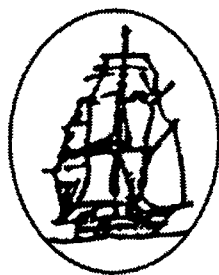


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Cover illustration

George William Evans, Chart of Van Diemen's Land, reproduced courtesy of the WL Crowther Library, State Library of Tasmania.

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Ray Tilley of Birchalls: Innovation in the Book Trade

Michael Hess

Birchalls Bookstore in Brisbane Street, Launceston is an icon in the book trade and in Tasmania. In terms of the trade it is 'Australia's oldest bookstore'; it has played an influential role in the development of bookselling in Tasmania and Australia; and it has also had an innovative influence on the International Booksellers Association.¹ In terms of the community it has been a fundamental presence in Tasmanian life. 'Meet you in Birchalls!' has been a familiar arrangement for generations of Launcestonians, while its educational services have been an integral part of going to school in Tasmania since the 1900s. This dual focus on being part of the trade and part of the community has been a foundation of Birchalls' longevity and its success.

A large part of the company's success has also been due to its leadership, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century when it had to adapt rapidly to changes in its trading environment and industry. In this regard, the contribution to the company of the Tilley family has been particularly significant. From 1928, when Stanley Tilley became Birchalls' accountant, to 2000 when his son Ray retired as Managing Director the company's fortunes were tied to the Tilleys' ambition to make Birchalls first survive, when that was in doubt, and then prosper in a rapidly changing industry environment. Ray Tilley's 62 years in the company, during which he moved from being a junior general hand in 1938 to retiring as Chairman in 2000, was the most significant individual contribution to this history. Not only was he among the last of the famous 'Brisbane Street barons' of Launceston's central business district, but he was a national figure in the bookselling industry and played significant roles in local and state government.

Nationally and internationally, business leaders tend to be presented in terms of an archetype involving strong personalities, with conservative social and political views and parochial loyalties.² Successful Tasmanian

1 <http://www.birchalls.com.au>. Primary source material for this article includes a series of interviews with Ray and Yvonne Tilley during 2005 and 2006. These were transcribed and their accuracy checked. Cross referencing was also possible using documents held privately by the Tilley family. In this article, references to specific interviews and documents are provided where they are the principle source of information.

2 This sort of hagiography is well reflected in web sites on Australian and international business leaders. See for instance: <http://www.woopidoo.com/biography/index.htm>

business people have tended to present themselves within this archetype as self-made individualists.³ The story of Ray Tilley and Birchalls reveals both the deeper factors which lay behind the stereotype and some remarkable points of departure from it.

The early history of Birchalls is integral to the development of bookselling in the Australian colonies. The original Brisbane Street bookshop was established by Samuel Tegg in 1844 'with a splendid assortment of books, stationery and fancy goods arriving by every vessel', following a similar business in Hobart.⁴ With his more famous brother, James, Samuel had operated a business in Sydney since 1835. Together the Teggs were hugely significant in the development of bookselling in Australia. Searching for 'Sydney's and Australia's first real bookseller', Brodsky settles on William McGarvie who operated a 'circulating library' from 1828.⁵ The Teggs, however, were not far behind. With their Sydney store open in 1835, they had the added advantage of connections with relatives in the trade in London. Thomas Tegg had a significant remainder business from the early 1820s in London. His son, William, was a free trader who campaigned against the price fixing of the large booksellers who monopolised the London Booksellers' Association. William Tegg operated in that market as an 'underseller' deliberately flouting the restrictive practices the Association sought to protect.⁶ This gave the colonial Teggs access to a supply of well-priced books upon which they based their Sydney, Hobart and Launceston operations. In 1847 James died and Samuel Tegg sold his Launceston shop and moved to Sydney and then London. He continued to act as agent for the Launceston business which he had sold to his manager R Blake.⁷

Andrew W Birchall arrived in Hobart a few years later in 1853. It was the year after George Robertson had disembarked in Melbourne and immediately 'opened a case of books on the wharf' to begin what became Angus and Robertson.⁸ Robertson opened his first store in Russell Street in

<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USAbusiness.htm>

http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/98/open_3ways-list.html.

3 A Launceston example of this genre is RA Ferrall, *90 Years On: A Tasmanian Story, the Autobiography of Sir Raymond Ferrall*, Launceston: Regal Publishing, 1995.

4 *Launceston Examiner*, 23 November 1844, p. 7; Alison Alexander, (ed.), *The Companion to Tasmanian History*, Hobart: Centre for Tasmanian Historical Studies, 2005, pp. 49-50.

5 Isadore Brodsky, *Sydney's Phantom Book Shops*, Sydney: University Co-operative Bookshop, 1973, p. 18.

6 James J. Barnes, *Free Trade in Books: A Study of the London Book Trade issue*, London, 1973, pp. 19ff.

7 *Launceston Examiner*, 2 October, 1847.

