



## **NO PLUCKING!**

**Oddments collected by a reptile of  
the press**

**By Tim Bowden**



## THE AUTHOR

### TIM BOWDEN AM



Tim Bowden is a broadcaster, radio and television documentary maker, historian and author. Born in Hobart in 1937 (which means he is now quite old), he is well known for hosting the ABC-TV listener and viewer reaction program ***Backchat*** from 1986 to 1994.

He is the author of 17 books including ***One Crowded Hour – Neil Davis, Combat Cameraman; The Way My Father Tells It - The Story of An Australian Life; Antarctica And Back In Sixty Days, Aunty’s Jubilee – 50 years of ABC-TV; The Changi Camera*** and ***Stubborn Buggers*** – the survivors of the infamous POW gaol that made Changi look like heaven.

Bowden's background in journalism includes current affairs, news, and feature and documentary work. He has worked as a foreign correspondent in Asia (covering the Vietnam war) and in North America. In 1969 he was the first executive producer of the ABC radio current affairs program ***PM***, before becoming a producer with the ground-breaking television current affairs program ***This Day Tonight*** in the early 1970s. In 1985 Bowden founded the ABC Radio's Social History Unit. Since 1989 Tim Bowden has been actively broadcasting, writing and researching Australian activities in Antarctica. He was commissioned to write the official history of ANARE (Australian National Antarctic Research Expeditions) ***The Silence Calling – Australians in Antarctica 1947-97***. Bowden also presented six half-hour documentaries ***Breaking the Ice*** on ABC-TV in 1996.

Tim Bowden received an Order of Australia for services to public broadcasting in June 1994. In May 1997 he was awarded an honorary degree of Doctor of Letters from the University of Tasmania.

\*\*\*\*\*

# CONTENTS

## Acknowledgments

## Introduction

Chapter 1	A war waif	1
Chapter 2	Learning to steal others' words, phrases and stories	14
Chapter 3	Screambled eggs and fried crabs balls	36
Chapter 4	Shuffling off the mortal coil	47
Chapter 5	The challenges of getting it right	58
Chapter 6	Life with Aunty	88
Chapter 7	Aunty lifts her skirts	116
Chapter 8	Makes you proud to be Australian	129
Chapter 9	Final oddments	155

\*\*\*\*\*

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Because of the 'bower bird' nature of the oddments collected in this book over a long lifetime it has not been possible to source all the material, but wherever acknowledgement is possible it has been included.

I am grateful to my friend Penny Lye who has patiently sub-edited my prose, not only picking up typos but ensuring that my enduring habit of using the same adjective twice in one sentence, or in following ones, has been addressed.

My thanks too to Phoenix Business Communications, particularly Louie Jahjah who has patiently ironed out problems that have arisen in the course of this self-published book, with the author attempting the layout.

\*\*\*\*\*

# INTRODUCTION

As I am now in my eighties, I can look back on oddments collected during a lifetime in journalism, a career path I have never regretted. I started in newspapers as a cadet reporter on *The Mercury* in Hobart in 1955, back in the days of hot metal, linotype machines and copy paper. I became fascinated by the possibilities of radio in 1958, when portable tape recorders using ¼ inch magnetic tape had just been developed. This gave enormous freedom to the radio reporter and documentary maker.

Before that, the only way of recording outside a broadcast studio was to cut an acetate disk in a van full of bulky equipment, with a technician. Amazingly, Australian Broadcasting Commission war correspondents like Chester Wilmot, actually took this highly vulnerable set-up right into the front line, even during the collapse of the Allied effort on the island of Crete in 1941. In one broadcast, when Australian sappers blew up a bridge to halt the advancing Germans Panzers before Wilmot expected it, the force of the explosion blew the needle cutting the disk right off the platter!

My first radio report for the ABC was recorded on a clockwork tape recorder where the sound was electrically recorded, but the spools of tape were driven past the recording heads by a clockwork mechanism. This meant the reporter had to juggle a formidable STC microphone (shaped like a black club with a silver grill) in one hand, and, with the recorder slung on around his neck by sturdy strap, then get ready to wind the spring up with his other hand like an organ grinder, as it only maintained the correct speed for four minutes. Well, a bit less than that, which meant that if you didn't tighten the spring along the way, your interviewee's voice on playback, quickly rose in what sounded like a growing hysteria, until it turned into total gobbledygook. There was a lot to think about as well as what questions you needed to ask. Getting all that right was stressful for a rookie radio reporter but it was also exciting.

But I digress.

I need to explain the title of this book. Most men grow a beard at least once in their life. Mine sprouted in my mid-forties in the mid 1980s and a photo of it was taken in Malaysia during a family holiday. Our hotel on the East Coast was near the beach, and a courtyard outside our room was edged by planter boxes containing a few rose plants doing their best to survive in the tropical heat. The following sign attracted my attention:



Back in Sydney I was lunching with a group of journalists and lawyers. My legal friend, Jack Grahame, was there. Jack always wore immaculate three piece suits, a fob watch and a silk handkerchief stylishly flowing from his top pocket set off by a matching necktie. He had also sported a meticulously trimmed pepper-and-salt beard ever since I had known him.

Waiting for a break in the conversation, he struck – saying loudly, ‘Bowden, I want to make a comment about your beard’. The well-wined lunch guests waited expectantly. ‘It’s rather pubic!’ (Loud guffaws.)

I had no immediate response, but when I got home I asked my wife Ros what she thought of my beard. ‘Actually, that’s your business.’

‘But I need to know – do you like it’?

‘Well seeing that you ask, not much.’

I withdrew to the bathroom and shaved off half, leaving a half moustache and beard on the right-hand side of my face, clean-shaven on the left. My two sons, then aged ten and seven were watching a cartoon on television in the living room. I walked in and said something to them to get their attention. They looked around briefly, then turned back to the telly without any comment. I returned to the bathroom and continued the removal, and have never grown one since. Jack was right. It DID look a bit pubic...

. . . . .

In 1965 the Australian Broadcasting Commission (as it then was) posted me to South-east Asia as a foreign correspondent based in Singapore. One day a friend handed me the instructions he had been given that came with a Japanese enema kit, written in what might be referred to as ‘Janglish’. The device was quite elaborate, with diagrams of how rubber tubes and flexible bulbs were to be squeezed by the operator to achieve the desired result. However it was important to – how can I put this delicately? – to hang on as long as possible before the moment of release. Which led to the wondrous punchline: ‘When being unbearable, have a good passage’. Yes indeed.

Singapore in those days still had its original Chinatown, with wooden two-story ‘shop-houses’, where the proprietor and his family lived above the ground floor shop and sold whatever goods were on offer down below. In this particular case, the Din Medical Hall (Est. 1902) displayed a sign featuring a large eye, with the following message in Chinese and English, SPECIALIST IN EYES AND PILES. It would seem the Singapore population in those days suffered difficulties in both those areas, and it clearly made sense to run a one-stop shop.



I think that is enough for the moment, and if you are expecting a rigorous analysis of politics, war or various situations that this journalist encountered during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Australia and without, it will not be found in this book. It will, however, feature some curiosities that I have personally found diverting over the years.

I hope you think so too.

\*\*\*\*\*

Tim Bowden 2018

# CHAPTER ONE

## A WAR WAIF



I was born in 1937, as Adolf Hitler's rush to war was clouding the future of the British Empire, of which Australia was then a loyal card-carrying member. Our Prime Minister Robert Gordon Menzies once famously said we were 'British to the bootstraps'. I missed the Horse's Birthday, 1 August (the date deemed to be the birth day of all horses), coming into this world the following day at Hobart's Queen Alexandra Hospital.

Timothy Gibson Bowden was rather an odd-looking baby at birth, with poppy eyes and hair that made it seem I had been plugged into an electric light socket. Hospitals were draconian institutions in those days, and as my father John Bowden came to pick up his young wife Peggy and newborn son, the matron strode into the reception area to hand me over. My father recalls she behaved 'Like a Pommy Sergeant-Major', and in a loud voice for the benefit of all the people in the reception area and nearby corridors, said:

'Now you keep away from that girl for the next three months! You leave her alone.'

My mother, formerly Margaret (Peggy) Lovett, hailed from Launceston in the north of the island state of Tasmania, and my father had been born in the south in Hobart. This meant I had a foot in both camps, as it were, because there was a regional rivalry between the two halves of Tasmania that made the bloody rivalry between the Republic of Ireland and the British-controlled north look like a mild brawl in a primary school playground by comparison. (Well... it was pretty intense anyway.)

The history of how this rivalry came about cannot be dealt with here but it was, and is still, very real.

In 1967, the deadly ‘Black Tuesday’ bush fires on 7 February, the worst in Tasmania’s history, left 62 people dead, 900 injured and over 7000 homeless. The total damage amounted to \$40 million dollars in today’s values. A Launceston friend of mine swore that he saw a hand-lettered sign in a shop window two weeks after the catastrophe:

**WANTED – 350 GOOD MEN AND TRUE  
TO MARCH ON THE SOUTH  
WHILE THEY ARE STILL WEAK**

Ask any Tasmanian, away from his beloved island, where he or she comes from, and they will say ‘Tasmania’ rather than ‘Australia’. Island people believe they have special qualities, denied to lesser mortals.

