

Tribute to Sir James Fletcher – 4 September 2007
Holy Trinity Cathedral – Auckland
(Delivered by his grandson James Fletcher)

Jim was born in Dunedin on Christmas Day 1914.

He was the second child born to James and Charlotte Fletcher. Lottie's family had been in Dunedin since the 1860s and had prospered. James was a newcomer. He had arrived in 1908, to seek his fortune in a country that had been described to him in his grey home town of Kirkintilloch as "the sunnier Britain of the South". He had arrived in Dunedin with his carpentry tools and £15 to his name. He started work the day after he arrived. Less than a year later he was working for himself as a builder, in partnership with Albert Morris. Their first contract was a cottage at Broad Bay, on the Otago Peninsula. It is still there today, maintained by the Fletcher Trust and open to the public. The partners made a profit of 3 shillings and 6 pence on a contract sum of £375 – a typical builder's margin!

Undaunted, the partners moved on to the next job, for John Cameron. When James called at the Cameron house to discuss the plans, he was bowled over by Lottie, John Cameron's daughter. She was wearing a pale blue dress he remembered till the end of his life. James and Lottie had 3 children. John, named for his maternal grandfather, Jim, named for his paternal grandfather, and Isabella, known as Ella.

Young Jim's life was shaped by this background. First, he was part of a close and loving family and family remained the centre of his life. James's great charm was not something reserved for public life or business advantage. He was a captivating father and later grandfather, telling stories and involving his family in his projects and schemes. There was a lot of laughter and fun in Jim's upbringing. Secondly, Jim learned loyalty from his parents. James never forgot Kirkintilloch. His mother had been left a widow with 10 children. Her industry in providing for her family through shrewd investments and encouragement of her brood set them all up as practical and purposeful tradesmen. James's brothers all emigrated to New Zealand, but the sisters who remained in Kirkintilloch in the home in which James had been born were part of the family for John, Jim and Ella and their children after them. The Camerons too were loyal, and much of James's early success was due to their support. Similar loyalty in family, in friendships and in colleagues remained a feature of young Jim's life. Finally, Jim learned from his family the work ethic that

remained with him to the end of his life. And the sense of fun in building and business that in turn he passed on to his own family and those who worked with him. From childhood he was set in the habit of learning and an attitude of optimism that never left him.

The construction company grew. And the work was further north. The family moved to Wellington when James was engaged in building the Railway Station. Jim went to primary school in Roseneath for 5 years. They moved back to Dunedin in 1925 to a new house in the High Street while Fletcher Construction was building the Dunedin Exhibition buildings. Jim went to High Street Primary School for two years and then boarded at Waitaki Boys High for 2 years, before the family moved to Auckland and Jim finished his schooling at Auckland Grammar. Jim enjoyed his time at both schools. In later years he remained very much involved with them. Waitaki Boys High under its redoubtable headmaster Frank Milner aimed to toughen boys up. The dorms were in verandahs enclosed only by canvas. Cold baths were part of the regime. Jim thrived on it, or at least survived. At Auckland Grammar he made life-long friendships. His last year in 1931 was in 6C and it has been a lifelong tradition for the boys in that class to meet regularly for dinners and lunches. There are now just three survivors. Bob Foster, later a colleague of Jim's at Fletcher Construction is here today.

On leaving school Jim joined South British Insurance in Auckland. He was an office boy at a weekly wage of fifteen shillings. He continued to play rugby for Grammar Old Boys. And at night he studied accountancy. The office boy eventually returned as a director to South British and ended up chairing it, a matter that caused some amusement to long-serving South British employees.

It was after leaving school that Jim took up horse riding. Thoroughbreds became an abiding passion. It has to be said that Jim was never a very correct rider. He made up for that deficit with courage and dash. The courage some might say was closer to foolhardiness and, in the way of things at the time, it may often have been Dutch courage. Jim was well known for his colourful and bracing version of a Pimms drink. On courage, Jim was fond of saying that his motto was "No Fear". He invited you to take that any way you would. And he did have a healthy sense of the need for self-preservation – in retrospect! – and always with a wry grin.

