

Sir Robert Risson, CB, CBE, DSO, OStJ, ED

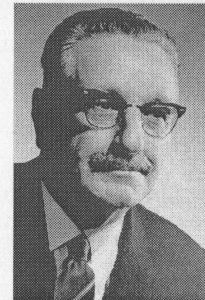


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Sir Robert Joseph Henry Risson was born 20 April 1901 at Ma Ma Creek near Grantham, South East Queensland. Educated at nearby Gatton High School, he subsequently graduated from the University of Queensland with a civil engineering degree before joining the newly formed Brisbane Tramways Trust in 1923. He married Gwendolyn Spurgin in Brisbane in May 1934.

Sir Robert led an outstanding transport and military career and his contributions to society extended into many fields. This annual memorial lecture honours the contribution he made not only in the field of transport but to management, public administration and the community.

The Military Man

Sir Robert joined the Australian Army Engineers as a Lieutenant in May 1933. He enlisted in the 2nd AIF in October 1939 and saw active service with the 7th and 9th Divisions in the Middle East (including Tobruk and El Alamein) and with the 1st Australian Corps in New Guinea. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Order and CBE and was promoted to the rank of Brigadier in March 1943. He returned from the World War II as one of Australia's most decorated soldiers, commanding enormous respect and exercising extraordinary influence.

His outstanding service during World War II was also recognised when he was awarded Commander of the Military Division of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire. "His outstanding service continued after World War II, and he was promoted to the rank of Major General and served as the Senior Officer in the Citizen Military Forces (CMF) in Victoria."¹ For his service as the CMF member of the Military Board, the highest appointment to which an Australian part-time soldier can be elevated, he was made a Companion of the Most Honourable Order of the Bath.

Transforming Transport

Sir Robert is best remembered as Chairman of the Melbourne and Metropolitan Tramways Board (M&MTB) from 1949 to 1970.

1. *The Victorian Mason*, Spring 1992, Square One Publications Ltd, East Melbourne; 7.

His appointment occurred at a very critical time in the history of the Board, an era when there were constant suggestions that Melbourne's transport policies were "out of touch" with the rest of the world, that the tramway system was "antiquated", and that trams should be replaced by bus services.

Despite the general acknowledgement that the buses which had replaced the last of the cable trams in Bourke Street had proved largely unsuccessful, the Board and in particular its Chairman had been accused of being "anti-bus". However, new tramcar construction continued as the Board reaffirmed its decision to proceed with the conversion of the Bourke Street buses to trams in 1949.

The late 1950s and 1960s was a difficult era for the M&MTB. Several Sunday tram services were replaced by buses and tram services with low patronage serving Point Ormond and the Footscray local lines were withdrawn in October 1960 and March 1962 respectively. The increase in private motor vehicle ownership and the introduction of television also contributed to the fall in patronage of evening services.

The view has frequently been expressed that the retention of the Melbourne tramway system during this period is due almost solely to Sir Robert's strong management and his firmly held (and public) view that tramcars were the most appropriate urban transport vehicle for servicing the inner suburban areas of large cities.

*"Beneath Sir Robert's stern exterior
was a warmth and understanding of the problems
that confront the average human being."²*

Many would suggest that the conversion of the Bourke Street bus routes to electric traction in June 1955 (East Preston via High Street route) and June 1956 (East Brunswick route) was Sir Robert's greatest achievement. Both projects were completed during an era when tramway abandonment was considered fashionable especially in the United Kingdom, United States and other Australian cities.

There were other contributing factors that supported tramway retention in Melbourne: wide city streets, an independent Tramways Board, well maintained rolling stock, and the majority of tram tracks were in reasonable to good condition.

2. *The Victorian Mason*, Spring 1992, Square One Publications Ltd, East Melbourne; 7.

Although sections of the media portrayed Sir Robert as a "tram man", he was nevertheless a highly respected transport professional who firmly believed that there was an appropriate role for all modes of transport in the world's largest cities. His influence in transport management extended well beyond tramways, especially in his role as Executive Director of the MTC.

Community and Professional Involvement

In the 1970 Queen's Birthday Honours, Sir Robert was created Knight Bachelor for his services to the community. Sir Robert retired as Chairman of the M&MTB on 30 June of the same year. He then served as Executive Director of the Metropolitan Transportation Committee until 1977.

Sir Robert's professional and community affiliations included:

- Fellow - Institution of Civil Engineers
- Fellow - Institution of Engineers of Australia
- President - Institution of Engineers of Australia (1962-62)
- Fellow - Australian Institute of Management
- Member - Institute of Transport (now Chartered Institute of Transport)
- Chief Commissioner - Boy Scouts, Victoria (1963-68)
- Chairman - National Fitness Council (1961-71)³

In addition Sir Robert was a foundation committee member of the Victorian Association of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire and was president of that association from 1980 to 1983. In this capacity he established the Queen Elizabeth II Silver Jubilee Scholarship Scheme which continues to this day.

