

HWT memories

By Jan McGuinness

Picture this as I attempt to guide you through a lost world and introduce you to a few of its strange inhabitants. It's sometime in the mid to late 1960s as we enter the foyer of 44 Flinders St, home to the HWT, and take the lift to the third floor. There we alight and turn left down mahogany row past the offices of the editor-in-chief, the chairman and the womens department on one side and those of the Sun News Pictorial on the other until reaching the big, brass framed, plate glass doors beyond which lies The Herald newsroom. Entering this vast open office we are confronted by a sea of desks where journos, most with a cigarette dangling from their lips, pound furiously at typewriters which are bolted to the desks. Artificial light illuminates this enclosed space where the jangle of dozens of ringing telephones fill the air heavy with the smell of printers ink and cigarette smoke. Directly opposite in a cordoned off area sits the COS, John Fitzgerald, surrounded by telephones and conferring with his secretary Bea Warren who stands leaning forward over his desk, propped on outstretched arms. Beyond them in a glassed off area is the subs room presided over by John Lahy, John Keily and Peter Maher and beyond them again, Herald Sport where sit Alf Brown, chief football writer and reigning oracle of all that Melbourne holds dear with grumpy Jack Elliot, the racing writer.

Cast around the news room and you'll see Bill Tipping perched in his own little wooden pen hard at work on another of his brilliant In Black and White columns. Nearby is John Sorell who is fast turning his On The Spot daily feature into a must read, while in through the door strides Geoff Clancy for a quick word with Fitzy. Geoff is the Police Roundsman and crime is at the heart of The Herald's news offering. He gets around town in a chauffeur driven Chevy tuned permanently to the police radio channels and works out of police rounds alongside the Russell Street police headquarters in a film noir world populated by Damon Runyan characters with names to match like Harry the Horse Lovett from the ABC and The Herald's own Fred the Needle, aka Peter Fitzgerald.

Away from the fray but just across a corridor beyond the newsroom and rarely seen sits the editor Stuart Brown, reputed to be a former communist and remembered by your guide for refusing her a \$5 a week pay rise on the basis that there were men with families more deserving than she.

Around lunchtime the elegant and delightfully named Earl Gray emerges from editing the letters to the editor page to join Keith Dunstan from the Sun and that other old dude who gets around in spats for a spot of lunch over at the Melbourne Club. Elsewhere in the building Jack Eddy, the finance editor, is readying for another bout at Lou Richard's pub across the road. As remembered by Garry Barker in a piece for The Age back in 2004, Jack was an alcoholic genius who started the day at Lou's drinking 'hotties.' Cold beer hurt his

fillings so the barmaid tempered his glass with boiling water before filling it. He could be legless but still dictate a masterly piece.

Jack was an old mate and contemporary of the executive chairman Sir John Williams described in a tribute on his passing in 1982 as autocratic, idiosyncratic and hard drinking. Many were the tales, possibly apocryphal, that attested to the latter. But my favourite concerns an encounter between a sober Sir John and a worse for wear Jack Eddy late one evening in mahogany row. Eddy commenced singing Sir John's praises telling him what a wonderful bloke and all round great journalist he was. After all, Sir John had overseen the growth of the HWT into the country's biggest media group.

Sir John told Eddy firmly to tone it down because he was embarrassing him. Well I never, replied an outraged Eddy, everyone else around here says you're a right old bastard.

Apart from this cast of contrasting and colourful characters it will be the Dickensian surroundings you notice on this long ago visit to Flinders St. The lino covered halls reek of printers ink and squeak as you walk along them past the old cage lifts or up to the ambient free cafeteria on the roof where Eric Page won The Herald food critic gig by being able to devour the most pies in one sitting.

Printing machines rumble in the bowels of the building, floors of comps, lino type setters, layout artists and proof readers occupy the floors above editorial. The sensation of being part of something vast and tangible is palpable and confirmed by the flotilla of Herald trucks in the loading dock piled high with the latest edition. Leaving the HWT building and strolling down Flinders St you'll pass an army of newspaper boys screaming Her-oild and be overwhelmed by a sense of excitement not to be matched however clever and efficient is this digital world we now inhabit.

