

The following article on James Gordon Bennett Jr. was prompted by a visit to Villa Namouna by Bob Wyckham.

As to what initiated of my interest in Bennett, it was my visit to your home in Beaulieu. I was fascinated by the house and gardens and checked out the man who made it famous.

Over the years I have written a series of articles for the Holy Trinity Newsletter, mostly about authors who have lived for a period of their lives in the South of France. Some, like Miles Davis, I wrote about only from personal interest.

Bob is Professor Emeritus, Simon Fraser University, Faculty of Business Administration, Vancouver, sometime visitor to the Cote d'Azur, and long-time member of Holy Trinity, Nice.

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Looking out the window on the *premiere étage* of the mansion, once the residence of James Gordon Bennett Jr. in Beaulieu, we can see Roman Abramovich's 162.5 metre yacht *Eclipse*. Conveniently, our host has a large professional-looking telescope with which we can view the helipad and watch the comings and goings on board.

Bennett, also a lover of grand yachts, was the son of James Bennett, founder and publisher of the *New York Herald*, said, in its time, to have been "the most profitable and powerful newspaper in the world." Having settled in Paris in 1877 to escape his scandalous activities in New York, Bennett Jr. established the *Paris Herald* which ultimately became the *International Herald Tribune* and, most recently, was renamed the *International New York Times*.

Referred to as Gordon Bennett to differentiate him from his father, he was an interesting synthesis of playboy, outlandishly conspicuous consumer and brilliant business strategist. He took over the *New York Herald* in 1866 from his father who had built his paper into the world's "most largely circulated journal."

Bennett followed in his father's footsteps as a significant journalistic innovator. A reading of the way his father started and engineered the growth of the *New York Herald* shows the basis of Gordon's journalistic entrepreneurship.

A biographer of the two Bennetts described the father, as "the first real reporter the American press had ever known." His father's penchant for sensationalism, self-promotion and innovation were clearly passed on to his son. Bennett Jr., however, "dwarfed the accomplishments of his parent."

So why France?

In 1877 Gordon Bennett was engaged to the pretty socialite Caroline May. At her parents' home on New Year's Eve, Bennett arrived late and drunk. Not a good start, but a minor blunder compared to his using the fireplace as a urinal. The scandal resulted in a broken engagement, a dual with her brother, and flight to Paris.

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When Gordon was quite young, his mother had moved the family to France to escape the notoriety of her husband in New York. Given that Bennett Jr. had been brought up and educated by tutors, primarily in France, it was natural for him to seek Paris as a refuge. Although a poor student, Gordon had a decent command of French but unfortunately, not his “father’s facile skill as a writer.”

Not content with the Parisian climate, Gordon Bennett soon found his way to the south of France and Beaulieu-sur-Mer.

Innovative journalism

According to one of Gordon Bennett’s biographers, “Beyond reporting events, the art of creating them is the greatest of journalistic attainments.”

Gordon Bennett had this in spades. Sending **Henry Morton Stanley**¹ out after Livingstone was a classic example.

Dr. David Livingstone, missionary and explorer, had been ranging over Africa for 30 years keeping the English-speaking world entranced with his exploits. In 1869, while attempting to survey the watersheds of East Africa for the Royal Geographical Society he had dropped out of sight, was presumed lost, and perhaps dead. And the public wanted to know.

Stanley, freelancing for the *New York Herald* covering Lord Napier’s 1868 British expeditionary force in Abyssinia, was recalled by Bennett to Paris. Here he was told to find Livingstone regardless of the cost, “draw a thousand pounds and when you have gone through that, draw another thousand and so on and so on, but find Livingstone.”

After a meandering sea voyage which touched on the Suez Canal, Constantinople, Odessa, Persia and Bombay (none of which had anything to do with finding Livingstone), Stanley finally landed in Zanzibar, Tanzania. All this took some fifteen months. It was now December 31, 1870. Livingstone could have been anywhere by that time.

