

Pressing On: The Story of New Zealand's Newspapers, 1921-2000.

By Ian F. Grant.

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Today's slender dailies, hanging by a thread, make it sound unlikely; but local papers once groaned with advertising. As Ian Grant recalls, Auckland's *Herald* even boasted in 1963 that it carried more advertising than any of its inky rivals, the holes around the ads filled with shared NZ Press Association copy.

No wonder Grant titles Part Two (1946 – 1965) of *Pressing On*, his twentieth century newspaper history, 'The Golden Years' when the industry boomed. Alongside a picture of sleek newsmen lined up in drape suits and Panama hats is a quote about the 'decided virtues of decency' in our fifty dailies (p. 245). Yet, looking back, it is hard not to see it as an industry making far too much money to worry about *journalism*.

And with the coming dawn of TV, as Grant points out, that prosperous world was already on notice. No thanks to Aussie carpetbaggers like Rupert Murdoch, who, during 1964 and 1965, virtually became a Wellingtonian – holing up for days at a downtown hotel, popping across to Parliament for meetings with PM Keith Holyoake; later appearing in shirt sleeves to supervise, night after night, production of *The Dominion* and *NZ Sunday Times*, his newly acquired titles.

Murdoch, later to be most reviled press baron of the twentieth century, was readying for world domination and it is amazing to recall how the New Zealand press was his first target outside Australia. Of course he wasn't the first Aussie larrikin to cross the ditch and shake up local journalism. Nor was he ever as successful here as John Norton who arrived in 1905 to produce a 'Maoriland' edition of his Sydney *Truth*, soon our biggest-selling newspaper. Half of us read it (on the quiet).

Muckraking *Truth* would be the making of Murdoch. In 1959, the 'Boy Publisher' from Adelaide gained his Sydney foothold by buying up a Sunday edition of *Truth* from Norton's son, trying the buccaneering formula here in New Zealand with a tabloid *Dominion*, then as we know, going all mogul in the UK and the USA.

Grant does acknowledge larrikins like Norton and Murdoch in this monumental, painstaking 670-page slab of a book, a sequel to *Lasting Impressions*, but his interests tend to be cataloguing the lives of refined, conservative male journalists like Alan Mulgan, the man responsible for the 'decided virtues of decency' quote.

And while he rightly concedes that the awful *Truth* was the closest the country had to a national paper, he seems reluctant to acknowledge its impact on local journalism. For example, he lauds industry heavyweights like Pat Lawlor, Les Cleveland and Don Bryant while failing to mention their deep *Truth* connections.

The women were coming. In 1956, as he points out, *The Dominion* employed Val Aldridge, its first woman journalist since Iris Wilkinson (Robyn Hyde). The latter rightly gets full credit here, but there's no sign of the brilliant Ruth Park, who cut her teeth at the Auckland *Star*, Elizabeth Riddell and Jean Wishart, who began her career editing *Truth's* women's pages. Fortunately luminaries like Judy McGregor and Sue Carty are fully acknowledged in later chapters.

In the end, wading through Grant's worthy list of every single inky print ever cranked out here becomes a distraction for all but the specialist. Do I really need to know that the *Waimarino County Call*, a tri-weekly, merged in 1948 into the *Central District Press*? Or the life and death of the *Wyndham Farmer*?

Pressing On notes how the almighty NZ Press Association 'reduced competition between papers, stifled the instinct to hunt down "scoops" and gave a very definite sameness' to the local press (p. 247). Labour MP Martyn Finlay went further, commenting that Kiwis got 'the press [they] deserved ... smug, self-satisfied and provincial.'¹

But as Grant points out, there was the odd flash of dissent. He quotes Les Cleveland's delicious tale from 1962 of how an independent-minded *Levin Chronicle* journo dared take it upon themselves to telephone Soviet leader Nikita Krushchev and ask questions about the Cuban missile crisis. 'There was a bitter protest about this breach of the [Press] Association's agreement' (p. 248).

¹ *Evening Post*, 28 October 1965, 14.