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THE MERCHANT PRINCE

By Jacqueline Richardson

Those who knew him, loved him. He was a private, sensitive person, who fought a natural reserve most of his life. I think even we, his family, little understood him.

Doctor Wallace Caldwell's first words when ~~he~~ visiting us as small children at our home, were always: "And how's the Merchant Prince?" This affectionate name for Max Richardson, our father, no doubt grew because Katanning was a thriving agricultural town and his business an active part of it.

Max Richardson's in Clive Street grew out of the original business set up in Austral Terrace in 1888 by F.H. and C. Piesse: "We finished our task, covered the goods with a tarpaulin sheet and that was the beginning of F. and C. Piesse's store at Katanning." ¹Y.

The gold discoveries in the eighteen hundreds lured many to venture across the Nullabor plain to Western Australia. After a chance meeting with Arnold Piesse in Adelaide, our grandfather, Robert Lawson Richardson, decided to leave his business in Clarendon, South Australia and travel west. He visited Kalgoorlie, Menzies and Northam before meeting the Piesse brothers, Frederick and Charles, who suggested he join their enterprise in Katanning.

Mr. Richardson was impressed with the challenge the Katanning

store offered and in 1904 formed a partnership with F. and C. Piesse, purchasing fifty percent of the shareholding of the company on condition that the business now be called 'Richardson and Company'. He became company chairman on the death of F.H. Piesse in 1912.

During these early years a barter system operated with all trading firms in Katanning, particularly the Katanning Stock and Trading Company, Rogers Limited, and Richardson and Company. As no stock firms existed at this time, business houses gave a twelve month credit to local farmers to assist their financial operations. Products such as eggs, butter, cream, wheat, barley and sheepskins (but no wool) could then be credited against their accounts. This system was common among farmers throughout Kojonup, Tambellup, Badgebup and Pingrup whilst they were still establishing their farms. Richardson and Co. had branches at all these centres and acted as a depot for produce from surrounding farmlands.

R.L. Richardson took great pride in his business and travelled regularly between stores in his buggy and pair. He kept his horses immaculately and perhaps Max's later lack of interest in our childhood ponies reflected the onerous hours employed in his father's stables.

In 1904 Mr. Richardson brought his wife and six daughters from South Australia and settled for a time in one of the Mill homes. Later they moved to Harris' house in Daping Street. It was here our father, Robert Maxwell, was born on

April 8, 1907. After nine daughters Mrs. Richardson is reputed to have protested vehemently when told she had a son: "Really doctor, this is no time for joking."

With seven doting sisters, Max as he became known, was much adored. He was a strongwilled little boy who was full of fun and mischief at an early age. His sisters recall his escapades on his Shetland pony and in the swaying branches of the big pine trees at 'The Pines' where he grew up. ('The Pines' is now ~~known as~~ 'Bethshan' ~~2~~ Home for the Aged.)

Reared in a strict home with strong Baptist influences, Max attended Guildford Grammar School for several years. Here his greatest love was football and, despite his slender build, he excelled at this sport and continued to play in Katanning as a young married man.

Although a student with obvious ability, Max tired of the school curriculum and is known to have broken bounds during his Junior Examination and poached fruit from a neighbouring orchard. After this episode his father gave in and allowed him to return home to Katanning to enter Richardson and Co. Shortly afterward Max was sent to South Australia for a training period with John Martin's in Adelaide and then to David Bell's in Strathalbyn. Here the seeds of his enthusiasm for the retail business were sown.

Life in a country town gave Max a special love for rural people and rural problems. As a young man he longed to go farming, but his father's property 'Ballochmyle' ^(at Cranbrook) was sold

when R.L. Richardson died in 1928, and the rural recession in the thirties caused him to remain with the store. Max retained his love of the land, and the difficulties faced by his clients often became his own personal problems.

In April 1930 Max married an attractive city girl named Dorothy Faulkner. He and Dorothy settled in a small home adjacent to 'Woodchester' until they moved to Wagin to manage a business purchased from the Malcolm family. Max managed the Wagin branch until his mother's death in 1937 when he, Dorothy and their two small daughters, Jill and Jacqueline, moved into 'Woodchester'.

'Woodchester', built in 1926-27 by R.L. Richardson, is a charming white, dutch-colonial home situated on the edge of the slope which rises from the township toward 'Kobeelya', original home of the Piesse family. Memories of 'Woodchester' still haunt us, with its dark timbers, delicate white wisteria, fruiting grapevines and crumpled old wattle, golden with bloom. Most vivid, however, is the image of Max, clad in baggy shorts lovingly turning his vegetable garden on a Sunday morning. Here Max found great peace and solitude. He experienced a spiritual joy in the plants he grew and although not a church-going man was, I think, very close to God.

By the early forties, Richardson and Co. had expanded to include branches in the neighbouring townships of Kojonup, Woodanilling, Tambellup, Broomehill, Gnowangerup and Nyabing.

Max further established shops in Cranbrook, Mount Barker and Albany, fulfilling his father's ambition to own a chain of stores from Katanning to Albany. He also initiated an enterprising postal-order department which flourished for some years and despatched parcels throughout Western Australia. I vividly recall the brochures Max posted out to customers with the quaint illustrations of clothing and materials.