The dash was in the get up. Beautiful English boots, polished to a high gloss (that was one chore Jim never delegated), and faultlessly folded

and pinned stocks. Jim, always one to laugh at himself, used to tell the story about his fitting for breeches at a Saville row tailor. "Sir" was asked to mount a wooden horse and then "sir" was invited to post to the trot, so that the tailor could check the fit. Jim always said those were the worst, most ill-fitting breeches he had ever had. But he was terribly impressed by the grand air of the tailor. Jim, of course, had no grand airs about him at all.

There was a touch of the Mr Magoo about Jim. It came out in family matters and in business, but it was most spectacular on the hunting field. Jim loved his years with the Pakuranga Hunt. The stories of his spills are legendary. He was usually impatient, part of the restless nature that always had him pressing on to the new in other areas of life. On one occasion, not wanting to queue to jump a stream with the rest of the hunt, he set off to find a way around and ended up taking a huge gate out on to a main road. In the mayhem, with cars swerving out of the way, Jim was spotted assiduously doffing his cap to all the furious drivers. On another occasion, after a spectacular spill, Jim, almost certainly concussed and with his glasses shattered was seen whoa-ing a bull he was trying to mount. He had some spectacular hunters. Some, like King Rod, had been horses he had raced. People on the hunting field still talk about Eldon. Jim never forgot the names of his horses – hunters and racehorses and had total recall about their exploits.

Jim loved racing. He was bitten by the bug when he had early success when King Rod won the Waikato Hunt Cup in 1936. Jim was 21 years old. The photograph of the presentation is in the programme you have.

Many of the traits and habits that Jim had were therefore formed before he teamed up with the two great loves of his life – the then family firm, and his partner of 65 years, Vaughan.

The firm came first in chronological order. In 1937 Jim resigned from South British to travel to England and Europe with his parents. On their return, Jim joined Fletchers. And when it was floated as a public company in 1940, he became the first company secretary of Fletcher Holdings Limited. Jim needed a secretary. Ian Graham, a friend from Auckland Grammar days who was working for Fletcher Holdings, encouraged his sister in law, Vaughan Gunthorp, to apply for the position. Jim and Vaughan met in a coffee shop in Vulcan Lane to discuss the position. She was beautiful and strong minded. She wanted 5 pounds a week and to work on the accounts, rather than to

be simply a short-hand typist. They were married in June 1942. Jim had proposed in March but told Vaughan that they would not marry until the accounts had been finalized for the year. They were always workmates, even after the family arrived, and soul mates for the next 65 years.

Jim arrived in 1944, Hugh in 1947, and Angus in 1950. Jim was away for the births of the first two. He was under notice from Vaughan that he had better be there for the third. But when Angus was about to arrive Jim and Lou Hahn were drifting in the Pacific somewhere between the New Hebrides (where they were looking at some forestry interests) and New Caledonia on a broken down coastal freighter. The skipper had out of date charts and Jim and Lou soon lost confidence in him. After dodging waterspouts and suffering some real dangers and hardships, rigging up makeshift anchors to avoid reefs, taking over the navigation themselves, and watching forlornly as a case of champagne care of their French military rescuers was lost overboard, Jim and Lou made it to safety, only to find it impossible to convince by telegram the accountants in Penrose that they had run through all the money they had taken and desperately required additional funds to get home. The telegram drafted by Jim read MUST REPEAT MUST have £200 by noon today. What the accountants received was MUST EAT MUST receive £200 today. Thinking that they had wine and dined sufficiently, Jim's request was refused. Needless to say, Jim arrived in time for Angus's birth only by personally begging the General Manager of TEAL to give him credit. From that time on, Vaughan traveled with Jim whenever she could.

