



**Trawling through the records to unravel the story of my
uncle the traitor:
A biographical paper-chase through international
archives**

Loreley A. Morling

Paper presented at
WA 2029: A shared journey
17-19 November 2004

Copyright LA Morling 2004

www.historycouncilwa.org.au
Email: office@historycouncilwa.org.au

Trawling through the records to unravel the story of my uncle the traitor: A biographical paper-chase through international archives

By Loreley A. Morling

Biography:

I fell into the profession of librarianship and worked in academic and public libraries for more than 20 years. As a result of trying to identify the people in a family photograph album I began researching my family's history in 1982. By 1988, when I completed a Diploma in Family Historical Studies, family history had evolved from a hobby to a passion and then a profession. This is amazing for someone who hated history at school. I've now been working as a freelance genealogical and historical researcher for about 16 years. During that time I've also been involved with voluntary work at the Western Australian Genealogical Society, including ten years as honorary deputy librarian. I served on the committee formed to establish the Genealogy Centre in the State Library and am a member of the Battye Library and State Records Office Customer Service Council. I've written articles and given talks about my own family, about other families and about various aspects of family history.

Abstract:

In 1987 I was given a bundle of letters, which included one written by my Uncle Bill from the war criminals' stockade in Yokohama in 1945. Others, written by my aunt in 1947, mentioned 'Bill's trial'. On quizzing my mother I was told Bill had broadcast propaganda during the war and been tried at the Old Bailey. These tidbits inspired me to journey through the archives to try to unravel the true story of my uncle's life. I discovered files relating to him in the Public Record Office in England, in the Australian National Archives and in the National Archives in Washington, DC. My journey was completed with the publication of a biography entitled *A Very Different Type: the True Story of a Recalcitrant Journalist*, in 2000. In 1987 I read some family letters written by my uncle in 40 years earlier which mentioned 'Bill's trial'. I found another letter written by my Uncle Bill from the war criminals' stockade in Yokohama in 1945. I was told he had broadcast propaganda during the war and been tried at the Old Bailey. These tidbits inspired me to journey through the archives to try to unravel the true story of my uncle's life. I discovered files relating to him in the Public Record Office in England, in the Australian National Archives and in the National Archives in Washington, DC. My journey was completed with the publication of a biography entitled *A Very Different Type* in 2000.

The theme of this conference is 'A shared journey'. This morning I'm going to share with you my journey through archival records in order to unravel the true story of my uncle's life. I'll explain how I managed to turn a few snippets of information into a 70,000 word biography and, along the way, uncovered allegations of espionage and treason.

I'd met my uncle John Holland (known to the family as Bill) a couple of times. I knew he'd spent most of his adult life in China and Japan and been imprisoned during the war. I'd never thought much about this as I knew many Australians had been prisoners-of-war.

When my mother was moving house in 1987, she gave me a bundle of letters, which included some written by my uncle in 1945. Others were written by my aunt who was living in England in 1947. These letters were peppered with such tantalizing phrases as 'Bill's trial' and 'we're sick of him spouting his Hitlerian theories'. I was intrigued, so asked my mother for more information. I knew my aunt had an almost irrational hatred of her brother and of anything Japanese and wondered whether the reference to 'Bill's trial' was a clue to the reason for this.

Mum came out with an amazing story about her brother broadcasting over Radio Tokyo alongside another Australian called Charles Cousens and the notorious Tokyo Rose. Bill (my uncle) apparently fell out with his Japanese employers and was imprisoned in Hokkaido in northern Japan. After the war he was arrested by the occupation authorities and sent to a small island in the Pacific where he was reported to be engaged to a princess. This article was the first news the family had about him for more than three years. It tells how he is being held captive on the island of Morotai and has become engaged to the daughter of a tribal ruler. They plan to live in a luxuriously furnished tent. You can imagine the family's astonishment at seeing this in the newspaper when they hadn't even known whether their brother was alive or dead for some years.

Mum explained how Cousens was put on trial in Sydney and Bill then fled to England where he was eventually tried at the Old Bailey. There were huge gaps and lots of speculation in her knowledge of her brother's life. And, as a genealogist, I knew family memories and stories could be quite inaccurate. My detective instinct and genealogists' need for accuracy soon got the better of me and I decided to try to uncover some facts. This was the beginning of a long journey through documents held by the National Archives in Australia, the National Archives and Record Administration in the US and the Public Record Office in London. They included Australian Federal Police and ASIO files, British criminal records, Shanghai police records and newspapers.

