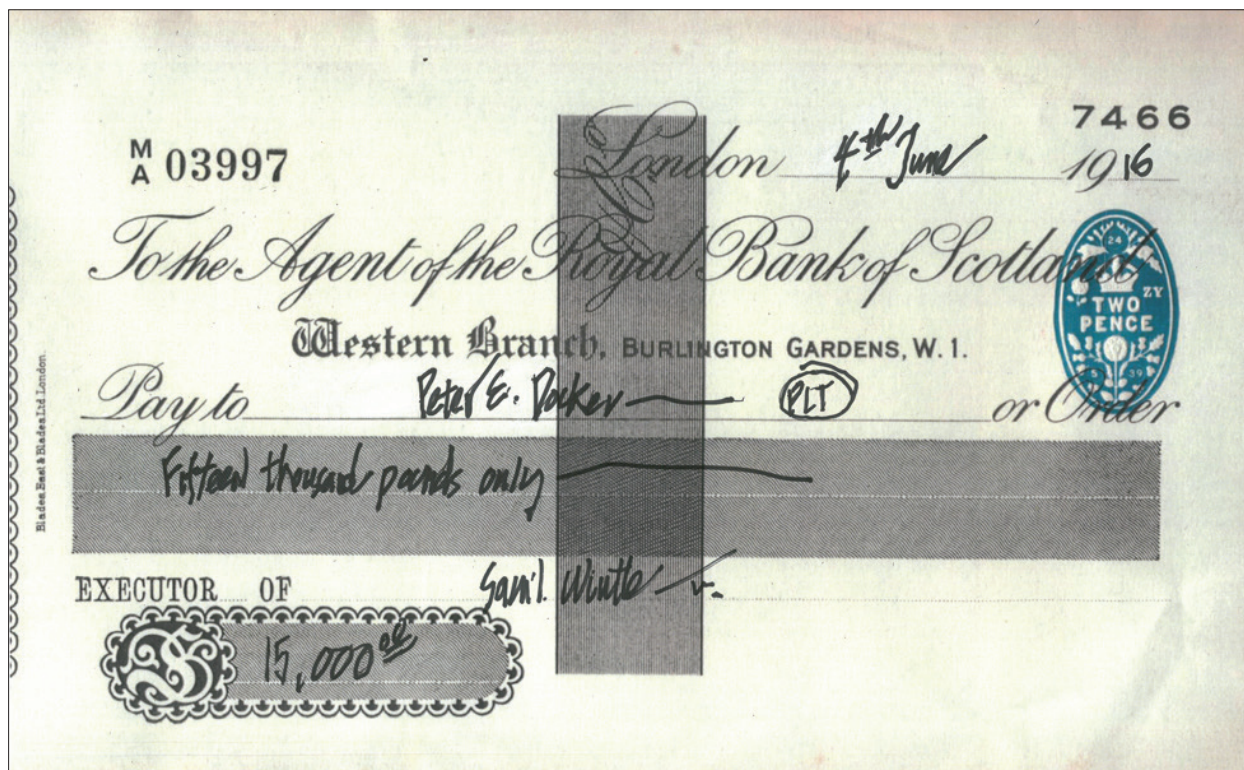


The £15,000 Cheque

Robert B. Stephenson

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The cheque in question.



The former Western Branch today upon which the cheque was drawn.

The £15,000 Cheque

MR JOE O'FARRELL of Enniskerry, Co. Wicklow, Ireland, has spent 20 years on his fruitless search for the person to whom the insurance cheque for the loss of the *Endurance* was written many years ago.

I believe I've solved the mystery . . . at least in part.

Some will remember the research I reported on at last year's Shackleton Autumn School: The discovery that Sir Ernest Shackleton spent three romantic days (and nights) with LUCY CONSTANCE DOCKER at THE TROUT INN, King's Lynn, Norfolk. Today, the blue plaque on The Trout attests to the fact.

It's not altogether surprising, therefore, that about nine months later—October 13, 1914 to be precise—a blessed event occurs at the ST. ALOYSIUS HOSPITAL in Rome: the birth of a boy who shortly thereafter is christened PETER ERNEST DOCKER.

Why Rome, you might ask? Well, the situation, of course, is sensitive. Given the times and their social set, the Dockers couldn't very well raise young Peddie as their own without incurring significant scorn from their friends, neighbours and associates. So off to Rome.

But then what? Long stays with certain relatives and, of course, boarding schools.

Peddie's early years continue to remain a mystery. One photograph has come to light of a young student in short pants with a school blazer and cap but we don't know what school or where.

