

Chris Holt (1947–2014)



Chris Holt co-founded and ran The Federation Press for most of his life. He was a publisher who made a huge and lasting difference in legal, scholarly and educational publishing in this country. He published the first books of many Australian authors, including many which otherwise would not have been published at all, and many written or contributed to by members of the New South Wales Bar Association.

Christopher Appleby Holt was born on 12 September 1947 in Buriton, England, the first son of Richard Anthony Appleby (always known as Bimby) Holt, a solicitor, for many years chairman of the Hutchinson Publishing Group, and a first-class tennis player and cricketer, and Daphne Pegram, the daughter of a vice-admiral who saw active service in two world wars. Holt attended Harrow, where he excelled at cricket, rugby and squash. He read law at Cambridge. He moved to Sydney shortly after graduating, and followed in his father's footsteps as a publisher.

Holt worked in legal publishing, first at Butterworths and then Law Book Company, in the 1970s and 1980s. He was promoted rapidly in both companies becoming head of department at

Butterworths at age 28. Very early in his career at Butterworths he was directly involved in publishing the first edition of *Equity: Doctrines and Remedies*, written by a leading silk and two partners of the firm then known as Allen Allen and Hemsley: Roddy Meagher QC, Bill Gummow and John Lehane. Much more importantly, while at Butterworths Holt also met, courted and married his life-long love Jo. I learned at his funeral that he gave Jo a bunch of white lilies every Sunday for the rest of his life.

The British group of which Law Book Company was a part of was acquired by a larger North American international publisher in 1987. The prospect of working in such a large organisation was unattractive to Holt and two colleagues, Diane Young and Kathy Fitzhenry. They mortgaged their homes, borrowed from family and friends, and formed The Federation Press. They did so at a time when other publishers, as well as universities and law firms, were racing to merge and attain scale, and university presses around the country were closing. However, Holt saw that there were large opportunities. There were many new law schools with students who needed books, and academics who needed to publish. The number of Australian practitioners had also significantly expanded. And there was also a new – albeit belated – approach to the distinctive nature and worth of Australian law and legal scholarship in its own right. As recently as 1977, Sir Anthony Mason had railed against Australian law being described as 'a mere appendage to the corpus of English law' and said:¹

Our knowledge and our thinking have been conditioned by what textbook writers have had to say about the law of the United

Kingdom. Overseas authors have given scant attention to judicial decisions in Australia and New Zealand and none at all to Australian statute law. The dearth of an authentic textbook of local origins has not only led to an inadequate recognition of our contribution to the law, it has handicapped its development.

The new company flourished. Over the next 27 years, the Federation Press under Holt published hundreds of Australian books, in all areas of the law. Many are now standard practitioner and student texts, in their fifth, sixth and seventh editions. Others are scholarly works and collections of essays, with smaller print runs, but which nevertheless made a lasting contribution to Australian law. He dealt with authors personally, patiently nurturing them, and had an enormous skill in bringing out their best. He also recognised manuscripts of lasting worth, and published many books whose immediate commercial viability was uncertain, and which would not otherwise have been published in a market dominated by multinational publishers. These included works of the highest scholarship, which larger publishers chose to let go, including new editions of legal classics such as Leslie Zines' *The High Court and the Constitution* and Sir Zelman Cowen's *Federal Jurisdiction in Australia*.

There were also books of especial interest to the New South Wales Bar. Recent examples are *Constituting Law: Legal Argument and Social Values*,² *The Byers Lectures*,³ Keith Mason's *Lawyers Then and Now*,⁴ *Key Issues in Judicial Review*,⁵ and biographies of Michael Kirby⁶ and Murray Gleeson.⁷ There was also a long tradition of publishing works of legal

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history, including two volumes of the *Historical Foundations of Australian Law*,⁸ and a series of biographies of colonial chief justices (now in 13 volumes) including Sir Francis Forbes and Sir Alfred Stephens by Dr J M Bennett.

Holt travelled widely, but invariably returned to the United Kingdom to make regular visits to his mother. He enjoyed art, natural beauty, wine and good conversation. He was extraordinarily well-read. He was deeply unconcerned by cant, correctness in any of its varieties and, it must be said, the condition of his hair and clothes. Holt's school-master from Harrow wrote in a report that 'he does give this curious impression of being loose-limbed, a little sloppy, and not anxious to appear very hard working'.

That description held true for the rest of his life. Yet Holt had a vision for independent legal publishing, and the courage to see it implemented, which made a lasting difference that will survive his untimely and sudden death on 4 September 2014.

When last we spoke – over lunch on 4 September – he was in excellent spirits, as usual, and bursting with vitality. We talked at length about two new book proposals, and the history of free trade in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and what we had been reading, but most of all about his pleasure from a recent holiday with one of his daughters. I remember now the time I first met him, at a careers day at Sydney Law School a quarter century ago, standing behind

a stall in the large Phillip St lecture theatre explaining, with a prescience I failed to appreciate at the time, how much more there was to the practice of law than working for the law firms who were offering summer clerkships in the neighbouring stalls.

Chris Holt is survived by Jo, their two daughters Camilla and Louisa, his granddaughter Laura, his mother Daphne and other members of his extended family.

By Mark Leeming

Endnotes

1. In the foreword to D Pearce, *Delegated Legislation in Australia and New Zealand* (Butterworths, 1977).
2. Edited by Justin Gleeson SC and Ruth Higgins in 2011.
3. Edited by Justices Perram and Pepper in 2012.
4. Published in 2012.
5. Edited by Neil Williams SC in 2014.
6. A J Brown, *Michael Kirby: Paradoxes and Principles* (2011).
7. M Pelly, *Murray Gleeson – The Smiler* (2014).
8. Edited by Justin Gleeson SC, James Watson, Ruth Higgins and Elisabeth Peden in 2013.