

2. A Journo in Sydney

My father decided that I should do something serious about a career in journalism and, with a family contact, Roger Davis, a senior journalist on *The Daily Telegraph*, he contacted Mark Gallard, the then Editor-in-Chief of *Truth and Sportsman*, publishers of the *Daily Mirror*. I managed to get a job as an office boy at the Sydney headquarters in Hosking Place in the city. I was often instructed to take several bottles of champagne to the fashionable restaurant Romano's, for the *Mirror's* proprietor, Ezra Norton, and his luncheon guests. Cigarettes were in short supply after the war and one had to be 'in the know' with a cigarette vendor. I would be sent off to a kiosk in Clarence Street on a regular basis to collect Mr Norton's cigarettes. None of this was a great learning experience, except that I got to know the Sydney CBD, before I cracked a job in the reading room at the *Truth and Sportsman's* editorial headquarters in Kippax Street, Surry Hills.

John Norton was one of the most colourful figures in the history of Australian journalism. Born in 1858 in Brighton, Sussex, he migrated to Australia in 1884, settling in Sydney. Despite bouts of drunkenness, he became a successful journalist and built up the newspaper *Truth*—at various stages published in Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne and Perth. The *Australian Dictionary of Biography* says that Norton senior introduced a sensational form of abuse of many figures in authority in the pages of *Truth*, from Queen Victoria ('flabby, fat and flatulent') to local councillors, especially the raving 'wowsers'—a word he claimed to have coined. His articles and alliteration (Lord Dudley was accused of 'libidinous lecheries and lascivious lapses') were immensely popular with the working class. *Truth's* circulation skyrocketed.

Ezra Norton was a hands-on newspaper proprietor, as were Warwick Fairfax (later knighted by Prime Minister Harold Holt, but not by Menzies) with the *Sydney Morning Herald* and Frank Packer (later Sir Frank) with *The Daily Telegraph*. Packer even checked the expense claims of his journalists. With the death of Stalin, Packer ordered a cartoon to be published in the *Telegraph* with a crocodile shedding tears—a commentary on the standard eulogies that were being published at the time of the death of the communist monster. Norton was not a member of the Sydney establishment and when the Australian Jockey Club (AJC) committee failed to elect Norton as a member, this bastion of the establishment became the target of ferocious criticism by the *Mirror*. This criticism did bear fruit when, after constant pressure from the *Mirror*, the AJC agreed to admit journalists to hearings of racing stewards inquiring into such matters as betting frauds, jockeys pulling horses and doping.

Newspapers then—even more than now—were examples of the management of complex organisations. The process involved the text of the journalist's story first being typed onto sheets of copy paper, before going to the subeditors' room, where it would be assessed for importance, given a place on a page, edited and given an appropriate heading, type size and font noted on the copy and sent off to the composing room. Here the material was 'set' on a linotype machine operated by highly skilled tradesmen. These machines produced letters from hundreds of lead moulds moved around in the machine by operation of an elaborate keyboard. The moulds ('slugs') would then form words and sentences and were assembled in the right order by a compositor (another trade branch of printing) on a steel table (a 'stone') to make up the page. 'Galleys' were impressions of the material on the stone, which went to the reading room where the senior reader read to the junior—my job. One had to follow the words of the reader and stop him if there was an omission or mistake in his reading against the copy. There were some eight teams, working throughout the day, checking all editions. When the galleys and pages on the stone had all been checked, semicircular impressions of the pages were made and then locked onto the rollers of the huge, super-fast rotary presses. There were, from memory, at least six editions a day and a number of 're-plates' involving limited changes to pages to deal with developing stories.