8 John Holroyd, *George Robertson of Melbourne 1825-1889: Pioneer Bookseller and*

1852 and at the time of Birchall's disembarkation in Hobart was settling into his long time location in Collins Street East. Andrew Birchall was 22 years old when he arrived in Van Dieman's Land and a free migrant looking to make his way in the young colony. He first worked as a journalist on the *Colonial Times*. In the meantime J Walch and Sons of Hobart had bought out Samuel Tegg's Launceston bookstore after it had passed fairly rapidly through the hands of R Blake (1847-49), Huxtable and Co. (1850-2) and Alexander Duthie (1852-4). Andrew Birchall took up the position of manager in 1854. Subsequently, he invested in the business becoming a partner and then sole owner before his death in 1893. The bookshop has traded as Birchalls since Andrew acquired his partnership in 1857.

In common with other bookshops of the period, Birchalls not only sold books and the whole range of stationery requirements, including art supplies, but was also a publisher in its own right. This was particularly important to local authors but also gave the booksellers an intellectual standing in the community, so they were seen as rather more than 'just a shop-keeper'. At the company's centenary, the *Launceston Examiner* reflected on the attitudes of the earlier period seeing Birchalls' role in the community in terms of 'a need for fresh assertion, a dignity based on learning[for which] books could – and did – provide many of the answers'.⁹ This vision of a grand role in local development was both a help and a hindrance to the development of the company. At one level it gave bookselling an enhanced standing as part of the march of human progress but on another it did not focus the attention of the booksellers on the more mundane retail business aspects of their activities.

This did not mean that booksellers were not innovative but it did mean they often neglected to commercialise their ideas so their businesses could capture the benefits of their initiatives. Andrew Birchall died in June 1893 and was succeeded by his son, JA (Jack) Birchall. Jack is credited in the company's corporate memory with having suggested the development of the writing pad. At the time, writing paper was folded and sold in lots of 24 called a 'quire'. Twenty quires were fitted into a box so each box contained 480 sheets of paper. This gave customers and stationers alike a cumbersome problem of repackaging to suit customer needs. Birchalls' legend credits Jack with asking a stationery salesman, 'Why don't you make some of your famous paper into a pad?'.¹⁰ Neither the salesman nor his company had much interest and even the idea that a pad could be made by simply cutting

Publisher, Melbourne: Robertson and Mullens, 1868, p. 16.

9 *Launceston Examiner*, 18 May 1967, p.15

10 Ray Tilley, 'As I Remember It: Serving the Book Trade for More Than Sixty Years', *mimeograph*, Tilley Family papers, no date, p. 5.

the paper, backing it with cardboard and gumming the lot together had to be carefully explained. The idea was rejected as outrageous but years later was taken up by Wiggins Teape in the Silver City Writing Tablets, the first widely available form of this necessity of modern life.¹¹

Despite this early leaning towards innovation, by the mid-1920s, under Jack Birchall's leadership, the company had become very staid, resisting change with management paying attention to the social status the operation brought rather than to its progress as a business. For instance, Birchalls offered services to school teachers and well-off rural residents which rarely made a profit but were considered significant by the management because they positioned the company as part of the Tasmanian establishment. By contrast, the large lending library which catered to a wide range of regional residents who would read several books a week, had a high turnover and made a solid profit but received little personal attention from the management. It was left in the hands of Miss Ruby Gibson, who had been a nurse and carer for the Birchalls' son, John. Miss Gibson's job as 'the librarian' at the bookstore grew out of this personal association and was not seen as core to the firm's business activities. Similarly, the services for teachers were not turned into a commercially viable operation despite the fact that their pupils offered a potential mass market which could have been developed in a business-like way.

Under Jack Birchall the shop also carried an increasing number of other lines, which on the surface had little to do with books but a lot to do with the personal interests of the Birchalls. Amongst these was fine china, in the collection of which the then Mrs Birchall took a particular interest. The store also carried the equipment for every sport which took Jack Birchall's fancy including cricket, golf, croquet, bowls and tennis, resulting in its having a well-stocked sporting department, which did not necessarily reflect the tastes of the local market. As such personal interests became influential in the company's operations, its success as a business began to falter as it suffered the difficulty of many mixed retailers of having large amounts of money tied up in stock.¹²

As general manager, Jack Birchall placed a high priority on continuing what he saw as the traditional ways of operating. He was active in a number of Launceston social and sporting organizations including golf, bowls and croquet clubs. In terms of the day-to-day operation of the company he seems to have been content to let it continue as it always had. His period running the company yielded little interest in growth or in re-investing

11 Tilley, 'As I remember It', p. 8.

12 CE Clark, 'Mathematical Analysis of an Inventory System', *Operations Research*, vol. 5, 1957, pp. 627-643.

profits. Furthermore, company and family finances had not been separated. The company had paid for the Birchall's home to be built and when they built another new house in the late 1920s, the borrowing had an impact on the company again. One result was that Ralph and Tilley Accountants were called in on the advice of the company's banker, the English, Scottish and Australasian Bank (ES&A). The brief was to bring good accounting practices into the company's *modus operandi*. Sorting out the finances became such an onerous task that soon Stanley Tilley was working long hours on it and doing little else. Tilley family tradition recounts an exasperated Mrs Elsie Tilley exclaiming, 'Stanley! If you're doing so much work for Birchalls you'd better move into Birchalls or else you'd better cut them off as one of your clients'.¹³ So in 1928 Stanley Tilley left his partnership in the accounting business and became Birchalls' first fulltime accountant. By 1929 he had 'purchased an interest' in Birchalls and was a member of the Board.

