

The Age Friday, July 27, 2007- obituaries

Early leader in arcane world of computers

EDWARD TREVOR ROBINSON

COMPUTER PIONEER

22-6-1922 — 13-6-2007

By **JOHN O'NEILL** and **WAYNE FITZSIMMONS**

EDWARD “ET” Robinson, whose legacy is a robust and growing Australian information and technology industry that is a massive part of the economy, has died at a nursing home in Windsor after suffering a stroke earlier this year. He was almost 85.

In addition to the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research Automatic Computer unit that is housed at the Melbourne Museum — the world’s fourth digital computer that was designed and built in Australia in 1949 — there is also a Control Data 3200 that was built in Minneapolis in the United States to specifications laid out by Robinson in Melbourne.

Remarkably, 10 of these beasts were delivered to CSIRO and the Bureau of Census and Statistics between 1964 and 1968 and became part of the world’s first “wide area network” of computers — and sealed Control Data’s rise to national prominence.

Australia was a pioneer in the design and the use of digital computers, and remains a leader in the effective and efficient use of information and computing technology. In fact, to the end of last year Australia’s ICT industry had grown to nearly \$80 billion in annual revenues, while employing more than 500,000 workers. It was people such as Robinson who made it so.

By the 1970s, Robinson had established himself as a leader on the global IT scene after spending eight years in the US and Europe; in London he ran the Data 100 company. Back in Australia, he became chairman of Control Data and was on the board of several other IT companies all eager to use his unmatched knowledge and skills.

In 1989, the then federal minister for industry, commerce and technology, Senator John Button, invited him to be an adviser at a time when multinational IT companies were being encouraged to be more responsible in selling their wares and to ensure the notion of “free trade” was not impaired. Robinson, an effective advocate of these notions, was described by Senator Button as having “a great business sense and knew not only what was an effective deal for both sides in any negotiations, but how to sell it up and get it through”.

Born on a Pilbara sheep station between Marble Bar and Port Hedland, Robinson was educated at Wesley in Perth before being caught up in World War II. He joined the RAAF as an officer in 1943 and commanded a couple of radar stations. He liked to tell the story of facing a court martial for failing to obey instructions to shut the first station down each day for routine maintenance. But he had figured out that by not shutting the system down the reliability of the vacuum tubes increased dramatically. Shortly after he proved the point his practice became standard.

After the war, Robinson completed his science degree at the University of Western Australia and joined the Department of Defense, where he designed, built and set to work on a resistance signals code-breaking computer. Ultimately, he played a major role in the development of a digital impact predictor at the Woomera Rocket Range in time for the British Blue Streak rocket tests. (The British satellite launcher never made it into orbit, unlike the Australian Weapons Research Establishment's one and only successful foray into launching satellites in 1967.)

In 1994, Robinson was recognised for his pioneering efforts and awarded an Order of Australia; in 1999 he was awarded the Pearcey Medal, the most prestigious award for individual contributions to Australia's ICT industry. He is survived by his wife Kaye, daughter Katie and her husband Martin, sons David and Chris, and granddaughters Isabel and Eloise.

John O'Neill and Wayne Fitzsimmons were friends and colleagues of E. T. Robinson in the IT industry.