‘Mightier than the Sword’:

The Life and Times of Sir John Waters Kirwan (1866-1949)

By

Anne Partlon MA (Eng) and Grad. Dip. Ed

This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of Murdoch University 2011
I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not been previously submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Anne Partlon
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Abstract

John Waters Kirwan (1866-1949) played a pivotal role in the Australian Federal movement. At a time when the Premier of Western Australia Sir John Forrest had begun to doubt the wisdom of his resource rich but under-developed colony joining the emerging Commonwealth, Kirwan conspired with Perth Federalists, Walter James and George Leake, to force Forrest’s hand. Editor and part-owner of the influential *Kalgoorlie Miner*, the ‘pocket-handkerchief’ newspaper he had transformed into one of the most powerful journals in the colony, he waged a virulent press campaign against the besieged Premier, mocking and belittling him at every turn and encouraging his east coast colleagues to follow suit. A founding member of the Eastern Goldfields Reform League, which convened to bring Western Australia into the national union, he spearheaded the ‘Separation for Federation’ agitation, arguing in the *Miner* that, if the colony did not federate, the Goldfields should go it alone. Of itself, this was nothing more than an audacious bluff designed to humble Forrest and his supporters, but exploited by key players such as James, Leake, Alfred Deakin, Charles Cameron Kingston, Patrick McMahon Glynn and Josiah Symon, even Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain, it proved an effective weapon. Chamberlain, in his controversial 27 April 1900 cable to Acting Governor Onslow, alluded to the ‘agitation of the Federalist party…in goldfields’ before urging Forrest to ‘bring the Colony into Federation at once’. Friends since his days as editor of the *Port Augusta Dispatch* (1893-95), Kirwan enlisted South Australian lawyers and parliamentarians Kingston, Glynn and Symon to redraft his petition to the Queen and advise the Separatists. This thesis, the first full-length biography of John Waters Kirwan, is also the first to examine in detail his service to what Kingston called ‘the sacred cause’ of national unity. From his arrival in Queensland in 1889 to his Presidency of the Western Australian Legislative Council nearly 40 years later, it gives new weight to his contribution while pondering why, after such a spectacular debut, he failed to make the most of his short-lived Federal parliamentary career.
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Introduction

A Most Unsuitable Candidate

On Saturday 8 April 1933, the people of Western Australia voted by a 68% majority to secede from the Commonwealth. The referendum added a bitterly ironic postscript to the stalled political ambitions of John Waters Kirwan, who in 1931, with the House evenly divided on the subject, had used his casting vote as President of the Legislative Council to save the Secession Bill from defeat.¹ For Kirwan was no Secessionist. He was on the contrary a staunch Federalist who, thirty-three years previously while crusading editor of the influential Goldfields daily the Kalgoorlie Miner, led a popular local agitation aimed at bringing Western Australia into the Commonwealth as an original state.

The 1899-1900 Separation for Federation campaign turned the tide of the constitutional movement in the west by threatening to excise the Goldfields from the rest of the colony, if it did not Federate. Since it was doubtful that the Imperial authorities would have acceded to such a request, the ploy was little more than an audacious bluff designed to coerce a reluctant Premier Sir John Forrest into holding a referendum on the subject, but with the connivance of leading Federalists and Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain himself it proved an effective lever by which to manipulate Forrest. It was also the making of John Kirwan, who capitalised on his growing celebrity to launch his parliamentary career; and yet as swiftly as he rose, he fell, losing his Federal seat after one short term and retreating to Kalgoorlie to lick his wounds. Such reversals are not uncommon in the world of politics. Churchill, for example, overcame several setbacks on the road to Prime Ministerial office. Kirwan did not. Although he subsequently ran for State Parliament, retaining for nearly forty years his seat in the Legislative Council and eventually securing the Presidency of the chamber, he never recovered his former stature, and the name which was once a ‘household word’² faded from civic memory.

