

He was raised in poverty, 'failed' kindergarten, wagged school as often as he could, is semi-illiterate... and now runs a multi-million empire that is admired around the world. The Mildura Weekly's ALAN ERSKINE this week caught up with...

# Tom O'Toole, the Beechworth Baker

IF Beechworth's Tom O'Toole ever wants to give up the bakery business, he's a shoe-in for stand-up comedy.

The 58-year-old exhibited all the passion of a keen teen as he enthralled, entertained motivated and amused 100 people at a Mildura Working Man's Club business breakfast on Wednesday.

The animated grandfather, Australia's most famous baker, took us on a roller-coaster ride through his life in an animated and enthralling talk that had many of the hallmarks of John Cleese at his very best.

But the overall message was serious – if you want to get ahead in life, it's up to YOU. Grab every opportunity by the throat, don't whinge and moan 'why me?'... after all, as Tom and many others before him have said – you're a long time dead!

The after-breakfast 'entertainment' started even before Workers manager John Harlock had finished his welcome address.

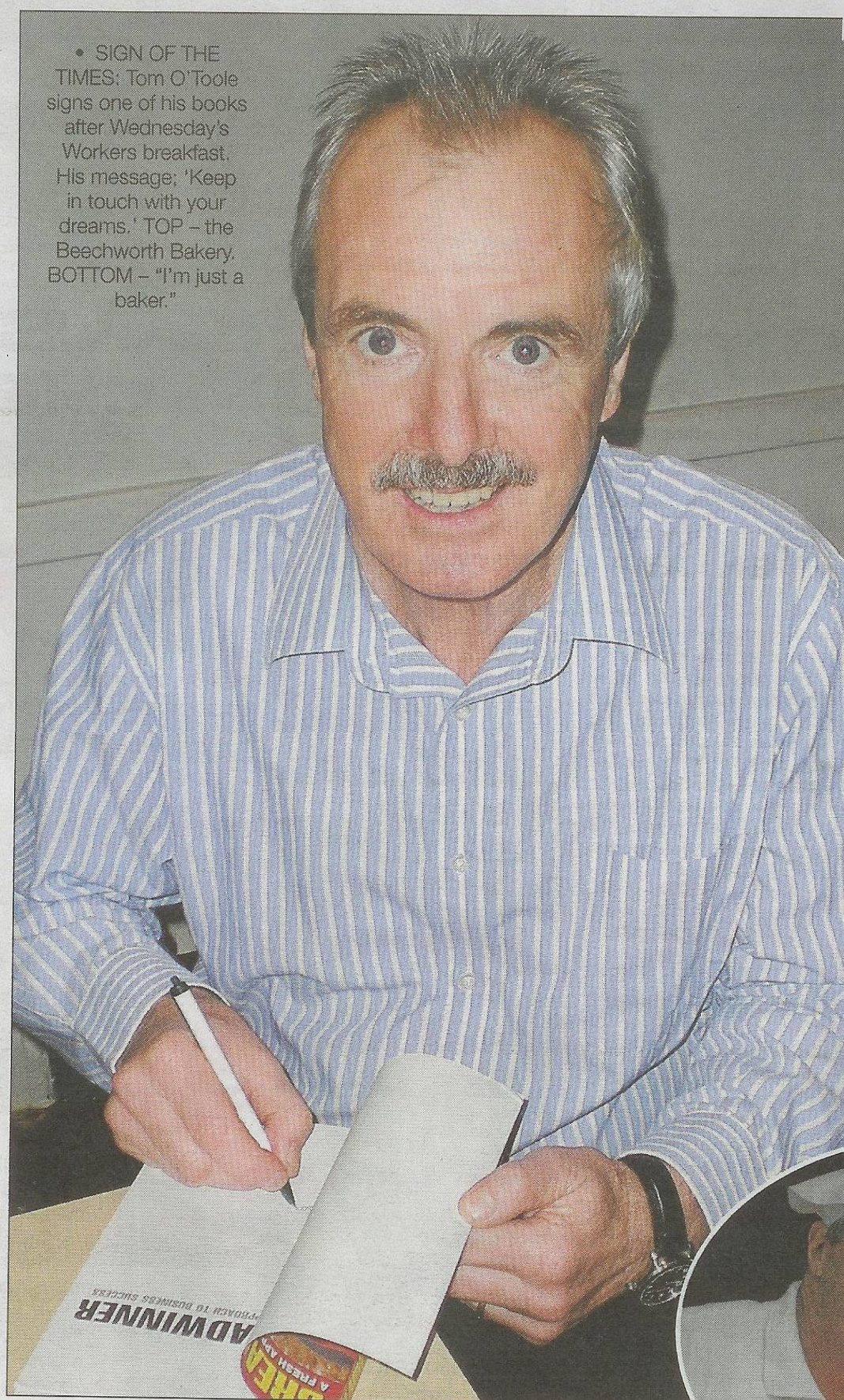
"God, don't feed 'em all that crap, I'm just a simple baker with a simple message," roared O'Toole into his lapel microphone as he strode to the stage and took over, eye-balling a packed room that included Workers staffers, students from Mildura Senior College and St Joseph's College, and business partners of the Workers.