In later years, when I became a journalist, I attempted to define this, and my effort was actually read into Hansard into the House of Representatives by a colourful Hobart politician, the Liberal member for Franklin Bruce Goodluck, on 25 February 1987. He began:

‘I would like to read a little quote from [a] Tasmanian, Tim Bowden from the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, when he launched a book *The Doubleman* which is written by a fellow classmate of mine Christopher Koch. I think that what he said is not rude, it is great.’

MR CAMPBELL: Hurry up!

MR GOODLUCK: The honourable member should be quiet. He stated:

*Tasmania is the testicle of Australia – suffusing the Mainland with strength and vigour.*

*What a pity there is only one of them!*

. . . .

TASMANIA – ‘THE ISLAND EVER SWEET AND FAIR...’

Many years ago, someone sent me one Skipper Francis’ Ode to Tasmania, which I feel compelled to share.

*There's a grand and stately island,  
 Standing in the Tasman Sea.  
 Where the mountains gird the meadows  
 And cool winds blow fresh and free.  
 Hill and dale present a picture,  
 Silver sand lies around her shores.  
 Pleasant days I've spent in Tassie,  
 Hope I'm spared for many more.*

### CHORUS

*Tasmania, Tasmania, your worth has not been told,  
 For many a glorious sunset  
 Has covered you in gold.  
 The heavens send their blessing  
 In sweet showers of rain.  
 When I leave I won't be happy  
 'Till I'm back in Tassie again.*

**FOR AULD LANG SYNE!**  
**AUSTRALIA WILL BE THERE**



**AUSTRALIA'S  
 BATTLE SONG.**  
 The Accepted March Song  
 of the  
 AUSTRALIAN EXPEDITIONARY  
 FORCES

Sung by the Troops on the  
 Troopship "SOUTHLAND"  
 when it was torpedoed on  
 September 2nd, 1915.

**SUNG BEFORE  
 HIS MAJESTY  
 KING GEORGE V  
 and ROYAL PARTY,**  
 at Buckingham Palace, March 22, 1916.

Played on the occasion of the Presentation  
 of the Freedom of the City of London to  
 the Prime Minister of Australia, the  
 Right Hon. W. M. Hughes.

WRITTEN, COMPOSED AND SUNG WITH PREPONDERANT SUCCESS BY  
**SKIPPER FRANCIS**

(The Royal Choral Society) to whom the Full Theatrical Performing Rights are Secured and Reserved.

So who was Skipper Francis? Walter William Francis was born in 1886 and handed in his cheque in 1957. I am not sure where he was born, probably Britain, as one of his accomplishments was to swim the Bristol Channel. He was most noted for encouraging Australians to join up and fight the Hun in World War I by writing patriotic songs – the most famous, FOR AULD LANG SYNE! AUSTRALIA WILL BE THERE.

He certainly must have visited Australia to form such a passionate bond with the Testicle State, but I can't find out if he ever came here to live.

It was pleasing to read that his patriotic songs were 'written, composed and sung with phenomenal success'. There is more, but I think one verse and chorus is plenty...

. . . .

Peggy (for some reason she refused to be called Mum or Mummy) was soon to be a single parent, as my father enlisted in the AIF in 1939 when war was declared and was soon off to the Middle East in some style on the huge pre-war liner *Aquitania*. Like most Australians then, few had been abroad. The furthest from Tasmania my father had been in his life was across Bass Strait by ferry to Melbourne. He was then 33 years old.

I had to wait six years before I got to know him. Money was short, and Peg had to work. One of her jobs was as a wartime censor, checking outgoing letters to see no details of Australia of use to an enemy got through. The offending material was simply cut out with scissors.

Money was short and after a year or so she had to move out of the family home that had been built in time for my arrival, and rent it out. For a while we lived with friends in a nearby street, Philip and Peg Waterworth, who had two daughters, the eldest Philippa my age.

In those days groceries were home delivered in wooden boxes packed by grocers in white aprons, and every item wrapped in crisp white paper. My mother ordered what she needed by telephone. One morning she was alone in the Waterworth house and in the loo. The phone was in the hall, mounted quite high on the wall.

I was three, and from the smallest room she heard me lug a chair along to the phone so I could climb up and reach it. She heard me say: ‘Peg can’t come to the phone at the moment, she’s in the lavatory.’



*Me at three*

‘But wait a minute, I think she’s about to come out.’

‘I can hear the paper rustling, and yes – she’s pulled the chain and here she comes!’

My mother presumed it was one of her women friends, but in fact it was the man from man from Beck’s Groceries ringing for the weekly order.

. . . .

As a young boy, a visit to the shoe shop was most exciting. It was the era of the fluoroscope – a wondrous machine that stood on a pedestal, ostensibly to help with shoe fitting. No shoe shop, even in remote Hobart, was without one. There was a viewing portal for the salesman, your mother, and you.

I recall standing in front of it with my new school shoes on, and edging both feet into a slot at the bottom. A button was pressed, and a low whine was heard from the bowels of the contraption. As you gazed into a viewing portal, the bones of your feet were revealed on a green screen and you could wiggle your toes and see the skeletal image move.

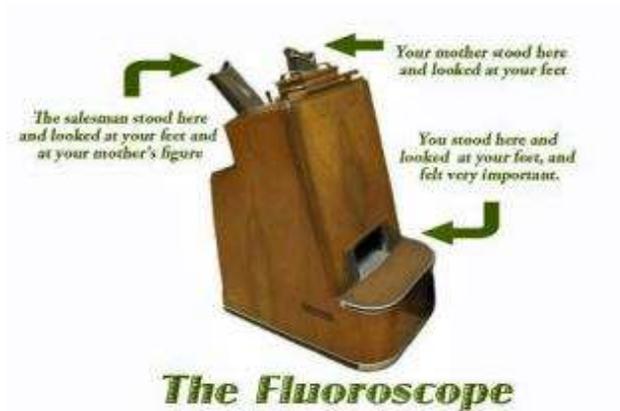
You could also see the nails around the edge of the shoe in this X-ray image, and whether there was enough room (or too much) between your feet and the boundaries of the shoe.



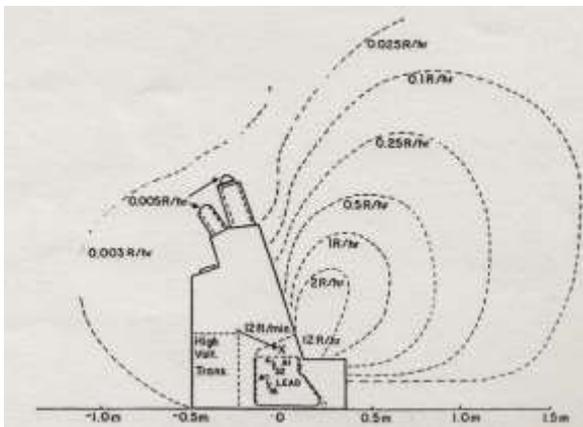
Every shoe shop had one, and busy mothers would order their sons and daughters to ‘play’ there, while they discussed various options for their own shoes as well as the kids.

This, in hindsight, was unwise as our developing gonads were being subjected to large doses of

radiation from the largely unshielded radio-active core of the fluoroscope while we kids marvelled at the spectral images of our feet for sometimes 10 to 15 minutes.



In truth the fluoroscopes were spewing out radiation literally all over the shop, whether they were being used or not. Those having a fitting got the most powerful dose, being closest to the radioactive core. But the hapless staff who worked there were permanently in range and received radiation all the time.



This diagram shows the radiation emitted at varying distances from the fluoroscope. The dose was measured in roentgens per hour.

Believe it or not, the amount of radiation being absorbed by shoe shop staff was not measured until the 1950s!

Even by the 1920s, when these contraptions were first invented, the dangers of radiation were well known, but not by the general public.

As far back as 1908 the annual meeting of the American Roentgen Association heard a report that 47 people had died due to radiation exposure. Some of these victims were hailed as 'martyrs to science'.

When the fluoroscopes were measured in the 1950s the results were frightening. In addition to the dosage being received by the feet, the entire body of the customer, as well as the salesman and parent, was bathed in radiation. Others waiting in the shop were being irradiated through the walls of the machine. Even in the waiting room, the permissible daily dose of radiation would be received by a single person in an hour! Shoe-store staff (and customers) were at risk of stunted growth, dermatitis, cataracts, malignant cancers and sterility. No focused medical study was EVER done on the effects of these machines.



The truth of the matter was that shoe shop staff (and their bosses) always knew that the fluoroscopes were completely useless as an aid to fitting shoes, but wonderful as a sales gimmick. This ad by Altra shows how bogus the whole thing was. The bones in your feet would never separate in this way, wider shoes or not.

In the United States and Canada legislative action to limit the use of fluoroscopes was slow, but did occur before the end of the 1950s and most had disappeared – but not completely – by the 1970s.

In fact, by the early 1960s, shoe merchants were flogging off their fluoroscopes to whoever was silly enough to buy them for a fraction of their original cost. Some were donated to schools for science classes, others slipped into the attics or basements of private citizens. Would you believe a functioning fluoroscope (still quietly emanating its poisonous radiation) was discovered in the basement of a shoe-shop in Ontario in 1996?

. . . .