Marching with his company of bearers and armed guards twelve miles a day, following his nose, Stanley headed for central Tanzania, then south, then west towards Lake Tanganyika. After many months of rough travel, hearing that a white man had been seen at Ujiji on the shores of the lake, Stanley came across Livingstone by sheer chance. It was November 10, 1871. It was thus that the phrase “Dr. Livingston I presume.” became part of the English lexicon.

The audacious Stanley and Livingstone affair was a journalistic winner; promoting an ill-fated **expedition to the arctic**, not so much. Ordinary folk were keenly interested in whether there was a Northwest Passage and who would be the first to reach the North Pole. Backing George DeLong’s disastrous 1879 voyage which, after two years at sea, was crushed in the ice and abandoned off the Lena River in Siberia, while a tragedy, still increased readership.

¹ Henry Morton Stanley, was born John Rowlands, an orphan, in London in 1841. The tale of Rowlands’ escape from a Liverpool workhouse, running away to sea, the kindness of a New Orleans merchant whose name he took, his escapades in the armies of the Confederacy and of the Union and his beginning in journalism while in the Union Navy make fascinating reading.

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On land, the crew broke up into three groups only one of which survived by locating a Siberian village. A telegraph to the United States Navy brought a representative of the *Herald* to get the news.

A final example of creating sensational news to build circulation was the **Wild Animal Hoax**. Starting on the front page of the *New York Herald*, Nov 9, 1874, and continuing for a number of pages throughout the paper, the article told of wild animals escaping from the Central Park Zoo, beasts marauding through the streets of the city mauling and killing people, citizens hiding in fear, police hunting the ferocious animals, the Mayor's proclamation of a state of emergency; and then, only at the end of the article, did the reader learn that this, "entire story.... is a pure fabrication. Not one word of it is true."

You can find a copy of the amusing illustrations for this story at the following web address. The cartoons perhaps explain why the public quickly forgave the *Herald* for this hoax.

http://hoaxes.org/archive/permalink/the_central_park_zoo_escape/

Although it caused panic and was denounced by politicians and rival newspapers, many readers found it farcical and circulation certainly did not suffer.

Two very profitable unique elements incorporated into the *Herald* by Gordon Bennett were the Personal Column and Real Estate listings. Most of the items in the Personals had to do with selling sex. Jealous competitors ranted against these advertisements drawing attention of a morality crusader in the 1890's. Fearing prosecution, the Personals were dropped and this highly valuable stream of revenue dried up.

Wanting to exploit his extensive his real estate holdings in Washington Heights (north of Upper Manhattan on the Hudson River), Bennett began a section of real estate news and advertising. This was a very profitable addition to his paper.

Being an **early adopter of technology**, Bennett used it to keep ahead of his competitors. Before the United States had a weather service, Bennett's *Herald* had one. He was keenly interested in shipping on the Atlantic and featured shipping news in his paper. So, he required information on the weather to support this effort.

His father had been one of the first newspaper people to adopt the telegraph for the transmission of news. Bennett Jr. was a prodigious user of the telegraph, both on land and under the sea. As the largest customer of the monopoly Western Union, Bennett was quick to agree to join J.W. Mackay to create a rival cable company, laying a new trans-Atlantic cable and thus drastically reducing his telegraph costs.

Bennett pioneered photojournalism and was among the first to see the advantages of radio in the communication of news. He brought Marconi to the US and hired him to report on the 1899 America's Cup race.

One of Bennett Jr.'s great skills was identifying writing talent. He hired people like Walt Whitman and Mark Twain to work on his paper. Beginning in 1868, Samuel Clemons, aka Mark Twain, wrote a column for the *Herald*, each week, for the rest of his life.

Bennett's definition of a great editor reveals something of his journalistic philosophy, "one who knows where hell is going to break loose next and how to get a reporter first on the scene."

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Escapades

Some of his antics were crazy and some just sophomoric. No doubt, at least a few of these tales are apocryphal or much embellished, but they are fun.

