

MYER, Kenneth Baillieu (1921-1992)

by Sue Ebury

Kenneth Baillieu Myer AC, DSC (1921-1992), businessman, philanthropist, patron of the arts and sciences, was born on 1 March 1921 in San Francisco, USA, the eldest son of the Russian Jewish immigrant and self-made retailing genius Sidney Baevski Myer (1878-1934), and his Australian second wife, (Dame) Marjorie Merlyn, née Baillieu (1900-1982).¹ Since Sidney's Reno divorce was not recognised in Australia, Ken and his three siblings' early years were divided between the two countries: had the children been born in Melbourne, they would have been considered illegitimate.

The family returned permanently to Australia in 1929, and ten-year-old Ken was enrolled at Geelong Church of England Grammar School (1931), where the recently arrived headmaster and Christian socialist Dr James Darling became his most significant influence for the next sixty years. Darling's belief in social responsibility became embedded with his father's philanthropy in Ken's conscious mind.²

Ken made few friends at school, for his parents protectively monitored their children's relationships, Melbourne society regarding the Myer marriage as irregular. His life changed dramatically on 5 September 1934 when Sidney died suddenly from heart failure, and Ken assumed his place as head of the family and heir to the Melbourne retail empire founded by his father in 1911.³

Conscientious, hardworking and fiercely competitive, he was on his way to New College, Oxford to read Modern Greats in 1939 when war was declared.⁴ Enrolling at Princeton University (New Jersey) instead, he excelled in Art and became interested in Architecture, but a degree in Liberal Arts was cut short when his mother demanded he return to Australia.⁵

In 1940 he enlisted in the Royal Australian Naval Volunteer Reserve to train as an anti-submarine officer⁶ and shortly before his 21st birthday he was appointed to HMAS *Arunta*, a fleet destroyer and the fastest ship in the Australian Navy. Nine months convoy duty on the 'milk run' between Australia and New Guinea, during which he was decorated DSC after directing the sinking of Japanese submarine *RO33*⁷ and promoted lieutenant, failed to still the restlessness that plagued him throughout his life, and in May 1943 he sailed to the United Kingdom and transferred to the Royal Navy.⁸

After three months in submarines,⁹ he was appointed anti-submarine officer in HMS *Tenacious*, serving in the Mediterranean and the Adriatic until September 1944.¹⁰ By now a qualified navigator with a U-boat to his credit and MID (1944),¹¹ Ken spent the remainder of the war patrolling the Western Approaches in HMS *Louis*.¹² Well-liked by his commanders, fellow officers and the lower deck, overseas service granted him anonymity and banished feelings of inadequacy and difference that had dogged him since school days. He returned to Australia to join HMS *Ursa* and the British Pacific Fleet as part of the occupation forces;¹³ in October 1945, he navigated his destroyer up the Sumida River to Tokyo and his 'love affair' with Japan began.¹⁴

Uncertain about his future career,¹⁵ he was a reluctant recruit to the Myer Emporium in 1946, but the responsibility of marriage to Prudence Marjorie née Boyd (1925-2005) in March 1947 launched him in retailing; in order to inherit his elder son's portion of Sidney's estate, he must be a senior executive by age thirty.¹⁶ He became a director a month before travel to the USA in 1948 inspired his most significant contribution to Myer corporate strategy and Australian retailing.¹⁷

California's post-war retail and urban planning environment showed him the future: great shopping centres linked to booming suburbs by expressways, demonstrating the interdependence of shopping, customers and automobiles.¹⁸

Back in Melbourne and bursting with ideas,¹⁹ he joined the Town & Country Planning Association (1951) and enthusiastically lobbied organisations, businessmen, engineers, town planners and architects.²⁰ By December 1953 as president and also organiser of the City Development Association, he vigorously promoted the Melbourne Metropolitan Board of Works Transport Plan (1954)²¹ that galvanised inner suburban citizens to demonstrate noisily against the environmental disturbances of a proposed ring road, bridge, freeways and highways.²²

