

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

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## Introduction

### A posthumous preamble

They have been called ‘oases of calm in a world gone mad’,<sup>1</sup> ‘an important characteristic’ of any newspaper aspiring to be a publication of record<sup>2</sup> and ‘writing that matters’.<sup>3</sup> They are the obituary pages. Eight Australian daily newspapers now have one. The *Herald Sun*, in Melbourne, followed shortly afterwards by the *Australian*, Australia’s national daily, began the process in 1993; the *Courier-Mail*, in Brisbane, became the eighth ten years later. This progress towards a ubiquitous presence, certainly so far as newspapers of some discernment is concerned, intrigues those whose business it is to comment on contemporary journalism practice. David Bowman, a former editor-in-chief of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, has observed:

In the English-speaking world, a newspaper of quality hardly seems complete these days without a regular obituary page. Somehow, in an era when we must all pretend to be young and, if possible, beautiful and immortal, obituaries have caught on. Why should this be so? Perhaps, in an age of bewildering change, it buoys one up to discover how others survived their times. The best obituaries, after all, capture life; they are not about death.<sup>4</sup>

Bowman’s finding that the best obituaries are intent on capturing life, rather than death, is of particular significance. Along with their emphatic presence has come a remarkable shift in the style of writing which obituaries adopt. One of London’s leading Sunday newspapers, the *Observer*, has offered this before-and-after assessment:

For too many years, ‘obits’ were seen as the dead arm of the newspaper industry, and that was about as good as the jokes got. Reverent, deferential and absurdly coy regarding what were often highly relevant parts of an individual’s life – the *Times*, for example, managed to obituarise Dylan Thomas at length without once mentioning the fact that he had been known to wander into the occasional pub – they also dealt almost exclusively with establishment figures, many of them criminally dull. This all started to change in the mid-Eighties...arid humour, walloping understatement and a fine new breed of euphemism became the order of the day, the collected books of obits became bestsellers and the ‘morgue’ became, if not quite the sexiest part of a newspaper, that conceit being a hard one to sustain, certainly the coolest.<sup>5</sup>

Britain's resuscitation, and reshaping, of the obituary was matched by a corresponding phenomenon in the United States. There, the movement was led by Philadelphia's *Daily News*, whose obituarist, Jim Nicholson, won a Distinguished Writing Award in 1987 from the American Society of Newspaper Editors. The following year, *Philadelphia* magazine noted: 'Since then, he's been getting calls from newspaper editors around the country who are curious about his style, curious about how obituaries could win anything.'<sup>6</sup> Those editors recognised the potential appeal to an ageing readership, started their own pages, and have subsequently transformed the obituary art into an instrument of such prominence in American journalism that, since 1999, an annual conference has been held solely to discuss its practice.

Australia's similar pattern of newfound interest has been noted in the press itself. *Panorama*, the literary supplement to the *Canberra Times*, agreed with the assertion in 2002 that the defined obituary section was 'the most significant innovation in the written content of Australia's newspapers of the past ten years' and devoted an entire page to the topic.<sup>7</sup> 'One of the undeniable improvements in the Australian broadsheet press in recent years has been the revival of obituaries,' wrote Peter Craven, in the 'Higher Education' section of the *Australian*, adding:

We live so much in a world where recent fame is the only fame that is remembered...that it can do us all good to be reminded of the different ways in which life can be lived and things achieved.<sup>8</sup>

The obituary in Australia has, however, been ignored as a subject of academic research. This study redresses that omission, bringing scholarship to a rediscovered expression of popular culture.

### **Aims and directions**

The prime aims of this thesis are: to identify significant characteristics in obituary practice by the eight Australian daily newspapers with a designated page from the inception of that page until the end of 2003; to present a comparison with contemporary practice in Britain and the United States; to define strengths and weaknesses in the Australian context; and, on the basis of the research findings, to propose remedial mechanisms for application in Australia. The author's capacity for attempting the last of those aims is sustained by his twenty years in journalism and eighteen years as a teacher of that craft in universities.

Given the unexplored nature of the defined field, so far as structured research is concerned, the thesis will also offer enlightenment on questions of historical and societal significance. This process will emerge from: a discussion of critical definitions in death literature; an archival study of obituary publication in Britain, the United States and Australia; and reflections on ethical issues. In addition, a content analysis of Australia's eight obituary pages over a six-month period (see **Methodology**) supplies an appraisal of: preferred sources; individual newspaper style; disclosure of cause of death; and gender balance in obituary publication.

### **Background to the research**

The chronicling of death is an ancient and integral element of newspaper composition. James Fergusson, obituaries editor of the *Independent*, a London daily, says that even the most simple death notice offers 'a private reality larger than that of front-page stories, of wars and earthquakes, economic booms and changes of government'.<sup>9</sup> Writing a foreword in praise of the obituary art for a *New York Times* anthology, Russell Baker found: 'Death is the end of all that awesome potential that the infant brings into the world, and each obituary is a tale about how well someone fulfilled it.'<sup>10</sup> Taking a less sanguine view, Richard Conniff, in a *Smithsonian* magazine feature on the resurgence of the obituary art, identified a darker underlying attraction:

Obituaries have always appealed to readers on a number of levels, not all of them edifying. Along with regret and sympathy, they elicit a gratifying sense of superiority. The people in them are dead, after all, and we're not. We read them partly to learn how to stay on the right side of that distinction....The cause of death can serve as a cautionary tale.<sup>11</sup>

A confrontation with reality, an opportunity for reflection, and an unintended agent of mildly perverse gratification; for all those qualities, the obituary has had a long, if episodic, publication history. Its earliest realisation is found in Samuel Pepys's London, when Roger L'Estrange, official journalist at the restored court of Charles II, published accounts of death. His newsbooks of the 1660s, to which Pepys had declined to contribute, occasionally embellished these reports with a brief appraisal of character, thereby satisfying the essence of obituary. This example, from January 1665, typifies the art as practised by L'Estrange:



*Westminster, Jan. 14*

Here was last night buried in this Abby, Mr Edward Hyde, the Third Son of the Right Honourable the Lord high Chancellor of England, who died upon Sunday last of the Small Pox, and (as I take it) about the 19<sup>th</sup> year of his Age. The Body was very honourably attended, and to do but Right to his Memory, his Death was certainly a considerable disappointment to the whole Nation, as the Loss of the most hopeful Youth and the best Natur'd Creature in the world could make it.<sup>12</sup>

With the arrival of daily newspapers and literary miscellanies in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the obituary became established as a journalism genre. The *Daily Journal*, the *Gentleman's Magazine* and, late in the century, the *Times* gave considerable play to it in Britain. Its American manifestation was led in 1704 by the *Boston News-Letter* and, later, Philadelphia's *American Weekly Mercury*; by 1729, Benjamin Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette* had adopted what Chapter Three of this thesis describes as 'obituary practice free of cant', in the manner first demonstrated by London's *Daily Journal*. The genre had imposed itself so firmly on American journalism by 1851 that, when the first edition of the *New-York Daily Times* (predecessor of the *New York Times*) appeared in the September of that year, it included nearly a full column of obituaries.

Australian readers encountered an obituary in the second edition of their first newspaper, the *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, in March 1803. It had been reprinted from a British newspaper; a year later, the *Gazette* published its first original obituary, following the death of the colony's building superintendent, James Bloodworth. Colonisation advanced, and the practice of recording and appraising life histories grew with it.

As well as providing a stream of instant biography, obituaries serve as social and historical indicators. In a demonstration of this quality, New World attitudes to the dispossessed inhabitants of both Australia and America are apparent from two accounts in the obituary columns. The subject of the American obituary, in 1911, was Quanah Parker, described by the *New York Times* as the 'famous Comanche chief'.<sup>13</sup> After making the point that his mother was 'a white girl who was captured in the massacre of a Texas settlement', the paper asserted that he had 'possessed intelligence far above the other members of his tribe'.<sup>14</sup>

The delivery there was patronising and, later in the narrative, paternalistic. In an 1891 Australian obituary, of a celebrated Aboriginal sportsman, a dismissive voice was adopted, consigning all Aborigines to imminent eclipse. A rural newspaper, the *Hamilton Spectator*, recorded the death of Johnny Mullagh, who had achieved some measure of fame as a cricketer with the Melbourne club and on a tour of England in 1868. After attesting to his ‘fine, free, wristy style’, the *Spectator* branded him as the last of his kind:

never will Mullagh’s reputation be surpassed by any of his race, for none, in a few years, will remain to show that once this great land of ours had a people of its own who, but a short half-century ago, were monarchs of all they surveyed.<sup>15</sup>

The published valedictions for Johnny Mullagh and Quannah Parker are from a time when the obituary was enjoying its initial episode as a fashionable and vigorous form of journalism. It had reached its apogée by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and was to retain that state until the 1920s, when the newspaper industry changed significantly, devoting much more space to pictorial spreads and display advertising, home-making features and competitions. The *Times* and the *New York Times* retained their obituary columns; at many other newspapers, the practice became unfashionable. This was particularly the case in Australia, where the obituary’s demise was accelerated by newsprint rationing in World War II. A protracted hibernation followed. Papers in both Britain and Australia continued to be affected by newsprint shortages until the 1950s; column space was then devoted, more and more, to television and to sport. In the United States, obituaries maintained a presence in regional newspapers but – save at the *New York Times* – failed to achieve the identity of a discrete editorial enterprise in the big cities, where they had to survive in the vortex of the general news columns.

The modern revival, on both sides of the Atlantic, came in the 1980s. American and British publishers were looking for ways of offering an intelligent, eminently readable alternative to television news; the obituary fitted that demand. In Britain, too, the mood of the moment was directed towards the production of bigger newspapers using computer-driven technology, following the defeat of anarchic forces in the print unions. Within that process, reformist obituaries editors were appointed in London, Washington, Los Angeles and Atlanta; through worldwide syndication, and through the determination of editors at the *Herald Sun* and the *Australian*, the spirit of revival reached Australia.

The introduction of designated obituary pages, at Australian daily newspapers, has followed this chronological sequence:

Herald Sun (Melbourne)	12 July 1993
The Australian (national)	6 December 1993
The Age (Melbourne)	30 May 1994
The Sydney Morning Herald	1 May 1996
The Advertiser (Adelaide)	1 May 1999
The Canberra Times	16 July 1999
The West Australian (Perth)	31 July 2000
The Courier-Mail (Brisbane)	17 February 2003

Though, quite clearly, Australia has pursued the obituary art with enthusiasm, some erratic characteristics can be detected. Obituaries by specialist writers frequently appear alongside homespun pieces submitted for publication by surviving family members or friends. At times, extracts from eulogies are reproduced with minimal editing, compromising the newspaper's stature accordingly.

Syndicated material from overseas presents some variations in form too. The American style, so far as quality broadsheets are concerned, is typified by: contemporaneous publication, adherence to conventional reporting style, inclusion of date, place and cause of death, liberal use of quotes and attribution, and a detailed list of surviving family. The British fashion is markedly different, disregarding in many instances the time factor along with the place and cause of death, adopting a reflective and often ironic tone, supplying candid revelation, and entertaining the reader with anecdote and *bon mot*.

Those properties and practices are identified in detail in this dissertation, and are subjected to analysis as part of the research regime.

### **Thesis structure**

The thesis takes a comparative approach, and that comparison begins with a discussion of the definitions applied in death literature. This process establishes a framework for aligning the obituary against, and distinguishing it from, other genres; eulogy, panegyric, hagiography, news story and death notice, epitaph and elegy are so compared. With those definitions in place, and with both scholarly and popular literature on the topic reviewed, a comparison of publishing practice ensues.

The history of obituary publication is then pursued, from the years of its first practice in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries to its flowering in the 19<sup>th</sup>, through its subsequent decline, to its modern revival. Each stage is illustrated, and enlivened, by liberal use of obituary extracts. This has endowed the text with moralistic fervour, colonial rectitude, passages of prurience and graphic intrusion, Victorian lament, wartime distress, and contemporary revelation. The pattern pursued is that of investigating, and contrasting, the practices of Britain, the United States and Australia. Separate chapters are devoted to prevailing styles of obituary publication in each of those nations.

Because the emphasis of this dissertation is directed at the realisation of the obituary in Australia, a content analysis of Australian practice appears as a discrete section. Its findings are presented in chart form and, in a qualitative application, through interviews with practitioners.

The ideal demonstration of the obituary art, according to the *St Louis Business Journal*, is found in a ‘a noble page’ that

states for the record, every day of the year, that it’s not the klieg lights, nor the value of one’s bank account that reigns supreme – but rather a life that, in some manner or another, had something to offer of true value to the rest of us.<sup>16</sup>

It would be unreasonable to expect a relentless expression of newsprint nobility. Nevertheless, this thesis does identify a number of areas in which Australian practice is found profoundly wanting. It concludes, therefore, with a chapter devoted to addressing those inadequacies.

## **Methodology**

The research process demanded archival investigation, qualitative enquiry, and a quantitative analysis. Its field elements required travel from Adelaide, South Australia to Britain (three times), the United States (twice), Canada (once), and, within Australia, to Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra, Newcastle, Perth, and Bunbury. The following initiatives were pursued:

- Examination of library holdings (texts, journals, theses, microfilm): Australian National Library, State Library of Victoria, State Library of South Australia, Flinders University of South Australia, University of Adelaide, University of South Australia, United States Library of Congress, University of South Carolina, Georgia Institute of Technology, Georgia State University, Manchester Metropolitan University (UK), Manchester Central Library (UK), British Newspaper Library (London).
- Analysis of current journals, serials, databases and websites.
- Qualitative research: (i) Interviews with editors and writers, 37 (Australia 13, Britain 10, USA 12, Canada 2); university/specialist educators, 6 (Australia 2, Britain 1, USA 3). (ii) Correspondence with editors and writers, 12 (Australia 7, Britain 2, USA 3); specialist educators, 3 (Britain 1, USA 2).
- Quantitative research: content analysis of eight Australian newspapers' obituary publication in six-month period (see **Note 1**).
- Consideration of historical and contemporary obituary practice in Britain – comparative techniques and treatment at four newspapers (*Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Independent*, *Guardian*). Those titles were selected because of their daily obituaries page and because their syndicated material is used extensively in Australia (see **Notes 2 & 3**).
- Consideration of historical and contemporary obituary practice in the United States – comparative techniques and treatment at four newspapers (*New York Times*, *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*). Those titles were selected because of their daily obituaries page and because syndicated material from two of them (*New York Times* and *Washington Post*) is used frequently in Australia; a geographical balance was achieved by inclusion of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and the *Los Angeles Times*. In addition, to address the pervasive nature of the obituary in American publishing, research was directed at regional newspapers in: California, Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, Arizona, Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, New York, Massachusetts, Ohio (see **Note 3**).
- Consideration of historical and contemporary obituary practice in Australia to the end of 2003 – comparative techniques and treatment at the eight daily newspapers (*Herald Sun*, *Australian*, *Age*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Advertiser*, *Canberra Times*, *West Australian*, *Courier-Mail*) with a designated obituaries page (see **Note 3**).
- Consideration of contemporary practice in Canada – techniques and treatment at two newspapers (*Globe and Mail* [Toronto] and *Vancouver Sun*).

- Note 1.** A content analysis of 1,433 obituaries published in seven Australian newspapers was conducted in the period 1 January to 30 June 2002, at a time when the *Courier-Mail* did not have a designated obituaries page. A separate six-month analysis of 234 *Courier-Mail* obituaries was then conducted, covering the period from 17 February (the date of its first obituary page) to 15 August 2003.
- Note 2.** The four selected newspapers are described in this dissertation as ‘quality broadsheets’. In the last quarter of 2003, both the *Independent* and the *Times* also introduced a daily tabloid version. Nevertheless, the broadsheet edition of each continued to have the greater print run; the obituary content was unchanged.
- Note 3.** The British, American and Australian newspapers selected for historical review were subjected to a search process involving an examination of obituary style in the first year of each newspaper’s publication, followed by an examination of style applied in the second year of each decade. Example: the *Daily Telegraph* has been examined for obituaries in 1855 (when it was first published), and then in 1862, 1872, 1882, 1892, 1902, 1912, 1922, 1932, 1942, 1952, 1962, 1972, 1982, 1992, and 2002. In addition, archival study was directed at those periods of publishing history which contained obituaries of social significance.

## Interviews: editors & writers

### Australia

Kim Lockwood	<i>Herald Sun</i>	8 February 2002
Patrick O’Neil	<i>Herald Sun</i>	8 February 2002
Philip Jones	Freelance writer	9 December 2002
Graeme Leech	<i>The Australian</i>	26 November 2002
Patrick Cornish	<i>The West Australian</i>	12 January 2003
Del Ambrosius	Freelance writer	13 January 2003
Alan Oakley <sup>†</sup>	<i>The Newcastle Herald</i>	3 February 2003
John Farquharson	Freelance writer	4 February 2003
Jack Waterford	<i>The Canberra Times</i>	4 February 2003
Cameron Ross	<i>The Canberra Times</i>	5 February 2003
David Bowman	Freelance writer	8 February 2003
Suzy Baldwin	<i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i>	10 February 2003
Michael Visontay <sup>††</sup>	<i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i>	22 November 2003

<sup>†</sup>subsequently editor, *The Sunday Age*

<sup>††</sup>formerly obituaries editor, *The Australian*

## Britain

Anthony Howard	Freelance writer	8 October 2002
Peter Davies	<i>The Times</i>	8 October 2002
Andrew McKie	<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>	9 October 2002
		7 June 2003
Jim McCue	<i>The Times</i>	10 October 2002
Phil Osborne	<i>The Guardian</i>	10 October 2002
Robert White	<i>The Guardian</i>	10 October 2002
Hugh Massingberd	Freelance writer	11 October 2002
David Jones	Freelance writer	11 October 2002
James Fergusson	<i>The Independent</i>	15 October 2002
Tim Bullamore	Freelance writer	7 June 2003

## United States

Kay Powell	<i>The Atlanta Journal-Constitution</i>	26 May 2002
Alana Baranick	<i>The Cleveland Plain Dealer</i>	31 May 2002
Claire Martin	<i>The Denver Post</i>	31 May 2002
Jim Sheeler	<i>The Rocky Mountain News</i>	31 May 2002
Michael Putzel	National Obituary Archive	1 June 2002
Larken Bradley	<i>The Point Reyes Light</i>	1 June 2002
Clara Garcia	<i>The Valencia County News-Bulletin</i>	1 June 2002
Connie Sexton	<i>The Arizona Republic</i>	1 June 2002
Joe Simmacher	<i>The Dallas Morning News</i>	3 June 2002
Myrna Oliver	<i>The Los Angeles Times</i>	6 June 2003
Richard Pearson	<i>The Washington Post</i>	6 June 2003
Charles Strum	<i>The New York Times</i>	10 June 2003

## Canada

Stephen Hume	<i>The Vancouver Sun</i>	27 May 2003
Colin Haskin	<i>The Globe and Mail</i>	12 June 2003

## Interviews: university/specialist lecturers

### Australia

Maurice Dunlevy	University of Canberra	4 February 2003
Rick Sarre	University of South Australia	14 March 2003

### Britain

Alan Moultrie	Kent Messenger Group	15 June 2003
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### United States

Jay Black	University of South Florida	1 June 2003
Garrett Ray	Colorado State University	3 June 2003
Carolyn Gilbert	International Association of Obituarists	5 June 2003

## Personal communication (mail, email, telephone): editors & writers

### Australia

Paula Beauchamp	<i>Herald Sun</i>	31 July 2002
Patrick Cornish	<i>The West Australian</i>	9 September 2002
		5 November 2003
John Messer	<i>The Age</i>	11 November 2002
Greg Chamberlin	<i>The Courier-Mail</i>	18 March 2003
		12 August 2003
		27 August 2003
David Bowman	Freelance writer	18 March 2003
David Fagan	<i>The Courier-Mail</i>	1 April 2003
		3 April 2003
Suzy Baldwin	<i>The Sydney Morning Herald</i>	11 November 2003

### Britain

Jim McCue	<i>The Times</i>	12 August 2003
Tim Bullamore	Freelance writer	3 November 2003

### United States

Alana Baranick	<i>The Cleveland Plain Dealer</i>	22 July 2002
		6 February 2003
Kay Powell	<i>The Atlanta Journal-Constitution</i>	11 September 2002
		16 October 2003
		21 October 2003
Steve Miller	<i>The New York Sun</i>	28 April 2003
		16 September 2003

## Personal communication: university/specialist lecturers

### Britain

Peter Sands	The Editorial Centre, Hastings	9 May 2003
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### United States

Carolyn Gilbert	International Association of Obituarists	15 June 2002
		7 July 2003
		23 December 2003
Garrett Ray	Colorado State University	8 November 2003



## **Lines of enquiry**

### **i. Qualitative**

In interviews and correspondence, the lines of enquiry were these:

- Selection process – criteria for obituary page inclusion.
- What editorial measures (if any) are in place with regard to demographic and gender balance in selection of subjects?
- Sources of information used – news agencies, syndicated reports, newspaper ‘death notice’ columns, private individuals, funeral industry.
- Editorial practices/policies in reporting circumstances of death (including time and place), cause of death, age, personal history, names of immediate family survivors.
- Key style components of each newspaper’s obituaries: how do those components differ, if at all, from the style employed in other areas/sections of the newspaper?
- Processes employed in the consideration of ethical issues – such as intrusion on grief and cause of death (particularly in instances where surviving family or associates request non-reporting).
- Why are some obituaries signed (with the writer’s by-line or end-credit) and why are others anonymous in authorship? Are there any editorial preferences in this regard?
- Sources employed in seeking/clarifying/confirming information.
- How is the obituary subject described in the finished product – by surname (with or without honorific/title) or given name?
- Comparison of international practice – how does obituary style differ (in a comparison of British, American, and Australian practice)?
- Purpose served by an obituary.
- What considerations should be applied in designing a model obituary style for contemporary application in Australian journalism?

### **ii. Quantitative**

In the quantitative phase, obituaries were analysed to determine: author/source; demographic selection (occupation or identity of obituary subject); incidence of age specification; incidence of cause of death specification; dominant reference (style adopted for referring to subject); male/female incidence (gender balance); obituary length (space occupied in column centimetres, with gender comparison).

## **Potential consequence and contribution of the research**

This is new territory. Chapter Two's literature review will discuss historical studies along with some sociological papers concerning, in the main, gender balance within contemporary obituary practice. It has not been able to establish, however, the existence of studies which have the writing and editing of obituaries as their focus.

Consequently, although this thesis has at its core the publication of obituaries in Australian newspapers, there are findings of considerable import in those parts of it which contain a British and American concentration too. Britain's obituary pages, in particular, have for too long been ignored as a topic of research. Magazines and journals of quality have reported the fact of their resurgence, a dozen anthologies have been published, yet scholarly enquiry has until now been absent.

Overall, the body of obituary activity has been such that it demands an advance in the body of knowledge. This thesis offers the first instalment.

## chapter one

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### **Definitions in death literature: the obituary as a first draft of history**

*'Read biography,' said Disraeli, 'for that is life without theory.'  
And to grasp the truth of that remark, read an obituary.*

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*National Review* (1997)<sup>1</sup>

### **Lives and transitions**

John Aubrey, peripatetic antiquarian and biographer of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, suffered a severe reverse in 1657: 'Novemb. 27, *obiit domina* [trans. she died, (my) lady] Katherina Ryves, with whom I was to marry; to my great losse.'<sup>2</sup> Union with Miss Ryves, and her dowry of £2,000, had promised him some relief from the 'chargeable and taedious lawe-suite about the entaile'<sup>3</sup> of the country property he had inherited. By 1670, when Aubrey turned 43, he had lost everything: 'All my businesses and affaires ran kim kam; nothing took effect.'<sup>4</sup>

His had, unquestionably, become a life shorn of theory. He wandered the roads of Restoration England on horseback, travelling from friend to friend in town and country, and rewarding their hospitality with his 'most ingeniose conversation'.<sup>5</sup> He rode and observed, explored and wrote, distinguished himself as an elected Fellow of the Royal Society, and proved by scientific investigation that prevailing belief on the origins of Stonehenge (which had been thought to be Roman) was erroneous. According to Lytton Strachey, he

would spend the winter in London – often with Sir William Petty or Sir Christopher Wren – and then, with the spring, he would ride off on a round of visits – to Lord Thanet's in Kent, to the Longs in Wiltshire, to Edmund Wylde in Shropshire – until the autumn came, and he would turn his horse's head back to London...he collected statistics, he was a profound astrologer, and a learned geometrician...[and] was in the habit of jotting down on scraps of paper every piece of information he could acquire concerning both his own contemporaries and the English worthies of previous generations. He was accurate, he had an unflinching eye for what was interesting, and he possessed – it was almost inevitable in those days – a natural gift of style.<sup>6</sup>

Unwittingly, Aubrey was making another contribution to cultural practice, too, through his compact biographies and character sketches, published long posthumously as *Brief Lives*. They inspired another Englishman – 300 years later, as Chapter Five of this study will argue – to redefine the nature of the newspaper obituary. The obituary’s journey to its contemporary form has, much like Aubrey’s enforced way of life, been one of persistent transition. The search for a definition, therefore, assumes a certain pattern of change in its own right, driven by shifts in public protocol and publication style. At its core, though, two facets endure: the Latin terminology used by John Aubrey to record his loss of Miss Ryves and the obituary art’s own allegiance to the biographical form. In defining the obituary, it is necessary to consider both the word and the practice.

### **Obituary: the word**

Though Horace advocated the canon of *carpe diem* (seize the day),<sup>7</sup> the imperatives of mortality are such that one must also acknowledge the force of *obire diem* (to meet one’s day). Underpinning that dictum is the infinitive form of the intransitive verb *obire*, a compound derived from the amalgam of *ire* (to go) and *ob* (up against). *Obire* therefore assumes these meanings: ‘to go to, to go to meet, to go against, to die’.<sup>8</sup> Taking the fourth of those in 1657, John Aubrey recorded his loss with the third person singular construction in the past tense: *obiit* (she died). The literal definitions of the linked noun, *obitus*, are these: ‘an approaching, going to, setting (esp. of the heavenly bodies)’.<sup>9</sup>

There is a transferred application also; it suited Cicero’s account of the legend which holds that the founder of Rome ascended to the gods: ‘*post obitum vel potius excessum Romuli* (after the death, or rather the passing, of Romulus)’.<sup>10</sup> The Medieval Latin *obitarius* (pertaining to death)<sup>11</sup> adds to the etymological mix. Its own incarnation, as an adjective, derives from the addition of the suffix *arius* to the noun *obitus*.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* draws on this root matter for two definitions of **obituary**, the first of these being ‘a register of deaths’. It records an early use as having occurred in 1725: ‘The Obituaries, or Obit Books, of Bridlington’.<sup>12</sup> Earlier still, however, is ‘The Obituary of Richard Smyth, Secondary [a sheriff’s officer] of the Poultry Compter [a prison for debtors], London: being a catalogue of all such persons as he knew in their life: extending from A.D. 1627 to A.D. 1674’.<sup>13</sup>

Smyth's register offers a piquant and extraordinarily detailed account of London life, albeit from the perspective of death, at times of:

*Domestic mishap*: '1648. April 3. Mr. Sam Crisp and his wife, in Bread Street, killed in their bed by the fall of the floor of an upper room overladen.'<sup>14</sup>

*Misadventure*: '1653. Sept. 9. Dr. Rant, physician, died, who attempting to creep to bed to Mis [*sic*] Bennett, lost his credit and his purchase.'<sup>15</sup>

*Plague*: '1665. August. Wm. Guyett (old goodwife Wenham's husband), near ye Jamaica in Shoreditch, died *ex peste*, with his little boy.'<sup>16</sup>

Richard Smyth was maintaining this type of obituary into the eighty-fifth, and last, year of his own life, registering *inter alia* on 15 November 1674 the death of the poet Milton 'at Bunhill near Morefields in Criplegate [*sic*] parish, blind some time before he died'.<sup>17</sup>

The writing discipline practised by John Aubrey, whose life (1626–1697) coincided with much of Smyth's, finds itself associated with **obituary** in the second definition supplied by the *Oxford English Dictionary*: 'a record or announcement of a death or deaths, esp. in a newspaper; usually comprising a brief biographical sketch of the deceased'.<sup>18</sup> Aubrey's portrait of erstwhile attorney-general Sir Francis Bacon (Baron Verulam of Verulam), for example, contains elements of anecdote and pathos which would rest comfortably in the contemporary newspaper obituary:

the cause of his lordship's death was trying an experiment: *viz.*, as he was taking the aire in a coach...snow lay on the ground, and it came into my lord's thoughts, why flesh might not be preserved in snow, as in salt. They were resolved they would try the experiment presently. They alighted out of the coach, and went into a poore woman's howse at the bottome of Highgate hill, and bought a hen, and made the woman exenterate it [remove the entrails], and then stuffed the bodie with snow, and my lord did help to doe it himselfe. The snow so chilled him, that he immediately fell so extremely ill...that in two or three days...he dyed of suffocation.<sup>19</sup>

The obituary art can also safely be considered under the heading of **necrology**. This word achieves a quality of synonym, given its definition in *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* as: 'a death roll; an obituary notice'.<sup>20</sup> It is applied by *Variety*, the

American entertainment industry periodical, to an annual column listing those members of the profession who have died during the year under review. The appearance of this list, in 1977, inspired William Saroyan's memoir *Obituaries*, in which he pointed astutely to the frisson of *Schadenfreude* which enlivens one's reading of the newly dead:

Do we mock the dead by staying alive, by reading their names in lists, by remembering them in the world, by speculating about those we never knew? Do we perhaps take pleasure from our own survival, and even from their sad or joyous failure to do so? Bet your life we do.<sup>21</sup>

### **Obituary: the practice**

Standard journalism texts, written for vocational courses at university, place considerable emphasis on the need for an obituary to capture the personality of its subject. So it was that, when Saroyan died two years after the appearance of his *Obituaries* memoir, a Florida newspaper drew attention to his self-confidence right at the start of his obituary:

FRESNO, Calif. – William Saroyan, the boisterous, brilliant and reclusive American bard of Central California whose prize-winning books and plays underscored the dreariness of life – and who readily admitted he was as great a writer as his admirers said he was – died Monday of cancer in Fresno. He was 72.<sup>22</sup>

One such text, drawn from teachings at Columbia University, acknowledges the allegiance which the obituary art owes to biographical practice:

Obituaries are among the most frequently read items in newspapers. A third to a half of the readers regularly read them....Here, in capsule form, is the biography of someone we know or have heard about.<sup>23</sup>

Further persuasive argument on this score is found in:

*The Encyclopedia of Death and Dying*

An obituary can be described as a published notice of the details of a person's death together with a biography cataloguing his or her life.<sup>24</sup>

*The Washington Post*

Richard Pearson, the [*Post*] obituaries editor, describes this news story as a mini-biography....Reporting all the principal events in a life is not a judgment of those events or the life they were part of. It simply creates a complete biographical record.<sup>25</sup>

*Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*

The obituary offers an appraisal of a life in the form of a brief biography – published in a newspaper, magazine or journal. It is important to note the appraisal factor, for it is this element which distinguishes an obituary from a standard news story about death. While the intent of the latter is to supply an account of a deceased person's life, often with information also on the circumstances of death, the obituary provides an assessment of its subject's character, achievements, and effect on society. This is frequently demonstrated through the use of anecdote.<sup>26</sup>

*The Penguin Book of Journalism*

The obituary is the first stab at biography...a first, brisk judgment in the heat of news. As such it has importance in the historical record; it is part of that 'newspaper of record' tradition to which newspapers and periodicals [of repute]...aspired, a tradition suddenly defunct in an age when newspapers have lost their self-confidence and the duty to inform defers cravenly to the duty to entertain.<sup>27</sup>

*The New York Times*

An obituary is, in many cases, a first draft of history. It is a miniature biography.<sup>28</sup> (The *Times* in this instance was perhaps inspired by the broader definition of news in general being 'the first rough draft of history'.<sup>29</sup> The expression in its original form is attributed to *Washington Post* executives.)

From 1964 to 1976, Alden Whitman was chief obituarist on the *New York Times*. He travelled around the world to interview prominent potential subjects, 'explaining in written request that a conversation would be confidential during the subject's lifetime and that its purpose was to help the *Times* prepare a proper biographical essay'.<sup>30</sup> His list of 'advancers' (the industry term for a stockpile obituary) included compact biographies of Pablo Casals, Maurice Chevalier, Helen Keller, Pablo Picasso, Bertrand Russell, Charles Lindbergh, Ho Chi Minh, Albert Schweitzer, and Graham Greene. There is a certain reciprocity in the obituarial-biographical nexus too. In its prefatory note, the 1986 edition of *The Dictionary of National Biography* acknowledges a 'great debt of gratitude...to the editor of obituaries in the *Times* [London], the most important material on which to base our selection'.<sup>31</sup>

As for **biography** itself, Cuddon's *Dictionary of Literary Terms* has succinctly defined it as 'an account of a person's life, and a branch of history....As a literary form, it has become increasingly popular since the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.'<sup>32</sup> The newsbook obituary appeared at precisely that same period, giving Samuel Pepys and his contemporaries a first draft of history at the coffee house, a morning biography in miniature. It was the time of John Aubrey too, as an exponent of emerging practice. His source for the Francis Bacon goose-and-snow account was Thomas Hobbes, the philosopher, whose own life was recorded in *Brief Lives* in a manner which has come to be regarded as an exemplar of both the biographical essay and the obituary.

Arguably, the one facet of the obituary craft which is not shared by these forms is that of contemporaneous publication. Newspapers, especially those in the United States, are assiduous in observing their own core definition. They find themselves impelled to publish that 'first, brisk judgment',<sup>33</sup> unlike the biographical essayists, who could write in a more leisurely fashion. Of the modern obituarists, perhaps only the *New York Times*'s Alden Whitman, with his magisterial quest for the 'proper biographical essay',<sup>34</sup> has enjoyed that degree of insouciance. What the two forms should both embrace, though, is a commitment to acute observation and astute description. Aubrey's written reminders to himself on this score are included in his text, and enhance his reputation accordingly:

Describe face, eyes, forehead, nose, mouth, eyebrows, figure of the face, complexion, stature of the body; shape (slender, large, neat or otherwise); figure of head and magnitude of head.<sup>35</sup>

His perceptive observation, inspired by such self-direction, enriches the resulting study of Hobbes:

In his old age, he was very bald (which claimed a veneration), yet...he used to study and sit bare-headed, and said he never tooke cold in the head, but that the greatest trouble was to keep off the flies from pitching on the baldness. His head was...of a mallet-forme (approved by the physiologers).<sup>36</sup>

Aubrey knew precisely the shape and dimensions of Hobbes's head because, as he noted in his manuscript, he had measured it.



The genus of the biographical essay – and, by extension, that of the obituary – owes much also to the traditions established by the Roman historians Plutarch, Tacitus, and Suetonius. Of the three, it is Suetonius who comes nearest in practice to the obituarist of today. His predilection for recounting the critical minutiae of a life, as evidenced in his portrait of the emperor Vespasian, would survive the expectations of modern journalism. The authority of imperial office, when described by Suetonius, is leavened by both humour and candid revelation, two qualities which have been adopted with enthusiasm at the obituary desk of the 21<sup>st</sup> century:

Vespasian was square-bodied, with strong, well-proportioned limbs, but always wore a strained expression on his face – so that once, when he asked a well-known wit: ‘Why not make a joke about me?’, the answer came: ‘I will, when you have finished relieving yourself’....After becoming Emperor, he would rise early, before daylight even, to deal with his private correspondence and official reports....Having attended to any business that had come up, he would first take a drive and then return to bed for a nap – with one of the several mistresses whom he had engaged....Finally, he took a bath and went to dinner, where he would be in such a cheerful mood that members of his household usually chose this time to ask favours of him.<sup>37</sup>

James Fergusson, founding obituaries editor of the London broadsheet the *Independent*, has acknowledged that connection, saying that Suetonius displays ‘a rhythm for writing a life to a length, which certainly has something in common with journalism’.<sup>38</sup> It is important there to note Fergusson’s reference to life, rather than to death, when reflecting on a forefather of his art.

In that process of reflection, it has to be recognised first that there are, undeniably, contrasts within contemporary obituary practice:

The American preference is typified by contemporaneous publication, adherence to conventional news reporting style, inclusion of date, place and cause of death, liberal use of direct quotation, and a detailed list of surviving family. The British approach is often more languid, ignoring in many instances the time factor along with the place and cause of death, adopting a reflective and occasionally ironic tone, supplying the barest essentials of surviving family, and entertaining the reader with wit, whimsy, and shafted observation.<sup>39</sup>

Despite that, there has been of late some evidence of a united editorial effort – regardless of geographical location – to pursue the doctrine that obituaries are about life, not death. It is a rubric fashioned by Hugh Massingberd following his appointment as obituaries editor at London’s *Daily Telegraph* in 1986,<sup>40</sup> and observed with some reformist zeal by devotees ever since.

### **Necrology: news story and obituary perspectives**

If contemporary practice favours the Massingberd doctrine that the obituary is about life rather than death,<sup>41</sup> an inference could perhaps be drawn that a **news story** – when of a necrological flavour – is about death rather than life. Such a deduction, in the welter of newspaper journalism, is too simplistic. Many newspapers do not have a page, or a section, dedicated to obituaries. Necrology in such circumstances is consigned to the general news pages, where the ‘angle’ sometimes favours the death and sometimes favours the life, and the ensuing text often unfurls as an amalgam of the obituary and the news story in style. Many other newspapers, even though they might possess an obituaries page, face a dilemma when reporting the death of a prominent individual. The news value of the death is so seductive that they feel impelled to give the event conspicuous treatment at or near the front of the newspaper. An obituary might then appear as a ‘side-bar’ (a related report) to the major story.

Australia’s newspapers encountered that sort of editorial predicament in May 2002, on the death of the Australian actor Ruth Cracknell. In Melbourne, the *Age*<sup>42</sup> and the *Herald Sun*,<sup>43</sup> both with long-established obituary pages, decided to run reports and associated tributes-cum-obituaries within their main news sections. For their part, the *Sydney Morning Herald*<sup>44</sup> and the *West Australian*<sup>45</sup> adhered more strongly to sectional discipline. They published extensive news stories and entertainment industry tributes, but each also found space for an obituary on the page dedicated to that purpose.

The question of definition, with evidence of a perceptible difference between news story and obituary, is best answered by those newspapers which pursue a rugged obituary policy, publishing a discrete section every day. In those instances, the boundary between obituary and news story is drawn with confidence. Two prime examples of this practice, both of recent vintage, can be found in the American and British press.

When William E. Colby, a former director of the CIA, vanished on a solo canoeing trip in 1996, it was indisputably a big story. The *New York Times* published reports of his disappearance and of the search. Resolution was achieved after nine days, with the discovery of Colby's body on the banks of the Wicomico River, Maryland. The newspaper responded by publishing two articles, each by the same writer, in its obituaries section. The distinct character of their headlines was enough, in itself, to indicate that the news story ('Body of William Colby is found on riverbank')<sup>46</sup> was about death, while the obituary ('William E. Colby, 76, head of CIA in a time of upheaval')<sup>47</sup> was about life (Figure 1.1).

In Britain, a classic separation of powers occurred following the death, in June 2003, of Professor Phil Williams. He had achieved distinction as a solar terrestrial physicist and as a leading figure in the Welsh national movement, representing Plaid Cymru in the Welsh Assembly. He died of an apparent heart attack in a Cardiff massage parlour; it set the 'red tops' (the unrestrained British tabloids) into a self-righteous frenzy. The *Times*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Guardian* and the *Independent* exercised more deliberation, choosing to place death (news story) on an early news page, with life (obituary) further back in the paper's defined obituaries section. The job done by the *Times* is indicative of their common approach. Under a page-seven headline 'Politician dies of heart attack in massage parlour', the *Times* told readers:

Dr Williams left his farmhouse home in Aberystwyth...telling his wife Ann that he was going to Cardiff University for a meeting with academic colleagues. Later that evening he had a suspected heart attack in the Touch of Class massage parlour....A woman aged 18 who works at the premises was interviewed by detectives.<sup>48</sup>

The detail was blunt, the seediness and misfortune reported in unsparing terms. The *Times* obituary, however, offered a measure of dignified euphemism. It said Williams had been 'found dead', without offering any further enlightenment on the subject, and described him as

[a] keen and modest committee man [who] also worked hard to promote renewable energy and the use of information technology. In the Assembly's first year he was named member of the year in a cross-party ballot and in recent weeks...had been talked of as a potential president of the [Plaid Cymru] party.<sup>49</sup>

This editorial strategy, in its application and in the respective content of its two components, draws an effective defining line between news story and obituary.



## Change in obituary and biography definition

Such candour as that found in the Vespasian portrait grew less fashionable in the Middle Ages; with few exceptions, the biography of the times tended towards the hagiographic, with ‘the lives of saints idealised according to predictable patterns’.<sup>50</sup> The 17<sup>th</sup> century has been identified as ‘the most important period for the development of English biography’,<sup>51</sup> notably with the composition of Aubrey’s *Brief Lives* (though not published until the 19<sup>th</sup> century) and Izaak Walton’s *Lives*. The latter, in his study of the poet and churchman John Donne, offered a clear reprise of the Suetonius style in describing his subject as ‘not dissolute but very neat, a great visitor of ladies, a great frequenter of plays, a great writer of conceited verses.’<sup>52</sup> (‘Conceited’ in that era carried a definition of ‘ingeniously devised’.)<sup>53</sup>

Obituary, in tandem with the renewal of biography, was gradually finding its own voice in English journals of the period. It is dangerous to declare, in scholarship and in journalism, that any individual work is the first of its kind. Nevertheless, the archival evidence attached to this study does establish that the earliest recognisable, if crude, examples of the obituary can be found in publications of the 1660s in England, immediately following the restoration of the monarchy. A little more than 100 years later, the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, a monthly miscellany, had refined the art through its ‘Lists of Deaths with Biographical Remarks’.<sup>54</sup> Those columns were not dissimilar in style to the press obituary of today, even if some trace of hagiography did endure.

Among the earliest explicitly negative character appraisals is that encountered in the obituary published by an English newspaper in 1818 of Queen Charlotte, consort of George III, whose German origins (and, so this obituary would suggest, mannerisms) militated against universal acceptance amongst her British subjects:

Her Majesty’s figure was very pleasing, but her countenance, though not without attraction when she smiled, could not boast any claim to beauty. It was, however, a well-known fact that the King declared himself satisfied with his connubial fortune.<sup>55</sup>

In the context of this thesis, the reference to a character sketch – often, as is nowadays the prevailing practice, of an objective and critical nature – assumes pivotal importance. It is this property which separates the obituary from other death literature definitions and traditions (with the exception of the epitaph at its most playful or pejorative, where some indication of character study is apparent). To resolve the question of definition, therefore, an examination of those other mechanisms in necrology is necessary. Such a process will nurture the cause of determining what the obituary is not, as much as what it is.

## Defining the more distant relations

### Elegy

‘How the elegy has changed,’ cried the *Independent* in 1996, when reflecting on what it saw as the emergence of ‘the obituary as diatribe’.<sup>56</sup> It had a point. The Press Association, Britain’s home-grown news agency (since 1868), had just released an obituary which described a former government minister as ‘a shambling figure’ notorious for ‘tightness with money’ and whose dishevelled appearance was such that at an overseas gathering he had been ‘mistaken for a tramp’.<sup>57</sup> The **elegy** by tradition avoids such bleak prejudice. Rather, it is ‘an elaborately formal lyric poem lamenting the death of a friend or public figure, or reflecting seriously on a solemn subject’.<sup>58</sup>

A significant subtype within this genre is the pastoral elegy, which ‘represents both the poet and the one he mourns...as shepherds’.<sup>59</sup> The pastoral elegists, from the Greeks through to the Renaissance poets, ‘developed a set of elaborate conventions’<sup>60</sup> involving an invocation of muses, a mourning by all nature of the shepherd’s death, and rituals rich in nymphs and flowers.

Inspired by the mood of the Renaissance, a gradual metamorphosis is then apparent. The elegy came to mean a lament for the passing of youth, for a vanished way of existence, or simply for the transience of life itself, unconnected with any individual death, as in Gray’s *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1750):

Far from the madding crowd’s ignoble strife  
Their sober wishes never learned to stray;  
Along the cool sequestered vale of life  
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.<sup>61</sup>

At the core of elegiac verse, however, a deeply personal strain of grief endures, even if it is expressed in the public domain. It is found in Wordsworth’s outpouring of despair at the drowning of his sea captain brother in a shipwreck (1805):

All vanished in a single word,  
A breath, a sound, and scarcely heard.  
Sea – ship – drowned – shipwreck – so it came,  
The meek, the brave, the good, was gone;  
He who had been our living John  
Was nothing but a name.<sup>62</sup>

Long before this, though, the elegy had been the object of some ridicule, much of it satirical in character. In her study of early American death literature, Rachel Larson has identified a tendency for elegists to ‘sound like either sentimental or religious beggars’<sup>63</sup> whose ‘chief purposes seemed to be to harass the emotions of readers’.<sup>64</sup> She traces this pattern of critical attack back to 1722, when Benjamin Franklin published ‘A Receipt [recipe] to Make a New England Funeral Elegy’:

Having chose the Person, take all his Virtues, Excellences, &c. and if he have not enough, you may borrow some to make up a sufficient Quantity....Then season all with a Handful or two of Melancholly Expressions, such as *Dreadful, Deadly, cruel cold Death, unhappy Fate, weeping Eyes*...and having prepared a sufficient Quantity of double Rhimes, such as *Power, Flower; Quiver, Shiver; Grieve us, Leave us; tell you, excel you; Expeditions, Physicians; Fatigue him, Intrigue him*...you must spread all upon paper...if you can procure a scrap of Latin to put at the end, it will garnish it mightily;...you will have an excellent Elegy.<sup>65</sup>

Larson maintains that, as the elegiac tradition declined in popularity, colonial writers were ‘quick to seize on an existent form of literature that might be more proper: the obituary’.<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless, the elegy did not disappear altogether. Walt Whitman’s ‘When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d’, with its elegiac treatment of a lament for Abraham Lincoln, is evidence of its lingering power:

‘When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d’ portrays the outpouring of uncontrolled personal grief gradually brought under control. Through the skilful use of his symbols – the star, the cloud, the lilac bush, and the bird – Whitman recreates the sweeping drama of Lincoln’s death and the national mourning and the impingement of these national events on his own consciousness.<sup>67</sup>

Symbolism and metaphor, however, were unsuitable mechanisms for the burgeoning readership of the press. One could attribute this, again, perhaps to the loneliness of the personal voice in the public domain. Accordingly, the elegy has experienced but brief episodes of concerted revival, as was the case in 1989, with an anthology devoted to ‘direct and unsparing’<sup>68</sup> expression in poetry on AIDS:

A nurse approaches, clipboard in hand.  
Have I brought my paraphernalia,  
sample of semen and excrement  
which the study cannot do without?  
And the old terror revives in me  
of what they will find: the truth, perhaps,  
that I like everyone else will die.<sup>69</sup>

The collection containing that poem, by David Bergman, declares in an introductory article that ‘the elegy itself is changing. It has always been a competent, traditional vessel to hold grief and praise of the dead. Now it seems to overflow, shatter, reform.’<sup>70</sup> There is perhaps a generous measure of sincerity in those sentences, but the breathlessness of the vocabulary – in company with the passionate sentiment of the classic elegiac form – has no place in the objective appraisal demanded of the obituary.

## **Eulogy**

This ‘oration in honour of a dead person’<sup>71</sup> has undergone some recent reconstruction. It has become the fashion at funeral services for a lay speaker rather than a minister of religion to deliver the homily. The **eulogy**, like the biography and the obituary, has altered markedly in form along with this shift in delivery, as a modern theology text concedes:

Changes in attitude, thinking and behaviour have brought with them changes to the purpose of the eulogy. In the past, the emphasis was mainly on the hereafter, the passage of the soul – the spiritual. The words spoken were general, all-embracing, rather than relating to the individual nature of the deceased person, which is primarily what we talk about today. Nowadays, we are more inclined to speak of the celebration of a life and include anecdotal material in order to reinforce personality, behaviour and the part that the person played in family and society. Now, with the best will in the world, few ministers or priests can be presumed to do justice to the task.<sup>72</sup>

The problem, so far as the discerning reader of Australian newspapers is concerned, is that this newfound form of eulogy provides a ready, if inappropriate, channel to the obituaries page. Some editors – for reasons of laziness or lack of resources or inadequate awareness of sound international practice – rely too heavily on the eulogy



as a source of instant text. The effect on the prestige of the newspaper concerned, and on the art of obituary, is dire, as extracts from published examples (in Chapter Eight) will demonstrate. This brand of editorial indiscretion appears particularly ill-favoured when printed in juxtaposition to a professionally crafted piece from a reputable syndicating source. Because of the polarity in definition, clashes of style are inevitable. Those difficulties are especially noticeable in terms of mechanisms for referring to the subject (the eulogy adopts an intimate tone, unsuited for delivery to a wider audience than that at the funeral itself) and in unrestrained sentiment of expression.

That sort of journalistic approach is, in any case, a relic of '[e]arly 19<sup>th</sup> century obituary style [which] often employed ornate prose and eulogistic expression, in conjunction with a tendency to moralise about the stoicism of the subject'.<sup>73</sup> It does not sit easily with the more candid form of review practised by *New York Times* obituarist Alden Whitman, who adopted the 'premise that if people were not saints in life, neither should they so be judged in death'.<sup>74</sup>

### **Panegyric**

But when it comes to a public building, you do it on the grand scale. Here stands a colonnade, there a shrine, rising as if by magic, so rapidly as to seem remodelled rather than fresh-built....If another had boasted a single one of these achievements, he would long since have worn a nimbus around his head; a seat of honour wrought in gold or ivory would have been placed for him among the gods, and prayers offered in his name with major victims on the holiest of altars. But you enter the sanctuaries only to offer your own prayers.<sup>75</sup>

There, in the creamy oratory of Plinius Secundus (Pliny the Younger), is both the seductiveness and the questionable taste of the **panegyric**. Under Domitian's rule he 'was in danger of his life',<sup>76</sup> but when Trajan became emperor, Pliny was rewarded with a consulate. His *Panegyricus Plinii Secundi Dictus Traiano Imp.* has survived as a classical illustration of 'a public speech or written composition devoted to the prolonged, effusive praise of some person, group of people, or public body'.<sup>77</sup> The unctuousness was equally unrestrained 1,500 years later when Dryden wrote a panegyric, *To His Sacred Majesty*, on the 1661 coronation of Charles II:

Now charg'd with blessings while you seek repose,  
Officious slumbers haste your eyes to close;  
And glorious dreams stand ready to restore  
The pleasing shapes of all you saw before.  
Next, to the sacred temple you are led,  
Where waits a crown for your more sacred head:  
How justly from the Church that crown is due,  
Preserv'd from ruin, and restor'd by you!<sup>78</sup>

The choice of 'restore', 'preserv'd' and 'restor'd' serves as a thematic allusion to the return to monarchic rule after Oliver Cromwell's Commonwealth. The dominant mood of the piece (136 lines in all) is fulsome panegyric at its worst, epitomised in the frenzied exclamation mark at the end of that extract. Charles II himself showed much greater economy, and effectiveness, of language in his celebrated deathbed words twenty-four years later: 'I am sorry, gentlemen, for being so unconscionable a time a'dying.'<sup>79</sup>

Panegyric is considered in this discussion of the obituary's extended family because it can straddle the wobblier elements of the life-death divide. *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary* offers 'eulogy'<sup>80</sup> as a second-preference definition of panegyric, *Roget's Thesaurus*<sup>81</sup> brackets it with both eulogy and hagiography, and Mark Antony's funeral oration in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* has been held to be panegyric in convention.<sup>82</sup> Its own dubious value as a tribute to the living, however, was identified by Plato nearly two-and-a-half-millennia ago:

To honour with hymns and panegyrics those who are still alive is not safe. A man should run his course and make a fair ending, and then we will praise him.<sup>83</sup>

## Hagiography

In its original form, as described earlier in this chapter, **hagiography** is defined as 'the writing or study of the lives of the saints'.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, a literal translation from the Greek is 'sacred writing'.<sup>85</sup> By extension, the term can now be applied to 'modern biographies that treat their subjects with pronounced reverence';<sup>86</sup> a recent example is found in the naively uncritical biography of Kingsley Amis by his Garrick Club drinking companion Eric Jacobs.<sup>87</sup>

Chapter Eight of this thesis – which concentrates on contemporary newspaper practice in Australia – argues that some obituaries, especially those originating from sources outside mainstream journalism and apparently published with minimal editing, have strayed into hagiographic territory. This extract, from the *Australian*, is illustrative of the style and language so encountered:

as she got sicker, her compassion for others deepened. People were drawn to her by the warmth she exuded, that she gave so unstintingly to all who came within her orbit....She knew when to come forward and when to back off. She knew how to put people at their ease and always did so. She would walk into a room and turn heads. It wasn't simply because of her beauty. It was an aura that enveloped those she met and made them feel special. She did all this with a perfectly judged touch.<sup>88</sup>

What makes that piece noticeable in a review of hagiographic tendency within Australian obituary practice is that the name of the newspaper's obituaries editor – a feature writer of repute – is bracketed with that of the contributor in the credit line at its conclusion. Once more, the accusation can be made that such expression is at variance with the times. It belongs more to the 19<sup>th</sup> century behaviour, as noted by American historian Janice Hume, in which American obituaries of the era offered comfort on the nature of death and the promise of immortal memory – and even immortality – for the virtuous.<sup>89</sup>

### **Epitaph**

*Roget's Thesaurus* places **epitaph** hard up against obituary, under the keyword **valediction**.<sup>90</sup> The *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* furnishes mild agreement through this definition: 'An inscription upon a tomb. Hence, occas., a brief composition written on the occasion of a person's death'.<sup>91</sup> Though it is true that epitaph and obituary each provides a posthumous account, and often one with an appraisal of character too, their own characteristics are markedly different. While the obituary, as has been established, furnishes the reader with as complete a résumé of a life as is possible in the circumstances, ideally with a character portrait too, the epitaph is but a miniature. Nevertheless, it can fulfil a complementary role through its presence on a permanent memorial or by its judicious inclusion in a newspaper obituary.

As an inscription, the epitaph's capacity for nobility of purpose is found in Arlington National Cemetery's tribute to The Unknown Soldier: 'Here rests in honored glory an American soldier known only to God'.<sup>92</sup> At a Los Angeles cemetery, Mel Blanc ('Man of 1000 Voices' on Warner Bros. cartoons) is remembered by the more whimsical 'That's all Folks'.<sup>93</sup>

The other model of epitaph, the brief composition, finds a similar measure of extremities. The heroic and patriotic is famously represented by the poet Rupert Brooke:

If I should die, think only this of me  
That there's some corner of a foreign field  
That is forever England.<sup>94</sup>

The poetic variety can also supply generous opportunity for the calculated insult, as in this verse composed by H.J. Daniel in memory of George II:

In most things I did as my father had done,  
I was false to my wife and I hated my son:  
My spending was small, and my avarice much,  
My kingdom was English, my heart was high-Dutch:  
At Dettingen fight I was not known to blench,  
I butcher'd the Scotch, and I bearded the French:  
I neither had morals, nor manners, nor wit;  
I wasn't much miss'd when I died in a fit.  
Here set up my statue, and make it complete,  
With Pitt on his knees at my dirty old feet.<sup>95</sup>

## **Death notices**

It is here, in terms of definition, that some capacity for confusion exists. The *Encyclopedia of Death and Dying* concedes the point: '**Death Notices** are inserted in local newspapers by family or friends and are also known as [paid for] obituaries.'<sup>96</sup> This is particularly the case in the United States, where paid obituaries – in effect, lengthy death notices often incorporating a detailed life history – are common. In the American episodes of this study's field research, it was found that classified advertising headed **Obituaries** or **Paid Obituaries** is often applied to what are, in

reality, death notices. Newspapers rely heavily on the revenue which this initiative engenders. Further, by their own testimony, obituary writers and editors clearly welcome the existence of this practice. Such notices can either generate ideas for subsequent 'news' obituaries or offer an alternative avenue of posthumous acknowledgment for those in the immediate community whose lives are not of sufficient appeal for editorial write-up.