In one particular Paris restaurant he was known to have been seen yanking the table clothes from under the cutlery and glasses of each table as he passed, to the consternation of the guests. Apparently, he always promptly paid the invoice sent by the *patron*. It was said that he had been seen on the streets of Beaulieu lighting his cigars with American banknotes and chucking the still lit bills into the gutter. Wild parties in the garden of his villa with young *demi-mondaines* and nude dancers popping out of silver platters were the talk of Beaulieu.

Gordon Bennett started his tomfoolery at a young age. Returning to New York from Paris in his youth he fell in with the fast crowd of the young and wealthy at Delmonico's. It was said that it took little to get him drunk and he sometimes stayed drunk for days at a time. Once, when a waiter was slow in delivering a bottle of Champaign, Gordon went up to Delmonico's bar and demanded service. Kidded by a small man at the bar Jr. took a swing at him, the man punched back and knocked him out. Later he took some pride in the fact that his assailant was Billy Edwards a light heavy weight boxer.

Bennett and the gang loved to drive drunk with horses and coaches around the New York countryside in the middle of the night. This was a lark he had learned in Paris where he was said to tear around Paris in the early hours in a coach and four drunk and in the nude.

One of the most notoriously ingenious and wacky figures of his era, James Gordon Bennett, ran his newspaper from his Champs Elysees apartment in Paris, his twenty room seaside villa in Beaulieu, his yacht, both called Namouna, or from La Reserve² or whatever restaurant he favoured that day.

Well known for his creativity, Bennett organized a horse-drawn mail-coach service running from the *Herald's* office on Place Masséna in Nice to La Réserve in Beaulieu. Travelling at six miles an hour, this high-speed service created so much dust for others on the road that officials forced it to slow down.

So that his friends could make reservations at La Réserve, Bennett paid to have a telephone installed at the restaurant in 1891, a first at that time in this part of the world. Even today, La Réserve de Beaulieu proudly displays paintings of Bennett's yachts and other memorabilia.

Gordon Bennett's temper could flare quickly and intensely. Not allowed to have lunch on the terrace of his favourite restaurant in Monaco, (management had decided that only drinks were to be served on the terrace) he solved the problem by buying the restaurant. And then, to make sure the message was clear, he gave the restaurant to his best loved waiter, Ciro. Over time this "humble Egyptian" waiter created what was said to be a "gastronomic Mecca."

Bennett the man

² Carved into the rock below the terrace of the restaurant established in 1880 were basins filled with salt water designed so that fishermen could unload their catch and keep it fresh for the kitchen. These became known by the fishermen as "la reserve," hence the name of the restaurant and hotel.

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In a memoir published after Bennett's death, a Parisian lady of his intimate acquaintance, described him as a man who had only a "thin veneer of civilization". "He had not been tenderly reared and had never known the gentle culture imparted to most children by their mother".

His fear of Caroline May's brother was not transient. Some years later, the Parisian lady, noted above, said she was surprised one evening to find that Gordon was wearing a suit of mail under his clothes. Bennett explained that Frederick May had just arrived in Paris and he was taking no chances.

His management style reflected his imperious manner and apparent lack of formal business training. He demanded complete and continuing devotion, without complaint, to himself and the *Herald* from those who worked for him. He used "demotion, reduction of pay, undeserved suspension and designed humiliation" to test and control his subordinates. Only those who passed these tests would he trust.

Bennett was "difficult to approach and hard to deal with". He was a "man of moods and seldom made an effort to restrain them". Once he ordered two senior executives to come to Paris. When they arrived, he said what the hell are you doing here and sent them back to New York.

A trusted senior manager, in the latter part of his career, lost favour and as punishment was given prescribed hours and someone to check to make sure he kept them. Working noon 'till midnight was devastating to a man in the twilight of his career. He quit and became the Associate Editor of the *New York Times*.