Privately, he and his brother Sidney Baillieu (1926-) funded traffic engineering scholarships to Yale University²³ and retained planners and estate agents to identify development sites,²⁴ but their cousin and Chairman, (Sir) Norman Myer, favoured regional development by acquisition. After Norman's death (1956), Ken became Deputy Chairman and joint Managing Director, and embarked on building Chadstone, the first American-style regional shopping centre in Australia.²⁵ Eventually Myer ringed Melbourne and dominated Australian retailing, and as the first Australian to win the American NRMA's 'Outstanding Retailer Award' (1969), Ken credited Myer's 25,000 staff as the winners, but by 1985 the brilliant merchants had retired and survival necessitated the Coles-Myer merger.²⁶

When Ken became vice-chairman of the National Gallery and Cultural Centre Building Committee (1957), he had no inkling that the complex on the south bank of the Yarra River would absorb him for thirty-two years. His chairman, Dr Leonard Cox, was also Chairman of Trustees and the National Gallery's Honorary Curator of Oriental Art, and under his scholarly tutelage Ken built up an important collection of ceramics and ancient Chinese bronzes.

Cox's descriptions of his visits to China and the Imperial Palace Museum treasures convinced Ken to travel to London in 1958 by way of China and Russia. This journey during the year of the Great Leap Forward 'had the biggest impact of any overseas trip' he made in his life, awakening him to Asia's importance for Australia; it was the catalyst for founding the Myer Foundation and endowing the Chair and Department of Oriental Studies (later, East Asian Studies) at the University of Melbourne (1959).²⁷ Ken inspired his brother Baillieu to join him in this new venture, whereby he fulfilled his wartime decision to give away his income from his father's estate, and coined a new term, 'risk philanthropy', to describe the 'rare privilege' of backing his own judgement and ideas with money beyond what he required for his needs. Henceforth, he would build up his private fortune in order to donate it to the Foundation at his death.

Ken shed all civic commitments other than the National Gallery to focus on Chadstone, the Emporium's redevelopment, and the design and construction of Melbourne's first major public building for eighty years by (Sir) Roy Grounds (1905-1981). But Professor Derek Denton's experiments on Merino sheep in the Department of Physiology's Ionic Research Unit at the University of Melbourne triggered Ken's fascination for science and ground-breaking research into the control of body fluid composition and the organisation of instinctive systems of ingestive behaviour in the brain. He became the 'prime mover' with Baillieu and stockbroker and financier (Sir) Ian Potter in underwriting the costs of building the Howard Florey Laboratory for Experimental Physiology.²⁸ Dr H C 'Nugget' Coombs, then Governor of the Reserve Bank of Australia was an important facilitator, became Ken's mentor for years.²⁹

With additional grants from the Commonwealth, the Rockefeller Foundation and the university, the building was completed (1963), and in 1971 by Act of Parliament it became the Howard Florey Institute of Experimental Physiology and Medicine, with Ken the first President (1971-1990); the grateful university awarded him an honorary doctorate. Named after Lord (Howard) Florey, the institute is arguably Ken's most important philanthropic contribution,

Ken's profound interest in science and his growing grasp of technology and molecular biology later led to his personal financial support for the CSIRO Division of Plant Research and Gene Shears - the organisation's 'largest commercial venture' (1992) - and anonymously or through The Myer Foundation to many institutions.³⁰ By 'special election' of people who are not scientists but have rendered conspicuous service to science, Ken was elected a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Sciences (1992).³¹

Prime Minister (Sir) Robert Menzies, impressed by Ken's widening business and civic responsibilities, appointed him to the Interim Council of the National Library of Australia (1960). Ken, the sole appointee involved in building another new, major institution, was the youngest member of the National Library Council and the Joint Building Committee (1961), responsible with the National Capital Development Commission for planning and building the new library.

