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GPO Box 5095 Sydney NSW 2001 Australia Ph +61 2 94863308 Fax +61 2 94863409 Email: info@worldtransformation.com

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Obituary of Sir James Darling

The Australian newspaper's 3 November 1995 full-page obituary of Sir James Darling.

The text is reproduced below.

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Geelong's master of inspiration

Sir James Ralph Darling, OBE
Headmaster of Geelong Grammar School, 1930-61.
Chairman of the Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1961-67.
Born Tonbridge, England, June 18, 1899.
Died Melbourne, November 1, aged 96.

ALTHOUGH James Ralph Darling, the second child of an Englishman, Augustine Major Darling, and his Scottish wife, Jane Baird, nee Nimmo, did not settle in Australia until he was nearly 30, he was to become a great Australian. Not only was he generally recognised as one, but he was also officially designated one of 200 "Great Australians" in Australia's Bicentennial year, 1988. Of the 200—22 then living—Darling was the only headmaster, public recognition there by being given to an exceptional, indeed unique, influence in the nation as an educator.

It was as headmaster of Geelong Grammar School, an Anglican foundation dating from 1855 and, in his day, mainly a boarding school for boys, that he began to make his mark from 1930.

He was educated at the preparatory school in Tonbridge run by his father, then at Repton, a boarding school in Derbyshire. After war and postwar service as a Second Lieutenant in the Royal Field Artillery in France and occupied Germany in 1918-19, he went to Oriel College, Oxford, where he read history.

From 1921 to 1924 he taught in a rather tough school, Merchant Taylors' in Liverpool, and then at one of the greater public schools, Charterhouse in Surrey, until his appointment to Geelong Grammar. This followed a tour of English public-school boys to Australia and New Zealand that was led by Darling, who was favourably noticed in Melbourne and elsewhere as a compelling speaker, and one who could lead young men by a combination of charm, intellect and idealism.

Scarcely 30, a bachelor, and somewhat pink in his political views (he had been chairman of the local branch of the Labour Party at Godalming while at Charterhouse), he was an unusual and courageous choice for a fairly conservative school with a strong liberal and Christian-humanist tradition.

Darling had only recently become a convinced Christian, but he rapidly became an eloquent and cogent preacher, candid about his doubts, but clear and convincing about his moral and religious convictions.

Darling accepted the school's conventional overlay, but began at once to activate a range of interests and concerns to renew the school's independent spirit. He took over early in the Depression and stirred the social conscience of the school. Much work was done by the boys in Geelong (where Apex was founded in 1931 with Darling's help, and a boys' employment centre), and employment was given at the school to many who would otherwise have remained without work in those dark days.

Thus, through the 1930s, a remarkable series of buildings was achieved, including substantial music and art schools, and a new senior boarding house.

In addition, the school was swept into drama on an unprecedented scale, with Shakespearean productions and pageant-plays. Music, art and the manual crafts were brought in from the fringes of the school curriculum and made central to a degree, unique in Australia and rare even in Britain at the time.

In 1935 Darling married Margaret Dunlop Campbell of Melbourne, a lady of great warmth and dignity who, though only 20 at the time, was to be a quiet but strong influence for human understanding in his life and, thereby, that of the school. Their family of three daughters and a son, and in due course seven grandsons and even great-grandchildren, were to enrich their lives. Darling celebrated his diamond wedding anniversary on August 21 this year with his wife and all their family.

World War II might well have dampened his energies and achievements had he not also possessed a resourcefulness in financial and administrative matters. In fact, the spirit of the school was probably never better than under the challenges imposed by war. A National Service scheme, introduced somewhat earlier, continued; the boys undertook domestic and maintenance work; and whole buildings, including local woolsheds, were built or rebuilt by them and the staff.

In the decade after the war, the school expanded with the addition in 1947 of Glamorgan, a primary department in Melbourne, and in 1953 with a new concept, Timbertop, in the foothills of the Australian Alps between Mansfield and Mount Buller. The latter is probably Darling's most famous innovation (and was to be attended by the

Prince of Wales in 1966), though he did not rate it as his most important. In his time it took the fourth form (later called Year 10) away for a year in which normal academic work was supplemented by a wide range of pursuits, the more physical of which, such as cross-country runs and long hikes, replaced conventional school sport.

The principal aims of Timbertop were to awaken, or reawaken, the spirit of adventure latent in adolescent boys; to challenge and channel their energies at a stage in life when what Darling called “the poisonous passions of puberty” could all too easily take control; to develop independence and self-reliance; and to restore something of the ancient harmony between man and nature. He wanted the Timbertop year to be, above all, of spiritual value.

The student population of the school had grown in his time from 370 to 1139, and it was more an empire than a kingdom that Darling handed on to his successor, T.R. Garnett, in August 1961.

STAFF appointed to Geelong Grammar by Darling included many who were to prove pillars of the school and young men who went on to a wider fame: Sir William McKie, for instance, as organist and master of the choristers at Westminster Abbey; and the radical historians of Australia, Russel Ward and Manning Clark. At least 27 of Darling's staff became heads of other schools or university colleges on five continents, and his words and policies were weighed in quarters where there was no direct connection with him or his school.

Any list of outstanding pupils from Darling's regime at Geelong Grammar must be invidious, and he himself set at least as much store by unsung and unrewarded service as by fame and worldly distinction, but it is appropriate, by mentioning a few names, to suggest something of the diversity of fields to which Geelong Grammarians of his era have contributed.

