

Character and Contradiction

As she sat down to write the story of her Uncle Geoffrey, she paused a moment. *I wonder how other family historians reconcile antithetical accounts of someone's character. How do I apportion justice to Geoffrey, the family black sheep so reviled that his brothers rarely spoke his name, yet so revered by others for averting a tragedy? I am neither judge nor executioner,* she decided. *I merely record the information before me. Let others determine Geoffrey's disposition.* Her fingers danced lightly across the keyboard as she began to type.



(left) Irene Maclaren Wallis and Geoffrey, c. 1915.
(right) Geoffrey Charles White Maclaren Wallis, c. 1916.

Geoffrey Charles White Maclaren Wallis was born in England on 5 February 1915. The eldest of five sons born to Reverend Hubert Edgar Wallis and his wife Irene, Geoffrey's name was testament to his noble lineage, notably his mother's. The White family held extensive parcels of shares in the Carron Company, supplier of cannons to the Duke of Wellington at Waterloo. And like his predecessors, Geoffrey carried the Maclaren family name linked to the Jacobite risings. So that's why I like *Outlander*! she mused. *It's not just about Sam Heughan!*



Hubert Edgar Wallis, c. 1916.

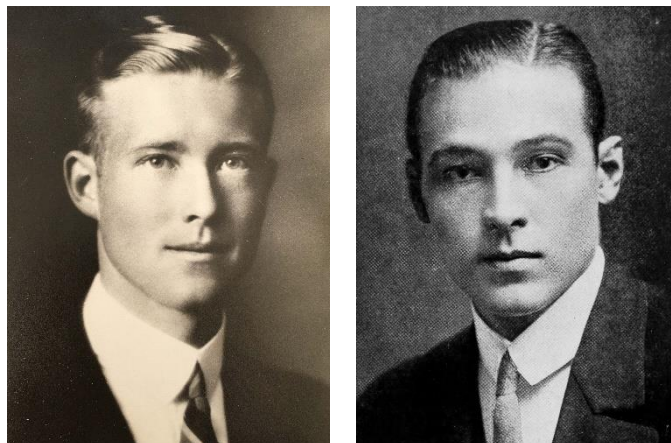
Picking up the photograph of her eccentric grandfather Hubert resplendent in a World War I uniform not his own - Hubert never achieved the rank of 2nd Lieutenant –she noted the damaged left hand, courtesy of a childhood accident. Hubert’s mental health deteriorated while serving in the Royal Army Medical Corps, the horrors of the battlefield returning home with him. Increasingly aberrant behaviour placed Reverend Hubert at odds with his Church of England elders, so in 1924 he moved his family – Irene, Geoffrey and younger sons John and Eric - to New Zealand. The family set up home in windswept Wellington where two more sons - Nigel and Basil – were born. She looked up at the 1931 photograph on her study wall. *There’s Geoffrey, ramrod straight - the idyllic portrait of familial pride.*



(left to right) Basil, Nigel, Eric, John and Geoffrey, c. 1931.

Three years after the photograph was taken, nine-year-old Nigel contracted a life-threatening illness, forcing Hubert to seek treatment for his ailing son in Australia. While Hubert moved his burgeoning family across the Tasman, Geoffrey stayed behind in New Zealand to continue his medical studies. Nigel's treatment was successful, but Hubert's behaviour continued to deteriorate. There were press reports of his all-night sermons on the 'evils of dancing', then Hubert threatened to kill the two youngest boys rather than let them enlist in World War II. Nigel joined up anyway. By 1942, Geoffrey's mother Irene could no longer tolerate husband Hubert's behaviour and the couple separated, the Melbourne-based boys siding with their mother. Not having witnessed Hubert's deterioration, Geoffrey took his father's side.

Meanwhile, in the absence of his family, rumours of Geoffrey's dissolute lifestyle filtered back to Australia. Geoffrey pestered his mother for money, something he considered his birthright as first-born son. Irene's refusal to accede to his demands drove the wedge between them deeper. Although earlier failing several exams, Geoffrey qualified as a medical practitioner in 1948. A year later, despite his lothario reputation – colleagues nicknamed him 'the Sheik' after actor Rudolph Valentino - Geoffrey's Protestant family was mortified to learn he had 'married a Catholic!' Lying about his age to impress his much-younger bride, Geoffrey listed his father's occupation as 'Radiographer', ashamed of his family's humble connections.



*(left) Geoffrey, c. 1936.
(right) Rudolph Valentino, 1923.*

She paused, trying to work out how to remain loyal to her father Nigel without condemning a man whose offences were apportioned through third-hand recollections. Then she remembered her grandmother Irene's will. Geoffrey had been disinherited.

5. I DECLARE that the reason why I have made no provision under this my will for my son GEOFFREY CHARLES WHITE MACLAREN WALLIS is that he has behaved to me in a manner in which no son is justified in behaving toward his mother. I have retained a number of -- letters written to me by my said son to which my Executors will have access. It is my firm belief that these letters and certain other facts known to my Executors afford full and sufficient -- reasons for my decision in this regard.

Extract, Will of Irene Maclaren Wallis, c. 1959.

But Irene could not have foreseen that a childless cousin would later bequeath his entire estate to the Wallis boys, so Geoffrey inherited Carron Company shares alongside his brothers. There was nothing left in their father's estate; Hubert died penniless. With Geoffrey's whereabouts uncertain, youngest son Basil paid for his father's funeral.

She thought back to the year 2000 when she first started looking for Geoffrey. *Family research was so difficult seventeen years ago. Everything's much easier now.* She recalled finding the Salvation Army family tracing service, but it didn't handle genealogical enquiries. A chance discussion, however, revealed that Eric and Basil had submitted DNA samples for research into a family medical condition. Now with a valid reason for requesting information, she submitted her enquiry. The long wait began.

When it came, the news wasn't good. Geoffrey had married a second time, but both he and his English wife Alice had long since passed away. She contacted the tracing service again. Two years after her quest began, an email arrived. Alice's niece, forever grateful for Geoffrey's help in saving the life of a young child, had written about his final years in England. Time and distance had tempered Geoffrey's character and he had become a much-loved member of Alice's family. Sadly, estrangement from his own had remained a source of great heartache. *And that photo of Geoffrey. So like Dad!*



Geoffrey Charles White Maclaren Wallis, c. 1980.

Placing the email printout beside her, she began to type the next chapter in Uncle Geoffrey's story.

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