Menzies called on him twice more: to the Universities Commission (1962-1965) and in 1963 to the Commonwealth Committee of Economic Enquiry ('Vernon Report'). His long absences from Melbourne were welcome opportunities away from the Myer business, but the government's rejection of the Report (1965) soured him against further such exercises.

Ken became Group Chairman of Myer in 1966, fulfilling his mother's ambitions, but responsibility for the 'biggest retailing chain below the equator' was a dark burden that he longed to 'escape'; feeling thwarted since puberty by his inheritance and describing his life as 'programmed'.³² His lifelong love of trees found expression in the purchase with Roy Grounds of 220 hectares at Tanja (South coast of NSW) in 1965, a retreat from the intense pressures both men experienced.³³ Given by them to the nation as a wildlife sanctuary and permanent reserve; the restored and replanted forest ('Penders')³⁴ was ultimately joined to Mimosa Rocks National Park and classified as a place 'of [NSW] state significance' on the Register of the National Estate.³⁵

The National Library of Australia and the National Gallery of Victoria opened within days of each other (1968). By then, Ken was Chairman of the Building Committee of the Victorian Arts Centre (1965), a founding member of the Australian Council of Urban Studies (1967) and of the Interim Council of the National Gallery of Australia (1968-1971).

His technological epiphany occurred when a distinguished visiting librarian at the library's opening observed that the building's information retrieval systems were mired in the eighteenth century.³⁶ Ken rapidly became a passionate, well-informed advocate for 'the information highway', seizing every opportunity through his international contacts to position the library in the vanguard of computer-driven technology, personally funding travel and research by senior staff that resulted in the purchase of the software infrastructure leading to the on-line Australian Bibliographic Network.³⁷

As the library's fourth Chairman (1974-1982), he was visionary, 'meticulous, hard-working and utterly exhausting,'³⁸ an able envoy - the first NLA contact with the National Library of China (1973) - who vigorously promoted cultural and technological exchanges with Japan, Sweden, Canada, the USA and Great Britain.³⁹

His influence was profound; many attest to his sense of humour, generosity with time, friendship and money, quiet donations that gave him pleasure (\$50,000 for an electron microscope to the Australian Museum,⁴⁰ much greater amounts to the National Library of Australia for the Director's discretionary trust fund he founded, to the Florey, the Victorian Arts Centre, universities and galleries in all states).

1972 and long service leave in Japan were transformative personally and politically. Ken fell in love with Yasuko Hiraoka, the diminutive Japanese girl engaged for Japanese conversation and skiing in the Japan Alps; but as one of the sixteen signatories of the controversial letter to the press that called for a change of government in the 1972 election, he provoked public outcry, family division, hate mail and repercussions by Myer customers.

His influence with Government increased when Gough Whitlam became Labor Prime Minister, and after Ken returned from the first Australian Trade Mission to China (1973), Whitlam asked him to be Governor-General. Ken refused: his undisclosed reason was Yasuko, who moved to Sydney to live with him in 1974. In the 1976 Australia Day Honours List, Ken was appointed a Companion of the Order of Australia.

After thirty years with Myer, Ken resigned as Chairman (1976), untethering himself from his mother and family responsibilities, and following his divorce from Prudence, he married Yasuko in 1977 on the anniversary of his father's death. She rekindled his interest in Japanese art, and the arrival of Director Edmond Capon at the Art Gallery of NSW (1979), resulted in the foundation of its serious Asian collection. By Ken's death, Capon considered him the foremost Australian collector of Japanese art.⁴¹

As Chair of the Victorian Arts Centre Trust (1980 - 1989), the statutory authority replacing the Building Committee, Ken navigated the completion of the Performing

Arts Complex through industrial disruptions and inflation. His life's mission was building the Victorian Arts Centre, and he proudly opened the Concert Hall in 1982.

That year, he retired as Chair of the Library Council; and in 1989, the Australian Libraries and Information Association recognised his 'outstanding service to the promotion of a library and to the practice of librarianship' with their Redmond Barry Award. Generosity had brought unlooked-for honours: Fellow, the Australian Academy of Humanities (1969); Hon Fellow, Academy of Social Sciences in Australia (1972); Life Member, National Gallery of Victoria (1975); a Doctorate (*hon. causa*) in Arts and Sciences from the Victorian Institute of Colleges.