Six months in the reading room provided invaluable hands-on training in the writing style expected and the way senior journalists treated their stories. It is a curious thing that today, with newspapers produced by the miracle of computers, deadlines seem to run behind the deadlines imposed in the hot-lead era. This is probably due to newspapers being much larger, with a lot more pages and, of course, colour. Apart from the actual production, there were also the complexities involved in the need for an advertising department to generate revenue. Distributing the paper across the city and State was a substantial and complex task. Paper sellers sold hundreds of papers from rent-free footpath sites on the streets of Sydney. They did a roaring trade as the evening rush hour approached and papers were bought for reading on public transport on homeward journeys.

A cadetship on the *Mirror* was not easy to get in the late 1940s. Under the Chifley Government's postwar reconstruction legislation, priority rightly went to journalists returning from the war. But finally, I was promoted to a cadetship after six months and I began my journalistic career. A cadetship was normally spread over four years and, on its completion, a journalist went on to the lowest level applying in the award: 'D' grade. From there, one would expect to be graded 'C', 'B', 'A' and 'A plus'.

Training on the *Mirror* for a cadet was not comparable with the intense training and instruction given in other trades to apprentice carpenters, electricians,

fitters and turners and plumbers. I had already achieved some ability as a touch typist. While in the reading room, I went to East Sydney Technical College for touch-typing courses and one of my co-students was well-known journalist (Sydney's) 'Won' Casey—as opposed to (Melbourne's) Ron Casey. One of the agreeable features of this course was that we were the only males in a room full of young ladies. The typing course was taken in the boss's time and, having abandoned Pitman's shorthand as too difficult, I decided to take up Summerhayes' Shorterhand—an Australian invention. Bobby helped me at the kitchen table at home, testing my memory for the correct shorthand symbols for contractions of common words and phrases. In later life in the press gallery, if I found it difficult to work out an outline or interpret my shorthand, I would go to Gough Whitlam's office and there Carol Summerhayes, a granddaughter of the creator, would easily read my outlines and solve my difficulties. Shorthand courses are a slow slog in many ways, so to relieve the boredom, we cadets would nick down to the Metropolitan Snooker Saloon rather than business college on occasions. Even so, we finally got through the course.

The *Mirror* did not 'train' its cadets. Essentially, you relied on your own initiative and learned from others—the more senior cadets and other journalists. At first, work was nothing but low-grade clerical duties: putting together lists of radio programs and shipping movements. The NSW lottery results for the cable edition were a major challenge for cadets. The cable edition contained material flowing in overnight by cable from overseas news agencies. Generally, this edition ran at about 10.30 pm, when the last number was drawn, and the page containing the lottery results was locked up on the stone in the composing room. The lottery was drawn from a large wooden barrel in an office just off George Street, near Wynyard, with the draw beginning about 9.30 pm. Each winning number from first prize down to the lowest £5 was read aloud by a government official. The cadets had to get all these numbers down in a hell of a hurry and get them to the *Mirror's* office.

The hardest to get accurate were the numbers of the final draw: 1500 prizes of £5 read rapidly. At the end of the draw, the official results would be transmitted to the *Mirror* from the lottery office and we would find that, on average, there were half a dozen or so incorrect numbers of £5 prizes in the paper. Pensioners and other needy people expressed bitter disappointment after reading the *Mirror*. Full of hope, they expected to collect the handy sum of £5 only to find that it was a mistake. Every week, we would receive groans and moans from the news editor and the chief of staff asking us to lift our game. The winner of first prize in the NSW lottery was known by mid-morning, and we competed with the *Sun* to get an exclusive interview with the lucky winner. We were sent off with a photographer, a radio car and a driver; the aim was to get to the winner before the *Mirror's* competitor, the *Sun*. If we were successful, the idea was to entice

the winner away from his or her home or workplace, so the opposition would not get an interview. One driver often with me was George, who was probably about thirty, a sixth-division veteran not all that long back from the war. It struck me later that here I was, an inexperienced kid, telling a knockabout bloke like George what to do and how to do it. But George was (fortunately) smarter than me. If we could not find our target at his/her residence, George had the nous to suggest we try some of the pubs. That often worked.