The paid obituary is frequently a discursive, and sometimes an expensive, item; this study, in Chapter Seven, discusses instances of individual notices which each cost a bereaved family at least \$US1,200 for a single appearance. Within the text, expressions of grief are relatively uncommon. Instead, the approach is one of folksy celebration, as adopted in the *Salt Lake Tribune* paid obituary of Clare F. Jones:

She married her military sweetheart, T. Sgt Cyril Jones, and they became the parents of two children...and they in turn had children...making six grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren in all. Clare lived a life full of spunk and was feisty to the end. She was a Utah Jazz and Atlanta Braves fan through and through. She never missed an opportunity to play the slots in Wendover [gambling, over the border in Nevada] with her family or friends....She loved talking on the phone to her two sisters Dozie and Berta.<sup>97</sup>

The paid obituary has now taken to cyberspace, with American companies selling this type of service online. One such leading entrepreneur is Legacy.com, based in Illinois; its stated mission is 'to use new media technology in expanding ways to celebrate people's lives',<sup>98</sup> its archives are permanent, its mourners' registers are electronic, and its demeanour is undeniably user-friendly.

Popular as the paid obituary phenomenon is as an instrument of community expression in the United States, it has come to be regarded with some wariness by historians and genealogists. Thomas C. Hobbs, archivist for the International Association of Obituarists, has registered concern about its potential for inaccuracy, exaggeration and deliberate distortion of fact.<sup>99</sup> In British and Australian newspapers, by contrast, classified death notices are much more restrained in language and length. The newspaper obituaries of Britain and Australia, therefore, stand apart in plain relief from this form of advertising. Consequently, they possess a less complex sense of identity and a more assured quality of their own definition.

## **Conclusions**

In achieving its sustained and significant revival, the obituary art has also been able to secure its own identity within death literature. The old Latin connection holds good and the legacy of the biographical essay, with its lessons of character sketch, has been an enduring force. To those properties now have been added a strain of practice which supplies vigorous appraisal of subject and an accent on a life lived instead of a death died.

This reassessment has helped to create a clearer separation in defining and considering the obituary against other death literature mechanisms. The obituary has proved itself better suited than the elegy to the public arena, sloughed off the conventions of hagiography and panegyric, and adopted a less sentimental voice than that of the eulogy. It is more comprehensive in content than either the death notice or the epitaph, less concerned with the circumstances of death than the news story, and more urgent in manifestation than the biography. There is, in short, nothing fanciful about endowing it with legitimacy as a first draft of history.

## chapter two

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### Literature review: the obituary as the ounce in history

*You might be quite famous, but then someone more famous than you dies the same day. Then your life is foreshortened by a few hundred words. The symbolism is almost overwhelming. Were you interesting enough? Well, were you?*

---

Esther Selsdon (*New Statesman & Society*)<sup>1</sup>

The obituary has been a topic of considerable research and report since the 1970s. This activity was at first inspired by the development, as an academic discipline, of media studies – particularly that element which concerns itself with gender questions. Those early projects analysed newspaper obituaries as a means of determining if posthumous sex discrimination existed in the mainstream press. A broader field of enquiry was then cultivated, linking obituary content and expression to issues of cultural identity. By the 1990s, there were indications that the journalism style of old, in terms of its application to obituary publication, was attracting some significant academic interest.

In the public forum, the post-1986 revival of the obituary created widespread reaction. Journals of quality in the popular press, such as the *Economist* and *Time*, discussed this phenomenon. Writers of fiction drew on obituaries and obituarists for plot – in novel, short story, theatre and film. All this, then, contributes to the cause of Literature Review.

#### Unreliable testimony

Alexander Bell, according to his obituary, was born in Scotland in 1830, trained as an agricultural chemist, mixed intimately with French republicans and an Italian revolutionary, sailed for Australia, where he was subsequently appointed an honorary magistrate, became editor of the Ballarat *Star*, and later joined the literary staff of the *Age* in Melbourne.<sup>2</sup>

Alexander Bell, according to *Men of Our Time* (1878), was born in Scotland in 1831, had family connections with the aristocracy, was involved in business enterprises in Victoria's gold-mining districts, acted as chairman of the bench, and was elected mayor of Walhalla.<sup>3</sup>

Those two accounts, both reported in Trevena's study of Australian country newspapers, demonstrate the point that obituary content can be selective.<sup>4</sup> The obituary in this instance places emphasis on Bell's liberal beliefs and achievements in journalism. For its part, *Men of Our Time* presents an image of an establishment identity, a man of capitalist trading sympathies and significant civic responsibility. Trevena's further research, however, has been able to demonstrate that each is about the same man. This example of deliberate distortion in narrative, and mild tampering with fact, supports a cluster of argument within this study – namely that the unchecked use of amateur contributors in the mainstream media is unwise, that inadequate reporting technique contributes to a flawed product, and that the paid obituary is a notoriously unreliable source of information. In such circumstances, the 'Were you interesting enough?' factor gains another dimension: is the life, as presented on the page, both interesting and true?

Trevena, nevertheless, acknowledges that the legitimate obituary is still of much historical relevance:

A newspaper obituary may be a source for more than vital statistics and similar facts. An obituary may help to place people on a broad canvas, and be able to evoke feelings, set atmospheres, convey attitudes or supply corroborative detail – what Barbara Tuchman has called the ounce in history.<sup>5</sup>

*Writes of Passage* will show that some Australian newspapers are guilty of short-weight tactics. Their ounce is too often missing some grains of truth.

In the same vein, and with concerns in particular about amateur contributions and about the growth of the paid obituary phenomenon in the United States, Sheppard's 1999 study appearing in *American Journalism Review* has questioned recent changes in newspaper publishing. It has as its focus the validity of allowing bereaved families to engage in religious expression and the effect that paid obituaries have had on the essence of news itself. Sheppard quotes a former dean of the University of Montana journalism school, Nathaniel Blumberg, as being a trenchant critic on both counts:

Blumberg is among those who thinks [*sic*] mixing staff-written and family-produced copy is a bad idea. 'It is the worst example of giving over control of news columns, this giving it to the survivors, the morticians,' he says.



‘There was a time when it was impossible to either buy into or buy out of the news columns. Now they’re allowing such expressions as “gone to be with the Lord” in the news columns. When you don’t distinguish between paid and unpaid, that is extremely objectionable.’

Blumberg says the practice [of paid obituary] is offensive because it ‘allows the cover-up of suicides, of criminal negligence’. He adds, ‘It also violates the traditional requirement of newspapers to list the cause of death.’ Making sure whatever appears in news columns is accurate and complete...historically and traditionally the ethical function of editors...is being circumvented by this practice, he says.<sup>6</sup>

Echoes of those views will be heard in, respectively, Chapter Seven of this study, when further debate on the paid obituary is enjoined, and Chapter Eight, when contemporary practice in Australian newspapers is discussed. Blumberg’s point about sanctimonious expression demands considerable scrutiny in the Australian context. Obituary editors in this country, when heavily reliant on contributed material of erratic standard, are too easily seduced into drawing on passages of eulogy. These make an uneasy transition from funeral service to obituaries page.

### **Attribution of cause**

Cause of death, in the opinion of Blumberg, is a ‘traditional requirement’ within the newspaper obituary.<sup>7</sup> That view sits comfortably with prevailing American practice, where some extraordinary efforts are made to enlighten readers in this respect. When the poet Charles Henri Ford died in 2002, at 94, the *Los Angeles Times* obituary attributed his death to ‘causes associated with aging’.<sup>8</sup> The British model is much less obsessive, warned off perhaps by an experience of *Daily Telegraph* editor Max Hastings. When he insisted on the inclusion of cause, obituaries editor Hugh Massingberd responded by demonstrating the potential for peril it might occasion:

an injunction arrived from on high that we were to make a point of including the cause of death. As it happened, a candidate for the morgue of the morrow, a priapic jazzier, had handed in his dinner pail after a penile implant had unfortunately exploded. We duly complied with the editorial diktat.<sup>9</sup>

From a more scholarly perspective, cause of death in the obituary has been considered from two standpoints – morbidity and incidence – in Ball and Jonnes’s *Fame at Last*, a study of *New York Times* obituaries.<sup>10</sup> Their substantial sample (9,325 obituaries in six years) is used to determine occupation and education of the selected subjects, sex and age, length of obituary, and cause. The authors found that the *New York Times* had identified cause of death in 6,234 instances (67 per cent).<sup>11</sup> Australian practice is markedly different. Chapter Eight of this thesis will present findings from a similar, though numerically smaller, analysis of eight Australian newspapers. The figure ranges from 18 per cent (the *Advertiser*) to 41 per cent (the *Australian*). Reasons for this significant variation will be discussed, through examination of current practice and as a result of interviews with editors.

Ball and Jonnes noted, *inter alia*, that the published cause of death for 242 *New York Times* obituary subjects (3.9 per cent) was ‘AIDS’.<sup>12</sup> This raises two points of contention: accuracy of attributed cause and ethical journalism behaviour. In Chapter Seven, through the fruits of interview with American obituary practitioners, it will be argued that AIDS induces conditions which kill – pneumonia, in particular – rather than being the clinical cause of death in its own right. The Ball and Jonnes study also lists ‘pneumonia and influenza (4.4 per cent)’ and ‘pulmonary diseases (3.1 per cent)’;<sup>13</sup> it is possible, surely, that some of the deaths attributed to AIDS might equally have been listed under those categories. A *New York Times* attribution of that period (1990s), and the conclusions drawn from it, must be treated with some caution accordingly.

Both *Newsweek* and the *New York Times* itself, in its in-house publication *Winners & Sinners*, have discussed the medical, legal and ethical complications encountered in this delicate area of obituary compilation. These publications cite two cases, each involving a prominent New Yorker, as prime examples. In one, the subject had attributed his terminal condition to cancer; in the other, the cause of death was said to be encephalitis. As *Newsweek* reported, it was widely known, yet impossible to state unequivocally on the record, that each was a victim of AIDS:

Neither...would admit that he had the dread disease. So how to proceed? How should the media square the interests of privacy with the interests of truth?...the issue is largely one of ethics – medical and journalistic. But those considerations are complicated by yet more elements: sensitivity, news judgment, and the conventions of obituary writing. When publicly...[naming] AIDS victims, 99 per cent isn’t certain enough; the standard of accuracy must be proof.

But proof only begins the argument...for [one subject] the issue arose because he and his lawyers claimed he was suffering solely from liver cancer. The obituary problem is particularly acute at the *New York Times*....The paper's in-house publication, *Winners & Sinners*, admitted recently that 'some suspect us of shirking our duty to report an epidemic. In fact...we're frustrated by closed-mouth survivors, doctors, hospitals and undertakers....The problem is that the *Times* obit [on the second subject], which cited viral encephalitis as the cause of death, was technically accurate but misleading.'<sup>14</sup>

It has also been argued that reticence on the part of AIDS patients and their families and friends is not necessarily serving the broader issue of public tolerance and understanding. In his study of *New York Times* 'AIDS obituaries', Winick has noted that candour can have a beneficial effect:

As a result of obituaries regularly reporting the deaths of notables from AIDS, the disease is increasingly legitimated, but the great majority of AIDS decedents are faceless non-persons 'unceremoniously discarded, as they were in life'. The routinization of reporting of AIDS in *Times* obituaries, [if] adopted by other newspapers, could contribute significantly to the legitimization of AIDS as a health problem. Since 1986, the paper's national leadership in the quantity and quality of its AIDS coverage has influenced other media. By reporting the AIDS-related deaths of persons who have achieved distinction, the obituaries help make AIDS less socially invisible.<sup>15</sup>

Winick's study concedes, however, that 'notables' might not want their condition known, for reasons of professional employment and civic status. It cites the page-long obituary of the dancer Rudolf Nureyev, whose death, according to his physician, had been caused by 'a cardiac complication, following a grievous illness':

The physician later revealed that Nureyev had concealed AIDS because he feared that disclosure would have prevented him from entering the United States.<sup>16</sup>

The *Newsweek* and *Winners & Sinners* reports and the Winick study have supplied important increments to the body of knowledge and debate. But, and without in any way denigrating their integrity, it must be conceded that they are becoming old. The *Newsweek* feature was published in 1986; Winick's research appeared in 1996, and was based on obituaries published in 1992–1993. Plainly, there is an overdue need here for direct and concerted discussion with obituaries editors. How concerned are

they to include cause of death? What are the implications for the reader if it is omitted? When, and how, do questions of privacy, sensitivity and ethical conduct affect the process? Which causes, such as AIDS or AIDS-related factors, create difficulties in this context? This thesis addresses that need. In so doing, it also investigates the language of death: the amalgam of frankness, euphemism, rhetoric, revelation, sentiment and cliché which inhabits, in particular, Australian obituaries.

Those are guilty, often, of employing the hackneyed – and, ultimately, meaningless – phrase ‘battle with cancer’. Britain’s *New Statesman* magazine, in discussing that term, acknowledges the temptation to see cancer as ‘an alien force invading the body, a force that has to be repelled’, but adds:

It is almost too obvious to point out that people don’t really ‘battle’ against cancer. They obtain treatment and they hope that the treatment will be successful. The outcome depends on various factors, such as the stage at which the disease was diagnosed and the quality of treatment, but the will of the patient doesn’t seem to be significant.<sup>17</sup>

The cause of death which gives editors the greatest dilemma, so far as expression and ethics are concerned, is suicide. An American study of some vintage has established that an increased incidence of suicide can be linked to media coverage of celebrity suicides.<sup>18</sup> An Australian monograph, by Richards, offers further persuasive evidence by drawing on studies which

looked at the clustering of suicide (by jumping from [Adelaide] car parks) following media publicity...an increase in the incidence of suicide in North Queensland during a period of negative publicity concerning the Townsville General Hospital...[and which found] the daily average male suicide rate from 1981 to 1990 increased significantly after the publication of suicide stories in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age*.<sup>19</sup>

It is, undeniably, a constant challenge for obituaries editors, who, through the very forces driving their page, are so often confronted by the death of a person of prominence. When that person has suicided, complex questions of judgment arise. *Writes of Passage* – in its chapters dealing with contemporary practice – reports the answers, as supplied by editorial decision-makers. The discussion in this area of enquiry acknowledges its complexity: the demand to relate a complete story opposed to family requests for elision, perceptions of right-to-know against a defence of right-to-privacy, intrusion on grief, processes of law and codes of practice.

An unashamedly unscholarly, yet engaging, argument on the right-to-know theme was advanced by Weisman in 1996, writing in the *Saturday Evening Post*. It has particular fun with disciples of deconstructionist theory, and concludes – with a sardonic nod – that the obituary art possesses some therapeutic value because

death is what happens when people refuse to profit from the obituaries of others....To keep death permanently at bay, obituaries must be read thoroughly, studied thoughtfully, and deconstructed strictly....Obituary writers, perhaps out of some warped notion of good taste, give us precious little hard information to go on, preferring soothing euphemisms like ‘natural causes’ and ‘after a long illness’...Sometimes an obituary offers multiple choices: ‘Mr What’s-His-Name, a lawyer with the New York Stock Exchange, was an avid bird watcher’...[he] may have died because he did not bother to learn to control his stress levels with biofeedback and positive imaging. Or, he might have died of Lyme disease because he didn’t tuck his trousers into his socks when he went bird watching, and then neglected to check his body thoroughly for any sign of a circular rash. It hardly matters which one did him in. Deconstructed is deconstructed.<sup>20</sup>

At the core of that wry observation, the *Post* does have a serious point. Faithful, unadorned recounting of cause of death can be of some benefit to the portrait and enduring characteristics of the deceased as presented in the obituary. The matter is considered in Chapter Six, through a case study of an erstwhile sporting celebrity who, towards the end of his short life, had retreated to some humble playing arenas. The thesis will argue that omission of the cause of death, in this instance, might well have persuaded readers to think that his life ended – or, possibly, that he ended it – in melodramatic circumstances. Such, in fact, was not the case. But the incomplete nature of the obituary was not helpful to biography and memory.

### **Accusations of gender bias**

Gender bias has long been an accusation levelled at major newspapers with defined obituary pages. Ball and Jonnes – in their analysis of 9,325 *New York Times* obituaries – reported that 7,705 (83 per cent) were of men.<sup>21</sup> These figures would indicate that, so far as the *New York Times* is concerned, little had changed in twenty years. The Ball and Jonnes study embraces obituaries published in the six years between autumn 1993 and autumn 1999.

Two decades earlier, Kastenbaum *et al.* found that the male-female bias in *New York Times* obituaries was 80 per cent to 20 per cent.<sup>22</sup> Almost identical figures were found, by the same researchers, at the *Boston Globe*: 81 per cent to 19 per cent. They also developed the impression that

another form of sex bias was present in the obituaries, namely that women tended to be given this special form of acknowledgment because of their relationship to men. This possibility disclosed itself in a number of obituaries in which emphasis was given to the deceased as ‘mother of...’ or ‘widow of...’.<sup>23</sup>

Moremen and Craddock pursued a similar line of enquiry in considering obituaries published over a thirty-day period, in 1997, by four major United States newspapers, with these results:

		<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>
Chicago Tribune	(N = 125)	71%	29%
Los Angeles Times	(N = 73)	81%	19%
Miami Herald	(N = 74)	76%	24%
New York Times	(N = 139)	88%	12% <sup>24</sup>

In their conclusions, Moremen and Craddock pointed to a reason for the continuing pattern:

Once the obituary department has the name of a potential news maker, that individual is ‘researched’. This usually consists of looking back into the archives to see how many news clips the paper has on the person from the past....If the individual is considered newsworthy and information is plentiful, then an obituary is written....The explanation that the editors offered for the preponderance of male obituaries was that these obituaries reflect society as a whole; men have held higher positions historically and more has been written about them. Therefore, they receive greater obituary recognition.<sup>25</sup>

There is a hint within that conclusion of some abbreviated qualitative research involving the views of editors. The study, however, did not pursue this approach through formal interview. It relied for evidence instead on its quantitative findings; these, though statistically valid, are driven by some modest numbers in a limited publication period. In taking the question of gender bias to the Australian obituary press, *Writes of Passage* will consider it on the basis of a six-month time span. One more point, that of mainstream media response, demands to be made about the Moremen-Craddock study before leaving it. An American women’s magazine,

*Working Woman*, pursued the story by contacting the newspapers involved. Ana de Gale, obituary writer at the *Miami Herald*, was quoted as predicting some changes in decades ahead: ‘Thirty years ago, women were housewives. Prominent women are not dying off yet, but maybe three decades from now things will equal out.’<sup>26</sup>

Essentially the same sentiment – but expressed in a more hostile tone – was voiced, in another article, by America’s veteran media watcher, *Editor & Publisher* magazine:

Robin Moremen, a Northern Illinois University sociologist, studies big-city dailies and discovers that the obituaries for men far outnumber the obituaries for women. She apparently concludes that this is discriminatory. That’s nonsense. The obituary sections of big-city newspapers focus mainly on people of great prominence...which means they were born before 1930. How many women born in that era went to college, earned advance degrees, held public office, ran big corporations, made scientific discoveries, climbed mountains, explored the planet? Not many. And, yes, in many cases it was gender bias that kept them from achieving great things. No question about it. But to fault major newspapers for not devoting limited obit space to the unheralded of either sex is silly.<sup>27</sup>

The storyline was pursued in Britain too. *New Statesman* magazine, investigating the comparative dearth of women on the obituary pages of its national broadsheets, found that a gradual shift in balance was inevitable:

It will take years, but obits editors are unanimous that eventually the balance will even out and that the process is already under way. ‘We’ve had [obituaries of] a couple of women ambassadors in the past year, and one of them was the first one,’ says Ian Brunskill of the *Times*. ‘We are also starting to see more women who’ve reached a certain level in the Civil Service and the law.’<sup>28</sup>

The reactions of editors and writers to scholarly research, especially that concerning charges of discriminatory treatment, deserve greater consideration in an equally scholarly framework. *Writes of Passage* (in Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight) will offer sustained qualitative findings on this theme, through interviews with editors and practitioners in Britain, the United States, and Australia.

The one departure from an omnipresent image of male hegemony on the obituary page is found in a 1970s study of two Colorado newspapers by Spilka *et al.*<sup>29</sup> The research team in this instance examined obituaries over three periods – each a month long – in 1976 and 1977. They found that the *Denver Post* and the *Rocky Mountain*

*News* both recorded a male-female comparison of 59 per cent to 41 per cent. Referring to studies which showed a much greater imbalance in *New York Times* and *Boston Globe* obituary pages, Spilka *et al.* concluded:

it can be claimed that the West has a better record than the East relative to sex distinctions. In politics, women in the West realized suffrage and rose to positions of prominence in state legislatures and governorships and entered the congress before their eastern counterparts. It is possible that the frontier experience tended to break down traditional restrictions on women.<sup>30</sup>

These findings, particularly given the era in which the research was conducted, are of interest in terms of presenting a variation on a theme. However, there is surely some danger in placing too much reliance on a comparison of New York-Boston with Denver-Boulder (the two main areas of circulation for the Colorado newspapers). The news agendas are not necessarily compatible, or comparable. Similar caution must be exerted, of course, in the consideration of Australia's obituary-by-sex data in Chapter Eight of this thesis. The *Australian* and Melbourne's *Herald Sun*, by way of example, display different readership profiles and pursue significantly contrasting policies in operating their obituary pages. While the raw data are of interest, it would be unwise to draw any conclusions of gender-oriented bias, given those inconsistencies in the nature of the two newspapers.

### **The forgotten dead**

Obituary-by-race has not excited so much study as obituary-by-sex. The most concerted research extant, so far as legitimate newspaper obituaries are concerned, is contained within Janice Hume's book, published in 2000, *Obituaries in American Culture*.<sup>31</sup> The 'legitimate' appendage assumes critical importance because of an occasional failure, in American-based findings at large, to distinguish between the 'news' and 'paid' varieties. A study of Arkansas obituaries by Marks and Piggee, for example, asserts in its opening stanzas that

[r]acial and gender differences existed regarding length and complexity of the obits. Whites were more likely than blacks to have longer and more complex obituaries. Blacks were more likely than whites to have a picture accompany their obituaries. Economic background of racial membership explains the differences found in length of the obituary.<sup>32</sup>



It was an enterprise of some dimension. The authors analysed 2,262 obituaries appearing in the *Arkansas Democrat Gazette* during 1993. These, as the text eventually makes clear, are paid notices: ‘Whites were willing to spend on average slightly more than twice as much as blacks for the obituaries of their deceased.’<sup>33</sup> Marks and Piggee’s findings, accordingly, are of no relevance here.

The Hume study, though dealing by design with a period in American history long before the modern revival and reform of obituary practice, does offer useful indications of publishers’ attitudes. In a section entitled ‘The Forgotten Dead’, it identifies notions of white superiority in an 1838 account following the death of a Native American, Osceola: ‘Of their inferiority, intellectually speaking, to the whites there can be no doubt – and their destiny, therefore, has been that of subjection to us.’<sup>34</sup>

Hume notes that the few 19<sup>th</sup> century obituaries which did commemorate Native Americans ‘were included only to illustrate that subjection’ and that ‘by the early twentieth century, when illustrating this subjection was no longer necessary, Native Americans were all but absent from the obituary pages’.<sup>35</sup> That study, in discussing 19<sup>th</sup> century African-Americans, finds that they too were virtually ignored in newspaper obituary columns:

Those few who were remembered seemed to have been included only because the deceased personified some type of news or cultural value...[l]ongevity, for example....Another avenue to commemoration on the obit page was any kind of link with American public memory....Mr Tucker Coles, ‘a Negro’, was remembered for longevity and for having shaken hands with Thomas Jefferson, and John Blake was cited for speaking with officers at the battle of Brandywine during the American Revolution.<sup>36</sup>

Children, another demographic group within Hume’s ‘Forgotten Dead’, are said to be ‘poorly represented in nineteenth-century newspapers obituaries and...virtually absent in the twentieth century’.<sup>37</sup> This situation has since changed to the extent that

the *Eugene [Oregon] Register-Guard* prompted a debate when it published a 1995 obituary for an *in utero* death. Editors later reconsidered the decision and formulated a policy that includes obituaries only for stillborn deaths carried to full term.<sup>38</sup>

Contemporary newspapers in Australia are displaying a propensity for obituarising youth. Examples from both Victoria and Western Australia, with a focus on parental as well as editorial attitude, are presented in Chapter Eight. It can be stated with some confidence that this aspect of the thesis is exploring an entirely fresh area of research on the obituary.

### **A page fit for rogues?**

The rogue element of society is also listed under the 'Forgotten Dead'. There was a time when only the good were accorded obituaries; evidence is provided in Endres's paper on 19<sup>th</sup> century Ohio regional newspaper obituary terminology. It finds that the dominant personal attributes accorded, in a study of 349 obituaries, are 'Respectability, Honesty, Intelligence, and Good Citizenship'.<sup>39</sup> Today, there is an entire anthology of recent obituaries entitled *Rogues*.<sup>40</sup> This collection, from the archives of London's *Daily Telegraph*, contains the obituaries which marked ninety-eight misspent lives, including requiems for a trio of heavyweights – Mafia bosses Anthony 'Fat Man' Salerno and Vincent 'Big Vinnie' Teresa, along with Queensland's Russ Hinze.

Media commentators have noted this trend of not discriminating in obituary subject selection between those who have adorned society and those who have undermined it. *American Journalism Review* reported the controversy which followed the front-page obituary of a career criminal published by Cleveland's *Plain Dealer*.<sup>41</sup> In Britain, the *Sunday Independent* has questioned the 'thousands of words on...obituary pages' devoted in April 2000 to Charlie Kray, 'whose only claim to fame was to be the older brother of a pair of disgusting gangsters'.<sup>42</sup> The paper took the opportunity to make a point about perceptions of sex discrimination on the obituary pages:

How many hard-working women would have to die to qualify for the acres of space that this apology for a human being obtained, written by journalists skilled enough to turn a life of utter unimportance into a quasi-comedy script?<sup>43</sup>

Such questions demand to be asked of editors. So far, however, it would appear that scholars of the obituary art have not pursued the issue. The challenge therefore, in researching its contemporary execution, is to develop a coherent argument on this changing face of the obituary. This thesis answers that imperative through the

scrutiny of emerging practice and by the fruit of interviews recorded at the 2003 International Association of Obituarists Conference in the United States, when the topic of rogues was debated as a plenary session.

### **No amnesty for obvious sins**

As Ball and Jonnes have noted, obituaries in major newspapers have now assumed a candid style:

in these tell-all times, euphemism is out on both sides of the Atlantic. One no longer expects the kindness of *de mortuis nil nisi bonum* [of the dead speak only good] from the modern obit. Nowadays, if you sold your soul to get re-elected – like Governor Orval Faubus of Arkansas – be prepared to have that harsh truth mentioned in your obit.<sup>44</sup>

Literature both academic and popular has recognised the marked change in complexion. In one of the more scholarly journals, former *Sydney Morning Herald* editor-in-chief David Bowman is quoted as an advocate of candour in posthumous appraisal:

To get nearer the character of the person is the aim now, to delve behind the curriculum vitae and, by description and anecdote, convey what the lamented – or unlamented – one was really like. Respect, of course, where it's due, no ungenerous tone, but no amnesty for obvious sins either, no stuffy reverence. Strengths and weaknesses it is. When the raw material is there, it comes off famously.<sup>45</sup>

The reference there to 'ungenerous tone' has inspired a line of enquiry in Chapter Seven. The case study of a former US senator – a man whose long record of public service was flawed by an incident of bribery – is examined from the perspectives of news value and the application of ethical standards of journalism. Chapter Six, which has as its focus contemporary British practice, dissects the debate generated by a notorious obituary in the *British Medical Journal*. The *BMJ* described its deceased subject as 'a rotter...the greatest snake oil salesman of all time'.<sup>46</sup> This, in a publication with a tradition of hagiography, was a spectacular illustration of newfound candour in the obituary art. The Australian counterpart to the *BMJ*, the *Medical Journal of Australia*, published in 2001 a monograph on its own obituary practice. In one of the few studies conducted on the genre in Australia, the *MJA*

concluded that there had been ‘a loosening of the *de mortuis* convention over the past 50 years’.<sup>47</sup> This study, by Haneman, sampled at five-year intervals the obituaries published in the *MJA* between 1950 and 2000. It found persuasive evidence of an emergent frankness:

In earlier obituaries, suicides were often concealed, though we are becoming more candid now. At one time, one had to read between the lines when homosexuality existed, while today it is more frankly implied. Divorce, once a taboo subject, is now sometimes mentioned.<sup>48</sup>

And so it goes on. *Time* has acknowledged in a feature article that ‘vivid profiles are becoming more common on Australian obits pages’,<sup>49</sup> Siegel’s anthology of *New York Times* obituaries has reported a style ruling that permits application of the ‘survived by’ tag to ‘unmarried companions of the same sex or the opposite sex’,<sup>50</sup> and *American Journalism Review* has discussed the excessive candour of obituary pages in both Seattle and Minneapolis.<sup>51</sup> The thrust of the *AJR* piece was that each of the newspapers in those cities might have unduly emphasised misdeed to the exclusion of positive achievement.

In the view of Britain’s *Economist*, the candid obituary is a product of a trend in which the press at large ‘became steadily – some might say ruthlessly – franker and more intrusive’.<sup>52</sup> It was to be expected, therefore, that ‘those habits began to carry over into coverage of the dead’.<sup>53</sup> The recurring nature, yet disparate location, of this theme suggests that it is time for consideration under a broad international canopy, as is the purpose of *Writes of Passage*.

### **A research obsession with times past**

Three historical studies, each with the obituary at its core, have been of particular value in the shaping of this thesis. Larson’s dissertation on distinction and deference at death, with its vast corpus of 18<sup>th</sup> century American newspaper material, has been notably instructive.<sup>54</sup> Larson sees the obituary as important because

[it] mirrors a community’s expectations and perspectives and because it developed differently in colonial communities, the obituary is a unique historical source. Since English-American colonies lacked the hierarchical social structures of England, the obituary offered Americans a chance to develop their own norms and models, a process which also aided achievement of an expressed American national identity.<sup>55</sup>

Hume's study of obituaries from 1818 to 1930 (*Obituaries in American Culture*)<sup>56</sup> is of help in extending familiarity with American practice, even if, as one critic has observed, the writer does display a peculiar reliance on the thoughts of Aristotle and 'the thieves' jargon of a certain Foucault'.<sup>57</sup> It complements the essence of Larson's finding that an examination of obituaries 'could provide a useful tool in exploring the changing values of Americans of any era'.<sup>58</sup> Hume too, as has been demonstrated in earlier sections of this chapter, is a useful resource for consideration of gender and race issues. Questions of class and gender – as raised by reports in the London press of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century – were also discussed by Stross in 1994.<sup>59</sup> This study, in a moment of some hyperbole, finds that obituaries are 'a very vast and rich source' of information in defining social values. In a calmer moment, it offers similar sentiments to those expressed by Larson and Hume on the contribution that the obituary can make to the cause of history:

Although the obituaries...did not necessarily present accurate historical 'truth' and they were often coloured by emotion, they were increasingly seen as a body of authoritative knowledge.<sup>60</sup>

Comparatively little work in this field has been attempted in Australia. Trevena has proved to be a worthwhile source in reflecting on the potential for manipulating historical information through the obituary, as reported in the first section of this chapter.<sup>61</sup> The greater concern of that study, however, is with the more generalised role of the country newspaper. Haneman, as noted, has published a short monograph on the shifting style of specialised medical journal obituary, and Peel has described the relevance of obituaries in colonial Australia's death rituals.<sup>62</sup> Peel's study is of use in confirming the predilection for elaborate tribute and, in finding that 'class differences emerged in most aspects of life surrounding death', it supports Hume's conclusions.<sup>63</sup>

Hume, in an entirely separate initiative, has also reviewed the narrative threads of 'Portraits of Grief', the series of vignettes published by the *New York Times* on victims of the World Trade Centre attack. This monograph notes that the portraits themselves do not follow conventional obituary structure or content, but are 'impressionistic sketches' which 'reveal something of what [the] community, and perhaps the nation, valued at a critical moment in history'.<sup>64</sup> With the exception of the *New York Times* study by Ball and Jonnes and, more recently, Hume's 'Portraits', the

pattern of scholarly obituary research has yet to follow the example of the intelligent mainstream journals in examining the late 20<sup>th</sup> century revival of journalism's dying art (the theme of Chapter Five). The temptation so to do has surely been apparent since the London broadsheet metamorphosis of the 1980s. As one commentator of that era found:

Recently...the obituary has been emerging as a compelling, even controversial feature of British newspapers. Each of the quality dailies now has its obituary department run by relatively recently appointed editors who have been helping to steer the obit away from the traditional earnest wad of text.<sup>65</sup>

Compelling as its content might be, the contemporary obituary has also been largely ignored – certainly so far as both Britain and Australia are concerned – as a potential topic for newspaper readership research. If indeed it is a controversial feature, what do readers like, and not like, about its delivery? What percentage turns regularly to the obituaries page? How do they feel about such questions as contemporaneous publication (a topic of some current in-house anguish at Britain's *Telegraph*), inclusion of cause of death, and gender imbalance? Answers to those, with the exception of a brief reference in Chapter Six to the *Telegraph*'s style dilemma, are not the province of this thesis, which has as its focus the style of the obituary and broad issues of practice as enacted by obituarists. A major survey, involving a large sample of readers, would be required.

One extant study of substance in this field is Northwestern University Readership Institute's survey of 37,000 American newspaper readers.<sup>66</sup> It found that

obituaries, along with community announcements and stories about ordinary people, have the highest potential of all news items to grow readership. In other words, if newspapers can do a 'better' job in presenting this kind of news, they will see positive overall readership results.<sup>67</sup>

The institute noted that 45 per cent of respondents rated obituaries as 'important', and that

this group tends to be more female, with at least a high school education and to have lived in their community somewhat longer than average. They are a little more likely to be older and retired than the average reader. They are more likely to be subscribers and they tend to spend more time with the newspaper and to read it more completely.<sup>68</sup>

Such findings do suggest the possible worth of an Australian study with similar lines of enquiry, particularly as a means of confirming some current editorial instincts. As Chapter Eight of this thesis will report, editors of executive rank in Australia have introduced obituary pages to raise the image of their papers. It would assist the causes of the industry, as well as those of scholarship, if such views could be tested.

### **The obituarists of fiction**

The composition of a Literature Review on the topic of contemporary practice is shaped also by an intriguing by-product of the revival – the growth in incidence of obituarists as characters in popular fiction. This demands attention not so much for the phenomenon itself but for what it says about perceptions of the obituary and its writers.

British novelist Robert Chalmers, in a 1989 magazine article, noted that although the obituaries desk had long been ‘regarded as something of a backwater’, this view was gradually changing.<sup>69</sup> It had changed so much by 2002 that his novel *Who’s Who in Hell* has as its central character ‘an obituarist at a prestigious London newspaper’ who ‘falls in love with a thrill-seeking American’.<sup>70</sup> This book is something of a *roman à clef*, in that Hugh Massingberd (*Daily Telegraph* 1986–1994) has clearly served as the life model for the obituaries editor of Chalmers’s fictitious paper. Massingberd, again but thinly disguised, also appears as the editor in Tim Heald’s prize-winning short story ‘The Obituarists’ Outing’.<sup>71</sup>

In the United States, Carl Hiaasen’s dark comic novel *Basket Case* offers as its anti-hero a hard-living and disaffected investigative reporter whose penchant for upsetting management has seen him assigned to routine tasks on the obituaries desk.<sup>72</sup> In this instance, the sub-text is perhaps more antiquated, in that it depicts the obituarist as occupying a peripheral existence, decidedly short on prestige, within journalism culture. Contemporary practice, in particular the American press’s concern for immediate publication, is faithfully presented in Porter Shreve’s *The Obituary Writer*, where a youthful obituarist uncovers an elaborate crime through his research.<sup>73</sup> The potential for misleading information, often deliberate, in an obituary submitted by a family member is the substance of Brad Leithauser’s *A Few Corrections*.<sup>74</sup> This novel’s chapter-by-chapter unravelling of the fabrications unwittingly published by a small-town American newspaper does serve to endorse the point – made right at the start of this chapter – that the obituary art can be manipulated to provide an unreliable testimony.

Australian novelist Lily Brett has created, in *Just Like That*, a heroine who is the resident New York obituarist for a London weekly.<sup>75</sup> Her job is said to pay well and not be onerous. Brett's character also reflects that 'the ratio of male to female obits she had written was ten to one...and she knew that it wasn't that more men were dying'.<sup>76</sup> Her response is to write longer obituaries of women. Obituarists have also been depicted in recent plays and in the film *Serendipity*, a romantic comedy.<sup>77</sup> They and their craft, it would seem, have suddenly become interesting. A possible reason for this surge in interest is found in the musings of the *Economist*:

In the mid-1980s, when a general, structural upheaval overtook the British quality press, provoking sharp new competition for market share and a search for editorial edge, the unexploited potential of obituaries as a source of human interest was recognised, and the obituarists came into their own.<sup>78</sup>

### **Jewish and Irish, Methodists and monkeys**

As is apparent from these formative chapters, in their discussion of historical and contemporary questions alike, obituary practice is diverse in character. That diversity is reflected in scholarship on the topic. In this final section of the Literature Review, an eclectic collection of studies is considered – concerning death literature of Jewish and Irish persuasion, the efficacy of prayer, necrology of legal and clerical complexion, and obituary of ancient simian inclination.

Roniger's study of death notices in the Jewish press finds that the 'laudatory necrological article, or obituary...is close to the eulogy and lamentation in its embrace of personal feelings', and that

Jewish forms were highly emotional in tone and intentionally literary or didactic in their rendering, and thus satisfied...expectations of the proper way to honor the memory of important individuals.<sup>79</sup>

In other words, this form of necrology is, in content and delivery, the antithesis of what the newspaper obituary of British, American or Australian type aspires to be. The point made in defining the obituary of mainstream journalism in Chapter One is that it should distance itself from the eulogy and eschew the didactic.



Emotion of a nationalistic kind is apparent in Greenlaw's essay on the recurring theme of self-identity in Irish obituaries of that country's celebrated writers.<sup>80</sup> While, for example, the leading English newspaper obituaries of the day emphasised the 'obscure...extravagantly extreme...[and] self-imploded genius' characteristics of James Joyce's writing, the Irish press took an opposing view:

Perhaps because of their will to reclaim Joyce as their property, Irish obituarists treat Joyce's detachment and unintelligibility as a detour only, a mark of the 'integrity and independence' and the 'liberty to think differently'...that is paradoxically suited to a nationalist representative.<sup>81</sup>

Such a view can be translated to obituaries of today – even to a comparison of British and Australian obituaries of modern vintage. As already reported in this chapter, Queensland's Russ Hinze appears in the *Rogues* anthology of *Daily Telegraph* obituaries; in his home city, Brisbane, he was remembered much more kindly. His obituary in Queensland's *Sunday Mail* appeared under the headline 'Rough, tough and loud but likeable', an overt pointer to the sentimental expression – laced with a splash of naïve state pride – which followed:

He has gone to his grave without being convicted of any of the criminal charges laid against him, so nothing of substance stands proved. The epitaph of Big Russ should note, however, that he was a character who identified with a Queensland of a bygone era; he was rough and ready in the tough old mould....Time and requirements have changed to a degree that his type of politician is unlikely ever to be seen again and, to that end, he will be missed by many who knew him and worked with him.<sup>82</sup>

That approach is not unusual, for there is a persistent strand of sentiment in Australian obituaries at large. It might, or it might not, have some connection with this nation's significant Irish heritage. But it is there, and it is discussed as a recurring theme in Chapter Eight's review of the art as practised in Australia.

In a more pragmatic vein, Francis Galton, a 19<sup>th</sup> century anthropologist and pioneer of statistical research, published a study – using obituaries as one of his prime sources – to determine if formal prayer for survival or longevity had any effect. He was intrigued in particular by the prayer, shared in form by sovereign states, for their monarch's divine protection. His research included a comparison of the mean age attained by 'males of various classes who had survived their 30<sup>th</sup> year from 1758 to 1843'.<sup>83</sup> The results were disappointing for royalty. Galton found that

sovereigns are literally the shortest lived of all who have the advantage of affluence. The prayer has therefore no efficacy, unless the very questionable hypothesis be raised that the conditions of royal life may naturally be yet more fatal, and that their influence is partly, though incompletely, neutralised by the effects of public prayers.<sup>84</sup>

Two much more recent studies, both of medical persuasion, have also employed the obituary as a mechanism for determining life span in measurable demographic groups. Vieweg *et al.* set out to see if ‘trial attorneys have shorter life spans than other attorneys, and [if] attorneys in general have a shortened life span compared with the general population’.<sup>85</sup>

Using obituaries from the annual report of the Virginia State Bar (USA) as a prime source, they found that the answer was ‘no’ on both counts. The difference in mean age at death between the two lawyer groups was not statistically significant. On the wider question, it was found that ‘[t]he life spans of both trial and non-trial attorneys exceeded those of the general population’.<sup>86</sup>

A study of similar intent, again drawing upon obituaries, was conducted by Allison and St Leger into the life span of British Methodist ministers from two branches of the church.<sup>87</sup> As the authors explained:

The Primitive Methodists came from a predominantly lower socio-economic background, whereas the background of Wesleyan Methodists tended to be more privileged. So we aimed to examine differences in life span between groups performing the same work but coming from different socio-economic backgrounds.<sup>88</sup>

They found that Wesleyans ‘from the 1850s cohort’ had a significantly longer life span ‘than did the 1850s Primitives’.<sup>89</sup> Other findings were, by the authors’ admission, inconclusive. In the context of *Writes of Passage*, such results are of no consequence. It is of greater significance simply to note that both the legal and the clerical study have turned to the newspaper obituary as a tool for quantitative research. That same mechanism is used – though directed at the shape and style of the obituary itself – in Chapter Eight of this thesis.

Obituaries of a more exotic fashion were interpreted by Goudsmit and Brandon-Jones in their research. Their paper reports the findings of a 1996 expedition to the Sacred Animal Necropolis baboon catacomb at North Saqqara, Egypt, and is concerned with tracing the trade route for monkey imports by the Ancient Egyptians.<sup>90</sup> Towards that

end, Goudsmit and Brandon-Jones – by translating obituaries written in cursive Egyptian script known as demotic – encounter a monkey that was ‘installed as an oracle on 27 November 178 [BC]’, calculate the time allowed between monkey mummification and burial, and divine the African regions in which these primates were captured for cult worship.<sup>91</sup> The obituary, as the ounce in history, can carry some surprising historical weight.

## **Conclusions**

Scholarly research on the obituary has considered its function as a tool of historical enquiry, along with its capacity to contribute to a number of sociological arguments. These include questions of ethical practice in posthumous disclosure (notably cause of death), gender balance and imbalance in newspaper content, and the growing tendency towards candid character appraisal. In the quality sector of the popular press, there has been sustained interest in newly invigorated obituary practice – with particular regard to its capacity for unsparing revelation and its overall contribution to frank, often intrusive, newspaper reporting.

The academic element of this literary activity has, in the historical context, been directed largely towards the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries; sociological studies, for their part, have offered a mix of the ancient and modern. Magazines and journals serving the public forum have taken an exclusively topical focus. On virtually every count, in scholarship and in popular culture alike, the accent has been a mix of the American and the British, with the American element much in the ascendancy. Comparatively little work has been attempted in Australia. With reflection on the legacy of all that material in place, this thesis can move to a union of the historical and the contemporary, an emphasis on the journalism, and an infusion of the Antipodean.

## chapter three

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# The flowering of the newspaper obituary

*There is something irresistible about lists of deaths.  
Death confers dignity on a name, however obscure.*

---

James Fergusson (*Penguin Book of Journalism*)<sup>1</sup>

The revival of obituary in contemporary journalism followed a simple pattern: restoration and reform, refinement, international recognition. In chronological order, it was restored to popular practice by reformist newspapers in London, refined by them and by their peers in both Britain and the United States, and adopted by zealous converts in Australia. This process, right down to the words used to describe it, was in essence a reprise of what had happened two centuries earlier at the adoption of obituary by the English-language press.

It began in that period of British history known as the Restoration, when, in 1660, rule by monarch was resumed. It was constrained initially, by decree and by the inhibitions of the first practitioners. Then, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it found freedom of expression and refinement of technique through such reformers of the art as John Nichols in London and Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia. As the press flourished during Britain's Industrial Revolution, in the independent and burgeoning United States and in the Australian colonies, so too did the practice of obituary. By the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, its flowering was complete.

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## Britain

### Early obituaries in the British Press

Sir Roger L'Estrange, an escaped prisoner-of-war and scourge of seditious printers, can make some claim to being the first obituaries editor in the English-language press. Those upon whom his columns conferred posthumous dignity were selected on the basis of their monarchist sympathies, for L'Estrange displayed a lifelong commitment to that cause. He had been a serving Cavalier in the civil war, raised a regiment in Norfolk for Charles I, was captured by the Roundheads, tried at court-martial and sentenced to death. He broke out of prison and fled to the Continent, returning at the restoration of the monarchy to ingratiate himself with Charles II.<sup>2</sup>

L'Estrange persuaded the king that, to prevent any further uprising, press censorship was necessary. Charles responded by appointing him Surveyor of the Press, an apparently dichotomous role which made L'Estrange both official journalist and national censor:

His first deed was to suppress all newspapers that were hostile to the Crown and in return he received a royal patent granting him 'the sole privilege of writing, printing and publishing all narratives, advertisements, Mercuries [obsolete term for a newsbook or journal], intelligence, diurnals, and other books of public intelligence'.<sup>3</sup>

It has been said that L'Estrange forced his way into the popular press of the day in order to wreck it, and that his first actions represent in character 'the antithesis of any true notion of news'.<sup>4</sup> That accusation arises in the main from his publication in 1663, shortly after receiving his royal commission, of *Considerations and Proposals in Order to the [sic] Regulation of the Press*. These warned printers not to disseminate seditious matter, a warning enforced by the announcement that informers would be rewarded. L'Estrange soon had his first victim, John Twyn of Cloth Fair, who had printed sheets expounding a doctrine that

'If the magistrates prevent judgment, the people are bound by the law of God to execute judgment without them and upon them'. For this, the unhappy Twyn was hanged, disembowelled and quartered.<sup>5</sup>

Roger L'Estrange was equally decisive that same year in executing the other half of his dual responsibility. In August 1663, as holder of that sole privilege of writing, printing and publishing a newspaper, he produced the *Intelligencer*, a weekly digest of news, largely in the form of a summary of official despatches. It appeared every Monday, with a supplement each Thursday entitled the *Newes*. Samuel Pepys was not impressed:

[to] Westminster-hall and there bought the first newsbooks of Lestrange's [sic] writing, he beginning this week; and makes methink but a small beginning.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, both *Intelligencer* and *Newes* demand recognition in the study of necrology for their inclusion of early demonstrations of this practice. Indeed, L'Estrange has been acknowledged by an American scholar, Lorna Clymer, as the publisher of 'what may, in fact, be the first print text to offer what we recognise as the

obituary'.<sup>7</sup> Clymer has identified L'Estrange's 'first obituary proper' as that of David Jenkins, a Welsh judge and royalist whose death was reported in the *Newes* of 17 December 1663:

*Cardiffe, December 12*

Upon the 6<sup>th</sup> of this Instant, that Eminent, Loyall, and renowned Patriot, Judge Jenkins Departed this Life, at his House in Cowbridge, the 81. Year of his Age, and in perfect Sence and Memory. He dyed, as he lived, preaching with his last Breath to his Relations, and those who were about him, Loyalty to his Majesty, and Obedience to the Lawes of the Land. In fine, he has carried with him all the comforts of a Quiet Conscience, and left behind him an unspotted Fame, together with the Memory of a President [*sic*], which only this Age could have needed, and the Next will hardly Imitate.<sup>8</sup>

The problem encountered here is that the moralising within, and the brevity of, the necrology found in L'Estrange's periodicals does cast elements of uncertainty on its obituary credentials, particularly when the defining qualities discussed in Chapter One are applied. These front-page offerings from 1664 editions of the *Newes* further illustrate the peculiarities of L'Estrange's journalism, with its mix of hagiography, obituary, and royalist sentiment (Figure 3.1):

*Chester, March 26*

Upon Monday last the Lady Dowager of Derby deceased; a Person Eminent both for Virtue and Extraction; and not less for her Constancy of mind in all Conditions, and for those Generous Actions against the Usurpers, in the late Times of Rebellion, that were performed by the Assistant Influence of her Directions.<sup>9</sup>

*Edinburgh, May 31*

This week affords but little but the sad news of the death of that great Minister of State, William, Earle of Glencairn, Lord High Chancellour of Scotland, a Person most Eminent, and well known in all his Majestyes Dominions, both for the Gallantry of his Spirit in the Noble Attempts against the Usurpers, as also for his sufferings during those times of Usurpation, and the many signal Services he hath performed in that high Station, wherein his Majesty most deservedly placed him since his happy Restauration. He dyed the 30<sup>th</sup> of the Instant of a Feavour in the 49<sup>th</sup> year of his Age, Beloved of his Prince, and Bewayled of all Ranks of his Majestyes Subjects here, and hath not only left us the Commemoration and Imitation of those his most specious [*sic*] Virtues of Piety, Loyalty, Valour and Justice, but also a little before his death layd his Commands upon his Friends' Children and Successors to follow the same Rules.<sup>10</sup>

All those reports reflect prevailing Restoration attitudes. In considering their potential for recognition as obituaries, in line with the definition established in Chapter One, it should be noted that each contains a slender attempt at character appraisal, albeit heavily coloured by the political toadying of the writer-publisher, and provides information on date of death, though some calculation by the reader is required in the instance of the Lady Dowager of Derby. Her example, however, goes no further than that and, mainly on the grounds of offering no biographical content, must fail the test. The other two (of Judge Jenkins and the Earl of Glencairn) contain clear references to the date of death, record the subject's age, and offer some indication of character in life and personal homily at death. Glencairn's cause of death is reported too. Accordingly, they meet – however awkwardly – the core requisites of the obituary art.

In assessing their credentials too, it should be noted that in the trough of obituary publication which followed World War II, the leading British broadsheets were publishing encapsulated reports of similar brevity under the heading of **Obituary**. If those qualified as such in the 1950s, then a similar admissibility could reasonably be applied for the product of the 1660s.

L'Estrange's publications were printed a little more than forty years after the appearance of the first newspapers in England. The history of early newspaper publication in general has rightly been called 'an elusive subject for study'<sup>11</sup> because

during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries a huge quantity of periodicals, occasional pamphlets and indeterminate publications composed a background against which it is sometimes difficult to identify the newspaper as a separate form....In spite of the existence of a complicated framework of official control, newsbooks seem to have appeared in quite large numbers during the first decades [of the 17<sup>th</sup> century], and this necessarily erratic output was given a substantial boost by the upheavals of the Civil War.<sup>12</sup>

(369)      *Num. 46.*

THE

# NEWES,

PUBLISHED

*For Satisfaction and Information*

OF THE

# PEOPLE.


*With PRIVILEGE.*

---

*Thursday, June 9. 1664.*

---

*Edinburgh, May 31.*

 His week affords little, but the sad news of the death of that great Minister of State, *William, Earle of Glencairn*, Lord High Chancellour of *Scotland*, a Person most Eminent, and well known in all his Majestyes Dominions, both for the Gallantry of his Spirit in those Noble Attempts against the Usurpers; as also for his sufferings during those times of Usurpation, and the many signal Services he hath performed in that high Station, wherein his Majesty most deservedly

Z z

**Figure 3.1** Early obituary. The year is 1664, the dateline 'Edinburgh, May 31': Roger L'Estrange's *Newes* printed one of the first recognisable obituaries. Its subject was the Earl of Glencairn, a loyal monarchist, who had 'dyled the 30<sup>th</sup> of the Instant of a Feavour in the 49<sup>th</sup> year of his Age'. (*Newes*, 9 June 1664)



The year 1621 had seen the distribution of seven small folio single-sheet editions of the *Corante, or, Newes from Italy, Germany, Hungarie, Spaine and France*, the 'earliest-dated English-printed newspaper of which copies survive'.<sup>13</sup> This was followed, the next year, by the first English newspaper in pamphlet form. It had no name, but is generally recognised as the *Weekely Newes* following the use of those two words in the title of the second issue. Because of Charles I's 'sensitivity to home news', its content was mainly a translation of material from European publications.<sup>14</sup> The obituary would have to wait, so it would seem, for L'Estrange's idiosyncratic stewardship.

He was to experience both official pleasure and disfavour. The censor-journalist was knighted by James II in 1685, but lost office three years later when the king went into exile. The man who could claim to be the first obituarist served two terms of imprisonment under the new regime and received, at his death in 1704, a hostile obituary: 'From the malice of L'Estrange the grave was no hiding place, and the house of mourning no sanctuary.'<sup>15</sup>

The new century saw the appearance of an eccentric monthly miscellany with a self-professed passion for death reporting. It has been said, in fact, that 'eccentric' is 'not a strong enough word' to describe the publisher, John Dunton, whose ventures 'became increasingly shrill and wild after the turn of the century'.<sup>16</sup> In January 1701 he issued the *Post-Angel*, promising his readers in the first number that a major part of each edition would be devoted to 'The Lives and Deaths of the most Eminent Persons that Died in that Month'.<sup>17</sup> His compact is neither as simple nor as true as it would appear, for subsequent material in the *Post-Angel* is coloured by Dunton's prurience, moralising, and inexactitude.

The third edition contained an extraordinary attack on perverse behaviour in churches and religious communities. It ran to more than four pages, and was inspired by the death of a clergyman named Jermain (or 'Jermaine', for the spelling is erratic), described as 'the late Clerk of St Dunstan's'.<sup>18</sup> Mr Jermain, said Dunton, had cut his throat with a razor after being charged with sodomy. The necrology section of the March 1701 *Post-Angel* argues that Jermain would not necessarily have been so distressed in former times. As evidence of that assertion, the editor pursues a prolonged condemnation of religious potentates who had condoned unnatural sexual practice, going as far back as 1103, when 'the Monks and Friers were always, in general, Buggers'.<sup>19</sup> The journal's displeasure is aimed also at a 15<sup>th</sup> century pope who 'granted a formal dispensation to the Cardinal St Lucia, to cool himself by sodomy [during] the Three hot months, June, July and August'.<sup>20</sup>

Roger L'Estrange is brought into the argument too, though in a more positive light, for ordering the prosecution of, respectively, 'a woman [who] proved to have had carnal copulation with a dog...[and] a man tryed for bugging a mare'.<sup>21</sup> With this penchant for colourful and digressive sermons, the *Post-Angel* has trouble establishing its authority as a legitimate source of obituaries. This delinquency is further demonstrated in June 1701 with the publication of what appears to be a long, comprehensive obituary of another cleric, Dr Anthony Horneck, a former canon of Westminster Abbey. The journal devotes more than six pages to a finely detailed account of his avocation, education, devotion to duty, and distinguished appointment. Towards the end, it states:

After some few Hours Groans, he expired January 31, at Eight a Clock that Evening, being then about the 56<sup>th</sup> Year of his Age. His Body was interred on February 4 in the Abbey Church of Westminster, with great Solemnity and a vast Number of Attendants.<sup>22</sup>

The biographical information is sufficiently extensive so that, *prima facie*, this narrative qualifies John Dunton as an early, possibly even the first, cultivator of the obituary in full flower. On this occasion, however, it is neither prurience nor digression but inexactitude which brings ultimate disqualification. Horneck's death was not, as one might infer, at 8pm on the night of the 31 January 1701, but at that time on that night in 1696.<sup>23</sup> The *Post-Angel* omits to tell readers that it is recounting events of five years before.