Ken's record with three statutory authorities, his high public profile and Labor Party sympathies commended him to the Hawke Government as founding Chair of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (1983-1986). To his regret, it was 'one of his principal failures' as a chairman.⁴² Both Board and ABC staff were initially enchanted by their tall, charming chairman with the piercing blue eyes, but he stumbled into a political minefield of ABC culture, work practices and Public Service-type regulations. His inept handling of serious conflict between the Managing Director, Geoffrey Whitehead, and the Staff Association board member caused his downfall, and he resigned after three turbulent years. Yet it was Ken's breadth of vision and leadership that gave the corporation Sydney's Ultimo Centre and Melbourne's South Bank building.

Gardening, the natural environment and fishing were life-long loves: he wished he had been a gardener and had an encyclopaedic botanical knowledge. From fishing as a small boy in California he graduated to angling with dry fly, or spinning on the coast at Penders, sharing all these activities with Yasuko. They would travel to the wilds of Alaska when the salmon were running and died there in a light aircraft crash while flying to a fishing camp on 30 July 1992⁴³ Their remains are interred in three places; the Box Hill Cemetery with Sidney and Merlyn in the handsome Myer Memorial designed by Edwin Lutyens, the Hiraoka family tomb on Kyushu and scattered through the forest at Penders..

¹ *Baby's Year Book*, Kenneth Myer Papers, (UMA).

² Kenneth Baillieu Myer, Oral History Interview (NLA), tape 1:1.

³ Alan Marshall, *The Gay Provider* (Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1961):153.

⁴ Correspondence in Merlyn Myer's files (Cranlana Archives).

⁵ Kenneth Myer to Merlyn Myer, 25 June 1940 (KBM Papers) UMA.

⁶ Kenneth Myer to Merlyn Myer, 2 March 1941 (KBM Papers), UMA.

⁷ Report by the Commanding Officer [Commander Morrow], HMAS *Arunta* on Attack of Submarine off Port Moresby 29 August 1942, 4 September 1942, 2026/4/112 (AWM).

⁸ KBM to Merlyn Myer, 1 March 1942, Kenneth Myer Papers (UMA).

⁹ Interview by author with Lieut-Commander C J Thode RN (rtd), 22 November 1995.

¹⁰ Interview by author with Walter Bazley, Toronto, 3 October 1997; interview by author with E B C Thornton, 25 August 1997; E B C Thornton, HMS *Tenacious: Her*

Story (Bungay, Richard Clay, nd); Walter Bazley to author, 3 June 1996.

¹¹ A/S report, June 1944, para1875 (RN Submarine Museum Archives, Gosport) WIR240/13; ADM199/464, f.426 (RN Submarine Museum Archives, Gosport) WIR 240/13.

¹² Donald Collingwood, *The Captain Class Frigates in the Second World War: an Operational History of the American-Built Destroyer Escorts Serving Under the White Ensign From 1943-46* (Annapolis, Naval Institute Press, 1999): 30-32.

¹³ Kenneth Baillieu Myer, Oral History Interview (NLA) Tape 4:1; ADM 190/2436, 'The End of the War, August 1945'. Notes made by Vice Admiral Evans Lombe in 1968 from contemporary papers and records (TNA).

¹⁴ Kenneth Baillieu Myer Oral History Interview, Tape 4:1 (NLA).

¹⁵ KBM to Merlyn Myer, 2 May 1946, UMA.

¹⁶ Last Will and Testament of Sidney Baeviski Myer, 3 June 1930, KBM Papers (UMA); Interview by author with Reginald Gregory, 8 July 1998.

¹⁷ Interview by author with Reginald Gregory, 8 July 1998; Alan Marshall, op.cit.

