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Wor. Bro. Sir James Norman Kirby (1899 - 1971)

(Engineer, manufacturer and businessman)

The man who owned the first air-conditioned car in Australia, a fully imported unit fitted to his Dodge in 1952, was born on 15th June 1899 in Sydney.

Educated at Newtown Public School and Francis Street Catholic School, Marrickville, in 1914 James was apprenticed to a motor mechanic at 7s. 6d. a week. He completed his training with the Howarth Petrol Economiser Co. Drawn to manufacturing machine tools, he set up his own automotive-engine reconditioning business, James N. Kirby Pty. Ltd. In 1924. At St. Paul's Catholic Church, Dulwich Hill, in 21st November 1925 he married a saleswoman Agnes Ann Wessler who he later described as his greatest asset.

A foundation member in 1931 of the Metals Treatment Society of New South Wales which became the Australian Institute of Metals, Kirby appropriated the micrometer as his advertising symbol. His firm reground cylinders in the engines of Bro. Sir Charles Kingsford Smith's aeroplanes. Kirby's reputation for precision engineering led to his involvement in the Commonwealth Government's manufacture of military aircraft in 1940 he was appointed manager of the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation Pty. Ltd. During his tenure he formed connections with the British air industry and began a long friendship with Lord Hives, chairman of Rolls Royce Ltd. Kirby's factories made field-guns and aircraft components.

After World War II, Kirby started to manufacture consumer goods; Crosley refrigerators and television sets, Bendix washing machines, Pye transistor radios and high fidelity equipment, lawnmowers and other household goods. He sensed a big future in industry based on suburban expansion and home-making. Strengthening his British links, he was appointed a director of Nuffield (Australia) Ltd., by Lord Nuffield - another dear friend - and with George A. Lloyd set up a car assembly plant, the British Motor Corporation (Australia) Pty. Ltd., in Sydney to build Morris Oxfords.

Founding chairman in 1958 of the Manufacturing Industries Advisory Council, Kirby attended the eleventh Australian Citizenship Convention in Canberra in 1960: He spoke in favour of sensitive assimilation strategies and opposed the formation of ethnic 'cliques' in factories; he also warned against the 'high sounding' New Citizens Council of Australia, agreeing with Albert Monk, President of the A.C.T.U., that it was connected with 'communists, crooks and tyrants of the unions'. Although Kirby

received limited formal education, he formed strong university ties. He was a foundation council-member in 1947 of the New South Wales University of Technology, now the University of New South Wales, and of the Nuclear Research Foundation at the University of Sydney where he became a friend of Professor Harry Messel.

In the latter part of his life the bulky-framed, ruddy-faced and laconic Kirby served as a director of many companies, including Qantas Empire Airways Ltd.

These also included:

- * Vice-chairman and Managing Director of Champion Spark Plug Co., (Aust.) Pty. Ltd.
- * Chairman of Conveyancer Fork Trucks (Aust.) Pty. Ltd.
- * Wales Unit Investment Pty. Ltd.
- * International Products Ltd., and subsidiary companies.
- * Director of British Motor Corporation (Aust.) Pty. Ltd.
- * Mutual Life and Citizens' Association Co. Ltd.
- * C.S.R.C.-Dow Pty. Ltd. Aust.
- * General Electric (Appliances) Pty. Ltd. Aust. and New Guinea Corporation Ltd.
- * National Heart Foundation of Australia.

He was appointed C.B.E. in 1956 and knighted in 1962. His idiosyncratic armorial crest bore the sign of a marlin to indicate his love of fishing, a motto in an Aboriginal dialect - 'Ngaben-Bidjigarme' ('I all hands hold') - and the words 'For God and Empire'. He was an honoured Rotarian, a director of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust and deputy chairman of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust (Australia) for many years.

Kirby belonged to the New South Wales, American National and Australian Golf Clubs and the Royal Sydney Yacht Squadron. He was also a record-holding fisherman, and an orchid grower. His horse, *Home James*, won the Grafton Cup in 1963 and 1964, and its owner developed a close association with the Clarence River Jockey Club, of which he became patron. In keeping with his preference for close working ties outside the spotlight, he enjoyed the relaxed fraternity of the country track more than the member's stand at Randwick. He was made an honorary citizen of Grafton in 1970. Sir James died at his Vaucluse home on 30th July 1971 and was cremated with Anglican rites; his wife and two sons survived him.

Paternalistic and charitable, Kirby had long admired American industry's culture of patronage. In 1967 he had established the James N. Kirby Foundation for educational and charitable work, with a grant of \$2 million, most of his personal fortune. "I came up the hard way", he said, "I suppose it is because of that I felt I had to plough something back". The foundation, chaired by one of his sons, has distributed more than \$5 million since its inception.

Wor. Bro. Sir James N. Kirby was made a mason in Lodge Wentworth No. 89 in Sydney on 6th August 1929.

He was passed Fellowcraft on 3rd September and raised a Master Mason on 5th November of the same year.

He was installed as Master of Lodge Wentworth on 1st June 1937.

A valedictory address was delivered at his funeral service by the Lieutenant-Governor and Chief Justice of New South Wales, Right Wor. Bro. Sir Leslie Herron P.J.G.W.

Not bad for an inner-city kid with very limited formal education.

REFERENCES:

- * Australian Dictionary of Biography.
 - * Who's who in Australia.
 - * History of Lodge Wentworth No. 89.
 - * United Grand Lodge of New South Wales - Membership records.
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