Jim loved his life with his young family and with the expanding business. He and Vaughan had bought the old Bailey homestead at Penrose when the firm acquired the Penrose site and the owners would not sell the land without selling the old, run down house. He would leave the house at 5 in the morning, to avoid getting caught up in the morning zoo hour with the babies. That habit stayed with him. Until only the last few years he was still going to the office with the birds. He always loved coming home to Penrose in the evening. He said that when he came through the gate and into the lovely garden Vaughan created he dropped away all the cares of the day. In the weekends the family would drive down to Alton Lodge, the stud Jim ran at Waerenga, near Te Kauwhata. It started as a hobby, with Jim as the stud master. Because Jim was unable to do anything by halves, it progressively became a substantial business. The first stallion Jim purchased was Balloch. He was followed by Gold Nib, Revelation, Mid Day Sun, Fair's Fair and Chatsworth II. Through these lines, Jim has had a lasting

influence on breeding in New Zealand. The property was also immaculate – Jim disliked an untidy property. Indeed it was a trial for the managers at Penrose when in later years Jim was put on an exercise regime and would walk every day around the sites, noticing things out of place.

So Alton Lodge was a real picture. As a result, it was asked to host the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh on the 1953 tour. Jim said the Duke was in a very bad mood. He had apparently taken over the driving on the way down and as a result arrived well ahead of schedule.

Jim was always interested in following the bloodlines of the horses he watched race if he could trace them to some he had bred. That interest may have been one of the reasons why he almost never bet on the races. (Although some in the family have wondered whether some early betting losses might have been responsible.) In its first 20 years Alton Lodge headed the winners table 10 times. Its success reflected the enthusiasm Jim had for learning from abroad, and especially from America. He introduced many innovations to New Zealand, including the live foal guarantee. Jim was also the Auckland Chairman of the New Zealand Bloodstock Breeders Association. Eventually, Jim's success made the business too big to carry on in competition with the other demands on his time.

After the stud was sold, Jim carried on his interest through his ownership of racehorses. He raced in Australia with Frank Dalton, winning the Tattersall's Cup with Taressa. He and Vaughan won the Wellington Cup with Rustler in 1973, trained by Merv Ritchie. He also had great success with the fillies Blyton and Ganymede. And he had one undoubted champion, Mr Tiz, trained by Dave and Paul O'Sullivan. Mr Tiz, racing in the tartan colours, ran up seven Group One victories, including three Railways, two Telegraphs and the Galaxy in Sydney. The Galaxy was one of the most thrilling wins ever. But his third successive Railway, from an impossible position, after a severe check and carrying a huge weight, with Lance O'Sullivan bringing him along the rail, is absolutely unforgettable. There were many other winners with the O'Sullivans with wonderful horses like Javelin and Morar.

Jim was an ideal owner. He was deeply interested in the horses. He always enjoyed visiting the stables in which they were trained. And he enjoyed the company of horsemen like Dave O'Sullivan and Ben Rutherford all his life. Jim was never one to complain about an

unlucky run or to blame anyone for a slow horse. He knew that racing was about luck. And he was grateful when he had good luck, but in any event always enjoyed being in the hunt. Jim has had a long association with the Auckland Racing Club. He was stipendiary steward, and a committee member before becoming President. With the same thoroughness Jim brought to any endeavour, he built up a complete collection of thoroughbred studbooks dating back to the 1700s. No one in the family had the heart to tell him that we cannot think what on earth we are going to do with the fruits of this enormous labour now that he has gone.