Bennett's work ethic was as volatile as his social behaviour. Waking in fine weather and in a good mood he would get to work; waking with a hangover on a foul day he was known to have dumped the sack of mail from the *Herald* off his yacht into the Rade de Beaulieu and gone off to lunch.

All was not negative. While in other New York newspaper "offices going to press was a scramble; in the *Herald* it was governed with military precision."

Bennett "in his last years mellowed and became a delightful host; also more moderate in his handling of men."

There was a magnanimous side to this over bearing character. For a period, Bennett had required the *Herald* to play down any successes of opera star Emma Eames because he had been told by a rival singer that Emma had bad-mouthed her to New York society. When he found that this was untrue, he asked to see Emma, told her the story and asked to be forgiven.

Bennett the sportsman

As a quite young man, Gordon Bennett's love of sailing, and his personal audacity, gained him entrance to the august circle of the New York Yacht Club, a place barred to his father. Racing his yachts across the Atlantic was his forte. When only twenty-six, he was elected Commodore of the NYYC. Some referred to him as the Commodore for the rest of his life.

In the 1870's Bennett introduced the game of polo to the United States and later helped found the Westchester Polo Club. He was quite an enthusiastic player in his early days.

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His sporting interests were wide-ranging as shown by the Gordon Bennett Cups which were awarded for international yachting, automobile racing, ballooning (Coupe Aéronautique Gordon Bennett), airplane racing and even football (soccer)

But Bennett's greatest love was yachting which he expressed by building, owning and racing sailing and steam yachts. In 1857, at the tender age of 16, Gordon had the 77 ton *Rebecca*, which made way, a few years later, for the 170 ton *Henrietta*. Not too shabby for such a young man. *Dauntless* followed and was the precursor to his first steam yacht, the *Namouna*³.

She was described as, "the most magnificent steam yacht of her day. At 616 tons and 246 feet *Namouna* was, by far, larger than the next largest. The *Namouna* caused quite a stir when she arrived in the bay of Villefranche-sur-Mer in 1883.

Although the Mediterranean was his favourite venue, Bennett sailed *Namouna* up the Nile, to India and Ceylon, and regularly across the Atlantic. A skilled sailor, Gordon was his own navigator. While at sea, he was regularly in touch with his people at the *Herald* by telegraph. Among Bennett's many illustrious guests on his Mediterranean cruises were Lady Randolph Churchill⁴ and her son Winston.

It was curious when, a few years later, Bennett sold the *Namouna* and purchased a much smaller steamer called the *Polynia*. The answer to this riddle was Bennett's pièce de résistance, the yacht *Lysistrata*.⁵

Costing more than three million dollars, the *Lysistrata* was launched in 1900. At 2,082-tons and 314 feet long she was big by any standards. A crew of 100 was required to maintain the three decks of suites. She was built with all the modern conveniences of the day and even had a resident cow for fresh milk. The luminescent owl's eyes,⁶ which adorned each side of the bow, lit up at night. The anchor from the *Lysistrata* can still be seen in the garden of the Bristol in Beaulieu.

³ Georges Bizet's 1871 opera *Djamileh* is based on Alfred de Musset's 1832 poem *Namouna*; *Namouna* was also the name of an 1860's ballet by Edouard Laio. Why Bennett chose this name is unknown.

⁴ Gordon knew Lady Churchill from his days at the Jockey Club in New York. She was then Jenny Jerome, the daughter of Leonard Jerome who owned the Jockey Club.

⁵ According to Wikipedia, in the year 411 BC with the war between Sparta and Athens having gone on for 20 years, the women, lead by the feminist Lysistrata, barricaded themselves in the Acropolis and refused to have sex with their men until the war ended. Bennett's rationale for this name is not known.

⁶ Owls were Bennett's lucky talisman. There were owls carved into the pillars around the entrance of the Herald Building in New York.