It didn't take me long to reconstruct my uncle's early life. He was born in 1907 in Kanowna on the goldfields, where this delightful picture was taken, then moved to Katanning, and subsequently to Perth, with his family. He and his father, a well-respected doctor, didn't agree on much at all and Bill left for Sydney after his mother's death in 1928. It wasn't long before he got into trouble there and was charged with fraud. This wonderful set of mug shots (found in the National

Archives) was taken at that time. He married while on bail and, five years later, left his wife to seek adventure in China, as this article shows. Gradually I discovered a little about his life in Shanghai, where he worked as a war correspondent during the civil war in the 1930s. But it was his World War II exploits I really wanted to know more about. I needed to be able to separate the truth from the family's speculation about what had happened.

I began by digging up some newspaper articles in the State Library. This one is about his arrest after the war as a suspected collaborator. Not knowing much about this type of research I badgered the library staff in the State Reference Library and University of WA Library for law reports or anything which might give me more details of the trial at the Old Bailey. I wrote to the courts in London and was really disappointed when told trial records were only kept for a few years.

Several years later I discovered the charges (of assisting the enemy) had been proffered by the Director of Public Prosecutions in England. By searching the Public Record Office's catalogue - available here on microfiche (and now on the Internet) - I found out that a small selection of records of DPP trials has been kept. Imagine my joy when my English researcher located a complete file relating to John Holland's trial, which was one of the few not discarded. My researcher was able to send me a copy of the relevant documents, which included transcripts of broadcasts made by my uncle. Much of what he said would be considered quite innocuous today: such things as 'Roosevelt and Churchill are stupid', 'Australia should cast off the yoke of imperialism and move towards Asia': a statement which would raise no eyebrows today.

Having gathered quite a lot of material, I decided to write an article about my uncle but, as I gathered more information, this gradually metamorphosed into a book.

I had constant disappointments when records weren't available and elation when other records were discovered unexpectedly: examples being the transcripts of John Holland's broadcasts turning up in the Public Record Office in London and his probate file in Hong Kong to which I was denied access until a kind friend went there and insisted she be given permission to see it. I had great trouble getting access to his school records in WA - the years I wanted were 'missing' - then I discovered I was not able to find out whether he had taken his leaving certificate because that information could only be given to next of kin. I've since discovered the UWA Archives has copies of the junior and leaving public examination records and they are open to researchers.

Fairly early in the piece I checked the National Archives database for any files relating to Cousens or Holland. There were a number, several unexamined. The National Archives holds documents relating to the federal government, or created by government agencies, and normally these are made available to the public after 30 years. Before they are 'opened' however they must be examined to see whether they contain anything which may be harmful to living people or to public security. This is an example of a search done for documents relating to 'Holland' from 1939-1950. You'll see some are marked 'Open', and some 'Open with

exception'. I'll use the top entry as an example to show you how to find out more about a file. If you click on the Control Symbol you come up with a Primary description of the item which shows this is a file called 'John Joseph Holland - alleged collaboration with the Japanese', the dates covered are 1945-49 and it's held in the National Office (ie Canberra).

Here's another example of a search page. This one shows one item 'Not yet examined'. The item I wanted is here. The Primary description shows it's just called 'John Joseph Holland' and covers the years 1943-48. It's located in New South Wales and is 'Open with exception'. The reasons for the exception are shown as the numbers of the regulations governing the exclusions.

It's now possible to request digitised copies of files so you can read them on your own computer. At the time I was doing this research I was only able to have photocopies of the files, which involved a lot of paper but made it easy to plough through the information. This is an example from one of the files I requested. It had been marked 'Not yet examined' and it took 18 months for it to be examined. When I finally received it some names were blacked out or 'masked'. Here you can see the address from which this letter was sent, the addressee and several other sections have been 'masked'. The letter is from John Holland's former landlady in Hong Kong and indicates he left Hong Kong for Shanghai owing her \$340. It's interesting to note that, although the name of the addressee is missing, down here the writer says 'Well dear Mr Cade' so we know do who she was writing to after all.

I discovered some files were duplicated in Sydney and Canberra and, where one had a name masked, the other might show the name.

All these documents contained enormous amounts of information. This one, although the name of the writer and addressee are missing, includes all sorts of gossip about foreign journalists in Hong Kong and notes here that John Holland did a 'fly-by-night'.

A very helpful archivist in the Sydney office phoned me to let me know there were a number of photos in one file and arranged to have them copied for me. This one shows John Holland in 1946 and the mug shots taken when he was charged with fraud were also included. There was another showing him with a Chinese lady friend and some photos of his sister and brother-in-law.

