

From: John McMeekin

Subject: Australian Ship Owners & Agencies 1944 – 1989
My Memories – Melbourne, Fremantle, Melbourne

Having left school at Leaving Honours level in December 1943, my mother was looking for a job for me, as I had no further interest in study at that time.

The house she rented in Mont Albert was next door to the one where Knowles Bennet's parents lived. He was a "big noise" in the Australian Shipping Board at the time and later started up the Columbus Line Agency. Anyway, he must have had some influence as I went for an interview at McIlwraith McEachern Ltd, 94 William Street, and was offered the position of Number 2 office boy.

I started there on 4th January, 1944 on 27/6d per week – later thanks to ASOA – to £2 per week. So my education began with hand delivered mail in the city block – Elizabeth to Spencer and Flinders to LaTrobe. Also at night to Spencer Street Station where there was a late fee bag for Sydney mail which went on the train – the Spirit of Progress.

One of the odd things I found out was that McIlwraith McEachern Ltd tried not to employ Catholics and that only two employees were of that faith having "slipped under the wire" as it was described to me. Later I discovered that this religious discrimination was common in the forties and fifties and worked both ways with some firms preferring Catholics and some Protestants.

It was, of course, the era of pen and ink and one of my duties was to make sure the Managing Director's inkwells were full. Number 9 nibs were standard. The accounts department at the back of the building (opening on to a laneway) wrote in big bound ledgers, which were gathered up each evening, placed on a trolley and locked in a strong room. The laneway provided a rear entrance to Scotts Hotel on Collins Street (now gone) and was used regularly by the Company Secretary – Reggie White – at lunchtime and by other staff members at 5pm to get a drink or two before 6 o'clock closing.

The Secretary's office was opposite the mail desk, which was presided over by Arthur Disher and where No. 1 & No. 2 office boys worked. To the south was the MD's office and the board room. He had a bell which, when rung, would elicit a response from the office boys to do his bidding. The MD was Stanley Thompson Edwards and Miss Agnes McCallum was his personal secretary and typist. When he dictated letters, his and her initials would appear in the top right hand corner of the note paper and caused much mirth to newcomers – STE:AM.

He was always particular about describing ships correctly. I remember one letter that arrived from interstate headed "KOOLIGA" (no SS or MV etc) and he wrote on it "What is this? A ship or a block of flats?". He then sent it back.

Of course we were brought up with our British overseas agencies under the Merchant Shipping Act 1896 that there were no Captains and Officers, only Masters and Mates.

I remember one Master who had to attend a Marine enquiry and gave his name as Captain So&So of the MV Something and was introduced to the court as Mr So&So, Master of the MV Something. He was quite shocked and talked about it for months after.

Another Master, Charlie Cole, when ashore always wore full uniform because, it was said, that he was in civvies once on the wharf and got into a fight because his position wasn't recognized.

McIlwraith's ran "60 milers" (small colliers), which we never saw because they ran coal between Newcastle and Sydney. Another trade was Stenhouse Bay to Melbourne with gypsum needed for the manufacture of plasterboard. Coal around the coast was a major part of McIlwraith's business.

S.T. Edwards had an antique clock on the mantle, which dropped a card advising of appointments coming up. Before my time a card was dropped saying "Appointment at Madam Brussles 6p.m." This caused an uproar and witch hunt but they were unable to prove a guilty party although the building caretaker was a suspect. The building was heated by a coal-fired furnace with hot water radiators one each floor in winter. COR was a tenant in the early days of my work.

I was promoted to first office boy and then to junior freight clerk in the overseas agency. The agencies were held by Birt & Co in Sydney who sublet them to Elders in Fremantle and Adelaide, their own office in Brisbane and McIlwraith's in Melbourne. Their MD/Chairman was Sir Thomas Gordon who was Australian representative of the British Ministry of War Transport. As the junior in that department, I had to duplicate outward manifests on a machine which had a bed made from what looked like gelatin. Typists had to type up manifests on typewriters with long rolls and special ribbons.

The war was still going when I was in the overseas freight because I remember the "DURHAM" left Melbourne with the biggest load of frozen meat that any one could remember. Older clerks were saying they hoped she got safely to England because the population there needed the food. She was also a cadet training ship and as such the limit for not requiring a doctor on board was exceeded. I remember

the doctor explaining something to a British seaman at the counter near the freight department one day while the "DURHAM" was in port when the seaman burst out with: "You talk about freedom under the British flag! We're nothing but a lot of bloody fuckin' slaves". On the other side of the office, George Rees, the overseas traffic manager, burst out of his corner office overlooking William Street and said loudly "Who's using the French?" Naturally the staff in the open plan office were most amused and even managers in offices along the south wall and the lift well came out to see what the fuss was about. George (Mud) Rees was the agencies boss. I asked a senior person once why his nickname was Mud and was told "I don't know but his name has been Mud for all the years I've known him."

