

Present: The President, Caroline Homer, in the chair and about 65 members and guests.

Minutes: The minutes of the previous ordinary meeting were read, and approved as a true record.

Business: After the President had welcomed attenders, Brian Rieusset spoke of the forthcoming excursion to the Transport Museum and Ian Terry of exhibitions at TMAG depicting the experience of migrant women since World War 2. Then Ms Homer introduced Professor to speak to the subject

*“Birchalls’ Bookshop: A history of survival”.*

Professor Hess began by explaining that his academic expertise was in business and labour history. His teaching in Launceston had prompted him to search for local case studies of small business. The extant record offered little, and so he sought an appropriate topic of research. An answer began with discovery that Birchalls’, situated in the city’s Brisbane street, claimed to have served the community since 1844. That was a remarkable span, most small businesses failing in the fairly short term. How then did Birchalls survive? The story ranged through three periods: up to 1900; the first half of the twentieth century; and thereafter. Throughout a dominant theme was continuity of ownership and control: the Birchall family produced many sons, several becoming managing directors, and then came transfer—without disruption—to the Tilleys.

The British world of the 1840s saw massive growth in literacy and readership. One London bookseller to ride that wave was Thomas Tegg. Two of his sons came to Tasmania, in 1844 Samuel establishing himself in Brisbane street, ever the town’s commercial hub; his wares including not only books, but stationery, sheet music, and perfumes. After Samuel returned to Britain in 1848 there followed eight years in which the business languished—but then JB Walch of Hobart took over, installing the young AW Birchall as manager. He became a partner in 1865 and sole owner some time in the ’80s. Four others of his family worked in the business. That it could sustain so many livelihoods reflected its part in Launceston’s mining-based boom of these days. Musical instruments and sporting equipment further diversified the shop’s range, while it facilitated the city’s broader culture. Andrew was a very active citizen, his death in 1893 evoking due response. Management passed first to Andrew’s son Harry, and after his early death to his brother Frank. Supply of books and stationery to schools became important around this time. On Frank’s death in 1907 his younger brother Jack, then aged 28, succeeded to leadership. He built up the sportsware side of the business, while maintaining ties with landed elites, and schoolteachers. While sometimes authoritarian, Jack allowed departmental managers to exercise initiative. New departments embraced art and fine china, a lending library of some 7000 volumes flourished, and ladies could relax in cosy reading rooms. So Birchalls’ became integral to Launceston’s self-image.

A federal Companies Act of 1921 prompted some managerial reorganisation, with a board of directors and distribution of shares. Jack initially affirmed that his authority would prevail unimpaired, but in the later 1920s this situation eroded as did the firm’s financial stability. Saving the situation was the 1928 move into the business of accountant Stanley Tilley. He and Jack reached an ‘agreement’ that, while never formally embodied, proved durable and effective. Anecdote tells that a badly-needed bank loan was secured in 1932 through the aid of JA Lyons, then Prime Minister but earlier one of those schoolteachers with whom Jack cultivated friendship. The following years saw recovery. Many Birchall family shareholders were interested more in dividends than management, giving greater leeway for Stan Tilley to become dominant. His sons Ray and Norman became involved and after their return from World War 2 became active managers and eventually owners of the bookstore. This seemed an appropriate point for ending the presentation.

After several questions, the Chairman thanked Professor Hess, and the meeting closed at 9:10pm.