



# Kimberley Society

## Book Note

***No Regrets : A Bicycle Dreaming from Belgium to Broome* by Antoine Bloemen. Hesperian Press, 2014. Soft Cover, 213 pages, illustrated, ISBN 978-0-85905-589-5, RRP \$40.00.**

When the Chief Justice of WA the Honourable Wayne Martin launched this book last November, the audience comprised the cream of the legal profession, prominent politicians including a former Premier, and even some prominent doctors. Little could Antoine Bloemen's mother have envisaged such an event and such recognition for her son. His rise from the humblest of backgrounds in rural Belgium to magisterial authority in the Kimberley must be one of the country's most remarkable success stories.

Antoine was born at the time of Nazi occupied Belgium, left school at 14 having been repeatedly told that he was a slow learner and educationally subnormal. He went to sea with the Belgian Merchant navy and supplemented his income in a variety of ways that could have resulted in his appearance before a magistrate such as himself in later life. He left ship in the USA and after some menial jobs (he was not cut out to be a baker) he was drafted into the Airborne Division of the army and because of his limited English, was surprised that he was expected to jump out of planes rather than fly them. On gaining promotion to the equivalent of a lance corporal, he was forced, against his will, to acquire more education. He married his teacher, had a couple of children, and, following an Australian holiday, his wife decided that Australia was the best place to live. He rejoined the family with some reluctance.

Inspired and supported by his wife, he then read for a law degree at UWA. On graduating he set up his own law firm eventually specialising in car insurance! It was some years later, following his appointment as the resident magistrate at Port Hedland, that his rise to celebrity status started. Roebourne was the setting for that the now famous story of his gift of a bicycle to a recalcitrant Aboriginal boy. This episode is the preface for the book. In both the Pilbara and the Kimberley, his unorthodox sentencing, compassion for the disadvantaged Aborigines in particular, endeared him to many in the local community but not all of those wishing to stick to the letter of the law. As he remarks, he endeavoured not to confuse the law with justice. So started his involvement with Aboriginal advancement.

Antoine, or Tony to his friends, speaks rapidly and often at length, with a distinct Flemish accent. His book romps along; also best read imagining his accent. There are few books nowadays that I can read a single sitting, but this was one of them. His book is entertaining, amusing, self deprecating and uplifting. Some episodes have been transposed to the medium of TV, for the programme "*The Circuit*" was based on his experiences.

Finally, a personal story. At the end of my time working in the Kimberley, I wished to work as a volunteer at a hospital in Tanzania. Certified copies of my qualification and registration certificates were needed by the Ministry of Health in Dar es Salaam. The stamp and signature of a JP and Shire President were not acceptable. I consulted Tony. "Are you a Notary Public?" I asked. "Indeed, here I am everything," he answered and he brought along his full panoply of rubber stamps which he attached with glee and signed to ten copies. "That will fix them," he grinned. And it did.

*Hamish McGlashan*