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The Darwen dictum: get out and get involved in the community

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In the shadow of the Australian press bicentenary next year will be the centenaries of such papers as the *Border Morning Mail*, established at Albury, New South Wales, on October 24, 1903, and the *Bowen Independent*, established in north Queensland on June 13, 1903. It says something about the significance of dynastic succession as an influence on newspaper survival that both newspapers still have the founding family involved. At Albury, the Mott family own the paper, founded by Hamilton and Decimus Mott, and direct its fortunes at a board level. At Bowen, Stephen Darwen, a grandson of the founder, is general manager. The North Queensland Newspaper Co Ltd, a News Ltd subsidiary, bought the *Bowen Independent* from the Darwen family 16 years ago. This article focuses on the Darwens.

William Henry Darwen launched himself and his descendants into lifetimes of service in Queensland provincial journalism when he bought the 15-month-old *Bowen Record* on June 3, 1903, from the widow of its late proprietor, Michael Keane, and 10 days later established the *Bowen Independent*.

Bowen had passed through a stormy three years of newspaper activity after 36 years of relatively smooth sailing. Frederick Thomas Rayner had persevered with the *Port Denison Times* down through the years, from its founding in 1864, even though he did go so far as to offer it for sale in 1883. He faced opposition from the *Bowen Observer* from 28 March 1888 until 29 March 1892 (with a publication break from 22 March to 1 October 1889).

From 4 November 1896, the *Bowen Mirror*, formerly the *Geraldton* (Innisfail) *Mirror*, competed with Rayner's paper, only to be remodelled as the *Bowen Advocate* from 12 October 1899 by Annie Christie Massy. If the competition caused a few waves in Bowen's normally placid newspaper waters, death would bring winds of change sweeping into the town to create turbulence. Three newspaper proprietors died within 2½ years, and the course of the Bowen press was dramatically changed as though what had been good enough for the nineteenth was unsatisfactory for the twentieth.

The first sign of the upheaval to follow came on June 5, 1900, with the death of Rayner, owner of the *Port Denison Times*. Mrs Massy merged the *Times* with her *Bowen Advocate*. Although she died on February 14, 1901, she had already altered the political course of the *Port Denison Times* and *Bowen Advocate* so that its sails billowed with Labour winds.

This upset the conservative section of the community and they made it worthwhile for Michael Keane to leave the *Ayr Chronicle*, which he had established in November 1897, to launch a new journal, the *Bowen Record*, on March 8, 1902. This Irish-born printer, who held a frame at the *Townsville Daily Bulletin* until the advent of the Linotype in that office, died on December 22, 1902, aged 42. His widow, Sarah Elizabeth, left with three sons and a daughter, sold the goodwill and plant of the *Record* (including a printing press, a wire-stitching machine, a cutting machine, a folding machine and type founts) to W.H. Darwen for £85 on June 3, 1903. The *Record* had been offered at auction, but Darwen bought it privately.

Darwen was biting off more than he knew, and would confide only a few months before his death in 1931 that he would not have tackled such an uphill struggle again. When he bought the *Record* he was running a bicycle agency and had three secretaryships. He continued this work when he launched the *Independent*, taking on an apprentice to help him produce a double-demy sheet weekly.

Darwen himself had served his apprenticeship as a printer under F.T. Rayner's tutelage on the *Port Denison Times* from August 1887 until 1892. His wages rose by 2s 6d (25c) each six months, from 10s (\$1) at the beginning to £1 12s 6d (\$3.25) at the end. Rayner apparently could not afford to keep Darwen on as a tradesman, but recommended him as "a careful, accurate and quick compositor" who had served him faithfully and well in every way during his entire apprenticeship.

Darwen, capable of hard physical labour, was soon in work, even if it was in different jobs. He had to make a contribution to his family's welfare because his father, James Darwen, formerly a Lancashire cotton weaver, had drowned close to the Bowen jetty steps on April 15, 1875, while fishing. James had been supporting his family by shooting wild ducks for sale and by fishing. He had fallen into the water when unloading his catch at the jetty and a bystander, unable to swim, had run a mile to the Town Clerk's office to obtain the key of the shed where the lifesaving gear was kept. But it was too late to save poor Darwen who was 40 and who left a wife and eight children, the youngest aged one.