Historical neglect and exiguous sources have completed the process. Ironically, while Kirwan himself was a prolific author of letters, pamphlets, verse, newspaper and journal articles and books, little has been written about him and what there is tends to be ephemeral, uncritical and inaccurate. The earliest contemporary portraits of him consist of testimonials,

² ‘Motion – Condolence’, Western Australian Parliamentary Debates [WAPD], Vol.125, 20 September 1949, p.2203.
political sketches and social glossaries of the type penned by ‘Truthful Thomas’\(^3\) and Mrs Leonard W. Matters, who wrote under the pseudonym, ‘Egeria’.\(^4\) These depict a man ‘slightly above middle height’ and, in contrast to his famously swarthy ancestors, of fair complexion, with ‘darkish hair and a mousey-brown moustache’.\(^5\) Kirwan himself claimed in a rare interview to be 5′10″,\(^6\) although youthful photographs show a slighter figure, and Jack Drayton, venomous editor of the *Kalgoorlie Sun* and a bitter enemy of ‘Curwan’, denominated him a ‘small, pale man’, from which came the contemptuous sobriquet, suggestive of a sickly, snarling mongrel.\(^7\) In fact, Kirwan does not appear to have had a robust constitution and, prone to colds and respiratory illnesses, often complained publicly of feeling unwell.\(^8\)

Friends in Port Augusta, fearing that his delicate features betokened an underlying frailty, did their best to dissuade him from going to Kalgoorlie, ‘where men were dying like flies’;\(^9\) and Kirwan himself was always sensitive about his health, to the point of exhibiting mild hypochondria. His mother died of phthisis when he was six and that loss, coupled with the deaths of two infant brothers the year before his birth,\(^10\) may have fostered his anxieties. He was accordingly an abstemious man, and neither smoked nor drank nor, apart from a youthful jaunt to the casinos at Monte Carlo and an occasional flutter on the horses, gambled.\(^11\) A dedicated tourist, especially in his later years, he believed in the curative powers of travel and once recommended it to his friend, Hugh Mahon, as a sop to the strains of Ministerial office.\(^12\) He was also notoriously reticent about his private life and, while outwardly charming, gave few insights into his deepest thoughts and feelings. His favourite flower was the rose, he admired actors George Arliss and Charlie Chaplin, he thought Ned Kelly the most memorable figure in Australian history, and he preferred


\(^5\) ‘Truthful Thomas’, *Through the Spyglass*, p.16.


\(^12\) John Waters Kirwan to Hugh Mahon, 29 April 1904, Mahon Papers, MS 937: 162-65, No.398, National Library of Australia, Canberra [NLA].
biographies to novels.\textsuperscript{13} In a rare effusion which did not bode well for his troubled marriage he later listed ‘books, reading and friendship’ as the three great pleasures of life.\textsuperscript{14}

