

The Passing of a Pioneer

Roy Edward Morgan : 1908 - 1985

A tribute prepared by David T. Bottomley

Roy Morgan, master pollster and pioneer market researcher, died on October 31, 1985. For 17 years he had fought cancer. He never allowed that fight to interfere with his work. To within a few hours of his death, he sent messages from his hospital bed to the company which he had founded, and which was his love and life.

In 1941, he first introduced the name "Gallup" to the Australian public and the "Morgan Gallup Poll" is familiar today, probably to every household and certainly, to every politician and social scientist.

Who was this astute man? When his company was backed by The Herald and Weekly Times newspaper group, a Herald cartoonist "Weg", always saw Roy as a sharp-nosed, bespectacled, inquiring man (but not a nosey-parker), in a pork-pie hat. He was indeed a man always keen to explore an idea, a person's need, the reason behind an attitude, the reason for a building's design, the ability of the latest computer or software package.

To walk with Roy around his beloved city of Melbourne was always an interesting experience. He knew so much about the commercial history of city companies and the dates of city buildings. He would point with interest to the vestiges of the old "outboard" lavatories that once existed on upper balconies. For many years he applied his city knowledge on the Melbourne City Council. As Chairman of its Town Planning Committee, he was responsible for negotiations that led to the development of the City Square and later, defended it successfully against the encroachment of tall buildings.

Roy's father was a New Zealander, his mother an Australian. His grandparents, all born in the 1830s, came from Ireland, Wales, and England. Roy was educated at Brighton Grammar School, Melbourne Grammar School and the University of Melbourne. In Melbourne, he started work during the Depression as an office boy with Dalgety, one of the large pastoral companies. After gaining his qualifications as a Chartered Accountant, he was invited by Sir Keith Murdoch to become a financial journalist at The Melbourne Herald and it was from there in 1940, with newspaper backing, that he established his market research business, The Roy Morgan Research Centre Pty. Ltd.

Roy's interests were wide. He loved history, in which he looked always for cause and effect relationships. He loved the art of simple expression. Continually, he looked for the most precise yet simple way of expressing an idea or asking a question. At times he irritated his associates by writing and re-writing letters or questionnaires. But he drove home his point that market researchers, whose medium is words, may never be satisfied with their understanding; must always strive for clear expression so that all should understand.

His notes "The Art of Plain Written English" helped many researchers to write better questionnaires and clearer reports.

His kindly nature, his enquiring mind and his considerable capacity to say to anyone exactly what he thought about their thoughts and actions impressed and stimulated them, even if his comments did not always endear him to them.

On his death, letters and telexes came from around the world. They included these comments:

"I will remember the many conversations I had with Roy on research matters, and on life generally."

"I received practical lessons on how to write questions in language which everyone understands."

"A few months ago he entertained us with wit, knowledge, understanding and wisdom."

"When I was a young advertising assistant, Roy was always helpful and friendly to me, for which I'm grateful."

"He was an able and interesting man, and I'm the richer for knowing him."

"Roy was a father figure in our business; someone you could always approach, whose opinion you could respect and whose confidential tips were always sensible and practical."

"He impressed me greatly. He had such a clear and common-sense view of the political system and how the real world operated. More important was the quite uncompromising honesty and decency of the man."

"I came to respect and to admire Roy. His wisdom and clarity of mind, despite his age and illness, will stand out amongst impressions left by people I've met."

"He was stimulating, aggressive, but fundamentally sympathetic and friendly."

"He was our friend and generous teacher, always helpful with useful advice."

"He was a loyal and dynamic colleague, highly individual and provocative, enjoying controversy, always speaking his mind and always faithful to the principles of good research."

Roy was an honorary member of the Princeton Class of '48 which he keenly supported. Tributes from two members included these comments:

"We of the Princeton Class of 1948 regarded Roy Morgan with the highest esteem and we always looked forward to his joining us, whenever he could, at our reunions. He added another dimension to our Class for which we are all thankful. We reserve a special place for him in our Class annals as a unique and provocative individual who will be missed by us all."

"We (of the Princeton Class of 1984) came to appreciate Roy as an outstanding, clearheaded thinker, with a great love of life, of his family, of his country and of his city. We saw his great love for Gary and the other members of his family. We saw also a kind, warm, generous and very articulate individual."