The Saturday edition was all about sport, and the permanent sporting journalists were supported by cadets who did the dogsbody work of assembling racing results. These had to be absolutely accurate: the correct placing of horses in each race, the odds for the various runners, tote odds, and so on. Any cadet who made a mistake with these details was in trouble. Punters not at the races could only 'get on' with illegal SP bookmakers who, unlike the on-course bookies and the on-course tote, paid no taxes to the State Government, and therefore, every effort was made to wipe out the SPs. It was a vast and crooked industry supervised by corrupt coppers. My cousin Don Smith ran the biggest SP in Yass, NSW, in the 1950s. The local police sergeant tipped him off when a visit from 'the flying squad' was expected. The flying squad was composed of senior vice squad detectives from Sydney who were supposed to swoop on SPs. Don was invariably given a warning enabling him to set up a dummy SP operator to be arrested by the flying squad. As the dummies had no previous offences, they would receive a light fine—paid by Don—and life got back to normal in the SP business.

The last edition of the *Mirror*—the country edition—went to press in the late afternoon and was delivered to Central Railway Station for distribution all over the State. Cadets put the nuts and bolts of this edition together. For example, we covered the wool sales at the Royal Exchange Building off Bridge Street. Each bid was noted in the day's catalogue and the auctioneer would let us know what were the more significant bids and whether or not it had been a good day for the sellers. These were the essential details for the story to accompany the table of bids. The graziers were to be seen sitting at the back of the auction room waiting to hear the outcome of a year's work on their property. It was the same story at the stock sales at Homebush, where we would carefully notate the prices fetched at auction for two-tooth wethers, finished bullocks, and so on. The stock and station agent would give journalists a rundown on what was happening in the market. With this information, a story would be phoned through for the country editions.

During my cadetship, I was intrigued by the new ballpoint pen, which had just come onto the market. It was claimed the pen could write under water—something I never actually needed to do, but it was an interesting thought. The original biro was too expensive for me to buy straight out so I put one on lay-by,

but when I got my hands on this treasure it was an absolute dud. The original biro was hopeless for shorthand, as it could not make a thick or thin stroke. Worse—it leaked hopelessly all over one's fingers.

One of the tasks assigned to cadets and more to my liking was a 5 am departure by launch from Bennelong Point—then the site of a tram depot and later the Opera House. Accompanied by a photographer, we travelled to Sydney Heads where we would scramble aboard one of the great P&O ships coming into Sydney Harbour. The ship's purser met us and, after a lavish breakfast, we were given the cabin numbers of VIPs and other interesting people onboard. There were pop stars and other entertainers, whom we interviewed as the ship steamed up to dock at Darling Harbour. Cadets were also sent to interview people of note arriving via plane at Mascot Airport. This was before the jet age and passengers came to Australia on the long-range piston-driven planes of the time such as the Lockheed Constellation.

The Sydney *Sun* had an aviation correspondent, John Ulm, son of the famous Australian airman Charles Ulm, stationed permanently at the airport. He helped inexperienced cadets and could recite some wonderful 'bloopers' made by young journalists doing interviews at Mascot. One hopeful interviewed Cardinal Gilroy who was departing for Rome to participate in some solemn event. The journalist asked this question: 'Will the Cardinal's wife be accompanying him?' Another keen young reporter would ask visiting celebrities who had just cleared customs: 'Now this is your first visit to Australia; how do you like it?'

Police rounds were exciting, as they covered accidents, murders, muggings, robberies and general mayhem in the city and suburbs. There was a specialised police-rounds group but cadets were used on occasions when a big story broke requiring extra manpower. The *Mirror's* police roundsman, Bill Jenkins, kept in sweet with police as a generous shouter in the pubs and would boom up his best contacts in the *Mirror* for the wonderful work they were doing. These were the days of relative innocence and police corruption was confined to minor industries such as brothels and SP bookmaking. The curse of drugs had yet to arrive.