Character references and newspaper reports, while affording further glimpses into Kirwan’s psyche, have only contributed to the enigma. Former employers, verifying his intelligence and his practical skills as a stenographer and ‘ready paragraphist’, also extolled his integrity,\textsuperscript{15} but Australian journalists were not always as complimentary or as consistent, depicting him in contradictory terms as courteous, scholarly, fair-minded, serious, witty, humourless, genial, ponderous, dignified, stubborn and diffident. Reflecting the views of the town after which it was named, the \textit{Port Augusta Dispatch} praised its retiring editor on the eve of his departure for Kalgoorlie as efficient, independent, impartial, conscientious, enthusiastic, learned and ‘a pleasure to know’.\textsuperscript{16} The \textit{Bendigo Independent}, reporting in 1902 when he was a Member of the House of Representatives concurred, finding him ‘temperate and logical in debate’, ‘quick at repartee’, and endowed with an ‘agreeable personality and courteous bearing’;\textsuperscript{17} but the \textit{Sun}, lamenting his lack of humour and mental stolidity, thought him ‘too soberly serious, too deadly solemn’ for his own good.\textsuperscript{18} Another plainly bored correspondent noted a fluent but dull speaker whose ‘slow utterances [were] apt to become…wearsome to impatient men who think and act rapidly’;\textsuperscript{19} yet Henry Hunt, Kirwan’s old boss at the Dublin desk of the \textit{London Central News}, attested to his ‘quickness of perception…and clearness of thought’\textsuperscript{20} and E. M. Heenan, who knew him in later life, remarked upon his ‘great sense of humour’.\textsuperscript{21} \textit{W. A. Truth} admired his persistence and ‘cheerful candour’\textsuperscript{22} but the \textit{Mirror}, mimicking his Irish brogue, described him as ‘nervous…diffident [and] dogmatic at times’ before declaring ‘J. W. Kirwan of the “Kal-goo-er-lie Moin-er”… a good democrat of the sensible sort’.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{15} Testimonials of Mr J. W. Kirwan, Member of the Australasian Institute of Journalists: F. H. Wayland, Chief Representative \textit{Dublin Morning and Evening Mail}, 21 May 1889; Henry Hunt B.L., Dublin Representative of \textit{London Central News}, May 1889; and J. J. Clancy, M.P., North Dublin, May 1889, Kirwan Papers, MN591 PR520 O/S C17, Battye Library [BL].
\textsuperscript{16} ‘Farewell to Mr J. W. Kirwan’, \textit{Port Augusta and Quorn Dispatch, Newcastle and Flinders Chronicle}, 29 November 1895, p.2.
\textsuperscript{17} 9 January 1902, Kirwan papers, MN591 PR520 O/S C17, BL.
\textsuperscript{18} Kalgoorlie \textit{Sun}, 20 November 1910, p.15.
\textsuperscript{19} Newspaper article, Kirwan Papers, MN591: PR520 O/S C17, BL.
\textsuperscript{20} Testimonials of Mr J. W. Kirwan, Member of the Australasian Institute of Journalists: Henry Hunt B.L., Dublin Representative of \textit{London Central News}, May 1889, Kirwan Papers, MN591 PR 520 O/S C17, BL.
\textsuperscript{22} 4 April 1903.
\textsuperscript{23} \textit{Mirror}, n.d., Kirwan Papers, MN591 PR520 O/S C17, BL.
In the absence of more comprehensive studies, these fragments must serve to illuminate the man, at least as he was in youth. Later acquaintances describe a mellower, more urbane individual while indices like J. S. Battye’s famous *Cyclopedia* (1912-13) and the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* offer the most reliable resumés of his public achievements. Neither summary does much more than scratch the surface, however. Battye’s abstract, couched in the polite terminology of the day, covers only the first decade or so of his career. Pat Simpson’s longer entry, while an efficient recital of facts, is constrained by space or tact, or both, from an analysis of his character, his relationships and his professional conduct. The only books to attempt a closer inspection – Jules Raeside’s memoir, *Golden Days* (1929), and Norma King’s corporate history, *The Voice of the Goldfields: 100 Years of the Kalgoorlie Miner* (1995) – cannot be said to be entirely disinterested. King’s volume, commissioned by Kirwan’s old firm, Hocking and Company, is essentially a commemorative history of the newspaper. Raeside’s memoir, while lauding Kirwan as the ‘doughty champion of goldfields’ grievances’ and presiding genius of the Separation campaign, appears to have been a collaborative effort between the two of them and is too hagiographical to be entirely credible. As well as assigning large tracts of the narrative to Kirwan, who contributed articles, verse, and the preface, Raeside, the pseudonym of Goldfields identity W. J. Reside, is also the brother of John Reside, the first Member for Hannan’s (later Kalgoorlie) in the State Parliament and one of Kirwan’s Reform League cronies.