Max became renowned for his business acumen and special knowledge of dress fabrics. As youngsters we were taught to handle and appreciate those of quality. Max endeared himself to his clients who came from afar for advice, and sometimes just a timely chat. His keen sense of fun and ability to tell a good story drew people to him, and his counter at the 'shop' was always a happy, bustling place to be. When he left Katanning in later years, the town lost more than just a businessman of repute, it also lost a close confidant and cheery friend.

Peter Balston, Max's good friend, reiterates this when he writes that despite "the financial system which he felt ... was hamstringing his endeavours to build a large and prosperous business ... it was a great credit to him that he remained such good company in his private life ...".

The war years brought changes to Katanning and to our family. The fun and laughter passed for a time and life became more serious.

In 1941 Max enlisted in the Army and spent a period with 'security' in Northern Queensland near Townsville, Cairns and Atherton.

During this time Dorothy did her First Aid training and worked in a voluntary capacity at the local Katanning hospital. 'Woodchester' now became home to our city cousins who were evacuated during the Japanese advance in the Pacific. Our link with Max was through his amusing and affectionate letters and his rare visits for 'leave' when he was besieged by us for the chocolates he smuggled out of Army rations.

The period which Max spent in 'security' between 1941-45 was to influence his thinking for a lifetime. His outlook became more rightwing as he observed socialist tendencies at work within Australia. He perceived that his ideals were now threatened and in ensuing years he became more and more disillusioned with the political direction of the country. Peter Balson also recalls: "He was one of the first people to make me aware of the 'creeping socialism' that was a practical feature of the private enterprise Menzies administrations. Because of his intimate and practical knowledge of the details of the impact of tariffs, quotas, wage demands, sales taxes and the like, and the fact that he was trying, on overdraft, to build a substantial retail business in an inland town against freight and other politically related disadvantages, Max was exceptionally well informed."

After demobilization, Max returned to Katanning to continue in his business. Then began torrid years of readjustment and turmoil. Against his judgment the Board of Directors of Richardson and Co. voted to accept a take-over offer by Foy and Gibson, under whom Max was to continue to manage the store. However, by 1947 he could tolerate their attitudes no longer and decided to sever his ties and enter business in his own right.

Max now negotiated and bought Rogers Limited, and difficult days ensued as he established himself in opposition to Foy and Gibson as 'Max Richardson's' in Clive Street. The esteem in which his staff held him spoke for itself when several members followed him to the new business and worked faithfully alongside for many years. His customers also remained true to him and assisted in making it a worthwhile enterprise.

Max met many challenges during these years and was among the first in the town to establish a 'cash and carry' store. After the initial impact it was well accepted and his large grocery department was welcomed as an innovation by most people.

To his disappointment, Max did not have a son to continue in his footsteps, but in later years our sister, Kathie, who was born ^{in 1944.} ~~after the war,~~ joined him in business. When he finally decided to retire to Perth in the early seventies, Kathie took over and managed the women's section as "Just Kates",

and the remainder of the business was divided into separate small shops. In 1980, 'Just Kates' was also sold and Kathie moved to Perth, breaking the final link with the Richardson business name in Katanning.

Katanning missed Max when he left. He was renowned for his sense of humour and quick wit and his genius at spinning a good yarn. Max was a popular companion at the Men's Club where lively jokes were told, subjects debated and much after-hour business transacted. Peter Balston tells of Max's delight in betting on two-bobs and on the numbers on a pound note, sometimes more than either of them could afford.

He was a deep thinker and universal questions were foremost in his mind. Doctor Christie, now retired from Katanning, recently wrote: "I am happy to remember quite a few most enjoyable times spent in his company ... our conversation roamed widely over many fields. On occasions we would disagree violently even to the point of ignoring each other for a few months, but happily we would always come together."

The years in Katanning permitted Max to become involved in few pursuits other than his business. However he did take an interest in Kobeelya Church of England Girls School as a board member, and spent some years on the Shire Council of Katanning. Ross Anderson recalls Max's quick grasp of shire problems and his ability to see these with balance and perspective. The pressure of work largely excluded Max from most sporting activities except the occasional social game of

tennis.

When illhealth forced Max to retire to Perth in the early seventies, it was a great wrench to him after a lifetime in Katanning. He found difficulty adjusting to city life, and to the pressures and attitudes of modern business. He had always lived by his word and would not tolerate compromise. His expectations were high and his final words were: "If a job's worth doing it's worth doing properly".

To us girls, Max was a sincere friend. His natural reserve made him a little remote from us as small children, but as we grew older, we learned to understand his way of life and to appreciate his true person. His empathy with nature and the delight he showed in his grandchildren, brought him closer to us, in old age, than ever before.

The years until Max's death in September 1979 were absorbed in his garden and an impressive stamp collection. He and Dorothy came to love their home at Salter Point, where, as his health deteriorated he was able to find solace in the tranquil views across the Canning River.

1. Great Southern Herald. September 1938.

Acknowledgments to: Peter Balston
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