

Kit (Mary Elizabeth) Kirkness



Mary ‘Kit’ Kirkness Starling

Mary Elizabeth Kirkness known as “Kit” was born on the 18th December 1874. Her father, James Flett Kirkness, was a machinist and gunsmith who had lived in Mudgee for 33 years, before moving his family to Penrith. James and his brother John emigrated from Kirkwall, Orkney, Scotland in 1856, on the “Glen Isla”. He set up a business in 1890 next to the Tattersall’s Hotel. (Once upon a road by Colin Stevenson). Her mother was Emma Eames, who was born in Bathurst in 1838. (Ancestry). James died in the suburb of Auburn while living with one of his sons, Tom and wife Elsie.

At 18 years of age Kit started working at the Nepean Cottage Hospital in April 1892. According to the Nepean Times, on the 9 April 1892, the Executive Committee of the Nepean Cottage Hospital appointed Miss Kirkness as a Probationer Nurse. Her manager, Miss Hawke and the Rev G Brown of the “Visiting Committee” spoke of Miss Kirkness working in a ‘competent’ manner as an assistant and that she would remain a ‘probationer’ at the hospital. On the 28 July 1894, the Nepean Times, reported a medical case of Mr Ransley, who had an amputation after an accident. He praised Miss Hawke, the matron and her assistant Miss Kirkness for their highly competent treatment of him in his recovery. Miss Kirkness took on the role of Acting Matron in August 1894 while Miss Hawke was away and all had “gone on in a most satisfactory manner”. (Nepean Times, 11 Aug 1894). The Nepean College Hospital’s Annual report for 1894, wrote that the Hospital has been managed “in a very careful and satisfactory manner by Matron Hawke and her assistant Miss M Kirkness. (NT, 26 January 1895). In June 1895, Matron Hawke and Nurse Kirkness received a gold brooch each from a grateful patient. In December 1895, Miss Kirkness was Acting Matron

and in her early report she asked for set times for visitors to the Hospital in an effort to improve the situation for all patients and nursing staff. (NT 7 December 1895). On the 1st February, The Nepean Times reported that Miss Kirkness was appointed Acting Matron, as her predecessor, Miss Hawke, resigned.

Although Kit had been working for over three years as an assistant to the matron, as well as several months as an acting matron at Nepean Cottage Hospital, she had not received a certificate showing her qualifications. This led to her resignation in May 1896 in unfair circumstances. Kit “never knew anything about her services were to be dispensed with until she saw where tenders were called for a matron”. She felt the Committee was “not treating her fairly”. At the end of the Hospital Meeting, the members decided ‘to continue to open tenders for a matron and to make Miss Kirkness some reparation’. (NT 16 May 1896). The newspaper further stated that “as soon as convenient she [Miss Kirkness] be allowed to resign her position as Acting-Matron. Resignation accepted” (Nepean Times 16 May 1896).

In spite of this unfair treatment, Kit had held the position of Acting Matron at the Nepean Cottage Hospital for ten months over her working life. She was “highly spoken of by the doctors” and “the patients, too, speak highly of her great kindness and attention”. (NT, 30 May 1896). She received a glowing reference and letters of commendation.

Later that year, Kit married her fiancé, William Brignall Rutter Starling on 5 September 1896 in Cootamundra. When they returned to their home in North Street Penrith, William, known as “Bill”, to some of his workmates, but as Will to family and friends, was presented a wedding gift from his workmates, which was a “very pretty electro plated butter basin” (NT 5 September 1896).

Kit’s first child was born in 1897, named William Joseph James, known as ‘Willie’. Sadly he was killed in 1916, about a week before his 19th birthday, at Pozieres in France during World War 1. (1916 Our fallen by Lorraine Stacker). Kit and Will had five other children – Colin, Amy, Halwyn, Mabel (an invalid all her life) and Flett who died in very early infancy (Nepean Times, 12 July 1919 p2; Faye Owen nee Kirkness, Kit’s niece).

Kit’s husband, William was the eldest son of William H Starling, who had business in Penrith as a horseshoer & blacksmith and his mother was Elizabeth Hughes. Originally from Littlebury, Essex, his grandfather Joseph Starling and his dad immigrated to Australia in 1855 on the vessel “Constitution” and settled in Penrith LGA. William was born in Luddenham and went to Penrith Superior Public School. He joined the Nepean Times team when he was 14 and worked as a foreman there for 32 years. William built their house on bush property on the York Estate, part of Jamison Street in South Penrith. He was secretary for the Sons of Temperance for 20 years and a member of the Independent Order of Oddfellows, as well as teaching Sunday school at St Stephens Church in his early years. He later attended the Methodist church and was buried in the Methodist section of the Kingswood Cemetery. (Nepean Times, 12 July 1919 p2). William Brignall Rutter was so filled with grief when his son Willie died in the Great War, that he took his own life, at the age of 46. This meant Kit had to care for and bring up the family on her own. Kit moved the family away

from the York Estate to Warwick Street Penrith to be closer to other people and community facilities. (Faye Owen, 2021)

Kit died on 25th March 1964 as a resident of 4 Warwick Street Penrith. She was 91 years old and an indomitable little lady (Ryerson Index, Faye Owen, Kit's great-niece)

References: Nepean Times; Faye Owen nee Kirkness