The transition to better accounting practices may have been just in time, with the Great Depression hitting Tasmania from 1930. The company also received some direct assistance from the Federal Government. For years one of the aspects of the business in which Jack Birchall had taken an active interest was visiting schools all around the state to sell book to teachers. Ray Tilley recalls:

This was the sort of thing old Jack really liked – visiting the intelligentsia and the landed gentry in his role as bookseller. He was probably a bit of a snob really and was magnanimous in the way he extended long-term credit to these sorts of clients.¹⁴

In fact, this form of business was not profitable, especially compared to the turnover from less socially prestigious activities such as the cash-based bookselling, stationery sales and the lending library. Jack Birchall saw it, however, as an important part of the public face of the company and on one occasion at least this focus came to the company's rescue in a very direct fashion. In 1932, when the credit crisis came to a head for Birchalls, Jack's strategy of taking care of the company's social credit paid its dividend. Jack Birchall and Stan Tilley went to the ES&A Bank to ask for still more credit but were told that the company's overdraft had been extended for the last time and that as it had not made previous repayments, the bank was going to call in the creditors. Among the school teachers in remote areas to whom Jack had sold books was Joe Lyons, who since January 1932 had

13 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 24 February 2005.

14 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 24 February 2005.

been Prime Minister of Australia and was himself beset with problems of balanced budgets and the financial stability required to see the country through the Depression. As Jack Birchall and Stan Tilley were returning from the interview at the ES&A, they met Lyons in the street and he asked why Jack looked forlorn. Ray Tilley retells his father's account:

Jack told him the situation. Joe listened and told him that the Bank of NSW would be interested and told him to see the manager with the message that 'the Prime Minister of Australia sent you' and see how you get on.¹⁵

The result was that Birchalls got new credit arrangements and a new banker which helped the company survive the Depression. Complacency, however, remained a significant characteristic of the company: 'Jack Birchall was satisfied with how it was operating and that was that.'¹⁶

This was the situation when Ray Tilley started work at Birchalls in 1938. In one sense he was following in his father's footsteps but he came to it by a very circuitous route which laid the foundations for an original and successful contribution to the company's development.

Ray was born in 1923, the eldest son of Stanley V Tilley and Elsie Corrick. Stanley had come to Launceston on a holiday after service in World War 1. He stayed because of Elsie whose family were famous entertainers who had settled in Launceston after their touring musical shows were terminated by the war.¹⁷ In Launceston they made a substantial contribution to the local entertainment scene. When she was in her seventies, Elsie told Patsy Adam Smith:

I thought I'd live and die playing piano in a picture theatre, while all the other girls were going to dances. 'I'll never get married', I wailed. Then Stan Tilley returned from the war, we met, married and had six children, who got used to hearing their parents calling one another to the tune of 'Oh, Listen to the Band'.¹⁸

Stan Tilley also saw business potential in the town, and after working as an accountant for the *Launceston Examiner* he became a partner with FH Ralph in the accounting firm, Ralph and Tilley, in 1922. As mentioned above, this firm came to play a significant role in the history of Birchalls

15 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 24 February 2005.

16 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 10 February 2006.

17 Patsy Adam-Smith, 'Family Troupe Toured the Outback Before World War 1', *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 11 September 1968, p. 12.

18 Patsy Adam-Smith, 'Oh Listen to the Band', *Walkabout*, January 1969, p. 35.

bookshop but initially its clients were drawn from across the business community of northern Tasmania. Stanley Tilley was a pioneer of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Australia (ICAA) but was also deeply involved in more local business and community organizations. In particular, he played a role in the Northern Tasmanian Alpine Club and the Northern Tasmanian Fisheries Association.¹⁹

Ray's early years did not indicate that he was likely to become a successful businessman. He was a student at Launceston High School during the Depression but showed little dedication to studies and 'often missed class to pursue more interesting activities such as mountaineering, skiing and fly fishing'.²⁰ The school leaving age was then 14, and Ray decided that it was the right 'time to start making my way in the world'.²¹ Jobs were hard to get as Launceston, along with much of Australia and all of Tasmania, did not really recover from the Depression until defence force recruitment took off in 1939.²² Ray, however, got a start as a tally clerk, counting timber at Kilne Dried Hardwoods, which was located on the river at Invermay. He recalls:

After I'd been there about six months my father came home from work one day and asked 'How are you getting on at school.' I said, 'I don't go to school Dad'. He said, 'We'll see about that' and it was back to school for me with the object of passing the Intermediate Certificate. It was a shocking downfall for a boy who was making his own way in the world to have to go back to school and eat humble pie.²³

Returning to school clearly did not change Ray's attitude to his study and although he sat the Intermediate Certificate, he failed to pass. He then started work at Birchalls as a delivery boy in 1938. It was the bottom rung of a crowded ladder, and Ray realised that he 'was ill equipped to take a place in the commercial world'.²⁴ He responded by reading extensively in the self-improvement literature and enrolling in courses at the Launceston Technical College. Ray recalls that at the beginning of these studies he had 'no particular direction' and was as likely to enrol in a class because there were 'lots of pretty girls there' as because of the subject's intrinsic value.²⁵ He did, however, read widely. Yvonne Tilley recalls him as 'the tall,

19 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 24 February, 2005.