Kirwan’s 1936 autobiography, *My Life’s Adventure*, is hardly more instructive. Written in episodic style, its most remarkable features are its lack of introspection and its unconventional habit of substituting for the author’s personal history a series of anecdotes about the many rich, famous and usually titled figures he encountered in his almost pathological wanderings. On the subject of his childhood, his troubled marriage to the mentally fragile Teresa Gertrude, daughter of Speaker T. F. Quinlan, and his four sons, two

of whom predeceased him, he has nothing to say. Partly his reticence may be attributed to the pieties of a more reserved generation who would have thought it bad form to air their dirty laundry in public. But another part of it has its roots in the ‘West Britonism’ which pervades his writing. Like many Irish Catholic élites, Kirwan was a closet Anglophile, aping English aristocratic manners and ingratiating himself at every opportunity with British grandees, from whom he was, however, alienated by race and religion. Correspondence from the 1920s and 30s when he was frequently in London reveal him to have been of a sociable cast, much given to lunching, dining and clubbing with his high-ranking patrons; and, when not thus engaged, he often busied himself writing panegyrics to Imperial statesmen and performing helpful little services on their behalf, as he did for John Jacob Astor, the wealthy and influential owner of The Times and future Baron Hever, to whom he sent flattering press cuttings of his 1925 Melbourne visit. 30 He was a founding member of the Empire Press Union and its affiliate, the Empire Parliamentary Association, formed to promote cultural exchanges between Britain and its dominions, and belonged to various gentlemen’s clubs: Hannans, Kalgoorlie, the Weld, Perth, Kildare St, Dublin, 31 and that bastion of British conservatism, the Carlton. 32

The best that can be said of this unattractive toadism is that he was, as some early observers intuited, naturally diffident, the worst that he suffered an inferiority complex amounting to a ferocious cultural cringe. Certainly there was an element of modest self-effacement about a man who, for all his bluff and bluster as a radical editor and maverick politician, once gave as his recipe for happiness ‘good health [and] thinking as little as possible about yourself’. 33 Family members recall a reserved individual, who took time to get to know people. 34 But was it false modesty? Whether from genuine humility or the belief that true greatness is conferred, not cultivated, he baulked at blowing his own horn and recruited others – the compliant Raeside, for example – to supply the deficiency. Nor

30 Sir Harry Brittain to Kirwan, 2 March 1921, Kirwan Papers, MS277: 1/170, NLA, thanking Kirwan for a copy of Two Imperial Press Conferences; Ronald Munro-Ferguson, Viscount Novar, to Kirwan, 15 April 1921, MS277:1/171, NLA; John Jacob Astor to Kirwan, 27 December 1925 and 17 February 1927, MS277:1/179, NLA.
32 Carlton Club Secretary Mary Sharp and Archivist Alistair Cooke in emails to the author on 14 and 16 August, 2, 6 and 14 September 2010 advise that Kirwan’s name appears in pencil on a 1932 list of members, from which it is deduced that he was an ‘honorary’ member. This is corroborated by a later annotated list from 1 February 1934, which bears the legend ‘honorary member’ next to his name. His son, John Daniel, became an ordinary member in 1935.
was Raeside the only proxy to be thus pressed into service. Novelist Katharine Susannah Prichard, historian J. S. Battye, and fellow Reform Leaguer Hugh Mahon, who in 1913 excited Kirwan’s expectations by announcing his intention of writing a memoir (it never materialised), were also approached.

Like his older contemporary, John Winthrop Hackett, Kirwan hailed from the Irish gentry, albeit from the opposite side of their country’s great religious and political divide. Hackett, the son of a Church of Ireland clergyman, traced his lineage to an Anglo-Norman follower who accompanied the Conqueror to England. Kirwan, son of an impoverished Catholic Irish gentleman farmer, came of a once proud clan of native (Gaelic) merchant princes and landowners. This cultural schism informed their competing visions of Irish nationhood. Hackett, the Ascendancy representative, vehemently opposed Irish devolution, and as owner-editor of the *West Australian* single-handedly mounted a pogrom against state aid for Catholic schools. Kirwan, the Catholic nationalist, was an ardent Home Ruler and Parnellite but, since he was also a monarchist, did not approve of the republicans who fought to end British rule, and it was many years before he could think of men like Collins and De Valera as ‘idealists [and] patriots’. The destruction of the Big Houses and their ‘beautiful desmesnes’ was an especial cause for regret. Born in 1866, the year after the poet, he was of Yeats’ generation and mourned with him the loss of ‘many ingenious lovely things’ wantonly destroyed by ‘the rage-driven, rage-tormented, and rage-hungry troop’.