Dunton has been branded as belonging to the 'first generation of London hacks', a group which 'was a sorry lot, not so much because its members lacked talent as because they lacked focus and a clear sense of where...novelty and innovation might lead'.<sup>24</sup> At the *Post-Angel* he did print lists of deaths, thereby conferring through his journal the 'dignity on a name' divined by Fergusson,<sup>25</sup> but was unable to stay long enough at this publishing initiative to qualify as an obituarist. In June 1702, he had a personal announcement for his subscribers:

The Author of the Post-Angel, having carried on this journal for Eighteen Months, and being about to retire into the Countrey for his health, thinks fit to acquaint the World that the Post-Angel will hereafter be continued by a Society of Ingenious Gentlemen, Clergymen and others.<sup>26</sup>

Their ingenuity lasted just long enough for the journal to publish a legitimate, and lengthy, obituary of the Countess of Orford. It appeared in the final *Post-Angel*, of September 1702, and in tone was indicative of the anti-Catholic sentiment which had festered since the short rule of James II:

She was born of an honourable Family, which has given sufficient Testimony both of Religion and Loyalty, by supporting the reformation and suppressing the Tyranny of Rome....Her Funeral was preach'd by the Reverend Mr Barker at Cheyneis [ancestral home of the Russell family], Jan. 29 170½.<sup>27</sup>

Seven months had elapsed between death and publication. The piece, though, is demonstrably obituarial in manner and content; once more, a favourable comparison can be made with modern practice, for it is not uncommon to find Australian obituaries of today germinating for five or six months.

### **Change for the coffee house**

With the new century came the new newspapers, some published daily and read by the burgeoning coffee-house society. A contemporary writer has captured the mood of the times, where polemics and politics were fuelled by journalism and java:

he, that comes often, saves twopence a week in Gazettes, and has his news and his coffee for the same charge...[I]t is an exchange where haberdashers of political small-wares meet and mutually abuse each other and the public with bottomless stories and heedless notions; the rendezvous of idle pamphlets, and persons more idly employed to read them.<sup>28</sup>

For the newspaper obituary, this brought a marked shift in style; the emphasis now was on the authoritative recitation of fact rather than circumstantial dogma. The *Daily Journal* (1721–1737) was a leader in the new realism:

#### ***London, February 7 [1721]***

On Sunday Morning Died Tho' Vernon Esq., Knight of the Shire for the County of Worcester. On the same Evening between the Hours of 8 and 9 [died] the Right Honourable James Earl Stanhope, one of his majesty's principal Secretaries of State and formerly General of her late majesty's Forces in Spain...after an indisposition of a few hours, in which his Lordship was visited by Dr Mead...His Lordship hath left behind him issue, 2 sons and 3 daughters.<sup>29</sup>

The *Daily Journal* had the capacity to offer a light touch in its necrology too, as exemplified in the story of John Smith, more commonly known as ‘half-hang’d Smith’.<sup>30</sup> He died in Newgate Prison after escaping the gallows on three occasions – twice on legal technicalities and once, more spectacularly, while literally strung up:

he was formerly hang’d seven minutes and a half at Tyburn, when a Reprieve came down from the late Queen and he was cut down....’Tis said the Gallows will go into Mourning...on this occasion.<sup>31</sup>

By the middle of 1722, *Daily Journal* obituaries were rich in biographical detail and authoritative in tone. The death, and the life, of the Duke of Marlborough was accorded nearly 600 words:

***London, June 18 [1722]***

On Saturday morning about four died John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, at the Lodge near Windsor, aged 72. He was born at Ash in the County of Devon. He came first to Court by Favour of the Duke of York, and inclining to a Martial Life he went to Tangier, and in 1673 to France with the Duke of Monmouth....

In 1704 he routed the French and Bavarian Forces at Schellenbergh, and afterwards defeated them at Hockstet, was made Prince of the Empire, and on his return had the Manor of Woodstock settled on him and his heirs.... We hear that his Grace has...ordered that his Corpse should be deposited in the Chapel at Blenheim House, and that the Body of his Son, the Marquis of Blandford, who lies interr’d at King’s College, Cambridge, should be taken up and interr’d with him.<sup>32</sup>

The obituary could finally claim, after nearly sixty years’ existence, to have become a first draft of history.

***The Gentleman’s Magazine: distinction and influence***

The late 20<sup>th</sup> century revival of the obituary owes much, as Chapter Five will report, to the launch in 1986 of a new London broadsheet, the *Independent*. James Fergusson, an antiquarian bookseller, was appointed obituaries editor. He played a significant role in changing British obituary practice, and – in an elegant monograph on the evolution of the art – has recognised a contribution of similar magnitude, made 200 years earlier, by John Nichols and the *Gentleman’s Magazine*. Nichols, says Fergusson, ‘established a standard of necrology for modern times’.<sup>33</sup>

Nichols inherited the magazine's commitment to death reporting from its founder, Edward Cave, whose first issue in January 1731 recorded the demise of fifty-five citizens. Their number included William Taverner ('son of Mr Jer. Taverner, face-painter, remarkably honest in his Business'), Will Whorwood ('Alphabet keeper to the Foreign Post Office'), Robert Bristow, aged 105 ('lost his Hearing but had his Sight and other Senses to the last'), Mr Trunket ('a Perfumer...well known at Newmarket'), and Mr Williams ('a celebrated Tragedian, belonging to the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane').<sup>34</sup>

That editorial emphasis blossomed under Nichols's direction. By August 1780 he had started a section entitled 'Obituary of considerable persons',<sup>35</sup> and by the following April had extended that heading to 'Obituary of considerable persons with biographical anecdotes'.<sup>36</sup> The use of the term **obituary** and the subsequent emphasis on **biographical anecdotes** were significant events in the refining of the practice. Rich nuggets of human mishap and character sketch became the fashion, much as are found in quality broadsheets of today:

Mr Benj. Warwick, farmer of Kit's End, near Barnet. His death was occasioned by his gun going off at half-cock...the third accident of the kind that happened this summer.<sup>37</sup>

At Peterborough, Mrs Amey Forster...[n]otwithstanding she had the misfortune to be deaf from her cradle, she had learned to read, to write perfectly well, and to converse familiarly with her acquaintance.<sup>38</sup>

Edward, son of Adm. Rowley...[who] went to see a lady in Jermyn Street, London, in whose family was kept a little dog, which being interrupted by the child while it was feeding, flew at him, and bit his lip....A few days after...he was seized with the hydrophobia and died within 24 hours.<sup>39</sup>

Rev. Mr Withers...[whose] death was occasioned by too violent an effort at a game of fives...[when] he imprudently sat without his coat and waistcoat during a shower of rain.<sup>40</sup>

At Spofforth, near Knaresborough, aged 94, John Metcalf, commonly called Blind Jack...the first person who set up a wheel carriage for the conveyance of company to and from the places of public resort in the neighbourhood...[He] often served as a guide in intricate roads over the frost during the night, or when the tracks were covered with snow.<sup>41</sup>

On Wimbledon Common, killed in a duel, Geo. Payne...[T]he cause of this disgraceful and fatal duel is stated in the public prints to have been an attachment to a young lady who was a visitor in the family.<sup>42</sup>

The *Gentleman's Magazine* has been acknowledged as 'without question, the most distinguished and influential periodical publication in English in the eighteenth century'.<sup>43</sup> In terms of the obituary's evolution, that combination of distinction and influence was to be reflected in the content of the great daily newspapers which emerged with the printing presses of the industrial revolution.

### ***The Times: plagiarism, gossip and majestic judgment***

The oldest of the surviving London daily newspapers is the *Times*. It began, as the *Daily Universal Register*, on 1 January 1785, and – from the second issue – was reporting deaths. Among those accounts, many of which were 'simply plagiarised...from another paper if it did not have one of its own',<sup>44</sup> was the story of a fag who died at 'a great public school...at the hands of a senior boy'.<sup>45</sup> Gossip, often with a touch of ribaldry, flavoured the columns in those early editions. The fifth, for example, reported the marriage in Cumberland of Jeremiah Rule, 19, and Hannah Hodgson, 61:

In the evening, several of the relations of her former husbands went to the apartments of the new married couple to pay their respects to their young grandfather. A great number of neighbours also appeared on the occasion, to congratulate him on the prudent choice he had made, loudly applauding that philosophic disposition which could prefer the ripened charms of threescore (which cannot possibly suffer by change) to the blooming beauties of youth, which are known to be as fading as any flowers in the wide field of nature.<sup>46</sup>

A similar mood permeated the statement announcing a change of name, to the *Times* or *Daily Universal Register*, on 1 January 1788. Ordering the newspaper under its original name at a coffee house, with the request 'Boy – bring me the *Register*',<sup>47</sup> had apparently been a hazardous affair. The waiter was likely to respond by discreetly slipping 'into the politician's hand *Harris's Register of Ladies* [a guide to the brothels of London]'.<sup>48</sup> In March that year it became simply the *Times*, but the necrology continued to be affected by strains of whimsical clubmanship. Reports were brief, their inclusion in the *Times* often governed by the sensational or unusual

circumstances of the death or by the prominence of the individual concerned. Even the portraitist Sir Joshua Reynolds, president of the Royal Academy, was accorded just twenty lines at his death in 1792.<sup>49</sup>

The penchant for plagiarism undermined the newspaper's authority. In one of the more blatant instances, the *Times* reprinted a report which had originally been published by an American newspaper on 26 September 1812. It appeared in the *Times* just over a month later, on 29 October, with a ludicrous reference to the funeral 'tomorrow afternoon [i.e. 27 September]':

**Mr Cooke** – Died this morning, at six o'clock, the celebrated tragedian, George Frederick Cooke, Esq. He had just completed his 57<sup>th</sup> year. His friends and acquaintances are requested, without further invitation, to attend his funeral, from the Mechanics' Hall, tomorrow afternoon precisely at half-past four o'clock (*New York Commercial Advertiser*, Saturday Sept. 26).<sup>50</sup>

Gradually, though, a style more in keeping with the example set by the *Gentleman's Magazine* became apparent. The *Times* printed a dignified and extensive obituary of the Marquis of Londonderry,<sup>51</sup> a warm appraisal of the actor John Emery (whose 'impersonation of Yorkshire characters...was inimitable'),<sup>52</sup> and an intelligent study of the philosopher Jeremy Bentham.<sup>53</sup> The Bentham piece was followed by an account of his body's public dissection:

It was a part of the will of the late Mr Bentham that his body should be devoted to the purpose of improving the science of anatomy....He looked calm and serene, presenting, as Dr Southwood Smith observed, an appearance that might reconcile those who have the most horror...[of] the aspect of death.<sup>54</sup>

The *Times* had begun its own advance to distinguished practice of the obituary. Such was the momentum that, in 1832, Sir Walter Scott (who 'created a new world of fiction, founded on the spirit of history rather than its letter')<sup>55</sup> was accorded two obituaries and a substantial slice of the editorial column's majesty. By the middle of the following century, the *Times* would achieve, over several successive decades, unrivalled primacy in obituary practice. In the Victorian age, however, it confronted some considerable competition.

## Rivalry, intrusion, and the art of dying well

London in the 1850s had eleven daily newspapers – and a price war. The *Daily Telegraph* began life on 29 June 1855 with a cover price of twopence; the *Times* sold at sevenpence and several others, including the *Morning Post* and the *Daily News*, at fivepence. Within three months, the *Telegraph* went even lower; it became London's first penny daily and, by 1877, its circulation was 'the largest in the world, close on a quarter of a million copies'.<sup>56</sup>

From the start, it displayed strength in military obituary (a property at which the *Telegraph* is seen as pre-eminent today), inspired perhaps by the casualty lists from the Crimean War. The first edition contained a tribute to Brigadier-General Estcourt, whose death 'after a short illness' followed his service at the Battles of Alma, Balaklava, and Inkerman, and the siege of Sebastopol.<sup>57</sup> Three days later, its editorial column lamented the death of the Commander-in-Chief of the Army in the Crimea, Lord Raglan, describing him as

[a] courteous and accomplished gentleman...who ought to have been left to pass the winter of his days in comparative tranquillity and comfort at home rather [*sic*] to face the horrors of a Russian winter...a cruel sacrifice of a gallant spirit.<sup>58</sup>

The *Telegraph's* capacity for recording a sophisticated appraisal of a life emerged in its obituary of 'the father of the House of Commons, the venerable Sir Charles Burrell', who had died 'in his 88<sup>th</sup> year'.<sup>59</sup> Importantly, for the study of obituary practice, it contained – along with a full acknowledgment of political achievements – a charming touch of anecdote concerning the old man's declining years:

In 1860 he brought in a singular bill to forbid servant girls to risk their lives by sitting outside window sills to clean windows, but the bill was courteously rejected.<sup>60</sup>

The same measure of enthusiasm for publishing obituaries was also proclaimed by the *Morning Post* (which was to be absorbed by the *Telegraph* shortly before World War II). The *Post* was founded in 1772 by a group that included, as editor, the Reverend Henry Bate. Enjoying the soubriquet 'The Fighting Parson', Bate was 'reckless with his libels, which led to imprisonment, and was a frequent duellist'.<sup>61</sup> Though his successors proved to be more cautious in personal habit, the *Post* could be uninhibited when the opportunity for deathbed pathos arose. It was all part of the



tradition of *ars bene moriendi* (the art of dying well), so beloved of moralist writers in the full pomp of Victoriana. One such occasion was afforded by death of Archbishop Archibald Tait (Archbishop of Canterbury 1868–1882). Four columns were devoted to a tale of exemplary surrender of the spirit:

On the Friday, when he was supposed to be dying, he asked what the day of the month was and, being told, expressed himself certain he should die on the anniversary he had always kept of Mrs Tait's death, and spoke of the joyful meeting with his deceased wife.<sup>62</sup>

This obituary also discloses another Victorian predilection: the explicit – and, by today's standards, intrusive – deathbed scene description:

About eleven o'clock on Friday night his Grace spoke his last words, which were 'It's coming, it's coming,' referring to an attack of spasms which then seized him....After this attack he did not speak, although he seemed to be aware of what was passing at intervals until the end. At seven o'clock [on the anniversary of his wife's death] the symptoms of immediate death appeared, and...he passed away. The body is slightly emaciated.<sup>63</sup>

The *Post* had also told its readers how the dying cleric had tried to write a final message to the Queen herself. He 'was raised in his bed' for that purpose, but 'nothing but the signature could be read'.<sup>64</sup> The *Telegraph* indulged the notion of *ars bene moriendi* too, notably at the death of John Maguire, a former editor of the *Cork Examiner* and four times Mayor of Cork:

Fortified by the rites of that Church of which he was so eloquent and earnest a defender, he departed this life at eight o'clock on Friday evening, in presence [*sic*] of his wife and daughter, at the age of 57 years. We presume to obtrude no ill-timed consolation for grief which must be sacred, but we feel that it must soothe the sorrow of bereaved survivors and the sadness of innumerable friends to know that his last hours were without pain, and his death, in truth, a Christian euthanasia.<sup>65</sup>

### **The Martineau legacy**

Obituaries of more secular aspect, and of less didactic address, appeared in the newspaper founded by Charles Dickens, the *Daily News*. Its relevance to this study, with regard to the evolution of style, is found in particular in the contributions by Harriet Martineau, an essayist and journalist who achieved some relief from her persistent ill-health through mesmerism.<sup>66</sup> She recovered sufficiently to write a series

of dispassionate, often forthright, obituaries on leading figures of the day, thereby anticipating ‘by almost fifty years the great debate about biography which attended the publication of Lytton Strachey’s [similarly candid] *Eminent Victorians* in 1918’.<sup>67</sup> One of her more astringent judgments occurred in the story she told of Byron’s widow, the former Annabella Milbanke:

He [Byron] spent the utmost shilling of her property that the law gave him while he lived; and he left away from her every shilling that he could deprive her of by his will.<sup>68</sup>

A selection of Martineau’s *Daily News* obituaries was published in anthology form. The collection offers abundant evidence of her talent for the anecdote, and her legacy to obituary development in that respect. Her 1855 obituary of Charlotte Brontë is, by way of example, a classic exercise in capturing life rather than death:

The account of the school in *Jane Eyre* is only too true....She was the smallest of women, and it was that school which stunted her growth...[and] being short-sighted to excess, she wrote in little square paper books, held close to her eyes, and (the first copy) in pencil. On she went, writing incessantly for three weeks; by which time she had carried her heroine away from Thornfield, and was herself in a fever.<sup>69</sup>

This character portrait was drawn from life, for Brontë had stayed at Martineau’s house, at Ambleside in the Lake District (the Wordsworths were neighbours). In a letter to her sister Emily from Ambleside, Brontë expressed admiration of Martineau for ‘the manner in which she combines the highest mental culture with the nicest discharge of feminine duties’.<sup>70</sup>

### ***The Manchester Guardian: death over life***

Of the four British broadsheets selected for contemporary analysis in Chapters Five and Six of this thesis, the *Guardian* was the last to join the obituary publication revival of the 1980s. It took two years to respond to the phenomenon generated by both the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Independent*. In its initial incarnation, as the *Manchester Guardian*, it showed a similar reluctance to pursue the emerging practice of obituary. The *Guardian* began life in 1821, campaigning for political reform at a time when Old Sarum, a notorious ‘rotten borough’,<sup>71</sup> had two members of parliament representing its eleven voters and when Manchester had a population of 150,000 but no MPs.<sup>72</sup>

For the first half-century of its publication history, the *Guardian* favoured the more sensational characteristics of necrology as opposed to the stately lament progressively adopted by other serious newspapers of the day. It also pursued, with some vigour and for several decades, an unrestrained policy of describing lurid images, as illustrated in this 1832 account of a soldier's suicide in Salford:

The unhappy man had loaded his musket with double-cartridge and ball, placed the muzzle to his mouth and, setting the butt end of the piece on the ground, pulled the trigger with his toes. All the upper portion of the skull was blown off, and his brains bespattered the ceiling.<sup>73</sup>

The *Guardian* continued to place an emphasis on the circumstances of death instead of pursuing the growing fashion elsewhere of recounting life by biographical sketch and anecdote. In 1862, Joseph Guy, solicitor to the Manchester, Sheffield and Lincolnshire Railway, 'became suddenly pallid' while awaiting the departure of the Gainsborough-to-Manchester train.<sup>74</sup> His death, 'before a surgeon arrived', was reported with a full description of time, place and context, but Guy's professional history was accorded just three lines.<sup>75</sup>

In the same vein of neglecting obituary, the *Guardian* devoted another miserable three lines to the death of Dr William Turner, who died in office after twenty-one years as Roman Catholic Bishop of Salford.<sup>76</sup> The next edition carried twenty-five lines on his lying-in-state, with an attempt to convey the atmosphere and 'mournfulness of the occasion' within St John's Cathedral.<sup>77</sup> No attempt appears to have been made to record or appraise his life and times.

By this stage in the practice of daily journalism, the *Times* had long taken a markedly different approach, dedicating generous swathes of its pages to grandiloquent obituary. The death in 1842 of Lord Hill, after a distinguished military career, prompted more than two columns of accolade and anecdote, right down to the many wounds the old soldier had suffered in campaigns for the empire:

in the memorable Egyptian campaign...Colonel Hill received a wound on the right temple from a musket ball, the force of which was providentially averted by a strong brass binding in the front of his helmet. The blow was, however, severe and he was removed from the field of battle in a state of insensibility.<sup>78</sup>

Readers of the *Guardian* would have to wait another forty years before their paper followed, on a regular basis, this sort of necrology. The shift had become apparent by the early 1880s, and was demonstrated at the death of Professor John Draper, a Lancastrian who had won an international reputation as a professor of science at leading American colleges:

Between 1834 and 1874 not less than fifty memoirs were published from his pen...He was not only the first to take a portrait by the photographic process of Daguerre, but the first who succeeded in obtaining a photograph of the moon.<sup>79</sup>

In finally choosing to write about life, as well as about death, the *Guardian* had scented the obituary in full flower. By so doing, it could proclaim with newfound justification its status as a newspaper of historical record.

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## United States

### **Establishing obituary tradition in the American press**

Of the three comparative elements in this study – namely the relative values and techniques of obituary practice in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia – it is the American factor which displays the most sustained commitment to publication. Four major newspapers (in New York, Washington, Los Angeles, and Atlanta) have been selected for analysis, at specified stages of this thesis, as a prime means of discussing that history. While, at times, each has undergone a temporary decline in its obituary content, the genre itself has proved to be a constant in the broad acres of American journalism. The frontier experience of the New World, with its assertion that almost everyone ‘deserved some sort of meaning being given to their lives’<sup>80</sup> through a printed memorial, has held true. It is commonplace today to find newspapers in small-town America devoting two or three pages to what they call ‘news obituaries’,<sup>81</sup> and then supplementing these, and their revenue, with expansive paid obituary notices in the classified advertising columns. This phenomenon has its origins in the appearance of the first American colonial newspapers just at the time that necrology was securing a presence in British journalism. The fashion made a successful and immediate trans-Atlantic migration.

It was helped by the emergence of a colonial coffee-house clientele. The first of those home-grown American newspapers was entitled *Publick Occurrences Both Foreign and Domestick*, published on 25 September 1690 by Benjamin Harris, an exile who had settled in Boston as a bookseller and proprietor of the London Coffee House.<sup>82</sup> He had fled from England four years earlier to escape prosecution for publishing pamphlets deemed offensive to the government of the day. His American initiative was similarly troubled. *Publick Occurrences* was immediately banned after the appearance of its solitary issue because it contained ‘sundry doubtful and uncertain reports’.<sup>83</sup> One of those reports, however, which gives the appearance of being entirely free of doubt is that of a suicide at Watertown, Massachusetts of an unnamed ‘old man...of a somewhat Silent and Morose Temper’ following the death of his wife.<sup>84</sup> It asserts that ‘though he had very careful friends to look after him’, he escaped from that care one evening ‘when The Devil took advantage of his Melancholy’ and hanged himself in a cow-house.<sup>85</sup>

This editorial interest in necrology surfaced again fourteen years later when a second – and, this time, successful – attempt was made to publish a newspaper in America. John Campbell, postmaster of Boston, issued on 24 April 1704 his *Boston News-Letter*. It was to survive for seventy-two years, eighteen of them under Campbell’s editorship.<sup>86</sup>

Until 1719, it was the only colonial newspaper, the unhappy memory of Harris’s *Publick Occurrences* having ‘warned away any [other] journalistic promoters during this interim’.<sup>87</sup> The first edition of Campbell’s *Boston News-Letter* contained a death notice (of a clergyman, the Reverend Mr Lockyer), followed shortly afterwards by a June 1704 edition with an account decidedly obituarial in style:

Medford, May 30 – Sabbath day last about noon, after Forenoon’s Exercise, Mrs Jane Treat, Grand Daughter to Deputy Gouverneur Treat of Connecticut, Sitting in her Chair...with the Bible in her hand as she was Reading, which was her delight, was struck Dead by a terrible flash of lightning...She was a Person of real Piety, and a Pattern of Patience, Modesty, and Sobriety.<sup>88</sup>

The pattern of obituaries in these early colonial newspapers continued to favour the hagiographic. The first to appear outside Boston was the *American Weekly Mercury*, published from 22 December 1719 by the Philadelphia postmaster, Andrew

Bradford.<sup>89</sup> Discovery of the first obituary in this periodical has been compromised by the loss of early editions. By 1721, however, it is apparent that the *Mercury* was practising the obituary art in a ‘well-developed and quite descriptive’ manner:

The Rev. Evan Evans...having on Sunday the 8<sup>th</sup> Inst. [October 1721] Read Prayers and Preached in our Church in the Morning, was taken with the Apoplectic Fit, as he was at the same Devotion in the Afternoon. He sank down immediately in the Desk, and was thence carried to his Lodging, where he remained speechless until Wednesday Morning about Two o’clock, at which time he breathed his last amongst us....[H]is soul, we doubt not, is joining in Hallelujahs with the Saints above.<sup>90</sup>

In terms of editorial content, therefore, these pioneering American obituaries offer a satisfactory degree of information to the reader. It is much the same in that respect as the necrology encountered in London’s *Daily Journal* of 1721. Where the two models differ is in the temptation to moralise. The *Journal* eschewed it; Boston’s *News-Letter* and Philadelphia’s *Mercury* wallowed in it. That same year, however, saw the blowing of ‘a fresh breeze in the stale journalistic atmosphere of Boston’ with the launch of James Franklin’s vigorous *New England Courant*.<sup>91</sup> Significantly, for subsequent obituary development, it offered ‘personality sketches [which] appealed to local interests’.<sup>92</sup> Benjamin Franklin, apprenticed to brother James and later to become a scientist and statesman of lasting repute, took this unencumbered style of journalism with him when he moved to Philadelphia. By 1729 he had introduced, in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, obituary practice free of cant. Instead of, for example, indulging in religious rhetoric on the death of a leading citizen, he simply depicted the physician Edward Owen as ‘eminent and useful’ and, when the colony’s governor died, Franklin devoted a ‘full one-and-a-half columns on [his] character, his family, and even details of his funeral’.<sup>93</sup>

The Franklin ‘breeze’ became a wind of change. A bolder model of journalism, with a ‘perceived...demand’ for obituaries, emerged in the newspapers of New York, Virginia and South Carolina.<sup>94</sup> This shift became even more apparent as the colonies moved towards independence. By 1775, the *Virginia Gazette*’s obituary style was characterised by biographical content spiced with republican sentiment. Accordingly, the death of attorney-general Peyton Randolph inspired expressions of patriotism rather than religiosity:

Descended from an ancient and respectable family, he received a liberal and polite education at William and Mary College [Williamsburg]. Removing from thence to the Inner Temple, he was advanced to the degree of barrister-at-law and appointed attorney-general of Virginia....When the measures of the British ministry compelled the American colonies to unite their councils in General Congress, he was...unanimously elected their president. While he was attending a third time in that great council, a sudden stroke of the palsy deprived America of a firm patriot, his country of a wise and faithful senator, his acquaintance of a valuable friend, his family of a most affectionate husband and kindest master, upon the 22<sup>nd</sup> day of October, in his 54<sup>th</sup> year of his age.<sup>95</sup>

Britain recognised the independence of the thirteen colonies in the Treaty of Paris in 1783, when there were just thirty-five newspapers in America. After independence, newspapers in the new Union multiplied at a remarkable rate, so that fifty years later there were 1,200 weeklies and dailies.<sup>96</sup>

The spirit of the War of the Revolution proved to be an enduring presence, to the extent that ‘service to country during the war...was mentioned more frequently even than religious affiliation’ in the obituaries of the day.<sup>97</sup> This tribute, published in the *National Intelligencer*, typifies the editorial mood:

***Another Revolutionary Patriot Gone!***

Lately, at Camden, S.C., Col. John Chestnut, in the 78<sup>th</sup> year of his age. This venerable citizen was distinguished by his zeal and patriotism in the service of his country throughout the revolutionary war, and contributed not a little to the success of the eventful struggle for American Independence.<sup>98</sup>

Another war – that between the Union and Confederate states – was to exert a further effect on obituary content; that finding will be reported shortly. First, however, the history of American journalism demands some reflection on the pre-war emergence of the *New York Times*, a newspaper which used the term **obituaries** with prominence in its first edition.

**Obituaries for sitting room and coffee house**

It began as the *New-York Daily Times* on 18 September 1851 with an assurance of ‘an abundance of means’, a commitment to ‘speak for itself’ on political, social, moral and religious questions of the day, and the promise of becoming ‘at once the best and the cheapest newspaper in the United States’.<sup>99</sup> Those were the words of the founder,

Henry J. Raymond, a politician-journalist who had learnt his craft as chief assistant to Horace Greeley, publisher of the *New Yorker* and the *New York Tribune*. Raymond pitched his *Daily Times*, selling for just one cent, as a family newspaper. In so doing, he deliberately distanced his editorial policy from that adopted by its British namesake:

The London *Times* is emphatically a paper for men; a paper for coffee-house and club-room reading....This absence of domestic qualities is a defect in the great paper; a defect scarcely appreciated in England, but which would prove a serious objection to it here. American women read newspapers as much as their liege lords. The paper [*Daily Times*] must accommodate itself to this fact...[and] speak to the parlor and sitting room, as well as to the office and the shop.<sup>100</sup>

The obituary was clearly an important ingredient in that policy. Under a page-two headline **Recent Deaths**, the *Daily Times* said that ‘adequate obituaries have not yet been given’ of ‘several distinguished gentlemen in various parts of the country’.<sup>101</sup> It then proceeded to put right this omission by devoting just under an entire column to five biographical sketches and, in the instance of an early Illinois settler, a three-line death notice. Though the tone was measured and the sentiment conservative, the column clearly tried to speak to parlour and sitting room with the subject of its first obituary. It appraised the life of Thomas H. Gallaudet, ‘well known as the pioneer of deaf-mute instruction in this country’, and, in so doing, offered an impressive element of anecdote:

In the autumn of 1807, a child of Dr Mason F. Cogswell, then residing in the city of Hartford, became, through the effects of a malignant fever, first deaf and then dumb. Mr Gallaudet, a young man of talents, education and benevolence, interested himself in the case of this unfortunate child and...attempted to converse with and instruct her. His efforts were rewarded with partial success and, through the exertions of Dr Cogswell, Mr Gallaudet was commissioned to visit Europe for the purpose of qualifying himself to become a teacher of the Deaf and Dumb in this country.<sup>102</sup>

American predilection for martial hyperbole resurfaced, though, a few days later at the death of a Revolution veteran. To be fair to the *New-York Daily Times*, this obituary was reprinted from the *Plain Dealer*, published in Cleveland, Ohio. Perhaps it was just too hard to edit. The first sentence is 157 words long, punctuated by a series of parenthetical dashes and increasingly excited in delivery:



when the black cloud of doubt and terror hung over his native land – his young heart warm with the love of liberty, and his spirit moved with the courage of a hero...he took upon him the habits and duties of a soldier for six months; at the expiration of which he was discharged without pay, and 200 miles from home, and not one cent in his pocket, nor any passport or dependence for getting home, save only his military equipage; which, however, readily gave him a hearty welcome with the people, who cheerfully ministered to the wants of this youthful soldier – thus destitute – returning from the timely services of his oppressed country.<sup>103</sup>

By the 1860s, when the masthead had gained a **The** and dropped the **Daily**, Henry Raymond's newspaper was exercising its obituary practice with sustained enthusiasm. Raymond himself became chairman of the Republican National Committee, directing the campaign that resulted in Abraham Lincoln's re-election. He and his newspaper, therefore, were intimately involved in the first draft of history which followed the president's assassination. The *New-York Times* itself reacted with a speed which newspapers today would find difficult to match. It splashed, right across its front page, a series of despatches from Washington. The most prominent amongst these was the War Department's 1.30am cable, which the *Times* presented – in an extreme example of the design of the day – under eight decks of headlines (Figure 3.2). The tributes and laments over succeeding editions were led by an editorial massive in length and obituarial character:

The heart of this nation was stirred yesterday as it has never been stirred before....That a man so gentle, so kind, so free from every particle of malice or unkindness, every act of whose life has been so marked by benevolence and goodwill, should become the victim of a cold-blooded assassination, shocked the public heart beyond expression...[H]is plain, simple common sense, conspicuous in everything he did or said...had won for him a sold and immovable hold upon the regard and confidence even of his political opponents.<sup>104</sup>

Five years after the assassination of Lincoln – five years of peace, following the end of the Civil War – the obituaries of the *New York Times* were showing an inclination to refrain from sentimentality and religious rhetoric. According to Hume's *Obituaries in American Culture*, the pursuit of domestic peace had brought with it a change in the public celebration of death:

It seems that...people were weary of romanticising the passing of their citizens.... Emerging medical science and funeral practitioners may have also eased this cultural change.<sup>105</sup>

Americans, as that finding demonstrates, were distancing themselves from the immediate impact of death. Medical practitioners and nurses, hospitals and funeral parlours were also – to an increasing extent – intervening in the experience. It is possible, therefore, that obituary expression began moving towards a more clinical form too.

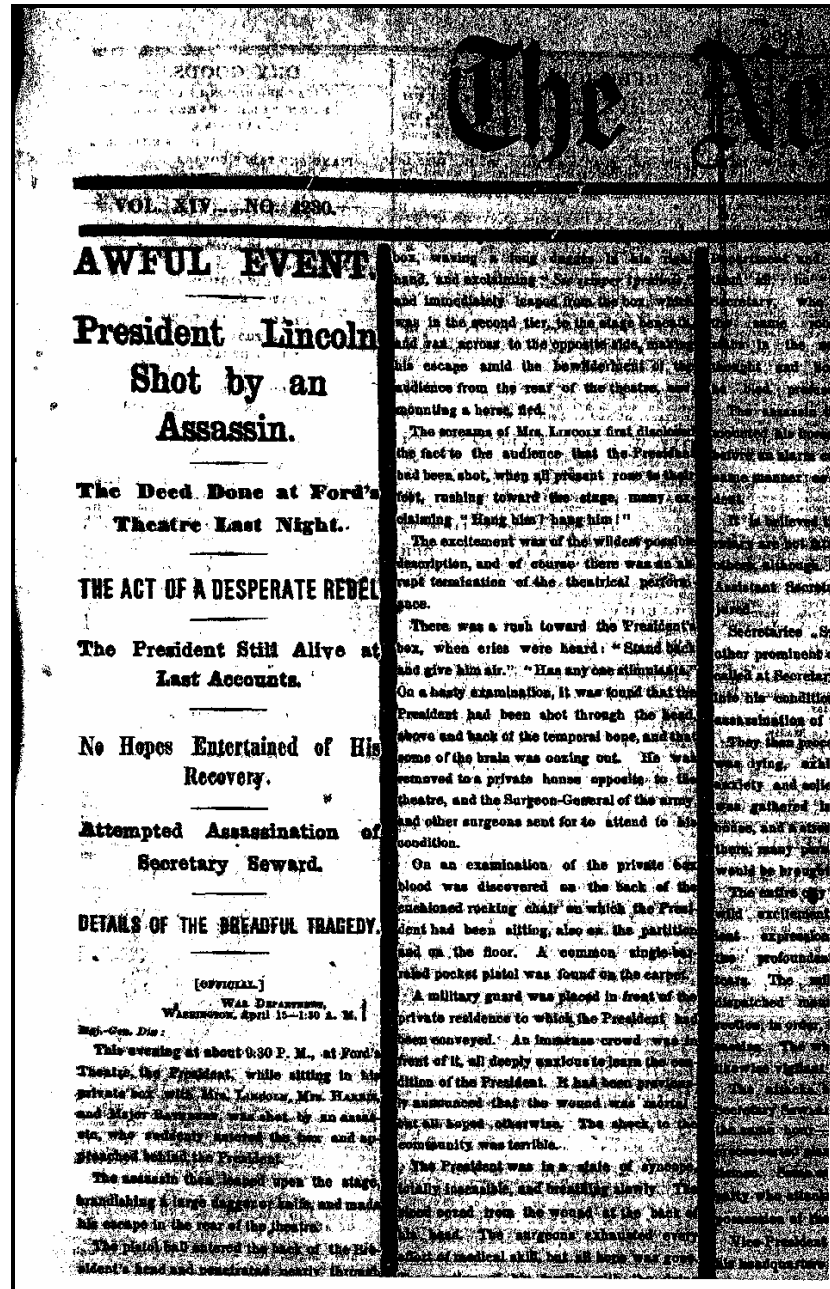


Figure 3.2 Lincoln assassinated. President Lincoln was shot at 9.30pm on 14 April 1865 in Ford's Theatre, Washington. In the morning, the *New-York Times* carried a detailed report under multiple headlines. Its obituary, in a subsequent edition, described him as 'a man so gentle, so kind, so free from every particle of malice or unkindness'. (*New-York Times*, 15 April 1865)

## **Atlanta, Washington and Los Angeles**

In the South, when a new Atlanta rose from the ruin of the Civil War, a newspaper soon followed. The *Constitution*, launched on 16 January 1868, was to become a powerful publishing presence in the region, ‘sharing southern leadership with...[the] *Louisville Courier-Journal*’ and winning a reputation for spending ‘lavishly to get all the news coverage possible in every field from politics to baseball’.<sup>106</sup> But that was all some time ahead, in the 1880s, when Henry W. Grady was appointed as managing editor. The early years of the *Constitution*, certainly on the evidence of its obituary style, suggest a quaintness of manner and a folksiness of writing. Georgia B. McCleskey ‘in all departments...illustrated the religion which was the ornament of her life’.<sup>107</sup> Allen W. Turner, a former member of the state legislature, had shown such exemplary kindness to the poor that ‘when the messenger came, it closed a life of honor and usefulness’.<sup>108</sup>

In addition, the *Constitution*’s initial necrology relied to a significant extent on a mix of the graphic (with the tale of young woman, driving a buggy, who was hit so violently by a train that ‘along the track for twenty-five yards or more lay the remains’)<sup>109</sup> and the bizarre (another young woman died after brushing her teeth with a twig ‘in which a locust had deposited its eggs’).<sup>110</sup> A quest for the first legitimate obituary is compromised by two factors: the 16 January 1868 edition of the *Constitution* is missing from the microfilm collection and the second is badly mutilated.<sup>111</sup> At best, therefore, it can be stated with reasonable confidence that the first obituary, appearing in the 72<sup>nd</sup> edition, on 7 September 1868, was this reprint from a rural newspaper:

### ***Death of the oldest man in Georgia***

There died yesterday in Vineville perhaps the oldest man in Georgia, if not in the United States. His name was Sambo Lamar. He was born in 1752 and was, therefore, 116 years old at the time of his death. He was born in Africa, was brought to Georgia when quite a boy by a slave vessel, and has been in the Lamar family ever since. He always spoke the English language with his native African accent. It was difficult for those unaccustomed to hear him talk to understand some of his sentences. He was a kind and obedient servant in his day and time, and in his old age he was taken good care of by his former owners. He passed away peacefully and we hope he now rests in peace after his long journey through life. – *Macon Journal and Messenger*<sup>112</sup>

There is a touch of irony in the fact that the subject was a slave. A hundred years later, in the 1960s, Atlanta's morning newspaper would be running a separate classified advertising section headed **Colored Obituaries**.

In the national capital, the *Washington Post* made an inauspicious start to its record of necrology with a cryptic article in its first edition, on 6 December 1877. The *Post* reported, with intermittent injections of obituary style, the imminent death of newspaper editor Samuel Bowles. It assumed, however, extensive knowledge on the part of the reader, failing to include any specific information about Bowles's appointment or status:

He conversed at some length with a subordinate on the political situation...and he has repeatedly dictated paragraphs, and even editorials, for his paper during the whole period....His physicians, on examination, pronounced that he had suffered an attack of serious apoplexy....Like Charles II, he felt and expressed ineffable disgust at being such an unconscionable long time a'dying, and welcomed any indication of the approaching end.<sup>113</sup>

That little incident demonstrates the prevailing habit, particularly in a government town, of writing for the *cognoscenti*. It also points to the perceived role, at that time, of the news magazines – those magnificently illustrated, eminently readable products of 19<sup>th</sup> century journalism. Samuel Bowles was editor of the *Springfield Republican*, an influential Massachusetts newspaper, and held high office in the Republican Party. Readers of Washington's new newspaper were expected to know that. When he died, six weeks later, it was the news magazine *Harper's Weekly* which published an obituary generous in tone and length, and illustrated with a portrait of its subject:

The death of Samuel Bowles, who breathed his last on the evening of January 16, has deprived American journalism of one of its most noteworthy representatives. The *Springfield Republican*, of which he was the editor, has for many years exercised a national influence in politics...[and] is regarded as a power in the land by the politicians of all parties.<sup>114</sup>

Washington's morning newspaper appeared content, for some years, to allow the news magazines their dominance in this field. Its obituaries continued to be comparatively brief and, often, to display that notorious weakness of the art in newspapers of the period – excessive concentration on the circumstances of death. Such was the case in the 1882 obituary-cum-death-report of an American emissary, General Judson Kilpatrick, 'late United States Minister at Santiago de Chile':

For five months prior to his death, Gen. Kilpatrick had suffered intensely from Bright's disease....In his responsible position, this preyed heavily on his mind...[and] on the very day of his death he endeavoured to dictate to an amanuensis some dispatches to the State Department, but was forced through sheer weakness to desist.<sup>115</sup>

By the early 1890s, the *Post* was demonstrating a much greater predilection for obituary, especially when the subject happened to be a Washington resident. This policy has survived ever since; the obituaries section of the *Post* today, in selection and style, has a localised air (as Chapter Seven demonstrates). In one respect, though, it has changed. There is no employment of the morbid metaphor, as was still on occasions the case in 1892:

George G. Cornwell, the well-known grocer, died suddenly yesterday morning at his residence, 1418 Pennsylvania Avenue....Though somewhat advanced in years, his wonderful energy and mental and physical vigor never for a moment forsook him, and when the summons came the dread messenger found him still at the helm, accomplished in the habitudes of occupation.<sup>116</sup>

On the west coast, the *Los Angeles Daily Times* (as it was first entitled) began its obituary publishing history in 1881 with a deference to its readers' assumed knowledge almost identical to that initially practised by the *Post*. The use of sanctimonious metaphor offered some similarity too. Under the heading 'The Spirit of Miss Spence Passes to a Better Home', the paper reported the death of a woman – apparently young – who had been a member of a family so well known that there was no reference to her parents' names and address:

Yesterday morning at ten minutes past eight o'clock the summons came which called from earthly friends the spirit of Miss Nellie Spence. For a year or two past, her health had been quite poor...[but] up to last Friday week she went out daily, riding and driving, and on that day in company with a party of friends took a long drive about the city. It was her last drive, and in little more than one week her friends are called to mourn her departure. In her death Los Angeles loses one of its brightest and best characters.<sup>117</sup>

The unnamed parents were said to 'have the sympathy of the entire city', as their daughter's death had occurred less than six months after the loss of their son, Peter, 'in the Arizona desert'.<sup>118</sup> That somewhat inadequate obituary appeared in the second edition of the newspaper, in December 1881. By the middle of 1882, the *Times* was

practising the art with more success. Although it had not dedicated a defined section of the newspaper to obituaries, they were appearing with some regularity and prominence in the general news pages.

The death of Manuel M. Corella, a Mexican consul with strong Californian connections, was accorded nearly half a column. His education at Berkeley, diplomatic postings, marriage to the daughter of an American judge, and hopes of 'seeing his native land take a leading place among the nations of the earth' were all addressed in a rational and literate manner in the text. Yet the obituary also showed that a fascination with the act of death itself had not entirely been discarded by American journalism of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century:

he felt weak, as he had a rather severe attack of dysentery during the day. He undressed and lay down on his bed and entered into a pleasant conversation with his friends...[then suddenly] threw up his hands, pressed his forehead, and said, 'It cannot be, it cannot be,' and almost immediately expired.<sup>119</sup>

Lingering though some of the penny-a-liner journealese might have been, and intrusive as its content might often appear, the presence of newspaper obituaries from New York to Washington to Atlanta to Los Angeles assumed impressive proportions. The ephemeral necrology of the exiled and much-prosecuted Harris, the pious affectation of Campbell, and the determined innovation of Benjamin Franklin had been harnessed to considerable effect by the second half of the century.

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## Australia

### **Transported for life: obituary in the Australian colonies**

'Big Sam', a sergeant of the 93<sup>rd</sup> Regiment, was 'six feet ten inches in height, four feet round the chest...and always disliked being stared at'.<sup>120</sup> He repeatedly refused to make celebrity appearances despite 'several considerable offers', breaking that resolve only once when, by royal command, he played 'the appropriate character of Hercules in *Cymon and Iphigenia*' with London's Drury Lane theatre company.<sup>121</sup> Sam, whose full name was Samuel McDonald, died 'aged 40, of water in the chest' on the British island of Guernsey.<sup>122</sup>

His obituary became the first published in Australia's first newspaper. It appeared in the second edition of the *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, on 12 March 1803. Although the paper was largely intended as a medium for proclamations

and notices, it also included news items – often reprinted from the London newspapers. That was clearly the source of the Big Sam piece, for, although it carried its own headline, it appeared next to a section entitled ‘Miscellaneous extracts from the latest London papers’. The rudimentary editing strengthens the case for saying his obituary came to the *Gazette* by that means too. Big Sam is said to have died ‘on the 6<sup>th</sup> instant’;<sup>123</sup> this would plainly have been a British reference, suggesting therefore that his death probably occurred some time late in 1802.

The *Gazette* was edited and printed by George Howe, ‘under the censorship of the secretary to the governor, who examined all proofs’.<sup>124</sup> Howe, who had been sentenced to transportation for life for ‘robbing a mercer’s shop’, reached Sydney in 1800, obtained the post of government printer in 1802, and – after enduring three years of considerable interference from Governor King in editing the paper – received a full pardon in 1806.<sup>125</sup>

There are frequent instances of necrology in his columns, reflecting the violent and capricious atmosphere of the colony. John Lynch and James Tracey were executed (or ‘launched into eternity’, as the *Gazette* put it) for an unnamed crime ‘of too heinous [*sic*] a nature to admit to the extension of clemency’;<sup>126</sup> after some convicts escaped, as constables were ‘loading and preparing their muskets’ one weapon discharged and ‘shot a labouring man through the body’;<sup>127</sup> the death of a child was described in extraordinary detail (‘the eyes actually burst from their sockets...one remained in a frightful state of protuberance until the little sufferer was relieved from the most dreadful stage of affliction by the hand of death’).<sup>128</sup> A note of some pathos was introduced in a report about a Tahitian who had died ‘of a consumptive complaint’ after arriving in Sydney on the *Glutton*.<sup>129</sup> On the evidence of the *Gazette*, he had probably been taken from his homeland to be exhibited in England as a ‘noble savage’, a not uncommon practice of the times:

During a residence in England of nearly Three Years, he was treated by all ranks of persons with that liberal hospitality for which the British Nation stands unrivalled in the Universe. The last duties of humanity fell to our care...the death of this young man is much regretted.<sup>130</sup>

The first home-grown obituary appeared in the 56<sup>th</sup> edition of the *Gazette*, on 25 March 1804 (Figure 3.3).

**Ship Betsey from Madras,**  
**ALL** Persons having Claims or Demands on Captain ROBERT WILLIAM EASTWICK of the Ship BETSEY, are desired to present the same on or before Saturday next the 31st Instant, in order that they may be discharged.  
 Sydney, March 24, 1804.

**Advertisement.**  
**THE** speedy Departure of the Ship BETSEY from this Port, renders it indispensable for Mr. LORD to request all Persons indebted to his Warehouse to liquidate their unsatisfied Accounts in the course of the Current Week, in Bills prompt for Consolidation; and the heavy Concerns which he is about to wind up at this period, will he trusts render any further Solicitations unnecessary.  
 Sydney, March 24, 1804.

**To be Let with immediate Possession,**  
**A** Handsome Thirty acre FARM, situate at Prospect, Twenty-six Acres cleared and fit for immediate cultivation, the property of Mr. JOHN THOMSON, of whom Particulars may be had at the Hospital Wharf, or of Mr. Kennedy of Prospect, who will show the Premises.  
 The above Farm is bounded by Mr. Kennedy's and Mrs. Smith's Farms

**Postscript.**  
 \* \* A MISTAKE was made in a Notice of last Week:-- Instead of "Orders signed by D. D. Mann," READ, "Answers to certain Letters, when countersigned with the GOVERNOR'S Initials."  
 On Thursday last, the 18th Instant, the time of beating off the Tap too was altered to 8 o'clock till further Orders.

The Military Establishment ready to embark for Hunter's River is for the present to consist of a Sergeant and nine Privates of the New South Wales Corps, part to embark on board the Lady Nelson to-morrow; the remainder to go in the Resource.  
 Mr. John Tucker goes also in the Lady Nelson as Surgeon, and Mr. William Knight as Superintendent at the above Settlement, together with several miners.  
 Among the prisoners and others intended to be embarked in the Resource is Joseph Holt, who yesterday underwent Re-examination, and at the recommendation of the magistrates was by His EXCELLENCY thus leniently disposed of.

**DEATH,**  
 On Wednesday last died, generally lamented, Mr. James Bloodworth, for many years Superintendent of Builders in the Employ of Government. He came to the Colony among the first Inhabitants in the year 1788, and obtained the Appointment, from his exemplary conduct, shortly after his arrival; the first house in this part of the Southern Hemisphere was by him erected, as most of the Public Buildings since have been under his direction. To lament his loss he has left a Widow and five Children, the youngest an infant now only one week old; and the complaint which terminated in his dissolution was supposed to proceed from a severe cold contracted about two months since.  
 The attention and concern which prevailed at the interment of the deceased were sufficient testimonies of the respect with which he was held, and the integrity with which he uninterestedly discharged the duties of a Public Trust during so long a period. His EXCELLENCY was pleased to order, that the Funeral should be provided for at the Public Expence, and to shew other marks of attention to so good a Servant of the Crown.  
 Four in the afternoon of Friday being at the wish of the widow appointed for the Funeral, the Relics of the deceased were at that hour removed from his house in South Street, and conveyed to the place of interment, attended by a great number of friends, among whom were most of the Sydney Loyal Association, in which he had been appointed Sergeant.  
 Opposite to his old residence a Procession was formed, which moved in the following order:--  
 12 of the Loyal Association, arms reversed  
 Sergeant of the Association  
 Drum muffled & Fife  
**THE BIER**  
 Two Sons, chief Mourners followed by an Infant Daughter,  
 Fourteen Female Mourners,  
 Twenty-four Male ditto,  
 A number of respectable Inhabitants in Rank  
 The Non-commissioned Officers of the New South Wales Corps,  
 And a crowd of spectators.  
 When near the Burial Ground the Association were obliged to file off, for the accommodation of the friends of the deceased, and the populace, who were become very numerous; and when the remains were deposited approached the grave and performed Military Honours.

**HIGH WATER at SYDNEY**  
 for the ensuing Week.  
 Monday---5 m past 9 in the morning  
 30 m past 9 at night  
 Tuesday---10 in the morning  
 30 m past 10 at night  
 Wednesday---55 m past 10 in the forenoon  
 20 m past 11 at night  
 Thursday---50 m past 11 in the forenoon  
 Friday---20 m past 12 in the morning  
 50 m past 12 at noon  
 Saturday---20 m past 1 in the morning  
 50 m past 1 in the afternoon  
 Sunday---15 m past 2 in the morning  
 40 m past 2 in the afternoon.

**HIGH WATER at PARRAMATTA.**  
 1 hour 15 minutes after Sydney

**PRINTED AT SYDNEY, AND ADVERTISEMENTS RECEIVED BY G. HOWE.**

**Figure 3.3** First Australian obituary. 'Death', a minimalist headline by George Howe, the convict editor-printer, introduced the first original obituary in Australia. Its subject was James Bloodworth, building superintendent of New South Wales, who had come to the colony in 1788: 'the first house in this part of the Southern hemisphere was by him erected'. (*Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, 25 March 1804)



The evidence of this finding is marginally blighted by two apparent textual flaws:

- The name appears to be ‘Bloodworh’ (*sic*).<sup>131</sup> It ends in either a typographical error or, possibly, in a printer’s digraph of the time. Printing was a capricious affair in the colony; worn type, along with shortages of ink and usable paper, compromised production of the *Gazette*. A search of registered deaths for that period has disclosed that a James Bloodworth died in Sydney on 21 March 1804, leaving a widow and children; this man, clearly, was the one who became the subject of the first wholly Australian newspaper obituary.<sup>132</sup>
- He was an important official in Sydney Town. Unfortunately, the typography again lacks assurance; Mr Bloodworth is said to have served as ‘Superintendatn [*sic*] of Builders’.<sup>133</sup> (Other reports in the *Gazette* files indicate that ‘Superintendent’ was the preferred spelling of the time.)

This, in part, was the obituary (edited for clarity):

On Wednesday last died, generally lamented, Mr James Bloodworth, for many years Superintendent of Builders in the Employ of Government. He came to the Colony among its first Inhabitants in the year 1788...[and] the first house in this part of the Southern hemisphere was by him erected, as most of the Public Buildings since have been under his direction. To lament his loss he has left a Widow and five children, the youngest an infant now only one week old...the complaint which terminated in his dissolution was supposed to proceed from a severe cold contracted about two months since.<sup>134</sup>

Other instances of obituary followed as Howe continued to crank out his *Gazette* on the Government House press. The practice was, accordingly, well established by 18 April 1831, the date of the first *Sydney Herald* (now, as the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Australia’s oldest continuously published newspaper). This newspaper ‘struck a chord with the upper class of the growing colony’,<sup>135</sup> notably so when Ward Stephens, a former clerk on the *Gazette*, secured sole ownership of the profitable *Herald* by the late 1830s.

The editorial opinion of his newspaper embraced the capitalist view, as was evidenced in its reaction to the hanging of seven stockmen for the murder of Aborigines at Myall Creek cattle station. It had ‘virtually urged the jury to acquit the prisoners even if guilty’ because ‘Aborigines had no right to land as they did not cultivate it’:

The British people found a portion of the globe in a state of waste – they took possession of it; and they had a perfect right to do so, under the Divine authority, by which man was commanded to go forth and people, and *till* the land.<sup>136</sup>

The *Herald* ‘long remained a Tory organ supported by landowners in the country and mercantile interests in the city’.<sup>137</sup> Consequently its early obituaries – along with those printed by its weekly associate publication, the *Sydney Mail* – tended to be concentrated at the higher end of the social scale too. They offered a permanent memorial in print to the contribution made to New South Wales by such prominent individuals as:

- Sir John Hayes – Commodore and Senior Officer of the Indian Navy and formerly ‘the explorer of the Derwent and the coast of Tasmania, New Caledonia and New Guinea’.<sup>138</sup>
- Captain J.L. Wilkie, of Her Majesty’s 12<sup>th</sup> regiment, whose death was accelerated ‘by the annoyance he was subjected to...[from] those holding higher rank’.<sup>139</sup>
- Richard Rouse, of Rouse Hill – ‘We notice in our obituary this day the death of an old and much respected colonist...who had nearly attained the age of eighty years.’<sup>140</sup>

It spoke to the establishment. When speaking of obituary practice itself, though, the delivery takes an apparently relaxed form. The easy despatch of introductory phrase to the third entry on that list, from a *Herald* of 1852, would seem to indicate that, by the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the term **obituary** had come into common usage in Sydney journalism.

### **The colonial chorus**

Eight Australian newspapers have been identified for analysis in this thesis because of the presence, in each, of a dedicated obituaries page. At this historical juncture – the examination of the obituary’s germination and flowering – four of that number, in addition to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, can be considered. The remaining three did not come into existence until well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, by which time obituary practice was clearly in decline. The four that present themselves for discussion now are:

- Perth’s *West Australian* (founded in 1833 as the *Perth Gazette and Western Australian Journal*)
- Brisbane’s *Courier-Mail* (1846, originally the *Moreton Bay Courier*)
- Melbourne’s *Age* (1854)
- Adelaide’s *Advertiser* (1858, originally the *South Australian Advertiser*)

## Victorian moralising: ‘treachery’ in west and north

The Western Australian experience was but a variation on Sydney’s opening obituary medley of misfortune, violent death, and lament at the loss of establishment figures. The earliest example – more a necrological memoir than a legitimate obituary – appeared in the ninth edition of the *Perth Gazette*, which at that stage was published weekly. It told of the placing in St James’s Church of ‘a very elegant monument and tablet’ to Captain Collett Barker, of the 39<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot, ‘treacherously murdered by the Aboriginal natives [two years previously, in 1831]’.<sup>141</sup> The following month saw the first proper obituary, a lengthy reprint of a British newspaper piece on Sir Walter Scott.<sup>142</sup> This had an element of antiquity about it too, for he had died nearly seven months before, in September 1832.

