

Jim Bennett, 1914-1994

Alan Bundy has written this tribute to the 'supplier to the nation's libraries'

The 17 February 1994 saw the passing, in his 81st year of James (Jim) Ingram Bennett, the founder of Australia's largest library supply company and 1978 recipient of the LAA's Redmond Barry Award for 'outstanding service' to libraries. On that Award Harrison Bryan, Librarian of the University of Sydney, wrote: 'When the full story of library development in this country comes to be written, one element in that considerable revolution will be given its due measure of recognition—namely the sources of supply for all the new material that was acquired so quickly. When this happens the name of James Bennett will be properly recorded.'

My attempt at that recording* describes how Jim was born on 21 January 1914 in Southern England's New Forest, the eighth and black sheep of an affluent and conservative family of nine. After three unhappy years in a bank in Southampton, which stimulated his republican, socialist and agnostic leanings, he arrived in Brisbane on 13 January 1936. In this he was encouraged by his older first cousin, a forthright columnist of the Melbourne *Sun*, Douglas Wilkie.

With intervening war service in the RAAF, 1936 onwards saw Jim Bennett as a jackaroo ('all I could do well was ride a horse'), rabbit-trapper, gold-pro prospector, tin-dredger, deep sea fisherman, meat worker, woodcutter, tractor salesman and a successful seller of Chinese Scrolls. He also married and had three children.

The Chinese Scrolls rapidly became almost *too* successful and the market for such a narrow offering was drying up. Jim had to find something for which the market would be insatiable... 'I had met a number of librarians, so why not books?'

And so books it was. Jim opened his business on 2 January 1958 in a small room near his home in the beachside suburb of Collaroy in Sydney. He had two cartons of borrowed books, an overdraft of £500, no telephone (he used a public telephone) and what Russell Doust, former NSW State Librarian, recalls as 'a somewhat battered blue VW beetle'. From that precarious start developed what by 1978 was a \$6 million a year business, by dint of what his contemporaries agreed was sheer hard work, application and intelligence, a superb

memory and an 'arithmetic mind', and an unfailing honesty.

The Bulletin (of 5 September 1978, from which comes *inCite's* cover picture) described Jim Bennett as a 'socialist tycoon', suggesting the contrary qualities which made him a puzzle to many—a well groomed Englishman with a cultured voice; a profound agnostic who delighted in the fact that his spartan office was in what had been the Collaroy village church; together with his friend John Metcalfe, an ardent Australian nationalist; a demanding yet ultimately soft-hearted employer from whom 'mistakes could never be hidden', a successful businessman who was a thorough-going socialist and until 1957 an active Communist Party member (he would remark that he was the only socialist among his 120 staff, and failed to convert any of them).

Jim Bennett had a total dislike of pretence which probably explained staff titles such as 'Book Putter-Awayer', 'Carder' and 'Order Follow-Up'. He was also a risk taker, never more so than when he challenged, without legal advice, the considerable might of the British publishing industry and the vested interest of the Australian book trade. But in 1965 he won the right for all Australian library suppliers to sell books at prices set in countries of origin converted directly to Australian currency—a significant benefit to libraries.

Long before it became fashionable Jim Bennett 'searched for excellence'. He was to claim '...All I did was try to earn a living', but after the first few successful years money was not the issue—

providing quality service to libraries throughout Australian and New Zealand, and Australiana to overseas libraries, was. When he retired in 1978 many Australian and New Zealand librarians and publishers wrote of their appreciation of his services—they now mourn the death of a man who set the benchmark for library supply in both countries. His memorial is the company he founded, and the millions of books that are on library shelves today because he did so well.

* Bundy, A.L. *James Bennett: supplier to the Nation's libraries*. Adelaide: Auslib Press, 1988. \$12.00. (a few copies are still available from James Bennett Pty Ltd, 4 Collaroy Street, Collaroy NSW 2097)

Epode for JB

James Wright, one of Jim Bennett's former associates, wrote a poem of farewell following Jim's retirement:

Rugged in your Harris Tweed
and pure new wool
Your firm, decisive step
and subtle wit, and
ready smile

Your stories from
Monash of that elusive Ball
The homilies of things
political which stirred
your Liberal ladies

In that place you called
your "Church"
Once a Wesleyan Chapel
which housed the treasures
of your world
Some now dispersed to antiquarians
with moist and eager hands

Noted in that "Bulletin"
"A Socialist Tycoon"
which brought a twinkle
to your eye and sure
smiles from George Finey,
Walter Stone, and the
Labor Daily boys

The keepers of the books,
your loyal ones,
some now gone
The boys of the Trade
both old and new
have raised their glasses
in salute
as in a rural place
you till a different soil
So well remembered
J.B.
A catalyst of the Trade