Sir John Gorton became prime minister of Australia and Sir Rupert Hamer premier of Victoria. David Caro was appointed vice-chancellor of Melbourne University, and Alec Broers of Cambridge. Russell Drysdale and David Strachan became major painters, and David Moore a distinguished photographer. In literature, Peter Carey won the Booker Prize. In athletics, John Landy—one of nine Geelong Grammarians to represent Australia in the 1956 Olympic Games—set a new world record for the mile. Sir Peter Vanneck was lord mayor of London. Sir John Young was chief justice of Victoria.

In public service, Peter Henderson and Richard Woolcott each headed the Department of Foreign Affairs, and Sir David Hay those of External Territories and Aboriginal Affairs. In industry there have been leaders such as Sir Brian Massy-Greene, Sir Brian Inglis, Sir Roderick Carnegie and Hugh Morgan. Media magnates include Rupert Murdoch, Kerry Packer, and James and John Fairfax.

Such a list could be much extended. Darling was delighted by somebody's remark that, “if you have been at Geelong Grammar, you may drift, but you cannot drift with an easy conscience”.

It was fundamental to his philosophy that boys should be imbued with a sense of responsibility and that they should be trained for the future. In almost every sphere, and not least in his awareness of Asia (particularly Thailand, whence boys began to come to Geelong Grammar in the late 1940s), he showed prescience—and sometimes was too far ahead of his contemporaries for a full registering of his message.

He was always concerned to protect independent schools from bureaucratic control and government interference, but also to build bridges with the government education

sector. Thus he was instrumental in the founding in 1931 of what is now the Association of Heads of Independent Schools of Australia and in the Australian College of Education, initiated in 1959. Darling was founder, first president from 1959 to 1963 and an honorary fellow of the college, which has its national headquarters at James Darling House in Canberra.

Darling served from 1933 to 1971 on the Council of the University of Melbourne and he was a member of the Universities Commission from 1941 to 1951.

A member of the Australian Broadcasting Control Board from 1955 to 1961, he was chosen to succeed Sir Richard Boyer as chairman of the ABC from July 1, 1961. He served two three-year terms in that office until his somewhat abrupt replacement in 1967, during the prime ministership of Harold Holt. He had striven to maintain high standards, moral and artistic, in radio and television, but probably felt somewhat like King Canute in attempting to resist the inexorable tide of commercial interests.

Appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 1953, he was knighted in 1968 (for services to education and broadcasting).

The posts he held and the palpable achievements that flowed from his tenure of those posts would by themselves entitle him to a place in Australian history: but it was his personality and character that lay at the heart of his influence in the life of the nation and in the lives of countless individuals, many of whom have themselves become influential.

As a headmaster he never ceased to teach, particularly the senior class of the sixth form—boys of 18 or so with whom he would share the full range of his mind and interests in literature, politics, history, philosophy, theology, and the affairs of the school and the world, and most of whom he inspired to extraordinary endeavour and service. He was always available—sometimes far into the night—to boys, masters or families facing crises.

His mind and conscience were always active. Possessed of exceptional charm, he nevertheless had the strength to resist popular opinion and risk unpopularity in the defence of right, and a humility and sense of his responsibility to God that saved him from the corrupting effects of power.

HE was a true Victorian in the sense of carrying his Christianity into every area of life, yet one whose life, spanning almost the whole of the 20th century, remained geared in a world of rapidly accelerating change to ensuring a better future, and whose thinking was usually ahead of younger people's in the awareness it showed of the way that world was going—and was likely to go.

He read constantly, history and biography in particular. Though he claimed no great scholarship for himself, he showed in the range and precision of his intellect the essential qualities of the scholar and he inspired scholarship in others.

With humility and a humour all his own, he wore the mantle of a prophet in the true biblical sense—one whose integrity, insight, intelligence and courage bestow an extraordinary moral standing in the community. His publications included four books: *The Education of a Civilized Man* (1962), a selection of speeches and sermons from his Geelong years; *Timbertop: An Innovation in Australian Education* (1967), written in collaboration with Timbertop housemaster E.H. Montgomery; an autobiography, *Richly Rewarding* (1978); and *Reflections for the Age* (1991), a selection of 70 of the “Saturday Reflections” that for more than a decade he had written (and continued until his 95th birthday to write) for *The Age*.

His long but active retirement, during which, apart from occasional travel, he lived with his wife in Melbourne, put a sunset aureole upon his achievements. He was visited

and consulted by friends—many of them his former pupils and colleagues—and he was generous of pen, presence and voice (gracing gatherings of friends and Old Geelong Grammarians with speeches even into his middle 90s), just as he and Lady Darling were generous and gracious hosts. His conversation was a delight for its pungency and wit, his memory undimmed and his rapport with young people lively to the last.

There will be those who, even into the second half of the 21st century will remember with gratitude and admiration this remarkable product of the second half of the 19th century, and distinguished contributor to the world of both halves of the 20th century.

Michael Collins Persse

Michael Collins Persse has been a friend of Sir James Darling since 1955, was a colleague at Geelong Grammar and is author of Well Ordered Liberty: A Portrait of Geelong Grammar School 1855-1995.

Read Jeremy Griffith's essay on Sir James Darling's vision at
<www.worldtransformation.com/darling>.

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All inquiries to: **WORLD TRANSFORMATION MOVEMENT® (WTM®)**
GPO Box 5095, Sydney NSW 2001, Australia
Phone: + 61 2 9486 3308 Fax: + 61 2 9486 3409
Email: info@worldtransformation.com Website: www.worldtransformation.com

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