeth Mary Clark, a domestic originally from London. They were married in All Saints Anglican Church on Forest Street, Bendigo.<sup>7</sup> This was not the first Wake union between a Robert and an Elizabeth, nor was it to be the last. On 21 December 1873, in a modest weatherboard cottage on King Street close to the Golden Square railway station and the New Chum line of reef, Robert William Charles Wake was born. This was Bob Wake's father. In the same year and in the same district Bob Wake's mother, Victoria Helena Young, was born.

There is no record that the Wakes and the Youngs were friendly when the children were born. They lived in a community that breathed the fire and fury of a boisterous mining town. There was extreme wealth and extreme poverty. The gods of fortune tended to favour the audacious. The Wake family had a decent roof over their heads and in the soot and arsenic of reef living they were comparatively well off. The Youngs, at first, were struggling. Ellen Young, according to my grandmother, gave birth to her babies in a tent. Ellen had twins. The *Bendigo Advertiser* in its classified columns of 4 February 1873 recorded: "On the 1st of February at Golden Square, Sandhurst, the wife of Frederick Jacob Young, miner, gave birth to twins, son and daughter."<sup>8</sup>

In later life Vicky chose to draw a veil over the birth of her twin brother Frederick, who died in infancy. The name Frederick lived on — Vicky chose it as the second name of her first and only child Robert Frederick Bird Wake. The twins' birth certificate not only revealed the brief existence of Frederick but also cast doubt on the origins of their father. According to the birth certificate Frederick Jacob Young, a miner of thirty-six

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<sup>7</sup> Marriage Certificate solemnised in the District of Sandhurst in the Colony of Victoria.

<sup>8</sup> Bendigo Regional Genealogical Society records.

years, was born in Hesse, Darmstadt, Germany.<sup>9</sup>

Why Jacob in his marriage certificate should choose to hide his German ancestry was a mystery. At the time there was no German phobia. The German-speaking community in Sandhurst/Bendigo was imminently respectable. Why, the Queen herself was married to a German. However, this German connection did prove to be an embarrassment for Robert Frederick Bird Wake during World War Two. Military Intelligence, in an attempt to discredit Colonel Wake, claimed that his mother was German. According to the Army, Wake's suspect antecedents made him an unsound security chief.<sup>10</sup>

The Young family might have made a poor start but they were soon able to claim some of Bendigo's prizes. They bought a market garden at Epsom Flat. With the profit from the market garden and capital which Jacob raised from his German friends he was able to put enough money together to build a crusher mill, which had a new and more efficient crushing device designed and built by Jacob.<sup>11</sup> The Youngs soon moved into a comfortable weatherboard house in Golden Square.

On 26 July 1884 tragedy struck. Jacob was killed while descending the ladder at the Red, White and Blue Mine. He fell five hundred feet to the bottom and was killed instantly. He was forty-seven years old.<sup>12</sup>

Ellen was devastated. In the space of a little more than ten years she had lost her brother Daniel, who had come out with her from Ireland, her son Frederick and now her husband.

Archdeacon J.C. MacCullagh,<sup>13</sup> an Anglo-Irishman, presided at the Sandhurst Cemetery funeral that took place the day after

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<sup>9</sup> Births in the District of Sandhurst in the Colony of Victoria registered by David Buchan.

<sup>10</sup> Australian Archives Victoria Office MP 729/8 item 41/431/136.

<sup>11</sup> *Bendigo's Mining History 1851-1954*, James Lerk, The Bendigo Trust, 1991, p25.

<sup>12</sup> Deaths in the District of Sandhurst in the Colony of Victoria.

<sup>13</sup> *Bendigo and District, The Way It Was*, Ken Arnold, Crown Castleton Publishers, p.40.

the accident. MacCullagh became concerned about the welfare of young Vicky, who was just eleven years old. Her mother was clearly unable to cope. A few months after Jacob Young was buried, arrangements were made to have Ellen Young admitted to the Metropolitan Lunatic Asylum in the Borough of Kew, County of Bourke, Melbourne.

It is impossible to imagine what went through young Vicky's mind when her mother was taken from her. The double blow of losing first her father and now her mother was bound to leave a permanent impression on her young mind. She decided to cope with the double tragedy in a characteristic way that was later inherited by her son: she chose to ignore the reality of her unhappy circumstances and create her own world. The Church adopted Vicky. She lived in the manse.

Vicky Young and Robert Wake were courting when Vicky was at the manse. Their greatest pleasure together was bushwalking. Archdeacon MacCullagh saw no harm in the liaison; indeed, he encouraged it. Young Robert Wake was a sober and industrious youth. He did not seem to be afflicted by his father's disenchantment with mining work and fondness for Bendigo's Cohn brewed lager. Robert senior was an unhappy man. The stress and strain of working underground was too much effort for too little reward. He found a job in Melbourne as a railway overseer and moved his family to 108 Barley Street, East Brunswick. Once the family was re-established in what was to become an important recruiting centre for the fledgling ALP, Robert senior arranged for Robert junior to start an apprenticeship as an upholsterer.

Vicky and Robert corresponded. An understanding was soon reached and Vicky regularly made visits to Melbourne before she finally moved to lodgings in an inner Melbourne suburb. In March 1899 Vicky entered into a contract to buy a small Victorian cottage at 9 Davies Street, Moonee Ponds for £140. The house was bought with the previous owner still in it. He was obliged to pay rent of fourteen shillings a month. But Vicky did not intend to collect rent for very long. On 27 December 1899 Vicky and Robert

were married at St Paul's Anglican Cathedral, Bendigo, with Archdeacon MacCullagh officiating. Shortly after the wedding they moved into 9 Davies Street, where they remained for the rest of their married life.<sup>14</sup>

Vicky and Robert were married just when Australia and Australians were about to embark on a contract of their own. Earlier in the year Robert Wake senior and his son were registered on the "Roll of the Victorian Voters Federal Referendum." They both voted yes. The six colonies were about to turn the island continent into a commonwealth. "One nation; one destiny."

Neither Vicky nor Robert was politically active, but they did share a sense that they were taking part in an important experiment. Universal suffrage and education, the bulwarks of the new commonwealth, were principles in which the young couple believed. They also supported the notions of a minimum wage and workers compensation. The poverty they had seen on the Bendigo diggings was enough to convince them that the state had a role and a responsibility in looking after people's basic needs.

In the middle of 1900 Vicky became aware she was pregnant. Without the support of her mother she turned to her neighbours, especially Mrs Mary Bird, who calmed the young woman's fears and prepared her for her confinement. Vicky Wake was not a timid soul but she knew the risks. Mothers could and sometimes did die in childbirth. On December 21, just days before the delivery, Vicky asked her solicitor to draw up her last will and testament, which was witnessed by Henry and Mary Bird.<sup>15</sup>

On 27 December 1900 Robert Frederick Bird Wake was born in the family home at Moonee Ponds. It was a difficult delivery. There was a midwife in attendance, and the family doctor looked

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<sup>14</sup> See of Melbourne certificate issued by the Bishop of Melbourne.

<sup>15</sup> Last will and testament of Victoria Helena Holland Wake, 9 Davies Street, Moonee Ponds, Melbourne, Colony of Victoria, 21 December 1900.

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in while Robert waited in the front parlour. When it was all over the young couple shared their pain and pleasure. Vicky smiled as she held the baby in its swaddling clothes.

“A new baby for a new nation, Robert.”