

Bricks at dead of night

by James Michael Fleming

© 2014



Jim Fleming is a retired Customs Manager and lives on Sydney's lower north shore. He began researching his family history in 1983 and has been a member of the Society of Australian Genealogists for 35 years. Aside from genealogy he enjoys travelling and sings baritone in two choirs.

Researching: Bowen, Flowerdew, Gardner, Gordon, Grady, Hanrahan, Jolliffe, Kemp, Kessey, Murphy, Poulton, Press and so many more!

Website: <http://jimfleming.id.au/up/index.htm>

I am regularly updating my website, so Like my Facebook page to keep up to date. Click the icon below.

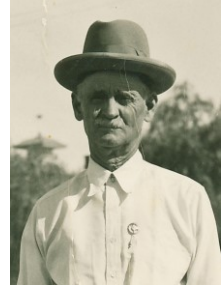
Find us on 

Bricks at dead of night

By Jim Fleming

During the Great Depression, Grandfather Kessey was mayor of Bourke. There was a very volatile political climate in NSW, which ultimately led to the dismissal of the Premier (Jack Lang) by Governor Phillip Game. The Communist Party was actively promoting its ideas and was getting a larger following. In response, some right-wing groups (such as the New Guard) were formed. It was in this political climate that a small drama was played out in western New South Wales.

James Kessey 1858 - 1944



It all started on Wednesday, 28 October 1931. A man named Moxon, new to Bourke, approached the mayor, James Kessey, with a request that he chair a public meeting to be held that evening in the park. Grandfather Kessey declined to chair the meeting and, furthermore, declined to grant permission for a public meeting to be held. No doubt he was aware of the trouble which had already occurred.

During the past week a Communist speaker has been spreading the Soviet Gospel at various public speeches. He has been "boosting" Russia as a model of Communistic ideas. Last Tuesday night's meeting was well attended in the Park and marked by the throwing of "rotten" eggs and "stink bombs". The speaker however was not perturbed, gave a forceful speech, and answered all questions¹.

Moxon went ahead with the meeting anyway and was arrested after some minor disturbances to vehicle traffic were observed by Sergeant Sturgiss. He was tried in the Bourke Police Court the following Tuesday night, 3 November.

It was a very hot, dry night and a busy one for mayor Kessey, in particular. Before Moxon's case was brought on, Kessey had already prosecuted another Communist² (a Mr Drinan³) for squatting in one of the mayor's houses. He then proceeded to personally lead the case against "Comrade" Moxon who pleaded Not Guilty. The mayor gave evidence on his own behalf before calling Sergeant Sturgiss and Mr Josiah Brown of Brewarrina (whose car had been obstructed)³.

The defendant gave evidence on his own behalf but refused to swear an oath on the Bible because he did "not believe in any religion". He was supported by evidence from Messrs Lewis Maher and Frank Minter, both of whom declined to swear the oath on the Bible. Moxon, in summing up, asserted that the prosecution was a political one to prevent him from spreading the views of Communism. The Police Magistrate did not accept this line of argument, found the defendant guilty and imposed a fine of £2 and costs of £3/10/-³. Moxon elected to be gaoled for 10 days rather than pay the fine⁴.

The mayor's busy night was not over. At 2am his household was "aroused from their slumber by a crashing sound and it was learned that about a dozen persons were seen to run away from the vicinity". The hoodlums had thrown a large number of heavy stones at the house and succeeded in smashing three long glass panes in the bay window of the front bedroom. One of these rocks was later "found in the baby's cot, but the infant⁵, luckily, was sleeping out in the cool"³. It seemed that Messrs Drinan and Moxon had a number of angry friends.

On the following Monday, a well attended public meeting was held at the Palais Royal. The meeting was chaired by the local doctor and Alderman, Robert Alcorn. He spoke about the need for Bourke citizens to uphold good citizenship. Following further words along these lines from Alderman Francis and Mayor Kessey, Mr D Maher "*came to the platform and announced himself a Communist. He said that Communists had been accused of the attack on the Mayor's residence...*" but was then interrupted on a point of order by Alderman Francis who noted that no party or organisation had been named. The meeting endorsed the motion that "this meeting of the citizens of Bourke protest against the willful damage to property by person or persons unknown and ask the cooperation of all citizens in the matter"⁶.

Two days later, on 11 November, the mayor convened a special Council meeting to consider an application by a Communist speaker to use the park for an address and also a resolution from the public meeting protesting against the Communist speakers being allowed to address meetings in the local Park. The Council unanimously decided to refuse permission for the speaker to use the Park for a public meeting⁶.

The following evening, a meeting of the Citizens Defence League (CDL) attracted about 400 people who marched to the Unemployed Workers Movement rooms to confront some thirty professed Communists, the latter (according to *The Western Herald*) armed with hammers, iron bars and pick handles. The police Sergeant asked the mob to disperse and considered reading the riot act, but the crowd was in no mood to take heed. Deputy Mayor Francis alleged that the Communists had issued a written threat on his life. "*The chief spokesman, Dr Alcorn, informed the Communists that the citizens objected to the man Moxon exciting the public by his speeches and said it was with difficulty that the large number assembled were held in check and prevented from storming the building. He issued an ultimatum to Moxon and some three of his supporters [Wallace, Minter and Maher⁷] to leave town not later than Monday next, otherwise the League will take such steps as they consider necessary*"⁶. After a stand-off lasting two hours, the mob sang the National Anthem before moving off⁸.