## Honest and blunt

O'Toole was honest, blunt, and got straight to the point. If his swearing or antics offended anyone, too bad... listen to the message.

The self-confessed kindergarten dropout who says he still doesn't know the ABC described coming from a dirt poor family of seven. Growing up around Tocumwal, he struggled through primary school, leaving only because he got too big for the desk. His younger brother beat him into high school.

But he had a dream... to become rich... and he makes no apologies for that. He grins as he makes the sign of the cross and apologies to the Catholic education students when discussing a person's spiritual needs. "Believe me, I've been poor, and there's nothing spiritual



• SIGN OF THE TIMES: Tom O'Toole signs one of his books after Wednesday's Workers breakfast. His message: 'Keep in touch with your dreams.' TOP – the Beechworth Bakery. BOTTOM – "I'm just a baker."

about poverty," he says.

After leaving school at 14, Tom worked for brief periods at a flour mill and then a cordial factory, before starting as a baker's apprentice. He started up his own bakery at the age of 21, and there were plenty of people – 'dream-takers' – who told

him he was mad, that the town was dying, and he'd go broke.

He'd already changed his name by deed poll – from Toole, to O'Toole. He didn't want to be known as a 'toole.' Things were tough, and got tougher when his wife ran off and left him... with a big

Fijian. He says wryly that's when he fell in love with her.

But with two young kids and a business to look after, Tom found the pressure almost too much, exacerbated day after day

when he got home from work to look after the kids, cook the tea, and watch all the bad news of the day on the television.

At one stage he admits to putting a loaded gun in his mouth. "Believe me, it's a lot colder and more oily than a sausage roll," he says.

## Living your dream

A Lifeline counsellor ("God bless 'em") told him to turn the TV off, take one day at a time, and live his dream. The real Tom O'Toole probably came alive about then. He became a driven man, and makes brilliant use of a slide show to demonstrate a slow but steady rise to the top, and his so-called 'secret recipes' for success.

He fills in his talks with some great anecdotes, amusing stories, and a lot of home-spun philosophy. When he first took over the derelict bakery, it was mouse and rat-infested, and a resident possum called in daily to chomp on the pasties. Time and again they 're-located' it to the bush, but it always returned, only disappearing, Tom says with a twinkle in the eye, when the Chinese take-away opened up a few doors away.

Tom had trouble getting capital to get started. The bank told him he was wasting his time. Beechworth was a dying town, especially after what was known locally

But Tom didn't take any notice of the doom and gloom forecasters. He persisted. Day after day he encouraged his staff to listen to the customer, look after them, smile, give them good service that goes along with a good product. He started with two part-timers, and ended up with 74.

Word spread. People started beating a path to Beechworth, population just on 3000, to get a taste of this livewire and his products – and the bakery grew... and grew. Now it heads an empire that serves around 900,000 customers a year, with a turnover of more than \$12 million. Beechworth is a changed town.

People came from all around Australia – and overseas – to learn his secrets of success. "They don't realise it's staring them in the face," Tom says. "Business is so simple that most people miss it."