The hard times that William Henry Darwen would know when growing up in Bowen were not Dickensian, but they were testing. Even in his days as a newspaper proprietor, things were rarely easy, and his obituarist would remark that "fate was not lavish in sprinkling the luxuries of life in his path". Darwen was born on June 14, 1872, at Bowen, the seventh child of James and Elizabeth Darwen, pioneer settlers of the town.

After being educated at the local state school, William worked for a baker and then as a yard boy at the Great Northern Hotel. At the age of 15 he began an apprenticeship as a compositor at the *Port Denison Times* and, when his services were dispensed with on his becoming a qualified tradesman, he tried his hand at anything and everything, from assisting on a grazing property to road-building and working for a butchering company.

In 1896 Darwen married Caroline Christofferson, the third daughter of a Danish father, Johannes, and a Swedish mother, Caroline. To support his bride and the children who began to come quickly, he went wharf-labouring, fencing, roadmaking and woodcutting. He became expert enough with the axe to win contests at agricultural shows and opened his own firewood depot.

He returned to his trade when Annie Christie Massy took over the *Bowen Mirror* and renamed it the *Bowen Advocate*. But he was retrenched, probably soon after the merger of the *Advocate* and the *Port Denison Times*, and was selling the famous Massey-Harris bicycles when he took the step that shaped the future for many members of his 13 surviving children and even some of his grandchildren.

For five years the *Bowen Independent and Proserpine Agriculturist* struggled as a weekly, but gradually the Darwen bicycle agency became more and more of a sideline. In 1908 Darwen stepped up publication of the *Independent* to twice a week, and in 1909 he arranged to sell it to the Bowen Newspaper Co Ltd, of which Myles Ferricks, later a Labor Member of the Queensland and Federal Parliaments, and F.J. Betzel were the principals.

About three months after the sale agreement was made, Ferricks was elected to the Queensland Legislative Assembly for Bowen, and Darwen bought back his proprietary interest. At the close of 1910 the *Port Denison Times* stood aside after 46 years, leaving the field to battler Darwen and his tribe of boys. Without the cheap labour source of his family, it is certain Darwen would not have survived these difficult early years.

W.H. Darwen's dictum as a country newspaper proprietor and editor was that "you have to get out and get into things". He did just that, belonging to many a community organisation in Bowen and serving for 27 years as an alderman. He was mayor in 1911, 1917 and 1918. Son Henry said his father had "literally worked himself to death and the W.H. Darwen Memorial Band Rotunda at Wangaratta Park is the only monument ever raised by the people of Bowen to one of its citizens".

From 1918 until the close of 1920, the *Bowen Chronicle*, run by McLeod and Chataway, of Mackay, competed against the *Independent*, but Darwen's doughty little journal absorbed the *Chronicle* from January 1, 1921. "Plugger" Bill, as the proprietor was nicknamed from sport, survived to fight another battle.

Darwen lived at such a pace that he left no real memoirs, apart from certain documents relating to business dealings, when he died of cerebral thrombosis on April 12, 1931, aged 58. He left £2,875 11s 11d. His sons have ensured, through what they have written, that the workaday routine of the *Bowen Independent* and the policy and attitudes of its proprietor will not be forgotten.

Douglas James Darwen (1906-1988), thrust into the editorship without any significant editorial experience, penned his recollections for the Bowen Historical Society. Born on April 12, 1906, on the premises of the *Independent*, he was the fifth of 14 children. During much of his education at the Bowen State School, Jim and other members of the family, in turn, provided crucial labour for the family newspaper, taking the 'smoko billy' to the office at night, or, some time between midnight and dawn on publication nights (Monday and Friday), "flying" the paper – taking the printed sheet from the cylinder of the printing machine as each of the 400 to 500 copies was printed. At daylight they would deliver the papers around Bowen, taking from an hour to three hours, depending on which delivery run they were allocated. The boy on the longest run invariably arrived late for school, but as their father was chairman of the School Committee they were generally not caned.