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Charitable giving

From what is known about Bennett Jr.'s benevolence, it seems he was much more likely to provide Bennett Cups for yacht races and polo than donations to charities. That said, he did once give \$100,000 to help alleviate distress in Ireland; and he had a free ice fund for hot weather relief in the tenements of New York. Touchingly, Bennett always bought an animal figurine from a poor old woman in Nice and installed them in the garden of Namouna cottage. He also contributed to Beaulieu charities and shipyards, and hosted village street parties with musicians and food for the townspeople

Gordon provided some of the funds needed to expand St. Michael's Anglican church in Beaulieu in 1903. Within a year the building, with its new bell tower, was able to accommodate three hundred.

Namouna Cottage

This attractive 20-room villa is set in large terraced gardens in the Petite Afrique *quartier* of Beaulieu-sur-mer. Called Belvédère when purchased by Gordon Bennett in 1903, he changed the name to Namouna. According to one account, Bennett had begun renting the villa in 1892. Namouna later became the home of François Coty, the founder of Coty Cosmetics.

Currently the Namouna Cottage, now styled the Villa Namouna, is a holiday rental. Photos on the website www.villanamouna.com provide a glimpse of its luxury. Even today, Villa Namouna displays the charm of the Belle Epoque with, "marble tiled floors, sculptured wrought-iron balustrades and marble stairs leading up to the domed ceilings of the two mezzanine floors and the apartments".

The villa's vast terraced gardens were filled with orange groves, and the lawn was covered with animal statuary. Bennett was particularly fond of owls—his lucky mascots—and he adorned the seven Pekinese dogs that roamed the grounds with diamond collars. An elaborate cage in the garden housed a monkey given to him by the Emperor of Ethiopia during an Asian cruise.

Namesakes galore

Gordon Bennett has a multitude of namesakes. There is a boulevard in Beaulieu and an avenue in Paris. There is a lake in Alaska, a river and a mountain in Africa and an island off Siberia. Herald Square in New York has a Bennett statue. There is also a rather dated expression used in England during his time. *Gordon Bennett!* Apparently signified incredulity at some outrageous thing done.

Nearing the end

The period after 1883 was difficult for Bennett and the *Herald*. The now famous Joseph Pulitzer arrived in New York City in 1883 intending to revive the *New York World*. He started a price war to which the *Herald* followed to its peril. To cover its losses the *Herald* had to increase advertising prices which upset large retailers. Embarrassed by the *World's* innovative approach to department store display advertising, Bennett had to follow suit.

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Meanwhile, the *Paris Herald* was losing a million dollars a year and the *London Herald* was a failure. For some years Bennett tried unsuccessfully to kill his money losing *Evening Telegram* which cannibalized the *Herald's* morning circulation.

When the young William R. Hearst acquired the *New York Journal* and initiated a circulation war with the *World*, Bennett and the *Herald* escaped uptown. Constructing the Herald Building on what is still known as Herald Square turned out to be a stroke of luck. Fortunately for the *Herald*, new department stores and train stations, catering to a more up-scale population, brought back profitability.

Married late

At the grand age of 73, Gordon Bennett married an American in Paris. His marriage to Maud Potter, Baroness de Reuter, widow of George de Reuter, almost seems like a business amalgamation of the *Herald* with Reuters news agency.

Interestingly, Bennett, born into a Roman Catholic family, became an Episcopalian before his marriage to Maude.

The ending

All things come to an end, even those who flash through life on the Cote d'Azur. It seems fitting that the asteroid 305 Gordonia, streaking through space, is named after him.

Just before his 77th birthday, Bennett read in his own newspaper that he was ill. Incensed, he cabled New York that he was well. Two days later, on May 14, 1918 he died in Beaulieu sur mer.

Local dignitaries, including the Mayor of Nice, gathered on the platform of the Beaulieu railway station to see his body on its way to Paris. His funeral service was held at Trinity Episcopal Church in Paris. He is buried in the Cimetière de Passy.

Postscript

Over the years, it is estimated that Gordon took \$30 million out of *Herald* for his own use. He left the company in desperate financial shape at his death.

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