Roy Morgan's contributions to social and market research were considerable.

Probably, Roy will be best remembered for founding and operating the Morgan Gallup Poll. Since 1941, it has had an outstandingly accurate record in describing the public's, political thinking. It has influenced political parties' and politicians' judgements. One distinguished and objective viewer of the political and electoral system wrote:

"Roy Morgans's contribution to public understanding of political and social questions was of enormous value, not only to policy-makers and academic observers, but to a great many men in the street.

Australia's place in the international social survey world is very largely of his doing, and his memory will be honoured for that."

The vehicle for the Morgan Gallup Poll is the Roy Morgan Research Centre's weekly national omnibus survey, "Consumer Opinion Trends". Each week throughout Australia, a fresh sample of 1100 people aged 14 years and over is interviewed, face-to-face.

That omnibus system is widely respected by business and government clients. It produces accurate results. Roy was delighted that in the week before he died, the company conducted five full omnibus surveys. "I'm not needed now!", he said.

Among other syndicated services which spring from the omnibus system is the Morgan National Print Media Surveys. Because media survey results are widely circulated, like political poll results, they are subject to close scrutiny and, at times, criticism.

To the writer, this criticism - sometimes from competitors, sometimes from academics and based on theories of sampling, or theories of questioning- at times overlooks the fact that much of science is an empirical art. The raw material is not subject to laboratory disciplines but is the fallible stuff of human conversation and human memory. Somehow, we have to find techniques that work. Roy understood that very well.

Always looking for better ways to evaluate media audiences, Roy looked to television meters as being the most accurate method for recording television viewing. He sponsored the work of Tom Mewes, an Australian inventor, in designing an Australian TV meter. The prototypes were built in the company's premises. The meters, now installed in 150 Melbourne homes, are providing daily reports on sets tuned in, minute by minute, to each channel.

Roy was certainly a "father of Australian market research". Starting his company during war-time, he joined with other Australian pioneers: Bill McNair, George Anderson, Sylvia Ashby and Stuart Lucy, in arguing for the application of market research to business. At that time there were many who were sceptical about that funny statistical thing which could tell business what to do by interviewing a few hundred people.

Roy was a founder member of the World Association for Public Opinion Research (WAPOR) and the first overseas member of the European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research (ESOMAR). With David Bottomley, in 1955, he founded the Market Research Society in Australia, though, on a matter of principle, Roy resigned from the Society a few years ago.

Roy became well known and won many friends around the world by participating in international organisations and by his overseas papers on Media Research such as "A New Approach in Audience Measurement for Print Media", (ESOMAR Seminar, Sweden, 1982) and "How a Composite Method has Overcome Telescoping, Prestige and Replication in Readership Research", (Admap Symposium II, Montreal, 1983). Many expressed regret that he was not able to attend this year's ESOMAR, WAPOR and Gallup functions in Wiesbaden, Germany. From the October Salzburg Readership Research Symposium, a few days before he died, Roy was delighted to receive a large card with greetings and good wishes from 40 international researchers.

On Roy's death, tributes were received from Gallup companies around the world.

Included in their many telexes and letters were statements such as:

"He was a great figure in our Gallup Association"

"Roy was my friend since our first meeting in 1947"

"We have lost in Roy a very dear friend and a most respected colleague"

"Roy Morgan was an inspiration to those in the industry who knew him"

"He was a very good man, and a very dynamic and pioneering spirit, and most certainly a friendly and sociable person"

"On many occasions I had the privilege of his sharing his ideas and visions with me and these moments of enlightenment have always served as a great source of inspiration. His passing away is not only a great loss to his family but to the entire Gallup organisation and the community of market research at large"

"We remember fondly and for ever Roy Morgan as a true pioneer in our field of opinion and market research: inventive as a methodologist, keen as an analyst, skilled in business. Above all he was our friend and generous teacher, always helpful with usable advice"

"From the beginnings of Gallup International in the 1940's until his death, he had the respect of colleagues, of friends and of clients. He was creative. As Jan Stapel, the Gallup International President once said, "You could not afford not to listen to what Roy had to say".