20 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 24 February 2005.

21 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 24 February 2005.

22 Lloyd Robson, *A History of Tasmania Volume II: Colony and State from 1856 to the 1980s*, Melbourne, 1991, p. 473.

23 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 24 February 2005.

24 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 24 February 2005.

25 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 2 February 2006.

handsome young man at the bookshop where I bought my school books'.²⁶ Some years later she was to discover the depth of his reading as he wooed her 'spouting poetry at every opportunity'.²⁷ Gradually commercial subjects came to dominate Ray's study. He moved from French, English, woodwork, and art to ticket writing, sign writing and commercial art. Then he went on to study trigonometry, engineering, book keeping, and accounting.

Equally significant in Ray Tilley's development were the recreational activities, which brought him into contact with older men who were members of Launceston's vibrant business community. It was a characteristic of the city's life in this period that recreational and business activity overlapped. Not only were both Ray's parents active musicians and involved in a variety of outdoor recreational activities, but these activities also involved many of Stan Tilley's clients and business associates. So commercial and family activities tended to flow into and enrich each other.²⁸

In pre-war Launceston, many of the popular outdoor activities, such as mountaineering, bushwalking and fishing were beginning to be organised through voluntary associations. Ray followed his father into the Northern Tasmanian Alpine Club, which brought him into social contact with families of local retailers such as the Perrins, Monds, McKinlays, Shaws, Hughes and Tysons. Ray recalls 'several of these men became very good mentors and gave me some very good ideas and there were advantages of being known to them'.²⁹ The history of the Alpine Club is related elsewhere and the Tilleys' role in it is well recognised.³⁰ As a younger member of this group of prominent commercial and social activists Ray took on roles such as editing the monthly *Ben Lomond Bulletin*, which gave him a solid basis for contributing to the group.³¹

What is less well known is the story of the Northern Tasmanian Fisheries' Association. The purpose of this organisation was to breed and hatch brown and rainbow trout. Initially, this was done at the Waverley Woollen Mills in ponds that had previously been used to hold water from the Waverley Dam before it was used for the factory. With mains water replacing the dam, the ponds were no longer used for that purpose. So the association approached the mill owners and was allowed to set up hatcheries using the ponds and some of their buildings. Subsequently, the Association established a

26 Interview, Yvonne Tilley, Launceston, 3 February 2006.

27 Interview, Yvonne Tilley, Launceston, 3 February 2006.

28 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 24 February, 2005.

29 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 10 February 2006.

30 M Giordano, *A Man and a Mountain: the Story of Gustav Weindorfer*, Launceston: Regal Publications, 1987; DM Harvey, *The Ben Lomond Story*, Launceston: DM Harvey, 2000.

31 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 24 February, 2005.

specially designed hatchery at Corra Linn. The members were keen and hardworking volunteers, but they had a vested interest. At this time there was a dispute between the Fisheries' Commission and some of the recreational fishermen. The former had a policy of not releasing rainbow trout into the rivers because they believed that the fish simply swam out to sea. The fishermen thought otherwise and illegally released fingerlings into areas their experience led them to believe were suitable environments. Ray recalls that association members:

used to stock the rivers near where we had our shacks. We could fit 5 to 7 cans of hatchlings into my father's car and take them up to St Patrick's river. No one else would know and we'd have our own supply for 2-3 years.³²

The experience of working in a co-operative relationship with men he admired – not to mention the opposition to contemporary orthodoxy and government policy – was a formative experience. That Ray was also making an impression on the people he admired was evident when he was made Secretary of the Association, despite being one of the youngest members. Ray's willingness to pitch in and do jobs that perhaps those with more experience and less enthusiasm were prepared to forego, paid handsome dividends in terms of his standing in the Launceston business community.³³

A more specifically business-oriented involvement was with the Tasmanian Retail Traders Association (RTA). Initially, Ray's involvement, like that in the recreational associations, was through his father and his father's friends. His willingness and enthusiasm, however, saw him appointed Launceston President of this association and 'a very young delegate' to the Australian Retailers Association when compared to others involved; he was 'still really just an office boy'.³⁴ Not only did the RTA give Ray access to the experience of other members, through its regular lunchtime discussions, but his voluntary assistance to the Branch Secretary, and the articles he began contributing to its monthly journal, made him very much part of the retailing community well before he had achieved business success in his own right. It also alerted him to the role such business community organisations could play in the development of enterprise.

Ray saw this period of his life in terms of 'learning to be useful' in the business and social life of Launceston.³⁵ His approach had not been to

32 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 15 December 2006.

33 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 24 February, 2005.

34 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 1 April 2005.