One of the more remarkable obituaries published by the *Gazette* in its early years was that of the Earl of Munster, described as the ‘eldest son of his late majesty William the IV, by the accomplished actress Mrs Jordan’.<sup>143</sup> (The word ‘accomplished’ is especially well-turned.) In a column-and-a-half of dense type, the newspaper recorded his military service, his marriage to a daughter of the Earl of Egremont, appointment to the privy council, and – with typically explicit Victorian particulars – his suicide:

The melancholy event took place...at No.13 Belgrave Street, Belgrave Square, his town residence, when Earl Munster put a period to his existence by shooting himself through the head with a pistol....The face and head were severely and extensively wounded, and the right hand was wounded and covered with blood...[H]e had been particularly agitated when he heard of the recent disastrous news from Central Asia, and had been very much excited at the report that Lady M’Naughten and the other ladies had fallen into the hands of the Affghan [*sic*] insurgents.<sup>144</sup>

In Brisbane, the *Moreton Bay Courier* – forerunner of today’s *Courier-Mail* – began life with an appeal to settlers of some social distinction:

The *Courier* has been established in compliance with the almost unanimous wish of every resident of character, property, and intelligence in this extensive district....As a local journal, it will be our great object...to point out the most eligible field presented to capital and enterprise.<sup>145</sup>

The pioneers of that 'extensive district' were confronted by some immediate dangers. In its first attempt at necrology, the *Courier* echoed West Australian sentiments in reporting the death of two timber cutters attacked by Aborigines:

Intelligence reached the settlement yesterday that Hugh Pheeny and a man named Collins, who were employed by Mr John Burgess in sawing timber on the Tweed [River], had been treacherously murdered by the natives about a month ago for the sake of their rations....The blacks in the locality have been long known as the most ferocious wretches in the district, and it is deeply regretted that there is no means of bringing them to justice. The unfortunate men who have become their victims were well known to many in Brisbane as hard-working, peaceable individuals.<sup>146</sup>

By the 1860s, the *Courier* (it had dropped the *Moreton Bay* prefix) was still concerned more with death reporting than with obituary, particularly if there were a chance to engage in moralising. An opportunity arose in 1862:

#### *Awful result of intemperance*

On Saturday morning last, a man named James Wright, a farmer, living near Riverstone, left his house in a very excited state, having been labouring under *delirium tremens* for some days. His wife becoming alarmed, obtained the assistance of some of her neighbours, and the body was found floating in the river not far from his late residence, by Mr Cameron. This dreadful case is rendered the more painful from the fact that the deceased was the father of two young girls whose death from drowning was reported in our last issue. The mother and a little girl aged about ten years old, we are told, are all that now remain of this unhappy family.<sup>147</sup>

Genuine obituary, on the occasions that it did occur, was more likely at that stage in the *Courier's* history to be preceded or overshadowed by an account of the circumstances of death. When Mr J.F. Morton, of the Cleveland Bay district, was killed in a riding accident, the paper did acknowledge him as 'an old and much respected resident of the district'.<sup>148</sup> It gave much more play, however, to the account of how his horse had 'shied and bolted into the bush, dashing the rider's head against a tree, and...throwing him from the saddle'.<sup>149</sup>

The layout of the *Brisbane Courier*, as its name had become by the 1880s, was of an eclectic kind. While the general news pages were now carrying obituaries with some frequency, they were presented in a headline-free melange. On 11 September 1882, for example, one of these columns alone offered information on forthcoming parliamentary business, revision of harbour fees, reports on British military engagements in Egypt, an announcement of land sales at North Sandgate, and the obituary of 'an old and much respected' Brisbane surgeon and former state MP.<sup>150</sup>

From then on, Brisbane obituaries were to endure reasonably frequent publication, but obscure placement, until the last years of the century. This unprepossessing design policy was disrupted only for the truly famous dead. A former Astronomer Royal, Sir George Airy, was accorded his own headline and two-thirds of a column attesting to his scientific achievement:

He has illustrated the Newtonian theory of gravitation and approximated the great object of ascertaining the weight of the earth by a series of experiments on the relative vibration of a mine...[and] has paid great attention to the testing and improvement of marine chronometers, and to the diffusion by galvanic telegraph of accurate time signals.<sup>151</sup>

An athlete and a policeman, by contrast, had their obituaries buried – without headline – amidst the minutiae of life and death within a *Courier* column:

the well-known and popular athlete Mr James Waterston...always to the fore in feats of strength and skill, took part in a gymnastic exhibition on Thursday night [at Winton] and, probably from injuries received, died next day.<sup>152</sup>

Old residents of Gympie will regret to hear that ex-Senior Sergeant W. Walsh died at about 2 o'clock on Monday morning last...For some time after his arrival on [*sic*] Gympie, about twenty-three years ago, he was in charge of the One-mile police station...[I]t was not until the last two or three months that it became apparent to the general public that he was physically 'breaking up'.<sup>153</sup>

## **Potency in Melbourne, eloquence in Adelaide**

Melbourne, through the wealth of the goldfields, became 'a huge and prosperous city with much beauty and gaiety'.<sup>154</sup> The grandeur of its architecture suited the more ornate aspects of Victorian obituary expression. Fine deaths were accorded fine tributes. The celebrated English historian Henry Thomas Buckle, who had the ambitious plan of writing 'a history of civilization, treating people in relation to each other and to the natural world',<sup>155</sup> died while travelling on horseback through Palestine. The *Age* responded in an orotund fashion:

At the sudden view...on emerging from the rocky defile on the eastern ridge of Anti-lebanon, he exclaimed, 'It is worth more than all the pain and fatigue it has cost me'. Alas! How much more it was to cost him! The fatigue again brought on diarrhoea. The quantity of opium prescribed...produced delirium for about a quarter of an hour, and it was touching to hear him exclaim in the

midst of his innocuous utterances, ‘Oh, my book, my book, I shall never finish my book!’...he was seized with typhus fever, sunk into an unconscious stupor...[and] died....And so, passing through the ruins of the Christian quarter, outside the walls, on the same day he died, as the sun set over that mountain ridge...in the small Protestant cemetery, its trees torn up and its eight or ten tombstones broken by fanatical Mahomedans, he was interred.<sup>156</sup>

Those with the courage to explore the more hostile parts of Australia were given similarly generous obituary space, though not necessarily with the same passion as that expressed in memory of Buckle. Two explorers, obituarised in two newspapers, serve as case studies. First, in 1869, there was the obituary of Charles Sturt, with its authoritative account of his retreat from Cooper’s Creek:

The return journey was performed amidst fresh sufferings from hunger, thirst and disease. Sturt himself was attacked by scurvy and ophthalmia, and...never fully recovered. Shortly after his return, he became totally blind and, though in after years he recovered his sight to some extent, it was never thoroughly restored. Though perhaps the most unfortunate, Captain Sturt must certainly be ranked as one of the greatest of Australian explorers. [*Argus* 1869]<sup>157</sup>

Of John King, a survivor on the ill-starred Burke and Wills expedition of 1860-61, Melbourne newspaper readers were told:

Accustomed to the wilds of India, John King soon after the expedition left Melbourne saw that Burke was not the man to have charge of such an enterprise. He was too brave and too rash...[yet] King venerated the memory of Burke and for some years after his return to the settled districts he could not hear his name mentioned without shedding tears. [*Age* 1872]<sup>158</sup>

More so than column space, however, it is the potency of these obituaries, allied to their capacity for historical detail and euphony of expression, which demonstrates that Melbourne newspapers had rapidly developed finesse in the craft. As was the case in Sydney, readers in Melbourne had a weekly newspaper to supplement their obituary needs too. In their case, it was the *Australasian* – an adjunct of a morning newspaper, the *Argus* – which offered this service. A prime example of this relationship in action is found in their response to the death of a noted sportsman of the day, Thomas Wentworth (‘Tommy’) Wills. In a colourful but troubled career, Wills had captained

Victoria's representative cricket team, trained the Aboriginal players who toured England in 1868, been accused of possessing an illegal bowling action, chaired the 'meeting of seven men who framed the first rules of Australian Football',<sup>159</sup> and eluded (by chance) an attack by Aborigines in Queensland which left his father and eighteen other pioneers dead.<sup>160</sup>

Wills, by the time he was 45, was an alcoholic with suicidal tendencies so pronounced that friends had engaged a man to watch him. One Sunday lunchtime, the *Argus* reported, when his guard 'went to his dinner...[Wills] stabbed himself with a pair of scissors'.<sup>161</sup> The newspaper concentrated on the death, with a brief news item and a report of the inquest. It was left to the *Argus's* weekly companion publication, the *Australasian*, to supply the life. In so doing, the obituary compared Wills favourably to the distinguished English cricketer W.G. Grace:

It is our painful duty to announce the death of this veteran cricketer....He was the chief of that band of cricketers whose disinterested exertions (so different from what is too frequently the case now) caused Victoria to assume the proud position of the leading cricketing colony of Australia....He was in fact 'the Grace' of Australia, but unlike that celebrated player of the old world, Tommy Wills was as well known for his good nature and kind heart as he was famous for his skill as a player.<sup>162</sup>

Adelaide's *Advertiser* appears to have taken rather longer than its interstate peers to have adopted obituary as a consistent enterprise. The standard mix of necrology – coronial enquiry, execution, traumatic accident, crime, and failed excursions of pioneering or exploration – was abundant in the first quarter-century of this newspaper's existence. Obituary was sometimes incorporated within such reports, but had to wait until the 1880s before becoming a regular and discrete feature. Then, in the full blooming of the art as it was practised in Britain and the United States, the *Advertiser* had some expressive material to reprint:

Our telegrams this morning announce the death of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, as far as Englishmen are concerned the most popular of American poets....Surrounded by his more intimate relatives and friends, he gently breathed his last beneath his own roof, a beautiful old-fashioned house on the outskirts of Cambridge, Massachusetts, and just overlooking Harvard University, where he spent some of the busiest years of his life.<sup>163</sup>

The death of Longfellow was a loss to the English-speaking world, and last week one of the mourners who stood by his grave – a venerable man whose writings have exercised a vast influence on the literature of his country too – passed peacefully away. Some critics have spoken of Ralph Waldo Emerson as America's Carlyle, but there was little in common between the men....With him [Emerson], truth, beauty and love were inseparable sisters, and though his creed, so far as he formulated it, was not ours, we must reverence the spirit which animated not the scholar and thinker only, but the man.<sup>164</sup>

Inspired perhaps by such eloquence in syndicated journalism, the *Advertiser* from that point on offered more sustained indications of its own obituary practice. Mr L.W. Warnecke, a settler from Cologne and 'resident of the township of Nuriootpa for nearly thirty years', was praised as 'a chemist of ability' whose character had won the endearment of 'a large circle of friends'.<sup>165</sup> Another German immigrant, August Adolf Bernhardt Holtje, a storekeeper at Mount Gambier, was 'highly esteemed by all with whom he had to do'.<sup>166</sup> The *Advertiser* noted that 'many, especially among our German residents, will look back with feelings of gratitude to the time when his clear-headed and disinterested advice directed them on a course which led to prosperity'.<sup>167</sup>

The tone was unshakably eulogistic, the sentiment often swollen, the language elaborate. If the combined effect of those judgments is, however, that obituary in Australia had a florid countenance, then that is not so disagreeable. It is perhaps just another way of saying it had flowered.

## Conclusions

The first newspapers in England, and in the American and Australian colonies, displayed an immediate recognition of reader interest in necrology. As government control of these journals slackened, the pioneer publishers gained more confidence as well as an increase in freedom. They were afforded the opportunity of printing an appraisal of a life lived, and therefore – by evolving practice – shaped the definition of obituary.

The pattern of development was noticeably similar in each of the locations discussed. The writing was at first often of a pious kind, then showed a certain obsession for the circumstances of death (frequently in graphic detail), and finally grew confident enough to engage in authoritative biographical portrait enlivened by anecdote. As the influence of Victorian literary expression grew, so too did the propensity for an orotund flourish within obituaries.



This, however, does not sit uncomfortably with the selection of subjects. In the main, obituaries published by the major newspapers at that time were written about landowners and clubmen, political and military leaders, eminent churchmen, scientists and inventors, explorers and adventurers, and editors who themselves had written majestic editorials. The mood was one of empire, masculinity and omnipotence.

The subsequent decline of the obituary in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was matched precisely by the questioning and undermining of that hubristic state.

## chapter four

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### **The force of circumstances: decline of the obituary in the 20<sup>th</sup> century**

*Last scene of all, that ends this strange eventful history,  
Is second childishness, and mere oblivion,  
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.*

---

William Shakespeare (*As You Like It*, Act 2, Scene 7)<sup>1</sup>

The event in journalism history which drives this thesis is the late 20<sup>th</sup> century revival of the newspaper obituary. Chapter Three has reached a conclusion, in terms of both period and pronouncement, which sees the practice of this art flourishing in newspapers of quality. Considered against the ‘Seven Ages of Man’ soliloquy from *As You Like It*, the obituary had by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century embodied ‘the justice, in fair round belly, with good capon lin’d...full of wise saws and modern instances’.<sup>2</sup> It is critical now, therefore, to demonstrate that somewhere between that embodiment and the modern revival there occurred also an age of marked decline. Such is the theme of the present chapter, which describes a metamorphosis from ‘the justice’ to ‘the lean and slippered pantaloons...his shrunk shank, and his big manly voice turning again toward childish treble pipes’.<sup>3</sup> While the obituary never, in truth, reached the oblivion of the ‘Seventh Age’, it did – in most of the newspapers considered in this study – atrophy, lose some bite and limit its vision through the force of many circumstances.

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## **Britain**

### **Words, war and withdrawal: *The Telegraph* and *The Guardian* 1902–1939**

Samuel Rawson Gardiner had in life won recognition as historian nonpareil on the England of the Protectorate. He died at the right time for protection, in the press, of his own place in history. The obituary by 1902 had assumed the ‘fair round belly’ of Shakespeare’s ‘Fifth Age’, a shape which was to be nourished until World War I. It was a time of fine words, a time when a man could decline an Oxford chair to pursue his research for no other reward than the purity of scholarship, and when the *Daily Telegraph* had room for liberal posthumous review:

The world of English letters is sensibly poorer by the death of Samuel Rawson Gardiner...the greatest of English living historians....Although Dr Gardiner was an Oxford man, he was never an Oxford professor. He was, it is true, offered the Regius Professorship of Modern History on the death of James Anthony Froude, but at the time it was thought unlikely that he would accept a post involving the duty of lecturing to students and spending some, at least, of his time in giving instruction. He declined the honour because he felt that the real business of his life lay elsewhere – in that province of original research in relation to the seventeenth century, which he has made so brilliantly his own.<sup>4</sup>

On occasions, in appraising the privileged and the distinguished dead of the Edwardian era, the measure of liberality was such that it crossed the boundary into hagiography. When Earl Fitzwilliam died, also in 1902, his *Telegraph* obituary beatified its subject with a lack of restraint:

Certain it is that among Irish landlords none were more popular than the kindly nobleman who expired yesterday...Gentle and amiable in disposition, generous and open-handed as the day, and entirely incapable of harbouring a mean, vindictive, or uncharitable thought, Earl Fitzwilliam lived in his own family and among his own people. 'Along the cool and sequestered vale of life, He held the noiseless tenor of his way.'<sup>5</sup>

Maintaining the mood, the actor-manager George Rignold was remembered for 'his splendid robustness, his glorious physique, his virile and dominating personality';<sup>6</sup> Admiral Sir William Dowell's career 'contributed in no slight degree to the greatness of England and her strength on the seas';<sup>7</sup> the United States ambassador to Great Britain, Whitelaw Reid, was honoured 'in his last sleep' as the architect of 'rapprochement between ourselves and our American cousins'.<sup>8</sup> In the same edition that acknowledged at length the life of Ambassador Reid, the *Telegraph* displayed a dash of egalitarianism too by printing a much briefer but equally warm obituary of Trooper Matthew Holland, a veteran of the Charge of the Light Brigade. The old soldier was quoted as having said: 'My old horse took me to the bottom [of the valley], then took it into his head to come back, and naturally I came with him.'<sup>9</sup>

It took another war to wound the *Telegraph* obituary, and there was to be no return to health for seventy years. Before considering the decades of withdrawal, however, some further examination of the obituary columns in flower is required, in this instance at the *Manchester Guardian*. Although this newspaper too could display a

talent for splendour of expression, there was at times a candid edge to its appraisal of a life. In exercising such an approach, the Manchester obituarists were reflecting the editorial policy of a paper which represented ‘the dominant expression of radical thinking among educated men and women’.<sup>10</sup> Cecil Rhodes, of goldmines and Rhodesia, was judged at his death to have ‘reverted...to the Napoleonic type; and of him, as of Napoleon, it may be said that he was rather a great force than a great character’.<sup>11</sup> That propensity for finding a critical twist could be felt also in the 1912 obituary of Viscount Llandaff, a barrister and erstwhile politician of Cabinet rank:

There was apparent [in Llandaff] that element of agility and adroitness, both physical and intellectual, somewhat foreign in its character, which displeases our countrymen and conveys the impression of insincerity.<sup>12</sup>

In this, the *Guardian* was anticipating a style of character assessment which was to emerge again with the obituary revival of the 1980s. Its initial incarnation proved ephemeral, however. The *Guardian*’s capacity to slice at layers of posthumous assessment was blunted, along with the *Telegraph*’s opportunity for mannered and leisured obituary, by the trauma of war. In common with all British newspapers of the time, their general operation was restrained by two persistent factors: shortage of newsprint and zealous censorship. By 1916, each was printing about two-thirds the number of pages which had typified immediate pre-war practice. Space on the surviving pages had to be devoted to news from the battlefields (albeit censored), lengthy political matter, casualty lists, and tributes to those killed on active service.

The *Telegraph* published, all too frequently for the fireside at home, a ‘Roll of Honour’ feature. It listed the dead, the wounded and the missing, and attached – in the smallest of typefaces – an obituary column exclusively of military subjects. It told in 1917, for example, of the short life of Lieutenant Thomas Waller, 21, shot by a sniper after ‘leading his company of Gloucesters “over the top”, gaining the objective and successfully holding it all day’.<sup>13</sup> His companions on the page included Captain William Villiers, 20, a late head of house at Winchester, and Captain Alfred Richardson, 24, ‘an ardent member of the choir’ at Exeter College, Oxford.<sup>14</sup>

At the *Guardian*, civilian obituaries became truncated, replaced in terms of both size and frequency by 'The Casualties'. This, like the *Telegraph's* 'Roll of Honour', combined a casualty list with short military obituaries. The *Guardian's* traditional commitment to social justice was apparent in its decision to include all ranks, as typified by the content one September Saturday in 1916. Among that day's life stories in miniature were those of the Mayor of Bath's two sons (both captains), a regimental sergeant major of the Loyal North Lancashires, and a Manchester private from the Royal Fusiliers.<sup>15</sup>

In the post-war years, the *Telegraph's* commitment to obituary publication was gone. A study of the files indicates just an occasional half-column of what is known in the American trade as the 'boilerplate' obituary: name, age, address, and the briefest of career recitation. There was neither room nor inclination to offer anecdote and character sketch. Readers, therefore, were left to wonder at the circumstances of such potentially intriguing subjects as Mrs Egerton Castle, described only as having been the wife of a 'famous swordsman and well-known novelist'.<sup>16</sup>

The *Telegraph* was confronted at this time by a severe trading downturn. The *Daily Mail* and the *Times*, both by then owned by the Northcliffe Group, had captured readers at, respectively, the popular and top ends of the *Telegraph's* market. Circulation by 1928 had fallen to 84,000; fifty years earlier it had been nearly 250,000.<sup>17</sup> The title was then sold to the Berry family, which was to retain control until Conrad Black's purchase in 1985. By reducing the cover price, acquiring the *Morning Post* and revitalising the content, Sir William Berry (later Lord Camrose) built both circulation and confidence. The obituary, though, was not part of his plan. It continued to struggle through the 1930s with intermittent publication in further boilerplate fashion. Herbert Waring, an actor celebrated for his Polonius at the Haymarket theatre, was accorded but five paragraphs;<sup>18</sup> forty years as town clerk of Cardiff earned Mr J. Larke Wheatley just sixteen lines.<sup>19</sup>

The *Manchester Guardian* of the 1920s and 1930s chose to ignore the obituary too. Its pre-war talent for cool, objective appraisal in two full columns of type was never revived. Instead, two or three times a week there appeared a literate, slightly dull, collection of acknowledgments in the space of a half-column. Sir James Jones, a former mayor of Rochdale, was recalled as a philanthropist of spectacular generosity,<sup>20</sup> Mr W.S. Barratt as a long-serving mathematics lecturer and 'excellent

bridge player',<sup>21</sup> and Dr H.H. Marsden as a leading medical practitioner in south-west Lancashire for nearly forty years.<sup>22</sup> The days of dissecting a cabinet's minister's complex personality and passing judgment on a man of Cecil Rhodes's stature were, it seemed, lost.

With the editorial decision-makers of the day now long dead, precise reasons for this retreat remain elusive. Arguably the sole surviving journalist of this period is W.F. Deedes, in 1935 a colleague of Evelyn Waugh's in the foreign press corps assigned to cover Italy's invasion of Abyssinia, and today (2004) still reporting for the *Telegraph*. Correspondence inviting him to contribute some thoughts to this thesis has, unfortunately, not prompted a response. The evidence, considered from a remove of seventy years, points simply to a combination of factors. The obituary art at the *Telegraph* and the *Manchester Guardian* – and, as will be demonstrated, at newspapers outside the British Isles as well – fell out of fashion and favour during World War I. In the aftermath of war, newspapers changed. Instead of returning to the pre-war pattern of ponderous parliamentary reports and long editorials, they conducted competitions (with 'tea sets, washing machines, encyclopedias and silk stockings' as prizes),<sup>23</sup> increased their photographic content dramatically, published home improvement and fashion advice, and contributed generally to an age in which the leisurely journalism of Victorian and Edwardian Britain was 'replaced by sport, crime and foreign news'.<sup>24</sup> The *Morning Post* had died. Of the other papers specialising in obituaries, only the *Times* displayed an enduring interest. The obituary, a casualty of war, found little prospect elsewhere of recovery in peace.

### **Rations and relocation**

The outbreak of World War II led to a further tactical withdrawal of obituary publication, by the *Telegraph* in particular. Newsprint rationing reduced its size significantly. By 1942, the entire newspaper was four pages in total, leaving no room for civilian obituaries. The *Manchester Guardian* was able to publish eight to ten pages by reducing its circulation; accordingly, it continued some measure of obituary publication. This, brief in form and haphazard in placement as it was, did at times reflect the extended impact of the casualty lists:

The death is announced of Mr Horace William Potter, Northern Editor of 'The Daily Mail', in a Manchester nursing home on Saturday. He was 56. Mr Potter...leaves a widow, [and] two sons who are reported missing in Singapore....His eldest son, Second Lieutenant H.W.H. Potter, was killed on Army manoeuvres last year.<sup>25</sup>

After the war, with newsprint rationing still in force until 1958,<sup>26</sup> the *Manchester Guardian* returned to its format of the 1930s: concise, quietly reverential life summaries in an occasional half-column on the general news pages. Change was apparent in other respects, however; in 1959 the ‘Manchester’ was dropped from the title and, two years later, publication shifted to London.

Regardless of location, the lack of passion for obituaries continued, as a result of which some opportunities for engaging story-telling were sadly overlooked. Viscount Elibank had served as a parliamentary private secretary, held a 300-year-old Scottish barony, and campaigned throughout his life for pictorial postage stamps to ‘stimulate the country’s tourist trade’.<sup>27</sup> His obituary compressed, in 1962, all this into five paragraphs. Ten years later, the neglect accorded Sir Rodger Winn was even worse. Despite being ‘crippled by boyhood polio’, he had served with ‘almost legendary brilliance’ in naval intelligence during World War II, and was later appointed a Lord Justice of Appeal.<sup>28</sup> This life of achievement was given fourteen lines.

The post-World War II *Telegraph* also treated the obituary art with disdain. The pattern that emerged in the 1950s, to be replicated for more than thirty years, was that of a daily main obituary of seven or eight short paragraphs (about 10–12 column centimetres) followed by a collection of one-paragraph death reports. It was colourless stuff, as these examples from the 1950s to the 1980s would indicate:

**Herbert Smyth.** In a London hospital, on Saturday, aged 66. The eldest of four successful racehorse-trainer brothers. Trained more than 500 winners at his Epsom stables under Jockey Club and National Hunt Rules from 1923. Retired in 1950.<sup>29</sup>

**Constant Huntington.** In London, aged 86. Head of Putnam and Co., publishers; born in Massachusetts, entered Putnam’s in New York, 1902, coming to London, 1905; acquired controlling interest of English company 1933, and was also a director of New York firm; was credited with discovering writers such as Erich Maria Remarque and Isaak Dinesen.<sup>30</sup>

**James Broderick.** At New Haven, Connecticut, aged 55. American film and television actor, best known for role of worried father in television series ‘Family’ (1977). Films included ‘Alice’s Restaurant’, ‘Dog Day Afternoon’ and ‘The Shadowbox’. Toured with Helen Hayes in ‘The Glass Menagerie’.<sup>31</sup>

A publisher, the second subject in that list, brings to the world of books Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, yet is given less than five lines of formulaic type. He was a victim of a prevailing belief, held by the owners of the time, that 'readers were only interested in live people'.<sup>32</sup> Readers surely deserved an opportunity to decide for themselves; they would have to wait until 1986 for the appointments, under Conrad Black's ownership, of Max Hastings as *Telegraph* editor and Hugh Massingberd as the reviving force of its obituaries.

### **Splendid isolation at *The Times***

Britain in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, at the height of its colonial power, favoured an isolationist approach in foreign affairs. That policy was particularly pronounced under Lord Salisbury, three times prime minister and, for substantial periods within those administrations, foreign secretary as well.<sup>33</sup> It became known as 'splendid isolation', a phrase commonly credited to the Liberal Unionist George Goschen, who said on 26 February 1896: 'We have stood alone in that which is called isolation – our splendid isolation, as one of our colonial friends was good enough to call it.'<sup>34</sup> Goschen was referring to a statement made in the Canadian parliament at a time when Britain – long before Euro-scepticism – was relying on the loyalty of its empire rather than allying itself with Continental neighbours. The *Times* displayed an identical, if much longer-lasting, commitment to the obituary, pursuing its cause when other newspapers of quality were forsaking it.

When *Times* practice was last discussed, in Chapter Three, reference was made to its capacity for dignified and extensive obituary, linked in some instances to imperious consideration in the editorial column too. Such was the case on the death of Albert, Prince Consort, in 1861, when the *Times* opined:

The nation has just sustained the greatest loss that could possibly have fallen upon it. Prince Albert, who a week ago gave every promise that his valuable life would be lengthened to a period long enough to enable him to enjoy, even in this world, the fruit of a virtuous youth and a well-spent manhood, the affection of a devoted wife and of a family of which any father might well be proud, – this man, the very centre of our social system, the pillar of our State, is suddenly snatched from us, without even warning sufficient to prepare us for a blow so abrupt and so terrible....In the Prince, notwithstanding his German education, we have had as true an Englishman as the most patriotic native of these islands.<sup>35</sup>



Death did not always inspire so declamatory a response in the *Times*, however. As well as its coffee-house clientele, the paper was also found in news rooms, 'where it could be read by the better-educated mechanics and artisans'.<sup>36</sup> One of these, in Manchester, took 'ninety-six publications, including the *Times*', charging its patrons a penny for reading only and sixpence for tea with sugar and cream.<sup>37</sup> They found in its pages a lighter style of writing too, even when the topic was that of obituary. Over tea and tobacco in the news room, they could have read of the death from consumption of Grace Darling, the heroic daughter of the lighthouse keeper on the Farne Islands. She had rowed through a storm to rescue survivors from the steamboat *Forfarshire*, when it ran onto rocks. Her fortitude was such that she had subsequently refused offers to re-enact the rescue in a theatrical tableau:

The circumstances of the late Mr Yates [an impresario] having offered Grace Darling a considerable sum of money if she would sit in a mimic boat, and be drawn about the stage...is well known...and her refusal thus to render herself a public spectacle has tended yet to raise her higher in the estimation of her friends and neighbours.<sup>38</sup>

They could have read too of John Camden Neild, 'of Lincoln's-inn, barrister-at-law', who at his death in 1852 owned property worth 'at upwards of £500,000'.<sup>39</sup> Yet he was so miserly and so poorly dressed, according to his obituary, that passengers on a stagecoach had on one occasion taken pity on him:

the deceased had been on a visit to some of his estates [where he enjoyed free accommodation], and was returning to London, when the coach stopped at Farningham. With the exception of our miser, the passengers all retired to the inn. Missing their coach companion, and recollecting his decayed appearance, they conceived he was in distressed circumstances, and accordingly a sum was subscribed, and a bumping glass of brandy and water kindly sent out to the 'poor' gentleman, which he gratefully accepted.<sup>40</sup>

His will, said the *Times*, made not 'the smallest provision' for 'a poor old housekeeper who was with him for 26 years'.<sup>41</sup> Instead, he left the entire half-million to Queen Victoria.

The talent of the *Times* for literary appraisal, as well as the nicely turned anecdote, was found in the obituary of Anthony Trollope. After recounting his practice of working from 5am to 11am, when 'at the stroke of the clock, the pen was laid down, however lightly it might be turning off the sentences', the obituarist offered an authoritative and generous assessment of Trollope's character inventiveness, of which this is an extract:

There are fascinating scamps like Mr Sowerby and commercial travellers like Scatcherd, and strong-minded spinsters like Miss Dunstable; and such embodiments of maidenly beauty and good-humoured innocence as Lucy Robartes and Grace Crawley and Lily Dale, which surprise as being realized rather than idealized by a middle-aged gentleman.<sup>42</sup>

It was thoroughly mean, though, in its posthumous treatment of another man of letters, Oscar Wilde. In a sniffy little obituary, positioned beneath that of a German military attaché who was ‘suffocated while sleeping in a Chinese house heated by a stove’,<sup>43</sup> the *Times* played down Wilde’s genius, emphasising instead his fall from grace:

The verdict that a jury passed upon his conduct at the Old Bailey in May, 1895 destroyed for ever his reputation, and condemned him to ignoble obscurity for the remainder of his days....Death has soon ended what must have been a life of wretchedness and unavailing regret.<sup>44</sup>

The *Times* itself endured some corporate regret in the decade before Wilde’s death. It had bought and published a set of forged letters which purported to implicate C.S. Parnell, leader of the Irish parliamentary group in the Commons, in a political assassination. Legal costs from a commission of enquiry and from Parnell’s suit for libel cost the *Times* more than £200,000, placing it ‘in mortal danger’.<sup>45</sup> The Walter family, proprietors from the first edition in 1785, were eventually forced to sell. Ownership passed in 1908 to Lord Northcliffe, founder of the *Daily Mail*. He cut the price of the *Times*, albeit temporarily, to a penny and ‘increased its circulation tenfold’.<sup>46</sup>

With its finances in order, it was able to sustain an obituary column throughout World War I under the heading ‘Fallen Officers’. There was room for a little more than just a capsule of life history, room one Monday in 1917 for a senior officer’s personal tribute to Second Lieutenant William Forth, 24:

His O.C. writes: – ‘I cannot tell you how much we all miss the lion-hearted, bright boy, and his action in going forward as he did with a handful of men into almost certain death was beyond all praise.’<sup>47</sup>

Between the wars, the *Times* demonstrated the obituary’s capacity both for pathos and nostalgia. The former was found in the obituary of Marie Lloyd, ‘the famous variety actress and singer’, who died a few days after a performance at the Edmonton Empire:

when she went on [stage], she could hardly stand. Throughout the hall, none of the audience thought she was ill....Her last song was 'A ruin that Cromwell knocked about a bit', in which she had to imitate the staggerings and clumsy buffoonery of a drunken woman. Her weakness was mistaken by the audience for fine comic acting, and they shrieked with laughter as she fell.<sup>48</sup>

Nostalgic recollection enriched the obituary of Janet Story, 98, 'widow of the Very Rev. Principal Story, of Glasgow University', whose fairness of visage as a young woman in Edinburgh had been such that

from time to time the whole regiment of Scots Greys would ride into Melville-street, deploy in front of the house of the pretty little lady in her teens, and wait patiently while the colonel had tea with her, the regimental band playing the while....[T]he old lady, in her eighties, could write of it still: 'The old scenes return...Colonel Griffith beside me, and the gallant "Greys" halting in the street...Oh, we were young, we were merry, if not very, very wise.'<sup>49</sup>

'Fallen Officers', accompanied by civilian obituaries of reduced length, returned during the years of punitive newsprint rationing in World War II. By the 1960s, the power of the obituaries page was restored. There were impressive instant biographies in miniature of T.S. Eliot ('a stooping, sombre-clad figure [who] appeared to be shy and retiring, formal in his manner, which was courtly and attentive but detached');<sup>50</sup> of Somerset Maugham ('he had occupied – and, in his own disillusioned way, taken pleasure in – the position of the most celebrated of English authors');<sup>51</sup> and of the comedian Tony Hancock ('the chronicler of social disorientation, of submission to undigested or indigestible little ideas dressed pompously in big words, of a craving for intellectual and social eminence on the cheap').<sup>52</sup>

The *Times* obituary, therefore, had survived two world wars and the changing fashions of peacetime journalism. It would soon, however, be silenced by a vicious episode of industrial strife.

### **'There will be an interval'**

In common with all London's daily newspapers of the 1970s, the *Times* was confronted by industrial anarchy. The printing unions were 'notorious for wild-cat strikes, over-manning and practising Luddite protectionism. They earned fabulous wages for ridiculously short hours.'<sup>53</sup> Some of the stoppages were acts of political cynicism; the *Times* lost an issue 'when the unions refused to print an article by

David Astor, of the *Observer*, on Fleet Street malpractices'.<sup>54</sup> Their Luddite tendencies became acute when management tried to introduce computer typesetting, which was already long established in the United States. Union objection and obstruction was such that both the *Times* and the *Sunday Times* closed down for a year. In an editorial announcing the closure, and headed 'There will be an interval', on 30 November 1978, the *Times* employed circumspect language, saying there was 'no intention to engage in total conflict with the trade unions...[but rather] to negotiate settlements, however hard those negotiations may be to complete or even to begin'.<sup>55</sup>

In fact, the two papers returned the following November only after

the management accepted abject defeat. The new technology was installed at considerable cost, but the terminals were manned by printers and not by journalists....The triumphant unions demanded even higher pay, and some workers had their wages doubled.<sup>56</sup>

During the hiatus, a few routines survived. In his book on the *Times* dispute, the paper's industrial affairs writer, Eric Jacobs, recalled that 'obituaries were kept up to date and so was a file on events, to help the *Times* maintain its index and its reputation as a newspaper of record'.<sup>57</sup> When publication resumed, three eight-page supplements were produced (16, 19, and 23 November 1979), each comprising a collection of those obituaries. There were some celebrated names: Earl Mountbatten and Airey Neave (both victims of IRA atrocities), Golda Meir, John Wayne, Nelson Rockefeller, Eric Partridge, Nicholas Monsarrat, Leonide Massine, Sir Barnes Wallis, Dame Gracie Fields.

The *Daily Telegraph* in this period had chosen not to pursue a more vigorous practice of the obituary. It was by now often reduced to a wretched third of a column; a charmless, witless concoction. On some days in 1979, particularly Mondays, there was just one listing, of half-a-dozen or so lines. Hugh Massingberd, destined within a decade to become the engineer of change and already confident of how obituaries could be revived, saw his chance. He approached *Telegraph* management, saying that the conche could painlessly be seized from the *Times*, only to be told in reply that it would be 'rather bad form' to exploit the temporary misfortune of an old and respected rival.<sup>58</sup>

Before Massingberd got his chance at the *Telegraph*, there was more industrial trauma at the *Times*. Rupert Murdoch, having acquired it on behalf of News International from the disillusioned Thomson group, moved the entire operation to his printing plant at Wapping, smashed the recalcitrant unions, and initiated in so doing the exodus of newspapers from Fleet Street.

Throughout the tempest, the *Times* obituaries page had remained insouciant, displaying a persistent presence. It is true, as Chapter Five will demonstrate, that Massingberd was subsequently to realise a new style of obituary, extending subject selection to diverse, often eccentric, characters and adopting wit, candour and a carefully muted irreverence. It is equally true that James Fergusson, at the *Independent*, which began publication in 1986, illustrated his obituaries with photography of a scale not seen before. Nevertheless, when revival is discussed, the one caveat in the context of British journalism is that the *Times* had been a constant in embodying the ‘Fifth Age’ of man, ‘in fair round belly... full of wise saws and modern instances’.<sup>59</sup>

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## United States

### Hard times and good times: *The New York Times* 1882–1964

In 1882 the *New York Times* published an obituary of remarkable racial insensitivity; it was more a celebration of a death than a celebration of a life. It began with news of a battle in the Chihuahua region between Mexican troops and ‘renegade Apaches’, in which the ‘head of the entire [Apache] nation’, Chief Loco, had been killed.<sup>60</sup> Then it addressed the story of Loco, saying that he had devoted himself to ‘love-making and poker’, and

was quite fond of a joke. Once, being given a burning-glass, he amused himself the entire day by drawing the sun’s rays to a focus on the backs of his wives as they sat at work, and was immensely tickled at their sudden gymnastics and howls....Scattered as they are, it is no longer possible now for the Apaches to elect a head, and as the royal succession has expired, they will probably go to pieces as a nation, which will be an excellent thing for the entire frontier.<sup>61</sup>

In a crude pun on his poker habit, the last of the Apache chiefs was despatched under the headline ‘Loco’s chips passed in’.<sup>62</sup> Within a few years, the *New York Times* itself was confronted by prospects of that identical figure of speech. It had, by then, a paid circulation of only 9,000, the lowest of the city’s eight morning dailies.<sup>63</sup> Sales had been eroded by the practice at rival newspapers of America’s notorious ‘yellow journalism’, described as ‘a shrieking, gaudy, sensation-loving...palliative of sin, sex, and violence’.<sup>64</sup> The *Times* was saved by a complex system of re-financing devised by a new proprietor, Adolph Ochs, a former printer’s assistant from Tennessee who had won control of the *Chattanooga Times* when he was only 20.

Under Ochs’s stewardship, the *New York Times* placed considerable emphasis on business news, civic affairs, the performing arts and literature, so that ‘in the pulpit, clergymen who had thundered against the yellows spoke in praise of [it]...as a decent, readable newspaper, fit for any home’.<sup>65</sup> The new owner and his editors capitalised on this aura of wholesomeness by running a competition for a slogan which reflected the spirit of their policy. Eventually, though, they chose one of their own invention: ‘All the News That’s Fit to Print’. It first appeared, on the editorial page, on 25 October 1896, moved to the front page on 10 February 1897, and has been there ever since.<sup>66</sup>

Ochs himself recalled, some years later, that he had created a ‘field all to himself’ by concentrating on the ‘neglected non-sensational departments of news’ – a concentration which sat comfortably with the obituary art.<sup>67</sup> The paper had already demonstrated, before Ochs’s intervention, a capacity for obituary with a lengthy appraisal of Walt Whitman, the poet. In style, it had all the authority and critical measure of London’s *Times* of the 1890s:

He wrestled with the big commonplace world of the United States, and managed, after his own strange fashion, to express its grandeur....He tried to express the human being inside and out, body, brains, and soul, and in the ardour of his composition found the shackles of rhyme and rhythm, sometimes of reason also, too strict for what he wished to say.<sup>68</sup>

From the early 1900s, however, the *New York Times* concentrated more on matter than art, printing obituaries in considerable number almost daily and reserving a lengthy appraisal only for the more prominent members of society. The edition of 4 January 1912 typified this practice: there were five main obituaries (averaging some

300 words apiece) and eleven 'Obituary Notes' (single-paragraph biographical summaries).<sup>69</sup> A further example is found in the edition of 16 February in the same year, when the paper again published five main obituaries, this time with twenty-five accompanying entries under 'Obituary Notes'.<sup>70</sup> Though the notes format was subsequently dropped, the *New York Times* was to retain its policy of compact, yet high-volume, obituaries for the next half-century.

At the same time, the newspaper did show on occasions that it could be both versatile in obituary treatment and generous in column space. When the theatrical entrepreneur Florenz Ziegfeld died, he was accorded nearly one-and-a-half columns, including a generous slice of the front page. The writer noted that

He had been known to take as many as a hundred trunks with him when he travelled. He had two gold telephones on his desk, and he enriched the telegraph companies by his fondness for sending 500-word telegrams.<sup>71</sup>

Ziegfeld's obituary was enlivened too by an anecdote about a law suit which provided free publicity for his first New York show, in 1896, which starred Anna Held, a performer of exotic personal habit:

The show was lagging financially until a milkman began suit against Miss Held for the milk in which she was said to have taken her daily bath, and when the news of that was spread, the actress became a great success.<sup>72</sup>

The Ziegfeld obituary was unusual in that it embraced anecdote and substantial character sketch. From immediately before World War I until the 1960s, the presentation of nearly all the *New York Times* obituaries remained essentially unchanged; they were large in number, but brief and direct in manner. The edition of 1 March 1952, for example, contained thirty-eight specimens on one page. There was a strong 'local paper' flavour, with that total including a retired print shop foreman, a public accountant, a convalescent home chaplain, and a former construction superintendent for Woolworth's who died in California 'after being stricken while on a vacation'.<sup>73</sup> It was not particularly well done, this boilerplate collage. It did, however, signify an enduring commitment to the cause of obituary.

## **Decline and renewal follow ‘The Angel of Death’**

The mood changed with the appointment of Alden Whitman as chief obituary writer at the *New York Times*, from 1964 to 1976. Whitman, as discussed in Chapter One, strengthened the image of the obituary as an instant biography with posthumous appraisals that were frequently 2,500–3,000 words in length, and often longer. In so doing, he cultivated a certain image for himself too; his pursuit of personal interviews with prospective interview subjects and his decision to wear a black cape won him the sobriquet ‘The Angel of Death’.

One of Whitman’s earlier compositions was on T.S. Eliot, described in the *Times* of London obituary (see earlier this chapter) as ‘a stooping, sombre-clad figure [who] appeared to be shy and retiring, formal in his manner, which was courtly and attentive but detached’.<sup>74</sup> Whitman, as a Harvard student, had ‘taken tea with him almost weekly when he was in residence in Cambridge, Massachusetts’ in 1930, and drew on his personal recollections to produce an echo of that description:

He lacked flamboyance or oddity in dress or manner, and there was nothing of the romantic about him. He carried no auras, cast no arresting eye, and wore his heart, as nearly as could be observed, in its proper anatomical place. Indeed, he was a rather stooped man of about six feet who had a somewhat prim demeanour.<sup>75</sup>

The one disappointment for the obituarist, perhaps, was that the paper – despite running some of this obituary on the front page – chose not to grant him a by-line. Instead, it was simply credited as ‘Special to the New York Times’.<sup>76</sup>

Whitman’s talent for the profile was realised also in his obituary of Dame Margaret Rutherford, the actress renowned for her portrayals of Oscar Wilde’s Lady Bracknell and Agatha Christie’s Miss Marple. She had, he wrote, ‘an impertinent nose and a fierce jaw that rested on an accordion of chins’.<sup>77</sup> His collected work was first published in anthology form in 1971, under the title *The Obituary Book*, with an introduction by his colleague Clive Barnes, the theatre critic.<sup>78</sup> Barnes’s thoughts are of relevance to the theme of this chapter, in particular when he compares Whitman’s *New York Times* obituaries with those published by the British press (notably the *Telegraph* and the *Guardian*) of the 1960s and early 1970s:



the British obituary tends to be a skimpy thing, a recitation of bald facts with perhaps nothing more than a few subsequent words of appreciation from friends to send a man out on his way to eternity....They order things differently in the United States...[and] the American obituary writer has the space to expand his subject beyond the immediate facts.<sup>79</sup>

Nevertheless, the *New York Times* appeared to lose its obituary direction and enthusiasm following Alden Whitman's retirement. For much of the 1980s, there was a marked decline; obituary space was reduced frequently to a third, and sometimes even a quarter, of a page. A gradual increase became apparent in 1987, however, and by the end of that year both space and style had returned to the measure of the Whitman years. The return was sufficient, in December 1987, for an authoritative obituary of James Baldwin, the writer:

Some critics said his language was sometimes too elliptical, his indictments sometimes too sweeping. But then, Mr Baldwin's prose, with its apocalyptic tone – a legacy of his early exposure to religious fundamentalism – and its passionate yet distanced sense of advocacy, seemed perfect for a period in which blacks in the South lived under continual threat of racial violence and in which civil-rights workers often faced brutal beatings and even death.<sup>80</sup>

Though there was a temporary reversal in the early 1990s, when page space was again reduced and the listing of obituaries vanished from the front-page index, signs of recovery were once more apparent in 1994. By the middle of 1995, the *New York Times* had resumed its stature as a leading publisher of obituaries, in quality and quantity.

### **A much overdue delivery in Washington**

The previous chapter has discussed the unashamed parochialism of the *Washington Post*. That characteristic was well established by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when obituaries carried home addresses (with street numbers) and detailed lists of surviving relatives, along with the date and time of the funeral. It was a policy which was to last more than seventy years – until, presumably, the fabric of society had decayed to the extent that publication of address and funeral information inspired robberies. In 1902, Mrs Eugenia L. Phillips, 'one of the oldest and best-known residents of Washington', died at her home, 1707 H Street North-west;<sup>81</sup> in 1941, Lieutenant Colonel George W. Ricker, of 1401 Forty-Fourth Street North-west, died in a military air crash;<sup>82</sup> in 1972,

Walter H. McClenon, of 3400 Gleneagles Drive, Rossmoor, a thirty-year veteran of the Library of Congress, died at Montgomery General Hospital.<sup>83</sup> While the obituaries desk was recording the last of those addresses, Woodward and Bernstein were talking to ‘Deep Throat’.

That contrast was noted by Richard Pearson, obituaries editor at the *Post* for fifteen years until his enforced retirement (through illness) in 2003, in an interview for this thesis:

People think of us as a big paper, a national paper, but foremost we’re a local paper. With Watergate...we gave the appearance of being a star publication, but obituaries [in the 1970s] were lagging because of the way they were handled. Copy aides would take telephone numbers of people calling in, they would drop them in a box and reporters would pick one out and try to call. So there was no real standard. A lot of the editors treated them as just something to fill up the space when we had room. For major figures, we just ran wires [obituaries from agencies].<sup>84</sup>

Departures from the formula, over eight decades, were rare. An opportunity for a greater degree of creativity did occur, however, in April 1912, with the sinking of the *Titanic*. The death toll was 1,517 (of 2,223 passengers and crew).<sup>85</sup> One of those who died was Major Archie Butt, military attaché to President Taft; although the early casualty lists were confused and contradictory, there was never any doubt that Butt was among the dead. As President Taft himself said in the *Washington Post* obituary, Butt’s chivalry and training made death the only choice: ‘I knew that Maj. Butt had not been saved. He was a soldier, and remained on deck, where duty told him he belonged.’<sup>86</sup>

The *Post* itself recalled this son of an old Southern family as the consummate presidential envoy on state occasions:

Under Maj. Butt’s direction, the four great evening receptions at the White House during the official season were changed from hopeless crushes into dignified and enjoyable levees. At these affairs as well as at musicales and smaller receptions at the White House, Maj. Butt stood opposite the President and Mrs Taft and announced the guests as they arrived in the blue room. His accuracy in the pronunciation of names was remarkable.<sup>87</sup>

*Post* journalists, though, seldom encountered such prospects for expressiveness in obituary writing. The pattern of local composition, in boilerplate fashion and allied to reliance on wire services for prominent subjects, was to endure while greater sophistication was emerging elsewhere. According to Pearson, the standard of its obituaries had become so poor by the early 1980s, that the *Post* was regarded as an ‘embarrassment’.<sup>88</sup> Consequently, an in-house bureau was established. By 1982, there was a fresh sense of ordered presentation and consistency of style about Washington’s ‘home-town’ obituaries. Under Pearson’s editorship, in the late 1980s, wit, anecdote, and inventiveness were encouraged too, as in this obituary of William ‘Fishbait’ Miller, a ‘legendary doorkeeper’ at the House of Representatives, who

hit the headlines...when then-Princess Elizabeth of Great Britain and her husband, Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, paid a highly publicized visit to Washington. When she entered the House, he greeted the princess with a breezy ‘Howdy, Ma’am’....As the princess gamely waved to House members from the speaker’s rostrum, Mr Miller was heard to bellow down to the floor, ‘Hey, pass me up the prince.’<sup>89</sup>

Resourcefulness and inspiration, therefore, became apparent in *Washington Post* obituaries at about the same time as the post-Whitman revival at the *New York Times*. The poor record of the *Post* over the preceding eighty years, though, rendered this national capital phenomenon as more a question of overdue delivery than welcome renaissance.

### **Confederate memories and segregation in the South**

Indications of America enthusiasm for formalised journalism training, with specified instruction on obituary composition, were apparent in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One pioneering text, Ross’s *The Writing of News* (1911), offered advice to reporters on ways of obtaining information for obituaries, adding that style and tone should be ‘dignified and simple, in keeping with the theme’.<sup>90</sup> Another, MacDougall’s *A College Course in Reporting for Beginners* (1935), advocated the use of anecdotes and ‘first-person reminiscences’ as a means of polishing newspaper obituaries.<sup>91</sup>

Atlanta’s *Constitution*, in the early years of the century, pre-empted that concern for soundness of technique and grace of delivery in obituaries – only to display a sustained decline in standard from the 1920s. A prime example of initial strength is found in the 1902 obituary of Judge Robert Falligant, the Savannah branch president

of the Confederate Veterans' Association. The *Constitution* offered readers an account, in impressive detail, of his father's adventurous travels from France to America, where Robert Falligant subsequently served in the Civil War with 'the flower of the young manhood of the south'.<sup>92</sup> His obituary recounted his courage at the battles of both Chancellorsville and Gettysburg and, finally, at Cold Harbour, where Lieutenant Falligant had fought 'all the day until night had drawn its sable mantle over the carnage'.<sup>93</sup>

The Falligant obituary was illustrated with a drawing of its subject, as was the obituary that same year of Jennie Croly, founder of Sorosis, the pioneer women's club. In a moment of unusually candid revelation for the period, the *Constitution* added that members of Sorosis had looked after their founder in her final years, when in addition to 'her ill-health and helplessness, the enterprises in which her money was invested failed and her income was greatly reduced'.<sup>94</sup> Candid reporting, though of a more lurid nature, was also found in the account of a prominent landowner's suicide. While the report did follow a standard obituary format in some respects, it also explained that Marshall R. Hudson had

placed the muzzle of the loaded gun in his mouth and fired. The entire load passed through his head, scattering his brains over the room. His terrified wife sprang from her bed to see her husband fall a corpse to the floor.<sup>95</sup>

The paper's enthusiasm for obituary was showing some sign of decay by 1912, when the topic was summarised in a series of brief notices under the heading 'Mortuary'.<sup>96</sup> Even the presidential attaché Major Archie Butt, a Georgian by birth and 'connected with...[an] old colonial family', was accorded just a brief tribute when the *Titanic* was lost.<sup>97</sup> In common with international trends in newspaper production, the *Constitution* from the 1920s devoted considerable space to display advertising, social pages with a high pictorial content, and comic strips. If its subject was not regarded as being a person of stature in Georgian society, an obituary was relegated to single-paragraph treatment in an obscure column entitled 'State Deaths and Funerals'.<sup>98</sup>

By the 1940s, the *Constitution* was scattering its minimalist obituaries around the general news columns. One such column, on 2 December 1942, carried (in descending order) an account of a public address by a syndicated journalist of some note, an obituary of a patent medicine manufacturer, a brief Associated Press despatch from Florida on business unrest, and two short death reports. The obituary

and one of the death reports each carried the word ‘succumbs’ in its headline.<sup>99</sup> This proved to be a singularly overworked verb of the era. In one edition alone, readers were told: ‘Buck Jones succumbs to Boston burns’ (p4), ‘Mrs Schwab succumbs here at 82’ (p6), and ‘Robert Lee Howell succumbs at home’ (also p6).<sup>100</sup>

Though use of that verb itself succumbed in the years after World War II, the obituary art continued to be treated with some editorial indifference. The only exceptions, in a continuation of a pattern established in the 1920s, were the obituaries of prominent citizens or national celebrities. Otherwise, until the mid-1990s, they appeared under a variety of collective headings – ‘Obituary’, ‘Obituaries’, ‘Deaths’ – with each listing rendered in the most basic style: name, age, indication of address, perhaps a paragraph or two of life history, surviving family, funeral details. As a precursor of the paid obituary (a feature of United States newspapers discussed at length in Chapter Seven), classified death and funeral notices became noticeably more lavish in the 1960s. This appeared to be particularly the case among African-American readers. They were allocated, as late as the 1960s, their own section of the *Constitution*’s classified advertising pages, under the heading ‘Colored’.<sup>101</sup>

Martin Luther King was shortly to change all that, but Atlanta had to wait rather longer, until the mid-1990s, for a significant improvement in its featured obituaries. Revival came slowly to the South.

### **An ‘A-list’ obituary agenda for Los Angeles**

The *Los Angeles Times* building was damaged by dynamite explosion in 1910, an attack ‘to which two radically-minded union men, the McNamara brothers, eventually confessed’.<sup>102</sup> They did it because the *Times*, published by General Harrison Clay Otis, had consistently resisted the presence of organised labour on its payroll. The newspaper’s necrology was given, by this time, to expressing itself in a similarly sensational fashion. Back in 1892, it had recounted the violent death of John Waters, ‘the hard-headed darky [*sic*]’, who was attacked with a hammer by his business partner, was found to have suffered a fractured skull, but ‘walked around for the best part of two days’, before he ‘took to his bed and died’.<sup>103</sup> In 1912, Calbraith Rodgers, the ‘daring birdman...first to cross the continent in an aeroplane’, miscalculated a stunt at Long Beach and died when his craft hit ‘the first line of breakers’.<sup>104</sup> The report did include a brief life summary, but seemed more concerned with describing the pilot’s fatal injuries.

Sandwiched by these events, there were occasional passages of classic obituary, particularly in the instance of business or political leaders of frontier heritage. John Quincy Tufts, a former congressman and ‘official in Indian territory’, was remembered as ‘one of the best known...pioneers of the boom days’ who had established the largest sporting goods outlet in America’s south-west.<sup>105</sup> Otto Freeman, who ‘came to California with the gold hunters’ in 1849, made his fortune in lumber and real estate, and died as the result of a fall ‘while climbing in the loft’ at his Pasadena home.<sup>106</sup>

The Tufts obituary, published in 1902, included a photograph of its subject – one of the earliest such instances. The *New York Tribune* had pioneered the process of photographic reproduction in 1897, and ‘pictorial journalism was on its way’.<sup>107</sup> By the 1920s, when the *Los Angeles Times* was concentrating on Hollywood and sport, all generously illustrated, the space allocated to obituaries had suffered accordingly. Nevertheless, the between-the-wars practice was not so neglected here as it was at the *Post* in Washington or at the *Constitution* in Atlanta. Its fortunes showed signs of improvement in the 1930s, through the restoration of news columns devoted to county-by-county summaries and through substantial obituaries of prominent individuals. One such instance occurred with the death, in the street after an address to the Los Angeles Bar Association, of Judge Clair Sprague Tappaan. He was accorded a comprehensive obituary, in which the newspaper acknowledged the judge’s record of ‘fearlessness manifested in several cases with a background of political bitterness’.<sup>108</sup>

There was a dip in the level of obituary content once more, however, from the early 1940s, when war news and show business features dominated the pages. In a pattern which was to be sustained from then until the late 1980s, the *Los Angeles Times* relegated its standard obituaries to an occasional half-column, well inside the paper. Departure from this process came only with celebrity death. The obituary of William Boyd, better known as ‘Hopalong Cassidy’, made the front page:

As the ageless Hoppy, Mr Boyd rode his horse, Topper, across the range for a quarter of a century. On the screen, he never smoked, drank, swore or made love to women. He always tried to capture rustlers rather than shoot them and he always let the villain draw first when a show-down was inevitable....He felt it was his duty to strengthen the moral fiber of American youth. The Hopalong code of conduct espoused loyalty, honesty, ambition, kindness, manners, obedience, patriotism, cleanliness and thrift. He once turned down a lucrative [advertising] offer...because he disapproved of chewing gum.<sup>109</sup>

By concentrating on the famous dead, some opportunities for storytelling were ignored. When Mabel Hutton, the mother of film actress Betty Hutton, died in a fire at her Hollywood apartment, a paragraph or two of obituary told how she had supported her young family by working on an automobile assembly line ‘at 22 cents an hour’.<sup>110</sup> She had also run a saloon in Michigan, where Betty Hutton and her sister Marion appeared as juvenile dancers. That however, was all; the obituary – such as it was – then lapsed into an account of her more famous daughter’s career. Lew L. Lipton was remembered as head of the MGM comedy department from 1925 until 1937, at the cusp of the film industry’s shift to sound, writing material for W. C. Fields and Laurel and Hardy. His boilerplate obituary in 1962, however, made no attempt to capture mood and scene.<sup>111</sup> It would be nearly thirty years before the *Los Angeles Times* introduced a radical new design, and a dash of star treatment, to its obituary practice.