So there you have it, a potted look at the context for what my own experience of those years was like.

I'm chuffed to be following Ranald, a revered former employer under whose guidance I flourished at The Age. By then I had hit my straps and become worth employing which was hardly the case when the HWT took me on as a graduate cadet in the late 1960s. So while my memories of those early days are somewhat random, twisted and blighted by fear and confusion, it is to The Herald that I owe whatever skills I have. Those years drilled me in the hard lessons, taught me how to write - *and* to leave everything to the last minute so as to enjoy that exhilarating, creative burst of adrenalin under pressure. As all of us trained on afternoon newspapers know, there is nothing like that series of deadlines throughout the day to get you moving. It's addictive.

My memories are personal by definition but I hope they resonate with some of yours - even the blokes. Because although females now dominate journalism courses by a factor of

about three to one back then the HWT and journalism per se was blokey heaven fuelled by cigarette smoke, alcohol and testosterone.

Us girls were congratulated on receiving equal pay, unheard of in any other profession or craft at the time, but equal opportunity wasn't part of the equation making it that much harder for us to survive let alone succeed in an already highly competitive environment.

Di Raynor, Liz Hooper, Anne Pilmer, Rosie Rule, Eve Syme, Belinda Lamb, Maureen Gilchrist, Julia Adams and Veronica Ridge were among my contemporaries. All of them - and the blokes - will have different memories of our shared experience reflecting that age old conflict between truth and accuracy. But here goes.

Being a uni grad I was at least three years behind my peers in the things that mattered like how to write an intro and even recognise a story. Today, those trying to crack journalism without a degree are the anomaly but back then, graduates were a novel and despised species - a privileged, over educated lot with no practical knowledge of the real world.

By comparison my predominantly male peers were uniformly cool and experienced and already making their names on various rounds or running sections like the Under 20s page. This was the fiefdom of Ernie Raetz when I arrived and I remember being dazzled by his floral shirts and matching ties. Us girls weren't even allowed to wear slacks to work, not even a trendy pants suit because of the improbability of being sent to government house or to interview the prime minister.

For those with a romantic 'Clark Kent, His girl Friday, The Front Page'-inspired notion of newspapers, sailing through the big glass doors into the brightly lit, noisy Herald newsroom was like entering a waking dream. But as one of those classic cases of someone approaching journalism from the 'I love reading and people say I can write' category, I was clueless about what it entailed and bewildered from the get go.

I arrived in the midst of a February heatwave having spent years incarcerated in an all girls school followed by three years in a female only university college. Naive and unworldly doesn't begin to describe me.

One of my first jobs was to cover the release of a BHP OH&S report. The stats and injuries weren't all that numerous but the sorts of accidents described were quite alarming. I kicked off what became a front page story thoroughly reworked by someone else with a description of the weather.

Cadet counsellor Bob Coleman's weekly pointers had no way of out pacing my floundering attempts at journalism. Shortly after the BHP fiasco I was sent to cover a magistrate's court in Brunswick hearing hundreds of cases brought against householders for abusing water restriction bans. I phoned in with a smattering of names but no addresses or occupations. Not even those wonderful female copy takers in the phone room - my champions on so

many occasions - could save my bacon that day and I became a legend in the subs room for all the wrong reasons.

When not filing the stock exchange reports, shipping news and muslim prayer times or wandering around trying to find courts in outer whoop whoop, I was on the road with a photographer which made finding the job easier but arrival not necessarily guaranteed. There were exceptions but by and large I remember them as a coterie of hardened drunks and crazy drivers. On the way to Olinda, for example, we stopped at every pub along the way while Bert Rodda's method of parallel parking was to crash and bash the vehicle on either end while mounting the footpath, only slightly less harrowing than driving down the middle of the road in his care as he ripped through the gears from one to three so as to save time.

Back in the news room I lived in terror of John Keily, the chief sub, who would regularly fly out of the subs room waving my copy over his head and screaming something like Miss McGuinness, you spelled principal with an L-E instead of an A-L. Today, of course, I'd require trauma therapy and he'd be counselled for bullying but I well knew that I had tried his patience beyond that which he was able. And I never made those errors again.