35 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 1 April 2005.

focus on his own career in itself but rather to become part of the town's commercial and recreational life. In recalling the formative influences of his youth, Ray singles out 'the voluntary recreational associations... my studies at the technical school which got me into studying business subjects ... [and] professional associations such as the Retail Traders Association'.³⁶ In each case he adds:

all of the men involved were much senior to me but I got experience of how these things could be achieved. They were my heroes and I just learnt so much from them. These experiences really formed my character and got me into the habit of working harder than most boys my age.³⁷

When Ray started work at Birchalls in 1938, the company had survived the Depression but showed little sign of moving forward. The state of the Brisbane Street building in the late 1930s provides an insight into the management's priorities. Birchalls had expanded from an original single shopfront at the turn of the century to occupy adjoining shops, but the premises were rented and the landlord really had no interest in maintaining them. Originally the lane between two shops had provided entrance to a small yard where a water well and stable provided for the needs of the white horse AW Birchall rode to and from work. By the late 1930s, the horse had gone but the stable was still there. The residences above the shops were in a dilapidated condition. They had been vacant for some time, and their derelict condition made it unlikely they would be occupied again as residences. Birchalls took them over to house the accounts office, the education department and the lending library. The absentee landlord was not interested in improvements, and the renovations needed to accommodate the extension of the store and its offices had been carried out crudely. Some of this work was carried out by junior employees, such as Ray Tilley, with little experience or expertise in building. When walls between the shops were knocked out to provide access, the floor levels were found to be unrelated. So there were lots of gaps in the walls and small or large steps up and down to be taken in negotiating a way from one part of the building to another. The rooms all leaked and little maintenance was done. The lead drains which ran across the ceilings had deteriorated to the point that they leaked and soaked the ceilings when it rained heavily. They were not renewed; so one of Ray Tilley's first jobs was to carry an umbrella over Jack Birchall's head as he moved around the building so he did not get

36 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 1 April 2005.

37 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 1 April 2005.

wet! His explanation for such a seemingly irrational arrangement is that 'a juniors' wages were more economical than the cost of repairs'.³⁸

At this time, Ray was one of half a dozen 'boys' aged from fourteen to eighteen who earned between ten shillings and seven shillings and six pence per week. Birchalls imported most of their books, stationery and other merchandise directly from England. Launceston was a busy port used by both sailing and steam vessels and there must have still been a good deal of romance about it for the 'boys'. Among their jobs was to run the Bills of Lading from Brisbane Street to the wharf and obtain the customs clearances from the Customs House. With no containerisation, the books and other goods were delivered in huge crates, well packed with sawdust in the case of the inks, pastes and other bottled materials to make sure breakages did not occur *en route*. Books arrived either in huge packing cases or were posted in cardboard packages bound by string. Another of the jobs for the 'boys' was unpacking:

We were told to cut the string, lay the books on the benches and drop the containers on the floor. We were forbidden to look at the book covers and certainly not allowed to open or examine them – that was a job reserved for the Managing Director alone. Only when he had fondly examined the new books would we be allowed to look for the invoices and gather the wrappers which littered the floor almost knee deep.³⁹

Between 1938 and 1941, Ray Tilley had moved from being the delivery boy to being first an office boy and then a salesman. He was particularly interested in the stationery side of the business. Contemporary 'copperplate' handwriting was quite an art with pens, inks, nibs and paper all varying greatly in quality and price. While the need for a penknife to shape quills had disappeared and the first ballpoint pens had been introduced, most writing was still done with fountain pens and ink. Personal preferences were significant as the nibs for these pens varied greatly and were also to some extent shaped by the writer's style. So the stationery side of the business was more technical than it might be today.

Ray's career at Birchalls then went into abeyance as, after turning 18 in 1941, he served during World War II, first in the artillery and then the air force. With demobilisation, there were lots of men trying to get their old jobs back. Ray Tilley returned to Birchalls moving through library and stationery departments. With little opportunity for advancement within

38 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 24 February 2005.

39 Tilley, 'As I Remember It', p. 3.

the company, the greater confidence he had as a demobilised officer began to show itself in his activity in industry organizations. He started getting involved again in the Retail Traders Association and also became active in the Chamber of Commerce. It was, however, in the Australian Booksellers Association (ABA) that he was to make his mark in the period immediately after the war. He recalls:

I'd gone to an Australian Booksellers Association meeting even before the war ended because I was in my air force uniform. The Booksellers Association consisted of a whole lot of fellows hiding their 'cards' from each other around the table. They all quarrelled bitterly with their suppliers – the publishers and between themselves. I was horrified at the way this group of people got on. The Chairman was the head of Dymocks in Sydney. He was chairman by right not by election or appointment. When there was an election he'd say 'All right I'll be president and I'll have you as secretary and you and you.' He just ran the whole thing like a dictator and that horrified me.⁴⁰

The relationship between publishers and booksellers was not organised and relied on the relationships between individuals with many deals done secretly between the various publishing and bookselling companies. So there was no level playing field for retailers, and the prices and margins were determined by the publishers. Ray saw the Association as the logical vehicle for giving the retailers a voice with the publishers. One of his initial aims was to build trust within the industry so that booksellers would feel able to exchange information to mutual benefit. In this regard, Ray was eventually able to initiate the first figure exchange between booksellers and publishers in Australia.⁴¹ This provided an information base within the industry covering issues such as wholesale and retail prices, as well as wages and turnover. The greater openness this provided was necessary to build trust within the industry and enabled comparisons so that traders could judge their own performance against that of others. For instance, previously publishers had been able to give discounts to some booksellers while pretending to others that they were getting the same deal. The figure exchange created a more open and transparent environment.