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## Australia

### From apogée to apology in Sydney and Melbourne

Of the eight Australian newspapers considered in this study, five were in existence at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the obituary art bloomed in the last years of Victorian journalism’s indulgence in opulent expression. Two, the *Sun* (now the *Herald Sun*) and the *Canberra Times*, emerged in the 1920s. The *Australian* followed in 1964. Accordingly, the force of circumstances was varied. In some instances, the obituary declined for reasons similar to those identified in discussing the history of newspaper publishing in Britain and the United States; in others, it was already unfashionable from the date of their first edition.

The point has been made in Chapter Three that, to appreciate the true flowering of the obituary in Australia, one has to consider too the illustrated weekly papers of Sydney and Melbourne. The *Australasian*, which began in 1864 as the weekly companion to Melbourne’s *Argus*, was printing obituaries with a certain swagger by 1895, when the death occurred of the pioneer landowner and philanthropist Sir Samuel Wilson. The *Australasian* told of his humble arrival in the colony of Victoria as a gold prospector, of his industry in ‘damming creeks and cutting drains’ to make ‘the dry plains fruitful’, and of his ‘highly prosperous’ pastoral development.<sup>112</sup> He had given £30,000 to the University of Melbourne, received a knighthood from a grateful colonial government, and set up house in London, where he ‘gave dinners to princes...and married his children into aristocratic families’.<sup>113</sup>

The *Sydney Mail*, weekly adjunct to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, allowed itself to be seduced by the prevailing apogée of the obituary art at the death of Queen Victoria six years later:

There never has been a ruler over so vast and so varied a confederation of peoples. There never has been a ruler so universally beloved by them. During those two days of suspense, during which the news from the sick room at Osborne [her residence] virtually monopolised the electric telegraphs of the world, there were being said by Mahommedans, Hindoos, Brahmins, Buddhists, as well as all the denominations of Christendom, prayers for the recovery of a Queen who was to all of them 'the Good Queen'.<sup>114</sup>

The *Mail* also took readers to the deathbed itself in a manner which, if applied today, would be considered ethically questionable:

There was a slight improvement on the Monday afternoon. The Queen awoke from a refreshing sleep at 4 o'clock and partook of some champagne and slight nourishment. She saw and spoke feebly to the Emperor William and the Duke of Connaught, both of whom were visibly touched on leaving. At 5 o'clock she fell asleep in the arms of the Princess of Wales....A stimulant was given to her Majesty, who showed a return to consciousness at the sound of her grandson's voice....Her Majesty asked for her favourite Pomeranian dog. It was brought to her and she fondled it for a moment.<sup>115</sup>

The daily newspapers of Melbourne and Sydney maintained a sustained respect, if not exactly a show of enthusiasm, for obituary publication. Its presence was, to some considerable extent, inspired by the sensational circumstances of the death or by the stature of the subject. Melbourne's *Age* gave more than a column, in 1892, to the suicide of Mr T.P. Fallon, 'a gentleman well known in business and social circles'.<sup>116</sup> It traced his history of property ownership and development, but was unable to resist the fascination of a violent death, describing how he was found

lying on the bed, with blood pouring from his mouth and eyes and ears. A portion of his brains were about his face...a revolver, on the butt of which his hand was firmly clenched, and with a thin film of smoke still curling from the barrel, spoke eloquently of the deed that had been enacted.<sup>117</sup>



Generous space was found too for obituaries received by cable. Under the heading 'Three noted men dead', the *Age* in May 1902 printed the life histories of the novelist Bret Harte, an admiral of the United States navy, and the Roman Catholic archbishop of New York.<sup>118</sup> Australian obituaries in the years leading up to World War I were not uncommon in the *Age*, but were generally accorded a relatively low profile by their inclusion in a feature entitled 'About People'. One such listing in that summary was the obituary of George Rignold, whose stage presence had won posthumous accolades in the London's *Daily Telegraph* (see earlier this chapter). For its part, the *Age* recalled him as 'for nearly thirty years...a prominent figure on the Australian stage' who had also made a triumphant tour of the United States in *Henry V*.<sup>119</sup>

The *Sydney Morning Herald* brought out some thick black borders for its columns on 15 January 1892, at the death of the Duke of Clarence, described as the favourite son of Queen Victoria. The *Herald* account blamed pneumonia, which had developed when he 'caught cold while attending the funeral of the late Count Gleichen, and afterwards contracted another chill while shooting at Sandringham'.<sup>120</sup> Describing him as a prince 'of much amiability of disposition', the obituary recounted in detail his Australian tour of eleven years earlier, when he was a midshipman in the Royal Navy.

Recollections of Australian journeys, though this time of the cricketing variety, were included in the *Herald*'s obituary of 'Johnny' Briggs, of Lancashire and England, who had died in an asylum. The text referred, somewhat obliquely, to his withdrawal from a Test match against Australia when he 'became suddenly ill' and to his subsequent 'very serious illness', as a result of which he was 'conveyed to Cheadle Asylum'.<sup>121</sup> What it did not disclose was that he made six tours of Australia in the 1880s and 1890s, an astonishing history given the onerous travel of the time, and that he was committed to Cheadle because of epileptic seizures caused by a blow from a cricket ball.<sup>122</sup>

The *Herald* also missed an opportunity to enrich with detail the obituary of another cricketer, Arthur Coningham of New South Wales and Australia. His obituary, in 1939, included his batting and bowling records from a tour of England in 1893 and recalled how, on a cold day in the outfield at Lord's, he had 'gathered papers that had blown on the ground and put a match to them, using the flames to warm his hands'.<sup>123</sup>

The obituary failed, however, to record a more controversial incident in his life. In 1900 he sued Father O'Haran, administrator of St Mary's Roman Catholic cathedral in Sydney, claiming that O'Haran 'had an affair with his [Coningham's] wife, a charge which stirred deep sectarian passions'.<sup>124</sup>

It is fair to say, though, that the *Sydney Morning Herald* gave reasonable play to obituaries until World War II. Business identities, the clergy, ex-servicemen, members of pioneering families, and those of some local repute in sport were accorded notices expressed in reverential, formal tones. Mr E. Rich was described as a 'deceased gentleman',<sup>125</sup> Mr J. Gregg 'had not been in the best of health for some time',<sup>126</sup> Mr Wade Brown pursued good works for his church 'with a benevolence that sought no publicity',<sup>127</sup> and Mrs J.R.F. Rutledge was 'a zealous worker for charity'.<sup>128</sup> In the event of a subject of prominence, a composition of more generous duration and elegance of expression appeared. This was particularly the case in the obituary of Henry Lawson, the writer and poet, in 1922:

In those earlier unfruitful days of poverty and repression – isolated and driven in upon himself by deafness, and out of tune with his environment – his shyness was almost a disease. He became embittered in mind, aloof, and sombre in bearing, retreating in habit. One day, seized by a sudden impulse, he began to write....A day or two later, he saw his first verse in print...the turning point of his life.<sup>129</sup>

In Melbourne, the *Age* had displayed some cooling of ardour for the obituary since the outbreak of World War I, when newsprint restrictions started to bite and when the remaining space was forced to find room for war news and casualty lists. The *Age* had encouraged readers to submit 'photographs of soldiers who have died on active service'; these were subsequently published in a feature entitled 'Careers of the Fallen'.<sup>130</sup>

In an essay on Australia's 'culture of death', Pat Jalland has argued that

The Great War marked a turning-point in the history of death, grief and mourning in Australia. It shattered the traditional culture of death as a dominant model...and also accelerated a pre-existing decline in Christian mourning rituals.<sup>131</sup>

It is possible that the decline in mourning rituals, as divined in Jalland's essay, was a force of restraining circumstance upon obituary publication between the wars. Change in content, much like that described in the United States section of this chapter, plainly had an effect on Australian newspapers too. In 1938, Sydney's daily newspapers had 47 per cent more advertising than they had enjoyed in 1933.<sup>132</sup> At the *Age*, the obituary limped on as a rather apologetic component of the 'About People' column, achieving greater self-expression only when the eminence of the subject so demanded. Such an event occurred at the death, in 1932, of Captain Albert Jacka, V.C., M.C. and bar, a soldier of 'most conspicuous bravery' who had consistently displayed 'contempt for the safety of his own life' in World War I.<sup>133</sup> He was accorded nearly a whole column.

### **The repression of talents**

Reduced by newsprint rationing for long periods to just four pages a day in World War II, the *Age* would take nearly fifty years to regain its taste for consistent obituary publication. In the immediate post-war years, it carried an occasional collection of vestigial notices under the heading of 'Obituary', in much the same manner as that adopted by the *Telegraph* in London.<sup>134</sup> They were formulaic in content, predictable in delivery, unrevealing as first drafts of social history, and they were gone by the 1960s.

Yet the talent was there. In 1986, eight years before the revival of the dying art in the *Age*, Melbourne's morning broadsheet had commissioned John Cargher, a performing arts writer and broadcaster of some distinction, to write the obituary of Sir Robert Helpmann. Preferring not to pursue the inflammatory 'homosexual of the proselytising kind' approach adopted in London by the *Times* (see Chapter Five), Cargher wrote with measured judgment, a nicely restrained admiration and a gentle wit:

Curiously enough, Helpmann was weakest in the field for which he was most famous: the dance....His technical shortcomings were covered with fakery of such a high calibre that it verged on genius....Like most showmen, Helpmann was flamboyant and often outrageous....It was Helpmann who pointed out the unsuitability of the male anatomy to nude ballet. He never produced one; at least not in public. The Nederlands Dance Theatre did, and proved his point.<sup>135</sup>

Later, within two years of obituary resuscitation, the *Age* published a piece of equally high quality on a campaigner for motor neurone disease research. Graeme O'Neill's obituary, with its bleak account of Richard Bottomley's inherited disorder, was an exemplar of employing descriptive passages in the art:

In the room there was a computer and printer, and a large draughtsman's table – a relic of his former job as a draughtsman for a mining company. Spread out on it was an elaborate family pedigree that he hoped might give geneticists clues in their hunt for the defective gene that causes MND....He was using a special computer, activated by a switch positioned beside his jaw, to type letters and documents...for up to seven hours a day, ignoring pain.<sup>136</sup>

The *Sydney Morning Herald*, where the obituary was in similar hibernation after World War II, showed its latent abilities in its full-page obituary of Australia's prime minister, Harold Holt, who drowned at a secluded surf beach on 17 December 1967. Staff writers Gavin Souter and Evan Williams produced a definitive appraisal, which appeared the following morning. It offered an instant biography in detail, discussed his political achievements and reverses, and spiced the narrative with character sketch:

Whenever weather permitted, he went spearfishing – usually at a depth of between 10 and 20ft, using only the air he could hold in his lungs. He disapproved of scuba diving. Wearing a rubber jerkin, a sweater (inside which he carried his catch) and an old pair of black ballet tights, he swam for an hour-and-a-half to two hours at a time.<sup>137</sup>

Apart from the occasional original effort along similar lines, most commonly at the death of a politician or an entertainer of note, the *Herald* allowed the obituary field to lie fallow from the years of wartime newsprint rationing until the years of comparative plenty in the 1990s. The increase in newspaper size, in Sydney and elsewhere, was then to prove a significant factor in the obituary's international revival.

## From artistry to obscurity in Brisbane

The *Brisbane Courier* masthead survived until 1933, when the paper became known by its present title, the *Courier-Mail*. Its policy of presenting obituaries in a ‘headline-free melange’, as identified in Chapter Three, lasted nearly as long. By 1922, however, they were appearing in the general news columns as items demanding attention on their own merits. In that year this more felicitous treatment was found in such obituaries as those of John Campbell, a builder of renown and ‘an omnivorous reader’ of Robert Burns,<sup>138</sup> and Peter McDermott, a senior public servant and celebrated member of Brisbane’s Johnsonian Club.<sup>139</sup> Both these appeared in the edition of 10 November, with the McDermott obituary in particular offering evidence that the art was still in flower in Queensland. In reflecting on his subject’s earlier career as a schoolteacher, the *Courier* obituarist recalled:

it is said that even at the beginning he devoted more attention to the literary development of his pupils than to the geographical and mathematical sides. An old Queensland inspector of schools on an occasion said: ‘I always know the young teachers or pupils who have been under McDermott. They are apt at Miltonics or the life work of Dr Johnson, but they can’t do sums.’<sup>140</sup>

Some signs of decline, certainly as far as artistry of expression was concerned, are apparent in the 1930s. The style changed to that of a series of brief life summaries under the collective headline ‘Obituary’. Perhaps the previous decade’s less disciplined practice of random positioning did need correction; unfortunately, the charm vanished with the new sense of order. On the outbreak of World War II, a time when Brisbane achieved strategic importance as the major Australian city closest to the Pacific conflict, there was little scope for civilian obituary. The *Courier-Mail* published instead its tributes to the war dead. These brief accounts often told stories of poignant loss, as in the instance of Sergeant ‘Jack’ Peters, killed in a training flight while on active service, the ‘only son of Mrs J.C. Peters, Eagle Farm’.<sup>141</sup> There was just enough room to add that her husband had died in action at Polygon Wood in World War I.

The obituary art then became unfashionable at the *Courier-Mail* until the 1990s, reduced to sporadic appearance by the forces of display advertising, bolder use of photography, home renovation and fashion features, and a significant increase in sports news. The chairman of the Queensland Canegrowers’ Council was given twelve brief paragraphs, with no scope for anecdote or appraisal;<sup>142</sup> a veteran officer

of the North Queensland Returned Servicemen's League was accorded just two.<sup>143</sup> These accounts both appeared on a decidedly cluttered front page of the paper on the same day, 17 May 1962, typifying the Australian press's view of obituary publication at the time; it had become a minor player in the production of general news.

### **Inconsistency in Perth, neglect in Adelaide**

Of the eight Australian newspapers studied, Perth's was the one with least interest in the obituary throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Its practice, for the first few decades, was for the most part directed at reproduction of material found in British newspapers or received by cable. The local variety, in essence no more than a death report, was almost invariably included from the 1900s until the 1930s in the columns entitled 'News & Notes' and 'Funerals'. Departure from this practice was unusual, occasioned only by such instances as the death in 1902 of Western Australia's premier, George Leake. A lengthy report of his pneumonia ('On Thursday afternoon, he...had a shivering attack....On Tuesday, about noon, signs of cardiac failure occurred'), was followed by an extensive biography, all contained within thick black borders:

From his youth he showed himself possessed of that magnetism which attracts one's fellow men. Those who lived in Perth at the time that the ill-fated steamer *Georgette* was wrecked...will remember how, during that time of painful waiting and suspense, the name of George Leake, then on the threshold of manhood and one of the passengers on board the vessel, was on everyone's lips and the feeling of relief with which it was eventually learned that he was safe.<sup>144</sup>

With rationing in force during World War II, and for some years afterwards, the obituary was not to enjoy that degree of free expression again for nearly a century. The practice in the 1950s was to note the deaths of Western Australian citizens, save for the most prominent of their number, in the 'Personal' column. The following decade, when suburban supplements were being published, occasional obituary opportunities appeared. Their realisation was inconsistent, though, ranging from the single paragraph to the full-blown, anecdote-laced, if somewhat amateurish, variety. An example of the latter was published following the death of Cyril Cornish (not, incidentally, related to the present obituaries editor of the paper), who in World War I had been 'recommended for the V.C., but was awarded the D.S.O....after he and

another man had attacked the Germans with hand grenades'.<sup>145</sup> The *West Australian* then entered a long period of haphazard, dry obituary, enlivened solely by wire service material on individuals from politics, business, sport, and the arts. As was the case in Washington, the eventual nurturing of the practice in Perth, in 2000, gave the impression of being more an overture than a reprise.

In Adelaide, the *Advertiser's* inclination of the 1890s towards rich sentiment and ornate language tended to atrophy in the first two decades of the new century. It began summarising local obituaries in its 'Personal' column, a practice pursued for thirty years and varied only when the force of news value so demanded. The dramatic circumstances afflicting the Duke of Fife inspired one such event. He, with the Princess Royal and their two daughters, was a passenger on a ship which sank off the coast of Morocco, and

It was thought that no one of the royal travellers was any the worse for the adventure, but it is to be feared that the drenching and the exposure told on the duke and left him too weak to fight successfully against the malady which [subsequently] struck him down in Egypt.<sup>146</sup>

Then, in the 1930s, a well organised if irregular feature carrying the headline 'Obituary' appeared. It was kept going, although on a reduced scale, during the war years, when editorial space in the *Advertiser* had to be found for casualty reports. In addition, as was the case throughout Australia, newsprint rationing had militated against the cause of considered, reflective obituary. Adelaide's morning paper by 1942 was exactly half its immediate pre-war size.

The post-war years were unproductive ones for the obituary in Adelaide. Its slender and tenuous presence was represented by the nine short paragraphs allocated to Sid Shepherd, 'one of...[the state's] best known agriculturalists',<sup>147</sup> the eight similarly brief paragraphs on a former professional soccer player who had served as a theatre commissioner for thirty years,<sup>148</sup> and the three paragraphs found for a distinguished member of the 9<sup>th</sup> Light Horse who had won the Military Cross in World War I and later become president of the Adelaide Hunt Club.<sup>149</sup> It was poor stuff, symptomatic of the neglect into which obituaries had fallen in four decades following World War II. Once more, space considerations must have been a contributing force, although these, unlike the wartime version, were self-imposed. The *Advertiser* by the early 1970s was frequently printing thirty-four pages; six of them, generally, were allocated

to news (in the realm of which, obituary had to take its chance). Some of those half-dozen pages carried extensive display advertising; the remainder of the paper was devoted to home comfort and recreational pursuits, sport, more advertising, and an extensive television guide. Only a dead celebrity, such as the entertainer Peter Allen, in 1992, could still call the obituary home.<sup>150</sup>

### **Pictorial in name and act**

Melbourne's *Herald Sun* first appeared in 1990, after the merger of the morning *Sun News-Pictorial* and the evening *Herald*. For the purposes of discussing the history of obituary publication, the *Sun*'s record is considered here, as this newspaper – in terms of its design and morning characteristic – was the one which more closely resembled today's *Herald Sun*. It began on 11 September 1922, with a spectacular attack on conventional newspapers of the day. While their front pages were devoted to advertising, the *Sun* was unquestionably pictorial. Its front page was entirely given over to photography – of a race meeting, the Prince of Wales 'holidaying incognito as Captain Metcalfe in Cornwall', a motoring accident, a dockside farewell, a traffic policeman in cape and helmet, and the pet cat at the *Sun* office.<sup>151</sup>

Short obituaries were published in the early years in a feature entitled 'A Place in the Sun'.<sup>152</sup> By World War II, the civilian dead were commemorated in an 'Obituary' column, with official casualty lists carrying the names of those dying on military service. The obituary, in truth, was never suited to the breezy delivery of the peacetime *Sun*. When the noted combat photographer Frank Hurley died, he was accorded a brief notice among items of general news;<sup>153</sup> the life of Fred Williams, a landscape painter of renown, was told in nine paragraphs under a photograph of a children's dance festival and immediately above an advertisement for the amazing 'Tummy Trim' device.<sup>154</sup> There was always room, however, for necrology, particularly if it concerned accidental or, even better, heroic death. Occasionally, such reports offered passages of biographical material – but it was the death, not the life, which enjoyed precedence.

### **Slow evolution in Canberra**

The slow between-the-wars obituary contraction was being felt when the *Canberra Times* was born. Yet, in the sixteen pages of its first edition (3 September 1926), it offered a generous measure of local content. An obituary of sorts was included, although it was barely more than a death notice in terms of information value and size. It acknowledged the life of Paul Brennan, 82, 'a pioneer of the district' who had



been born at Tuggeranong, a grazing settlement now a satellite city of the national capital: 'His sturdy personality and kindness of heart endeared him to all who came within his circle of friends.'<sup>155</sup>

Standard obituaries were to continue in this form until after World War II. The *Canberra Times* ignored the death of a former prime minister, Andrew Fisher, in October 1928 and, four years later, could find room for only five paragraphs on Albert Jacka VC, who, as reported earlier, had been accorded nearly an entire column in the *Age*. Even then, the Jacka story was more a funeral report than an obituary: 'Many people stood for hours in the sun to pay homage to the dead hero...[N]early 2000 unemployed joined the cortège at St Kilda.'<sup>156</sup> One departure from this pattern in the late 1920s and early 1930s was prompted by the death of Dame Nellie Melba, the opera singer. The *Canberra Times* of 24 February 1931 offered four decks of headlines on its front page, a photograph, a tribute from prime minister Scullin, a generous account of her career, and told its readers: 'Thus has been silenced the sweetest songster and most famous soprano and operatic singer of modern times.'<sup>157</sup>

By 1942, the front page of the *Times* was reflecting the prevailing fear in Australia – invasion by Japan. Singapore had fallen, the Solomon Islands were under siege, and refugees from New Guinea were seeking shelter in North Queensland. With such competition for space, in such a mood of national travail, and with wartime editions of four pages, the obituary was unlikely to flourish. The Impressionist painter Julian Ashton, who always claimed that he was the first in his country to complete a work *en plein air*,<sup>158</sup> was accorded just three dispassionate sentences by the *Canberra Times* on his death in April that year.<sup>159</sup> With newsprint restrictions lingering, by the 1950s Canberra's newspaper offered its readership a total of six pages, filled largely by wire service material and leavened by reports of local hospital board meetings, social diaries, and sport. There was no wit, no inspiration, no letters column, no sense of community spirit, and some photography of quite awful woodenness. The routine obituary, when found, was unchanged from its 1926 rendition.

Canberra, though, is a government town. Its morning paper therefore published an extensive front-page obituary in 1952 of William ('Billy') Hughes, the 'fiery little Welshman' who served more than fifty years in federal parliament, eight of them as prime minister.<sup>160</sup> Ten years later, the front-page headlines announced the death of Lady De L'Isle, wife of the governor-general. It was a circumspect report, carrying some brief biographical material, giving her age as 48, but avoiding any details of

cause.<sup>161</sup> Readers learnt simply that she had been ‘gravely ill’.<sup>162</sup> The idiosyncratic style of Jack Waterford, later to bring a more explicit model of obituary to Canberra, was at that time still being nurtured by correspondence school at his family’s sheep station.

### **A ‘truly national’ event**

Rupert Murdoch’s *Australian*, launched on 15 July 1964 as ‘Australia’s first truly national newspaper’, took some years to publish obituaries with style and definition.<sup>163</sup> By the 1980s, when the paper had grown appreciably in size and advertising revenue, it was running a dedicated section. The edition of 10 August 1982, for example, carried four obituaries in this fashion. Three of the subjects – a mining engineer, a Victoria Cross winner, and an inventor – were Australian.<sup>164</sup> Though each obituary was, in general, of only 10 – 12 centimetres in length, the impression was a positive one. The feature had a clean, purposeful appearance, and made a superior editorial statement to that attempted in the same field of endeavour by London’s *Telegraph* and the *Los Angeles Times*.

Australia’s national newspaper did not pursue this course for long, replacing it after six months, in January 1983, with a page aimed at women readers. The obituary then reverted to news status once more, until the introduction of the ‘Time & Tide’ page in 1993. For the intervening ten years, in all Australian daily newspapers, obituary publication assumed the character of Shakespeare’s ‘lean and slippered pantaloons’.<sup>165</sup> Its shank was shrunk.

### **Conclusions**

The obituary, as practised by the quality broadsheets of British journalism, entered the 20<sup>th</sup> century with a certain splendour of expression. It was given liberal opportunity and generous column space to offer an instant biography of the distinguished and privileged dead. The tone for the most part was reverential and laudatory, though some departure was apparent in the occasional critical edge applied by the *Manchester Guardian*. From the outbreak of World War I, however, the obituary lost standing. There was no longer room, under newsprint rationing, for the leisured, reflective account of a civilian life well lived; lengthy casualty lists from the battlefields, and the accompanying brief military obituaries, rendered pre-war practice immediately unfashionable.

Newspapers underwent further change in the years between two world wars. Advertising and pictorial content increased significantly; neither the *Telegraph* nor the *Guardian* displayed any enthusiasm for revisiting the obituary of the Victorian or Edwardian years. The *Morning Post*, once a leading practitioner, closed. Only the *Times* continued to foster an obituaries section, thereby achieving some splendour in isolation. A second world war brought newsprint restrictions of much greater ferocity than those encountered the first time around. Rationing then lingered until the late 1950s, eliminating any prospect of the obituary's peacetime rediscovery. Once more, it was the *Times* alone which kept the art from extinction, and its major opposition seemed content to allow an enduring measure of indulgence. When the *Times* was forced to close for a year because of industrial trouble, the *Telegraph* even rejected a proposal that it might capitalise on the hiatus by publishing its own obituaries page, on the grounds that it would have been 'rather bad form' to do so.

The four major American newspapers studied for this thesis recorded some diversified treatment of the obituary during its years of decline. It fared best, though with some occasional reverses, at the *New York Times*. The most significant event, in its 20<sup>th</sup> century realisation at the paper with 'All the News That's Fit to Print', was the 1964–1976 appointment of Alden Whitman as chief obituary writer. His biographical studies, drawn often from interviews with his subjects, demonstrated the possibilities of obituaries when given room to breathe. The *New York Times* subsequently displayed ambivalence towards obituary publication, before resuming its stature as a leader in the genre during the 1990s.

At the *Washington Post*, the standard obituary was regarded as unimportant until, on the admission of a senior staff member, its inadequate treatment had become something of an embarrassment. An editorial overhaul then put in place a more assured delivery from the 1980s. There was, at best, spasmodic concentration on obituaries at both the *Constitution* (now the *Journal-Constitution*) in Atlanta and the *Los Angeles Times*. Signs of withdrawal became noticeable as early as 1912 in Atlanta's morning newspaper, and by the 1940s a similar lack of commitment was apparent in Los Angeles.

Five of the eight selected Australian papers showed a marked cooling of interest in obituaries for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; this was particularly the case from the 1940s. Long before that, though, the obituary had become – except in the instance of the

celebrated dead – formulaic in content, predictable in delivery, and unrevealing as a first draft of social history. As was the case in Britain, Australia experienced severe newsprint rationing in World War II, driving obituaries into obscurity. Two newspapers, the *Sun News-Pictorial* (now the *Herald Sun*) in Melbourne and the *Canberra Times*, began publication in the 1920s, well after the flowering of the obituary art. Another, the *Australian*, was first published in 1964, when it had long withered.

Though the forces of circumstance were varied in both origin and chronology in Australia, considered in sum they exerted sufficient impact to render journalism's dying art almost moribund by the 1990s. Revival, however, was imminent.

## chapter five

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### Revival of a dying art

*Max Hastings, when he was made editor of the Daily Telegraph, managed with infinite tact to bring it at least into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, though it is true that he had one unique advantage, which was that roughly a third of his regular readers were dead, and indeed buried, or at least embalmed, thus being in no position to complain.*

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Bernard Levin (*If You Want My Opinion*)<sup>1</sup>

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## Britain

### The antecedents of change

Augustus Tilley had, by 1986, been obituaries editor of the *Telegraph* for twelve years. It was an odd sort of a job. According to a colleague, David Twiston Davies, the obituaries editor had the responsibility of ‘keeping as much material out of the paper as he decently could’, to satisfy the proprietors’ belief that readers were not interested in the dead.<sup>2</sup> If a person of prominence died, space could be found on the news pages. Augustus Tilley, therefore, had only to concern himself with the production of ‘half-a-dozen paragraphs a day; an essential part of the job, he declared, was to bring a book to read in the office’.<sup>3</sup> It was an office of a London newspaper at which ‘the average age of the Arts Department’s critics was seventy-two’, with a book-keeping system still performed in longhand, espousing an editorial policy of ‘whalebone-corseted Conservatism...well past its prime’.<sup>4</sup>

Bernard Levin, as a requirement of the satirist’s trade, exaggerates his finding of *rigor mortis* in the readers. They were, in fact, moving – moving away from the *Telegraph*. The political cartoonist Nicholas Garland, who at that stage was contemplating a shift to the newly created *Independent*, has said in his published memoir that the paper was losing 4,000 readers a day.<sup>5</sup> Garland’s recollections paint the *Telegraph* as a ‘home for dead-beats and eccentrics’, where ‘it was only after one leader [editorial] writer had sunk irrevocably into paranoia and alcoholism, and had ceased to come to work at all for over six months, that anyone got round to suggesting they might have to stop paying him’.<sup>6</sup> The cartoonist also maintains that *Telegraph* staff were ‘proud of the story’ that the owner, Lord Hartwell, had once proposed the appointment of another leader writer, T.E. (‘Peter’) Utley, as television critic. Utley was blind.

Conrad Black was not blind. He owned a chain of small newspapers across North America and had his sights on ‘control of a big title’.<sup>7</sup> In December 1985, he achieved that ambition through buying a majority stake in the *Telegraph*, and thereby securing for himself ‘one of the jewels of the British newspaper industry – if it could be saved from the brink of financial, industrial and editorial disaster’.<sup>8</sup> To put right the third of those factors, the following February he appointed Max Hastings, an author and *Sunday Times* columnist, as editor. Hastings, determined to challenge the *Times* as the perceived authority on obituary publication, in turn engaged Hugh Massingberd as obituaries editor, in July 1986, on the recommendation of a political columnist whose opinion he respected. Augustus Tilley remained on staff until the end of that year, then retired and watched his old page lead an international change of the old art. Decaying management, corporate opportunity, stock options, an inspired appointment, a nudge and a wink of approval, and the newspaper industry suddenly found itself confronting an obituary revival with a man who could not even type as its instigator.

### **The end of the street**

The obituary’s revival coincided with, was assisted by, and in its own not insignificant way was a contributor to, the transformation of the British press. Clive Barnes, in his 1971 introduction to the collected obituaries of Alden Whitman, found that British newspapers ‘suffer from brevity’ and since World War II had ‘hardly been ample enough to discuss at decent length the life and achievements of the newly dead’.<sup>9</sup> The reason was that they were being produced on outmoded equipment by a bloated workforce belonging to anarchic unions. Industrial intransigence, which had forced the *Times* and *Sunday Times* to close for a year, continued in the 1980s to restrict technological developments that had long been accepted overseas. Hastings, reflecting on the mood at the time of his appointment, has recalled that

The unions and their extortionate piecework rates restricted paper sizes. Printers received regular payments for non-existent work. Many men held down full-time jobs elsewhere in the London economy while appearing every week on newspaper payrolls. Any threat to the unions’ control of production was met by industrial action, to which daily newspapers are uniquely vulnerable.<sup>10</sup>

Linda Melvern, in *The End of the Street*, her definitive account of News International's history in this latter-day industrial revolution, has pointed to the significance of one week-end early in 1986, when the *Sunday Times* showed it was no longer willing to tolerate union excesses. On 18 January, the paper was printed for the first time at the company's Wapping premises, by the Thames. It carried this proclamation: 'This week's *Sunday Times* is 104 pages – the biggest ever produced in Britain. It contains a twelve-page special report on the country's most modern print plant.'<sup>11</sup> Inside was an editorial branding 'the affairs of Fleet Street a national disgrace', and admitting that

production departments were overmanned by at least 50 per cent in most areas and in some cases by up to 300 per cent. Three Royal Commissions and countless enquiries over the past forty years had urged Fleet Street to put its shameful house in order.<sup>12</sup>

A week after the appearance of that editorial, Murdoch's News International led what was soon to become the Fleet Street diaspora by moving all production to Wapping, described at the time as being picket-proof, with searchlights, razor wire, and electronically controlled access. The repercussions were impressive. The print unions, after much violence, were eventually seen off; the *Telegraph* confirmed plans to move to the gentrified docklands district, with the intent of cutting its staff by nearly two-thirds; the *Independent* made good its promise to open up shop there too; London's quality broadsheets became bolder and bigger.

It was the end of the street. It was the revival of the obituary.

### **Massingberd, Fergusson, and Grigg: agents of revival**

The new newspapers had to sustain the bounty of revolution by filling their increased column space with literate composition. Obituaries suited this cause, for, as Russell Baker has said so eloquently in his foreword to a 1997 anthology, they 'encourage the long view and raise entertaining questions'.<sup>13</sup> Baker relishes the 'blessed relief they provide after the front page', finding them to be

Oases of calm in a world gone mad. Stimulants to sweet memories of better times, to philosophical reflection, to discovery of life's astonishing richness, variety, comedy, sadness, of the diverse infinitude of human imaginations it takes to make this world. What a lovely part of the paper to linger in.<sup>14</sup>

However, on the evidence of the preceding chapter in this dissertation, the obituary art in Britain had – save at the *Times* – become a sad and ill-favoured thing. Then came Massingberd, Fergusson, and Grigg. Massingberd changed the scope and the perception of obituary, in Britain and elsewhere; James Fergusson was the usher of a radically amended form of presentation on the page; John Grigg, in one brief episode, tempted its writers to abandon restraint. Of these, it is Massingberd who has been accorded the greatest measure of credit, with Fergusson assuming – so far as this branch of popular culture is concerned – a significant, but secondary, place. Their respective, and often complementary, contributions to the revival demand reflection; first, though, Grigg must be despatched.

John Grigg, who had inherited the title Lord Altrincham (which he subsequently renounced) in 1955, won a reputation as a polemicist two years later with his criticism of the monarchy. In the journal which he edited, *National and English Review*, Grigg argued that the Queen was cut off from her subjects by her ‘tweedy courtiers’ and was also required to read texts so painful in their construction that her speaking style was ‘a pain in the neck’ and her apparent personality that of ‘a priggish school girl’.<sup>15</sup> Although, in the face of subsequent public outrage, he protested that his comments were intended to be constructive, he found himself

pilloried as a heretic in the press, challenged to a boxing match, struck in the face by a member of the League of Empire Loyalists...and described as ‘very silly’ by Dr Geoffrey Fisher, the Archbishop of Canterbury.<sup>16</sup>

Unquestionably, though, he proved his diligence as a writer, winning the Whitbread prize for biography and, in the 1980s, becoming a columnist on the *Times*. Grigg was acting obituaries editor there in 1986 in a brief but seminal stewardship noted by the author and obituarist Robert Chalmers for a Sunday newspaper feature on the revival:

John Grigg...produced some pieces which were not so much ‘warts and all’ as ‘warts only’ obituaries; many readers found Grigg’s work tricky to reconcile with Bacon’s belief that death ‘openeth the gate to good fame’.<sup>17</sup>

The dancer, choreographer and actor Sir Robert Helpmann had the fingers of his reputation jammed in that gate when the character sketch which Grigg wrote, or allowed to be written, contained this reference to Helpmann’s sexual proclivity:



His appearance was strange, haunting and rather frightening. There were, moreover, streaks in his character that made his impact upon a company dangerous as well as stimulating. A homosexual of the proselytising kind, he could turn young men on the borderline his way.<sup>18</sup>

Protests from the world of the performing arts were loud and sustained. One of the better humoured letters of complaint argued

in so far as ‘proselytising’ goes, whenever I saw Bobby he was always surrounded by a mass of attractive young persons of both sexes, all trying to get off with him (some with more success than others, naturally).<sup>19</sup>

Anthony Howard, a former deputy editor of the *Observer* and obituaries editor of the *Times* from 1993 to 1999, has identified the date of the Helpmann obituary, 29 September 1986, as the day that brought an end to the convention of *de mortuis nil nisi bonum* (of the dead speak only good).<sup>20</sup> On the broader question of obituary revival, though, Howard sees the reform of the *Telegraph* and the arrival of the *Independent* as being of more significance:

I think what really changed things was that the *Times* lost its monopoly. Two things came together [in 1986]. The *Telegraph* really decided to go for it, and the other thing was that the *Independent* came on the scene and decided to make a big go of obituaries...they also had access to a picture library.<sup>21</sup>

It is for his pictorial treatment that James Fergusson, obituaries editor at the *Independent* from the first edition on 7 October 1986, is noted as an agent of change. Prior to this, the occasional single-column head-and-shoulders portrait was the limit of obituary illustration. Fergusson, formerly an antiquarian bookseller, offers a self-deprecating reason for his dramatic use of photography. He maintains that, when dummy editions of the new paper were being produced, ‘we didn’t have enough words – so the pictures were used bigger’.<sup>22</sup> The outcome, fortuitous or otherwise, clearly has had its imitators; obituaries published by several of the newspapers examined for this thesis (notably those in Sydney and Los Angeles, as well as in London) have adopted a bold photographic approach. The policy becomes apparent in one of the early *Independent* obituaries, of Christopher Sykes, a biographer of some distinction. Sykes is seen, thirty-five years before his death, at a BBC radio drama rehearsal with two actors. The scene has the virtue of complementing, rather than simply illustrating, the text.

The Sykes obituary also demonstrates the new style of writing which Fergusson brought to obituary composition. It is written with an accent on first-person recollection, a profile more than a history, with no chronology in the narrative, and much reliance on anecdotes such as this:

More than once he described to me the game – it was his word – which he played in the London Underground. This was to follow a departing train by running through the tunnel to reach the next station before the next train crashed into you.<sup>23</sup>

The obituary concludes with the name of its author and a ‘go-last’ (a concluding one-paragraph summary of its subject’s dates of birth and death, marriage and progeny, and career accomplishments). The *Independent*, under Fergusson, was the first British newspaper to identify its obituary writers as a standard practice. It also, on the available evidence, became the first to use the ‘go-last’, a device which – like the photography – has subsequently been imitated by other practitioners. Recognising such inventiveness, the *Economist* in 1994 noted: ‘The *Independent* appointed as its obituaries editor...James Fergusson, who encouraged informal writing and unconventional photographs.’<sup>24</sup>

Fergusson’s editing has, therefore, a legitimate claim as a force of revival. Hugh Massingberd, in a 1989 newspaper interview, conceded that ‘James Fergusson made everybody think about what they were doing.’<sup>25</sup> It is Massingberd himself, however, who is widely acknowledged as the greater force. Anthony Howard, much as he recognises Fergusson’s achievements, said in an interview for this thesis: ‘I wouldn’t put the *Independent* in the same league as Hugh myself.’<sup>26</sup> Tim Heald, an author and contributing obituarist to the British broadsheets, agrees:

Up until Massingberd and the mid-80s, the *Times* was the only real player in the ‘obit’ game – at least in the UK. My mother always used to say ‘You get a better class of death in the *Times*.’ But Hugh changed everything, and then others such as the *Guardian* and the *Independent*, and even the *Mail* and the *Express*, followed suit in their own particular ways.<sup>27</sup>

T.E. Utley, once briefly destined for opaque television reviewing on the *Telegraph*, told a BBC radio interviewer in 1988:

For years, obituaries were governed by the view that the reader was depressed by death and, therefore, if we had to have obituaries, they should be short and bad and preferably inaccurate. All that has gone under the *Daily Telegraph*'s present, brilliant editor [Massingberd].<sup>28</sup>

Max Hastings, in *Editor*, recalls that Massingberd changed the obituaries page 'from a musty backwater of the paper into the most brilliant feature of its kind in the business'.<sup>29</sup> The British novelist A.N. Wilson, reviewing a collection of *Telegraph* obituaries for *Country Life*, supported that view:

Hugh Massingberd single-handedly transformed the slightly stuffy formula of the newspaper 'obit' into a high comic form. The *Daily Telegraph* obituaries which he commissioned, although penned by divers hands, all bear his stamp – his novelistic delight in human oddity, his capacity, where due, for hero-worship (particularly of sporting, military or theatrical luminaries) and his delicately anarchic sense of fun....Among the hundreds of us newspaper hacks today there is a tiny handful of true artists at work. Of this select band, Massingberd is king.<sup>30</sup>

Educated at Harrow and briefly an articled clerk in a solicitor's office, Massingberd had for eighteen years written and edited works of genealogical reference, studies of royalty and social history, and a series of illustrated volumes on palaces, grand hotels and country houses. He was also a contributor to *Private Eye*, the satirical magazine; the mordant wit nurtured by that engagement, allied to his knowledge of British society, was of use in the transition to obituaries. That ambition, nurtured from the earliest of those eighteen years as a writer, had been inspired by Roy Dotrice's performance as the diarist and biographer John Aubrey in *Brief Lives*:

Picking up a work of reference, he [Dotrice] read out an ineffably dull biographical entry about a barrister. Recorder of this, Bencher of that, and so on. He then snapped shut the volume with a 'Tchah', or it may have been a 'Pshaw', and pronounced: 'He got more by his prick than his practice.' It was the blinding light for Massingberd. There and then in the Criterion Theatre, I determined to dedicate myself to the chronicling of what people were really like through anecdote, description and character sketch rather than merely trot out the bald curriculum vitae.<sup>31</sup>

On his first day at the *Telegraph*, 1 July 1986, the draft death announcements included that of Tom Blofeld, father of the BBC cricket commentator and a minor celebrity in his own right as ‘the Norfolk squire whose surname had been appropriated for the [James] Bond villain’.<sup>32</sup> Told to ‘bash it out and then try to sell it to the chief sub [-editor]’, the new obituaries editor had to explain that his inability to type made that impossible.<sup>33</sup> Augustus Tilley, seeing out his last months in co-existence with Massingberd, did the typing for him. By September of that year, it became no longer necessary to sell ideas to the chief sub-editor; Massingberd forged an agreement with Hastings that obituaries would have ‘two roped-off columns of their own’.<sup>34</sup>

The timing was all. The *Telegraph* by September 1986 had a reformist editor and significantly increased space; the *Times*, in the Helpmann obituary on the 29<sup>th</sup> of that month, extended the bounds of explicit posthumous comment; the *Independent*, in early October, introduced author credits, an informality of style, and innovative photographic treatment. The revival had begun.

## **Four British broadsheets: what happened next**

### ***The Daily Telegraph***

Successful parlaying of office politics ensured that the obituary would continue to prosper. Previously, its presence had been governed by the mood of the news editor; now, under Hastings and Massingberd, it would function as a self-determining department, able to shape its own style and commission specialist writers to fill those ‘roped-off’ columns. Massingberd stayed at the job for nearly eight years, until a heart attack and by-pass surgery in 1994. It was long enough to re-write the obituary agenda.

The posthumous cast changed. The *Telegraph*’s subject selection was to be driven by the quality of the life story, rather than by the rank of the individual. Massingberd and his department – in particular, his assistant editor for seven of those eight years, David Jones – found that ‘the joy of the job is capturing for posterity some little-known, or half-forgotten, figure who has made a hitherto undervalued contribution to some aspect of our times’.<sup>35</sup> In so doing, they encountered colour and eccentricity, rendering those qualities in droll under-statement. A classic example, from early in their tenure, is offered in Jones’s obituary of Denisa, Lady Newborough, who

was many things: wire-walker, nightclub girl, nude dancer, airpilot....Her admirers included the Kings of Spain and Bulgaria, Adolf Hitler...Benito Mussolini...and Sheikh ben Ghana (who gave her 500 sheep).<sup>36</sup>

Right at the end comes the minimalism: 'She is survived by her daughter Juno, who is married to a dentist.'<sup>37</sup>

In 1994, Jones (by then obituaries editor) exercised all the virtues of observation advocated by Massingberd's muse, John Aubrey, in his character sketch of a Soho bar owner:

Ian Board, who has died aged 64, was the proprietor of the Colony Room, a Soho drinking club favoured by Bohemians, artists, homosexuals and assorted loafers....Perched on a stool by the bar, clad in tasteless leisure-wear, his eyes protected by sunglasses, 'Ida' (as he was known to his closest friends) would trade coarse badinage with his regulars....Board was an heroic smoker and drinker...and if his drinking destroyed his youthful good looks, it also shaped and nourished his magnificent nose.<sup>38</sup>

There were difficulties too. In 1988, the *Telegraph* published an obituary of the 5<sup>th</sup> Lord Rayleigh, who was given to standing up in the parish church on his 7,000-acre Essex estate and telling worshippers: 'I am the King of England.'<sup>39</sup> His obituary added that he had been 'spirited away' to Ireland in 1953 because of fears that he might similarly disrupt the Queen's coronation and, in a less diverting recollection, recorded his fines for indecent exposure and 'insulting conduct towards females'.<sup>40</sup> There were complaints that the obituary represented an uncharitable, and anonymous, attack on a man suffering from a mental disorder. According to Massingberd, Max Hastings – a devotee of field sports – was 'deluged' with letters saying 'You'll never shoot in East Anglia again.'<sup>41</sup>

Hastings's book on his nine years as editor also discusses the sensitive issue of publishing intimate revelations concerning rival proprietors. 'There is,' he says, 'a shameless, self-serving compact between companies that the personal embarrassments of newspaper owners are not reported by competitors.'<sup>42</sup> That code was broken in the 1989 obituary of Lady Stevens of Ludgate, wife of the Express Newspapers proprietor. The *Telegraph* quoted at length from her controversial book *Woman as Chameleon*:

‘Any husband who has desires to make love in one of the hundred possible different ways is therefore fully within his rights to seek a mistress if his wife refuses to co-operate....Always kiss your husband’s body starting from his toes. After kissing his toes and sucking them...proceed to kiss every inch of his legs.’<sup>43</sup>

The *Telegraph* board took offence at what Massingberd and Jones contrived to say, and the obituaries editor and assistant editor became immediate victims of the proprietorial compact, as Massingberd recalls:

I was told I wouldn’t last the night. Heads would roll. The board formally admonished the editor-in-chief, Andrew Knight. There was a grovelling apology in the ‘Peterborough’ column [daily diary], saying the paper was ashamed of what had been published. What stank in the nostrils was the utter hypocrisy...that ridiculous Fleet Street thing that dog doesn’t eat dog.<sup>44</sup>

Nevertheless, he did survive the night and, subsequently, popular support has proved to be so strong that by 2003 ten volumes of collected *Telegraph* obituaries had been published. The first was subtitled *A Celebration of Eccentric Lives*, recounting the idiosyncrasies of such career eccentrics as the 4<sup>th</sup> Earl Russell, elder son of the philosopher Bertrand Russell. He had told the House of Lords that the leaders of the Soviet Union and the United States (at that time, Leonid Brezhnev and Jimmy Carter) were ‘really the same person’ and that the state should give each girl in Britain a house of her own when she turned 12 ‘so that marriage would be abolished and the girl could have as many husbands as she liked’.<sup>45</sup> Away from the Lords, he spent his time ‘writing and crocheting’, once showing a visitor

a pair of trousers hanging on the wall by a nail. ‘I crocheted these out of string,’ he said. ‘It took me a long while because I didn’t have a pattern. I had to keep trying them on.’<sup>46</sup>

The *Eccentric Lives* was followed by an anthology of *Heroes and Adventurers* obituaries. Both made the ‘Top 15 Biography’ list published by the *Times* in December 1996; *Eccentric Lives* was second and its companion twelfth. *Heroes and Adventurers* demonstrated the *Telegraph*’s specialisation in military obituary, at which it has remained supreme. It told of the Australian prisoner-of-war camp surgeon Sir Edward (‘Weary’) Dunlop, who insisted on completing an operation after a day of being tortured by the Japanese; of Sergeant Fred Kite, who won the Military Medal three times; of Air Marshal Sir Harold ‘Mickey’ Martin, who deliberately

dived his fighter aircraft into a tree to rip a snagged balloon cable from his wing; and of officers who variously organised foxhunts at the Front, tried when well-dined to light a cigar with a geranium, and perfected the trick of ejecting a monocle upwards from the eye-socket and then catching it again.<sup>47</sup> There was also the obituary of Digby Tatham-Warner, a Parachute Regiment company commander who led a bayonet charge at Arnhem wearing a bowler hat and carrying an umbrella. When told by a fellow officer that in an enemy bombardment the umbrella would not do him much good, Tatham-Warner had replied: 'But what if it rains?'<sup>48</sup>

The standard of obituary under Massingberd and Jones, and as pursued by their successors, persuaded the *New Yorker* in 1998 to declare:

The clear leader in the field is the London *Daily Telegraph*, which in recent years has raised its obituaries page to such a pitch of eminence that one finds oneself ruffling briskly past the news pages in order to reach the real news.<sup>49</sup>

### ***The Independent***

The *Independent*, a publishing enterprise of courage, was the creation of three former *Telegraph* journalists. Within this trio, the dominant entrepreneur was Andreas Whittam Smith, formerly the *Telegraph* city editor, who 'knew where to seek professional advice and raise money – £18 million – although he also mortgaged his own house'.<sup>50</sup> It recruited, from the *Times* and *Sunday Times*, staff who 'did not want to work for Murdoch or disliked walking through the threatening picket line at Fortress Wapping'.<sup>51</sup> Those with a talent for design were notably employable; in his memoir *Not Many Dead*, Nicholas Garland has described at length the extensive effort directed at the appearance of the paper.<sup>52</sup> It was during this process that the dummy editions, containing the radically changed pictorial treatment, were produced.

In its dry runs, and in its initial realisation, the *Independent* tried to establish a line of difference between itself and the other broadsheets. As one strand of this, it omitted – or relegated to pages well inside the paper – reports about Britain's royal family. It also played down classified advertising. Though, by 2004, both those tendencies had been adjusted to fit a more conventional publishing initiative, the originality of approach in obituary style has endured. *Independent* obituaries continue to be characterised by a narrative construction replete in personal anecdote and studiously

under-nourished in chronology, inspired by James Fergusson's admiration for John Nichols and the *Gentleman's Magazine* of 18<sup>th</sup> century London: 'I take him, in part, as my rather eccentric model...I was always fascinated by the *Gentleman's Magazine*.'<sup>53</sup>

Fergusson says also that he wanted his page, in content and appearance, to offer a contrast to the *Times*. One important tactic which assisted that process was the 'go-last' (Figure 5.1), the summary of life events at the end of each obituary:

There was really only one newspaper [before the 1986 revival] doing obituaries properly, and that was the *Times*, and the *Times* had become rather tired. It had a reputation for having an enormous number of pre-written obituaries...[that] hadn't been updated. It [the 'go-last'] was an idea that I had, to break away from the *Times* format...in 1986 they were often nothing better than *Who's Who* obituaries with mortar poured in the gaps. It was totally boring, reading that sort of chronology. I wanted to escape from that and put the chronology at the bottom, so that you always had a map to guide you. It means you don't have to put every date in the middle...[which] impedes the narrative flow.<sup>54</sup>

Of greater significance in the evolution of the British obituary since its revival, however, was the decision to attach author credits. This had occurred but rarely in the past. There had been the occasional personal addendum provided by a writer of distinction (notably by Neville Cardus, in the *Manchester Guardian*) and, on the *Times* obituaries page during World War II, a series of personal tributes. In April 1945, for example, the *Times* had published such a tribute, written by the diarist and biographer James Lees-Milne, to the memory of Major the Hon. T.D. Mitford (brother of Nancy and Diana, once the quintessential Bright Young Things):

One by one our generation is depleted, and it seems necessary that the flower of it shall always be taken....Like all highly cultivated people, he was intensely fastidious, and with him the second best simply did not pass muster....And so he was among the first to join the Territorials, and with his usual thoroughness threw himself heart and soul into what to him was a new-found romance – the science and art of warfare.<sup>55</sup>





Apart from that, the pattern in all the broadsheets from the earliest days of the art had been one of anonymity. Fergusson determined that change was important because

the best signed obituary beats the best unsigned one, always. It will be the sort readers cut out and file, the sort historians later refer to. Unsigned obituaries, outside Christmas anthologies, are doomed to become items of curiosity only, historical gewgaws.<sup>56</sup>

A writer specialising in the entertainment industry, Gilbert Adair, contributed the first *Independent* obituary; it appeared in the third edition of the paper, on 9 October 1986, with the film producer Hal B. Wallis as its subject. Later, the Australian author and journalist Robert Milliken supplied the obituary of Sir William McMahon, describing his nation's former prime minister as 'a small, wiry man with a sing-song voice and big ears...[who] became something of a figure of fun'.<sup>57</sup> This was, in the event, a little kinder than the *Times* obituary of McMahon, which contained the unfortunate assertion that he was renowned for 'his almost embarrassing public display of devotion to his wife'.<sup>58</sup>

More recently, Fergusson commissioned an obituary by Caroline Richmond, a leading medical writer, following the death of Dianne Pretty. Richmond's task was to explain the complexities and significance of her subject's unsuccessful petitions to both the House of Lords and the European Court of Human Rights. Pretty, who died of motor neurone disease, had 'sought legal immunity for her husband if he were to assist her suicide'.<sup>59</sup> This grim story, of loss of speech and diamorphine dosage and the law lords' declaration that they were not 'entitled or fitted to act as a moral or ethical arbiter', was written with a sustained authority and an absence of sentimental indulgence.<sup>60</sup>

Since the revival, British newspapers have encouraged commentary on their obituaries. The practice has flourished at the *Independent*, in which, on 2 October 2001, there appeared an obituary of Amelia Nathan Hill, founder of the charity Action Against Allergy. It was written by her husband, Roland Hill, a journalist, and asserted that after prolonged 'migraine, stomach upsets, [and] painful limbs and joints', she had discovered

the revolutionary diet programmes carried out by Dr Richard Mackarness at his allergy clinic in Surrey and later in Australia, where he died in 1996. Amelia Hill became his chief disciple and propagator of the elimination diet.<sup>61</sup>

Two days later, Fergusson printed a measured but formidable rebuttal of the charity's beliefs and associated therapeutic regimes, by Caroline Richmond:

Thanks to Mackarness and Hill, thousands of people suffering from the physical effects of neurosis decided that they had allergies to food or the environment....A phalanx of dodgy doctors, ready to humour them for a suitable fee, sprang up around them.<sup>62</sup>

The obituary, on Britain's newest quality newspaper, had become an instrument for vigorous, often sharply conflicting, debate.

### *The Guardian*

Unlike its major competitors, the *Guardian* resisted the sirens of the docklands and stayed in the middle of London – in Clerkenwell, about a twenty-minute walk from Fleet Street. For more than a year, it resisted the revivalist call of the obituary cause too. Then, when the paper was subjected to redesign, a section entitled 'Review' was introduced; obituaries were initially given a half-page within it. The first set, on 12 February 1988, was introduced with a message expressing the assurance that in death, as well as in life, the *Guardian* was committed to democratic principles. This promise, unfortunately, was compromised by error:

On this long-desired but only recently planned page, we don't expect to...merely replicate the function of Establishment functionaries' notice board [*sic*] elsewhere....One day, perhaps, a more egalitarian society than ours will publish a daily obituary of an Unknown Citizen, computer-selected from the undertakers' lists, as a modern *momento* [*sic*] *mori*.<sup>63</sup>

The selection of subjects that first day was equally mercurial. Philip Haggren, in an obituary markedly deficient in a sense of time and place, was remembered as 'the last survivor of a group of Catholic artists and craftsmen' whose lassitude, melancholy and ill-health had 'prevented him making the most of his talent'.<sup>64</sup> His companion on the page was a veteran French diplomat who had served as ambassador in London immediately after World War II.<sup>65</sup> In their introductory notes to the new venture, the editor and the assistant editor, Bill Webb and Christopher Driver, invited contributions to future pages. They also listed the names of twenty-nine recently deceased 'whom we would have liked to find some space for since Christmas';<sup>66</sup> several gave the appearance of being considerably more interesting than the page's two debutants.

