

JAMES GERALD GULLIVER
CVO, BSc, MSc, DUniv(Glas), FICE, FRSA

James Gulliver was among the most gifted Scottish businessmen of his generation, combining an acute and wide ranging intelligence with prodigious energy and drive. During his years as a top manager and entrepreneur he captured the interest of the City and excited the financial press through the scale and diversity of his commercial activities. Between 1973, when he formed his first investment vehicle, and his death twenty three years later, there was scarcely a year in which he did not initiate a number of high profile bids, mergers, investments and acquisitions. His most substantial achievement was the formation and development of the company now named Safeway plc, but known for nineteen years as Argyll Group plc. From the unpromising base of a modest investment in a Manchester meat business with very small profits and sales of around £20 million per annum, Gulliver and his team grew a company which reported in 1997 sales of over £7 billion, and profits of £420 million with a market capitalisation of £4 billion.

Within the Scottish business community James Gulliver might be best remembered for his daring and imaginative bid to acquire the Distillers company in 1985. His analysis of Distillers' weakness and his strategic appreciation of what should be done to exploit the latent brand strength and international potential of Distillers products made the acquisition of Distillers inevitable. Sadly, Distillers' management elected to ally themselves with the then management of Guinness, depriving Gulliver of his great ambition to lead, from Scotland, an international scale consumer products business. After his failure to acquire Distillers Gulliver re-shaped his life, retiring from the food retailing sector, spending his time on his estate in Scotland and involving himself in a range of business and cultural activities until his death in Edinburgh in 1996.

James Gerald Gulliver was born in Campbeltown on the 17th August 1930, the son of a successful local grocer. He was a distinguished pupil and *dux* of Campbeltown Grammar School. At Glasgow University he graduated in civil engineering with first class honours and obtained a Fulbright scholarship which enabled him to carry on his studies at the Georgia Institute of Technology. His national service was spent as a short-service Commissioned Officer in the Royal Navy.

Initially his career in management consultancy was directed towards projects to which he could apply his engineering skills. From there he progressed into general consultancy, and his work on the construction subsidiary of Associated British Foods in 1965 so impressed Garfield Weston that he invited Gulliver to examine his somewhat unsuccessful retail food business, Fine Fare. Then aged thirty-five, Gulliver rapidly assessed the emerging opportunities for large scale food businesses willing to invest in self-service supermarkets and in the technical and marketing support needed to optimise the financial performance of this new retail concept. He was appointed Managing Director of Fine Fare in 1965 and Chairman in 1967. Fine Fare became a lead player in the development of superstores and a key contributor to the profitability of Associated British Foods.

In 1972 Gulliver decided that his own future would lie in the direction and management of businesses which he would control through investment and through the boardroom. He abandoned his role as Chairman of Fine Fare and as a director of Associated British Foods and set about the task of finding a small business which would become his investment vehicle. In 1973 he obtained a controlling investment in Oriel Foods Limited, a small food distributor and refiner of edible oils for the grocery manufacturing sector.

Thereafter he and his associates spent the next ten years assembling a wide range of consumer business interests; at one time in 1981 James Gulliver Associates controlled and managed four separate quoted companies. Progressively, however, the food retail business came to predominate over the smaller liquor, food wholesaling and food manufacturing activities.

In 1982 Argyll acquired Allied Suppliers from Sir James Goldsmith for £104 million and this gave Gulliver the platform for the development of a grocery business which would, in time, far outstrip the Fine Fare business which he had left in 1972. By 1987 Argyll was in a position to acquire the UK activities of Safeway from its American parent for £664 million and this was the final acquisition carried out by Gulliver as Chairman of the company which he founded.

Among his peers in the food sector Gulliver was recognised as a man of truly exceptional formal intelligence who, at the age of 42, abandoned a big job in a big company and set out on a new career as an entrepreneur tackling the management challenges posed by a series of small struggling businesses. During this period he revealed his qualities of leadership and practical hands-on management and it is possible that he enjoyed the time he spent between 1973 and 1981 more than any other period in his business life.

James Gulliver was married four times yet, paradoxically, he was a family man who stayed close to his five children and his extended range of relatives and friends. He was a very keen football enthusiast and took great pride in having been Vice-President of Manchester United and Vice-Chairman of Heart of Midlothian. He loved speed and it might be debated whether he ever drove any of his numerous sports cars as fast as he careered down the ski slopes at Courchevel and Arosa. To his friends he was a thoughtful and generous host; strangely he did not drink whisky, but in every other respect he was a sentimental Scot with a love of poetry, song, dancing and pipe music. He and his sister both sang for the Campbeltown Gaelic choir and went with them to the National Mod on a couple of occasions.

His greatest pleasure was to be awarded the CVO by HM The Queen last July in recognition of his work for the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme.

James Gulliver died on 12th September 1996, aged 66.

ALISTAIR GRANT