Major John Bowden was discharged from the Australian Army in 1944, and I had a father again. His return was marked by the birth of my brother

Nicholas, followed by Philip and lastly (to my parents' great delight) a daughter, Lisa. Nicholas did not arrive till two years after his return. I was seven. My father recalls Peg at first said, 'The desert sands must have burnt you out'. I was seven when my brother Nicholas was brought home from the Queen Alex. hospital. My parents were progressive for their era, and involved me in from an early age with basic accounts of babies growing 'inside Peg's tummy', and breast feeding.

I have been told I could hardly wait for the first feeding session, and asked where Peg was going to sit. I drew up a small stool near the sofa indicated, sat down on it and waited for the action. Peg, a modern mother, sat down, produced a breast and baby Nicholas obligingly began sucking vigorously. Apparently I jumped up from my little seat, and took in this wondrous sight from every angle, including close-ups. After a time, Peg recalled, I said:

'What happens if he blows instead of sucks?'

. . . .

I am indebted to Merle Jantzen, one of my mother's friends, who unexpectedly emailed me in 2008 about the difficulty of acquainting seven-year-olds with the basic facts of life.

I remember a lunch held in Hobart by Claire Mitchell, where a gaggle of young women (and their kids) were present. The mums were listening indulgently to the children chatting happily just outside the sunroom window. The talk evolved to babies. One knowing little sod – not you this time – said that babies grew inside the mother's tummy. You refused to believe this and got quite angry with the child who had made this claim.

You stormed inside to the group of mums and, stood in front of Peg with your hands on your hips and demanded: 'Is it true that I came out of your stummick'? Peggy, somewhat taken aback and a little embarrassed but determined to follow the modern trend and not push the cabbage-patch bit went a little pink, and said, 'Yes Tim, that is true'.

You glared at her as only a seven-year-old can, stamped your foot, and said: 'Well, I think that is disgusting,' and stormed out.

At this time, our hostess, Claire Mitchell, was heavily pregnant herself. The kid who had first advanced the tummy theory told the other kids there that Claire was about to have a baby.

Asked how you could tell, you volunteered: 'Well she looks as if she is wearing dozens of aprons – that's how!'

At a later social gathering at Claire's house, the topic of tummies and aprons was again discussed by kids outside the sunroom window. This time you were more offhand about it, and it was you that came in to ask the key question, 'How do the babies get out'?

None of the mums was quite up to explaining the details and after a long pause you turned to your own mother, slapped her on her backside, and said: 'Well I guess that's the obvious place!' Then once again made a dramatic exit.

. . . .

In 1948 my parents and four of their friends made a brave decision to walk the central Tasmanian mountains track from Lake St Clair to Cradle Mountain, a hike of some 80 kilometres. The really courageous part of this exercise was to take me! I was then 10 years old, and I don't know what their companions thought about the prospect of me going – but I can guess.

Few people went bushwalking in those days. If you met someone else on the single track coming the other way you were disappointed as you felt you had the right to have the wilderness to yourself. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century thousands of visitors walk the Overland Track, as it is now known, in summer and (unwisely in my opinion) in winter. The boggy buttongrass swamps that we negotiated in our boots and gaiters, mud (sometimes sloshing up to our knees) are now all protected by board walks, and the handful of rough slab huts available along the route have been replaced by a variety of upmarket accommodation, some companies stocking them with fine wines and gourmet food for their customers and arranging for their clients to carry only light day packs for each day of the six stage walk.

Haversacks were primitive with a small metal frame from which the bag, with extra pockets, hung down dragging on your shoulders. Everything had to be carried in them, emergency tents, food, billycans for open fires (now

strictly verboten) and mercifully some high-energy food like raisins and chocolate, which supplemented the dehydrated stews, porridge, milk powder and soup cubes that were available then.

My mother Peg was still getting over the birth of my brother Philip the previous year and really should not have gone, as she hated that kind of thing anyway. My father was an outdoor enthusiast, as were the Waterworth brothers, Phil and David, and their wives Peggy and Betty – although Betty was a total novice at that stage.

We planned to take ten days to do the 50 miles, with some side excursions to high country attractions like a place called the Labyrinth, which was well named because we got lost on the way to it, rather than in it, and had to retrace our steps to find the overland track again.

We had reached the northern section of the trek, passing Tasmania's highest peak Mt Ossa (1617 metres) named after a mountain in Greek mythology, to be almost in sight of Cradle Mountain, when we stopped for a rest beside the track. To our collective amazement we heard and then saw a young man running towards us complete with pack. He stopped to tell us that a young woman had been bitten by a tiger snake and had collapsed in the Mt Pelion hut. He was trying to get help from the police and a doctor at the nearest town of Sheffield, about another 80 kilometres to the north.

As it happened, we had a doctor in our small party. David Waterworth was a specialist eye surgeon. He did not volunteer that he was a doctor, and no one else said anything. Later, in his defense, David said that judging by the nature of the bite she almost certainly would not have survived the first night, and this sadly turned out to be true when days later a doctor and police did get to her. My father and Phil Waterworth said they would go with him as far as Waldheim, a chalet at the end of the overland track. My father said later the first thing they did was stop him running.



*Some of our party pause under the bulk of Mt Pelion East to the north of Mt Ossa. I am standing on the left*

The young woman was the only female in a small group of four, members of a church bushwalking club. She had waited decorously while the men walked on in order to pee. She used a fallen log for support and of all things, urinated on a tiger snake, which reared up and bit her on or near her private parts.

Now every snake in Tasmania is poisonous and the tiger snake is at the top of the list. Tasmanian bushwalkers always wear long trousers and gaiters, as the tiger snake has grooved fangs down which its venom travels to kill its prey. If it bites a human through protective clothing, most of the venom ends up in the clothing.

Even then it can be touch and go. In this situation there was no hope. The young woman was embarrassed about what had happened, and did not tell her male companions of the bizarre nature of her toilet stop until she collapsed on the track.

. . . .

## NOCTURNAL NUDIST AT SANDY BAY

This headline even made it into the news pages of The Hobart *Mercury*.

Our family home at 37 Maning Avenue, Sandy Bay, was built at the top of quite a steep hill. This did give us water glimpses of the Derwent Estuary, but basically our house was difficult to get to because of the hill.

Winters in Hobart could (and can) be extremely cold. One of my earliest memories is being taken outside by my father to see a brilliant display of the *Aurora Australis* which had by some trick of the atmosphere made its way all the way to Hobart from the Antarctic, displaying improbable shimmering curtains of green and red in the night sky, the result of collisions between energetic electrons, atoms and molecules in the upper atmosphere.

In the late 1940s my mother Peg used to meet one of her women friends to go to see a movie in the city. 'Going to the pictures' was the phrase used then.

One evening in mid-winter, she walked up our also steep driveway to the top of Maning Avenue to walk down and meet her friend with whom she would catch a tram along Sandy Bay Road to the picture theatre of their choice. My father stayed at home to mind me.

As she reached the top of the Bowden drive on a frosty night, she was surprised to say the least to see a completely naked man standing in the roadway. I suppose it says something about the comparative innocence of those times that she did not have any sense of alarm. She decided to ignore him and set off down the hill to meet her friend.

The naked man fell into step beside her, and they began to walk silently down the road together. Peg said later that she felt this was ridiculous, and decided that when she got under the next street light and she would look at him to see if she knew him.

No words were spoken until they came under the light. Peg turned to face him (she didn't know him) and said, 'Aren't you cold'?

He muttered, 'Well yes I am a bit', rushed down the hill a bit further into a hedge, pulled on a sweater and trousers and rode off on a bicycle.

My mother thought to herself, 'Well that was odd', and met her friend, who freaked out. 'We must call the police immediately and report this!' This was probably done, because otherwise it would not have made the morning paper.

POSTSCRIPT: Some of her cynical friends put it about that what she had really said was, 'Aren't you cold, dear?'



My mother Peggy hated being photographed, but during the war occasionally used street photographers to be able to have photos of her and first born son (and war orphan) sent to my father John Bowden, then in the Palestine with the AIF.

\*\*\*\*\*

## CHAPTER TWO

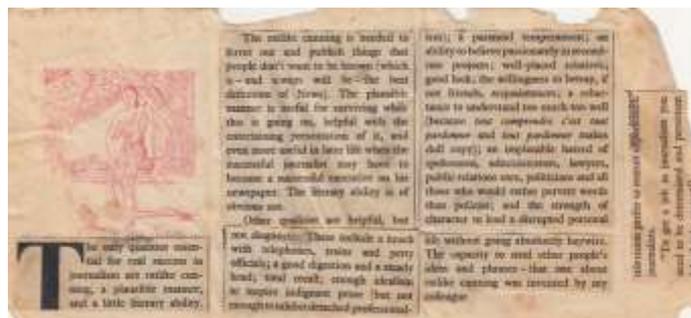
### LEARNING TO STEAL OTHERS' WORDS, PHRASES AND STORIES

As English was my best (and most loved) subject at school, I decided I wanted to be a journalist. Jobs were easier to get back in 1956 and I was taken on by *The Mercury* in Hobart as a cadet reporter. It is a decision I have never regretted. Then the paper was produced by a process that dated back to William Caxton, with linotype machines and hot metal, which when cooled was slotted into flat page formats with metal slugs capped with reverse print.