Despite their initial hostility to one another, Kirwan and Hackett were eventually to become friends and, indeed, had much in common. Both were shrewd businessmen who headed major newspapers and went on to parliamentary service. Kirwan, at the *Kalgoorlie Miner*, articulated the opinions of the young, progressive and politically conscious Goldfields community. Hackett, at the *West Australian*, spoke for the conservative majority in the older, coastal and south-west agricultural districts. As friction between the two groups escalated in 1899 over whether or not Western Australia should join the Commonwealth, Kirwan and Hackett found themselves at loggerheads, with Kirwan, the Federalist, preaching national union and Hackett, the ‘disunionist’, urging caution. Once Federation became an accomplished fact in 1901, however, the rivalry between them lost much of its

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heat, leaving them open to the possibility of rapprochement. In some respects, they complemented each other. Hackett, the conservative, was ‘liberal’ on such matters as education, female suffrage and mental health. Kirwan, the radical, was morally conservative and resisted attempts to relax the divorce laws.\(^3\) As ‘loyal’ Irishmen, they believed that the continent should be preserved for the British race, subscribed to the White Australia policy and supported the construction of railways and similar state-backed initiatives. They were both members of the Empire Press Union and Perth’s exclusive Weld Club and, by 1912, had become so cosy that Hackett invited Kirwan to join him on the Senate of the University of Western Australia.

There were, however, fundamental areas of disagreement. Hackett, the press baron, was the archetypal capitalist. Kirwan entered State Parliament as a nominee of the Newton Moore Ministerialist government, precursors of the Liberal Party, but exhibited left-wing sympathies. He stood for small business as well as the working man: the former made him a Free Trader while the latter inclined him towards the trade union movement. He was present at the birth of the Labor Party in April 1899, when he addressed its inaugural Congress in Coolgardie to rousing applause, and later proved a stalwart ally of Labor Premier John ‘Happy Jack’ Scaddan’s ‘goldfields government’. From such auspices as these, he might have been expected to throw in his lot with Labor and, but for the party oath which would have obliged him to vote with caucus in preference to his conscience, may well have done so. He was an old-fashioned radical liberal in the mould of Edmund Burke (1729-97), the Anglo-Irish philosopher, statesman and political theorist whose belief in a free market economy, a property-based social hierarchy, and the right of elected officials to vote as their judgement decreed, and not necessarily as their constituents wished, he shared. Many of his rulings while President of the Legislative Council – those aimed at shoring up the prerogatives of the propertied classes, for example – can be attributed to his Burkeian sensibilities. Similarly, his decision to vote for the Secession Bill in 1931 in spite of his Federalist principles may be seen as striking a blow for liberty and the democratic process.

But his independence came at a price. As was to become apparent after 1911, when Labor’s growing dominance forced the conservative representatives to band together for their own survival, Kirwan’s determination to remain a ‘non-party’ man in an increasingly partisan chamber deprived him of political power and ultimately consigned him to oblivion. To some extent, he was a victim of circumstance. Ironically, given his Liberal origins, the

closest he came to influencing government policy was through his alliance with the Scaddan Labor government, but after the split of 1916 he could no longer count on his old comrades and, while keeping his distance from the new party political combinations, found himself temporarily on the outer.

The problem for Kirwan’s biographer is how to sustain interest in a long, distinguished but unspectacular career which peaked early and never recovered its former altitude. His main claim to fame, and one he flagged himself, rather awkwardly adumbrating it ‘a movement of far-reaching importance with which I was directly associated’, was as leader of the Eastern Goldfields Reform League and chief apologist for the Federal cause in Western Australia. It is also the only time in his autobiography that he turned the spotlight on himself, declaring that it was he who ‘advocated in the Press the separation of the Eastern Goldfields from the colony of Western Australia for the purpose of forming a new state and joining the Commonwealth’.

