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Smith, William John (Bill) (1882-1972) and Crown Crystal Glass Co. Ltd 1924 in Australia

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Smith, William John (Bill) (1882 - 1972)
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Smith, William John (1882-1972), industrialist, was born on 28 May 1882 at **Walton, Liverpool, Lancashire, England**, sixth surviving child of **David Smith**, engineer from **Belfast**, and his Lancashire-born wife, Elizabeth, née Bernard. With his mother and siblings he reached **Melbourne** on 2 November 1885 to join his father; they settled at Spotswood in 1887. Endowed with a powerful physique and a reputation as a fighter, Bill left school at 12 and began work as a 'water boy' at the **Melbourne Glass Bottle Works** (M.G.B.W.), owned by **Alfred Felton** and **Frederick Grimwade**. On 28 September 1897 he was indentured as an **apprentice glassblower** and, as assistant secretary and secretary, helped to form the **Melbourne Glassblowers' Union**.

Believing himself a marked man, he took ship to **Sydney** in 1902 and on arrival found himself **blacklisted**. Unable to enlist for military service in the South African War, he worked for a small firm where he earned 18 shillings a day **blowing a hundred dozen bottles**. Nine months later he returned to Melbourne where he was employed by the **Caledonian Glass-Bottle Works**, whereupon M.G.B.W.'s general manager William James McNeilage successfully sued him for breaking his indentures.

In the protected national market created by Federation, M.G.B.W.'s operations expanded and when it acquired the **Caledonian** works in 1904 Smith, at McNeilage's instigation, became its manager. After restoring the profitability of this plant, Smith was sent to South Australia in 1907 to manage M.G.B.W.'s latest acquisition, G. Hinrichsen's **Adelaide glassworks**. He arranged mergers with the three existing glass-bottle manufacturers

in Adelaide, erected a modern factory at **Kilkenny**, effectively controlled the South Australian market, and protected customers' property rights by producing '**named**' bottles. On 12 December **1908** he married Anna Gertrud Hoff (d. 1924) at Flinders Street Baptist Church; they had three sons and a daughter.

Appointed manager of the rundown **Sydney Glass Bottle Works** in **1915**, Smith in July became assistant general manager of the **Australian Glass Manufacturers Co. Ltd** (A.G.M.), formed in July **1915** with issued capital of £ 276,005 by a merger with (Sir) Mark Sheldon's **Waterloo Glass Bottle Works Ltd**. Based in **Sydney**, Smith negotiated a large overdraft to re-equip the Dowling Street factory with **American semi-automatic bottling machinery**, manned by skilled glass-gatherers recruited in America; the Waterloo works was closed; and Vance & Ross Pty Ltd was bought out for £ 40,000 and shut down. He soon managed to allay considerable strife and unrest within the industry and from **1917 had no serious strikes**. By the end of the war, A.G.M., profiting from reduced imports at a time of rising demand, dominated the State's bottle trade with its lower cost-structure.

When McNeilage began to groom his son as his replacement, Smith, who had expected to succeed as general manager, accepted the position of managing director of the **Zetland Glass Bottle Works Ltd** in **1920**. Within 18 months, A.G.M. invited Smith back and the two firms merged in October **1921** when A.G.M. was re-registered with an issued capital of £ 950,695. As general manager and a director for the next 35 years, Smith presided over the spectacular development of **one of Australia's largest industrial empires**. With thick wavy hair, small glittering eyes, 'a chest like a barrel, his massive head set on a thick neck ... and muscular of every limb', he dominated policy-making through his forceful personality. Self-made, a prodigious toiler and extensive traveller, Smith was a tough, **cantankerous autocrat** with a swashbuckling style. Nicknamed 'Knockout' and 'Gunboat', he thrived on risks and brooked no opposition. With abundant resources at his disposal, mergers formed the basis for growth. Wherever possible he internalized transactions through vertical integration and diversified the company's product range whenever the **government protected the domestic market**.

In the **mid-1920s** Smith embarked upon **other types of glass manufacture**, such as **flintware**, with the acquisition of the **Crown Crystal Glass Co. Ltd** in **1924**. Australian **Window Glass Pty Ltd** began to produce sheet glass by the Fourcoul process in **1932**. Three years later, after difficulties with the quality of Tarzan safety glass, Smith, with Pilkington Bros Ltd of St Helen's, England, invested in and became a director of **Pilkington Bros (Australia) Pty Ltd**, established to make **toughened sheet glass for motor vehicles**. By the **mid-1930s** A.G.M.'s glass-manufacturing activities were as comprehensive as local conditions permitted. The company had diversified its activities both directly and through subsidiaries into producing cast-iron, coal, containers, tools, machine parts, structural steel for the fab-

rication of producer goods, and into real estate. In January **1939** Smith's diverse, far-flung industrial empire was reorganized as **Australian Consolidated Industries Ltd** with an issued capital of £ 2½ million and Smith as managing director. A large part of the company's profits now came from **activities other than glass-making**.

Early in **1940** Smith reluctantly made a controversial agreement with the Menzies government which gave him a virtual **monopoly to manufacture motor cars** under the protection of the Motor Vehicles Engines Bounty Act (1939). The minister for trade and customs, John Lawson, who had organized the deal, resigned in February 1940 after his arrangements for leasing a race-horse from Smith were made public. Thereafter repeated allegations were made in Federal and State parliament and by the press that 'Knockout Smith' exercised 'such influence in Governmental quarters that he can buy members of Parliament'.