Two years later, in 1990, the *Guardian* still appeared rather uncomfortable with its rediscovery of the art. William Leith, writing for *Tatler* on the obituary phenomenon of the British press, commented: 'It is true to say that the *Guardian*'s pages are the least highly thought of.'<sup>67</sup> Christopher Driver, of the *Guardian* obituaries desk, offered this cryptic quote for the same magazine article: 'We specialise in people of the old, new, and far left.'<sup>68</sup>

After another two years, however, a more assured delivery, allied to a less doctrinaire mindset, was in place. More than half a page was allocated to obituaries, which – so far as design was concerned – were similar in visual impact and textual style to those of the *Independent*: the photography was bold, each offered a writer's end-credit and a concise 'go-last', the narrative was deliberately free of chronology, and readers' correspondence was encouraged. In addition, the page contained weather information, a birthdays segment, and a short, eminently readable feature entitled 'Another Day', in which elegant literary miniatures of antiquity were reprinted. A singularly successful instance of this mix is found in the *Guardian* of 18 March 1992. There is an authoritative assessment of a Chinese Communist Party veteran, a wartime sketch enlivens the obituary of a cartoonist who had been knighted for his work, and, dominating the page, a mountaineer (whose death followed a fall) is seen against a panoramic view of the ridge he had traversed 'without oxygen in the best avant-garde style'.<sup>69</sup>

That confidence has continued to advance. *Guardian* obituaries by 2003 were allocated a full page, the end-credit and 'go-last' summary had become established features, and the use of photography displayed intelligent application. There was also, where appropriate, a professionally rendered lightness of touch, as in the obituary of Debbie Barham, the comedy scriptwriter who had died of anorexia nervosa at 26. Pushing the bounds of obituary taste, but capturing in so doing the spirit of his subject, Bruce Hyman wrote:

In January 1998, she was emboldened to write about her illness in characteristically unsentimental style in London's *Evening Standard*: 'It's not the idea of food I object to. I adore food. I just can't bring myself to swallow. But how many girls have said that at Christmas parties? Usually in the stationery cupboard with their knickers round their ankles.'<sup>70</sup>

There is a broadness of subject selection too. Though the *Guardian* continues to pursue a liberal conviction, it will countenance the dead of all persuasion for its obituaries page. ‘If there’s a significant Conservative politician [who has died], he’d get as fair an innings as would a left-of-centre politician,’ said Robert White, the assistant obituaries editor, in 2002. ‘We’d want our obituary to be the first verdict of history.’<sup>71</sup>

### *The Times*

In its report on the revival of the late 1980s, *Tatler* argued that the ‘faceless, discreet authority’ of a *Times* obituary had by then become ‘unfashionable with younger readers’.<sup>72</sup> Reflecting in 1994 on that period of transition, the *Economist* agreed, saying that the *Times* left itself vulnerable to an attack on its traditional ownership of the territory: ‘The *Times*...had long been unrivalled in the obituaries field but had adhered to a subfusc prose style and favoured a relatively narrow selection of subjects.’<sup>73</sup> James Fergusson, pioneering obituaries editor at the *Independent*, while conceding that the *Times* exercised an ‘effortless authority’, found also that its reliance on an obituaries stockpile had conferred a certain *ennui*:

The inherent problem of commissioning obituaries of subjects in advance is that...as time passes, all the bases on which they are written shift and they become illegible in a new age.<sup>74</sup>

Another adverse view of the *Times*, on this occasion in its perceived response to the repercussions of obituary transformation, appears in David Twiston Davies’s preface to his published Canadian collection:

Ironically, *Times* obituaries went into a sharp if temporary decline at this time [1986–1987]; an attempt to make them more frank had given way to a sullen disapproval of the *Telegraph*’s new efforts, which one *Times* obituaries editor sniffily dismissed as ‘a graveyard gossip column’.<sup>75</sup>

The point is vigorously disputed by Peter Davies, chief obituaries writer at the *Times*. He contends that during Colin Watson’s long tenure as obituaries editor (1956–1982), the paper was offering diversity and occasional levity. Davies joined the *Times* as an obituary writer in 1975, and therefore has the advantage of an impressive retrospectivity of view. In his obituary of Watson, written in 2001, he noted that his former editor ‘extended the frontiers of acceptability’ to the extent that:

An account of so lurid a life as that of the singer Janis Joplin, little calculated to appeal to the traditional readership, was seen as having established the principle of treating the heroes of the new sub-culture on the merits of their impact on the age.<sup>76</sup>

Interviewed for this thesis in 2002, Davies contended that the obituary style which emerged after 1986 was more the product of bigger papers with generous column space than the result of inspired editing. He was particularly dismissive of public acclaim for Massingberd's contribution:

Massingberd talks a good fight...from the moment he had his bum on the obits editor's chair at the *Telegraph* he was already publishing articles about how the world of obituaries would never be the same again. It's actually bollocks.<sup>77</sup>

Nevertheless, it is surely indisputable that Massingberd did make obituaries – for the first time – funny. Critical response, notably in the sales of *Telegraph* anthologies and in assessments published by journals of repute, has acknowledged the appeal of this factor. The *Times* has responded in the years since revival by adopting a series of emphatic changes to style and presentation. The first of these, firmly in practice by the early 1990s, involved the use of a 'stand-first' (a capsule of life history at the head of the obituary). Previously, there had been rigorous adherence to the convention of an opening paragraph of text containing name, demographic description, and age of the subject. The adoption of a 'stand-first' had the immediate effect of allowing Peter Davies and his writer colleagues an opportunity for greater creativity of construction. An example of that is found in the obituary of Ashby Harper. The 'stand-first' summarises his name, age, date and place of death, and reason for recognition (he had become, in 1982 when he was 65, the oldest man to swim the English Channel). With that biographical information *in situ*, the *Times* was able to begin the obituary with this:

Albuquerque, New Mexico, where Ashby Harper chose to live, is one of driest spots in the United States. It was an odd place to find a man who seemed to spend his entire life looking for large bodies of water to conquer.<sup>78</sup>

The second shift, also in the writing, concerns the licence the *Times* now allows in character sketch. Tim Heald enjoyed that degree of freedom when composing his obituary of David Treffry, ‘an Arabist of distinction’ who cultivated an eccentric appearance in Fowey, his home town in Cornwall:

Seeing him striding with his walking stick about the narrow streets of the historic port in his trademark flannel trousers (the bottoms flapping several inches above the ankle), a tweed jacket that looked as old as Fowey itself, a faded striped tie (probably of the Duke of Cornwall’s Light Infantry) and a battered cloth cap, one was reminded more of a classics master in an Evelyn Waugh prep school than of the international diplomat he had actually been.<sup>79</sup>

The Treffry obituary, published in April 2000, also offered evidence of a third adjustment of *Times* dress. The ‘stand-first’ paragraph had been replaced by a ‘go-last’, in the manner preferred by both the *Independent* and the *Guardian*. Then, in 2002, *Times* obituaries were moved to the second section of the newspaper, between the business and sporting news. The reward for leaving what the former obituaries editor, Anthony Howard, calls ‘the main body of the church’, is a substantial increase in dedicated space.<sup>80</sup> *Times* obituaries now dominate a handsome two-page subsection called ‘The Register’, accompanied by segments devoted to anniversaries, birthdays, readers’ responses to obituary content, and the classified births, marriages and deaths. Photographs are used with intelligence and flair. A striking instance of the photographic treatment occurred in October 2002, at the death of Henry de Lotbinière, a barrister whose appearance was ‘devastated by the effects of cancer’ (Figure 5.2).<sup>81</sup> The obituary proved the point by carrying a full-face photograph and a reproduction of his portrait, both in colour, and explaining in the narrative:

De Lotbinière, 6ft 2in tall, lean and handsome – by common consent ‘the best-looking man at the Bar’ – was only 42 when an ulcer on the roof of his mouth proved to be cancer of the salivary gland. Over the next 15 years, in 17 operations at the Royal London Hospital, Iain Hutchison removed almost every part of the left side of de Lotbinière’s head – lower jaw, upper jaw, eye socket, forehead, part of his brain – reconstructing the face with skin and muscle grafts from other parts of his body.<sup>82</sup>

Debate Online with Edwina Page 40



Court & Social Wellington's letters Page 41

Anniversaries

EVENTS: On this day in 1938 the comic-book hero... On this day in 1993 the King and I was first produced in London...

BIRTHS: Philip Larkin referred to John Cowper Powys as a 'signature myopic-literary yokel'... Heinrich Schütz, composer born in Köstlin, Germany, 1586...

DEATHS: 'The Last of the Trinitron', Carlo di Renzi has frequently been honoured in literature... Henry Fielding, novelist, died in Lisbon, 1754... Sir John Monash, engineer and general, died in Melbourne, 1931...

Birthdays

Before becoming the first female Speaker in more than 700 years of Commons history, the former Tully girl Betty Boothby urged Members of Parliament to 'elect me for what I am, not for what I was born'...

Who wrote this?

'As impudent as it is mendacious, and therefore typically English'

Obituaries

PRINCE CLAUS OF THE NETHERLANDS

Consort of Queen Beatrix, who overcame hostility to his German roots to become a popular member of the Dutch Royal Family

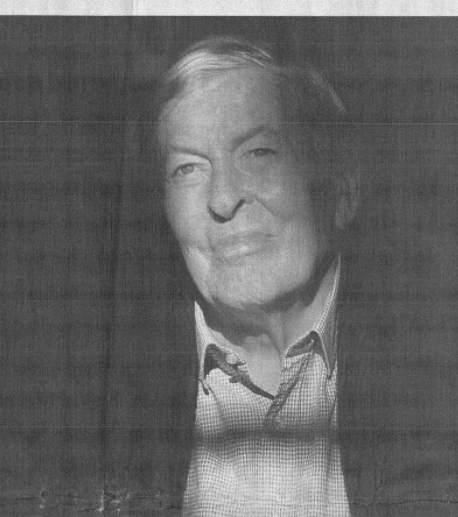
When news of the nuptials between Claus von Amsterg and Beatrix of the Netherlands first spread in the spring of 1966, there was a sense of horror among the Dutch people...

While the facts surrounding his past were undeniable, von Amberg worked hard to win over the Dutch, fighting hostility to his German roots...

Graced Dutch citizenship at the time of his marriage, Prince Claus quickly threw himself into learning the language and assimilating himself with Dutch society and customs...

He was particularly active in development co-operation, a field in which his knowledge and experience he had gained in his earlier years...

Claus Georg Wilhelm Otto Frederik von Amsterg was born in Dötzingen, the Elbe in 1926, the only son among several children of a minor German noble family...



Despite serving in the Hitler Youth, Prince Claus helped to heal the wounds between Germany and his adopted country

As befitted a minor aristocrat who was popular with girls, Claus grew up with a love of fast cars, and was frequently spotted speeding along the autobahn in a blue Porsche...

HENRY DE LOTBINIERE

Barrister who defied disfigurement from cancer, continued working, and astonished all who met him with his pleasure in being alive



De Lotbiniere refused to be cast down by his condition and his portrait by Mark Gilbert proved inspirational

Henry de Lotbiniere became widely familiar when his face was devastated by the effects of cancer, and his portrait was painted by the young Glaswegian artist Mark Gilbert...

his fiancée, family connections and wartime record coming under intense scrutiny. There was talk of Prince Beatrix renouncing either the throne or her lover...

In 1968 Beatrix's mother, Queen Juliana, indicated after a brief illness that she intended to abdicate the throne in favour of Beatrix to assume the throne with Prince Claus at her side...

Prince Claus of the Netherlands was born in Dötzingen, Lower Saxony, on September 28, 1926. He died from cancer in Amsterdam on October 6, 2002, aged 76.

Conrad, in 1986, which was a landmark in the recent evolution of the duty of care owed by local authorities. One of our best lifelong passions was for cricket. He played, until eight years ago, for several clubs including the Redfords, the Bat cricketers XI, on Sunday afternoons against village teams...

De Lotbiniere remained a lively party animal, and a few days before his death he hosted his 76th birthday dinner at home. There, during a family holiday in Devon, at the seaside village he had gone to every year since childhood, he caught pneumonia, of which he died in a Plymouth hospital. He was survived by his wife and their two sons and daughter.

Figure 5.2 A sign of changing times. Times obituaries now dominate a section entitled 'The Register', with application of the 'go-last' and bold photography. In this edition, one of the subjects had earned a reputation for boldness too: Henry de Lotbiniere, who endured seventeen operations following cancer of the salivary gland. The identity of his obituary's author is not indicated – a style point discussed in Chapter Six. (Times, 8 October 2002)



The *Times* added that courtrooms were subsequently brightened by his matching eye patches and bow ties. Its performance that Tuesday morning, in word and image across two pages of imposing design, symbolised an old newspaper's new command of the obituary art.

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## United States

### A sense of independent renewal

The American obituary experienced a period of reinvigoration at the time of revival in Britain, as Chapter Four has established. There is persuasive evidence, though, that this advance in presence and performance was achieved by editorial initiatives on its own side of the Atlantic. The British transformation should be regarded as coincidental rather than instrumental. Newspapers in the United States had, by this stage, long been confronted by the need for change. As far back as 1969, John Tebbel, a professor of journalism at New York University, addressed this factor in his published history of American newspapers.<sup>83</sup> Emphasising the impact of television and displaying prescience in his predictions of electronic communication, Tebbel called for 'radical change' to the industry, adding:

Newspapers, in brief, are living today in a period of transition which is at once agonizing and exciting....[They] have not altered substantially since 1835, when James Gordon Bennett, Sr., introduced the modern paper. In losing their primary news function to television, they are now compelled to devise a new purpose and a new usefulness. In competing with other media, they must find new ways of reaching people.<sup>84</sup>

Subsequent events would suggest that, as a prophet, Tebbel should be accorded some honour in his own country. The editors interviewed for this thesis all recall a process of reflection and renewal in the 1980s and early 1990s, during which the obituary flourished anew. However, as Mike King, of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, so succinctly explains: 'The influence was not Britain. It was just something we had wanted to do for years.'<sup>85</sup> Myrna Oliver, a writer and editor of obituaries at the *Los Angeles Times* since 1990, is equally dismissive:

I don't buy that 'Brits-invented-the-modern-obituary-in-the-late-1980s' theory. When the British obits became popular, we all read some for entertainment. But I don't think their style influenced what we were already doing and expanding upon.<sup>86</sup>

An identical view has been expressed by Alana Baranick, obituaries editor of the *Plain Dealer*, in Cleveland, Ohio. She was appointed to the job in 1992 ‘because obituaries were expanding’.<sup>87</sup> The expansion in Ohio, though, had its origins in a self-generated desire to improve the quality of *Plain Dealer* obituaries, as part of a newspaper-wide venture aimed at providing an alternative to broadcast news services:

We were striving for better written and more interesting stories that offered readers more substantiated facts, and presented more clearly, than what they were seeing on television. I wasn’t even aware of anything special about British obituaries until my son came home from London with some obituary pages in the mid-1990s [after the British revival]. By that time, we were writing less formulaic obituaries at the *Plain Dealer*.<sup>88</sup>

Long before Cleveland’s awakening and, so it would seem, even preceding Massingberd *et al.* by as much as four years, the *Philadelphia Daily News* achieved a reputation for its informal, innovative practice. Two American publications, *American Journalism Review*<sup>89</sup> and *Philadelphia*<sup>90</sup>, both record 1982 as the year in which Jim Nicholson was appointed as obituaries writer for the *Daily News*. It was apparently a perspicacious choice; the Society of American Newspaper Editors in 1987 recognised with a distinguished writing award his performance as an obituarist. *Editor & Publisher* said at the time that Nicholson and the *Daily News* had

saluted the very common man or woman, ranging from a vice-squad cop who dropped off bags of groceries to families of those he had arrested; a scrubwoman who spent many of her off-hours cleaning her church; to a retired maintenance man ‘whose faith and joyful persona were a magnet to people who wanted his prayers and counsel, and who was a leader in his church and the Boy Scouts’.<sup>91</sup>

There was, as that quoted passage would suggest, a strand of candied sentiment in the Philadelphia obituaries. Nevertheless, *American Journalism Review*, also acknowledging their success, had a valid point when it found that Nicholson brought

an unusual flair to a part of the paper often overlooked by teams of newsroom reformers scoping out ways to improve local coverage...despite a Newspaper Advertising Guild survey that found more than half of all readers read the obits.<sup>92</sup>

The more astringent flavour of the revived British model, particularly in its rendition of eccentric characters, has clearly intrigued contemporary American writers; the *Wall Street Journal*,<sup>93</sup> *New Yorker*<sup>94</sup> and *Smithsonian Magazine*<sup>95</sup> have printed major reports on it. The *Smithsonian* account even included an anecdote which suggested that sudden exposure to the *Daily Telegraph*'s approach had persuaded a Denver editor to sanction a new style of obituary:

The *Telegraph*'s style is now widely imitated in newspapers around the world. At the *Denver Post*, for instance, reporter Claire Martin recalls that when she first proposed an obit about a tree-trimmer named Redneck, 'My editor said "I don't understand why you're writing about this person. He didn't really accomplish anything." So I got out an obituary from the *Telegraph* about the village drunk [and convinced the editor].'<sup>96</sup>

The accumulated effect of this exposure to the British product might well be apparent through, as *Smithsonian* says, occasional instances of imitation in style of composition. The initial re-ordering of obituary affairs in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s should be regarded, by way of contrast, as a home-grown story of independent origin.

## **An American quartet: four newspapers at a time of revival**

### ***The New York Times***

The retirement in 1976 of Alden Whitman, the caped 'Angel of Death', left the *New York Times* obituary in a state of some decline, as the preceding chapter has indicated. The 1980s at Times Square proved to be a decade of further uncertainty, in which obituary practice suffered from an absence of continuity in terms of both exposure and expertise. Whitman himself, celebrated as the writer of compact posthumous biographies, became a casualty of transition at his death in 1990. The *New York Times*, in an obituary of its own distinguished obituarist, included a reference to his conviction twenty years earlier for contempt of Congress.<sup>97</sup> That assertion needed qualification, for Whitman had subsequently been cleared at a fresh trial; the obituary failed to make this point. The *New York Times* then found itself in the embarrassing position of having to print a correction. Interviewed by the *Washington Post*, the *Times* obituaries editor of the day conceded that the original work had been 'written by a committee'.<sup>98</sup>

Performance showed signs of improvement as the 1990s progressed. In 1991, the *New York Times* had the confidence to challenge conventional subject selection by publishing an obituary of Richard Speck, ‘one of the nation’s most notorious killers’, who had murdered eight student nurses in their Chicago town house in 1966.<sup>99</sup> The death sentence had been commuted to eight consecutive terms of fifty to 150 years’ gaol; Speck died in hospital of heart failure.

The *New York Times* files for the ensuing few years indicate the gradual, and positive, influence of Marvin Siegel, a writer and editor with extensive experience in the arts. He restored the stature of the *Times* obituaries page by securing staff appointments, encouraging fine writing and winning the allocation of significantly increased space.

By 1997, a showcase of his department’s work was published under the title *The Last Word*.<sup>100</sup> It contains some obituaries which, as well as being written with dexterity, support the notion that the United States does not necessarily need British journalism’s help in *recherché* expression of the art. There are vignettes of a beggar with an accounting degree; of Helen Bunce, known as the mitten lady, who ‘knitted so many mittens she didn’t know what to do unless she was knitting more mittens’;<sup>101</sup> of ‘Wrong Way’ Corrigan, who in 1938 took off from Brooklyn on a solo flight to Los Angeles but ‘turned into a cloud bank’ and landed the next day in Dublin;<sup>102</sup> and of Harold C. Fox, inventor of the ‘zoot suit’:

From the wide, padded shoulders and broad lapels of the long, billowing jacket to the ballooning high-waisted pants with the tourniquet-tight pegged cuffs and the inevitable long, looping watch chain, the zoot suit was an exaggerated fashion fad that not so much defined as defied an era of wartime conformity.<sup>103</sup>

A prominent by-line in this anthology is that of Robert McG. Thomas, assigned to the obituaries desk from 1995 until his death five years later. The *New York Times* said he had ‘extended the possibilities of the conventional obituary form, shaking the dust from one of the most neglected areas of daily journalism’.<sup>104</sup> Siegel’s successor as editor, Charles Strum, has sustained his newspaper’s commitment to sound obituary publication, seeing it as an accessible and instant exercise in popular biography:

Kids grow up loving biography. An obituary is a biography. Who wouldn’t want to read about the life of Joe DiMaggio in baseball or Zero Mostel [the actor], or the two men who came up with DNA? It’s a great read because you learn what it takes to be human.<sup>105</sup>

The daily ration of space, however, is unpredictable; Strum sometimes has to squeeze that biography into a little over half a page. On other occasions, when the subject is a compelling one, he enjoys a more generous measure. A notable example in recent times was that of John Gotti, a Mafia identity described by the *Times* as having been ‘boss of the nation’s largest and most influential organized crime group’.<sup>106</sup> His obituary started on the front page and continued for most of page 26, telling readers that Gotti had been

a narcissistic tyrant with a furious temper who betrayed allies and who ordered the slayings of...loyalists he suspected of being informers or who he thought had not shown him proper respect.<sup>107</sup>

An intriguing feature accompanied the Gotti obituary in that day’s paper. The *Times* interviewed people who had lived near him in Queens; some were reported as saying that, without his presence, the neighbourhood would deteriorate.<sup>108</sup>

Regardless of the relative size of its obituaries, the *Times* adopts a traditional approach as far as the opening thrust is concerned, with the name, age, and demographic description of its subject in the first paragraph. There is no application of ‘stand-first’ or ‘go-last’ here (nor is there at any of the four American dailies examined for this thesis). As is standard practice in the United States, each *Times* obituary of substance carries its author’s by-line. The headlines are often lengthy, stretching right across the page and containing a series of initial capital letters in a style long abandoned in British and Australian journalism. It can look like this:

**Benjamin Ward, New York City’s First Black Police Commissioner, Dies at 75**<sup>109</sup>

In terms of its content, the *New York Times* obituaries page is, for the most part, an exemplar of the journalism of record. When, just occasionally, an anomaly is found in that record, the paper is unfailingly anxious to atone, and the result can provide a moment of engaging self-deprecation:

An obituary on May 13 [2001] about Sebastian Snow, an eccentric English explorer who helped confirm the source of the Amazon River, referred erroneously to an encounter he had with animals during a trek north from Tierra del Fuego. Tigers are not found in the wild in the Western Hemisphere.<sup>110</sup>

### *The Washington Post*

The career history of Richard Pearson supports the point that the modern American obituary has pronounced home-grown characteristics. In an interview for this thesis, he recalled his permanent appointment to the obituaries desk in 1981, at a time when the *Post* was concerned about its erratic performance in this area of journalism. Though the subsequent improvement at the *Post* was, as Chapter Four has demonstrated, more a question of overdue delivery than welcome renaissance, it did have the virtue of being able to set its own agenda. Pearson's employment record shows that the process was in place before Massingberd, Fergusson and the Fleet Street diaspora. Indeed, despite the *Post's* protracted neglect of the art, authoritative obituaries under Pearson's name appear in the files as far back as 1978 and 1979. By the late 1980s, when he had become section editor with his own staff, that sense of authority was being exercised on a broader canvas.

At the same time, the *Washington Post* has maintained its 'local paper' characteristics. Prime examples of this editorial policy were apparent by 1992. The 27 January edition carried an obituary of José Ferrer, the actor, along with a supporting cast of twenty obituaries (Figure 5.3). That number included a retired beer salesman, a former manicurist, a mail department worker at the *Post*, and William Lutwiniak, 'one of the nation's most gifted and prolific crossword puzzle constructors' who had served as a code breaker in wartime.<sup>111</sup> This policy of inclusiveness has been fostered by Pearson because, he said, it satisfies Washington's character:

We run over 6,000 a year. We'll often do twenty a day. I don't think there's any paper in the world that does as many. We do schoolteachers and cab drivers...until recently we were a small town and they're still important to us.<sup>112</sup>

Room continues to be found for major obituaries of national, or international, figures. Prominent among those in the earlier years of Pearson's administration was that of Pat Nixon, wife of the former president. In its 1,692 words, written by Pearson himself, the obituary revealed that she was born Thelma Catherine Ryan, of impoverished parents in Nevada, changed her given names to Thelma Patricia, and 'scrubbed floors at the local bank while keeping house for her two brothers, who were in college'.<sup>113</sup> Money, at \$6.50 a day, also came from work as a film extra with RKO and MGM. Her solitary line of dialogue, in the 1935 film 'Becky Sharp', had 'ended up on the cutting-room floor'.<sup>114</sup>

OBITUARIES

Oscar-Winner Jose Ferrer Dies; Seven-Decade Career Spanned Stage, Film, TV

By Martin Wolf
Jose Ferrer, the Puerto Rican-born, Princeton-educated stage...

Other notable film roles came in 'The Game Makers', 'Joan of Arc' and 'Sgt. Fury'.



JOSE FERRER

He was a multitalented figure of prodigious energy, who was known for vigorous, expressive performances throughout a career that spanned seven decades. Mr. Ferrer, who played several languages in a rich, hoarse voice, made his mark on the stage as a playwright and director as well as an actor.

Mr. Ferrer was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico, the son of a lawyer and his mother was Spanish-born and was an alleged U.S. citizen. They brought their children to this country when Mr. Ferrer was 5. At Princeton University, Mr. Ferrer studied architecture and organized a band that toured successfully.

After his divorce from Mrs. Hagen, with whom he had a daughter, Mr. Ferrer was married to Phyllis Burt. They were divorced in 1963, and he married Rosemary Clooney that year. They were divorced in 1967, and he later married Stella Tzaphne Magee. Mrs. Magee and Ferrer had five children.

W. Lutwiniak, Crossword Puzzle Expert, Dies

William Lutwiniak, 72, one of the nation's most gifted and prolific crossword puzzle constructors...

Mr. Lutwiniak, who had constructed more than 2,000 crossword puzzles since his first puzzle in the New York Herald Tribune at the age of 14 or 15, also assisted in the editing of The Past Magazine's puzzles.

By profession, he was a cryptanalyst, or breaker of codes. With the exception of three years as a major sergeant in the Army Signal Corps during World War II, he spent his entire working career at the National Security Agency's cryptanalytic research center.

Mr. Lutwiniak graduated as a consultant to the NSA after retirement, making weekly visits to the Fort Meade headquarters.

Always he was widely read and well-versed in many subjects. His normal recreation, second with his grandchildren from his wife in his native Jersey City, N.J., among his interests was politics, and he particularly enjoyed writing political references into puzzles he constructed.

His wife, Jennie, passed away last year after a long illness. They had four children: three sons and one daughter.

Mr. Lutwiniak was a member of the American Cryptanalytic Society and the American Cryptanalytic Society.

He was a member of the Washington Post's crossword puzzle team.

He was a member of the Washington Post's crossword puzzle team.

He was a member of the Washington Post's crossword puzzle team.

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He was a member of the Washington Post's crossword puzzle team.

He was a member of the Washington Post's crossword puzzle team.

He was a member of the Washington Post's crossword puzzle team.

Mr. Robertson was born in the Spring Valley section of Washington from the late 1910s and worked at Westward & Lothrop until 1975. She died in 1991.

Mr. Robertson was a member of the King Catholic Church in Chevy Chase.

Mr. Robertson was a member of the King Catholic Church in Chevy Chase.

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PHILIP CRIVELLO
PHILIP CRIVELLO, 72, died of cancer...

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DEATH NOTICES
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Figure 5.3 Supporting cast. José Ferrer, of film fame, was remembered by the Washington Post alongside a retired beer salesman, a former manicurist and a crossword deviser. The Post maintains a pronounced 'local newspaper' character, publishing 6,000 obituaries every year. (Washington Post, 27 January 1992)

The enduring image of the *Post* obituaries pages is that of a vigorous provincial newspaper, anxious to record in print the stories of its dead. Perhaps the best demonstration of that occurred after the terrorist attack, of September 2001, on the Pentagon. The death toll was 172; the *Post* published 156 obituaries.<sup>115</sup>

### *The Los Angeles Times*

Myrna Oliver, week-end obituaries editor at the *Los Angeles Times*, was first exposed to the newspaper 'death beat' at 13. Her father had been killed in a quarry accident at Bloomington, Indiana. When the *Bloomington Daily Herald* sent round a reporter and photographer, her future career was decided: 'Far from being horrified, I was really touched that they cared.'<sup>116</sup> Her own opportunity came with a transfer to the *Times* obituaries desk in 1990, to join the then obituaries editor, Burt Folkart, as a specialist writer. By 1992, their presentable but somewhat obscure section was occupying a quarter to a third of a page each day, well back in the paper; the main obituary carried a by-line, with the shorter accompanying pieces presented in boilerplate fashion.

Oliver succeeded Folkart as editor in 1993, gradually building the status of the page until the paper's obituaries enterprise 'began expanding in an incredible way' in 1998, with the appointment of an executive editor and another full-time writer.<sup>117</sup> Further expansion has followed, so that by mid-2003 the executive editor, Jon Thurber, was leading a department comprising Oliver as week-end editor and senior writer, an editor assigned to 'advance obituaries',<sup>118</sup> three writers and a researcher:

They [obituaries] have proved so popular that it's just more and more and more. At slow news times, they [senior management] seem to expect us to fill the paper. We sometimes have three full pages.<sup>119</sup>

At the *Los Angeles Times*, the story of the obituary revival is one of a lavish new design as much as it is one of resources. The pages have an elegance of line and a strength of purpose. They incorporate potent photography, 48pt headlines, 'pull-quotes' (in which quoted passages from the text are replicated in large and italicised form), definitive captions (or cutlines, as they are known in the United States), and creative use of white space (Figure 5.4).



*'Ethel got involved with you; she would bring out your best. It was never a job for her.'*

David W. Rintels, writer-producer

## Ethel Winant, 81; First Woman to Become Network Executive

By SUSAN KING  
Times Staff Writer

Ethel Winant, an Emmy and Peabody award-winning television producer who made history as the first woman to hold an executive position at a network, has died. She was 81.

Winant died Saturday at the West Hills Hospital and Medical Center of complications from a heart attack and stroke she had suffered nearly a month earlier.

Winant managed to break into the male-dominated world of television in the 1960s when she was made senior vice president of talent, casting and special projects at CBS.

At the time most women were relegated to working as assistants and secretaries to male executives.

"She had the sharpest mind in the business," said writer, producer and director Allan Burns, who is probably best known for "The Mary Tyler Moore Show."

"Jim Brooks and I thought we owed her an enormous debt. When we were starting 'The Mary Tyler Moore Show' and we were writing scripts — this is before the show was ever shot and everyone at CBS to a man disliked what we were doing — Ethel became our staunchest defender, almost to her own peril. She stood up for us in meetings. People at CBS didn't get our scripts. They thought we were going to tank. She fought for our scripts."

Burns said that because she loved the show so much, Winant personally cast the series, putting together an ensemble that included Ed Asner, Valerie Harper and Cloris Leachman.

"She found us almost every person in our cast," Burns said. "It was all due to Ethel and her patience and willingness to go the extra mile."

When Winant made it to the executive suite at CBS, it was not without some odd moments.

She recalled that she had to put her shoes outside the bathroom at the network's executive dining room to let everyone know she was inside.

"They had a bathroom there which didn't have lock," Winant said in a 1999 interview with The Times. "Every time I had to go to the bathroom, I would go outside, take the elevator and go down stairs to the women's bathroom. One day I thought, 'This is so silly. I am spending my life in the elevator, so I'll just take off my shoes and that ought to give them a clue I am inside.'"

Born in the farming community of Marysville in Northern California, Winant began her professional career backstage on Broadway in the late 1940s, when she worked as a production assistant to producer Irene Selznick on "A Streetcar Named Desire," director Elia Kazan on "Death of a Salesman" and writer Tennessee Williams on "Summer and Smoke."



ETHEL WINANT

*"She had the sharpest mind in the business," writer-director Allan Burns says of Winant, who was named a senior vice president at CBS in the 1960s. "When we were starting 'The Mary Tyler Moore Show' — and everyone at CBS to a man disliked what we were doing — Ethel became our staunchest defender."*

As much as she enjoyed her work in theater, Winant knew she had found her true calling when she walked into a television studio one day in the early 1950s to watch a rehearsal.

"I walked into a rehearsal of 'Studio One' and it was just breathtaking," Winant told The Times.

"I was heartsick when the rehearsal was over. They said, 'You can come back tomorrow.' So I went the next day and thought, 'I just want to stay here forever.' I sort of did. I just hung around. I knew eventually someone would want a cup of coffee and I would get it for them."

She started by running errands but eventually moved up to directing productions for "Armstrong Circle Theatre," "Philo-Goodyear Playhouse," "General Electric Theater" and "Playhouse 90"; she was also associate producer for the latter two.

During her years on the dramatic anthologies, she worked with such directors as George Roy Hill, Arthur Penn, Franklin Schaffner, John Houseman, Robert Mulligan and John Frankenheimer. She later collaborated with Frankenheimer on the 1987 miniseries "George Wallace" and the 1988 feature "Ronin."

Winant subsequently

worked with the Children's Television Workshop as vice president for program development, where she produced the miniseries "The Best of Families."

At NBC, she was senior vice president of miniseries and novels for television. Under her guidance, NBC scored with critics and audiences with such miniseries as "Shogun" and "Murder in Texas."

"Ethel was always passionate about material," said writer-producer David W. Rintels, who first worked with Winant in 1981, when he was executive producer of "NBC Live Theatre."

"She didn't care so much about whether she got credit for it. She just wanted to make everything as good as it could be. Ethel got involved with you; she would bring out your best. It was never a job for her. It was a chance to make a difference."

Over the years, Winant won numerous accolades, including a special Emmy for "Playhouse 90," two Peabodys, the Humana Prize, the Christopher Award, the Alice Award and the Crystal Award from Women in Film.

In 1999, Winant was inducted into the Hall of Fame of the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences.

Winant was beset with

various medical problems during her life, including macular degeneration in both eyes and lung cancer.

For the past few years she was living at and fund raising for the Motion Picture & Television Fund Country Home in Woodland Hills.

She is survived by her sons, Scott, an Emmy-winning producer and director; William, a musician; and Bruce, an actor; and four grandchildren.

She requested that her family not have a funeral or memorial service. The family requests that memorial donations be made to the Motion Picture & Television Fund at (818) 878-1800 or through the fund's Web site at [mpftfund.org](http://mpftfund.org).

### Finding News Obituaries

Looking for an obituary that appeared in The Times last week? You can still find it on the Internet. Go to The Times' Web site at [www.latimes.com/obits](http://www.latimes.com/obits).

Figure 5.4 Creative direction. Ethel Winant's obituary demonstrates a classic Los Angeles Times formula: an entertainment industry narrative allied to the creative use of photography and white space. (Los Angeles Times, 3 December 2003)

The obituaries themselves are frequently of 1,300 to 1,500 words, containing, as is the American fashion, quoted reminiscences or reflections on the subject and a detailed list of surviving family members. In naming those survivors, the obituary will generally also state their places of residence; this characteristic does serve as a reminder that the *Los Angeles Times* has a role to some degree as a local newspaper in a way in which the British daily broadsheets do not. They happen to be based in London; they have no charter to serve the immediate interests of the city or its population. The visual image created by the *Los Angeles Times*, though, is of the highest international standard:

We have benefited from a wonderful design emphasis. There's quite a bit of white space and great use of pictures, to the point that photographers want their work to be used in our section. We also pride ourselves on very, very good writing.<sup>120</sup>

A prime instance of the quality of composition is found in Myrna Oliver's obituary of Charles Henri Ford, a poet and editor of literary magazines. There is finesse of expression in references to his 'eclectic...peripatetic life' and to his having been described as 'a gadfly in the upper echelons of the US/European avant-garde'; there is contrapuntal vigour in the testimony that 'Ford, a homosexual,...met lesbian writer Djuna Barnes, 19 years his senior, and moved into her apartment in Paris.'<sup>121</sup>

The *Los Angeles Times* shares, with the *New York Times*, an obsessive attitude to corrections, even when the error might not have been its fault. Such was the case in the 6 May 2003 obituary of Suzy Parker, the fashion model and film actress.<sup>122</sup> The following morning, on the second page of the paper's front section, and with a touch of virtuous self-flagellation, the *Los Angeles Times* declared:

An obituary of former model-actress Suzy Parker...stated that she was 69. Various biographical reference books say Parker was born on Oct. 28, 1933. But her step-daughter, Pamela Dillman Harman, said Parker was born on Oct. 28, 1932, and was 70 when she died.<sup>123</sup>

According to Myrna Oliver, writers and editors have been ordered to be 'upfront about everything to a point that is sometimes laughable'.<sup>124</sup> The challenge of obituary composition, for a newspaper which serves the collectively fragile egos of the Los Angeles entertainment industry, is refined accordingly.

### *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

Joey Ledford had worked out, in 1993, that in the greater Atlanta metropolitan area the average number of deaths each day was forty-eight. He saw this as an opportunity for the *Constitution* to publish a comprehensive list recording every death, using funeral homes as the source of information. Ledford, a *Constitution* employee, was aware of how urgently his newspaper needed to address its declining circulation, and that such a list – augmented by an expanded treatment of obituaries – could serve that purpose. He relayed his ideas to the editor of the ‘Metro’ section, Mike King, hereby inspiring, as *Atlanta* magazine has found, a mechanism that ‘breathes life into the paper through the old-fashioned art of telling extraordinary stories about ordinary people’.<sup>125</sup>

In the period leading up to Joey Ledford’s inspiration, the *Constitution* had been publishing obituaries in a well-ordered, clearly defined manner, and with an obvious sense of egalitarianism. This section on 10 September 1992, for example, contained the obituaries of a former mayor of Memphis, a retired university professor, a prominent gospel group leader, a Georgia state health official, a seamstress, and four women whose demographic description was ‘homemaker’.<sup>126</sup> The common textual content, though, was of the boilerplate persuasion; there was no attempt, indeed no room, for anecdote or character sketch.

In adopting the notion that obituaries had readership potential, the *Constitution* began a chapter of self-propelled reform. The chronology, once more, might have followed the British revival – but, as obituaries editor Kay Powell recalls, there was no causal relationship: ‘For a long time, *Atlanta Constitution* editors felt we weren’t doing enough with obituaries. Discussions were held, research was conducted...and our own style evolved.’<sup>127</sup> She also quotes a senior editor of the day as having said: ‘I don’t know that we were aware of what was going on in England. It had more to do with a general feeling that we weren’t doing enough with obits.’<sup>128</sup>

There was the feeling too that greater effort had to be made to brand the *Constitution* as an Atlanta product, in the face of increasing competition from community newspapers. The editorial unit, in pursuing this policy, used as its model the *Philadelphia Daily News* and its series of award-winning obituaries. Powell was appointed obituaries editor in 1995, by which time there had been a general revision of the page so that it contained what she calls ‘feature obituaries’, along with a daily

list of those who had died in the metropolitan area. That list has been continued, as a free service. The page itself epitomises the union of courtesy, brio, ante-bellum quaintness and aggrandisement that is Georgia. *Atlanta* magazine, in reporting this invigoration of the genre, has identified in particular the obituaries of David Robeson Morgan, who in 1947 underwent a frontal lobotomy for schizophrenia, of Kathy Lewis, a 'knock-kneed' ballet dancer who became a choreographer of international repute, and of Jimmie M. Thomas, who 'sang at Martin Luther King Jr's funeral and raised "If I Can Help Somebody" to the level of anthem'.<sup>129</sup> After much discussion, Powell even convinced the management that its paper in 1998 should publish her obituary of Calvin F. Craig, who for eight years had been grand dragon of the Ku Klux Klan in Georgia and who later worked for racial harmony.<sup>130</sup>

The *Constitution* merged with Atlanta's evening newspaper, the *Journal*, in November 2001. Since then, the obituaries page of the *Journal-Constitution* has maintained its commitment to posthumous appraisal, in the voice of the South. That voice was heard, albeit on a sinister note, when one Atlanta family, in providing information for an obituary, told the *Journal-Constitution* that 'Daddy died after a fall.'

'Later,' said Powell, 'we found out that Daddy fell because his daughter murdered him.'<sup>131</sup>

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## Australia

### The quest for paper-of-record standing

Australian newspapers, with their omnipresent wire service links from London, were clearly influenced by the British obituary revival. According to Maurice Dunlevy, a former senior lecturer in journalism at the University of Canberra, it came at a time when

Newspapers were changing. They could no longer be the main source of news for most people. They had to find another function, and I think one of the reasons the obituary has been revived is that this [the obituary page] gets them away from hard news, which now most people get from radio and television. The obituary helped them [newspapers] re-establish themselves as papers of record.<sup>132</sup>

A similar view is held by David Bowman, who was editor-in-chief at the *Sydney Morning Herald* from 1977 to 1980. Interviewed in 2003, he recalled that

Papers expanded greatly after I dropped out – a coincidence, I hope....[They] had been looking for quite a time for material that was not just news, because of television and because of radio on the hour and the half-hour. Opinion has been allowed to a much greater extent, and I think the obituary fits into that to a considerable degree.<sup>133</sup>

Bowman also finds there is a demonstrable link between developments in overseas publishing and Australia's rediscovery of the obituary:

Australian newspapers are very derivative. They look at the British and American newspapers, scratch their heads, and the thought begins to generate. It might have taken an Australian editor to read only two of Massingberd's obituaries in the *Telegraph* to think 'My God! We should be doing something like this.' We're not only derivative, but good copyists too. Once one paper started [obituaries] here, others were drawn in as a result.<sup>134</sup>

Maurice Dunlevy's reference to 'papers of record' is of particular import in this context, for it is the acquisition of that state of grace which inspired three of the editors figuring prominently in the Australian revival. The first of that trio is Alan Oakley, at the time of writing (2004) editor of the *Sunday Age* but in 1993 the recently appointed editor of Melbourne's *Herald Sun*. He maintains that

the paper that has births, marriages and deaths advertising is the paper of record, and therefore has a certain standing in the community. The obituary becomes part of that.<sup>135</sup>

Oakley had worked in his home country, England, for the *Daily Telegraph* and was an admirer of his old employer's obituary prowess:

I've always viewed the *Telegraph* as the benchmark in obituary writing. Every trainee journalist the world over should be made to read them. The attention to detail is fantastic and the great thing, of course, is that the intros follow a form and in the space of thirty to thirty-five words they encapsulate a life. That is an art.<sup>136</sup>

Under his direction, the *Herald Sun* took two significant editorial decisions in an attempt to challenge the traditional primacy of its Melbourne rival, the *Age*, in the 'A/B' demographic groups (the better educated and more affluent). It expanded its

business coverage and introduced obituaries which were ‘done in the *Herald Sun* way, a very egalitarian way’.<sup>137</sup> After some experimentation, the new obituaries page – the first in Australia, of the modern era – found a permanent place next to the classified birth, marriage and death notices from 12 July 1993.

The second editor to talk about the obituary’s contribution to paper-of-record status, and to acknowledge the British influence, is Michael Visontay. He recalls this exchange, also in 1993, with Paul Kelly, at that stage his editor-in-chief at the *Australian*:

**Kelly:** ‘What do you think the British newspapers do well?’

**Visontay:** ‘Sport, the arts, features?’

**Kelly:** ‘Obituaries.’

‘Jesus!’ thought Visontay. ‘That’s the end of my career.’<sup>138</sup>

Visontay’s chagrin, on being appointed obituaries editor, was understandable. As Britain’s *Sunday Correspondent* put it when discussing the revival, the commonly held view at one time was that obituary writing represented ‘the journalistic equivalent of being sent to Siberia’.<sup>139</sup> The editor-in-chief argued, however, that the development of an authoritative obituaries page would strengthen the reputation of the *Australian* as a newspaper of record. So, on 6 December 1993, Australia’s national daily carried a front-page announcement of a new feature entitled ‘Time & Tide’, containing an assemblage of ‘Obituaries, reviews and life’s revealing moments’.<sup>140</sup> It was the start, for Visontay, of the ‘most fulfilling’ part of his career, with no Siberian connotations.<sup>141</sup>

David Fagan, at Brisbane’s *Courier-Mail*, is the third editor to identify the presence of an obituaries page as a means of securing paper-of-record recognition:

What inspired it? I thought obituaries were an important characteristic of any newspaper that aspired to be a newspaper of record and of any local newspaper of note....It’s also important to this part of the world, where there is a lot of change and population turnover, to give our readers clear links and signposts to the past.

They also add to the sense of continuing community. For people who have lived all their lives here, Brisbane is still a big country town. It doesn’t take much for anyone who’s been around here for a long time to either know or know of someone who’s being obituarised, if that’s the word. So, as well as being good for our paper-of-record credentials, they’re also good for newspaper credentials.<sup>142</sup>

Fagan, shortly after being appointed to edit the *Courier-Mail*, therefore introduced Australia's eighth designated obituaries page. It appeared on 17 February 2003. In the intervening ten years, since the *Herald Sun* and the *Australian* began the revival, similarly designated pages had been established on other newspapers in Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide, Canberra and Perth. As will be discussed in the content analysis appearing in Chapter Eight, some of those pages have a markedly localised flavour; 'homespun' is a word which has been applied, in that analysis, with justification. Nevertheless, the British model remains of formative relevance. Reflecting on the Australian revival, and the manner in which it is being expressed, *Time* in March 2003 reported:

Whether their lives are tragically short or long and full, Australians dying now are more likely to be profiled in print than they have been for a century....In their 19<sup>th</sup> century heyday, obituaries thrilled readers with tales of long illnesses and graveside anguish...[but] now the focus is on the dead person's life – their quirks and failings as well as their achievements....That shift, and the inspiration of Britain's *Daily Telegraph* – which pioneered a new, chatty, anecdotal style – has made the Australian obituary as lively as Lazarus.<sup>143</sup>

### **The Australian group of eight: seeking the right credentials**

**Note:** In discussing at this juncture the revival in Australia, focus has been limited in each instance to the character and appearance of obituaries typically encountered on the page. A content analysis, based on a study of each obituary published by the selected group of newspapers over a six-month period, appears later in the thesis (Chapter Eight: Part One).

#### ***Herald Sun***

Though their existence can be attributed to an editor's admiration for the *Daily Telegraph* species, in their realisation over ten years *Herald Sun* obituaries are clearly not of the Massingberd-Jones school. The pattern, virtually unchanged from July 1993, is that of a respectful tribute to a citizen of Victoria, accompanied by two shorter pieces, at least one of which is taken from the wire services. Kim Lockwood, online training manager at the *Herald Sun*, makes the point that 'there are very few that are negative in tone'.<sup>144</sup> Life's quirks and achievements, identified by *Time* in its review of the Australian phenomenon, are frequently in attendance; the failings are not.

In terms of design, the half-page devoted to obituaries has also remained constant. Each obituary displays the name of its subject immediately above or below the headline, with a brief 'stand-first' containing a demographic description and (usually) the dates of birth and death. Although the name of the journalist assigned to obituaries is published on the page, as a reference point for readers, by-lines are not applied. Photographs take the form of head-and-shoulder portraits, modest in size because of tabloid format restrictions.

The first subject, on 12 July 1993, was Henri Schubert, a German émigré who coached members of Australia's athletics squads at Olympic and Commonwealth Games. One of his athletes described him as 'a gentlemen...and a legend'; to another, he was 'one of the greatest people she'd had the luck to know'.<sup>145</sup> A mould of warm, mildly eulogistic obituary had been cast. Its shape was still apparent in January 2002, during this study's content analysis, when Joan Hoare was remembered as a 'mother and volunteer' who had emigrated from England 'determined to create a better life' for her children.<sup>146</sup> In later years, nursing home staff had recalled 'her warmth and good humour'.<sup>147</sup>

The early pages of *Herald Sun* obituary publication solicited reader contributions in a form of words which also fitted that mould: 'If you would like us to **pay tribute** [author's emphasis] to a friend or relative who has recently passed away, call our obituaries writer, Barry MacFadyen, on 652-2599 after midday.'<sup>148</sup> A similar message, though without the time reference and the euphemism, survives ten years later, along with the gentleness of the product.

### ***The Australian***

The 'Siberia' fear which founding obituaries editor Michael Visontay had imagined on appointment was immediately repudiated by the nature of his initial challenge, having to secure at short notice an obituary of a corrupt law officer. Murray Farquhar died on 3 December 1993, a Friday. Sydney's chief magistrate for eight years, he had subsequently been jailed for four years on a charge of perverting the course of justice. Over the course of his first week-end at the job, Visontay had to find a specialist crime reporter with the knowledge and the willingness to write the obituary. An investigative journalist, Bob Bottom, agreed to fulfil the task, in a manner much bleaker than that found in the daily homily printed by Melbourne's *Herald Sun* (Figure 5.5). The evidence of the revival era at Australia's national broadsheet, the following Monday morning, began with this:



Murray Frederick Farquhar, World War II veteran, solicitor, Chief Stipendiary Magistrate, epitomised the unfortunate nexus between Sydney's notorious underworld and its so-called upper world. His death on Friday, of a heart attack, aged 75, has laid to rest the most public symbol of that particular malaise in Sydney society over recent decades which saw criminal figures mix openly with public officials.<sup>149</sup>

Immediately below was an obituary of a quite different character. Rodney Shearman, professor of obstetrics and gynaecology at the University of Sydney, 'an Australian of immense and daunting intellect', was accorded in print the accolades of a grateful community.<sup>150</sup> It originated as a contributed piece from Ian Fraser, a colleague at the university. Further material of this type was sought by the *Australian*, on the page, in these words: 'If you know someone whose contribution to society should be **honoured** (author's emphasis) with an appreciation, call Time and Tide [*sic*] on 228 2555.'<sup>151</sup> The pattern was set, accordingly, for a mix of hard-nosed, professional appraisal and soft farewell laced with eulogy. Initially, the *Australian* used a lengthy 'stand-first', summarising the milestones of life in a degree of detail adopted by the *Independent* in Britain in its 'go-lasts'. Within a few months, this had been simplified to a formula of name, demographic description, and dates of birth and death. That approach has been sustained over the years. Photography is of generous proportions, again pursuing the example set by the *Independent*.

After despatching Murray Farquhar, one of Visontay's immediate concerns was to commission file obituaries:

My view is that you should be commissioning obituaries to ensure that you don't become a brand within another culture, as can happen if you just run a piece from the *Telegraph*.<sup>152</sup>

He recalls having to find, for 'the morgue', definitive life appraisals of such prominent potential subjects as Kerry Packer, the media baron, Sir Donald Bradman, the cricketer, Alan Bond, the forgetful entrepreneur, and Sir John Gorton, a former prime minister. By the tenth anniversary of 'Time & Tide', two of that group (Bradman and Gorton) had died; a third, Packer, had undergone heart surgery and a kidney transplant. Visontay's preparedness had proved impeccable. In more recent times, however, the *Australian's* obituary initiative has declined, as Chapter Eight's content analysis will demonstrate.

OBITUARIES EDITOR MICHAEL VISONTAY

Obituaries

# A man from both sides of the Bench

**Murray Frederick Farquhar**  
Former Chief Stipendiary Magistrate of NSW, died in Sydney on December 3, aged 73. Born in Broken Hill July 7, 1918. Stipendiary Magistrate, 1961. Chief Stipendiary Magistrate 1971, convicted and sentenced to four years jail March 1985; released January 17, 1986. Married Dorothy 1944 (separated); one son and one daughter.

**M**URRAY Frederick Farquhar, World War II veteran, solicitor, Chief Stipendiary Magistrate, epitomised the unfortunate nexus between Sydney's notorious underworld and its so-called upper world.

His death on Friday, of a heart attack, aged 73, has laid to rest the most public symbol of that particular malaise in Sydney society over recent decades which saw criminal figures mix openly with public officials.

Farquhar, a chief magistrate and dedicated gambler, was able to remain on the Bench despite his links with crime figures. Even after being jailed for corruption he was often depicted simply as a 'colourful' Sydney identity.

That label sprung from his involvement in a series of infamous NSW legal cases — the Botany affair, the Sankey case, the Cessna-Milner case, and most notoriously the Street Royal Commission. Farquhar's tragedy is that a man of determination and charm who battled his way to respectability (and became synonymous with all that was bad in the NSW judicial system).

Born at the inland city of Broken Hill in 1918, Farquhar was the son of a Scottish miner who died when Murray was four years

old. He grew up wanting to be a teacher, believing that in those days it was one of the best things a person could do. But his classmates had a different view. When he was 15, an entry in the Broken Hill High School magazine said: "MF. Should be a lawyer".

In 1936 Farquhar came to Sydney to enrol at teachers' training college. On a whim he decided to take the Public Service exam, passed, and for the next four years worked as a clerk in the Department of Attorney-General Justice.

In 1940 he joined a South Australian infantry battalion that fought at Tobruk, El Alamein, New Guinea and Tarakan. He always reflected with pride on his achievements in uniform.

After the war, Farquhar returned to work as a clerk of Petty Sessions in the local courts, first in Broken Hill, then back in Sydney. He was admitted as a solicitor, and joined a Stipendiary Magistrate in 1961, then Chief Stipendiary Magistrate in 1971.

The crucial point in a long series of events that led to Farquhar's fall was the decision on May 9, 1977, by the NSW Court of appeal to remove him from the conspiracy case against the former Whitlam government ministers launched by solicitor Danny Sankey. In January 1977, Farquhar took over hearing of the case but was removed five months later



'Colourful': Farquhar was able to remain on the Bench despite his links with crime

when the court found that he had interfered in proceedings.

The NSW government initiated no inquiry into Farquhar at the time but there was already debate about his hearing of the Botany Council affair, which involved charges against the then NSW ALP secretary Geoff Cahill and Laurie Brereton, now a federal minister, both of whom were discharged.

By the mid-1970s, with the growth of syndicated organised crime under public scrutiny for the first time, NSW police had introduced a special crime intelligence unit (CIS) to target criminal leaders disclosed by the 1973-74 Moffitt Royal Commission into criminal infiltration of NSW licensed clubs.

Its priority target was George Freeman, an associate of Lennie McPherson, Sydney's so-called Mr Big of organised crime. During surveillance operations the

CIU photographed Freeman at the races at Randwick with Farquhar and Nick Patos, who was later convicted of drug importation.

Despite parliamentary pressure from the then government of Neville Wran refused to suspend or sack Farquhar. Although in June 1978 Farquhar was to turn 60, he was reappointed Chief Stipendiary Magistrate. As well, he was appointed chairman of the newly established NSW Drug and Alcohol Authority.

On May 24, 1978, the day before Farquhar did step down as Chief Stipendiary Magistrate, he dealt with a drug charge against an American, Roy Bowers Cossina, involving a reported \$1.5 million drug seizure. Farquhar released him on a bond. In doing so, Farquhar had accepted evidence of a lower value for the drugs, enabling him to deal with the case summarily in the lower court

rather than have to refer to a higher court.

It was in the Street Royal Commission in 1983, following revelations by journalist Chris Masters on an ABC *Four Corners* program titled *The Big League* that Farquhar became etched in the public memory. The program disclosed that Farquhar had interfered with a case, resulting in the discharge of fraud charges against rugby league boss Kevin Humphreys.

As a result of the Street Royal Commission — in which the then NSW premier Neville Wran stood aside following allegations against him — Humphreys was retried and convicted, and Farquhar was himself convicted on March 18, 1985, of perverting the course of justice and sent to Long Bay jail, where he served 10 months of a four-year sentence.

Farquhar remembered the experience fondly and on his release he paid tribute to fellow prisoners as good blokes. Away from the constraints of the Bench, Farquhar found himself more frequently on the wrong side of the law and was returned to court, again on the wrong side of the Bench.

First there was a charge of allegedly receiving valuable stolen paintings. He was acquitted but maintained he unwittingly got involved through some people he met in a pub.

When he died, Farquhar was back before the court yet again, this time for allegedly arranging to secure false passports in an incredible scheme worth a supposed cache of \$7 billion in gold bullion in the Philippines. Though he protested his innocence, he went to the District Court five months ago seeking notice of a likely sentence length (possibly 10 years), pleaded guilty. His health had been failing (him) and at his age he feared dying in jail.

His former barrister, John Keesing, once described Farquhar as "someone who deeply wants to be loved". Another barrister, Alec Shand QC, argued that Farquhar had been guilty "of a loss of moral perspective" that had marred the latter part of his life.