An impression was taken of the flat page with a flexible matrix and bent into a hoop shape which was cast in metal. The following page was treated similarly, and the heavy casts were bolted together on both sides of the cylinders on the huge printing presses. When, in the early morning, the presses rolled, the huge roll of virgin newsprint went through the printing rollers and was cleverly sliced and cut to be compiled into the morning paper. The whole building used to shake when the presses rolled.

Journalists typed their stories on small squares of rough copy paper (for economic reasons the same grade of paper *The Mercury* was printed on).

So what qualities made up a good journalist? Someone sent me a clipping from an unknown magazine which I thought summed it up superbly. I do not know who wrote it, but it deserves a wider airing. The clipping is too hard to read here, but this is what he said:



*The only qualities essential for real success in journalism are rat-like cunning, a plausible manner and a little literary ability.*

*The rat-like cunning is needed to ferret out and publish things that people don't want to be known (which is – and always will be – the best definition of news). The plausible manner is useful for surviving while this is going on, helpful with the entertaining presentation of it, and even more useful in later life when the successful journalist may have to become a successful executive on his newspaper. The literary ability is of obvious use.*

*Other qualities are helpful, but not diagnostic. These include a knack with telephone, trains and petty officials; a good digestion and a steady head, 'total recall'; enough idealism to inspire indignant prose (but not enough to inhibit detached professionalism); a paranoid temperament; an ability to believe passionately in second rate projects; well-placed relatives; good luck; the willingness to betray, if not friends, acquaintances; a reluctance to understand too much too well; an implacable hatred of spokesmen, administrators, lawyers, public relations men, politicians and all those who would rather pervert words than policies; and the strength of character to lead a disrupted personal life without going completely haywire. And to get a job in journalism you need to be determined and persistent.*

*Regarding the ability to steal others' words and phrases – that one about rat-like cunning was stolen from a colleague.*

. . . . .

*The Mercury* was rated as a national newspaper in a state capital. In reality Hobart was like a big country town, but the training for cadets was excellent. You were apprenticed to the various 'roundsmen' – women only did the social pages then – which included shipping, civic (the Town Hall), state parliament, police (including the courts), sport including football and horse racing. All reporters had to wear a suit and tie to work whether you were chasing fire engines or covering the Magistrates Court.

The courts were never dull. One magistrate, rejoicing in the name of Hubert Mansel Brettingham-Moore, had a great sense of humour. But on this particular morning in 1956 he was particularly irritated by the number of motorists caught speeding on Sandy Bay Road.

He finally rounded on the tenth defendant so charged and said, 'I've had enough of this, I'm going to make an example of you'.

Reaching under the bench, he produced a black cap, put it on and intoned sonorously, 'It is the sentence of this court that you be taken from here to a prison, and thence to a place of execution, and that there you shall be hanged by the neck until you are dead. And may the Lord have mercy on your soul...'

There was a stunned silence in the traffic court. Then someone jumped up at the back and said, 'You can't do that – you haven't got the authority'!

'Oh, haven't I?' said Brettingham-Moore, taking off his black cap. 'Oh well – fined 10 pounds.'

I was not in court at the time, but the senior police roundsman, Rex Mitchell, was and confirmed the story with me many years later.

Part of a cadet's training was to learn Pitmans shorthand, and we were given weekly lessons by the football roundsman, Keith Welsh. *The Mercury* had a policy of never giving journalists a byline (seems quaint now) and Keith wrote his football coverage under the pseudonym 'Drop Kick'. Inevitably we cadets called him 'Drip Cock' – but not to his face.

Even in those early days I kept keeping a record of headlines with a double-entendre, and I remember others which have been mislaid, but stuck in my mind. It is time to give them a belated airing.

**BENGAL TIGER FOR  
HOBART CUP**

*Must have caused a frisson in the stands...*

**Billy Graham  
marries  
his daughter**

*Really? I never heard about that before...*

**State marksmen  
upset by wind**

*Aren't we all?*

**ROBBER GETS AWAY WITH  
£1,235 PAYROLL IN SNATCH**

*You'd think they might have taken a canvas bag with them...*

After the Iranian revolution, the exiled Shah of Persia briefly took his retinue to the Bahamas.

# SHAH STICKS IT OUT ON RESORT

*Some kind of gesture to the Ayatollahs?*

Hobart had a quite successful racehorse named after the well-known Tasmanian apple variety, Granny Smith. The good burghers of Hobart awoke one Saturday morning to see a two-column wide headline on the sporting pages with the following prediction...

## GRANNY HAS IT SEWN UP

*The mind boggles...*

This one is more recent, from the *Great Lakes Advocate*, the local paper where I currently live on the mid north coast of New South Wales. The local dramatic society turned on a Christmas pantomime. But it can't have been this bad, surely?



This reminds me of a drama critic, commenting on another amateur production who wrote:

'For many of the young players it was a first appearance, and they displayed their parts with dignity and poise'.

But happily not in the Forster Tuncurry Memorial Services Club on this occasion.

My favourite from the 1950s is coverage by *The Mercury* of an outing by Hobart's Catholic Archbishop Guilford Young in 1955. Only 31 years old when he was appointed, he made up for his youthful appearance by adopting a gravitas beyond his years. Always dressed in his Archbishop's black robes, he moved slowly and spoke deliberately in a deep sonorous voice wherever he went, in church and in this case attending a function at the Hobart Town Hall with his visiting two visiting civilian brothers, who could have doubled for plainclothes coppers. This was regrettable due to the headline for an entirely different story which was unfortunately placed directly beneath this photograph on page 3.



In 1990 someone sent me this heading from a Hobart suburban give-away, *The Southern Star*. It even boasted a financial section, with the following headline outlining possible good buys for the canny investor in the current difficult financial climate.



*Your nose perhaps?*

. . . . .

The impermanence and transitory nature of the newspaper story as a historical record was demonstrated to me vividly in 1955, shortly after joining *The Mercury* as a cadet reporter.

Noticing a touring cyclist from Europe pausing on his heavily laden beflagged machine to get his bearings in front of the newspaper office, I asked him some questions, jotted down his answers and dashed inside to inveigle one of the photographers to snap a pic. It all worked out, and I had the great joy the next morning of seeing my first ever published and illustrated story in the paper.

About a week later I happened to visit a hamlet on the rural fringe of Hobart, improbably named Bagdad, to interview a local resident. I needed to use 'the smallest room' which in this case was a traditional weatherboard one-holer out the back. Squares of torn up newspaper on a spike were the sole concession to basic hygiene.

I was a little surprised and at first concerned that my prized story of the beaming Swedish cyclist was hanging there as the first option.

I used it, too. It was at least a variant on the old saw 'today's news wraps tomorrow's fish and chips'. Nor was the irony of the situation lost on this 18-year-old fledgling reporter meditating on his journalistic future in that country dunny.

*The Mercury* reporters' room was Spartan to say the least – a bit like a big secondary school classroom. A long built in wooden desk fronted the windows overlooking Macquarie Street. It was distinguished by a line of literally hundreds of cigarette burns along its front edge. These occurred when a journalist would come in close to deadline to write his news story.

If he didn't have any cigarettes, he would frantically importune one from a colleague, light it, take one long drag and put it down on the edge of the desk – where it would slowly burn away unattended as the journo banged away at his typewriter.

It had to be his own typewriter too, because *The Mercury* management was too mean to provide them. There were a couple of old chaff-cutters, an Olivetti and Imperial, on two of the separate tables elsewhere in the reporters' room for emergencies, but that was that.

Everybody smoked and drank prodigiously. (For some reason I never took up smoking but like everyone else did not foreswear the demon drink.) In winter, with all the doors and windows shut against the frigid air outside, the whole editorial floor was clouded in a thick haze of blue smoke which everyone breathed – and took for granted.

I recall one of my fellow cadet reporters, John Sorell, was assigned one night to cover the annual meeting of the Hobart Temperance Society. He went down to the pub and got drunk instead and returned to the office dangerously close to deadline. He did have a program giving the basics of the meeting before it happened. Johnsy was so pissed he actually fell sideways off his chair before he started to type. Returning undaunted to the task at hand, he began to make it all up.

'Alcohol continues to be the greatest curse threatening the stability of our society today', said the President of the HTS Mr Eustace Clatworthy. 'Battered women and abused children are the innocent victims of this pernicious habit.' This went on, line after line.

John (who was later the News Editor of Channel Nine in Melbourne for more than 30 years) then fell asleep while someone else submitted his copy. Although all of this was fabricated, no one from the temperance society ever complained. Doubtless Mr Clatworthy was surprised and delighted to get the unexpected publicity.

. . . .

If ever there was role model for journalists not to take themselves too seriously, Claude Cockburn is a superb candidate. Once, while working as a sub-editor on the august *The Times* of London, he got away with a single column heading of wondrous insignificance:

**SMALL EARTHQUAKE  
IN CHILE  
NOT MANY HURT**

Like many a good communist, Cockburn was born in 1904 with a silver spoon in his mouth. He survived a splendidly eccentric English childhood, rather reminiscent of Nancy Mitford's world. After a public school and Oxford (he edited the university magazine *ISIS* for a time) he won a travelling scholarship. This was fortuitous, as he had been living beyond his means and needed the money to pay off his creditors. There was enough money to get to Berlin, where he contributed an occasional piece to *The Times* through its resident correspondent there.