By 1928 we discover him at KING EDWARD'S SCHOOL in Birmingham where he does well particularly in cricket which historically Dockers excelled at. Dudley, his stepfather of sorts, also attended King Edward's School as did his stepbrother Bernard. We may never know for certain but this suggests that the Dockers were becoming more involved with Peddie's upbringing than in earlier years. Conversely it appears that there is no active recognition from the Shackleton parentage. More on this later.

There's some evidence that the Dockers first son—BERNARD DUDLEY DOCKER, later Sir Bernard (1896-1978)—may have taken an interest in his young stepbrother.

From King Edward's, Peddie matriculates in 1933 at Cambridge (CAIUS). He rows for his college and plays cricket but fails to distinguish himself in other pursuits especially those of an academic nature. That—and the fact that he is known to spend much time at certain public houses in Cambridge—may explain why he leaves after his second year.

Later in 1935 we find Peddie at GORDONSTOUN in Scotland where his cricket skills are appreciated if not his academic abilities. He coaches his team to many victories. He mentors one particular student, PRINCE PHILIP OF GREECE. They will later be comrades-in-arms.

His years at Gordonstoun are ended by World War II. Peddie enthusiastically volunteers for service. Perhaps because of his interest in T. E. Lawrence he enlists in the RAF not as Peter Docker but as ROBERT HIGHTOWER and racks up many kills.

Peddie's life as a dashing war hero changes dramatically when he's introduced to the young dancer VERA-ELLEN by Jeanne Stuart, an actress and the wife of Peddie's stepbrother, Bernard.

In a whirl-wind romance they are married on November 9, 1940 at ST. GEORGE'S, HANOVER SQUARE. Peddie continues with the RAF and Vera continues dancing.

On May 16, 1941, they happily greet their son, Robert Hightower, Jr. He is so cute that the nurses show him off to hospital visitors.

The young family live in a house in Bromley, Kent, close to RAF BIGGIN HILL where Peddie is stationed.

Just as the war winds down Peddie is sent on an undercover mission to BURMA. He's never heard from again despite heroic efforts by the SAS. He is later declared missing-in-action and presumed dead.

Vera-Ellen is distraught, of course, but as an ambitious dancer she decides to move on and move out, specifically to HOLLYWOOD. Young Robert, Jr., would be an impediment in her new life so she puts him up for adoption during a three-day stopover in Boston during the flight to California in early 1946. (Some years later she marries Victor Rothschild with whom she has a daughter who sadly dies as an infant.)

Years pass. Peddie's mother, Lucy Constance Docker, dies in 1947 (her husband pre-deceases her in 1944). Vera-Ellen becomes a big star in large part because of the success of the film *White Christmas* in 1954. Robert, Jr., growing up in suburban Boston, is a remarkable child with many intellectual and sporting interests. He is completely unaware of his true parentage.



AT THIS POINT we must return to an earlier time when a certain £15,000 cheque enters the story. The date of the cheque is the 4th of June 1916. It is signed by Sam'l Wintle and is made out to Peter E. Docker—Peddie. There are curious encircled initials after his name on the cheque. What could these signify? Consulting with Johns and Saggar, solicitors of Gray's Inn, I determine that the initials 'PIT' stand for "paid in trust." And who is Sam'l Wintle? Well, Joe O'Farrell inadvertently shed light on this through his correspondence with Jonathan Amos, the BBC Science Correspondent, who in response to a query from Joe stated that David Mearns had researched the matter of the cheque and who received it. He, Mearns, had concluded that "the syndicates that had insured *Endurance* no longer exist. Their interests were absorbed by Equasis and Resolute, who told David that, to the best of their knowledge, abandonment was declined and that the policy was paid out through the brokers, Wintle and Co." So apparently a Samuel Wintle of this firm signed the cheque.

At the time Peddie is only two years old which, explains the 'PIT.' But this raises the question who is Peddie's trustee? My supposition is that Bernard Dudley Docker, Peddie's stepbrother acted as trustee and to some extent surrogate father to Peddie. The fact that Peddie attended Dudley's and Bernard's old school—King Edward's—is perhaps a clue that this could have been the case. Bernard was 20 years

older than Peddie but then he might have been more open to the arrangement than his mother or father.

The £15,000 is helpful to Peddie (and likely to his stepbrother) in the years that follow. In fact it probably keeps him going well into adulthood.