Cadets did a lot of court work, from suburban magistrate's courts through to the High Court at Darlinghurst and the Supreme Court and Equity Court off Queens Square. The Equity and Supreme Courts were beyond our understanding in most cases, but we got by with the assistance of barristers involved in the cases. They would give us a rundown on what each judgment meant. With nobody to assist or tell us how to put together a story, we learned from the subeditors who handled our copy before it appeared in the paper. For the afternoon editions (often up to five), speed was the key and one had to keep a keen eye on the clock since we were competing at that time with the Sydney *Sun*, the other afternoon

paper in Sydney. A lot of copy was simply dictated over the phone, maybe from a hot and dirty public phone box, to wizardly women copytakers back at the *Mirror* office. They were excellent spellers and corrected our halting grammar as they typed.

At the Magistrate's Court in Paddington, the police prosecutor and the magistrate would drink together at the pub opposite the court at lunchtime and sometimes the journalists would join in. I thought this was a cosy sort of an arrangement but not too good for the accused. A 'surfie' teenager had been found guilty of some sort of homosexual charge at the Bondi Beach dressing sheds and at lunchtime the magistrate remarked to the prosecutor, 'Oh, you could tell he was guilty by his long hair.' That says a lot for justice from police and magistrates in New South Wales at that time. The *Mirror* put heavy responsibilities on cadets in court work. We covered murder trials lasting for a week or more, alone and unaided, having to sit through these trials and follow the proceedings very closely. High accuracy was required, particularly with the names and addresses of those charged, various witnesses and exactly what was said. And one had to have the ability to work out what was the big news story of each half-hour to an hour, then head for the phones for *Mirror* copytakers to re-lead stories, changing them as the trial developed. When back in court, hopefully another journalist from another paper would fill in on happenings in the interim. It was a demanding job.

I was sent to Nyngan, way out west in New South Wales, on the overnight sleeper train to report the trial of a local grazier, Edward Ronald Backhouse (twenty-nine), accused of attempted murder. It was alleged he had sent a box of chocolates laced with strychnine to another young man, who was a local involved in a love triangle with a young woman. The only advice the chief of staff gave me was to buy an expensive box of chocolates, take it down to the Nyngan telephone exchange and ask the girls to put me through to the *Mirror* office as soon as I came on the line. This did the trick over the week I spent covering the trial. After arriving in Nyngan and booking in to the pub, I asked for a key to my room. 'Oh, no key, you'll be in number six sharing with Jack. He's a shearer', was the publican's reply. I was somewhat taken aback, but as it turned out, the shearer and I never met in the bedroom. There were reporters there from the *Sun*, *The Daily Telegraph* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and we were overnight celebrities—newspaper reporters from the big smoke. At the end of the week, the defendant was found not guilty, mainly because of a lack of direct evidence connecting him with the poisoned chocolates.

An aspiring journalist had to sink or swim: you either got the hang of it quickly or you did not, and if you did not then, too bad, you were no longer required. One afternoon, the chief of staff, without any notice, told me to get myself to the NSW Art Gallery and phone in a story on the awarding of the Archibald Prize

for portraiture. I told him that I did not know the first thing about art. ‘When you get to the gallery, find somebody who does,’ he snapped. I did. That was the way it worked and, if you were not worldly wise when you began working at the *Mirror*, it did not take long to learn a lot about the seamy side of life. Cadets were required to cover what was called ‘dirty day’ at the Redfern Magistrate’s Court—generally once a month. This was a closed court and the most awful charges of various descriptions were heard: bestiality, buggery, assaults on children and the like. Journalists were allowed in the court but the text of their stories had to be read and approved by the magistrate.

I was getting plenty of experience in day-to-day journalism, but had not thought much about specialising in any aspect of it. What I did not want was to end up permanently in police rounds. Nor did I relish years covering courts. Someone soon made up my mind for me.