By being in the right spot at the right time he managed to bypass the entire journalistic training system and was invited back to Printing House Square by the legendary (later pro-Nazi) editor Geoffrey Dawson. He later wrote this wonderful description of life in the Foreign Editorial Room of *The Times*.

A sub-editor was translating a passage of Plato's *Phaedo* for a bet. Another sub-editor had declared it could not be done without losing a certain nuance of the original. He was dictating the Greek passage aloud from memory.

That very first evening I saw the chief sub-editor hand a man a slip of Reuters' Agency tape with two lines on it, saying that the Duke of Gloucester had arrived at Kuala Lumpur and held a reception. It would run to about half-an-inch. I dare say it could have been got ready for the printer in a matter of minutes. I was glad to see nothing of that kind happened here.

The sub-editor, a red-bearded man with blazing blue eyes who looked like a cross between John the Baptist and Captain Kettle, had at the age of 20 or thereabouts written the definitive grammar of an obscure Polynesian language and gone on to be – a curious position for an Englishman – a professor of Chinese metaphysics in the University of Tokyo. He took the two-line slip of paper into the library, and then to the Athenaeum Club, where he sometimes used to go for a cold snack during *The Times* dinner hour.

His work was completed only just in time for the 10 o'clock edition. It had been a tricky job. 'There are', he explained, '11 different ways of spelling Kuala Lumpur, and it's difficult to decide which should, as it were, receive the imprimatur of *The Times*.'

Cockburn very quickly won the job of *The Times* Washington correspondent. The handover from the incumbent was brief to say the least – but time for the departing reporter to give Cockburn the two best bits of journalist advice he ever received. It was the financial crash year of 1929.

'I think it well', he said, 'to remember that when writing for the newspapers we are writing for an elderly lady in Hastings who has two cats of which she is passionately fond. Unless our stuff can compete for her interest with those cats, it is no good.'

The second, shouted from the window of his already moving taxi, 'Remember old boy, whatever happens, you are right and London is wrong.'

My favourite of all Cockburn's pertinent quotes on journalism is:

'Never believe anything until it is officially denied.'

. . . . .

I am sure Claude Cockburn would have enjoyed the following headlines, gleefully collected by Gordon Balfour Haynes, of the *Echo* ('grammar nazi'):

**INCLUDE YOUR CHILDREN WHEN BAKING COOKIES**

**SOMETHING WENT WRONG IN JET CRASH, EXPERTS SAY**

**POLICE BEGIN CAMPAIGN TO RUN DOWN JAYWALKERS**

**IRAQI HEAD SEEKS ARMS**

**IS THERE A RING OF DEBRIS AROUND URANUS?**

**PROSTITUTES APPEAL TO POPE**

**PANDA MATING FAILS; VETERINARIAN TAKES OVER**

**TEACHER STRIKES IDLE KIDS**

**CLINTON WINS BUDGET; MORE LIES AHEAD**

**PLANE TOO CLOSE TO GROUND, CRASH PROBE TOLD**

**MINERS REFUSE TO WORK AFTER DEATH**

**JUVENILE COURT TO TRY SHOOTING DEFENDANT**

**STOLEN PAINTING FOUND BY TREE**

**WAR DIMS HOPE FOR PEACE**

**IF STRIKE ISN'T SETTLED QUICKLY, IT MAY LAST A WHILE**

**COUPLE SLAIN; POLICE SUSPECT HOMICIDE**

**KIDS MAKE NUTRITIOUS SNACKS**

**LOCAL HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS CUT IN HALF**

**TYPHOON RIPS THROUGH CEMETERY; HUNDREDS DEAD**

**SCHOOLBOYS GET FIRST HAND JOB EXPERIENCE**

**MINISTER LAUNCHES PROBE INTO CONTRACEPTIVE**

**POLICE STONED**

## CHILD'S STOOL MAKES INTERESTING GARDEN ORNAMENT

**FERTILE WOMAN DIES NEAR CLIMAX:** headline in a North Dakota newspaper (Climax being a town there)

*The Mercury* in my time was a broadsheet paper, as were many other metropolitan dailies, including *The Melbourne Herald* and *The Age*, and the *Brisbane Courier Mail* just to name a few. But by the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the competition of the digital era and falling circulations, tabloids are the fashion and they are getting more anorexic by the week. Only Rupert Murdoch's *The Australian* is a broadsheet, and that may be because Murdoch is rich enough to subsidise it for old time's sake. Michael Leunig summed up the dilemma as only he can.



In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the now defunct British humorous magazine *Punch* celebrated its 150th year of publication, and included some odd and unusual examples of journalism culled from many countries and a variety of periodicals and newspapers. Australia got a mention.

Errol Flynn 'a Hollywood tragedian of Tasmanian origin' is noted for his amorous reputation. And for playing *You Are My Sunshine* on the pianoforte - without the use of his hands.

The magazine comments: 'It is not known whether he enjoyed any success with his unconventional approach to the instrument [the pianoforte that is] but, as Dr Johnson said of a dog walking on hind legs, "It is not a question of it being done well but that one is surprised to find it done at all".'

From the *Worthing Guardian* came: 'The steamy film *Nine-And-A-Half Weeks* has been temporarily banned from Worthing's Dome Cinema until it has been privately viewed by Worthing Council's moral watchdogs. The film *Body Lust – Best Bit Of Crumpet In Denmark* will be shown instead.'

*The Trinidad Guardian* featured with: 'LOST – Bull Terrier, has three legs, blind in left eye, missing right ear, broken tail, recently castrated. Answers to the name of Lucky.'

It is easy to make mistakes, as the *Dalhousie Gazette* recognised: 'Gerald Harris, whose name was incorrectly given as Harold Morris and who is 39 and not 93 as stated in the story, is an associate professor of Tort Law School and not a janitor at the public library as the story incorrectly stated.'

This one is from *The Sun-Herald* in Sydney. 'A public notice in the classified ads section recently read: "I, Satpaul Dikshit, of Harris Park, will henceforth write my name as Satpaul Dixit". And who could blame him?'

. . . . .

## RANGING FURTHER AFIELD

‘Irish police are being handicapped in a search for a stolen van, because they cannot issue a description. It’s a special branch vehicle and they don’t want the public to know what it looks like.’ (*The Guardian*)

‘After being charged £20 for a £10 overdraft, 30-year-old Michael Howard of Leeds changed his name by deed poll to Yorkshire Bank PLC Are Fascist Bastards. The bank has now asked him to close his account, and Mr. Bastards has asked them to repay the 69 pence balance, by cheque, made out in his new name. (*The Guardian*)

‘Would the congregation please note that the bowl at the back of the church labelled “for the sick” is for monetary donations only.’ (*Churchtown Parish Magazine*)

‘There must, for instance, be something very strange in a man who, if left alone in a room with a tea-cosy, doesn’t try it on.’ (*Glasgow Evening News*)

‘A young girl who was blown out to sea on a set of inflatable teeth was rescued by a man on an inflatable lobster. A coastguard spokesman commented, “This sort of thing is all too common”.’ (*The Times*)

‘At the height of the gale, the harbourmaster radioed a coastguard on the spot and asked him to estimate the wind speed. He replied that he was sorry, but he didn’t have a gauge. However, if it was any help, the wind had just blown his Land Rover off the cliff.’ (*Aberdeen Evening Express*)

‘Mrs Irene Graham of Thorpe Avenue, Boscombe, delighted the audience with her reminiscence of the German prisoner of war who was sent each week to do her garden. He was repatriated at the end of 1945. She recalled: “He’d always seemed a nice friendly chap, but when the crocuses came up in the middle of our lawn in February 1946, they spelt out HEIL HITLER”.’ (*Bournemouth Evening Echo*)

‘Commenting on a complaint from a Mr. Arthur Purdey about a large gas bill, a spokesman for North West Gas said "We agree it was rather high for the time of year. It's possible Mr. Purdey has been charged for the gas used up during the explosion that blew his house to pieces".’ (*Northern Post*)

. . . .

One of the most important parts of a young journalist's training is how to fiddle expenses to augment the lousy pay. This has to be done creatively - but without overkill. But sometimes creativity has to be defended. I worked in South East Asia for the ABC in the mid-sixties, and got to know Neil Davis very well. He covered front-line combat in the Indo China war for an amazing 11 years, and was sadly killed in Bangkok in 1985 covering an attempted coup d'etat there.

This story goes back to his first year in Asia in 1964, when he was sent to Kuching in East Malaysia on assignment and put in his expenses when he got back to the ABC office in Singapore. His boss there at the time was a noted character and legendary drunk, Ted Shaw, who outdid Walter Mitty in inventing exploits that never happened. Ted claimed in his cups to have broken wild brumbies in Queensland, played test cricket for Australia, and interviewed Hitler in the Berchtesgaden before the war – all at the same time. Ted was a great story teller over a beer, but he wasn't much of an administrator, as he was too lazy to bother about all the detail. But he had learned the old supervisor's trick of glancing over expense receipts and homing in on a dodgy one. Neil Davis, unlike most journalists, was meticulously scrupulous about not gilding the lily on expenses, but with this receipt he'd slipped up. The dance halls and bars in South East Asia those days had what were called taxi dancers that you hired by the hour. What happened later was another matter. Well Neil had a receipt for his Chinese taxi dancer whose name was Rosette.