We now move forward to the World War II years. We last hear of Peddie lost and presumed dead somewhere in Burma. But he actually isn't dead and gone; he is very much alive. It's a long and complicated drama—his escape from a Japanese prison camp, his days trudging through the jungle, his eventual arrival in Rangoon and then Singapore. He thinks it best to lay low for a bit. He gets a job behind the scenes at the Raffles Hotel. One day he comes upon a cricket game and with his experience at Cambridge and then at Gordonstoun he soon is spending weekends at The Padang, the Singapore Cricket Club ground.

Time marches on. Eventually Peddie finds himself back in Blighty where he scrapes by doing this and that (nothing of the £15,000 remains). But the East has a magical pull on him and he returns more than once. Finally, in 2003 Peddie joins a group sex tour to Thailand. He is now 90 years old and is still able to keep up with those far younger. Sadly, this time age catches up to him and he expires in Bangkok's *House of Joy*, wasted but happy.

So ends the tale of PETER ERNEST DOCKER (1914-2003), son of Sir Ernest Henry Shackleton (1874-1922) and Lucy Constance Docker (1863-1947), husband of Vera-Ellen Westmeier Rohe (1921-1981), father of Robert Hightower, Jr. (1941-).



Young Robert, Jr., is now an aging retired man living in New Hampshire. Those paying attention to this narrative will see the emerging truth: Robert Hightower, Jr., is the adopted son of Otis and Elizabeth Stephenson, and the grandson of Sir Ernest Henry Shackleton and the stepbrother of the Honourable Alexandra Shackleton, Lady Hammersmith!



A Family Album



St. Aloysius Hospital in Rome



*Young
Peter Ernest Docker "Peddie"
in early 1915.*

Young Peddie as a schoolboy.



King Edward's School in Birmingham.



Peddie third from left rowed for Gonville and Caius.



*Cricket at Gordonstoun.
Peddie second on the left in
the back row. The future
Prince Philip, Duke of
Edinburgh in the front row
center.*



Squadron Leader "Robert Hightower" in his Hawker Hurricane MK1 having just returned to RAF Boscombe Down from yet another dogfight.



*Mrs "Robert Hightower" (Peter Ernest Docker), the actress-dancer Vera-Ellen.
"The world's most beautiful legs."*

The Happy Couple



The Bromley house





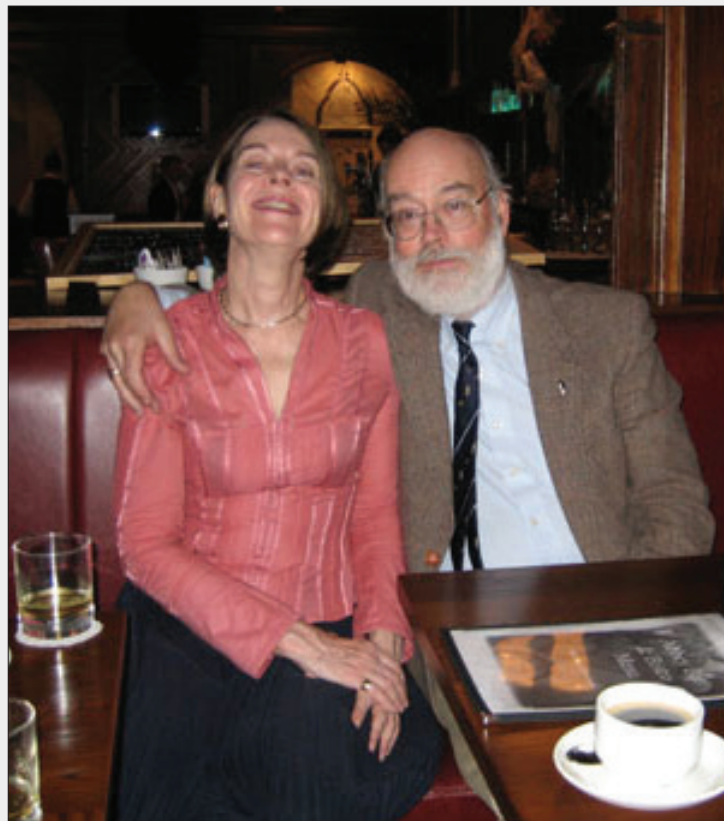
Robert, Jr., only son of Mr & Mrs "Robert Hightower" (né Peter Ernest Docker)



*Peddie just before his final journey.
Not looking his best but still happy as a clam!*



The Bangkok 'House of Joy' where Peddie expired in his last bout of ecstasy.



Me and My Stepsister.