For the rest of his life Kirwan insisted that the Separationists had played a seminal role in uniting the nation. ‘Were it not for the fear of losing the Eastern Goldfields’, he maintained, ‘Parliament would not have given the electors the right to vote for or against Federation, and thus the colony could not possibly have joined as an original State’. It was a theme he continued to pursue in the *Kalgoorlie Miner* and in the State and Federal Parliaments where he never lost an opportunity to pummel Forrest and the ‘Swan Settlement parochialists’ who had stood fast against the cause until compelled by the Imperial government to hold a referendum.

On this subject, however, historical opinion is sharply divided. J. S. Battye, in language which echoes Kirwan’s own, agrees with him in seeing the Separation campaign as ‘the most important factor which led to the ultimate unconditional submission of the [Constitution] Bill to the electors’. This view is endorsed by pseudonymous Goldfields poet Jules Raeside, as well as by Perth Federal leaders Walter James and George Leake, with whom Kirwan liaised throughout the agitation. Leake, writing to thank him for his ‘able advocacy’ at the conclusion of the campaign, went as far as averring that without him ‘we should have had but a poor chance’.

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40 Kirwan, *MLA*, p.144.
41 Ibid., p.146.
45 George Leake to John Kirwan, 15 June 1900, Kirwan Papers, MN591, 383A/1, BL.
Other commentators were less convinced, however. Hal Colebatch, while conceding that ‘Sir John Kirwan was on sound grounds in arguing that the goldfields separation agitation played a major part in securing the immediate entry of Western Australia into the Federation’, regretted the haste with which it had been accomplished. Jack Drayton, Kirwan’s *bête noire*, was predictably irreverent, mocking ‘the apostle of Separation, the missionary of Federation’ and accusing him of delusions of grandeur. ‘You were to be Premier (or was it king?) of Auralia’, he crowed, alluding to the new state proposed by the agitators. ‘Imagine you being …king of anything more important than a camp of emigrants’!

Amongst a later generation of historians, only David Mossenson affirms the importance of the Eastern Goldfields Reform League, calling it ‘an effective weapon with which to bludgeon a reluctant parliament into submitting the Commonwealth Bill to the people’. The opposing camp is represented by John Bastin who disputes that the Separationists were ever taken seriously by Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain. His view is echoed by Frank Crowley and Brian de Garis who dismiss the movement as a damp squib. Crowley accuses Battye of relying too heavily on Kirwan’s version of events. However, the same charge can be levelled against Bastin, Crowley and De Garis who appear to have taken their cues from Colebatch. As for Colebatch himself, his argument that Western Australia might have acquired better conditions if it had waited flies in the face of the available evidence.

The other question mark concerns Kirwan’s peculiar career trajectory. In the ten years between his arrival in Australia as a penniless journalist and his election to the inaugural Commonwealth Parliament in May 1901, his progress had been nothing short of meteoric. From editor and co-proprietor of the *Kalgoorlie Miner*, the small daily newspaper he transformed into one of the most influential journals in the colony, he successfully

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reinvented himself as the tribune of the people, embracing popular causes and consolidating his authority by winning the Federal seat of Kalgoorlie. The rest of the story should have been equally uplifting and, for one brief shining moment, it promised to follow the usual pattern. In Melbourne he came to the notice of Sir Frederick Holder, Speaker in the House of Representatives, who appointed him one of his deputies. He served on two parliamentary committees and a Royal Commission, discussed books and politics with Alfred Deakin in the grounds of Parliament House and, though seated on the opposite side of the chamber, enjoyed the somewhat erratic patronage of Charles Cameron Kingston, the former South Australian Premier and Reform League advisor whom he had befriended while editor of the *Port Augusta Dispatch*.