The *Australian Bookseller and Publisher* characterised Birchalls at this time as 'not a very progressive company... [with] a derelict building, an absentee landlord and a nervous bank manager'.⁴² Its observation that

40 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 24 February 2005.

41 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 10 February, 2006.

42 *The Australian Bookseller and Publisher*, July 1992, p. 48.

Birchalls 'was reputed to be the dearest shop in town, trading to a select upper class of customers who never paid their bills' might appear extreme.⁴³ Yet it fits very comfortably with Ray Tilley's memory of a company with potential which was held back by a business approach which had more to do with the social standing of its owners than with the profitability or efficiency of the operation. The areas he identified in which reforms were needed included 'a change of customers, a change of identity, a change of stock, a change of staff attitudes and of selling methods and business systems'.⁴⁴

From the position of an employee, however, there was not much Ray could do to ensure that Birchalls did reform its practices. This began to change in the 1950s, as the Birchall family had no logical successor to Jack in terms of managing the company. Jack's son had a disability. His daughter, Dr Ida Birchall, was establishing her gynaecological practice which served Launceston for many years. She was also working philanthropically to promote better care for the community's physically and mentally disabled. While she played a significant role on the Birchalls' Board in later years, Dr Ida's priorities clearly lay elsewhere. By contrast, Stan and Ray Tilley saw potential in the business and were determined to rebuild the company on a stronger commercial footing. The Tilleys also had several other sons of employable age. One of them, Norman Tilley, was a school teacher and he was encouraged to assist Jack Birchall in the education section of the bookstore's operation.⁴⁵

Over the years, Stan's position as company accountant had enabled him to gain more and more influence with Jack Birchall. While Jack remained Managing Director of the company, Stan had become the effective fulltime manager. In part, this was because he brought to Birchalls his reputation as a member of the Launceston business community in his own right. Furthermore, given the financial problems of the company, an arrangement had developed by which Stan was paid partly in company shares. After the war, this arrangement had been extended to include Ray and later to his brother, Norm. So the Tilleys' influence in the company was not only dependent upon having good ideas for change but also rested on their own reputations and their increasing shareholding in the company. For his own part, Ray Tilley had decided that he 'would buy additional Birchalls shares at any opportunity'.⁴⁶ The shareholdings of the Birchall family were spread between quite a few relatives, some of whom lived inter-state, and few of

43 *The Australian Bookseller and Publisher*, July 1992, p. 49.

44 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 24 February 2005.

45 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 10 February, 2006.

46 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 15 December 2006.

whom had any interest in the company's business beyond the dividends it yielded. By contrast the Tilleys' increasing shareholding was concentrated in the hands of people working in the company. This was formally recognised in 1953 when Ray became a member of the Board. In management terms, Jack Birchall had been moving to a less hands on role for some time. In 1957, he died and Stan Tilley succeeded him as Managing Director, a position he held until 1968. The result was that during the 1960s the Tilleys had both the ownership and managerial control to modernise Birchalls' operations.⁴⁷

One of the first moves in the direction of a more businesslike approach had been the purchase of the Brisbane Street building. It had been owned for many years by the Atkins family of Hobart and in the early 1950s this ownership rested with a widowed Mrs. Atkins. Stan Tilley was able to convince her to sell the Birchalls property and impressed upon his sons the idea that they should 'never sell Brisbane Street because property in the CBD is like gold'.⁴⁸ This gave the company its permanent location and, importantly for Ray's modernisation plans, the ability to make the alterations to the premises it needed as it grew. The wisdom of buying the property which had been leased for so long was seen in the waves of alterations Birchalls undertook, with major rebuilding and extension work being carried out in 1953, 1955, 1962 and 1966. The physical changes culminated when the Brisbane Street Mall was opened in 1975 and the premises were altered yet again to provide access from the new mall through to Paterson Street.

It was also during the 1960s that Birchalls began to move seriously into the three areas which were to make the company a modern mass retailer: the use of computers, a self-service mode of operation in the shop and the promotion of books in the local community.

Ray Tilley was particularly taken by the potential applications of computers in bookselling. One of the industry's major bottlenecks was in storing and retrieving information about books. Ray saw computing as providing 'new ways of listing authors, titles and publishers, as well as customers, which can give us information quickly'.⁴⁹ He had begun putting these ideas forward in the Australian Booksellers Association 'but the others all thought I was a kid without much experience and that was true'.⁵⁰ But it was also true that the industry in general, and Birchalls in particular, were not moving with the times. The 'computers' of this period were primitive

47 *Launceston Examiner*, 27 March 1985, p. 14.

48 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 10 February 2006.

49 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 10 February 2006.