■ Bob Bottom

Bob Bottom is an investigative journalist and author. Additional material by Mark Chipperfield

# An enduring contribution to women's health

**Rodney Philip Shearman, AO**  
Professor of obstetrics and gynaecology, University of Sydney, 1968-93; head of obstetrics and gynaecology, Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, 1970-83. Died in Sydney, November 30, aged 65. Born in Sydney, February 17, 1928. Married Judith Craig 1952; two sons and two daughters.

**'A**N impressive figure — omniscient, sartorially elegant, just slightly stooped, and somewhat cold, serious and unsmiling — an air of hormones like a corona surrounds him. — Sydney University Medical Year Book, 1969.

An Australian of immense and daunting intellect, who was educated at Orange High School and Sydney University. Rodney Shearman — who died last week after a long and courageous battle with a particularly aggressive type of cancer — was one of the clearest and most incisive medical thinkers of his time.

He was a dominant figure on the medical academic scene of the University of Sydney, and was regarded with great respect and indeed much awe by colleagues in other departments, faculties and universities.

Autocratic and single-minded once his decision was made, he was nevertheless always open to

argument before his path was chosen. He was a brilliant but dogmatic lecturer, who frequently used old but classic slides as illustrative material and then supplemented these with data that were "too recent to have reached the published literature".

He preferred the Socratic approach to small-group learning and expected his students to make major contributions to each session. Many of his students and junior colleagues remember the sense of apprehension, even terror, when faced with making a presentation before the professor, who had a reputation for not suffering fools gladly.

He was noted for his aphorisms, always highlighting a message of profound common sense — "the day of your birth is still the most dangerous single day of your life" and "the frequent experiments of nature" — a comment emphasising the precise errors in baby function accompanying most diseases and the potential for a good clinician and scientist to be able to elicit



Indelible impression: Rodney Shearman

date their nature and plan the best management.

Rodney Shearman's lasting contributions to Australian life have four themes. He helped to ensure the importance of family planning and contraception specifically through his support and encouragement of Australian Family Planning associations.

Second, for more than 20 years he chaired and guided the NSW ministerial committee responsible for the quality of services and the

safety of mothers and newborn babies in the State, and in 1987-88 chaired the ministerial taskforce to review maternity services and plan strategy into the 21st century.

The three-volume Shearman Report also became the national benchmark for planning high-quality care and choices for mothers and babies. An extension of this mission was his leadership and enthusiasm, over 40 years, for the services for women and men at his own hospital, the Royal Prince Alfred and King George V hospital complex.

Perhaps his most enduring but least obvious contribution to the care of Australian women was at the Royal Australian College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, which he helped establish. He was president of the college for three years and was pivotal in encouraging the development of its innovative training and examination methods, as well as its emphasis on continuing education for fellows and members.

He recruited me as an obstetrics graduate working at the University of Oxford 18 years ago. I was enormously excited to be coming to a department with an aura of promise engendered almost solely by the magnificence of one man.

At that time, his university academic department consisted of only one professor, one reader, an

associate professor and two senior lecturers, whereas it now consists of six full professors, three associate professors and two senior lecturers (plus five clinical academics and is the largest and arguably the most prestigious department of obstetrics and gynaecology in Australia).

Sir Gustav Nossal, director of the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research in Melbourne, recently wrote of him: "His restless, inquiring mind, his supreme technical skills and a dynamic quality that today would be described by the overused term 'charisma', all left an indelible impression. His work with the World Health Organisation's human reproduction program has set a standard which few have since emulated".

Rodney was always a very private person with an intense recognition of the importance of his family. He married Judith Craig in 1952 and they have two sons and two daughters — a charming, warm and supportive family.

■ Ian Fraser

Ian Fraser is a professor of obstetrics and gynaecology at the University of Sydney.

If you know someone whose contribution to society should be honoured with an appreciation, call Time and Tide on 288 2355.

**Figure 5.5** Contrasting subjects. The first 'Time & Tide' page in Australia's national daily, the *Australian*, carried the obituaries of a corrupt magistrate and a distinguished surgeon. The detail of the 'stand-first' life summaries has been cut back over the years, as too has the appearance record of 'Time & Tide' itself (see Chapter Eight). (*Australian*, 6 December 1993)

## *The Age*

The death of Julius Boros, twice US Open golf champion, signalled the arrival on 30 May 1994 of a third designated obituaries page. Melbourne's morning broadsheet, the *Age*, published a compact obituary of the golfer as the main item within a new miscellany, 'Chronicles'. The Boros piece did not carry a credit, but appeared in style – notably through its use of quotes and an emphasis on the circumstances of death – to have come from an American wire service. Two days later, the *Age* published its first Australian obituary; the subject was Sir Charles Spry, for nineteen years director-general of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO). The writer, Robert Manne, began with the sort of wooden intimation that too often afflicts opening paragraphs in Australia: 'Charles Spry was born in Queensland in 1910.'<sup>153</sup> If, however, readers were not entirely alienated by this, they would later have found a more engaging delivery:

Spry's greatest success came early, in April 1954, when, with ASIO's encouragement, two Soviet security officers, Vladimir and Evdokia Petrov, defected in Australia. They were among the most important defectors of the Cold War. It came as a bitter surprise to Spry when the Leader of the Opposition, Dr Evatt, charged him and ASIO with conspiring over Petrov to help Menzies retain power [as prime minister]. From this unjust attack on his integrity and political impartiality, Spry never quite recovered.<sup>154</sup>

Though obituaries continued to have a modest presence in the *Age*, with just one making a 'Chronicles' appearance each day, the content often supplied a candour not found in its tabloid competitor, the *Herald Sun*. Don Lane, the Queensland politician sentenced to prison for misuse of ministerial expenses, was said to have 'epitomised the wily, street-smart, parish-pump conservative...[whose] associates proved somewhat shady'.<sup>155</sup> Tony Lock, the expatriate English cricketer, was remembered as an 'intense...versatile and sagacious' performer who died of lung cancer while 'legal proceedings involving alleged sexual assault' remained unresolved.<sup>156</sup>

'Chronicles' itself was part of an *Age* section entitled 'Today', published Monday-to-Friday; on Saturdays the obituaries appeared within the 'Insight' section. The style which evolved was that of the subject's name as a headline, followed by a brief 'stand-first' (demographic description, dates of birth and death). Despite this construction, the *Age* was often prevented from exploiting opportunities for a creative lead paragraph by its apparent unwillingness to amend reader contributions.



Madelene Crump was the only child of Amy Madeline Crump (Brownell), of Tasmania, and Arthur Rainsford Crump, of New Zealand, who taught at the Clarendon Ladies College, Ballarat. The college was owned by Mr Crump's four sisters, one of whom, Lillie Crump, was the principal. [The obituary was of a woman who, after studying in the United States and Britain, pioneered psychiatric social work in Australia.]<sup>159</sup>

Keith McDowall was born at Camperdown, where his father had a 4000-acre sheep property on the Camperdown-Lismore road. Keith was three years old when his father died. His mother, with five children under the age of seven, put in a manager for the property and moved to Camperdown, where Keith grew up. [The subject of this obituary won the Military Medal in World War II and was commissioned in the field.]<sup>160</sup>

Those life stories, as the parenthetical information makes clear, were worth reading. Potential readers, however, needed a more aggressive dose of encouragement in the opening paragraph.

### ***The Sydney Morning Herald***

The early years of obituary publication at the *Sydney Morning Herald* were similarly afflicted by obscurity of position. This drew criticism on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's radio program 'The Media Report', during a panel discussion about the Australian revival. Jack Waterford, of the *Canberra Times*, advised the *Herald* to shift its obituaries from the 'Business' section to a more prominent part of the paper:

In recent times we've seen a number of newspapers dedicate specific space for obituaries. The *Australian* runs a very good section called 'Time & Tide', for example, although occasionally there's the impression...that it's padded out with obituaries bought from wire services overseas. The *Sydney Morning Herald* has tried to devote some space to it [obituary publication], but unfortunately has put it so far back in the paper, often with the impression that it's some 'make-space' between the 'Business' section and the 'Classifieds'.<sup>161</sup>

The *Herald* page had begun on 1 May 1996. It contained two syndicated pieces, from the *Daily Telegraph* and the *New York Times*, and an appeal for reader ideas: 'Do you know someone who has died recently and whose life merits a *Herald* obituary? Post details to the Assistant Editor, *The Sydney Morning Herald*...or send a fax to (02) 282 3282.'<sup>162</sup>

The first Australian obituary appeared on 10 May, of the Sydney writer Mena Calthorpe; it was respectful, literate, and elevated safely above the boilerplate category by the inclusion of anecdote, recalling her ability to enliven her creative writing classes with verse and ballad.<sup>163</sup> Evidence of a more delicate topic for the obituarist appeared the following day:

The sad and troubled spirit of Robert Riley will at last be at peace when he is buried next week in the Noongar Aboriginal heartland of Western Australia. A brilliant and charismatic indigenous leader, Riley...ended his life in a suburban motel room....He is being hailed as a freedom-fighter, a kind and caring man, a loyal friend.<sup>164</sup>

In choosing that form of words, the writer addressed the delicate subject of suicide with honesty and restraint. At the same time, the Australian obituary's predilection for bathos and extravagance is apparent in the latter part of that extract. The point will be addressed in Chapter Eight's discussion of contemporary practice.

By the year 2000, the *Sydney Morning Herald* had increased its obituary space considerably, to five columns a day. The presentation, though, was conservative: the name of each subject as a headline, the briefest of 'stand-firsts', the occasional small photograph, and an end-credit. Many of those credits were of overseas origin, as the *Herald* continued to place much reliance on the wire services.

With the exception of the concise 'stand-first', all was changed from 6 August 2001, when 'This Life', edited by Suzy Baldwin, replaced the staid obituaries page of old. Its photographs are big and its headlines inventive (as in 'Well-bred gel's interest in silks went well beyond stockings', accompanying the obituary of Georgina Coleridge, journalist).<sup>165</sup> There is also an occasional sub-section for readers' contributions, entitled 'Untold Stories',<sup>166</sup> offering a thread of equality of opportunity in obituary page recognition (Figure 5.7). 'Untold Stories', as a subsequent section of this thesis will demonstrate, has been instrumental in addressing the question of gender balance; the *Sydney Morning Herald* recorded the highest incidence of female subject selection in this study's six-month content analysis of Australian obituary pages.

# This Life

Edited by Suzy Baldwin

## New woman rises from Nazi rubble

**Hildegard Frieda Knef**  
Actor and writer  
1923-2002

The prominent German stage actress Hildegard Knef, who has died aged 78, played the role of a returning survivor of a Nazi concentration camp in Wolfgang Petersen's *The Merchant of Venice* last night in one of the five postwar German films.

For the public, she embodied a new style of woman, composed and detached, the exact opposite of Third Reich heroines. Some critics called her "the leading lady in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*".

Born in Ulm, in southern Germany, she grew up in the same Schöneberg neighbourhood of Berlin as Dietrich, with whom she later developed close friendships.

Employed at 17 by the Ufa disc during World War II, Knef worked as a pianist and entertainer in the amusement department while studying acting at the Babbling Film school. Her first role, as Lisa, in Heinrich Strohm's *Transatlantique* (1944) led on the cutting edge film, but her talents were quickly recognised and she was given better parts in films directed by the architectural genius in Goebbels's film office: Gerhard Lamprecht's *Die Brüder Noltenius* (The Brothers Noltenius, 1945), Helmut Kästner's *Das deutsche Mädchen* (The German Girl, 1945), and Erich Engel's *Immer glückselig* (Always to Happiness, 1945).

After falling in love with Oswald von Demanowski, a production chief at Ufa Film, Knef followed

him during the closing days of the war to the Eastern Front disguised as a nun, where she was arrested and jailed by the advancing Polish army, and later released from prison. Although these experiences were later used to good effect in *The Merchant of Venice*, the first DEFA film production, they did not sit well with Allied military officials, particularly as the *Das Mädchen* film was produced in the eastern sector of Berlin.

Turning to the stage, Knef was engaged by Viktor de Kowa at the Theater, and by Reinhold Böling at the Schloßpark Theater in West Berlin, to play leading roles in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, *Richard III* and *Macbeth*.

After two years of unemployment in Hollywood - probably because she refused roles, possibly because of her past association with the Nazis - she returned to Germany to star in Willi Forst's *Die Sünderin* (The Sinner, 1950), the scandalous story of a woman who possesses herself to save a painter from going blind, appearing made-in-one-piece.

From 1950 onwards, Knef was sought by both Hollywood and German production companies. She starred in *Anna Karenina's* co-



Hildegard Knef in her most successful role, as *Shakespeare's* *As You Like It*.

clusion *Richard III*, her first Hollywood production shot in Germany, about which Wesley Craven, the New York Times critic, wrote: "As a weary-eyed beauty in a German café, Hildegard Knef is affecting, conveying the pangs of desolation without making any pitiful appeals."

Producer Erich Pommer, who had also returned to Germany, engaged Knef for three German productions. She was teamed, as a prostitute again, with Hans Albers in *Richard III's* *Anna Karenina* (1951), and with Helmut Kästner in *Richard III's* *Anna Karenina* (1952).

In Hollywood, Henry Hathaway teamed her with Tyrone Power in *Diplomatic Courier* (1952), and Henry King with Gregory Peck in

*The Snow of Kilimangaro* (1952). Joan Dwyer directed her in her first French film, *Le Fils de Henriette* (1952), and Cecil De Mille starred her in *The Man from Snowy Mountain* (1953), which was her first British production.

Knef's great stage success was a 10-year span on Broadway, from 1944-55, playing *Nanook's* 675 seats in Cole Porter's musical comedy *Silk Stockings*, the "mile-proved" success that he began a habit career as, in Ella Fitzgerald's words, "the world's greatest singer without a voice".

Beginning in 1953, after a production of *Spoken Word* in Wolfgang Petersen's screen adaptation of Brecht-Weill's *The Threepenny Opera*, Knef landed her new career as a chanson singer, cementing a lasting friendship with Dietrich, and worked

with Billy Wilder in *Fedora* (1978), her last major screen role. Afflicted by cancer, and crippled for a time by her addiction to drugs, Knef showed great courage by undergoing several operations and continuing her tour between stage and television jobs. One of her two autobiographies, *The Victim*, deals specifically with her fight against cancer. When actor Romy Schneider died in 1982, Knef published a book about her friend and colleague.

Knifing her time between Los Angeles and Berlin, she was married three times to Hans-Joachim Christen, and to Paul von Schell, who, with Christina, survives her.

By Helen

### UNTOLD STORIES

## Teacher, mother, wife - and always pretty in pink

Joan Elliott had very definite ideas about what was proper in many areas. But, probably because she was not a feminist, she held particularly strong views about child-rearing.

Joan loved pretty things and her favourite colour was pink. She dressed her only daughter Elizabeth in snatched outfits that matched with pink shoes, her grand-daughter Alexandra had velvet dresses with lace collars and both had extremely girly wardrobes.

Joan's affection with cheeky - pretty children - continued into the third generation. In the '60s she would take Elizabeth shopping for clothes and accessories. She was particularly picky about "something lovely" for her daughter, who remained femininely dressed in army fatigues, a denim jacket and red wig.

Though the '70s and '80s were committed to be appalled by Elizabeth's clothes. She would slip money on Elizabeth's house partner John, saying, "Now I want you to make sure that Elizabeth buys something lovely." Joan would always confide to Elizabeth that he had the money and now again it would be spent on new tags, the plumber or paying off Helen the electrician who had rewired their house in Borealis.

Borealis Joan gave up her daughter's wardrobe and turned her attention to her granddaughters.

No one looked forward to Alexandra's

Elliot, born on January 18, 1923, in Ulm, Germany, and died on February 7, 2002, at the age of 78.

Joan Elliott was a teacher, mother, wife, and always pretty in pink. She was a prominent German stage actress who played the role of a returning survivor of a Nazi concentration camp in Wolfgang Petersen's *The Merchant of Venice* last night in one of the five postwar German films.

For the public, she embodied a new style of woman, composed and detached, the exact opposite of Third Reich heroines. Some critics called her "the leading lady in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*".

Born in Ulm, in southern Germany, she grew up in the same Schöneberg neighbourhood of Berlin as Dietrich, with whom she later developed close friendships.

Employed at 17 by the Ufa disc during World War II, Knef worked as a pianist and entertainer in the amusement department while studying acting at the Babbling Film school. Her first role, as Lisa, in Heinrich Strohm's *Transatlantique* (1944) led on the cutting edge film, but her talents were quickly recognised and she was given better parts in films directed by the architectural genius in Goebbels's film office: Gerhard Lamprecht's *Die Brüder Noltenius* (The Brothers Noltenius, 1945), Helmut Kästner's *Das deutsche Mädchen* (The German Girl, 1945), and Erich Engel's *Immer glückselig* (Always to Happiness, 1945).

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### SIGNPOSTS

**Who**  
Bare: 1920, American Civil War commander William Tecumseh Sherman ("The Old Fuss and Feathers").  
1925, actor Jack Lemmon (*The Day After Tomorrow*).  
1928, actor James Dean (*Rebel Without a Cause*).  
1940, actor Nick Nolte (*The Golden Boy*).  
1950, author John Grisham (*The Firm*).

**What**  
In 1881 Mary Queen of Scots was beheaded in the Great Hall of Falkenberg Castle. In 1942, Japanese troops under General Yamashita landed on the northwest coast of Iwojima. In 1950 the Queen Elizabeth theatre decided to sever ties with the P.W. C.A.R.C. and advised its members to sever ties with the G.A.P. of Arts then proclaimed her accession at St James Palace in 1907 (Queen Elizabeth II).  
1960, author Arthur C. Clarke as leader of the A.U.

Tell our readers: we are invited to celebrate the life of a friend or relative in an informal, anecdotal and personal story of 400 words. Please include dates of birth and death and a copy of the death notice. Send to: **Bury Bulletin**, GPO Box 306, Sydney 2001, or email to [burybulletin@smh.com.au](mailto:burybulletin@smh.com.au). This page appears, when space permits, next to the death notice. It is listed in the page 2 index under *The Life Obituary*.

## A surgeon's skill with an eye for sturgeon

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## PERSONAL NOTICES

### Births, Engagements, Marriages, Deaths

#### Summary of death notices

DEATHS	FUNERALS	RETURN THANKS
<b>ALLEN, Frances</b> (nee GIBSON), 85, died peacefully at home on February 6, 2002. Burial at Rookwood Crematorium. Family contact: 02 9550 1234.	<b>ALLEN, Frances</b> (nee GIBSON), 85, died peacefully at home on February 6, 2002. Burial at Rookwood Crematorium. Family contact: 02 9550 1234.	<b>ALLEN, Frances</b> (nee GIBSON), 85, died peacefully at home on February 6, 2002. Burial at Rookwood Crematorium. Family contact: 02 9550 1234.
<b>BROWN, John</b> , 78, died on February 5, 2002. Burial at Rookwood Crematorium. Family contact: 02 9550 1234.	<b>BROWN, John</b> , 78, died on February 5, 2002. Burial at Rookwood Crematorium. Family contact: 02 9550 1234.	<b>BROWN, John</b> , 78, died on February 5, 2002. Burial at Rookwood Crematorium. Family contact: 02 9550 1234.
<b>SMITH, Mary</b> , 92, died on February 4, 2002. Burial at Rookwood Crematorium. Family contact: 02 9550 1234.	<b>SMITH, Mary</b> , 92, died on February 4, 2002. Burial at Rookwood Crematorium. Family contact: 02 9550 1234.	<b>SMITH, Mary</b> , 92, died on February 4, 2002. Burial at Rookwood Crematorium. Family contact: 02 9550 1234.

## Capture Your Child's Birth-Day Forever

What better way to celebrate the birth of your own baby than with a special AFDA full colour copy of the front page of the Sydney Morning Herald? This is a fantastic way to capture what is happening on the day of your child's birth and there is something to share with your child in the years to come.

The poster is also a fantastic gift for a special friend or an excellent inclusion into any CRAZY time capsule.

Cost: \$50 including GST, postage & handling.

**Save 20%**  
This year Birth Notice in The Sydney Morning Herald and receive the front page of the Sydney Morning Herald for \$13.25.

To book your Birth Notice call:  
**13 25 35**

### LEGAL NOTICES

**AFDA**  
At the time of your need, we are here to help...  
Phone: 1300 888 188

**LEGAL NOTICES**  
In the Supreme Court of New South Wales  
AFTER 14 days notice of the death of a person, the executor of the will of the deceased may apply to the court for an order for the distribution of the estate of the deceased. The executor of the will of the deceased is the person named in the will as the executor of the will of the deceased. The executor of the will of the deceased is the person named in the will as the executor of the will of the deceased.

**Figure 5.7 Told and untold.** The Sydney Morning Herald emphasises its homespun obituary contributions by labelling them 'Untold Stories'. This tactic eases the transition in style, found here in shifting from the Guardian obituary of Hildegard Knef ('great stage success' in ten years on Broadway) to the life story of Joan Elliott ('teacher, mother, wife'). (Sydney Morning Herald, 8 February 2002)

In the commissioning of obituaries, specialist contributors to the *Herald* have at times been encouraged to address a theme. A notable example of this occurred on 6 September 2003, on the death of the Sydney restaurateur Vadim Steven Kerr, who in the era of restricted licensing hours

ran the last of a line of Sydney bohemian restaurants and coffee shops....Nat King Cole, Rudolf Nureyev, Margot Fonteyn, Mstislav Rostropovich, Vivien Leigh and Yevgeny Yevtushenko broke the law, like everybody else, drinking booze from coffee cups after midnight.<sup>167</sup>

Baldwin devoted all her five columns that day to the Vadim story, with additional material by Richard Neville, one of the editors of the erstwhile magazine *Oz*, and by Kate Fitzpatrick, the actor. Neville wrote of times when 'At Vadim's, the chattering class was never a class, it was an ecosystem, a profusion of voices that crossed boundaries of gender, suburb and age.'<sup>168</sup> Fitzpatrick, who had worked as a waitress at Vadim's, drew a seductive picture of Sydney of the Sixties:

I knew Vadim at an innocent, happy time when everyone I loved was still alive, everyone I knew was young and fearless, and life was a breeze....Hookers were old boilers who could take care of themselves, not junk-addled children....Because of the liquor laws, all the booze at Vadim's had to disappear about 11pm in case the cops came. Wine went into coffee cups, bottles under tables and stemmed glasses vanished.<sup>169</sup>

The *Sydney Morning Herald* has brought flair to the obituary in Australia. That quality, however, is expressed irregularly; 'This Life' appears to have a tenuous existence, often being omitted from the paper as much as twice a week. Baldwin, in her interview for this thesis, identified 'a daily page' as her prime demand for the section's future wellbeing.<sup>170</sup>

### ***The Advertiser***

Adelaide's morning newspaper flirted with a formalised treatment in 1994, publishing an irregular series carrying the 'Obituary' tag and a succinct 'stand-first'. It waited until 1 May 1999 before developing this initiative into a discrete page, appearing every Saturday. The start was impressive. There were two obituaries, each of a prominent citizen and written by a staff journalist; the page was completed by a 'Milestones' column, listing historical events and birthdays, much like that found in the London papers. Gradually, though, Australian journalism's passion for egalitarian



expression – or perhaps for economy of scale – crept in. The *Advertiser* pursued the practice of soliciting material: ‘Readers are invited to contribute obituaries. These should include dates of birth and death, and a photograph.’<sup>171</sup> The number of obituaries increased, usually to four each Saturday, the ‘Milestones’ column vanished, and the overall standard of writing declined.

This decline, in one of its manifestations, became apparent in the practice of printing extracts from eulogies. These expressions of personal loss, based often on a similarly personal philosophy, demand some reinterpretation for the public forum (as Chapter One has found in its discussion of definitions). On the death of Arnold Hunt, a theologian, the *Advertiser* obituary end-credit stated: ‘Edited from eulogies by the Reverend Don Catford, Moderator of the Uniting Church, and the Reverend Neale Michael, a past moderator.’<sup>172</sup> The editing, however, maintained in parts the grammatical structure and the cadences of eulogy:

In Arnold Hunt we had far more than an academic or theologian or historian or lecturer. We had a warm-hearted human being, a beloved husband, father and grandpa. We had a college lecturer and principal capable of helping students find their own weaknesses without them [*sic*] being wounded; who was able to inspire the student to do better than he or she believed and who could reach out compassionately when needed.<sup>173</sup>

That is, no doubt, a statement of sincere belief; but, since it does not appear as a passage of quoted speech, its legitimacy as sound journalism technique must be questioned.

The *Advertiser* has also appeared to be remarkably tolerant of the dull introduction. It began the obituary of a former Olympic silver medallist, World War II fighter pilot and successful business identity in this undistinguished fashion:

Theodore Bruce was the fourth child born to Frederic Theodore Bruce and Kathleen Longmuir Park Bruce (née Macindoe). He was named after his paternal grandfather, the Honourable Theodore Bruce, MLC.<sup>174</sup>

At other times, the process of community offerings can bring rewards. Such was the case following the death of Robert Mohr, a judge, whose obituary was written by a judicial colleague.<sup>175</sup> Considerable play was made of Mohr’s enduring pride in his having been a wartime stoker on *HMAS Arunta*. The obituary related a post-war

encounter at Melbourne's Naval and Military Club, when an admiral recognised Mohr and assumed he was working there as a steward. Mohr had to explain that he was visiting Melbourne in his capacity as judge-advocate of the Australian Defence Force.

In its fifth year of obituary publication, the *Advertiser* obituaries page gave the impression of being a community newsletter of fond remembrance; a Saturday interlude of amiable hagiography and occasional diversion.

### *The Canberra Times*

Though the *Canberra Times* weekly obituaries page was formalised on 16 July 1999, the art itself had been practised for some years before this by Jack Waterford in his capacity as editor and, later, editor-in-chief. As far as technique is concerned, he advocates a strong opening paragraph followed by a candid appraisal:

You have to tell somebody [the reader] in the first paragraph why the fuck the person was interesting enough to write an obituary about....As a matter of honouring the dead, you sometimes put the boots in. It's rather more likely, doing it that way, that they'll be remembered and marked than if you begin with their being born somewhere and working tediously through to the end without saying what made them interesting or remarkable.<sup>176</sup>

He began his 1992 obituary of Pat Lanigan, a barrister who had formerly been a senior public servant, by relating the unusual setting and circumstance of the death:

Lanigan...died in Turkey last week, apparently of a heart attack when he set off walking after his car had become bogged. He was thought to be in the process of realising one of his last dreams – of visiting Gallipoli – having just realised another – of visiting St Petersburg – while in Europe attending an International Bar Association conference. Anyone familiar with the usual chaos of Pat Lanigan travel arrangements would understand that no-one quite knows whether he got to Gallipoli or not, or whether he was going to Gallipoli or returning to Istanbul when he left his vehicle.<sup>177</sup>

With a personality trait, that of disorganisation, in place, Waterford was able to add:

He once drove to Sydney, then flew back, forgetting he had driven there. Characteristically, he also missed his last flight. His body had been supposed to arrive home on Sunday, but was transferred to another aircraft and arrived only yesterday morning.<sup>178</sup>

Arguably his finest moment of candour came with the death, in 2003, of a *Canberra Times* colleague, Bruce Juddery. It was so true to its subject, apparently, that Juddery's family invited Waterford to deliver the funeral eulogy. Yet this, in part, is what he had written:

Nearly everything he touched outside of mainstream journalism – whether in public relations with the Australian National University, a subscription newsletter, and being secretary of the ACT branch of the Australian Journalists Association, was a disaster for him, as, increasingly, was the chaos put on his life by his abuse of alcohol.<sup>179</sup>

The regular obituary section had a promising start, that July Friday in 1999. It contained three local subjects (an actor, a press photographer and a draftsman) and a syndicated piece from the *Guardian* on Bill Owen, a veteran of the British theatre.<sup>180</sup> The layout was well structured, each obituary had a 'go-last' and an end-credit, and the writing was assured. Over the ensuing four years, that standard was maintained by able contributors, notably from the Australian National University and executive levels of government departments. John Farquharson, a former deputy editor of the *Canberra Times*, had proved to be a source of meticulously researched obituaries; Sir Ninian Stephen, once governor-general of Australia, also wrote for the page.

However, by the end of 2003, the Friday obituary section was reduced, frequently, to a solitary item. There were signs at the *Canberra Times* that the first fine mood of revival had passed.

### ***The West Australian***

Patrick Cornish, obituaries editor at the *West Australian* since the start of its page on 31 July 2000, had been the paper's foreign editor for six years and, in a three-year secondment, taught journalism at Perth's Murdoch University. Just like Michael Visontay at the *Australian*, he entertained misgivings about the obituaries appointment, a feeling which has dissolved with experience:

I thought initially this might be a little bit of a gloomy area to get into...but it hasn't turned out like that. I've found it quite the least useless writing I've ever done as a journalist. I've found it a very absorbing, uplifting area to be in....[As foreign editor] I'd had it up to here with bombs, bullets and protest marches. In this job, I've had piles of cards and letters....It's actually writing that matters.<sup>181</sup>

Cornish echoes the sentiments too of those editors who refer to the obituary's bestowal of paper-of-record status. In his view, 'It's shaking hands with history. It's one of the few innovations we've brought in that's widely perceived as raising the tone and reputation of the paper.'<sup>182</sup> The first subject to appear on the page was Paris Drake-Brockman, 'a descendant of WA pioneers' who, as a student at the University of Western Australia in the 1940s, was the perpetrator of a celebrated hoax lecture on modern sculpture.<sup>183</sup>

Significantly, in terms of the Australian revival, the Massingberd legacy persisted; the accompanying obituary on that first page was a syndicated piece, on a military subject, from the *Daily Telegraph*.<sup>184</sup> Its approach to the art is found too in Cornish's preference, where possible, to employ anecdote. This example from the opening paragraphs of an obituary of a senior police officer illustrates the effectiveness of the device in securing reader interest:

A policeman's lot often combines drama and daring with duty, but few shifts in Roy Balcombe's career compared with the day he arrived naked at an air force outpost. His mate was wearing a sopping wet skirt....What unfolded was a tale of heroic rescue. Navy signalman Balcombe had leapt off his minesweeper, *HMAS Medea*, to save a non-swimmer named Chapman. The rescuer, naked because he was about to put on fresh clothes when Chapman fell in, swam vigorously and grabbed him just as he was going under....And the skirt? Bateman [the other rescuer], just before dashing for the lifeboat...had grabbed the old Australian Women's Auxiliary Service garment from a bundle of rags in the engine room.<sup>185</sup>

The *West Australian* is able to begin its obituaries in a creative manner by use of a 'stand-first', encapsulating name and dates of birth and death. The pattern, most of the time, is to publish an obituary of a local subject (written either by the obituaries editor or a staff journalist) and an edited piece from the wire services. In editing background material contributed by bereaved families, Cornish has imposed house rules on the eulogy as a source of information:

We never run extracts from eulogies, although such texts are very useful for the sequence of facts and sometimes have an anecdote or two that can be run. We avoid the predictable 'much missed', 'nature's gentleman' type of phrasings. That's laudable grief, but it's not journalism.<sup>186</sup>

When the *West Australian* obituaries page began, it appeared four days a week (Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday). This was increased, from March 2003, to six days (Monday–Saturday), an indication of sustained revival in the West.

### ***The Courier-Mail***

Brisbane rediscovered the art of disciplined, organised obituary one Monday morning early in 2003. This realisation of the *Courier-Mail* editor's paper-of-record ambitions began, on 17 February, with a page containing three obituaries, one written by a staff journalist and the others by wire services. As the Chapter Eight content analysis will disclose, staff contributions to the new page are vigorously encouraged by the *Courier-Mail*, especially if specialist knowledge is required. One of those contributors has been the arts editor, Rosemary Sorensen, whose obituary of Carol Shields, a Canadian winner of a Pulitzer Prize for literature, is of particular significance within this study.<sup>187</sup> It is most unusual for an Australian newspaper to produce its own obituary of non-Australian international figures; the preferred practice is to choose a readily available syndicated piece. In the Shields case, for instance, the *Age* took the entirely reasonable decision to run the *Daily Telegraph* version. Another factor demanding notice was that on three occasions during the first six months of its page, the *Courier-Mail* printed obituaries of former politicians contributed by the Speaker of Queensland's State Parliament, Ray Hollis.

The style adopted has been that of a 'stand-first' (name, demographic description, date of birth, date of death) and, in the event of a staff-written piece, an end-credit. One of the early subject choices created some controversy. The 'stand-first' for Jack Warren, 79, who had died of cancer at the Gold Coast, gave his occupation as 'Criminal'.<sup>188</sup> The text then recalled his career as 'a master shoplifter, conman and fraudster' who, at the age of 70, had been arrested 'in connection with what was then [1994] Australia's biggest cannabis haul'.<sup>189</sup> It added that after being granted bail, Warren hit a television cameraman with an umbrella outside the court house. There were some complaints from *Courier-Mail* readers about the appearance of this account on the new page. Greg Chamberlin, the acting obituaries editor, recalls that the standard reply was this:

We'd say 'If Ronnie Biggs [of Britain's 1963 'Great Train Robbery'] died, you'd expect to read about him, and this guy is much the same – only he's from our area.'<sup>190</sup>

By the tenth anniversary of its revival in Australia, therefore, eight obituary pages were in existence. According to Maurice Dunlevy, of the University of Canberra, their publication was in tune with the needs of a greying population:

As you get older, you become more and more interested in the fate of people in your own age group. So obituaries have a great readership along older people. Both my mother and my father used to read two things in the newspaper – one was the funeral notices and the other was the obituaries.<sup>191</sup>

## Conclusions

A confluence of events saw the art of obituary revived in Britain during the 1980s. The *Daily Telegraph* and the *Independent* appointed innovative, reformist editors; the *Times* led the Fleet Street diaspora, breaking print union restraints and allowing newspapers to grow in size and scope; the *Guardian* underwent an overhaul of design and content. It became fashionable suddenly to complain about the bulk of the papers, much as occurs each Sunday across the Atlantic when readers are confronted by the grey newsprint mass calling itself the *New York Times*. Obituary, in its incarnation as instant biography, suited the column space which, increasingly, was made available. The *Times* eventually devoted the better part of two pages to it.

That revival, though, was more than an exercise in broad acreage. New styles of writing were cultivated too. Obituarists, pricked perhaps by the explicit judgments of an editor briefly appointed to the *Times* obituaries desk, adopted a more candid form of posthumous appraisal. Humour was introduced also, notably by the *Telegraph* in writing about eccentrics, of which there appear to be many in Britain. Photography, for the first time, was treated as an integral element of the obituary page, led by the example of the *Independent*; author credits were included by both the *Independent* and the *Guardian*. Public interest was such that the *Telegraph* published obituary anthologies.<sup>†</sup>

The flow-on effect of that confluence was felt in Australia, where eight newspapers in a ten-year period initiated their own obituary pages. Most of those papers, as well as producing their own material, maintained overt links with developments in British practice by printing syndicated obituaries from the London broadsheets. The content of the new Australian pages was compromised to some extent, however, by the inclusion of amateur contributions, sometimes displaying little evidence of professional editing.

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<sup>†</sup> The *Guardian*, late in 2003, also published an anthology: *The Guardian Book of Obituaries*, 2003, ed. P. Osborne, Atlantic Books, London

In the United States, revival was apparent too. Newspapers, searching for new ways of maintaining sales in the face of competition from broadcast and online information sources, found that the obituary offered an eminently readable alternative. Editors maintain that this reinvigoration of their industry was of their own volition, occurring quite independently of the British experience, and one must believe them. Nevertheless, some American journals of repute have written at length about the British phenomenon; their intrigue at the idiosyncrasies of style found there might well, subsequently and perhaps subliminally, have affected the way that obituaries are being composed in the United States.

As the obituaries of Britain, the United States and Australia build upon their candour, wit and nerve, a measure of urgency becomes attached to questions of taste, judgment and ethical consideration. These demand some immediate consideration.

## Contemporary obituary practice (Britain): matters for judgment

*After we are dead, the pretence that we may somehow be protected against the world's careless malice is abandoned. The branch of the law that putatively protects our good name against libel and slander withdraws from us indifferently. The dead cannot be libelled or slandered. They are without legal recourse. Biography is the medium through which the remaining secrets of the famous dead are taken from them and dumped out in full view of the world.*

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Janet Malcolm (*The Silent Woman*)<sup>1</sup>

### Death brings freedom and restraint

Janet Malcolm writes of the poet Sylvia Plath, her marriage to Ted Hughes, her suicide, and the forty years of conjecture about Hughes's responsibility for her death. In so doing, she identifies the opportunity and temptation presented to the obituarist as the instant biographer, the chronicler of the ounce in history. There is, as she says, an immediate lifting of the restraint imposed by defamation law; the legal maxim *mors omnia solvit* (death dissolves all things) takes care of that. David Jones, composer of classic obituaries from the Massingberd era at the *Telegraph*, acknowledges this measure of freedom: 'You cannot libel the dead and, although you are not intent remotely on denigrating the subject, you are free for the first time from the libel laws.'<sup>2</sup>

Jones is, quite reasonably, repeating the catechism of the moment. Contemporary obituary practice, as Chapter One of this thesis has established, makes considerable play of the objective, and often critical, character sketch. It is (again, to draw from that chapter) a property which separates the obituary from other death literature definitions and traditions. Malcolm, however, in her book on Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, looks around the corner of the law and the angle of contemporary practice, and sees the living. She finds that Hughes

has had to watch his young self being picked over by biographers, scholars, critics, writers, and newspaper journalists. Strangers who Hughes feels know nothing about his marriage to Plath write about it with proprietary authority.<sup>3</sup>



The obituary columns too, by definition, must pick over the human condition and write about it with a merited, or an assumed, measure of authority every day. They inform, they enlighten, they entertain, they – as the preceding chapter has said, in quoting from a recent anthology of the art – are stimulants to ‘discovery of life’s astonishing richness, variety, comedy, sadness, of the diverse infinitude of human imaginations it takes to make this world’.<sup>4</sup> They can also offend and wound. The obituarist’s appraisal will be judged by relatives and lovers and antagonists and acquaintances whose view of the newly dead will be coloured by an intimacy not known to the readership at large. There are other, more prosaic, demands too. The obituary must follow rules of journalism style and expression so that its application is coherent, and so that it reflects the discipline of its own body corporate. A death might allow a newspaper the freedom to publish what it has long been waiting to say, but there are still self-imposed rules and restraints on how it can be said. In practising this craft, therefore, obituarists themselves encounter some appreciable matters for judgment.

This chapter examines them in two parts. The first is concerned with publication principles, those areas of contemporary practice with which are involved matters of editorial policy and ethical consideration. The second has as its theme the engagement with style, a constant force in the craft of journalism. Given the influence which the British obituary has exerted on the revival in Australia, these findings provide a framework for reflection later on Australian practice.

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## **Part One: Publication principles**

### **1.1 Candour, complaint and code**

It is in its capacity for candour that contemporary British obituary practice demonstrates the greatest shift, when compared with the pre-revival model. Chapter One has already noted, in defining the individual characteristics of death literature, the lament of Paul Vallely, writing in the *Independent* in 1996: ‘How the elegy has changed.’<sup>5</sup> Vallely’s plaint followed the syndication of an obituary by Chris Moncrieff, of the Press Association, a British news agency. Moncrieff had described Lord Jay, a former cabinet minister, as ‘a shambling figure’ whose ‘oratory was as mediocre and uninspiring as his appearance’.<sup>6</sup> Emboldened perhaps by the maxim *mors omnia solvit*, the Press Association obituarist added:

Stories about his reputed tightness with money abounded...(H)is attire was such that at one overseas gathering he was mistaken for a tramp...one of his suits was accidentally posted off to Oxfam.<sup>7</sup>

While Jay himself, in death, could not be considered a victim of defamation, his surviving family was well placed to express collective outrage. One of Lord Jay's twin daughters, Catherine Boyd, was working as a producer at the BBC and saw the piece as it emerged on the wire service. Mrs Boyd, married to Stewart Boyd, QC, rang the Press Association to complain, as a result of which the agency sent a follow-up memorandum to all its clients, advising them that the obituary had caused offence. The incident itself made the front page of the *Times* the following day, with Lord Jay's son Peter, the BBC's economic editor, quoted as saying:

My feelings are obviously today about my father and what he meant to us all, of our pride in his life. I really don't feel like tarnishing that with thinking about something that a sad old hack might have written.<sup>8</sup>

As for Catherine Boyd, she conceded – in the same *Times* report – that her father had indeed been 'shabby' because 'clothes were not important to him...to go on about it so much was stupid. There was nothing about him [in the obituary] as a human being.'<sup>9</sup> Clearly, the composition of Moncrieff's character sketch was much in question. A further matter for judgment in this instance was the opportunity for the bereaved family to seek legal redress, not for what was said about Jay but for an inference possibly drawn from it. According to Rick Sarre, associate professor in law and criminology at the University of South Australia, the merciless description of Lord Jay's physical appearance could have implied that his immediate family had failed in their duty of care. Sarre has found that the consequent potential for defamation lies in another legal maxim, *res ipsa loquitur* (the thing speaks for itself):

Those who feel defamed could say: 'The fact that he was dishevelled, and we were neglectful and didn't intervene, speaks for itself – and that casts aspersions on us.' A clever obituary writer in such circumstances would be advised to say something like: 'Despite the protestations of his family, he continued along this path.'<sup>10</sup>

Sarre points to the danger, for writers, in publishing at moments of posthumous pronouncement 'any reflection on the living that would tend to lower them in the estimation of other persons'.<sup>11</sup> He urges editorial caution, as the candid exercise of contemporary obituary practice can 'bring people who are still alive into derision'.<sup>12</sup>

A singularly acrimonious instance of this, in recent times, occurred when the *British Medical Journal* obituary of David Horrobin, a pharmaceuticals entrepreneur, said he ‘may prove to be the greatest snake oil salesman of his age’.<sup>13</sup> Associates had described him, according to the obituary, as ‘a “rotter”, unethical, and given to avoiding his responsibilities’, with a history of research ethics ‘considered dubious’.<sup>14</sup>

It was there, in the research reference, that Sarre’s warning on the potential for derision of the living has relevance. The obituary, written by Caroline Richmond, maintained that Horrobin’s widow, Sherri Clarkson, had been appointed as the pharmaceutical company’s research manager, despite a lack of scientific experience. Clarkson sought an apology and a correction, saying that she was ‘put in charge of research administration, not its policy’.<sup>15</sup> Although the journal did agree to an apology, its subsequent wording did not satisfy some readers, whose letters of dismay kept the topic alive. One such letter, under the signature of A. Chaudhuri, senior lecturer in clinical neurosciences at the University of Glasgow, was particularly critical of the editor:

Although the apology has been issued collectively, it is on record that Dr Richard Smith [*BMJ* editor] had the sole responsibility of authorising the publication of this disgraceful obituary in the first place....[T]he *BMJ* has shown a level of insensitivity and editorial misconduct that is rare even in a third-rate tabloid magazine. It is only a tribute to Dr Horrobin that in his death, he could expose the real face of this ‘establishment’ medical journal regarding those who do not ‘toe the lines’. I heard in the BBC news that the position of the Press Secretary in No. 10 may soon be on offer. Dr Smith has certainly shown some of the required skills to move on.<sup>16</sup>

Character assessment in the obituary requires some delicacy of execution when the history is that of a fall from grace. A century ago, a narrative of downfall was recorded, if at all, with extreme circumspection. As Chapter Four has said, Oscar Wilde’s weakness for rent boys was described in the *Times* obituary column of 1900 simply as conduct which had ‘destroyed for ever his reputation, and condemned him to ignoble obscurity for the remainder of his days’.<sup>17</sup>

In 1992, the death of Christopher Trace – a name of lesser literary stature, but nonetheless wide public recognition in Britain – prompted a *Times* obituary of measured, clinical detail. Trace ‘was the television favourite of a generation of children in the 1960s’, as presenter of the BBC’s *Blue Peter*.<sup>18</sup> His decline began, said

the *Times*, when he ‘besmirched his Uncle Chris image by having an affair with a teenage Norwegian girl he met while on a *Blue Peter* assignment’.<sup>19</sup> The obituary then charted the road to oblivion: marriage collapse, regional television, work as a handyman and barman, bankruptcy, final years ‘in a two-bedroom flat in Walthamstow, East London...[living on] national assistance’, death from cancer.<sup>20</sup>

In confronting matters for posthumous judgment, however, the British broadsheets do strive to offer a balanced, fair judgment. Philip Ziegler, a biographer of King Edward VIII and Earl Mountbatten, has found this to be the case in his study of ‘more than 1,500 obituaries’, noting that ‘such criticism as exists is delicately nuanced’.<sup>21</sup> An instance of this is found in the *Daily Telegraph* obituary of Peter Hobson, who resigned as headmaster of Charterhouse, an English public school, in 1995 ‘after it emerged that he had had an encounter with a 19-year-old girl from an escort agency’.<sup>22</sup> The *Telegraph*, in appraising his administration, found that he ‘was not noted for his tact’.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, it balanced this with the assertion that parents ‘were well-disposed towards him’ and that in his enforced retirement he had found fulfilment in voluntary work and ‘showed no bitterness at the curtailment of his career’.<sup>24</sup>

Tim Bullamore, an obituarist of considerable experience at both the *Independent* and the *Times*, has sensed the natural intrusion of sympathy in obituary composition, especially when contact is made with a bereaved family:

So often I read the cuts [newspaper file clippings] and think ‘What an arch shit!’, and then I speak to the family and begin to feel great sympathy. But then, one person's free spirit is another's reckless buffoon. I try to keep both strains of thought in if I can...but it is tempting to avoid offending people who, in their hour of distress, have been so helpful.<sup>25</sup>

A further demonstration of an innate compassion is apparent in the code devised by Massingberd and Jones at the *Telegraph* in the late 1980s. Under this, a rarefied brand of euphemism was applied to matters for judgment in obituaries of the more extreme eccentrics. These inventive circumlocutions emerged: ‘tireless raconteur’ (bore); ‘affable and hospitable at every hour’ (afflicted by drinking problems); ‘gave colourful accounts of his exploits’ (prone to exaggeration and untruth); and, in the celebrated instance of a peer of the realm, ‘a most uncompromisingly direct ladies’

man' (serial philanderer).<sup>26</sup> Massingberd, as obituaries editor of the day, recognised the esoteric delight which this practice afforded the *cognoscenti*. 'In its most refined form,' he said in 1989, 'an obituary might take three readings before its full, beastly significance becomes clear – and, even then, only if read by another obituarist.'<sup>27</sup>

Although British obituarists have today largely stopped that manner of orchestration, a bar or two of reprise can sometimes be heard when warranted by legal considerations involving family sensitivity. An example of recent vintage appears in the *Independent's* obituary of Sir Colin Cole, for fourteen years Garter Principal King of Arms. After referring to his 'exaggerated notion of camaraderie and [his] over-optimistic craving for unanimity in institutional decision-making', it delivered this judgment on the late knight's marital relationship: 'Something of a ladies' man, he nevertheless enjoyed a long and successful marriage, his wife Valerie being admirably tolerant of his many outside commitments.'<sup>28</sup>

## **1.2 Matters of ethical judgment: bounders and villains**

In their treatment of bounders, the British obituary pages again reveal some tolerance of their own. The *Times* demonstrated this virtue in remembering that Oliver Reed, the actor, had been 'drunk and trouserless on the streets of Toronto in December', and then acknowledging that the 'power of his screen personality' had been sustained until the end of his career.<sup>29</sup>

It is the *Telegraph*, though, that is generally recognised as being the dominant obituarial saint of cads. In passing judgment on the matter of their erratic lives, the *Telegraph* is invariably both explicit and excusing. Colin McIvor, studying for the priesthood, had a sudden loss of faith and 'jumped off a train at Swindon when returning to Oxford with a party of Jesuits'.<sup>30</sup> He was subsequently an unsuccessful kidnapper and failed film-making entrepreneur, yet the *Telegraph* still described him as 'brilliant, witty and outrageous'.<sup>31</sup> The obituary of Simon Raven, the novelist, began with this character sketch:

Simon Raven, who has died aged 73, set himself up, convincingly, as a bounder...yet retained the discipline, wit and intelligence to become the author of 36 books and several television scripts. Raven the cad attained his finest hour when his wife sent the telegram: 'Wife and baby starving send money soonest'. He replied: 'Sorry no money suggest eat baby'.<sup>32</sup>

Jeffrey Bernard, a columnist for the *New Statesman* and the *Spectator*, was said by the *Telegraph* to have passed much of his life in ‘an alcoholic blur, so that when [he] was commissioned to write an autobiography, he had to place an advertisement asking if anyone could tell him what he had been doing between 1960 and 1974’.<sup>33</sup> The paper paid him a considerable posthumous compliment, though, by publishing a second obituary, written by Bernard himself:

May I add a few words to your excellent obituary of Jeffrey Bernard. I knew him intimately for many years....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....Thinking that geographical changes would solve his problems, he moved [from Soho] to various ‘dream’ cottages in the country. Unfortunately, he was always there too.<sup>34</sup>

The management of such obituaries plainly brings to the job itself a generous serve of levity. *Smithsonian Magazine*, in recording its impressions of the *Telegraph*, observed an irreverent mood:

The writers often convene to tweak one another’s efforts and make things more entertaining. Robert Chalmers, a former obituary writer turned novelist, recalls a staff member touring guests around the newsroom. ‘That’s sports over there,’ he said, ‘and those people laughing around the screen, those are the obituarists.’ They were laughing, as it happened, about one writer’s bid to say that a politician would ‘be remembered for the size of his ears and the vulgarity of his wife’. (The line was not published; even at the *Telegraph*, there is such a thing as too much candor.)<sup>35</sup>

The death of those who have, without qualification, undermined society is treated with rather more gravity; in such instances, matters for judgment become complex. Of particular issue is whether inclusion on the obituaries page confers, axiomatically, a certain cachet of posthumous distinction. In an internationally syndicated column addressing this point, published towards the end of 2001, an anonymous *Times* writer recalled:

There was a brief moment of alarm on *The Times* back bench on Sunday night last week when the night editor noticed that an obituary was being published of a criminal – Mohammed Atef, the terrorist who planned the September 11 atrocities. We didn’t publish obits of criminals, he said.<sup>36</sup>

The night editor, as the column explained, was only partly correct. Though the *Times* would not publish obituaries of those whose renown, or notoriety, originated solely in their criminal acts, there was a codicil to that policy. It could be varied if, in the opinion of the newspaper, the life in question had ‘helped shape the world we live in, or affected its political history’.<sup>37</sup> In the Mohammed Atef case, therefore, obituaries were published the following day in three of the quality broadsheets: *Times*, *Telegraph* and *Guardian*. The obituaries editor at the *Times*, Ian Brunskill, defended his decision by saying:

Atef’s actions had led directly to one of the most intensive military campaigns of recent years...to the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan; to a fundamental change in the way the world responded to terrorism...and to an international diplomatic realignment on a scale not seen since World War II.<sup>38</sup>

There were difficulties, however, of juxtaposition for the *Times*. The Atef obituary appeared on the same page as, and immediately below, that of Group Captain Hugh Verity, DSO and Bar, DFC, who ‘flew moonlight missions into enemy-occupied France to enable British agents to help the French Resistance’ (Figure 6.1).<sup>39</sup> It was a decision taken in consultation between Tim Bullamore, in charge of the desk that weekend, and his obituaries editor, Ian Brunskill, who was attracted to the potential for a page of eclectic character.<sup>40</sup> Bullamore, over ensuing days, received calls and letters of complaint. Tiring a little of these, he told one correspondent that a precedent had been set with the *Times* obituary of Adolf Hitler in 1945. The reader’s riposte was this: ‘At least Hitler was a proper army general, wore a uniform...and fought a decent war.’<sup>41</sup>

Archival research for this thesis has established that the *Times* did print an obituary of Hitler; however, and of significance to this question of value judgments, it appeared on page two of the 2 May 1945 edition.<sup>42</sup> It did not appear on the obituaries page, the content of which was devoted to ‘Fallen Officers’; neither did it carry, above the headline, the ‘Obituary’ tag. Similarly, the *Telegraph* chose, on 18 March 1995, to dedicate its page three to a detailed posthumous account of the London gangster Ronnie Kray. It carried the by-line ‘By Our Obituaries Staff’, but it was not given the distinction of inclusion on the obituaries page.<sup>43</sup>

# GROUP CAPTAIN HUGH VERITY

## Pilot who flew moonlight missions into enemy-occupied France to help the French Resistance

The memoir of wartime Special Operations Executive agent Hugh Verity, better published than that of the Royal Air Force pilot who delivered them into occupied Europe and recovered some of the survivors, Operations Group agent Hugh Verity during the week of 1943. Others had pioneered the techniques but he refined and perfected them, regulating his flight by the cycle of the Moon.

A directive from the British Chief of Staff of May 1942 instructed SOE to build up and equip paramilitary organisations in the area of proposed operations in Western Europe. In France the priority was to establish contact with the Maquis resistance movement — well known to some useful internal operatives — and prepare the more extensive of the groups as sabotage, the road and rail communications that the German Army would need to reinforce its divisions facing the Allied breakthrough when the invasion was launched in Normandy in June 1944.

The Lysander had the advantage over delivery of agents by being able to land in a wooded glen or a field, and its speed and manoeuvrability, at short take-off and landing capability, at short range and its robust fuel endurance allowed it to be used in a variety of ground and air when fitted with an internal fuel tank. Its range was extended to 800 miles. The pack also navigated and the rear



Verity, second from left, with other pilots of that remarkable workshop the Wellington

four or five minutes would be from a local landmark — a church or railway junction — down to the ground. Verity's first mission was to deliver a message to the SOE's Baker Street headquarters. The agents were always on a first-time mission as it was usual to be dropping a new agent. Verity's first mission was to deliver a message to the SOE's Baker Street headquarters. The agents were always on a first-time mission as it was usual to be dropping a new agent.



Verity, second from left, with other pilots of that remarkable workshop the Wellington

the Lysander would be turned back at the end of the strip. Verity was the only pilot who was able to land in a wooded glen or a field, and its speed and manoeuvrability, at short take-off and landing capability, at short range and its robust fuel endurance allowed it to be used in a variety of ground and air when fitted with an internal fuel tank. Its range was extended to 800 miles. The pack also navigated and the rear

one night to Tangmere with Jean Mouchin. General de Gaulle's personal representative in the French Resistance, he found the French Resistance in danger of being broken by the Germans. Verity was one of the few pilots who were able to land in a wooded glen or a field, and its speed and manoeuvrability, at short take-off and landing capability, at short range and its robust fuel endurance allowed it to be used in a variety of ground and air when fitted with an internal fuel tank. Its range was extended to 800 miles. The pack also navigated and the rear

relative long refused to meet him in the mission he believed that he had broken his parole. After the Lysander squadron he was in the operations branch of SOE in the early 1950s, the major RAF DSO and Bar and the OBE. His appointment to the Liaison Officer and the award of the Cross of Guerre. Hugh Verity was born in Jamaica where his father was an Anglican clergyman. He was educated at Cheltenham where he won a Law scholarship to Queen's College, Oxford, to read French literature as the law, but he was attracted to the Foreign Service but when he broke out during the summer vacation of 1938 he volunteered for the RAF. While he was flying a Bristol Blenheim light bomber with Coastal Command in the autumn of 1940, he was shot down over the Channel and landed in the French Republic where he was interned. Taking advantage of his guards' absence he escaped to the French Resistance where he met other members of the Special Forces Club at the university of aeronautics in Paris and in 1943 he joined the Industrial Training Board. He returned to London in 1944 where he and his wife often entertained friends from the French Resistance, with whom he maintained contact. He frequently represented the Special Forces Club at the university of aeronautics in Paris and in 1948 he joined the Industrial Training Board. He returned to London in 1944 where he and his wife often entertained friends from the French Resistance, with whom he maintained contact. He frequently represented the Special Forces Club at the university of aeronautics in Paris and in 1948 he joined the Industrial Training Board.