Jim was not the sort of person who enjoyed sitting on a beach. He was never idle. Family holidays were built around interests such as racing and breeding, or travel, and always around business. Travel around New Zealand was always exciting. Jim was a director of BP. His strong loyalty to that brand meant that the boys and Vaughan had to watch other service stations come and go, while the fuel tank showed empty for anxious miles. Funnily enough, he was usually in luck in the end. And he had an uncanny knack of always finding a car park right outside the door of the place he was going to. Not for him the safe course of finding a car park building, a genetic trait passed down to his son Jim. Mental arithmetic was a family game. The three boys were always included in discussions about work, as was Vaughan. They all had business in their blood. And they absorbed the great optimism and restless inquiry for the better that characterized Jim and made him so modern and up to date even into his 90s. Jim wasn't someone who divided his life into compartments. The firm was part of his family and those who worked for it were part of the family too. He put the same energy and drive for excellence into everything he did – riding, breeding, and gardening of a manic, chainsaw sort, which invariably resulted in shamefaced apologies for the inadvertent destruction of Vaughan's roses. He was death to machinery. He loved fast cars and kept them in great order at huge expense. The expense was huge because he insisted on driving them off road or into hedges with great panache. Suffice to say that the back seat was always at a premium when driving with Jim. It was also a huge expense because he insisted on having such expensive cars and maintaining them to such a high standard. Indeed, he was taken aback once when he lent one of his Bentleys for a Royal tour to have it returned with the seats covered in sheepskins and a most inferior paint job. In typical fashion he didn't complain. It was a great wrench for Jim to have to give up driving 2 years ago, when his eye-sight started to fail.

Jim was modest in most respects. But he was extravagant about cars and clothes, particularly about shoes. Some podiatrist made a lasting impression on Jim when he was young when he told him he had perfect feet. Jim made it a point of honour to keep them perfect and to show them to best advantage in beautiful pigskin or calfskin hand made in St James. And that was only the beginning. The shoes would have to be transported back to London for proper repairs. Most people traveling to London learned to keep quiet about it in Jim's company after one experience of his shoes weighing down their luggage. And his children and grandchildren, when on OE, had embarrassing experiences being looked up and down by superior sales assistants when sent along to buy lisle socks or Sea Island cotton underpants from expensive stores.

Apart from art, Jim's tastes were decidedly low brow. He read voraciously – business and news magazines, but also historical romances and westerns. He loved John Wayne and Bob Hope movies. He was incurably romantic about New Zealand's pastoral tradition. He bought exotic deer, and exotic sheep, he loved the time he spent on sheep stations, Nga Tapa and some of the back blocks owned by the company in Gisborne for forestry. He dreamed of owning a station in the Southern Alps but that was one of the few things Vaughan put her foot down about.

It is in the art collection that he and George Fraser started, that he has lasting cultural impact. Although his own tastes were for the conventional and the historic, George and succeeding inspired art curators found in him a willing participant in building up a comprehensive and adventurous collection. Vaughan too was right behind the idea and an enthusiastic partner in it. The aim was to provide works which would be enjoyed by, and would challenge those who worked in the firm. The decision to acquire modern and challenging works was sometimes preceded by a good natured chortle and a comparison to his grandchildren's and later great grandchildren's artistic abilities. Today the Fletcher Trust Collection owes its size and quality to Jim's determination that it should represent the whole sweep of New Zealand painters and, of their work, the best.

We in his family are very proud indeed of the contribution Jim made to New Zealand in so many ways, but particularly to business in New Zealand. He was ahead of his time in many things. He always looked for the new and was optimistic about the future. He pioneered many new industries, foremost among them newsprint and steel. He was proud to be a New Zealander. Even in his last years he threw his

energies into building New Zealand business through Business in the Community. And through the Fletcher Trust he has made a substantial contribution to education and to youth.

We in the family are also grateful for what he gave to our lives. The great enthusiasm and interest in anything we undertook - the fact that he was never negative or critical and always loving to all of us. He opened windows on the world for us by his own wide interests. He loved his country and his family, and which he imparted to us by example. Jim had a great life. He achieved a great deal but never rested on what he had done. He wasn't proud. He was always interested in everyone and in new ideas. He was happy in his life. He missed his family and friends who have gone before him. He appreciated them all so much. The loss of his eldest son Jim was very hard indeed for him.

He never complained. Not even in the last few months when his health was really failing. He was appreciative always of the wonderful care he received from Ellen, Charlene, Gill and Melissa. It made it possible for him to stay at home with Vaughan. It is hard for us to say goodbye to this lovely and dear man. But we know how fortunate we have been in having him.