Unveiling of a headstone for William Tipple Smith

Ladies and Gentlemen

We would not be here today, almost 170 years after the death of my g g g uncle, William Tipple Smith, had a newspaper not blown into the face of his son, as he walked along a Sydney Street in 1890. Pulling it away, he saw his father's name in connection with an enquiry into the gold discovery of 1851.

Knowing that his father had been branded a fraud by Governor Fitzroy, for claiming he had found a gold field and for trying to pass off gold from California in order to extort 500 pounds from the government, he broke open a drawer in his father's desk, which had remained locked for 40 years, as no one could find the key. In it he found correspondence between his father and government officials in Sydney and London, which proved that William Tipple Smith had found a payable goldfield in 1848, and had been the victim of a corrupt administration.

He tried to gain justice for his father, but failed miserably – carrying the letters around with him until they fell to bits. In 1924, shortly before he died, he dictated from memory their contents to a younger cousin, who typed them up. In 1985, I was given an incomplete copy of the typescript by a distant cousin, who told me that were about Uncle William's gold.

I had read in numerous history books that he was a shyster and a fraud, a thoroughly disreputable character. However, as the letters were dated and there were addresses on the fragments, my curiosity was piqued. So I began a search of the government files in NSW and London, only to discover that, although the receipt of the correspondence was logged, it was missing from the files. Determined to find it, I eventually did so. Misfiled, these documents had been lost for 134 years, and had resisted all attempts by eminent historians and geologists to discover their whereabouts.

The letters proved that, acting on a prediction made by Murchison in 1847 that gold would be found on the western slopes of the Blue Mountains, William had made a successful journey of discovery, extending his searches in 1848 and again in 1850. Believing that the Crown would be interested in his mineral intelligence, he informed the influential and well-connected Murchison, sending to him boxes of mineral samples and valuable gold nuggets, worth about $7000 in today's market. Murchison, impressed by William's information, lodged the nuggets in the London Geological Museum, and informed the Secretary of the State.

Despite Murchison's hopes, the Crown was not interested in promoting gold exploration, a verdict that was relayed to William. Undaunted, he got on with establishing the iron and steel industry at the recently opened Fitzroy Iron Works, named for the governor, which he and his brother and two businessmen had established at Mittagong.

News of a massive gold strike in California reached Sydney in December 1848. In the new year, as people were leaving Sydney for the goldfields, Uncle William believed that the time was right for him to approach the local administration about his gold finds. He visited the powerful colonial secretary on 24 January 1849, leaving with him

a nugget to the value of $7000 and offering to reveal the location of the gold field in return for 500 pounds, as he had been to great expense and trouble.

Despite the efforts of a previous governor, no mineral rights had been reserved for the Crown. If you owned the land, you owned everything on and below it, a situation that wealthy landowners certainly did not want to change. For a person like William, a mineralogist, the only monetary reward would be if he could obtain compensation for his discovery.

The Colonial Secretary in due course informed the Governor that a Mr W T Smith had discovered a gold field, but he took no action, as he had no interest in 'agitating the public mind and diverting people from their proper and more certain avocations'. The Colonial Secretary however, was extremely interested, and took the nugget with him on a private tour to the west of the mountains to find out where it had come from, evidently in an attempt to buy up the land, as whoever owned the land owned the minerals in it.

After hearing nothing about his gold discovery for six months, William Tipple Smith wrote to the Colonial Secretary who, in his reply, did not invite further disclosures about the gold field and stated that any remuneration must be left to the consideration of the government. This non-committal answer reinforced what Murchison had already stated was the case – the authorities had no interest is prosecuting gold exploration.

In February 1851, Edward Hargraves, who had prospected unsuccessfully in California, heard that gold might be found on the western slopes of the Blue Mountains. With funds provided by a wealthy backer, in return for information that would allow him to buy up gold-bearing land, Hargraves travelled to the Bathurst region where he formed a partnership with two young men - James Tom and John Lister. Despite weeks of searching, they found nothing more than a few specks of gold. Leaving his partners to continue the search, Hargraves returned to Sydney and told the Colonial Secretary he had found a gold field and enquired about a reward. He was told that it would depend on the value of the goldfield. As he had found just a few specks, the value was zero.

Meantime, back at Bathurst, fate had intervened in the search when James Tom had to return to his droving job. He was replaced by his brother, William, who lived on the family farm and knew all the local gossip. His uncle was William Lane, who had seen William Tipple Smith finding gold at Yorkey's Corner in 1948. Despite the protests of Lister, who said Hargraves had been to Yorkey's Corner and found nothing, William Tom insisted they go to there and try their luck. While relieving himself in the creek, Tom spotted a gold nugget. Within hours the pair had found enough gold to inform Hargraves of their discovery.

After announcing in the Sydney press that a goldfield had been found, he rushed across the mountains. He brought with him a borrowed ten-pound note, which he used to purchase most of the gold from his partners. He then called a meeting in Bathurst, exhibited the bought gold, and started a rush, predicting that miners would find nuggets as big as your boot.

Within a fortnight of this public meeting, the diggers had recovered 10,0000 pounds worth of gold. With the gold field proven, Hargraves declared all partnerships null and

void, and claimed the reward, eventually receiving more than 12,000 pounds. Uncle William received a letter from the Colonial Secretary, advising that, as he had kept his secret to himself, he was not entitled to anything, whatsoever.

This pesky mineralogist, however, presented a problem. He had found payable gold in 1848, and the both the colonial secretary and the governor knew about it. Furthermore, because of the uncontrolled rush, both the administration in London and Sydney were being heavily criticised for losing millions of pounds in revenue for the Crown, due to inaction.

In order to extricate himself from a difficult situation, Governor Fitzroy informed his superiors in June 1851 that he had been caught unawares – previous finds had been isolated and he had not acted on the advice of a Mr Smith, who had visited the office "about two years' previously. The deliberate falsification of the date from January to June, allowing time for someone to travel to California and back, allowed the governor to declare that he suspected the gold had come from California.

The Secretary of State in London had the proof that William Tipple Smith was not a fraud. He had received iron-clad documentation about the date of the discovery and the nuggets had been lodged by Murchison in the Museum. Eager to avoid any repercussions for his ineptitude and faced with the irrefutable proof of the gold discovery on the one hand, and the lies of the governor on the other, the Secretary of State did what all canny politicians have done since Pontius Pilate - he washed his hands of the affair and referred the case back to Fitzroy.

At the end of November, William Tipple Smith received a curt letter from the Colonial Secretary advising that his claim was a local matter, and admonishing him for contacting the Secretary of State by an indirect route. Three days later he was dead, having suffered a third and fatal stroke.

It was not until 1985, when I located the missing documents, that the truth finally emerged. It has taken another 35 years to have Uncle William's contribution to the nation officially acknowledged, thanks to the generosity of the NSW Government, Bluescope Steel, Rookwood Cemetery and private donors.

In 1985, when I first saw his neglected, unmarked grave, I discussed with my father what a suitable epitaph for his non-existent headstone might be. He chose a Latin phrase – 'Magna est veritas et praevalabit' – great is the truth and shall prevail.

However, recalling the way in which history had so badly treated an innocent and honourable man, I settled on something far more down to earth. They are words spoken by Henry Ford, who was famous for two great one-liners.

The first was 'You can have any colour car as long as it is black.

The second, and I am sure William Tipple Smith would agree, is far more apt –

'History is Bunk'.

Lynette Silver
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