Whilst Melbourne continues to operate the largest tramway system in the English speaking world and globally numerous light rail schemes have come to fruition, the recent emergence of segregated busways and transitways as alternatives to light rail in urban areas has and will continue to ensure that the modal debate remains topical.

Sir Robert's considerable influence has led to the continued operation of a unique multi-modal public transport system in Melbourne, of which the trams, now seen by many as an icon, are an integral part.

This article is based on an edited version of 'Sir Robert Risson - A Tribute', prepared by Graeme Turnbull, Transport Research Centre, RMIT University.

3. 'Army Lodge Who's Who', *The Army Lodge No 478 Newsletter*, April 1971.

Guest Speaker: Mr Keith Kings

Keith Kings has been a resident of Melbourne all his life and from an early age developed a keen interest in the Melbourne transport scene. He was educated at local schools in the eastern suburbs and at Melbourne Boys High School. Shortly after leaving school Keith joined the public transport industry and in later years pursued a career in the private sector.

Over the years Keith has observed, researched and faithfully recorded the ongoing changes that have been associated with the transport network from the 1940s.

He has written or has been the major contributor to over twenty-five books and substantial journal articles on Australian public transport, particularly street-based public transport.

Keith has been, and remains, at the forefront of the public transport and commercial vehicle preservation movement. His two personally restored buses have gained numerous awards at displays and his 1942 Studebaker bus was included in the finalists of the well known and prestigious Bay to Birdwood rally in 2000.

Mr Bernie Carolan

Bernie Carolan has had a career of 30 years in passenger transport and is currently Commercial Director of the National Express Group's rail franchise businesses in Victoria.

His experience has included a very wide range of involvements in the industry. At one time or another his main focus has been within each of the bus, train and tram modes; at other times he has been associated with cross-modal development and integration.

Bernie has worked in very diverse employment settings -- with periods in Government regulatory bodies, public sector operating businesses, large consultancy firms, as a self-employed contractor/consultant, and most recently as a senior manager with an international private operator of train, tram and bus services.

Bernie has delivered many papers at conferences and seminars. He has professional qualifications in economics, is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Transport and is currently a committee member of the Australian & New Zealand Division of the UITP. He is married, lives in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne and has three teenage children.

Associate Professor Jenny Morris

Associate Professor Morris has been engaged in transport planning research in Australia for more than 20 years. With a PhD in Urban Geography, Jenny has concentrated her research energies on understanding travel behaviour and developing useful perspectives for assessing the social impacts of transport planning and policy decisions. She served as a member of the Road Construction Authority during the 1980s and, more recently, as a member of the Marine Board of Victoria.

Jenny has performed the role of Director at the Transport Research Centre, RMIT Business, since February 1999.

Dr Michael Kennedy

Dr Kennedy is the current Chief Executive Officer of the Mornington Peninsula Shire. He has a keen interest in transport in all its forms, and is involved with public and private transport in both a professional and academic capacity.

Michael is a member of the RMIT alumni, and served for many years on transport course advisory committees. His doctoral studies related to public sector reforms and the contracting of public sector services to the private sector.

He has worked in the rail and bus sectors and in particular has a thorough understanding of the relative strengths of the public and private sectors.

Michael is a past Victorian Chairman and National Councillor of the Chartered Institute of Transport.

The Transport Research Centre

The Transport Research Centre (TRC) at RMIT Business is a multi-disciplinary research centre specialising in transport, land-use and environmental studies. The Centre was established in 1991 at the University of Melbourne and moved to RMIT University in July 1995.

Since then, the TRC has embarked on a progressive path of engaging in real-world research, which befits the RMIT philosophy of directing research to the needs of business, industry and the community.

As part of RMIT Business, the TRC provides postgraduate research supervision for masters and doctoral studies, conducts issue-specific workshops, professional seminars and specialised training courses for business organisations, government departments and the general public.

Research and consultancy projects undertaken in the past span the very basic tasks of asset inventory to the highly sophisticated routing and modelling of urban activities for a range of clients in both government and industry. Central to its activities is the Victorian Activity and Travel Survey, more popularly known as VATS.

Staff within the TRC specialise in fields ranging from transport planning and policy analysis, urban and regional planning, survey research, statistical data analysis, systems modelling, geographical information system applications, and environmental management.

In addition to publishing research and making significant conference presentations nationally and internationally, many of the TRC's staff possess substantial project management skills and industry and consulting experience with government and international organisations.