But in the summer of 1903 Kirwan’s Federal ambitions ground to a sudden halt when he lost his seat to Labor candidate Charles Frazer in the December elections. Exhausted and humiliated, he retreated to his office at the *Kalgoorlie Miner*, where he resumed his editorial duties before suffering what appears to have been a physical and nervous collapse. A long convalescence followed, during which he embarked on a personal odyssey, touring Britain and Europe and pondering his future; at one stage he contemplated moving permanently to Ireland. It was five years before he could bring himself to consider a return to politics, and then it was in an arena as far removed from the epicentre of Federal power as possible: the ‘gentleman’s club’ of the Western Australian Legislative Council, there to see out his days in quiet deliberation.

It is tempting to speculate about what might have been, had he retained his Federal seat or recontested it at the next election. Whether he might not in time have obtained a Cabinet position or the Prime Ministership is one of life’s glorious imponderables but certainly he had in the years prior to 1903 demonstrated the energy, drive and ability necessary to get him there. Had he joined the Labor Party his future may well have taken a different course and the name of Kirwan entered into the annals alongside those of Fisher and Hughes. Alternatively, a diplomatic sinecure might have been found for him. From his frequent jaunts to London in the 1920s and 30s, his desperate courtship of British officials, one suspects he coveted such a role, seeing himself in imagination as Agent-General Kirwan or High Commissioner.

So what went wrong? How did a young, talented, ambitious man squander his best, his only, chance at immortality? One explanation is that Kirwan had the sheer bad luck to

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re-contest his Federal seat at a time when the Labor Party was emerging as a new political force. But another and perhaps more telling reason lies in Kirwan’s volatile temperament. As hot-headed as his famous duelling ancestors, Kirwan often breached etiquette in this politest of Parliaments, losing his temper in debates and hectoring his colleagues, for which he was as regularly admonished, sometimes by the deputy leader of his own party, Sir William McMillan.53 Later renowned for his parliamentary courtesy, he was in 1903 a peculiar mix of nerves and bombast, a young man eager to be heard in an environment dominated by many of the most brilliant intellects of their age. To an already passionate nature was added an obsessive streak so that while he was capable of terrier-like devotion to a cause he was equally prone to bear malice, as his lifelong feud with Sir John Forrest attested. A stalwart ally – he counted mining fraudster Claude de Bernales among his friends – he could be an implacable enemy.

It is probable that an element of snobbery inflamed his animosity towards Forrest, whose humbler origins as the son of indentured servants did not impede his progress or prevent him out-performing the former Premier might have impressed his constituents, it is equally likely that they won him few friends in Melbourne. Jack Drayton gloated that the attacks had backfired by stimulating a reaction in Forrest’s favour, and although not the most disinterested witness where Kirwan was concerned, he appears on this occasion to have been reliably informed. Even Kingston, who was no fan of Forrest’s, pronounced himself ‘fed up’ with hearing about ‘the pioneers of the back-blocks’ and their epic battle for nationhood, prompting further outbursts from Kirwan. The upshot is that while he proved a keen, conscientious and diligent Federal Representative he was also ineffectual and, increasingly frustrated by the slow pace of parliamentary procedure, the long hours, interminable tariff debates, above all, the chastening experience of being continually on the losing side as a member of a minority party in a hung Parliament, may have decided that the effort outweighed the honour. Seasoned veterans of the calibre of Kingston and Sir George Reid, leader of the Free Trade Opposition, eventually buckled under the pressure, so it is not to be wondered at if a mere neophyte like Kirwan were to feel the strain. In the words applied by a future Prime Minister to another failed contender, perhaps he simply didn’t have the ticker for it.

If history is written by the victors, Kirwan must appear a most unsuitable candidate for a biography. For his is not a success story, a steady ascent in which one triumph follows another, but a case of diminishing returns after a dazzling pyrotechnical debut. Politically, he achieved very little in his long span; his legacy was slight, his much vaunted claim to have secured the Commonwealth, contentious; his name forgotten – the natural fate perhaps of the maverick whose independence deprives him of a party faithful. When in addition to his abortive career trajectory one takes into account his defects of character – his explosive, hair-trigger temper, resentful nature, neuroses, snobbery, pomposity, his faults as a husband and father – it is hard at times to feel much liking or sympathy for him; harder still to escape the conclusion that he ended his days a disappointed man, sad, lonely and uneasily conscious that he had traded the promise of his youth for a handful of honours which had long since lost their lustre.