Jim wanted to become an apprentice carpenter, but his father refused and at fourteen Jim was "pressed into service" in the family newspaper and printing business. Overcoming his resentment, he decided to become proficient at hand-setting type. After four years of the monotonous routine of setting every letter by hand and redistributing the type to its cases after use, Jim persuaded his father to buy a Linotype, a mechanical typesetter. Jim received a fortnight's tuition from a skilled Linotype user and amazed his father by setting all the copy for the *Independent's* two issues that week and all the commercial printing jobs, tasks that normally occupied three hand setters. He had to work long hours to maintain this achievement.

He worked even longer hours when he was thrust into the additional role of editor (which involved some reporting) when his father died on Jim's 25th birthday. The sons were very much in charge: Ronald became the manager, Claude a printer, Henry a reporter, Roy a compositor and Bob a printer's devil. Despite Jim's lack of journalistic experience, he fulfilled his new role with distinction, tirelessly promoting the needs of the district through his editorials. He served as both editor and Linotype operator until 1950 when younger brother Henry became the editor. Jim continued to set the copy for the newspaper and printing jobs until he retired in June 1976. His son, James, worked on the paper in various capacities, from Linotype operator to advertising manager, from 1950-85, apart from a decade as a farmer from 1962.

As editor, Jim followed his father's community-involvement dictum, serving as secretary of the Back to Bowen celebrations in 1937, becoming a long-time member and some-time president of Bowen Town Band, being twice elected a member of Bowen Town Council, and serving as secretary of the secretary of the Progress Association and as a show committee member.

Henry William Darwen (1913-1994), who edited the *Independent* from 1950-85, was another son who followed his father's "get out there and get into things" dictum. The ninth child of W.H. Darwen, he was on just about every committee in Bowen. He served for a period as deputy mayor of Bowen Town Council and his friendship with Peter Delamothe, then the mayor, developed into an important productive partnership in the town's history, especially when Delamothe was elected to State Parliament in 1960 and subsequently became the Attorney-General and Minister of Justice. Darwen played a key role in the development of Bowen Harbour.

In 1984-85 the *Independent* faced possibly its severest test when the Asher Joel Media Group launched the tri-weekly *Northern Leader* to serve Bowen and the Whitsundays. The paper began publication on May 9, 1984. It closed on May 31, 1985, because the expected Comalco smelter for Bowen had not materialised, according to general manager Brian Evans, and because the "people of the three regions the *Leader* sought to cover – Bowen, Collinsville and Airlie Beach/Prosperpine – refused to be tied together emotionally or in any such way", according to editor Bruce Morgan. Evans is now the general manager of

the *Newcastle Herald* and was recently given the additional responsibility of overseeing the John Fairfax group's 40-strong stable of regional and community newspapers in New South Wales and Victoria.

The stoush with the *Leader* impressed on the Darwens their vulnerability, even though the *Independent* did not lose circulation during the contest. At the end of 1985, they concluded negotiations with the News Ltd subsidiary, the North Queensland Newspaper Co. Ltd, and sold the *Independent* on January 1, 1986.

After the sale of the *Independent*, Henry Darwen maintained a close link with the paper as a consultant and contributor. He regularly wrote articles and on July 16, 1993, he officially opened the new premises of the *Independent*. He contributed a two-tabloid-page history of the *Independent* to a special issue of the newspaper to mark the occasion. His only son, Stephen Henry (1956-), now manages the *Independent*. He joined the paper in 1974 after leaving school and became deputy general manager in 1990 and general manager in 1996. Bill Darwen, son of Claude, works in the composing room. Neil Carvolth, son of Mabel (née Darwen), works as a casual inserter.

CAPTION FOR PIC (sent separately):

The Darwen family, photographed about 1924:

Standing (l to r): Henry, Madge, Jim, Ron, Vic, Mabel and Claude. Seated on chairs: Marjorie, Caroline (mother), William (father), Doris and René. Front row: Enid, Roy and Bob.