

## DR DARTON BELOVED PHYSICIAN

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Colleen O'Sullivan *Mudgee Guardian* 19 August 2013

I suspect many of us, having finally accepted we are going to die, hope that our funeral will at least affirm the significance of our life. Dr William Reginald (Bill) Darton's impressive funeral did that. The *Mudgee Guardian* account covered two and a half columns headlined "First Citizen of Kandos Passes On...Community Pay Homage to Great Man".

Bill Darton died unexpectedly of a heart attack on the evening of Friday 12 March 1943. On the morning after, his casket was laid in state in St Lawrence Church for a steady stream of mourners to pay their respects. From 6pm a guard of honour kept half-hourly watches till morning.

When the funeral service began at 11am Sunday morning, over 100 floral tributes had been placed near the coffin, the church was filled with mourners and "a crowd estimated at over a thousand people gathered outside the church". Representatives were there from every business, lodge, club, association and institution in the town; and many from further away. Two ministers conducted the church service and three held the graveside service.

I ask myself, what kind of man is honoured in such a way at his death? The surprise and untimeliness of it must be of some account. He was "in fine spirits...getting ready to attend to his evening surgery when he became suddenly ill," the paper reported. A few minutes later he was dead, at the age of 50.

There would have been many in the town that day who exchanged a smile, joke or friendly greeting with him; asked about his golf or complained about a council issue. In the course of his medical duties he would have helped some and reassured others. No one would have expected it would be the last time they saw him.

The town's grief and respect for him is obvious in several meetings and letters to the editor about a proposed "W R Darton Memorial Fund". At a public meeting one week after his death it was decided to open a fund for a three-fold purpose: the erection of a suitable gravestone, the education of his children and the erection of a memorial building.

The memorial caused some disagreement. One suggestion was the construction of a children's ward at Rylstone Hospital; another suggestion was a maternity ward for the baby clinic in Kandos. In the end it is Darton Park that continues to commemorate his twenty-two years service to the Kandos community.

After graduating with a Bachelor of Medicine and Master of Surgery from Sydney University, followed by a residency at Lewisham Hospital, Dr Darton was well-qualified to be admitted into partnership with Dr Norman Hansard of Rylstone in February 1921. At the age of 30 he set up his surgery in the industrial centre of Kandos five miles away.

It was a time when a medico could be called out at any time of the day or night; when epidemics were a constant threat (especially among children) and work accidents were common; when the source of all health knowledge, public and private, was the local doctor, especially one who had the title Government Medical Officer. Dr Darton must have been the

most recognised and valued man in town. “The Beloved Physician” was the title Reverend Hawkey gave to his eulogy.

The *Mudgee Guardian* reveals some of the cases Dr Darton had to attend to at his surgery, in the operating theatre at Rylstone Hospital or on-site. There was Jim Hundy with a pick driven through his arm, Albert Guthrie who survived a rock fall and William Robinson whose arm was severed below the elbow while he was greasing machinery. Some like Edward Gallagher, who suffered a fractured skull and a torn-off leg when he fell into the belting at number 2 rawmill, didn’t survive.

He had to deal with several typhoid scares due to poor sanitary conditions and lack of water. Before vaccination programs, childhood diseases like diphtheria, scarlet fever, whooping cough and polio were common and took him into many Kandos homes.

Dr Bill Darton was a man committed to community service. During his years in the town he was at different times President of the Kandos Rugby Football League, President of the Kandos Golf Club, President of Rylstone Shire Council (for nine of eleven years), Vice-President of the Boy Scouts and a member of the first Rylstone Kandos Show Society.

The *Mudgee Guardian* shows him attending dinners, judging competitions, opening events, planting trees, presenting deputations and giving lectures. “He realised he had obligations as a citizen”, said Reverend Hawkey. It is no wonder that in 1935 he was awarded the King George V Silver Jubilee Medal, one of only 6,500 awarded to Australians.

Reverend Hawkey eulogised: “But not only in the more serious sides of community life did he find his interest, but in those good and happy things of recreation and art.” He played golf, practised archery, played the violin (including at public functions) and involved himself, in a mentoring capacity, in the sports of his youth - football, rifle shooting and boxing.

His secondary school education at Newington College from 1907 to 1912 points to a young man who will make his mark in the world. An all-rounder, he excelled at rifle-shooting and rugby, served in the Cadets and was appointed Colour Sergeant; and was on the editorial council of the school magazine, *The Newingtonian*. According to Rose Fitzgerald (*Victory in our Veins* 1988) he learnt music at a nearby convent.

In a group photograph of the Prefects in 1912 we see a handsome young man with a slight arch of an eye-brow and tilt of the head as if Bill Darton is considering something, perhaps his future. I see alertness, intelligence and openness in his demeanour.

And what of family life? He was married at St John’s Anglican Church Ashfield two months after he established his practice in Kandos. Enid Cogan was the eldest daughter of the Auditor General Frederick Coghlan and his wife Kate. Bill’s brother Jack, who also became a doctor, was best man. His sister Elsie and sister-in-law Evelyn Coghlan were bridesmaids. It is a lovely description of the bride in the *Lithgow Mercury*: “The bride wore a gown of white georgette and crepe-de-chene and pale pink georgette whilst her veil was fastened with a wreath of orange blossoms. She carried a shower bouquet of white cactus dahlias and carnations.”

Bill and Enid had two children, a son Ronald and daughter Gwenyth. Gwen Dickson in *Doctor’s Daughter* (2007) recalls memories of her early life in Kandos and tells something of

her father's practice in Kandos (with some airbrushing I think). She tells too of the decision of her parents that Enid and the children move to Cremorne so that Ron could continue his secondary education in the city; a decision that resulted in much travelling by Bill, back and forth at weekends. It was a cost that he was obviously prepared to pay having made a commitment to his practice and country life but I imagine it was a strain on the relationship and perhaps a disappointment for Enid, with a father who had attained so much.

My mother shared two memories of Dr Darton. One is of her father Bill Walsh and Dr Darton drinking port in the sitting room while Nurse Babbage was helping her mother deliver a baby in the bedroom. Another is a piece of local gossip that "Dr Darton had an affair with a nurse at Rylstone hospital". I have mulled over those snippets searching for both truth and meaning.

In the end I lay them out as part of his story and come back to Reverend Hawkey's words: "Himself straightforward and direct, he hated insincerity or cant of any kind and was not slow to detect humbug."

I believe Bill Darton was loved and admired so widely not just for his goodness but for his humanness in all its dimensions. "So passed a good man, truly great," were Hawkey's final words. Not many I think get such a send-off.