Back at the Singapore office Ted, looked suspiciously at Neil.

'What's this bloody Rosette business?'

Now it should be said that Ted was never wrong, and knew everything. Neil had a flash of inspiration. 'You know Ted, the French wine, rosette?'

Ted glared at him: 'Well, why didn't you get Algerian – it's cheaper'.

Mind you, some people never learn. I came across the following memo from a news editor to a newspaper reporter who had been assigned to cover the tall ships leaving Sydney in 1988 during the Bicentenary celebrations.

*I note from your expenses claim that you have invoiced us for the hire of a large motor cruiser used to cover the sail-past of the tall ships. On the live television coverage of this event, you were clearly visible in a small rowing boat.*

#### MEMO TO NEWS EDITOR

*Thank you for refreshing my memory. I enclose an additional bill for the cost of hiring the rowing boat used to reach our motor cruiser.*

Not be neglected is this expense story concerning the legendary foreign correspondent Rene Cutforth, who joined the BBC in 1946. He became well known as a broadcaster and travelled the world as a BBC correspondent. He also reported on the Korean War. Reviewing one of his television programs, *The Forties Revisited*, the critic Clive James wrote in *The Observer*, 'Cutforth is that rare thing, a front man with background. Fitzrovia and Soho weigh heavily on his eyelids. His voice sounds like tea-chests full of books being shifted about.'

Cutforth used to be the resident correspondent in Beirut for the BBC in the 1950s. He used to make up his monthly expenses by taking an imaginary spook to lunch. 'Took Carruthers of MI 6 to lunch – eight pounds seven and sixpence' – modest enough sums, but which built up over time. This got up the nose of one of the BBC's accountants who happened to have some intelligence connections. He rang up someone he knew in MI 6 and said, 'I know you can't tell me anything officially old boy, but if you DIDN'T have an operative called Carruthers operating out of Beirut I'd like to know for the following reasons'. His contact said, 'Of course I can't tell you anything officially but...'

Cutforth received a cable to the effect that as MI 6 had never had anyone called Carruthers on their payroll in Beirut, add would he please refund his entertainment claims of the last three years on Carruthers, amounting to the grand total of 257 pounds 10 and sixpence.

Cutforth cabled back instantly: *APPALLED DISCOVER CARRUTHERS AN IMPOSTER STOP I SHALL NOT ENTERTAIN HIM AGAIN STOP CUTFORTH*

. . . . .

Cutforth was one of a breed of journalists that is now extinct - the feature reporter who covered the world in the post war - the 50s and 60s. And I mean the whole world. Wherever there was a good breaking story, the great Fleet Street figures like Noel Barbour, Arthur Cooke, Rene McColl, Donald Wise and their ilk would be there, ready to scoop each other. The greatest rivalry of all was between the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express*. The *Express* was owned by Lord Beaverbrook, who wouldn't even allow the word 'exclusive' to appear on a story. 'Everything in the *Express* should be exclusive', growled the Beaver.

Today, there are specialist correspondents in most major centres. There is no need for the Great Foreign Correspondent to descend from afar – but it was not always thus.

In 1959 the Dalai Lama decided to go into exile in India following the Chinese take-over of Tibet. For some weeks the world waited for news, as his tiny caravan made its way through the Himalayas towards India. The press arrived in force at a remote region on the Indian border near Nepal where it was thought he might appear. There was absolutely nothing to report, of course, until the Dalai Lama appeared. The 40 or so correspondents banded together to charter a plane to try and over-fly the escaping Tibetans – a pool effort so they could all write 'Today I flew over the Dalai Lama' stories, AND keep an eye on each other at the same time. The press corps arrived at the airfield at the appointed hour, to be told by an apologetic Indian pilot that permission for the flight had been refused. Noel Barbour of the *Daily Mail* turned to his colleagues in some embarrassment and said: 'Gentlemen I feel it only fair to tell you I filed my story three hours ago!'

When the Dalai Lama did appear, there was enormous pressure on the news agencies to get pictures out. In those days black and white photographs had to be transmitted dot by dot by special machinery only available in major post offices. The head of United Press International, a flamboyant American, Ernie Hoybrecht, had chartered a plane to fly the first photos of the Dalai Lama from the remote border area to the nearest Indian post office able to transmit pictures. So had the rival agency Associated Press, but Ernie was a step ahead. He had a special dark room built in the plane, processed the film in flight, and dashed to the telegraph office at least 15 minutes ahead of AP while 20 shots were transmitted, a process that took about three minutes per photo.

Ernie was lounging against the counter beaming beatifically when the rival AP rep dashed in. As he savoured the moment and his world exclusive, a telegraph clerk came to the counter and said: 'Mr Hoybrecht, here is an urgent flash from your head office. It says: How come your Dalai Lama has beard?'

In the heat of the moment on the border, the UPI photographer had photographed the wrong man! It was the turn of the AP rep to beam and lounge on the counter, knowing that his pix were now first around the world.

This eagerness to be first nearly finished the career of the Daily Express's Arthur Cooke, who was still covering the world in the 1960s. I met him in Singapore during the Vietnam war era. He was working for the *Daily Mail* then, probably as a result of the events that took place in Iran in 1952. The powerful then Prime Minister of Iran, Mohammed Mossadegh, over-threw the Shah over a dispute on oil policy. But the Shah struck back, and returned to power a few days later. Mossadegh was tried for treason, and convicted. The penalty for treason was death by hanging, and Arthur filed his story reporting the trial and that Mossadegh would hang the following morning.

The trouble was Arthur had not fully understood the Iranian system of justice, which was based on the French model. Mossadegh had been found guilty in a committal hearing; the real trial was yet to come. An increasingly distraught Arthur received a cable from his foreign editor Charles Foley asking ominously:

## WHY YOUR EXCLUSIVE STILL EXCLUSIVE?

Followed 24 hours later by another:

## IT'S MOSSADEGH'S NECK OR YOURS

Mossadegh died of old age in his bed many years later and Arthur switched from the *Daily Express* to the *Daily Mail*.

. . . . .

There are many stories told of the *Daily Express*' foreign editor Charles Foley as he attempted to get value for money out of his far flung correspondents. Most of them were not unfond of a drink, and one had been sent to Cairo on an unusually vague assignment. The correspondent propped up the bar at Shepheard's Hotel and had not filed for a week. Foley cabled him: WHY UNNEWS QUERY FOLEY?

(It was common practice to run words together in cables to save money.)

The Cairo correspondent ordered another drink and reached for a message pad, which the well-trained waiters immediately filed for him.

## UNNEWS IS GOOD NEWS.

Within an hour, an urgent cable boomeranged from London.

## UNNEWS UNJOB STOP FOLEY

Cairo seems to have been a hazardous assignment on the job front. Another correspondent on assignment there for the *Daily Express* for some months had a girl-friend in Beirut – then famous as the Paris of the Middle East – and used to slip off to see her every weekend. Unfortunately for him the Egyptian army chose a Sunday to overthrow King Farouk. Foley knew where he was though, and an ominous rocket arrived from London.

## FAROUK ABDICATED, cabled Foley, WHAT YOUR PLANS?

. . . . .

***One cannot hope to bribe or twist,  
Thank God, the British journalist.  
But seeing what the man will do  
Unbribed, there's no occasion to.***

. . . .

I've been trying, in an eclectic kind of way, to give some insights into the world of journalism – and I began by attempting a definition.

Here are a few more. How I wonder how we might define a columnist?

*Someone whose drinking habits no longer allow him or her to meet the public.*

A cadet journalist?

*A trainee on the same level as a bandage washer in a leper colony.*

A public relations executive? (PR people are always executives.)

*Public relations is an industry invented so that people in advertising could finally have someone to look down on.*

Television reporters shall not escape. This one is from the United States.

*Television shows us reporters with \$60 haircuts on \$6 heads trying to get through four sentences without fluffing.*

But I think the status of the journalist in society can be located more precisely following remarks made by the author Dymphna Cusack on ABC Radio, in 1981.

*I was accustomed to England where the contempt for writers is quite an established thing. When I wanted an account at Barkers' department store and said I was a writer, they said I would need TWO references, and what was my husband? I said he was a journalist. They said, 'Then you'll need THREE.'*

. . . .

I have been, unashamedly, a journalist by profession, but surely no-one lived more disgracefully than Jeffrey Barnard, bibulous chronicler of his 'Low Life' column in *The Spectator*. He had always been a heavy drinker, and began in journalism writing a weekly column for *Sporting Life* in 1971, but was sacked in the same year for his uncontrolled drinking.

This precipitated a disastrous period in his life. His third wife left with their two-year-old daughter and he was hospitalised in a detox clinic where he was forced to attend Alcoholics Anonymous sessions. He afterwards always wrote scathingly about AA. After being told by a doctor that he would die very shortly if he continued drinking, he stopped and was 'dry' for almost two years, during which he perhaps unwisely worked as a barman.

