



MEDIA

Newspaper's golden age

MOIRA RAYNER DECEMBER 19, 2008

Once, I had a column in *The Age*. Like Karen Blixen, who famously wrote about her farm in Africa, I remember that interlude a little mistily, and as rather better than it might actually have been. Writing weekly was a challenge, a drama and cause for satisfaction. I felt honoured to do it, and hurt when it was dumped.

Watching Fairfax dividends dwindle and editors change, at the same time as overseas bastions of the press, the massive Tribune Co. and the *New York Times* among them, sicken and die because of falling readership and rising online advertising, I have had cause to recall those lucky days.

Fairfax has been clear about its reasons — drops in advertising revenue in print, and lack of profitability online. Costs have to be cut and changes made. The old profits are likely never to be matched. The new CEO, Brian McCarthy, has quite a task ahead of him: how to save a business without losing the heart of a newspaper.

It is apparently old-fashioned to expect to be primarily informed and engaged by a newspaper. Yet that is what Melburnians loved about *The Age*.

I came in — and went out — at the turning point for that venerable organ. I'd been writing for a couple of years when we were given a new editor, Bruce Guthrie (he who was just dumped from the *Herald Sun* editorship and has sued his employer for \$2.7 million).

Bruce created a new office of assistant editor, whose duties included managing op-ed, including me. Within a week, said assistant editor had judged that week's column to be inadequate and rejected it. Within two, he had shouted at me.

When this persisted, I objected to being bullied, and Bruce decided one of us must go, and it wasn't going to be his new right hand. So I went back to writing books and for *Eureka Street* and *The Big Issue*, and the right-hand man wrote a column in my spot for a few months, which I thought much inferior to my own, and after a while went the way of all bullies — working for another one, this time in politics (and that also came to a bad end).

I wrote for a different A/age virtually gone over the last few years of shifting style, substance and editors. We know that the credit crunch and shuddering financial markets will have a big impact on local media companies, which will worry their shareholders, but will also worry us freelance writers, journalists and contributors, and the old style journalists that the struggling papers are 'letting go'.

As well, I fear for the quality of those lucky few who will continue to be on payroll.

I never claimed to be a brilliant writer. I learned by doing, as journalists do, though they won't learn that way any more, because Fairfax has cancelled its traineeship program. You don't learn about investigative work by doing a course. Seeking out facts and hammering out thoughts is part of the wordsmith's art.

Nor do you make a newspaper by paying politicians to review movies or pay peanuts to freelancers for truly big stories.

And what happened to the characters of my happiest writing days, when *The Age* set up the late Paddy McGuinness' column deliberately a couple of days before mine, so we could annoy and argue with one another. As then chairman of the board, Sir Zelman Cowan remarked during an old-fashioned afternoon tea for contributors, *The Age* wanted to contribute to the distinctive character of Melbourne.

The Age has not been what it once was for a very long time. Under the new leadership of the former CEO of Rural Press, the Fairfax Board will require it to go through an uncompromising corporate culture change, after the failure of board-approved Hilmer-style 'managerialism', rising debt and dropping earnings.

The board, of course, is where the problem lies, not the editors. And McCarthy will, obviously, have to consider whether or not running two completely independent newspapers in Sydney and in Melbourne makes sense any more. McCarthy's various colleagues in Rural Press clearly favour the idea of 'breaking down the silos'.

This former contributor, though, would beg board and boss to hasten slowly on that thought. The only reason *The Age* has survived is because the readership of Victoria still feel ownership of it, as a Melbourne paper. The *Herald Sun* ain't that bad, and will still be Melbourne's. Think about it.



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