50 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 1 April 2005.

but some accounting machines had the capacity for simple functions, which could improve efficiency in the bookselling trade.⁵¹

Ray Tilley encouraged Birchalls' accountant, David Harvey, to work on these radical ideas. Norm Tilley, who had been a school teacher since the war, was also brought into the company to help Jack Birchall with the school business. Initially he was not interested in the experiments Ray and David were trying but when the advantages were demonstrated he embraced them wholeheartedly. Ray recalls:

Norm was much cleverer than me, especially at mathematical and mechanical things. However he and my father were hard to persuade that computers could retrieve and match authors, titles and publishers to customers at a much faster rate and more reliably than if this information was committed to memory. However, David Harvey, our accountant, was familiar with a Burroughs Accounting machine, which had a memory. I said to him, 'If we were to put book titles, authors and customers into it, the computer would serve them back up to us in an instant. Then items on order could be recalled by author, title, publisher or even date.' He and I worked together using the Burroughs machine, putting book titles into it and doing our orders through it. Lo and behold we got it to work for us doing some of the things computers do today.⁵²

When Ray and David triumphantly demonstrated this evidence of greater efficiency at the Booksellers Association they were not believed and laughed at: 'their view was that a good bookseller knows all his authors and publishers and can quote them back from memory'.⁵³ Ray's view was that computers were coming anyway and 'we should be putting a number in every book so that when the computer industry does take off books will be able to be identified by that number'.⁵⁴ Ray was able to give this view a wider airing when elected Vice-President of the ABA in 1961.⁵⁵

In the meantime, however, Ray and Norm were able to make use of the simple computing functions available in Birchalls' operations. Initially, the value of this was in the education, rather than the retail, section of the shop. Here they were able to make use of the Burroughs Typing Sensomatic machine with its a magnetic stripe enabling it to store simple information. Previously Birchalls had sold to schools through the agency of travelling

51 *The Australian Bookseller and Publisher*, July 1992, p. 49.

52 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 1 April 2005.

53 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 24 February 2005.

54 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 24 February 2005.

55 Tilley, 'As I remember ...', p. 11.

sales staff who built up relationships with particular teachers. In this approach, the salesman's own knowledge of titles and subject was essential to identifying the books, which would fill the teachers' needs. The use of the Burroughs machine created efficiencies by storing information, which could be accessed regardless of the level of the personal knowledge of the staff or their personal relationship with the customer.⁵⁶

At about the same time, Ray was urging the need to expand the shop by taking over Round's Grocery Store which was next door to the bookshop. When Ray had first argued this course of action in a Board meeting, an incensed Jack Birchall cried out, 'You'll never live to see the day that we take over the grocer next door'.⁵⁷ By 1962, however, Birchalls were selling toys and children's books in what used to be the grocers' shop.⁵⁸

That expansion also provided the physical room for a move to a self-service operation. This was a major innovation in both the industry and the company where a conservative approach to doing business had been dominant. Under the old system of operation, staff were organised into a rigid hierarchy, with very little asked of them other than to follow a set pattern of procedures, day after day. The knowledge of books, authors and publishers conformed to this hierarchy with the Managing Director holding most knowledge and less being held by individuals at each lower level of the hierarchy. The inflexibility of this system meant that very few activities could be conducted without direct and constant supervision. This under-valued the potential contribution of staff and led to a lot of wasted time for both the supervisors and those they supervised.⁵⁹

Self-service, however, introduced a more flexible mode of operation. It required knowledgeable floor staff who could answer customers' questions and a separate set of staff who could ring up the sales. Advances in cash register technology had created a specific set of retailing skills required at the register which had little to do with the book trade specifically. As Ray Tilley puts it, the company 'could train bright young people more or less straight out of school to be very efficient operators on cash registers within a short time'.⁶⁰ This freed up those staff with deeper knowledge of the book trade to focus on providing customer advice on the shop floor.

Eventually it would combine with the introduction of computer technology enabling increasingly complex storage, and rapid retrieval, of

56 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 10 February, 2006.

57 Ray Tilley, 'Birchalls at the Turn of the Century', a talk given to the Friends of the Queen Victoria Museum, 28 October 1992, p. 2.

58 *Bookselling*, September 2005, pp. 28-9.

59 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 10 February, 2006.

60 Tilley, 'Birchalls at the turn of the Century', p. 8.

information to open a new way of thinking about bookselling. Rather than resting on the expertise of bibliophiles targeting highbrow readers the new forms of information management and self-service eventually enabled bookselling to become a mass retail operation. The interesting point in Birchalls' story is that the Tilleys were taking the first steps down this road well before micro chips allowed computers to become small enough and cheap enough to be part of the daily operation of a book store. Before the technology was available in a suitable form, they had seen the potential efficiency of computerisation for the book trade and were doing what they could with the machinery available to them.⁶¹

Ray took this view with him to Europe in 1968 as a delegate to the International Booksellers Federation conference. He recalls:

they listened to me and the Chairman said he didn't understand what I was talking about but that I should have morning tea with him to discuss it. Then he ordered a huge jug of beer and I threw up my arms in horror – I'm not really a beer drinker – and I knocked this jug of beer all over the chairman. So I started off very badly with the International Fellowship of Booksellers. But they didn't hold it against me and they did support putting a number in every book. Slowly this caught on and the ISBN number was invented.⁶²

Ray was also writing almost evangelical articles for the magazines of Australian and British booksellers' associations about using computers in the book trade.⁶³ The available electronic computers were, however, huge, expensive and required housing in an air-conditioned room. They were, in other words, quite impractical at this stage for the small businesses that were bookshops. Nonetheless, Ray's enthusiasm was responsible for bringing many booksellers around to the idea that computers had potential to solve problems in the business of bookselling. As the technology improved and the price of computers came down, he also began to obtain a more receptive hearing.