Appointed **director of gun ammunition** in the Department of Munitions in June **1940**, Smith efficiently organized the manufacture of shell bodies, 'pressing into service the resources of all the State railway workshops, the steel industry, and other private engineering firms'. When he stepped down in August **1942** (after constant friction with the Labor government) production had 'leaped to astronomical levels'. He remained a focus of public controversy. He was at least twice sued and acquitted of improper business practices: in a breach of contract case in 1940, it was alleged that he was of German descent. In October **1941** he unsuccessfully demanded a public inquiry into charges against him made under privilege in State parliament, against which he had no means of redress: 'I have been shot at, and sniped from ambush, and, as a British citizen, most despitely used'. Although such repeated allegations were proved unfounded, the publicity tarnished his reputation and rumours continued to circulate. In **1945** he survived extortion and death threats.

In **1944** Smith took on the Curtin government, when it paradoxically denied the existence of his car-manufacturing agreement and repealed the relevant Acts. Eventually, after arbitration A.C.I. was awarded £ 56,000 compensation. The company grew rapidly post-war, venturing into **manufacturing fibre glass** and starting **production in Asia** with a factory in **Singapore** in **1948**. Smith was appointed C.B.E. in **1956**. When he retired next year shareholders' funds exceeded £ 18 million.

At St Clement Danes Church, London, Smith had married a 31-year-old widow Jessie Davenport Barbour (d. 1969), née Nicholson, on 20 October **1937**. In the late 1930s he founded two family investment companies, **Danmark Pty Ltd** and **Forestwood Pty Ltd**, with his children as shareholders; in **1943** the companies successfully appealed to the High Court of Australia against taxation assessments: the commissioner of taxation had claimed that Smith 'had been guilty of every possible fraud'. Next year he bought into the ailing tabloid, **Smith's Weekly**, in which from 20 September to 15 November **1947** he published reminiscences of his

early years; he sold out for a handsome profit in 1950. [...]

Smith died at his Point Piper home on 14 July 1972, Point Piper, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia, and was buried in South Head cemetery. He was survived by his two sons and daughter Thelma, wife of Senator Sir Alistair McMullin. Smith's estate was valued for probate at \$ 10,647. In 1941 he had claimed that 'the world has gone well with me. I direct industry ... on a vast scale ... I have no trouble with labour. Men who have grown up in the industry with me call me "Bill" and I call them by their Christian names. I know every man in our works'. With his passing, **Australia lost one of her few industrial giants**.

Select Bibliography:

[...] T. C. Barker, The Glass-Makers, Pilkington 1826-1976 (London 1977) [...] More on the resources

www.crowncommercial.com.au Crown Commercial History

1926 - the best join forces: Crown Commercial company began in 1926 when **several Sydney glass makers amalgamated to form Crown Crystal Glass** (owned by **A.C.I. / Australian Consolidated Industries Ltd**). The Balmain Glass Works, the Crown Glass Company of Alexandria and the Crystal Glass Works of Waterloo were well known for producing **hand blown and pressed flint and crystal glass**. Their joint production facility, as Crown Crystal Glass, was set up in Bourke Street, Waterloo.

1928 - meeting and creating new markets: The new company changed direction in 1928 to meet emerging tastes and markets. **European glass cutters were brought to Australia** to teach the difficult craft of glass cutting. High quality crystal was marketed under the brand 'Grimwade Crystal', with a second quality range sold under the 'Wyndham' brand, both keenly sought after by collectors. [...]

Siehe unter anderem auch:

- PK 2003-1 Conway, Ein Brief mit 2 Büchern über Pressglas in Australien**
- PK 2003-1 Arnold, Pressglas der Crown Crystal Glass Co. Ltd in Australien**
- PK 2003-3 Conway, Gepresstes Glas aus den Dreißiger Jahren und nach 1945 (Australien)**
- PK 2003-3 Bannister, Crown Crystal Glass, Australien, reproduzierte in den 1930-er Jahren Pressgläser von Walther**
- PK 2003-4 Bannister, Pressglas von Crown Crystal, Australien, nach Mustern von August Walther & Söhne um 1935**
- PK 2004-3 Hayter, Heinemann (Australien), Stopfer, SG, Die grüne Fußschale mit Tauben und eine blaue Vase mit Papageien - kommen sie ursprünglich aus der Tschechoslowakei, 1930-er Jahre?**
- PK 2005-4 Bannister, Eine neue Website zu Pressglas: The Crown Crystal Glass Company Ltd**
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- PK 2005-1 Blomfield (Australien), SG, Blue Satin-Finish Art Déco Glass Cherubs Centre-Piece, Regd.No. 756470**
- PK 2005-1 Blomfield, Heinemann (Australien), SG, Blaue und rosa-farbene Vase mit zwei Kakadus von Brockwitz um 1940**
- PK 2005-1 Blomfield (Australien), Wessendorf, SG, Blaue Schale mit Griffen, Marke „Weinglas / Stern“, Tschechoslowakei, 1930?**
- PK 2005-1 Haberland-Noce, SG, Extraordinary Figurine Flower Frog „The Water Carrier“. „Wassermagd“ und Schale „Orla“ von Walther 1933 (Australien?)**
- PK 2005-4 Haberland-Noce, SG, Green Glass Koala Frog, Hersteller unbekannt, Australien, um 1935**
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- PK 2007-2 Blomfield, SG, Schale mit Prachtleierschwanz aus Australien, Hersteller unbekannt, 1930?**
- PK 2007-3 Bannister, SG, Australian Angus & Coote Catalogue of 1937 with Some Walther Pressed Glass**
- PK 2010-4 Joyce, Cockhedge Glass Works, Scotland Road, Warrington, Lancashire, 1805-1867 and First Glass Production in the Australian Colonies**