Unpredictable, he was an awkward conference delegate but a brilliant chairman. He charmed my children for hours with stories of early Australia. A patriot, an anglophile, and a great contributor to Gallup International. We will miss him".

And from the original founding company: The Gallup Organisation, Inc. came this tribute.

"With Roy's death, we have lost a good friend and close associate, and the world of research has lost an important and pioneering figure. We shall always remember Roy for his perceptive mind, his quick wit and his total integrity. Paul Perry, our former Gallup President, writes this about Roy:

My friendship with Roy Morgan dates back to 1940 when he first arrived at the Gallup Poll in the earliest of many visitations. He was one of my oldest and best friends, but also a greatly respected professional colleague. Roy's personal, business, and professional ethics were of the highest. He was tireless in his interest in survey research, and the subject was never far from his thoughts. I am sure he pursued that interest with energy, insight, and devotion to the last".

In a recent interview with David Jones, his friend and business associate, he answered these questions:

What was the most embarrassing moment of your life?

"None worth remembering. Time is a great healer."

What was the most enjoyable moment of your life?

"Probably related to conceit. We all like to be noticed and appreciated, e.g. some moments to do with (Sir Robert) Menzies (many incidents), some to do with (Sir Keith) Murdoch: like Gary, he listened to me because it was profitable, and (the late George) Gallup who happily received and gave ideas. They showed their belief in the opposite of 'What's yours is mine and what's mine is mine too'."

Among Roy's writings of recent weeks were these statements of his attitudes to life:

"To achieve, you need wisdom (digested knowledge), curiosity (by which hypotheses may become new facts), ability to do things better (a basic difference between mankind and other animals) and decisiveness; plus helpful friends, a lot of luck and, importantly, ability to resolve problems effortlessly when relaxed or asleep!

Kipling's "Elephant's Child", read to me by my mother, made me curious. My school's motto "Meliora sequamur" taught me to try to do things better. Then, realising that man's destiny was to be never satisfied (another basic difference between mankind and other animals) I decided that, for happiness, I must follow King George V, and count my blessings".

Roy believed greed was the great social sin of our day. In the interview with David Jones he said:

"In the story of the Last Supper, Judas' actions may be related to Moses' commandment not to covet, i.e. don't let jealousy and ambition 'have reign'. The Last Supper tells us that a fair proportion (perhaps 1 in 12) will sell his boss or his mates for a fair price because jealousy, ambition or covetousness has got out of hand.

Man's destiny is to be dissatisfied (and never satisfied). That leads to progress. But if it gets out of hand, the unhappiness greatly exceeds the good. I wonder how many pieces of silver were the 'first offer' to Judas? Did he bid up the ante?"

Roy will be long remembered because the company he founded, for some years now managed by his son Gary, will long stand as his monument. The Roy Morgan Research Centre with 300 staff and 14 operating divisions around Australia reflects much of Roy's vision in which he saw the market research function fairly in the heart of marketing and management information systems. Market research, he saw, was not just about surveys. Its function was to provide and transmit commercial information. That gave his company a sense of direction which is rapidly leading it along paths unfamiliar to many market researchers.

An unconventional touch was the development on the ground floor of the Roy Morgan Centre of "Gallery 499", a commercial and artistic display centre. Last month, it housed the first public display of Sir William Dargie's portraits: many of Melbourne's most notable business, academic and sporting people, and some of international figures. It was fitting that a week before he died, Roy Morgan though, in a wheel chair, was able to attend the official charity opening of the exhibition by the Lieutenant Governor of Victoria, Sir John Young, and to meet many of his old friends for the last time.

A few days later, in "Gallery 499", we held Roy's memorial service. Friends and staff reflected on Roy's many contributions and expressed their sympathy and support for Mrs Marie Morgan who for 47 years had shared Roy's life, and for their sons Gary and Geoffrey, daughter-in-law Genevieve and their four grandchildren.

Roy said recently: "I would not complain if I died now. Life has been good to me."

The service concluded with George Santayana's words:

"When a man's life is over, it remains true that he has lived; it remains true that he has been one sort of man and not another. In the infinite mosaic of history that bit has its unfading color and its perpetual function and effect. A man who understands himself...knows that he cannot wholly die, even if he would; for when the movement of his life is over, the truth of his life remains. The fact of him is part forever in the infinite context of existence."