## Invest in yourself

Other bakery owners still can't believe it. He tells them it's easy to pick up one mistake... a lot harder to congratulate staff on the 99 things they're doing right. He tells them to invest in themselves... invest in the dream. When he ran out of room at the bakery, Tom bought the place next door, and then the vacant shop on the other side. He ran out of room again, so he headed upstairs.

When a state-of-the-art, purpose-built bakery went broke in Echuca, Tom bought the place and got some good staff to run it. There were many who said the move was doomed from the start, but Tom's philosophies and business principles took the Echuca business from a turnover of \$300,000 to \$1.5 million in just a few years. Last year it turned over \$4 million, and Tom says it's on target to beat the success of the Beechworth bakery.

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as 'the lunatic asylum' shut down, with the loss of 700 jobs.



# Tom O'Toole, the Beechworth Baker

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Since then he's opened up other 'franchises' in Ballarat, Albury, Bendigo and Healsville. The next stage, he says, is up to his new business partner – a former apprentice – and his wife. "They own 25 percent of the profits," he says. "I have 75 percent of the liability!" He credits much of the success to the support of his wife Christine, although he says he's reluctant to let go her hand... every time he does she goes shopping!

Tom says Australia has more than its fair share of 'knockers', people just not prepared to have a go, but he says this is still the luckiest country in the world, and if people didn't believe that, they should visit countries like India, or Bangladesh. "This must be a great country," he says, "you don't see boat-loads of people leaving our

shores for Afghanistan, do you?"

He says it's up to businesses to invest in their staff, to encourage them, to compliment them, to show them the way, to give them responsibility, to make them feel part of the success story. He organises regular staff get-togethers ...he's already gone from a dictatorship to a management team... they even get the kindergarten kids in during quiet months to make their own biscuits and bread. Staff sometimes come to work in their pyjamas, or dress up as clowns, "to get them out of their comfort zone." They are encouraged to pull together, help each other out, do that little bit extra, those little extra things that make a big difference.

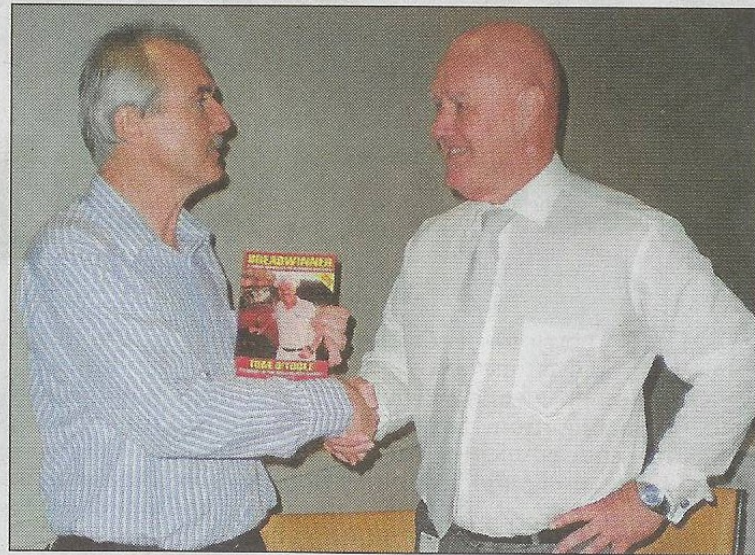
When he came up with the idea of putting a band upstairs to play one day a week, the dream-takers told him the ideas wouldn't work. Tom wants

more ideas like it – on the days the band plays, the bakery takes up to \$36,000 across the counter!

He advises people to have a goal, put some fire in the belly, and enjoy the journey. He tells the story of the 69-year-old who recently asked if he could start an apprenticeship. "He's 70 now, and in his 2nd year," Tom says happily. "God I hope he makes it!"

Tom says his success in business doesn't make him an expert. The credit, he says, is due largely to great staff – "and I've got around 260 of the buggers now." Most of them now tell him what to do, and he doesn't mind that in the least. He knows his businesses are in good hands. "After all, these are the people who are taking ownership," he says.

"They are the learners of today, and the learners of today are the ones who will inherit the future."



• THANKS MATE: Beechworth baker Tom O'Toole (LEFT) is congratulated on an outstanding presentation by Working Man's Club manager John Harlock.