I tried to join the navy myself when I turned 18 – about 9 months before the war ended. I was called up twice, the first time to be told I wasn't needed at the moment and the second time – about 6 months later - to be told the war was nearly over and anyway I was in a reserved occupation.

Liner agencies held by McIlwraith's from Birt & Co were:

- Federal Steam Navigation Co
- The New Zealand Shipping Co
- Rederiaktiebolaget Transatlantic (RABT)
- Pacific Australia Direct Line (PAD)
- Montreal Australia New Zealand Line (MANZ)

Additionally on their own account there were numerous tramp agencies from English owners such as R Ropner & Co. Their Fremantle office also held the Bank Line agency as a sub agent from Howard Smith Ltd.

Bills of Lading were distinguished between "Received for Shipment" and "Shipped on Board" the M.V. Rotorua at Liverpool bound for the Port of Melbourne *or so near thereto as she may safely get, lie and discharge unto* (consignees name) – great language.

Anyway, progressing on, staff previously in the forces began returning as they were discharged and were integrated back into the office. In 1947 however, it was announced to the staff that we had lost the Birt & Co agencies. Birt's and Elder Smiths had combined to set up an agency – Birt, Elder Pty Ltd in Melbourne. It would be staffed by the current McIlwraith's staff with a Birt & Co Sydney manager becoming manager in Melbourne. We were never told the reason for this change; we presumed that Sir Thomas Gordon and Stanley Thompson Edwards had fallen out.

It was then I was called into Mr. Edward's office and offered a position in the Fremantle office. I deferred a decision until I consulted with my mother, a widow, with my two younger brothers still at school. I came

back the next day and said OK but that I would need a salary increase because it would cost me more to live than paying board currently did. "Get out" was the stern reply. This occurred on a Monday afternoon and first thing next morning I was called into his office and told: "Aah McMeekin, the Board decided that should you accept the transfer to Fremantle, you will get a salary increase of £50." Not a pound a week you will notice but just under. You will also notice that the Board had a meeting between 5:00pm and 9:00am.

I accepted and arrangements were made for a train trip to Adelaide and the Transcontinental from there although I think I changed trains in Port Augusta. Trains were coal-fired in early 1948 and water was also needed so there were several stops along the way. We changed trains again at Kalgoorlie and it was on the station there that I had my first introduction to draft Swan or Emu which was 2% more alcohol than Melbourne beer and served in schooners.

I arrived in Perth about noon on 10th March where I was met the Industrial Officer, Peter Naughton, a returned member of staff. He then took me to Fremantle where I was accommodated in the P&O Hotel until I was able to arrange my board and lodging.

The manager of McIlwraith's in Fremantle was Cecil Hedley Salmon. There was some story of how he had got his own money mixed up with the firm's in the 1930's but I never got the whole story.

My experience was dramatically broadened as McIlwraith's had their own stevedoring set-up and I was put straight into the wages department. The building was Scottish House with a laneway along the west side between Customs and us. There were two small windows where, in previous times, the waterside workers would come to be paid. The union was known as the Fremantle Lumpers Union of Workers but the creation of a central Ship-owners Waterside Pay Office some years before had eliminated the need for the workers to go to each stevedoring company to get their total week's wages.

My job was as a timekeeper depending where the ships were working and it was all on foot – from Victoria Quay on the south side of the Swan River Sheds A to 11. If they were over the river on North Wharf, the FHT ran a launch across to ferry walkers. Petrol rationing was still in force in those days. McIlwraith's had a big coal business in those days with a principal client as Perth Gas Co. The coal usually came in ANL River Class ships with about 10,000 tonnes DW. They also had a bunkering business with the dump being in North Fremantle on the ground behind 5/6 North Wharf. WA summers were pretty hot as you can imagine and a good water supply was needed to make sure the dump never lost any coal as had happened one year. What went in, didn't get loaded out.

Another time the SS Barwon was at North Wharf and changed Masters. Jock Forsythe came to take over and the crew knew he was Scottish so they prepared for him. One of his nicknames was "Haggis McBagpipes". He was delivered to the foot of the gangway by taxi and the minute he set foot on the bottom step a bagpipe record started to play on the ship's loudspeaker system. He came up the gangway to the deck and then up the ladders to the accommodation went into the Master's cabin and shut the door. All without any change of expression on his face or any acknowledgement that he had even heard it.

Stevedoring in Fremantle was different from Melbourne in that Fremantle Harbour Trust took over labour responsibility at the ships side. Stevedores in Fremantle employed three on deck, six below and one on wharf known as the "Hookeyon". This is of course before containerization when cartons were handled individually and rice was always in bags.

To be continued