He was afterwards to describe this as the worst period of his life and resumed drinking on the grounds that life, if it required sobriety, wasn't worth having. He did change from whisky to vodka to lessen the effects of hangovers.

Barnard continued to submit writing to various papers. He became Racing Correspondent for the satirical magazine *Private Eye*, and even had work accepted by his ex-employer *Sporting Life*. He was given a column in *The Spectator* in 1975. His column, entitled *Low Life* was a contrast to the paper's *High Life* column which described the lives led by wealthy socialites who had luxury yachts, visited casinos and grand hotels.

Instead, Barnard's weekly column chronicled his daily rounds of intoxication and dissipation in the Coach and Horses public house, described by food writer and film maker Jonathan Meades as a 'suicide note in weekly instalments'. Quite often he was too wasted to write his column, and *The Spectator* evolved the policy on these occasions printing a blank space where his column should have been, with the brief comment: 'Jeffery Barnard is unwell' – which his readers knew was code for him being too pissed to meet his deadline.

Not wishing to leave his obituary to some unworthy scribbler, he decided to write his own shortly before he drank himself to death in 1997. In it, he included this description of his early life.

‘His drinking began to escalate to such an extent that he was unable to hold down the most ordinary job and he was consequently advised to take up... journalism.’

Oh dear.

\*\*\*\*\*

## CHAPTER THREE

### SCREAMBLED EGGS AND FRIED CRABS BALLS

I was posted to South East Asia in the mid 1960s for the ABC and being an ex-newspaperman, I used to keep a close eye on the English language press. *The Straits Times* in Singapore then used to run a kind of 'man bites dog' spot in the centre of its front page with the standard headline, *JUST FANCY THAT*. I shared a flat with a Reuters correspondent when I first got to Singapore, and he choked on his cornflakes one morning while reading *The Straits Times*. The story (attributed correctly to Reuters) concerned a resident in one of Singapore's high rise buildings who found the lift door open, but no lift. As he stuck his head in to see where the lift was, it promptly shot past and decapitated him. The heading? *JUST FANCY THAT!*

Overseas restaurant menus are often a rich source of misunderstanding. One Asian restaurant in Malaysia once offered me a rather alarming SCREAMBLED EGGS for breakfast. This establishment also had a most unusual and one would presume – fairly rare delicacy, FRIED CRABS BALLS. You'd need a lot of crabs to keep that one served up on a daily basis.

The 1980s and 1990s years I presented a twice weekly television program for the ABC titled BackChat, which gave ABC viewers and listeners an outlet to say what they liked and didn't like about the ABC's output. On one occasion, I asked viewers to send in examples of 'unusual' dishes they may have encountered in Asia.

The response was joyous and immediate. Robin McConville, of Botany, New South Wales, swears he found the following delicacy on the menu of the Sheraton Hotel in Taipei – STEAMED WHOLE CRAP. Only a carping critic would query that one, surely.

Anne Fisher, of Baldry, New South Wales sent in a menu souvenired from a recent overseas trip featuring such delicacies as CRAZY SPICY JELLYFISH, SWEET AND SOUR PIGS HANDS AND FEET, FRIED SNAKEHEAD MULLET BALLS, FRIED GOOSE'S INTESTINES WITH

SALTED VEGETABLE, washed down if so desired with WHITE FUNGUS WITH SUGAR CANDY.

But Romola Shallcross, of Cottesloe, Western Australia topped that with a dish she found on a Turkish menu – WOMEN'S THIGH BALLS.

Things went from bad to worse. I was forced to reveal some of the gastronomic highlights of Valda and John Lambert's excursion to Thailand. DEEP FAT FRIED PIGS STOMUCH was for breakfast, presumably, after a heavy night.

Looking further afield, Joan Powling, of Ivanhoe, Victoria reported finding the following at a tiny taverna in Crete:

GRILLED LAMP SHOPS, BOWELS TOMATO SPECIAL, and SPLEEN OMELETTE, WELL COOKED. It would need to be, wouldn't it? Joan said she was gutless enough to give the BOWELS TOMATO SPECIAL a miss, but the GRILLED LAMP SHOPS were delicious.

Today the internet abounds with unfortunate computer translations of both Jinglysh and Chinglish signs. I cannot resist passing on this one, which was designed to direct foreign male tourists to a disabled toilet.



Well. we know what they meant to say...

. . . .

## TOILET HAZARDS IN FOREIGN PARTS

I travelled to Japan for the first time in my life in 1983, and spent three weeks in Tokyo, also visiting Kyoto, Hiroshima and Kurashiki City which I reached by the *shinkansen* Japan's famous bullet train which hurtles through the countryside at 300 kilometres per hour. In my work as a journalist I have been lucky enough to visit many Asian countries, but none

was so completely foreign, in my experience, as Japan. I loved the food, of course, although pickled fish for breakfast did not become a permanent habit.

Walking the streets of Tokyo is to see nary a non-Japanese face, and little English is spoken. People are universally friendly to foreigners, although through embarrassment often avoid making eye contact with you if you need to ask directions in the street. If eye contact IS made, they are culturally obliged at least to try and help you rather than walking past.

Before I left Australia I thought it wise to look up some dos and don'ts while in Japan. Their tourist organisation does have English language advice information for first visitors. One of the biggest cultural shocks to the new-comer are Japanese toilets, and that is given particular attention in the briefing. It was valuable information!

## Aim Carefully, Please

The chances are that sometime during your stay in Japan you will find yourself having to use a Japanese-style lavatory. It is not made for sitting down, but don't despair. The receptacle is usually on a raised floor. The opening is rectangular with a sort of hood

over it.

Climb up on the raised floor and stand flat-footed outside the opening with your face towards the hood. Then bend down into a crouching or squatting position, making sure that your rear is over the opening and not protruding beyond it.

The position may not be comfortable but it is sanitary because no part of your body comes in direct contact with the bowl.

In the case of the male, he urinates by standing on the lower floor and aiming for the opening. Please aim carefully.

The most commonly heard word for toilet is *otoi-arai*. To ask for the washroom, simply say "toire doko?" (toilet, where?). The word for toilet is *otoi-arai*, pronounced like two Japanese feet squaring on top. However, Japanese women object to the word just like some Western women avoid the word "toilet".

Public latrines are few and far between — and most of

them are *otoi-arai*. If you're out in the streets, the best thing to do is to go into the nearest coffee shop or tea room and invest in the cheapest drink. It won't cost you much more than the tip you have to give to the lavatory attendant in many other countries.



The chances are that sometime during your stay in Japan will find yourself having to use a Japanese-style lavatory. It is not made for sitting down, but don't despair. The receptacle is usually on a raised floor. The opening is rectangular with a sort of hood over one end.

Climb up on the raised floor and stand flat-footed astride the

opening with your face towards the hood stop then bend down into a crouching or squatting position, making sure that your rear is over the opening and not protruding beyond it.

The position may not be comfortable but it is sanitary because no part of your body comes in contact with the fixings. In the case of the male, he urinates by standing on the lower floor and aiming for the opening. Please aim carefully!

The most commonly heard word for toilet is *otoi-arai*. To ask for the washroom, simply say *toire doko?* [Toilet, where?]

The word for a toilet that is easiest to remember is *benjo*. However, priggish Japanese women object to this word just like some Western women avoid the word 'toilet'.

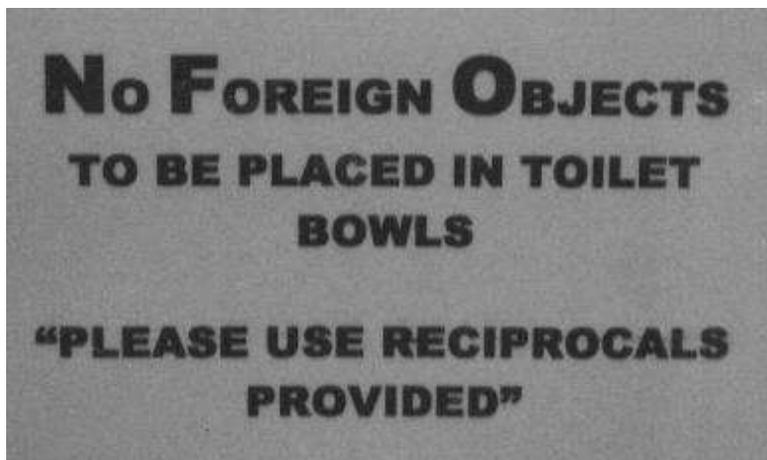
Public latrines are few and far between – and most of them are filthy. If nature calls when you are out in the streets, the best thing to do is to go into the nearest coffee shop or tearoom and invest in the cheapest drink. It won't cost you much more than the tip you have to give to the lavatory attendant in many other countries.

Um, er, and for record I did aim carefully...

. . . . .

THIS TOILET SIGN WAS HOME GROWN

Somewhere in the Gulf of North Queensland, I photographed this puzzling instruction in a restaurant loo.



. . . . .

## MANAGEMENT SPEAK

We must not ignore home-grown mangling of the English language, even in the halls of academe. I refer to the perils of management jargon which continues to infest the culture of not only the corporate world but also the universities as well!