¹⁸ Kenneth T Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier. The Suburbanisation of the United States* (New York, OUP), 1985, 232-33; Greg Hise, *Magnetic Los Angeles. Planning the Twentieth-Century Metropolis* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).10-11; Jeffrey M Hardwick, *Mall Maker: Victor Gruen, Architect of an American Dream* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997) 48-51. Prudence Myer to Eina Boyd, [nd, ?25 February 1949], Prudence Myer Papers.

¹⁹ KBM, Oral History Interview, Tape 4:2 (NLA).

²⁰ Town & Country Planning Association (T&CPA) minute book No 1, 1945-1953 (SLV); Letter from Town and Country Planning Board to T&CPA, 2 May 1952 (SLV), Michael Robinson, *The Melbourne Movers. The City Development Association 1953-1961*, BA Hons thesis (1981, University of Melbourne): 20-21.

²¹ T&CPA minute book no.1, minutes, 10 September 1948 (SLV); *ibid.* minutes15 August 1952 (SLV).

²² Graeme Davison, *Car Wars: How the Car Won Our Hearts and Conquered Our Cities* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2004), 187-92.

²³ Sidney Myer Highway Traffic Scholarships.

²⁴ *Argus*, 3 August 1953, 'Cars the King, American Expert Says'.

²⁵ Myer Management Board Minutes, 20 January 1960, Myer Papers, Box155 (UMA). Kenneth Baillieu Myer Oral History Interview, Tape 4:2 (NLA).

²⁶ Interview with Keith Rosenhain, 11 November 2006; interview with S Baillieu Myer, 20 November 2006; Eric McClintock, *Aide Memoire: Five Days – through the Rear Vision Mirror*?, KKBM Papers (UMA)

²⁷ Kenneth Baillieu Myer Oral History Interview, Tape 5:1 (NLA).

²⁸ Derek Denton. *Historical Records of Australian Science*, 18:1 (2007).

²⁹ Interviews by author with Jean Battersby, 11 December 1996; Claudio Alcorso, 25 May 1996.

³⁰ Interview with Dr Jim Peacock, 12 August 1997. 'How the Myers Aided Science', letter to the editor, *Age*, 6 August 1992.

³¹ Derek Denton, 'Kenneth Baillieu Myer1921-1992', *Historical Records of Australian Science* 18 (2007): 97-111.

³² Prudence Myer Papers.

³³ Roy Grounds to Kenneth Myer, 20 September [1964], Attachment A, unsigned memo to Mr G W Sexton re New Company Penders Perpetual Forest Pty Ltd, 16 June 1964, Kenneth Myer Papers (UMA). Attachment B. In the nature of Penders Perpetual Forest Pty Limited. Report on Incorporation of Companies, nd. but before 27 July

1964. Partnership agreement for Penders, L C Shaw to KBM, 2 July 1965.

³⁴ Interview by author with Lindsay Pryor, 13 August 1997.

³⁵ Jill Shepherd, *Penders Conservation Management Plan* (Melbourne, Biosis Research, 2002).

³⁶ Kenneth Baillieu Myer Oral History Interview, Tape 6:1 (NLA).

³⁷ Arthur Ellis, quoted John Thompson, *op.cit.*, 8.

³⁸ Director-General Dr Harrison Bryan, quoted in John Thompson, 'Kenneth Baillieu Myer. An Appreciation', *National Library of Australia News*, November 1992, 8.

³⁹ Ken Myer, 'Impressions of China', *Australia's Neighbours*, Fourth Series, 86 (July-August 1973), 2.. Interview by author with Sir Andrew Grimwade, 22 July 2006.

⁴⁰ Interview by author with Robyn Williams, 22 May 1998; ABC interview with Robyn Williams, *AM*, 3 August 1992, Rada Accession No. 550261.

⁴¹ Interview by author for Kenneth Myer biography.

⁴² KBM Oral History Interview, Tape 7:1 (NLA),

⁴³ 'Accident Reports 1 and 2, file 92-52987 (Washington DC, National Transportation Safety Board, 1992).