I was not alone in my confusion. One day the roar of a fire engine could be heard speeding down Flinders St. 'Get that,' Fitzy, our redoubtable COS growled head down, arm up waving at the big plate glass doors on to mahogany row. An eager beaver Sean Hanrahan took up the challenge and duly returned, not with the details of the fire but with a girl who had been passing the doors at the time.

At the end of such a day one could always repair to the top bar at The Phoenix across the road, and usually did. There gun feature writer Alan Stewart serenaded young female cadets night after drunken night with 'To Dream the Impossible Dream,' and I consumed more beer than I have ever done before or since. To the point that one night I got home to Parkville without my car which remained parked in Mugs Alley, not because I was cautious and responsible but because I'd completely forgotten that I even owned a car.

Other diversions included being sent off to shorthand classes once or twice a week at a school run by two old dears known to someone in the Herald hierarchy and situated in a dusty classroom set up in a building conveniently close to the Australia Hotel and other watering holes. Carillo Gantner, who did a sort of gap year in journalism before segueing into a career in diplomacy and the arts, was held up to us as a shining example of someone who mastered the skill in only six weeks. It could be done. But few of us were equal to the challenge and easily lead astray. The boys always suggested the pub or a nearby coffee shop as an alternative and nine times out of 10 that's where we'd end up.

Our social life extended beyond the pub since every Saturday night there was a Herald party in a rotating series of suburban flats and houses belonging to the older, married journos and

their long suffering wives. John Lahy organised parties also for the cadets at his place in Eltham and there was, I guess, an over arching culture of family. But that said, it *was* a boot camp out of which life long bonds and friendships were born and I guess that's largely why we are here today.

Given that I was no competition to anyone I received a lot of helpful advice and mentoring. Not least from Bob Coleman, the reluctant cadet counsellor who was instructed to take me on as a special case. He clued me in and taught me to write simple elegant prose, to develop a voice of my own and an eye for the unusual. Along the way we became firm friends and often had lunch together, unfortunately choosing places frequented by Fred Daley, our philandering Editor in Chief and his current girlfriend. The straighty one eighty Bob was mortified that Fred would think we too were an item.

At one stage I suspect the hierarchy tried to shake me off by sending me to 3DB to write news bulletins from 4 am until midday. The radio station was part of the HWT empire and housed in a dungeon below Flinders Lane where a highlight was the breakfast arrival of four n twenty pies and other fast food freebies. But I prevailed and hung on somehow as fellow cadets powered from strength to strength and managed to avoid womens which rightly or wrongly I perceived as a dead end. Indeed, I asked to go to Police Rounds which was what all the male cadets aspired to. When I put this to Fitzy he suggested I was a ghoul.

Apart from Bob, Fitzy and the sergeant major-like Bea Warren had the unenviable job of knocking me into shape, and somehow I got through that challenging first year and became a D grade journalist.

Someone, probably Bob, pinched my file from Bea's draw and informed me that I was the most improved cadet that year, though clearly it was off an extremely low base. So here I stand before you many decades later as someone who has made a career of journalism thanks to that baptism of fire at the old Melbourne Herald and is now imparting her knowledge and experience to Monash journalism students.

I would have never made it in today's environment. Which can only make me wonder what other gems are lost to the profession in these straightened times. Getting and retaining a cadetship now sounds like a version of Game of Thrones. At Fairfax, I believe, they take on interns with no guarantee of a job at the end of their servitude. The Herald-Sun is not much different. Yet we continue to turn out journalism graduates who are no less keen and determined than we were. Plus they have the benefit of being taught by experienced practitioners. For I am no academic and simply teach by deconstructing everything I learned along the way, mostly by osmosis, imitation and mentoring.

Does Journalism have a future? Of course it does. People will always want information and they thrive on stories. Sure the means of delivery have changed, and we are in a process of

evolution that feels like revolution, but I don't want to bang on about broken business models.

Thanks for allowing me the opportunity to bang on at all. A special thanks to David Harrison for herding us all together for this mini festival and to Ken Davis who might not have had as much to do with this gathering but has been responsible for so many others down the years.