I spent some time poring over these documents, correlating them with newspaper articles and letters and trying to determine what was truth and what was speculation or innuendo. I soon learned the need to take some of the information with a grain of salt. There was an amazing description of an Australian woman living in Shanghai. One document noted details of her relationship with a number of men then, in another document, there's an allegation that she may be a lesbian. Someone had made a statement that this lady didn't believe in the White Australia Policy, possibly because her mother was French: this was held to indicate she was anti-Australian.

A statement given by my uncle contained all sorts of inaccuracies. This so-called 'Statement of facts' shows his date of birth as 15 July instead of 5 July. This dossier has his mother's name wrong - it was Alicia not Eliza - his sister's date of birth is four days out and his other sister's name is spelt incorrectly. It should be Eleanor Marion with an 'o'.

Despite the inaccuracies and value judgements the files were an absolute treasure trove of information: containing copies of family letters and newspaper articles as well as official correspondence and statements. After I'd read through them all I began sorting the events in my uncle's life into chronological order and writing the biography, all the while keeping an eye open for further sources of information.

In 1996 I had a condensed version of the story published in the *West Australian's* Big Weekend section. This led to contact with a chap called Glen Cox who was charged with 'minding' John Holland while he was on the island of Morotai. Glen was able to share his memories of that time with me and explain the story about the princess. Morotai was being used by the army as a staging post to return prisoners-of-war and servicemen to Australia. As an Australian soldier Glen was assigned to look after John Holland who was being held under open arrest while the authorities decided what to do with him. Here there are shades of the situation of David Hicks in Guantanamo Bay, which I'll allude to again later. It appears the two of them led an idyllic existence: swimming during the day and going to the cinema most evenings. Apparently the story about the princess actually applied to someone in the army who fell in love with a local girl and was allowed to marry her. They were allocated a tent, furnished with a fridge and other luxury goods left behind by American servicemen. Evidently my uncle used this story, with himself as the main character, and I now believe he submitted it to the *News of the World* himself, using the pseudonym 'A. Noyes Thomas'. It doesn't sound like a real name, does it?

Shortly before I completed my book I learnt of the existence of further documents about my uncle's time in Shanghai which are contained in Shanghai Municipal Police files kept at the National Archives in Washington, DC. I was able to purchase microfilms of some of these files. They added immensely to my knowledge of the activities in which my uncle and his associates were engaged in Shanghai before and during the war. This one gives a description of his life and activities from the time he arrived in Shanghai in 1937.

As I've tantalized you with a few details I should explain that I discovered that during the war John Holland belonged to a right-wing political movement and broadcast propagandist over a German-controlled radio station in Shanghai. When he felt he was not being paid sufficiently for this work he accepted an offer to go to Japan, where he broadcast news commentaries over Radio Tokyo. After a while he quarreled with his employers, made the mistake of referring to them as 'stupid little yellow monkeys' and pasting monkeys' heads over the faces of Japanese people in a cartoon.

He was subjected to a secret trial and was imprisoned in horrific conditions in Hokkaido for two and a half years, most of this time in solitary confinement. Then, as soon as the war ended, he was arrested by the Allies for his propaganda activities. He wrote this 20,000 word letter to his family while he was being held in the war criminals' stockade in Yokohama. It describes quite graphically his life during the previous three years. He was repatriated to Australia, via the island of Morotai.

At that time Australia had no law under which it could try someone for treason if the offence occurred outside Australian territory. There was also some doubt about whether he was still an Australian citizen as his old passport had expired. Apparently, more than 50 years later, there is still no law under which someone can be tried for treason if the offence occurred outside Australia. This is the reason David Hicks, who is being held in Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, cannot be tried here. So, there was an amazing paper-chase over three continents before it was decided to try him in England for assisting the enemy. He'd arrived there after working his way on a ship. He was very fortunate to get off with a good-behaviour bond, as he could have faced the death penalty. He returned to Asia, spending the rest of his life there working as a journalist and even marrying a Japanese lady. This photo shows him during the 1950s or 60s and is one of the last we have of him before his death in 1972.

As with all books one has to begin writing and decide to cut off the research at some stage, often when there are still loose ends. I wished I'd had more input from people who knew him. After my book was published I was contacted by someone who knew my uncle in Hong Kong shortly before his death. Her employer actually arranged his funeral. A couple of years later a man who had known him in Japan and in Perth heard about my book and I spent some time listening to his reminiscences. It would have been wonderful to speak to these people sooner but if they hadn't heard about my book I would never have met them.

This is the result of my journey through the records and describes my uncle's journey through life. It's great to see something I spent so much time researching and writing in print and it shows how much research can be achieved without leaving Western Australia.