Along with the progressive approach to technology and the self-service mode of operation went a commitment to staff training. While some of this was done in-house and on-the-job, an interesting partnership was developed between Birchalls and the local adult education program. By lecturing in this program, Ray Tilley was able to ensure that his staff received the training he wanted. Additional advantages for the company included the fact that their staff were now training with retail staff from many other

61 *Australasian Bookseller and Publisher*, July, 1982, pp. 48-9.

62 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 25 February 2005.

63 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 10 February, 2006.

types of operations and therefore getting new ideas from their classmates as well as from the courses themselves. Furthermore the classes were held at night so there was no loss of working time involved. Tilley concludes that 'the company was able to appear very generous in paying fees for its staff to participate but actually benefited greatly because this saved the company the time and effort of running the training during paid working hours'.⁶⁴

Another innovation during this period in which the Tilleys had a freer hand to try new things were the efforts Birchalls made to raise community awareness about books. Perhaps the most successful of these was the Children's Book Week. This began using the brainstorming technique Ray Tilley introduced into meetings of Birchalls staff to access their ideas. In the case of Book Week, however, the meetings were open to anyone and all suggestions no matter how outrageous or illogical could be thrown into the melting pot. An important aspect of this process was to establish a positive atmosphere so that people would feel able to put forward ideas freely. Ray Tilley recalls using his position as chairman of these meetings to create this atmosphere of working together. So 'no criticism of other people's ideas was permitted and every suggestion had to be positive and build on previous suggestions'.⁶⁵ The result was 'a riotous collection of ideas' which 'generated tremendous enthusiasm and participation'.⁶⁶

There was also criticism with some booksellers complaining that these Book Week activities represented a 'Birchalls Benefit'. It was certainly the case that Birchalls gained a competitive advantage and reaped a commercial reward from being seen to be at the heart of such community-minded activity. On the other hand, the community orientation would not have been sustainable if the activities were driven purely by one company's profit motive. Important participants in broadening the organising basis of Book Week were the schools, the staff of the City Council and Library whose support also gave Book Week a public profile and the use of council facilities and venues. For several years the Mayor of Launceston chaired the Book Week Committee. The Book Week Committee became one of those organizations which, by including government, business and community, gained broad credibility and capacity. The promotion of children's books also received a boost through television with local TV broadcaster having a weekly children's library show and Book Week:

became a huge function, eventually embracing every school and library in the State, with halls and theatres hired for presentations, huge parades of

64 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 1 February 2007.

65 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 2 February 2007.

66 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 1 February 2007.

children dressed as book characters, bus trips to places of literary interest and authors and speakers from around the world.⁶⁷

The education section of the business also took its message outside the normal store environment. A portable display was developed which could be set up for public events taking place in any educational setting. From the 1960s, a Birchalls' desk became a familiar part of fairs and open days at schools, colleges and higher education institutes throughout the State. The partnership between Birchalls and the Tasmanian Department of Education proved very fruitful for the company. Since the 1930s, the Department had produced many of its own teaching aids especially in the primary education areas. These included exercise books with double lines for upper and lower case letters in the copperplate style of the day as well as spelling books and mathematical table manuals. Ray Tilley recalls that:

The printing was done by J Walsh & Sons in Hobart and the immense task of distribution was undertaken by Birchalls who re-packed the books in huge pine packing crates and consigned them to the individual schools, usually by rail'.⁶⁸

Birchalls also managed the book stores attached to the tertiary colleges and the University. At the end of the century, with Ray Tilley retiring as Chairman, Birchalls had 90 employees and operated in five locations.

Conclusion

The Tilley's' contribution to modernising Birchalls enabled the company to survive into the twenty-first century as a viable business and a significant institution in Tasmanian life. The continuity of purpose established during the periods in which first Stan, and then Ray Tilley, were general manager gave the company a focus and drive to change with the times. The philosophy behind this was encapsulated in a formal statement of policies which identified nineteen things needed for the company to achieve continued success. They were:

1. Create a unique store personality.
2. Build capable management.
3. Seek the best buying terms.
4. Establish a 'formula for profit' in all operations.

67 Interview, Ray Tilley, Launceston, 1 February 2007.

68 Interview, Yvonne Tilley, Launceston, 3 February 2007.

5. Strengthen the image of the Launceston store and keep it up to date.
6. Identify our customers and merchandise actively to them.
7. Emphasise customer service.
8. Be alert to changing times.
9. Establish Branch stores at carefully selected sites.
10. Make long range estate plans.
11. Plan adequate financing.
12. Be active in civic affairs.
13. Be active in Trade Associations.
14. Get and keep key personnel.
15. Re-vitalise Launceston City Centre.
16. Budget for and control expenses.
17. Have written policies and goals.
18. Strive for leadership.
19. Make more use of credit selling in its various forms.⁶⁹

Ray Tilley is fond of quoting the Prophet's aphorism 'those without vision do not survive'. It is not an accusation that could be levelled against the Tilleys' leadership at Birchalls and the company's survival provides a commercial proof of the Prophet's wisdom.

69 Ray Tilley, 'Birchalls' Policies to Achieve Success as an Independent Store', *mimeograph*, Tilley family papers, 1977.