Kirwan, then, does not fit the typical profile of the biographical protagonist. He was not one of history’s colossi but a complex and fallible human being whose aspirations did not meet with the right admixture of ability, energy and luck conducive to greatness. But history, if it tends to reify its heroes, is not concerned only with those who wear the laurels. Not everyone is born to be a Caesar or a Napoleon, and even divine Caesar knew loss and disappointment ere he too crumbled into dust. It was Kirwan’s misfortune to live always in the shadow of greater men than himself, but that does not invalidate his story. On the contrary, it is possible to learn as much from those who fail to make the grade as it is from their more successful contemporaries. An astute observer of the times, Kirwan knew – one could say he made it his business to know – many of the social and political leaders of his day, men whose own characters acquire sharper contours when viewed through his lens. From the 1893 property market crash in the eastern colonies to the West Australian goldrushes, the Federation movement and the birth of the nation, he was serendipitously on the spot at critical episodes in the country’s evolution and uniquely placed to open a window onto a tumultuous and formative epoch. At the same time, he was of the era and must face scrutiny in his turn.

This is the first full length biographical account of the life and times of Sir John Waters Kirwan and charts his progress from his birth in Liverpool, England, to his death 83 years later in Subiaco, Western Australia. On this subject, however, a few qualifications are necessary. Despite exhaustive enquiries, it has not been possible to uncover any salient facts about his childhood, his education or, indeed, his later relationships with the opposite sex. Romantic by nature, yet marrying at the venerable age of 45, he must have enjoyed earlier
love affairs but, if so, no least hint of a rumour remains to tease the imagination. As illustrated by his strangely unreflexive autobiography, his private life was a closed book. The same shroud of silence surrounds another character in the story: Kalgoorlie. Remarkably, when one considers the impact of the 1890s mineral boom, there are no social histories of the Goldfields. *Golden Destiny*, Martyn and Audrey Webbs’ epic two volume set, is primarily a geological study of the mining industry.54

Notwithstanding these constraints, in Chapter One the thesis uses what little documentary evidence exists to explore his family background. Chapter Two focuses on his editorship of the *Port Augusta Dispatch* and his relations with the three South Australian lawyers, Premier Charles Cameron Kingston, rival newspaper editor Patrick McMahon Glynn and Josiah Symon, whose advice and support during the Separation campaign would prove invaluable. In Chapter Three the scene shifts to the Coolgardie Goldfields, where Kirwan’s crusading zeal as radical editor of the *Kalgoorlie Miner* and champion of popular causes such as the 1898 Alluvial Rights dispute and later Federation movement puts him on a collision course with Premier Sir John Forrest. Chapters Four and Five follow him to Melbourne where he takes his seat in the first Federal Parliament opposite a glowering Forrest while Chapters Six to Eight trace his State parliamentary career, from his election as an Independent to his appointment as President of the Legislative Council. Spanning two decades from 1927 to his death in 1949, the Epilogue covers his later journalism, his Presidency, his compulsive wanderings and his growing reputation as an apologist for British Imperialism. Here, a further caveat is necessary. It will be readily understood that a single volume cannot dwell with equal emphasis on all aspects of the subject’s life, especially one as long and varied as Kirwan’s. The extraordinary duration of his state parliamentary service alone – 38 years as Member, 20 as President – precludes more than an overview of his speeches, although every effort has been made to be as thorough as possible. Similarly, it has not been found feasible to do other than look at the highlights of his Presidency. The peculiar arc of his career demands that the stresses fall on Chapters Three to Five, when basking in the applause of his Goldfields constituents he stood poised on the cusp of the brilliant career which never eventuated.