



in the
AFTERMATH
OF A GENIUS



AS GEORGE DANIELS, the most important watchmaker of our times, passed away last October, he was leaving the soil thoroughly cultivated for further generations of independent watchmakers.

BY THOMAS BYCZKOWSKI

Usually a genius is defined in a late period, at least decades after his death, as successors or spectators who are slowly trotting along at their own speed decide that this seemingly fanatic inventor with his crazy ideas actually was not that crazy after all, but grasped the world at an angle not receptive to others.

George Daniels was such a genius, yet he had more luck—as he was able to pluck the fruits of his work during his lifetime. It is barely believable that just thirty years ago, this man, who ended up eventually hiding away in a mansion on the northernmost tip of the Isle of Man, would be rocking the watch world with an invention, nobody had been thinking of or even been waiting for.

However, the odds were against this man, who most likely was born on the 19th of August 1929 into a slum in northern London as the illegitimate child of a rigid puritanical mother with a violent drunkard as a stepfather. The unwanted twelfth child in this family had a hard start, as he later said.

But he soon learned to take his fate into his own hands: sweating away in the steaming heat of a London mattress company by the age of 14, he swore that from now on he would follow his own path. And that led him to a watchmaker in the neighborhood where he was learning as much as he could about this tiny universe that opened up with the lid of a watchcase.

He became an electrician, and—still

in military deployment to Palestine—repaired watches for his comrades. Upon returning to London, he finally was able to turn to watchmaking in evening school. Through his life he had acquired a Yorkshire Terrier-like stubbornness. And the stamina to fulfill: He sweated away in 16-hour shifts repairing and fixing watches, until in 1969 he decided to build his own pocket watch.

“Nobody wanted a pocket watch at that time,” he said, “I had no buyer, no idea of marketing.” Just an unbendable will to succeed—and the right friends: Cecil Clutton, for example, the expert of historic motorcars, clocks and organs. He bought Daniel’s first watch without blinking twice. And showed it to his influential



“DANIELS WAS BANGING ON THE DOORS OF THE BIGGEST WATCH COMPANIES AGAIN AND AGAIN, TRYING TO CONVINCe THEM ABOUT HIS ESCAPEMENT.”

friends. Suddenly the young man was the most sought-after watchmaker of the time: Everybody wanted a Daniels pocket watch. He ended up building 37, each meticulously crafted in his workshop from scratch.

In his prime in the seventies he was furious that “those damn electricians came along trying to tell me that they knew it better.” The quartz crisis seemed to take down mechanical watchmaking like a tsunami. Still, in his stubborn Terrier-like ways, Daniels was convinced that he would be able to build a watch that was better than a battery-powered timekeeper. “Not in the short term, there the accuracy of a quartz watch will always succeed. But in the long term, as my watch should be able to run for 15 to 20 years without maintenance.”

Eventually he found the right ingredients. His coaxial escapement, in which the “huge sliding action of the normal escapement is replaced by small pushes of the anchor against the wheel,” essentially zeroing out the use of lubricants, which are the central focus of regular servicing concerning mechanical watches.

His achievement ended up being the most important invention of the last 250 years. and it was a manifesto for handmade watches. which in Daniel’s view had to be more than just handmade: “A watch has to look as if it has appeared out of thin air,” was his credo. “It’s all about finish and shine,” he used to say, well aware that his fellow watchmakers, as soon as they picked up a watch to view it with their loupe, were not looking in admiration: “They were simply looking for imperfections.” >>



The 35th Anniversary Watch as seen from behind

But nobody had been waiting for a British watchmaker to shake up the conservative Swiss watchworld: In the late seventies and eighties Daniels was knocking on the doors of the biggest companies again and again, trying to convince the watchmakers of Rolex, Patek Philippe, Omega and the likes of the superiority of his escapement. After the umpteenth prototype—Daniels has outfitted several wristwatches of these aforementioned companies with his system—his stubbornness was overcome by desperation and he retreated back to the Isle of Man to enjoy his other pastime adventures: namely resurrecting and racing his magnificent Bentleys and other vintage cars. “In me you find a man who is both a successful and accomplished race car driver and a watchmaker,” he said as he was sitting in his living room last year, blanket over his knees, cup of tea in his hands, smile on his face. We were waiting for the only apprentice he ever had to show up to discuss their latest project: the Daniels Co-Axial 35th anniversary wristwatch.

As he arrived at Daniel’s place, tweed jacket, smart jeans and dark blue Jaguar, Roger Smith set down a box with the first prototype of the new caliber. Just down the road from Daniel’s mansion Smith had put up his own workshop after learning the traditional British watchmaking ways from the old master. Since then he has worked himself up the ladder of fame of independent watchmaking. >>

The presentation that accompanies the George Daniels 35th Anniversary Watch





The caliber of the Daniels 35th-anniversary watch

And therewith he set a mark for generations of independent watchmakers to come: You can play a role in today's watch world, if only you work hard enough—and your work is good enough. “There will always be a young watchmaker to push the limits, reaching for the extraordinary,” Daniels said. But how to achieve it? “I have written enough books on watchmaking,” the old master grunted, “just follow my advice.”

Later that autumn day, Daniels was wheeled out to the backyard of his mansion where seven of his most beloved cars were waiting in the stables-turned-garages. The Birkin Bentley, for example, a supercharged 1929 racecar converted into a red single seater—and maybe the most famous of all Bentley cars—had just returned from the museum in Crewe where “they would have loved to buy the car, only they cannot afford it,” Daniels chuckled.

Surrounded with memorabilia of his own career, Daniels could truly look back on a life fully filled with adventures and honors. He was well looked after by two caring nurses and chatting up his friends that dropped in on regular visits. Like Roger Smith, who said: “Since we were planning the anniversary watch, George is pleased as punch again. We have hours long of vivid discussions—like in the old times.” It is a once in a lifetime chance



for Smith as well: even though he today is ranked as one of the top watchmakers in the world—his Series 2 watch being highly sought after—it is an honor to put life to the ideas of his old master for the last time. This is what collectors grasped immediately for the £142,000 masterpieces are all either pre-sold or reserved.

George Daniels passed away peacefully in his home on the 21st of October 2011. In an interview he said that he had done everything he wanted, “succeeded in everything I set my mind to,” and quoted another genius: “Einstein said, ‘One man in his lifetime can comprehend only one philosophy. When he has done his best,

he leaves it to others to continue.’” Upon which Daniels leaned back and added: “I am perfectly happy with that.”

His car collection was sold off in an auction at Goodwood Festival of Speed on the 29th of June, making it the hottest auction of the year. Bids for his famous watch collection were placed to Sotheby's on November 6th of 2012. The proceeds went to the George Daniels Educational Trust to help gifted young people who lack the means to follow their dreams. Even though the late Daniels was a celebrity in his own way, the man who worked himself up to the Olympus of watchmaking never forgot where he came from. ●

A young George Daniels at the bench, working on one of his legendary pocket watches.

