

**Writes of passage: a comparative study of
newspaper obituary practice in Australia,
Britain and the United States**

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Glossary of terms

boilerplate obituary	American term for an obituary which offers a brief, formulaic account without anecdote or character appraisal
by-line	name of the author, printed below the headline
decks	lines of headlines
end-credit	name of the author, printed after the closing paragraph
go-last	capsule of life history at the end of an obituary
lead	opening paragraph of a newspaper item
pull-quote	a brief text extract, often from a passage of direct speech, presented as a design feature in larger type
side-bar	a secondary article featuring some aspect of a main story
stand-first	capsule of life history at the head of an obituary
wire service	news agency or other news organisation which disseminates reports or information to clients for publication

Style note: punctuation

1. In some instances, to achieve clarity of meaning, the punctuation of archival passages has been adjusted so that it conforms with the style applied elsewhere in the thesis.
2. The allegiance of this thesis to newspaper practice finds further expression in the style adopted for quotation marks attached to passages of direct speech. Their rendition follows journalism convention, in that
 - **Complete quotes** have the closing inverted comma outside the punctuation point which indicates the passage's conclusion, as in: 'Just last week, a widow I was interviewing didn't want the first wife's name in,' recalls Tim Bullamore, of the *Times*. 'I insisted on including it, but managed to convince her I wasn't interested in why the marriage had ended.' (*Chapter Six*)
 - **Incomplete quotes** have the closing inverted comma inside the punctuation point which indicates the sentence's conclusion, as in: Her obituary in the *Post* said that at times she had 'been known to give rudeness a bad name'. (*Chapter Seven*)

Style note: numbers

The text of this thesis adopts for the greater part a traditional Humanities approach, in that numbers less than 100 are spelt out. The following exceptions are applied:

- Linked ordinals, as in: '19th century'.
- Numbers expressed as percentages.
- Ages (to match newspaper style, numbers above nine are presented in figures).
- When numbers are attached to units of linear measurement, as in: '64 column centimetres'. (*Chapter Eight*)
- Figures contained in quoted passages are reproduced without change.

Summary

Australian newspapers in recent years have increased significantly the column space devoted to obituaries. The *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Australian*, the *Age*, the *West Australian*, the *Herald Sun*, the *Canberra Times*, the *Advertiser*, and the *Courier-Mail* now publish them in dedicated sections, often allocating an entire page to the obituary art. Their popularity in Australia follows a pattern established during the 1980s in Britain and the United States. Australian practice has been influenced in particular by developments in British journalism, which has seen a phenomenon described by the *Wall Street Journal* as ‘an odd revival...the rebirth of long newspaper obituaries’.[†]

In its first incarnation, the obituary can be traced to the newsbooks of England which appeared in the 1660s, during the Restoration. It flowered in the 18th century, in the first daily newspapers and magazines; it grew luxuriant, and sometimes ornate, in the 19th century; it became unfashionable and fell into some general neglect in the 20th. Then, with the appointment of reformist editors and, particularly in Britain, the publication of bigger newspapers by an industry no longer subjected to labour restraint, the obituary itself experienced restoration.

Though the momentum of renewed practice has been of mutual rapidity on three continents, there are some significant variations in its application. The American product generally favours a style faithful to news-writing principles so far as timing and content are concerned and is frequently expansive when relating the details of surviving family and funeral arrangements. In Britain, the emphasis is more on creative composition and a recitation of anecdotes, with less of a sense of urgency about news value and a consequent accent on character sketch. Both models, in recent years, have displayed a propensity for explicit appraisal and an increasing willingness to publish obituaries of those who have undermined, rather than adorned, society.

Newspapers in Australia, while adopting the obituary with apparent fervour, have found their delivery of the product restrained by a lack of resources. Obituary desks in this country are staffed by a solitary journalist-editor. This has resulted in a reliance, often to an unhealthy degree, on contributions by readers. The tone of this material, with its intimacy of address and excess in sentiment, sits uneasily when appearing on the same page as obituaries syndicated from overseas sources.

Contemporary obituary publication in the United States has been subjected to some scholarly analysis in terms of gender balance, identification of cause of death, and the demographic mix of its subject selection. This thesis, by means of a six-month content analysis, addresses such questions for the first time in an Australian context. In addition, it examines issues of style, origin and authorship. It finds that cause of death is identified much less than is the case in American obituary practice, that women are significantly under-represented, and that editing is sometimes haphazard.

[†] Pope, K., 1996, ‘This dying art is brought to life by British press’, *Wall Street Journal*, 22 Aug.: Eastern edition A1

Nevertheless, the accumulated body of evidence points resolutely to a remarkable reinvigoration of practice in Australia's daily newspapers. The thesis, by discussing the views of specialists in the field of obituary publication, pursues mechanisms for sustaining the momentum and for improving the product.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university, and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Nigel Starck

April 2004

Acknowledgments

Lewis ('Jimmy') Mason, a local newspaper editor with fierce glasses and a nicotine-tinged moustache, deserves to be at the head of this list. He sent me on an obituary assignment when I was a trainee reporter just out of school and quite unsuited for the task. He sent me back to the bereaved family when my first effort was inadequate in the matter of the deceased's war service details; among my many failings had been the inability to elicit the matter of a World War I cavalry charge. He sent me back again when my second draft was inadequate in the matter of offspring names and funeral minutiae. He was of kindly disposition behind the bristly facade, so, when he rewrote entirely my third attempt, he translated it into a eulogy and gave it the quaint headline 'He loved animals'.[†] However, Mr Mason (cadet reporters were not intimate, to his face) had, by his example, made me appreciate the obituary art's demands of accuracy and completeness, and that lesson has been of persistent value in the composition of this thesis.

I am indebted also to Brian Austin, a former colleague and one of Jimmy Mason's successors as editor, for making archival material available. As a once youthful and reluctant obituarist himself, he understands the peculiar nature of the job, particularly when the deceased happened to be placed in the front parlour for a viewing at the time the reporter called. In the matter of the obituary family at large, my thanks extend too in the direction of Dallas, Texas, the home of the International Association of Obituarists. This organisation, especially its founder, Carolyn Gilbert, provided much sustenance for my research. Its members' willingness to engage in conversation and correspondence has, I feel, endowed these chapters with an authentic voice. A particular acknowledgment is owed also to the association's honorary archivist, Thomas C. Hobbs, of the University of South Carolina (Aiken), for granting me access to his papers. In Britain, my appreciation of contemporary journalism practice was assisted by the counsel of Alan Moultrie, a former managing editor of the Kent Messenger newspaper group; in the United States, Steve Miller, obituaries editor of the *New York Sun*, proved an engaging source of information.

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[†] 'He loved animals', 1959, *Herne Bay Press* [UK], 27 Mar.: 4

Editors, writers, teachers of the craft of writing, librarians and obituary enthusiasts – in Australia, Britain, the United States and Canada – have responded to my many requests and enquiries with generosity and enterprise. The names of some appear in the endnotes; the contributions of all enrich the text.

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[†] Herbert, G., 1959, *Outlandish Proverbs* (No. 183), ed. F. E. Hutchinson, Oxford at the Clarendon Press: 327