The 1990s bred a mania for downsizing, that is, getting rid of anyone who had been around the place longer than five years, thus taking a terrible toll of middle managers over the age of 45 who actually had some corporate memory. This culture was encapsulated in the person of the appalling American business executive Albert 'Chainsaw' Dunlap, who not only ripped through the staff of any company he was associated with, but gave advice to other corporate high flyers on how to sack people and feel good about it. It turned out in the end the feared 'Chainsaw' was a fraudster with psychopathic tendencies.

The big wheel turns, of course, and I was delighted to hear that Dunlap himself was given the flick in the end by the Sunbeam Corporation in 1997 and had to pay them \$15 million in damages for his fraudulent business practices. Not long afterwards the corporate culture swung from sacking people to acknowledging that people had become important again and managers were charged with nurturing the staff they once looked to prune. This was coupled with the startling realisation that older staff have a good deal of expertise and wisdom that can actually benefit the company they work for.

The 1980s saw the worst of the psychobabble of corporate navel gazing. Even my own organisation, the ABC was infected with it, although the production of programs composed of thoughts and ideas could hardly be equated with the manufacture of widgets, and judged accordingly. It was the word 'priorisation' which finally snapped my self control and sent me into rug-chewing mode. It seemed to sum up the worst of all the omnipresent management speak that began to blight our working lives.

Even in the ABC we found ourselves struggling in a web of 'mission statements', 'hierarchy of objectives', 'random unilateral impacts', 'action planning', 'world best practice', all leading to the creation of the unstoppable 'corporate plan'.

'Priorisation of objectives' is the phrase which resonated most with me in those desperate days. 'Priorisation' did not appear in any dictionary I could find. It was a bestial assault on the English language, but is unlikely to cause a nanosecond's dismay to those who organised the latest trendy blueprint for corporate spring cleaning.

I could not resist keeping this classic comment from the ABC's Organisation & Methods Department, when one shiny-bummed bureaucrat refused to sanction a payment to a program researcher who was working extra hours for no pay to get the job done. His response was:

'While conscientiousness is praiseworthy and is to be encouraged – it is not something that should be a liability for the ABC.'

I put this in the same class as a program producer when facing managerial obstruction on a particular television documentary blew his top with the admin guy he was dealing with, and said, 'I think you should realise that the ABC actually exists to make programs for radio and television, and that your job is to facilitate this – not make it more difficult'.

His reply? 'I think that is a very narrow-minded attitude to take...'

Now let's consider the dreadful Mission Statement. To the best of my understanding this sets out aims and objectives for the coming year for you or your department if you run one. Then at the end of the year, you are reviewed (doubtless in conjunction with the massively unreadable Corporate Plan). If you haven't achieved the stated aims of the Mission Statement you are presumably given a dreadful bollocking, put on notice to do better or fired. Perhaps I should say 'made excess to requirements'.

The trouble is, the chance that the manager who goaded you into writing your Mission Statement will still be there at the end of that year is remote. Depend on it – there will be a new, ambitious boss just drooling to get his or her hands on the latest shiny levers of the management efficiency systems.

Your original Mission Statement will have as much appeal or interest to your new manager as a dog might evince to a plate of lettuce.

So you start another one, at the same time re-organising your section which has now been incorporated into a different department while you have been trying to rationalise the previous move engineered by the bright spark who triggered your original Mission Statement.

Not all the corporate stuff transposes well into the public service or the universities. An historian friend told me that his humanities faculty had to stop teaching, not so long ago, to work on their Mission Statement for the next financial year. Someone in the history department came up with the bright idea of having 'the pursuit of truth' as one of the nominated goals.

Not a bad concept for a history department, you might think. But the experts in charge of the process said that the pursuit of truth didn't fit the criteria and so they couldn't have it. And why not? asked the baffled historians. Well, we can't quantify it accurately, the management gurus said. It couldn't be quantified or calibrated to make sure that achievable targets were reached.

My friend discussed this with his colleagues and decided to hold out for the pursuit of truth. He found the whole thing distinctly Monty Pythonesque – that the processes of review were actually setting the agendas of the client organisations.

'Philosophy is stuffed for starters', he said to a colleague. 'Clearly the only way we can hold on to the pursuit of truth is to tell lies. We could say that this year we achieved 94.3 per cent, absolute truth, and next year we are confident we can rock in at 95.7 per cent.'

I don't think truth made it into the Mission Statement.

No job – even in the public service – is for life any more. And perhaps that's not a bad thing. But how do you locate those who are not pulling their weight? The management consultants have procedures, of course. I once sighted an internal university document which addressed this particular concern. The report stressed the need to identify, and I quote, 'The inadequate performer'.

After having winkled out 'the inadequate performer' the report strongly urged the heads of departments, heads of research schools and the Vice Chancellor 'to act with firm resolve in dealing with these cases'. And we can all guess what that euphemism really meant. 'Here's the door'.

If the identification of the 'inadequate performer' is straightforward enough, the next category is designed to put a chill into the hearts of any yet to be assessed lecturers or tutors. 'How to identify 'The *barely* adequate performer....'

### The immediate future

It will be apparent that adoption of proposals 5.1 and 5.2 in relation to future contracts would not begin to alleviate the problems outlined in section 4 until some time in the next decade. In relation to existing contracts, the following observations and suggestions are made:

- 1) The inadequate performer. It is the Committee's view that adoption of the Board's recommendation concerning the review of the performance of individual academics will provide appropriate documentation on which the University may act to terminate the appointment of the inadequate performer under existing contractual arrangements. It strongly urges heads of departments, heads of research Schools and the Vice-Chancellor to act with firm resolve in dealing with these cases.
- 2) The barely adequate performer. Again, reviews of performance of individual academics will assist in locating such staff. It is the Committee's view that heads of department within each School should be required to report in writing to the head of the School periodically stating (a) whether, in the opinion of the head of department, any of the tenured academics within his department fall within the "barely adequate performer" category, and if so, (b) what measures have been taken or might be taken to respond to the situation. The heads of Schools should be similarly required to report in writing to the Vice-Chancellor periodically stating (a) whether, in the opinion of the head of School, any of the tenured academics within his School fall within the "barely adequate performer" category, and if so, (b) what measures have been taken or might be taken.

WE TRAINED HARD . . . . . BUT IT  
 SEEMED THAT EVERYTIME WE WERE  
 BEGINNING TO FORM UP INTO  
 TEAMS WE WOULD BE REORGANISED,  
 I WAS TO LEARN LATER IN LIFE  
 THAT WE TEND TO MEET ANY NEW  
 SITUATION BY REORGANISING;  
 AND A WONDERFUL METHOD IT CAN  
 BE FOR CREATING THE ILLUSION  
 OF PROGRESS, WHILE PRODUCING  
 CONFUSION, INEFFICIENCY AND  
 DEMORALIZATION.

PETRONIUS ARBITER, 210B.C.

Time to upgrade the hierarchy of objectives, wouldn't you say? And the game goes on well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I shall leave the last word to the author of *Satyricon*, Petronius Arbiter, in 210 BC

'The future seems to be nothing more than an expensive sequence of never-ending upgrades.' (Mark Trevorrow)

Meanwhile even chief executives are tapping away on their keyboards when once they would have dictated their correspondence to their secretaries or a stenographer (now a vanished breed).

We are all slaves to our computers. Young people are especially afflicted, stabbing obsessively away at their mobile phones or tablets, in the street, on public transport, or anywhere, permanently stressed that they may have not caught up with a Tweet or Facebook message in the last 10 seconds.

But all ages are at it. In Myanmar, of all places, my wife and I were in a restaurant with a Chinese family of four at a nearby table. The children, a boy of about 13 and a girl of 11, were both playing games on their screens. The parents were on their tablets. I don't think anyone exchanged a word during lunch.

In Japan they have replaced the impersonal and unhelpful Microsoft error messages with Haiku poetry verses. Haiku has strict rules. Each poem has only 17 syllables. Five syllables in the first line, seven in the second and five in the third. They are used to communicate timeless messages, often achieving a wistful, yearning and powerful insights through extreme brevity.

*Yesterday it worked  
Today it is not working  
Windows is like that.*

*The web site you seek  
Cannot be located, but  
Countless more exist.*

*Chaos reigns within  
Reflect, repent and reboot  
Order shall return.*

*Program aborting  
Close all that you have worked on  
You ask far too much*

*Windows NT crashed.  
I am the Blue Screen of Death.  
No one hears your screams.*

*Your file was too big.  
It must have been quite useful.  
But now it is gone.*

*Stay the patient course.  
Of little worth is your ire.  
The network is down.*

*A crash reduces  
Your expensive computer  
To a simple stone.*

*Three things are certain:  
Death, taxes and lost data.  
Guess which has occurred.*

*You step in the stream,  
But the water has moved on.  
This page is not here.*

*Out of memory.  
We wish to hold the whole sky.  
But we never will.*

*Having been erased,  
The document you are seeking  
Must now be retyped.*

*Serious error.  
All shortcuts have disappeared.  
Screen. Mind. All is blank.*

. . . .

And lastly:

### THE CENTIPEDE

*The centipede was happy quite,  
Until a toad in fun  
Said: 'Pray which leg goes after which'?  
That worked her mind to such a pitch  
She lay distracted in a ditch,  
Considering how to run.*

. . . .

(Credited to Mrs Edward Craster, Pinafore Poems 1871)

\*\*\*\*\*