On the next evening, an aged Mr Henry Howard was assaulted by the man who was earlier prosecuted for squatting in James Kessey's house, James Drinan⁹. It was "*only the arrival of the police prevented the culprit from being rough handled by the large crowd*"⁷. As it was, Drinan was publicly "ducked" in the Darling River by the angry mob. Drinan was eventually convicted of assault and sentenced to 3 months gaol⁹.

The following afternoon the CDL held another meeting at which Dr Alcorn repeated his ultimatum that the four Communists leave town. A further public meeting took place on the next evening (Sunday), Dr Alcorn declaring the meeting open with the words

*"Citizens, I wish to introduce to you, tonight, a man who is a man, and has proved himself to be a man - a man with guts! Gentlemen, the Mayor of Bourke - Ald. James Kessey."*⁷

It would appear from this that mayor Kessey was very active behind the scenes in the CDL, with Dr Alcorn as his frontman.

The next morning, about 140 CDL men formed into patrols which then searched the town, but no trace of the four Communists was found. It appeared the ultimatum had worked! "*It now seems certain that the four Communists - Moxon, Maher, Minter and Wallace - have left the district. Sergeant Sturgiss reports this morning that the "Reds" have evidently made East and it is now 'All Quiet on the Western Front'*"⁷.

This victory for the citizenry and Mayor Kessey was warmly welcomed in other towns throughout the State, but not everyone ratified the methodology employed. The local Member of the Legislative Assembly (and Minister for Public Works) M A Davidson issued a statement that "*force will not be tolerated on the part of any section of the community ... It did not matter whether people called themselves Communists, New Guard or Citizen Defence Societies, they must not take the law in their own hands and use force*".⁷ Mayor Kessey was not impressed by these sentiments and demanded that Mr Davidson "state which side he was on as far as Communistic sentiments are concerned and so far Mr Davidson has side stepped the issue completely"⁷.

The Government was, understandably, very concerned that the situation could get out of hand because the Communists were involved in similar confrontations in a number of NSW towns at this time. It may be no coincidence that Communists were standing in the Municipal elections which were due to be held within a few weeks. No doubt, the sitting Aldermen did no harm at all to their electoral standings by taking firm action against Communist agitators.

Municipal election results, 5 December 1931

Mr Morrall	345
Dr Guiney	315
Dr Alcorn, Robert M	303
Mr Moxam	302 (NB Not Moxon)
Mr Kessey, James	282
:	:
:	:
Mr Minter	14 (last)

Dr Alcorn published a notice of thanks to members of the CDL in the following terms:

*"I feel very sincerely the honour to have led men who have displayed courage and discipline. With discipline you accepted my directions. With courage you faced the possibilities of injury and with perhaps greater courage you restrained your indignation in the face of insolent abuse of your manhood. Our actions, carried out steadfastly and soberly, have had a repercussion in the Parliaments, in the communities, and in the hearts of the people of Australia."*¹⁰

The last word belongs to *Eldorado* who published the following verse in the Western Herald of Friday, 27 November 1931:

All's Quiet on the Western Front

"All's quiet on the Western front!"

Reports the head serang of police;
Which means we may now thank the Lord
Or Sergeant, for preserving peace.

The Dubbo hops have hopped away,
The guards have thrown their waddies down,
The cry of victory rings out
From every shop and pub in town.

No longer Alcorn's gallant troops
The hairy scalps of Bolshie's hunt,
For Sergeant Sturgiss now reports,
"All's quiet on the Western front"

No more will hen-fruit, over ripe,
At Park debates be in the boom;
No more will bricks at dead of night,
Invade the Mayor's reception room.

No longer at a sporting Club
Will Dinny Maher on "good things" punt,
Since Moxon's colt, Komrada, came
A "Gutser" on the Western front.

An ill wind it must surely be
That to a town no blessing blows,
For now united, 'neath one flag,
Are two contentious medicos.

And though the Press it seems would have
Our peaceful gutter tinged with blood
The fact remains, the only tinge
Discernable, so far, is mud.

So, barring Davidson's retort
That made the Mayor go somewhat sore
The atmosphere about the town
Is even deader than before.

So here's respects to "Sudden Death"
And all the Johns who in the hunt,
Assisted by the Sergeant, saved
A scrimmage on the Western Front.

¹ *The Western Herald*, Friday 23 October 1931

² *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Tuesday 17 November 1931

³ *The Western Herald*, Friday 6 November 1931

⁴ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 November 1931, "Minister's threat: Force will not be tolerated"

⁵ Oral history: the infant was James Anthony Kessey (the mayor's grandson), b.31 March 1930.

⁶ *The Western Herald*, Friday 13 November 1931

⁷ *Ibid.*, Tuesday 17 November 1931

⁸ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 November 1931, "Communist version"

⁹ *Ibid.*, 17 November 1931, "Communists leave Bourke; other towns taking action"

¹⁰ *The Western Herald*, Tuesday 24 November 1931