# RALPH HOLDER

## Climbing the ladder at The Times

A CASE REPORTER in the early 1950s, Holder would be remembered for his reporting on the foreign desk he returned to the City office in 1960. He was a member of the paper's staff since 1947, and his career was marked by a number of significant events. He was a member of the paper's staff since 1947, and his career was marked by a number of significant events. He was a member of the paper's staff since 1947, and his career was marked by a number of significant events.

Holder continued to serve the paper for a further ten years, a period in which he was involved in a number of significant events. He was a member of the paper's staff since 1947, and his career was marked by a number of significant events. He was a member of the paper's staff since 1947, and his career was marked by a number of significant events.

Holder was born on March 1912. He died on October 19, 2001. He was a member of the paper's staff since 1947, and his career was marked by a number of significant events. He was a member of the paper's staff since 1947, and his career was marked by a number of significant events.

# CHARLOTTE COLEMAN

## From Worzel to Oranges and Four Weddings

AN ACTRESS best known for her role in the film *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, Charlotte Coleman was a versatile performer. She was a member of the paper's staff since 1947, and his career was marked by a number of significant events. She was a member of the paper's staff since 1947, and his career was marked by a number of significant events.

Coleman was born on March 1912. She died on October 19, 2001. She was a member of the paper's staff since 1947, and his career was marked by a number of significant events. She was a member of the paper's staff since 1947, and his career was marked by a number of significant events.

Coleman was a member of the paper's staff since 1947, and his career was marked by a number of significant events. She was a member of the paper's staff since 1947, and his career was marked by a number of significant events.

# MUHAMMAD ATEF

## Terrorist who planned the September 11 atrocities

GENERALLY regarded as Osama bin Laden's closest adviser and the military commander of the al-Qaeda network, Muhammad Atef was a former Egyptian intelligence officer who was recruited by American and British intelligence as the key planner of the devastating attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11. He was a member of the paper's staff since 1947, and his career was marked by a number of significant events.

Atef was born in Egypt in 1942. He was a member of the paper's staff since 1947, and his career was marked by a number of significant events. He was a member of the paper's staff since 1947, and his career was marked by a number of significant events.

Atef was a member of the paper's staff since 1947, and his career was marked by a number of significant events. He was a member of the paper's staff since 1947, and his career was marked by a number of significant events.

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Atef was a member of the paper's staff since 1947, and his career was marked by a number of significant events. He was a member of the paper's staff since 1947, and his career was marked by a number of significant events.

# Lives in Brief

**Dharma Kumar, academic** was born in Lahore on March 1918. She died in Delhi on October 18, 2001, aged 83. She was a member of the paper's staff since 1947, and his career was marked by a number of significant events.

**Chandra B. A. Sarda, IAS, welfare developer** was born on February 12, 1909. He died on October 13, 2001, aged 92. He was a member of the paper's staff since 1947, and his career was marked by a number of significant events.

**Charles Coleman, actress** was born on March 1912. She died on October 19, 2001, aged 89. She was a member of the paper's staff since 1947, and his career was marked by a number of significant events.

**Charlotte Coleman, actress** was born on March 1912. She died on October 19, 2001, aged 89. She was a member of the paper's staff since 1947, and his career was marked by a number of significant events.

# On This Day November 19, 1987

At least 50 people were believed dead and more than 50 were injured when a train derailed in a tunnel beneath a Swedish railway station. The train was carrying a number of passengers and was travelling at high speed. The accident was caused by a failure in the track's support structure.

The train was carrying a number of passengers and was travelling at high speed. The accident was caused by a failure in the track's support structure. The train was carrying a number of passengers and was travelling at high speed.

# 31 DIE IN BLAZE AT KING'S CROSS

Thirty-one people died and more than 100 were injured when a train derailed in a tunnel beneath a London railway station. The train was carrying a number of passengers and was travelling at high speed. The accident was caused by a failure in the track's support structure.

The train was carrying a number of passengers and was travelling at high speed. The accident was caused by a failure in the track's support structure. The train was carrying a number of passengers and was travelling at high speed.

**Figure 6.1** Hero and villain. Controversial juxtaposition: a decorated RAF pilot and an al-Qaeda terrorist are united in the *Times*. Defending this decision, the obituaries editor argued that selection for his page was governed by the degree to which potential subjects had 'helped shape the world we live in, or affected its political history'. (Note: the *Times* obituaries page used the spelling 'Muhammad'; a subsequent syndicated article on this incident, printed in the *Australian*, preferred 'Mohammed', as indicated in the text of Chapter Six.) (*Times*, 19 November 2001)



A notoriously delicate question of publication ethics occurred exactly a year after the Atef affair, in November 2002, when Myra Hindley died. Described by the *Telegraph* as ‘the country’s longest serving and most reviled female prisoner’, Hindley was sentenced to life imprisonment in 1966 for her part in the ‘Moors Murders’.<sup>44</sup> As *The Independent* recalled, in its posthumous reflections:

The killings were pitiless. Some of the [murdered] children were photographed in humiliating poses; one tape recorded Lesley Ann [Downey] as she pleaded with her tormentors. The effect upon the nation, quite apart from the courtroom, was traumatic.<sup>45</sup>

The question here was, again, one of news value flavoured by concerns of precedent and moral judgment. Were the London obituary pages, with their reputation for recording lives of distinguished rank and sound repute, the right repository for an instant biography of Hindley? Two of the broadsheets, the *Guardian* and the *Independent*, took the view that this placement was acceptable. Defending this decision, the obituaries editor of the *Independent*, James Fergusson, found that it was simply a question of news values; moral judgments, he said, were irrelevant.<sup>46</sup> In an interview a month before Hindley’s death, he had argued that an obituary was required because

She is a villainess of our times....Yes, she did terrible things, but how is it that people become so enthralled by Hindley, villainess, that no Home Secretary dare release her, even though by all the rights of justice she obviously should be released? She was sentenced to a more-or-less fixed term, which she has long overstayed.<sup>47</sup>

Of the two, it was the *Guardian*’s obituary which caused the greater measure of debate, as a result of Peter Stanford’s largely sympathetic appraisal, which some observers (notably the *Spectator*, a weekly magazine) interpreted as being a posthumous apology of Hindley. This extract from the *Guardian* piece created particular attention because it offered a form of overt opinion more commonly found in a newspaper’s leader column:

The authorities’ repeated refusal to grant Hindley parole came even though she more than met the criteria. In the end, it was public opinion that kept her in jail. Britain’s longest-serving woman prisoner was, in effect, a political detainee, and prejudice her jailer.<sup>48</sup>

The *Times* had earlier declared that it would not print obituaries of either Hindley or her accomplice in the murders, Ian Brady, because they did not meet the criterion of having prompted political or societal change. For its part, the *Telegraph* allocated considerable space on its news pages to reporting Hindley's death, and to describing her crimes and the judicial-penal processes, but also decided against an obituary. In an interview for this thesis, the obituaries editor, Andrew McKie, conceded that his newspaper had in recent years published obituaries of perpetrators of barbaric acts, listing Pol Pot, tyrant of Cambodia, Seán MacStiofáin, of the Provisional IRA, and General Ali Hassan al-Majid, aka 'Chemical Ali' (though his paper subsequently had to report the capture, rather than the death, of the Iraqi biological warfare specialist).<sup>49</sup> Defending those decisions, McKie said:

Those people all had some political significance. [But] I take the view that serial killers are not in themselves people that one wants to write about on the page – not because of what they've done but because their actions have no wider significance other than being a series of tragic murders. I think there is a slightly different argument with a criminal whose life has become part of public life and public debate. The one I am trying to decide on is Ronnie Biggs [of Britain's 1963 'Great Train Robbery']. Biggs is notorious because he escaped from jail, lived in Brazil for thirty years, and in that time made a film with the Sex Pistols....I used to think I wouldn't do Biggs, but now I think I probably will.<sup>50</sup>

McKie and the other London editors entertained no hesitation when Saddam Hussein's sons were killed in Mosul, northern Iraq. Uday and Qusay, both indisputably of political significance, became automatic candidates for the obituaries pages of the *Telegraph*, *Times*, *Guardian* and *Independent*. Readers of the *Times* were notably intrigued, as the deputy obituaries editor, Jim McCue, has recalled: 'The *Times* obits of the Hussein [brothers]...were our most read articles online on the day of publication.'<sup>51</sup>

### **1.3 Gender imbalance**

Although there is no information available in the public forum on subject selection by gender for the British obituary pages, random observation would suggest a pronounced male dominance. Among the editors, there is a shared view that this will gradually change by natural processes. They do not favour any other method, as James Fergusson, of the *Independent*, makes clear:

It would be mad if we tried to impose quotas. We did do a survey [in-house], and I discovered that we do more women than any other paper. The *Guardian* came second and the traditional papers, the *Times* and the *Telegraph*, lagged a bit. So what? All we are doing is interesting stories that reflect history. If you are doing obituaries on women who are 90, they were born when women didn't have the vote and when they certainly weren't expected to go out and work and achieve in the conventional way.<sup>52</sup>

The *Guardian*, too, is aware of the question but, according to the obituaries editor, Phil Osborne, is similarly disinclined to correct the imbalance by the imposition of a quota system:

I quite often get letters from people saying 'You don't have many women on your pages. Why not?', and it's a difficult one to answer. There are historic reasons. You'd get into very difficult areas by saying 'We will correct this imbalance by making sure we have three or four women a week.'<sup>53</sup>

All is determined, as Osborne and his colleague Robert White agree, by the 'quality of the story'.<sup>54</sup> Andrew McKie, at the *Telegraph*, subscribes to that policy too, while predicting that a shift can be expected 'in ten or twenty years' time because there will be more women [by then] who have reached prominent positions'.<sup>55</sup>

A more forceful judgment was recorded by Jim McCue, deputy obituaries editor of the *Times*:

There is a difficulty about women's achievements. It's simply the case that there are no great women musicians, mathematicians, and all kinds of other things. They don't exist. It's not a media plot.<sup>56</sup>

McCue's department has inherited, perhaps unfairly, a reputation for elitism on its page. While he concedes that this was once true of the *Times*, in that an arcane system of social stratification had previously determined candidature, selection now is governed by that ancient shibboleth of journalism, story value:

Is it an interesting read? And if it's not an interesting read, out the window....If there are things that would make the reader think 'My God! What an extraordinary person!', then I would go for it. I wouldn't care if they [the subject] had been a tramp.<sup>57</sup>

This view is shared by other editors. McKie admits that the *Telegraph* has a tradition of specialising in ‘eccentrics, aristocracy and moustaches [military officers]’, but says there is no hierarchical rule in existence: ‘I will do a private soldier who’s never won a medal if the story is good enough.’<sup>58</sup> At the *Independent*, says Fergusson, selection is governed by fame and fascination:

There are two reasons people get obituaries. One is an obvious one – they’re household names. The other is much more subjective; it’s because they led interesting lives. A good obituaries page should be able to tell you those stories just as well as [those of] the famous or the obvious achievers. What we try to steer away from on the *Independent* is to treat it like a school magazine ‘*Valete*’ column which is written simply for those in the know.<sup>59</sup>

In such circumstances, the question of gender – as a selection factor – assumes irrelevancy. The quality of the legend is all.

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## **Part Two: The discipline of newspaper style**

Leslie Sellers, once production editor of London’s *Daily Mail*, has acknowledged the fluid, fluctuating properties of newspaper style. In one of his texts on the subject, he expresses a touch of frustration:

Take ‘ladies’ for example. Over the past fifty years, intrepid editors all over the land have fought and won battles to banish this false, unreal, twee, mock-genteel and over-nice word, and almost reached the point where its use had been confined to public lavatories....Then, suddenly, the word became with-it and in and modish and all that. It’s now creeping back via the fashionable magazines and the trendy columnists and rhubarb supplements given away with the posh Sunday papers.<sup>60</sup>

Nonetheless, Sellers finds some residual satisfaction in the practice of his craft:

‘Journalese’ is often denigrated, particularly by those incapable of writing lucidly themselves....But at its best, popular newspaper writing is a model of crispness, clarity, conciseness and immense readability.<sup>61</sup>

He draws attention to the need for precision and consistency of expression, adding: ‘[N]ewspaper style is not a matter of mere mechanics and exactitude. It is concerned also with every device of writing which can make a story more easy to absorb.’<sup>62</sup>

In considering the question of style as a discipline for obituary publication, this thesis has therefore identified six matters for editorial judgment which embrace that breadth of interpretation: writer credits and anonymity of authorship, subject name reference and statement of age, inclusion and omission of cause of death, listing of survivors, contemporaneousness of publication, and application of photography.

## **2.1 Authorship: signed versus unsigned**

It is important, in any discussion of British obituary practice, to appreciate the degree of competition that exists between the London papers. The four broadsheets considered in this study are all intent on securing a profitable share of the A/B market (as defined in Chapter Five by Alan Oakley, formerly of the *Herald Sun*, when reflecting on his reasons for introducing an obituaries page). That rivalry was at its most intense in the mid-1990s, when News International tried to undermine the *Telegraph* by cutting the price of the *Times*. Max Hastings, in recounting his nine years as *Telegraph* editor, points in particular to the campaign of 1994:

Our Saturday circulation was around 1.2 million, and we charged 70p for the paper. Yet *The Times* was now offering its own Saturday package for 30p. Readers were chasing the bargain.<sup>63</sup>

The *Telegraph* responded by reducing its weekday edition to 30p, a decision which inspired the *Times* to drop its price to 20p. Hastings and the *Telegraph* ‘dug into our trenches for a long, bitter campaign of attrition’.<sup>64</sup> Though his paper survived, and the News International tactics were eventually abandoned, the mood of contest could still be heard in 2002, when Andrew McKie, the *Telegraph* obituaries editor, defined his attitude towards the opposition: ‘I want to make the other three obituaries pages look shoddy, pathetic and inadequate.’<sup>65</sup>

In their judgment of matters shaping obituary publication, the four papers best demonstrate a tangible point of difference through the debate over author attribution. The *Times* and the *Telegraph* have adhered, throughout the years of revival, to the tradition of an unsigned piece (Figure 6.2). It confers a value which McKie, at the *Telegraph*, finds reassuring: ‘I think I prefer the Olympian and omniscient approach. The obituaries editor sees everything; he knows all.’<sup>66</sup>



This is detected, in an unalloyed manifestation, through the shafts of character assessment which typify the process. Seán MacStiofáin, the Provisional IRA's Essex-born chief of staff, possessed a 'laughable Irish accent' (the *Telegraph*);<sup>67</sup> Sir Reginald Hibbert, British ambassador to France 1979–1982, was remembered for his 'unclubbability' (the *Times*);<sup>68</sup> Beryl Graves, married to the philandering poet Robert Graves, knew every time that her husband would eventually be 'abandoned by the [latest] Belle Dame Sans Merci' (the *Telegraph*).<sup>69</sup>

The *Independent* and the *Guardian*, as Chapter Five established, changed British practice by adopting a policy of signed obituaries. In considering the merits of this approach, Robert White, of the *Guardian*, argues: 'It's more responsible. An unsigned piece can be...put together from all sorts of sources. It sometimes reads like that, a sort of patchwork.'<sup>70</sup> The debate is summarised by James Fergusson, who pioneered the signed version as founding obituaries editor of the *Independent*, in his monograph 'Death and the Press':

The old school will say that signed obituaries are by their nature flawed, for they represent only one person's knowledge and that person will, by appending his or her signature, be so compromised that nothing will come from his or her pen but gush and tribute; that the obituary will be written with an eye for the family of the subject, not the regular reader or a notional posterity. That is certainly a danger; there is nothing worse than the 'he was marvellous' tribute and no one will ever want to know that 'he will be much missed'. But the other school will argue that, if this happens, it is the fault of the editor, not a collapse of the principle. The same school will contend that there are few obituaries more worthless than the third-rate unsigned obituary, which is mechanical, possibly stolen or the work of a committee, and in either case unaccountable.<sup>71</sup>

Some authority, quite clearly, can be attained by proclaiming the hand of a specialist contributor. Such was the case in January 2002, when the playwright David Hare wrote the obituary of Diana Boddington, 'inspirational *grande dame* of stage managers', for the *Guardian*.<sup>72</sup> The power of the intimate anecdote, albeit rendered in fruity theatrical language, conveyed the quintessence of portraiture:

When...[she] tried to round up a reluctant group of our actors to stay on and meet a distinguished member of the audience on stage after a performance, the cast all vehemently refused, asking why on earth they had to bother. They received the unanswerable reply: 'You have to do it because he's the fucking King of Greece.'<sup>73</sup>

Chapter Five of this thesis has reported Fergusson's contention that the signed obituary is of greater historical value. An opposing line of argument is found, however, in the *Economist*, within its 1994 review of the revived British taste for the art:

At its best, the unsigned obituary can communicate a sense of magisterial objectivity while still embodying a distinctive editorial voice. For intimates, trying to guess the identity of an author...from, say, the Trollopean notes sometimes struck in the *Telegraph's* ecclesiastical notices...may be much of the pleasure. The danger of the signed obituary, often written by a close friend of the deceased, is that it may play too safe by favouring reverential clichés of the funeral-eulogy type...and glossing too cosily over the more complex aspects of the life in question.<sup>74</sup>

David Twiston Davies, in his anthology of Canadian obituaries, is an advocate of the unsigned strategy, on the basis that

it enabled writers to be more frank about their subjects than they would otherwise have been...[and] avoided that curse of the signed obituary, noticeable in both the *Independent* and the *Guardian*, which is the paean of praise directed at the deceased's widow or widower.<sup>75</sup>

That potential for cosiness of appraisal, with its tendency towards platitude, was apparent in the *Independent's* obituary of Beryl Graves, whose stoic character when confronted by infidelity had been conveyed with such assuredness by the *Telegraph*. Miranda Seymour, obituarist for the *Independent*, referred by contrast only to the 'turbulence of her husband's life' and ended with the trivial reminiscence: 'It should also be said that Beryl Graves made possibly the best gazpacho that either I or Dunstan Ward [a Graves scholar] have ever had the luck to eat.'<sup>76</sup> It could be argued too that an excess of personal feeling, allied to a certain looseness of expression, intruded upon the *Guardian's* obituary of the actor Katrin Cartlidge, written by the director Simon McBurney, a close friend: 'She was steadfast, especially as a friend, and was always there for all of us.'<sup>77</sup>

At the *Guardian*, the condoning of contributed pieces by intimate acquaintances has also meant some confusion of style in referring to its subjects. On 5 October 2001, for example, it published three obituaries: one pursued the preferred practice of British obituary by using the surname throughout; the other two consistently applied the given name.



The most persuasive point to be made against the signed version is that it can both confuse and delay delivery of the product. Anthony Howard, obituaries editor at the *Times* for six years, initially was attracted to the use of author credits before abandoning the idea for reasons of practicality:

If you want a quick turnaround – on the death, for example, of a famous novelist – you simply cannot afford to check every update or amendment with the relevant author in the probably very limited time at your disposal. Yet, if the piece carries a signature at the bottom, how can you possibly put words into the mouth of an identifiable individual that may not at all represent his or her view?<sup>78</sup>

In more extreme instances, the two British broadsheet proponents of signed obituaries have had the process complicated by the death of the writer. On one such occasion, the *Independent* published an obituary of the broadcaster Johnny Morris, written by his erstwhile BBC producer, Desmond Hawkins. A footnote added: ‘Desmond Hawkins died 6 May 1999’.<sup>79</sup> The facing page carried Hawkins’s own obituary; the effect was rather peculiar.

## **2.2 Names and ages**

With the exception of the *Guardian*, and its frequent use of given names in contributed pieces, the British broadsheet style favours rigorous application of the family name only. ‘It looks ridiculous to use honorifics in obituaries,’ says McKie. ‘I strip people of their doctorates quite merrily, and it looks too chummy to say “John” or “Andrew”.’<sup>80</sup> Accordingly, the *Daily Telegraph* has, for the most part, an egalitarian approach in the execution of this particular matter for judgment. Rank is of no significance in its celebrated military obituaries. Brigadier Jock Hamilton-Baillie, a serial escapee from World War II prison camps, was ‘Hamilton-Baillie’;<sup>81</sup> Sergeant William Parkes, of the World War I Welsh Bantam Brigade (for troops under 5ft 3in in height, and therefore less conspicuous in the trenches) was ‘Parkes’.<sup>82</sup> Even-handedness is applied to the clerical obituary too. Canon Edwyn Young, Chaplain to the Queen, was ‘Young’;<sup>83</sup> the Reverend Michael Bland, who was hauled before the Consistory Court in Gloucestershire for, *inter alia*, writing ‘rude letters to six people’, was ‘Bland’.<sup>84</sup>

The Bland story is such an extraordinary one that its completion here demands more than a footnote. He was charged on four counts of neglecting his duties, all related to his pugnacious nature. Bland was sentenced to be deprived of his living, but won on appeal to the Court of Arches, which administered only a formal rebuke and allowed him to return to his parish. The *Telegraph* noted:

Any hope that, once the court case was ended, there would be a recovery of pastoral relations between the Rector and his parishioners quickly was dashed....For many years, Sunday services...were attended only by the Rector's housekeeper.<sup>85</sup>

Titles surface, though, in *Telegraph* obituaries of the aristocracy. The 12<sup>th</sup> Duke of Manchester was 'Angus' (his given name) and 'Lord Angus' in that part of the obituary relating his early years, when he married a Melbourne typist. For the later years of the obituary, after his inheriting the dukedom, he was steadfastly 'the Duke'.<sup>86</sup> The 11<sup>th</sup> Earl of Coventry, whose colourful career included employment as a cosmetics salesman and as a porter for a Chelsea removals firm, was predominantly 'the Earl'.<sup>87</sup>

The *Telegraph* becomes a little quaint in obituaries of women, regardless of their social or occupational rank. The paper's practice in this instance is to apply a full name. So, Kathleen Jessie Raine, a poet 'much feted in France' and confidante of the Prince of Wales, was 'Kathleen Raine' throughout,<sup>88</sup> Professor Lillian Mary Pickford, the first woman appointed to a medical Chair at Edinburgh, was 'Mary Pickford' consistently;<sup>89</sup> Eileen Daphne Fox, a patriotic stripper who 'could seldom hear *Rule Britannia* without loosening her bra straps', was 'Eileen Fox' five times over.<sup>90</sup> McKie, the editor responsible for this exercise in chivalry, is unrepentant:

Yes, we do spell women's names out in full. It looks discourteous to call a woman by her surname....I don't know why I think it looks blunt and brutal...but I do. It may seem patronising and old-fashioned, but it's the way we do it.<sup>91</sup>

At the *Times*, Peter Davies, as chief obituaries writer, has experienced similar sentiments: 'At first, there was a sort of feeling it was slightly unchivalrous to call a woman by her surname, but we got over that barrier.'<sup>92</sup> He finds the *Telegraph* style 'fairly Jurassic Park'. An examination of the *Times* pages discloses a determined constancy to the surname cause, regardless of the sex or rank of the subject. Sir Peter

Johnson, 7<sup>th</sup> Baronet, veteran of ten Fastnet yacht races, was ‘Johnson’;<sup>93</sup> Sarah Markham, a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, was ‘Markham’.<sup>94</sup> Some variation did occur in the obituary of Diana, Lady Mosley (née Mitford, and, as the daughter of a peer, an Honourable in her own right); she was described as ‘Diana’ and ‘Diana Mosley’, occasioned perhaps by a need to distinguish her from her husband, the founder of the British Union of Fascists, who was ‘Mosley’ throughout.<sup>95</sup>

While the *Independent* is similarly rigorous in its dedication to the use of the surname, some softening of style is encountered in the *Guardian*. Joan Leigh Fermor, muse of the writer Patrick Leigh Fermor, became simply ‘Joan’;<sup>96</sup> Diana Boddington, already encountered in this chapter as the subject of an obituary by the playwright David Hare, was ‘Diana’.<sup>97</sup>

Three of the broadsheets state the age of each subject. The *Times* includes it in the ‘go-last’, along with the dates of birth and death; the *Telegraph* always has it in the opening paragraph of text and, with some variations, follows this with dates of birth and death once the chronological narrative is underway; the *Guardian* prefers to give the age in the first paragraph, with dates in the ‘go-last’. The *Independent* is the only one to require some calculation of its readers; they have to work out the age from the ‘go-last’ summary.

### **2.3 Cause of death**

Informed assertion, rather than definitive statement supported by quantifiable data, is necessary in this area of enquiry; none of the London newspapers has been subject to research of the type conducted by Ball and Jonnes in their study of the *New York Times*.<sup>98</sup> What can be asserted, from the available literature and from interview, is that effort is made to attribute a cause, within a specified age limit, at the *Guardian* and the *Times*. It can also be deduced that cause of death is regarded as relatively unimportant at the *Telegraph* and the *Independent*. Enthusiasm for this factor at the *Times* originates from Anthony Howard’s regime as obituaries editor (1993–1999):

My policy was that we gave the cause of death if someone died under the age of 70. I think you owe a duty to the reader, particularly when someone died at 42 or whatever. There’s a question mark, and you have to answer that question.<sup>99</sup>

Senior management at the *Times* continues to insist on inclusion of cause where possible. According to Jim McCue, the deputy obituaries editor, it is not always easy to satisfy that demand because

There are some cases where it's so complicated that it becomes incomprehensible to the average reader, or it's unknown and subject to a *post mortem*. Then someone dies of pneumonia after suffering from cancer, so it starts to become ridiculous. It's got to the stage that if they're over 80, we leave it out....[But] we do want to give the cause, because I think people are interested in it.<sup>100</sup>

The *Times*, in pursuing that practice, includes the cause in the 'go-last' summary. The *Guardian* prefers to state it in the text, again on the basis of perceived reader interest. 'Anyone aged from 20 to, say, 70, the general reader would say "I want to know how they died",' says Robert White, assistant obituaries editor.<sup>101</sup> In addition, in the event of traumatic death involving a subject aged over 70 the circumstances are usually specified.

James Fergusson, however, defines the cause on his *Independent* page only when it is an intrinsic element of the obituary narrative, as 'in the case of a mountaineer falling off a cliff'. His greater concern, he says, is to publish obituaries that are 'about lives, not deaths'; he finds 'something morbid and prurient in people's interest in how other people died'.<sup>102</sup> Andrew McKie takes the same sort of approach in *Telegraph* obituaries:

If someone has been very brave in struggling with a debilitating disease or has been out of the public eye for ten or fifteen years because they've had Parkinson's or Alzheimer's, it's important to explain. But on most occasions I am not interested at all in the cause.<sup>103</sup>

An indication of the *Telegraph's* disdain is found in its anthology *The Very Best of The Daily Telegraph Books of Obituaries*, a collection published in 2001, edited by Hugh Massingberd (and dedicated to McKie).<sup>104</sup> Of the 100 reprinted obituaries originally published between 1987 and 1999, only nine indicate the cause of death; in six of those it is clearly stated and in the other three a cause is implied. Further, it is apparent that in each instance the information is there because of the relative youth of the subject or because it is germane to the narrative. The anthology offers a classic *Telegraph* voice in the obituary of Nico, a singer described as 'the Dietrich of the 1960s', who 'gave up heroin for bicycling, which was to turn out the more dangerous amusement – she died when she fell off a bicycle while on holiday'.<sup>105</sup>

That published collection also contains a life story brought to a close by an ‘AIDS-related’ cause, a topic which the British obituaries pages have discussed openly from the early years of their revival. In this instance, the death was that of the comedian Kenny Everett.<sup>106</sup>

Suicide, for reasons discussed in Chapter Two, is a cause of death which taxes editorial judgment, so far as the form of words and the exercise of ethical considerations are concerned. A blend of candour and recognition of the coronial process was found in the *Times* obituary of the novelist Richard Burns, who ‘died, apparently having hanged himself’ in Sheffield.<sup>107</sup> The *Independent* was a little more circumspect:

With a new novel out next week...and about to take up a full-time appointment as Head of Creative Writing at Lancaster University, Burns seemed at last about to turn a corner. But his demons got him anyway....Richard Burns is dead, by his own hand, on the day before his 34<sup>th</sup> birthday.<sup>108</sup>

There is also a practice which sees the news pages carrying the death and the obituaries page the life. It works well with the nature of obituary publication, given that consideration has to be allowed at times for its retention by a bereaved family. Sir Derek Bibby, awarded the Military Cross, chairman of a shipping company, and a worker for disadvantaged youth in the north of England, took his own life after enduring prolonged treatment for leukaemia. The *Times* news story, on page five of the 11 October 2002 edition, reported the consequences:

A bizarre suicide by a multi-millionaire shipping magnate prompted a full-scale chemical alert at a Merseyside hospital amid fears that patients could become contaminated by toxic fumes from the body. Sir Derek Bibby, 80,...swallowed the rat poison, aluminium phosphide, which releases highly toxic phosphine gas when it reaches the stomach. The war hero was moved from the family home...by firemen wearing breathing apparatus.<sup>109</sup>

The report then described the closure of the hospital’s accident and emergency department, and referred to Bibby’s decision to stop the treatment of his cancer by blood transfusion. His obituary, on page thirty-four, said only that ‘death came as a result of swallowing a chemical, aluminium phosphide, at his home. He had been suffering from leukaemia.’<sup>110</sup> The *Telegraph* applied an even sharper separation of powers, printing a detailed news story of the reasons for the hospital’s closure and, in the obituary, ignoring the cause of death altogether.<sup>111</sup>

In closing this line of enquiry, some reflection is required on the potential for misleading impressions which can be occasioned by omission of cause. The *Weekly Telegraph* (a digest of *Daily Telegraph* material, distributed internationally) published in 2001 an obituary of David Rocastle, a former footballer.<sup>112</sup> It related his early successes with the Arsenal club, his appearances for England, and his selection in 1989 as the nation's best young footballer of the year. Then came the fall:

Having reached the summit of the game so quickly, he now appeared to tumble from it almost as fast [because of injury]....In 1997, still only 30, he found himself in the Third Division playing for Hull City. The following year...[he] moved to Malaysia, where he finished his career last year with Sabah.<sup>113</sup>

As Chapter Two has said, that obituary's failure to supply a cause of death 'might well have persuaded readers to think that his life ended – or, possibly, that he ended it – in melodramatic circumstances'. A search of the *Telegraph* archives, however, has disclosed that Rocastle, described as 'lively...modest, courteous', had died from non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.<sup>114</sup> It is conceded that the *Weekly Telegraph* experiences a constant pressure in terms of available space; in this instance, though, the cut was unkind.

## **2.4 Survivors: the last paragraph**

Right at the bottom of column six, page thirty-six, in the edition of 21 May 2002, the *Times* carried this rueful note:

Norman Vaughan (obituary, yesterday) was 79 when he died, not 75. His first wife, Bernice, in fact died in 1992. He married Susan Hart in 1994. She and three stepdaughters survive him, as does the son of his first marriage. We apologise for the errors.<sup>115</sup>

The practice of obituary becomes delicate in the matter of the so-called survivors, especially when there has been more than one marriage, and when parentage has to be summarised in the confines of a concluding paragraph. Writers can make mistakes, and are more likely to do so when the bereaved family are guilty of deliberate obfuscation or omission. '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.'<sup>116</sup>

Bullamore is perhaps fortunate, in this respect, to be an obituarist on a British broadsheet, where the preferred style is one of restraint. The American approach, as the next chapter will disclose, is expansive. At the *Times*, the obituary text ends, when so demanded, with some or all of the following: the name of the surviving partner (usually marital), the year of marriage or marriages, the name of any former marital partners, a reference to dissolution of marriage or death of a partner, the number and sex of surviving offspring and stepchildren, the number and sex of deceased offspring. Offspring are named if they have achieved public prominence. The *Times* obituary of David Brinkley, the American broadcaster, therefore ended thus:

His first marriage, to Ann Fischer, ended in divorce. He is survived by his second wife, Susan, a stepdaughter, and three sons from his first marriage.<sup>117</sup>

Brief though this might be, it is too much for the paper's chief obituaries writer, Peter Davies. He follows the style ruling only out of respect for newspaper self-discipline:

I think we ought to get away from...who survives them. It doesn't bloody well matter who they were married to. It's become ingrained...there's a tendency to become locked into a template.<sup>118</sup>

The *Telegraph* takes the same approach, as – much of the time – does the *Guardian* too. The assistant obituaries editor says, however, that there is some opportunity for flexibility and creativity at the *Guardian*:

If there's a strong pay-off which we don't want to kill, then we'll try to work the survivors into the piece earlier. We try to avoid the formula 'He/she never married'. It has appeared, but we don't like it. You should be clear about people's private lives or you should say nothing. You don't want to leave an implication at all.<sup>119</sup>

A final paragraph of some literary construction is more likely still at the *Independent*, which summarises life's milestones in its 'go-last'. Sir John Gorton, prime minister of Australia 1968–1971, therefore, was accorded a 'go-last' which ended in this fashion:

married 1935 Bettina Brown (died 1983; two sons, one daughter),  
1993 Nancy Home (née Elliott; five stepsons, one stepdaughter);  
died Sydney, New South Wales 19 May 2002.<sup>120</sup>

As a consequence of this mechanism, the narrative of Gorton's obituary was able to display a concluding assessment of his career. It gave the overall structure a shape and a symmetry so often denied other compositions through their persistent adherence to survivor references:

Towards the end of his life he was accorded renewed honour by a Liberal Party that belatedly realised he was a more profound and enlightened politician, and more in tune with changing public sentiment, than many had suspected when he was in power. Indeed, John Gorton might have become one of Australia's greatest Prime Ministers but for certain facets of his rugged character that he made little attempt to change.<sup>121</sup>

On occasions, there are references to intimate relationships of the same sex. The *Times* suggested this, though with a shade of ambiguity, in closing its obituary of a Radio 3 broadcaster: 'Michael Oliver is survived by his long-term partner.'<sup>122</sup> A clearer statement, concerning the British ballet dancer Ronald Emblen, was made by the *Independent*: 'He lived in Hornton, Oxfordshire, near Banbury, with his friend of 36 years Philip Williams.'<sup>123</sup> At the death of the composer and conductor John Lanchbery, the *Telegraph* summarised an unorthodox domestic alliance with equal assurance: 'Jack Lanchbery...married the ballerina Elaine Fifield in 1951. The marriage was dissolved in 1960. He is survived by their daughter and his companion, Thomas.'<sup>124</sup>

The four papers present a united rejection of surviving families' requests, which sometimes do occur, for obituary preview. At best, they are prepared to read, over the telephone, those sections of an obituary which are concerned with matters of historical fact. However, Andrew McKie, at the *Telegraph*, recommends strongly against the sharing, and clearing, of 'editorial judgments'.<sup>125</sup> On behalf of the *Times*, Peter Davies is vigorously dismissive of the notion that the survivors might see in advance of publication what has been written:

It's not to get into the hands of the family. Service families are generally very good and say 'We'll give you all the help you need', but some people want to manipulate you and say 'We want to see the final text.' Well, I'm sorry but we're not going to go down that route.<sup>126</sup>



## 2.5 Time for posthumous reflection

The competitive nature of newspaper production is felt, particularly at times of celebrity death, on the obituaries desk. Andrew McKie recalls his first obituary, while working on a casual engagement for the *Times*; he had three hours to compose 1,500 words on the thriller writer Derek Raymond.<sup>127</sup> Peter Davies was late for his Tuesday evening interview for this thesis; an obituary had been demanded in a hurry following the announcement that afternoon that Phyllis Calvert, an ornament of the British stage, had died. Hugh Massingberd, in his memoirs, reflects on circumstances which contributed to his 1994 heart attack:

what had previously been a doddle, handled with insouciant panache (or so I liked to think), turned into neurotic obsession. The quest for perfection took on an alarmingly psychotic element – though at the time I thought I was merely doing my job. I would drive [David] Jones and my long-suffering colleagues up the wall by fussing late into the night over whether some mildly uncharitable statement would cause trouble, or whether every minute detail of someone's curriculum vitae was absolutely correct.<sup>128</sup>

The job does have its pressures. Obituaries of the less notable kind, however, are allowed to mature in a manner which conflicts with conventional journalism practice, where contemporaneous publication is regarded as important. The *Telegraph*, in the knowledge that its specialisation in military figures is condoned by the other papers, can afford to wait. Peter Wand-Tetley, who survived fourteen months behind enemy lines on clandestine operations in Greece, died in mid-March 2003; his obituary appeared in the *Telegraph* at the end of May, nearly ten weeks later. According to McKie, this is not unusual:

The longest delay I can recall is six months, which worries me not....Though I'm very keen that we should be seen as a news page, that applies only to people who are already in the news.<sup>129</sup>

A character who relishes a little subversion, he has a workable solution: 'I simply cheat, and omit the date of death.'<sup>130</sup> At the *Guardian*, the obituaries editor, Phil Osborne, believes that concern about the quality of the product should outweigh the timing of its delivery: 'Ideally, in my view, it's better to have a delay of a day or two and have a really good obituary, because I don't believe the reader is sitting at home comparing them.'<sup>131</sup>

That reader, according to the *Economist*, has been confronted since the mid-1980s by

a source of daily fascination and delight...[O]bituaries are much better written than ever they used to be, and much better than most of the other pages of the newspaper still are: anecdotal, discursive, yet elegantly concise; learned, touching, and, in a kindly way, often extraordinarily funny.<sup>132</sup>

## 2.6 Illustrating the obituary

Extending the verdict of the *Economist*, it can be said with confidence that the photography is rendered with intelligence and refinement too. The *Independent*, as related in Chapter Five, was responsible for transforming this facet of obituary practice; seventeen years on, it is still practising it with feeling. The effect is at its most potent in those obituaries of subjects who have lived long and adventurously and who are depicted, in the accompanying pictorial image, in youth. On 6 October 2003, the *Independent*, in its main obituary of the day, revived a sliver of social history from Scotland of the 1930s, when recession closed the shipyards:

a substantial body of men and women had time on their hands, mountains on their doorstep, and very little money. Resourceful Glaswegians hitch-hiked north in their hundreds to camp, climb and walk in the hitherto privileged domain of the West Highlands, dossing in caves....As the mountaineering historian Ken Wilson colourfully put it, 'It was rather as if a group of East Enders had suddenly decided to take up grouse-shooting or polo.'<sup>133</sup>

Alastair Borthwick, the subject of the obituary, recorded that phenomenon in his 'classic account of domestic adventures', *Always a Little Further*.<sup>134</sup> Later, he served with the Seaforth Highlanders in the North African and European theatres of war, wrote from the Isle of Jura (preceding George Orwell by three years), and became a prolific broadcaster. He lived to be 90; his obituary chose to capture the spirit of his formative years with a deep, four-column photograph of Borthwick and a young woman, laughing together and both wearing rucksacks, 'on a hike in the West Highlands c 1935'.<sup>135</sup> It endows the obituary with charm and hope and flesh.

This technique has some poignancy too in military application. The *Telegraph*, with its stable of 'moustaches', understands that wars are fought by the young. Its obituary of Major Richard Coke, awarded an MC in 1943 and a DSO in 1944 while serving with the Scots Guards, carries an image of peace. Coke, aged about 25, with his captain's pips on the epaulettes of a virginal uniform, is sitting on a log, pipe in mouth

and dog at foot. It could well have been taken when he was on embarkation leave. He looks rather like a boy dressed up as an officer for a school play; the dog, a retriever, appears more formidable than the man. A few months after that photograph was taken, Coke commanded his company 'under heavy mortar and spandau fire' in the assault on Monte Cassino.<sup>136</sup> A year after that, in another campaign, he 'was an inspiration to his men, personally directing operations and throwing grenades in the close fighting'.<sup>137</sup>

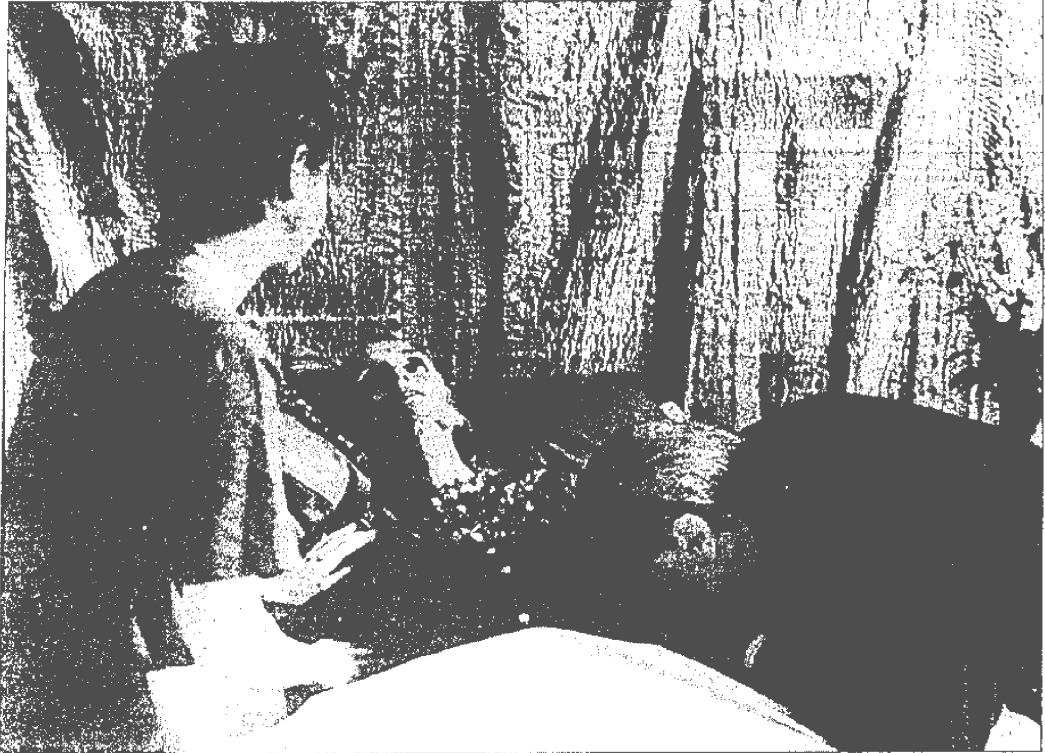
The picture was all in the *Times* obituary of Paul Vathis. He was the Associated Press photographer who portrayed the weight of presidential office with his 'Pulitzer-prize photograph of John F. Kennedy and Dwight Eisenhower, deep in thought following the Bay of Pigs invasion'.<sup>138</sup> The image of the two presidents, their backs to the camera and walking down a path at Camp David, dominates the page; the life of Vathis himself is summarised in a caption.

The *Guardian* took obituary practice to a new area of illustration in 1993 at the death of Sasha, Lady Young. By her own choice, her obituary was accompanied by a photograph of a death tableau. She lies, centre frame, her daughter to her right and her husband, his head bowed, to her left (Figure 6.3).<sup>139</sup>

There were letters. One writer, describing herself as 'a cancer patient in remission', pleaded with the *Guardian* to 'spare us undue emphasis on its effects';<sup>140</sup> another found it 'a courageous gesture equal to the courage of its subject' in a culture which 'shrouds death and is therefore resistant to a process in which life itself (and lives) can be celebrated'.<sup>141</sup> The newly widowed Lord Young of Dartington concluded the column with an explanation:

The photograph of my wife was not taken 'at her death' [as had been stated in the caption] but the day after she died. She was a Buddhist, and in the Buddhist tradition, with its openness about death, it is customary to have the body on view so that relatives and friends may come and pay their respects, which they did.<sup>142</sup>

For the *Guardian*, and for the evolution of the contemporary British obituary, it was a matter of judgment which broke with custom. As far as can be established at this juncture, it has not been repeated. Perhaps it was too harsh a reminder that the obituary art is predicated by death; British practice, on the evidence of this chapter, is more concerned with depicting life.



Sasha Young at her death, photographed by a family friend at home with her husband, Michael Young, and daughter Sophie

Obituary: Sasha Young

## Sunshine on the paradise tree

**S**ASHA Young, who has died aged 62, lived the 200,000 hills of Provence. This reminded her, perhaps, of the dry Mediterranean winds she once crossed Cape Town, where she had grown up during the second world war. From the sixties onwards, she and her husband Michael lived – for as much time as could be won from his busy teaching, editorial and entrepreneurial – in a succession of houses around the Pyrenees.

She flowed in the sun rays, taking the scrubby hill paths and the little scenic marble lakes. When in 1975 she published her first novel, *A Traveller's Companion*, her

own name, Sasha Moorson, it had been set in Provence, England, where she was born and lived most of her life. It was all very well, but France was where her heart was. She translated Perrault's fairy tales into English. France was a fairy tale for her.

She was one of the best South African actresses of her generation (though she also got a *First in English*, from London) and she always had the poise and energy of an actress. She was both writer and light hearted. It was always a delight to see her, she had an intense gift for friendship.

The first of the blacks who had helped bring her up, installed in her workshop with

her and she didn't go back to South Africa (it Nelson Mandela was freed. She went to Mauritius, however, where she helped Michael Young in setting up the International Extension College (now) of the Open University). In Nigeria she taught for a while at Alhaji Delle University, and it was Nigeria that gave her the subject matter for her second novel, *The Shadow Of The Paradise Tree* (1983).

From the Cape to the Ivory Coast she had gone to do three programmes of work on contemporary lectures and drama. She was the producer of the radio drama *London of Jean Rigny's*, dark Parisian novel, *Good Morning, Midnight*, which

brought Rigny (whom many assumed long dead) back into the public eye and renewed publication. But for this, *Wide Sargasso Sea* would probably never have seen the light of day.

When Michael Young and Peter Willmott brought out their sociological classic, *Family and Kinship In East London* (1957), Sasha made a radio documentary about it.

In 1969 she married Michael (now Lord Young of Dartington) and they had two children, Sophie and Toby. She became deeply involved in much of Michael's work. She edited the education magazine, *World* and wrote a consumer column in *The Observer*.

She also edited the first

course-books for the Open College of the Arts. She helped launch Health Line, which people could ring to hear pre-recorded tapes of health advice. But the arts remained her great passion.

She wrote poetry all her life; it was published in national magazines though not, so far, collected. She was the driving force behind the restoration of Laureate House on Highgate Hill, as an arts and community centre. Lately, she had turned her hand to ceramic sculpture.

She bore her cancer with characteristic courage and energy. She was determined to carry on arranging a concert at the church of St Bartholomew the Great, in

Smithfield, for the composer, Anthony Scott, who was an old friend. It took place last month, and she attended in a wheelchair.

She was surrounded, in that astonishing Beaman nave, by her family and her friends. It was a deeply moving occasion for all of us there, not just because of the music, but because of Sasha, sitting listlessly by one of the large masonry pillars. One of Scott's new settings of a Berlek song, was dedicated to her. So, in a way, was the entire occasion.

**Paul Barker**  
Sasha (Moorsom) Young, born January 25, 1911, died June 22, 1993.

**Figure 6.3** Death tableau. The body of Sasha, Lady Young, flanked by her daughter and her husband: he explained in a letter to the editor of the *Guardian* that, as a Buddhist, his wife had believed in 'openness about death'. (*Guardian*, 26 June 1993)

## Conclusions

The ‘source of daily fascination and delight’ that characterises the obituary of the quality British press is nurtured by recognition of publication principles and style.<sup>143</sup> There are few instances of idiosyncratic departure from what is, in essence, an industry driven by well defined sets of rules. The *Guardian* will on occasions allow a contributor to refer to the subject by given name; the *Telegraph* cannot countenance using the surname alone in an obituary of a woman; subjects of the highest social rank sometimes enjoy posthumous reference by title in what is otherwise an determinedly egalitarian section of the newspaper. That, in sum, is the extent of the anarchy.

Though the four papers are competing for the same educated, relatively affluent section of the readership market, the competitive nature of their relationship is ignored if circumstances so demand. They would rather, as the *Guardian* obituaries editor has conceded, pursue perfection of the prose than be first with the product. Indeed, there are times when it is felt that the obituary can wait several weeks.

There are two major points of operational separation: identification of authorship and definition of cause. In the first, both the *Independent* and the *Guardian* have adopted the practice of signed obituaries; the *Times* and the *Telegraph* adhere to the traditional unsigned model. In the second, the *Times* and the *Guardian* generally, except where old age is concerned, seek to disclose the cause of death; the *Telegraph* is less interested, the *Independent* rarely interested.

While there is a common demonstration of candid appraisal, this commitment is leavened by a concern for balance in the narrative. Anecdotes, accordingly, are both revealing and forgiving. It is, in fact, the anecdote which underpins the art in the British broadsheets. They employ it with dexterity in weighing the post-revival ounce of history.

The examples set by, and the lessons learnt from, the British experience must now be augmented by similar examination of American journalism. An informed consideration of contemporary practice in Australia is then the more achievable.

## chapter seven

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### Contemporary obituary practice (United States): matters for judgment

*You must select the Puritans for your ancestors. You must have a sheltered youth and be a graduate of Harvard. Eat beans on Saturday night and fish-balls on Sunday morning. You must be a D.A.R. [Daughter of the American Revolution], a Colonial Dame, an S.A.R. [Son of the American Revolution], or belong to The Mayflower Society. You must read The Atlantic Monthly. You must make sure in advance that your obituary appears in The Boston Transcript. There is nothing else.*

---

Joseph P. McCarthy (*The Christian Register*)<sup>1</sup>

#### An American legacy

There is something else. There is the *Point Reyes Light*, a weekly newspaper in Marin County, California. The obituary writer, Larken Bradley, finds a constant demand for her work:

We try to write an obituary on everyone who dies here. We even wrote one the other week on an 18-year-old Mexican immigrant who'd been working on a dairy farm. He'd only just arrived here, but he got a full obituary.<sup>2</sup>

There is also the *Valencia County News-Bulletin*, west of Albuquerque in New Mexico, which, each Wednesday and Saturday, offers further proof of America's enthusiasm for the obituary. 'We view obituaries as important news,' said the resident obituarist, Clara Garcia, interviewed for this thesis. 'Our readers want to know who died as soon as they open the paper, so they look for the obituaries before they read the front page.'<sup>3</sup> In Buffalo, upper New York state, the *News* devotes at least a page every day to obituaries. Their headlines often conjure up images of an old, gentler America of Norman Rockwell and the *Saturday Evening Post*. 'Ruth Anne Lacey, known for her violets', a headline from the edition of 31 May 2001, epitomises this quality.<sup>4</sup> In Denver, capital of Colorado, the *Post* has extended demographic boundaries to the extent of publishing obituaries of babies and of homeless people. 'I want to get a different, mixed ethnic and social strata,' said the obituary writer, Claire Martin. 'I don't want them all to be pillars of our community.'<sup>5</sup>

Those examples are drawn from the publication of what the United States knows as news, or feature, obituaries. Their appearance is supplemented by the burgeoning presence of the paid variety, which this chapter will discuss too. Obituaries are also being published on commercial websites, with – subject to the capacity of the client’s online connection – the future option of a video message from the deceased. It is apparent that the revival on the four major newspapers selected for this study has been accompanied by a groundswell of vigorous practice across the states of the Union. This chapter, therefore, extends discussion beyond the confines of that major-city quartet; an attempt is made to capture the mood of the continent. In its realisation, the United States obituary phenomenon offers a number of contrasts, as well as occasional similarities, to those issues identified in the preceding chapter. Some reflection at this juncture, particularly in terms of style, process and ethical considerations, will afford the opportunity subsequently for an informed analysis of Australian practice, as Chapter Six has found.

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## Part One: Publication principles

### 1.1 A mindset of news

The Poynter Institute, a journalism study centre based in Florida, has offered these definitions of obituary practice in the United States:

**News Obit:** The report of a death that is considered newsworthy because of the prominence of the individual or his or her place in the community.

**Feature Obit:** The basic news report fleshed out with biographical information, including anecdotes, descriptions, quotes, reminiscences. Although feature obits are usually limited to prominent, influential or famous people, a new form – dubbed the ‘common man’ (and woman) feature obit – emerged in the 1980s.<sup>6</sup>

In simple terms, the first of those definitions is synonymous with the formulaic boilerplate treatment applied to the vast body of obituaries in American journalism. To describe it thus is not necessarily pejorative; it is universally efficient, and often sufficient for its purpose too. The second is likely to be found in those newspapers with the resources, and the inclination for a more inventive approach; papers such as the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Denver Post*, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, the (Cleveland) *Plain Dealer*, and the *New York Times*.

The two forms, however, have an essential property in common: they are both generally shaped by the mechanisms of news. It is this factor which, in spirit, offers a point of departure from the British product. As this chapter unfolds, a news credo will be detected in those aspects of contemporary American practice concerned with the composition of the obituary's opening paragraph, the timing of its publication, the use of quotes and attribution and the tone of delivery. Evidence of this is found in the philosophy of Charles Strum, the *New York Times* obituaries editor. He dismisses all debate about the relative virtues of the signed and the unsigned obituary because 'It's a news story. We sign our news stories, so we sign our obituaries. There's nothing more to it than that.'<sup>7</sup> Microsoft Corporation's online magazine, *Slate*, has endorsed that view, and in so doing offers a useful summary of comparison to the British model:

By contrast, the *New York Times* and most American newspapers treat obituaries primarily as news stories. The [New York] *Times* always includes the cause of death near the top of the article and almost always includes the age of the deceased in the headline. The British broadsheet obituary more resembles an essay tacked onto a tombstone. The headline is usually just the person's name, with a one-line description, and then his birth and death dates near the end. The [inclusion of] cause of death is optional.<sup>8</sup>

The *Guardian*, in coming to the same conclusion, described obituaries as 'a business in the US and an art in the UK', adding:

While American newspapers treat obituaries of public figures as occasions to record historical facts, British newspapers in the past 15 years have increasingly used the obituary as an interpretation of the life and career of the deceased.<sup>9</sup>

There are, inevitably, variations on the theme; as Chapter Five, in discussing the force of revival, has said, United States obituary practice is on occasions similar in form to that encountered in the British broadsheets. The *New York Times*, despite its allegiance to classic news values, can be as playful as the *Daily Telegraph* at its most Massingberdesque. Here is Robert McG. Thomas on a pool shark:

Rudolf Walter Wanderone, the charming, slick-talking pool hustler who labored largely in obscurity until he reinvented himself in the 1960s by claiming to be Minnesota Fats, died at his home in Nashville. He was eighty-two, or perhaps ninety-five.<sup>10</sup>



There is also Douglas Martin's *New York Times* obituary of the brassière sorority's doyenne:

Selma Koch, a Manhattan store owner who earned a national reputation by helping women find the right bra size, mostly through a discerning glance and never with a tape measure, died Thursday at Mount Sinai Medical Center. She was 95 and a 34B.<sup>11</sup>

In a less frivolous, but similarly creative, enactment of the obituary, the *New York Times* published its 'Portraits of Grief' series following the September 11 acts of terrorism. The Poynter Institute has described this collection of 2,400 short stories as having created 'something akin to the Vietnam Memorial'.<sup>12</sup> The idea was to publish vignettes of those victims whose life achievements or characteristics were such that they did not qualify for the obituaries page itself. Instead, the *Times* produced what it calls

impressionistic sketches [that] skip most items required in standard obituaries: survivors, lists of colleges, degrees earned, jobs held, descriptions of newsworthy accomplishments....They are based on the highly colored recollections of family and friends, and are the kind of stories told at wakes and memorial services....Basically, the profiles are about love – not the usual focus of a daily newspaper.<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, the imperatives of news maintain an over-riding influence in the contemporary practice of obituary across the United States. Garrett Ray, a professor of journalism at Colorado State University, finds that there is at heart a difference of orientation: 'The American obituary is fact-oriented, while the British obituary is personality-oriented and impression-oriented.'<sup>14</sup> The accuracy of that observation is detected at frequent junctures of discussion within this chapter.

## **1.2 American candour: an ethical debate**

T.S. Eliot, in *The Waste Land*, writing at a time of kinder obituary practice, pointed to

The awful daring of a moment's surrender  
Which an age of prudence can never retract  
By this, and this only, we have existed  
Which is not to be found in our obituaries.<sup>15</sup>

It is often to be found, however, in the contemporary practice of obituary by major American newspapers; an allegiance to the principles of news has made candid revelation difficult to ignore. Kay Powell, obituaries editor of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, recalls having to pursue that course when a ‘popular fire chief’ died.<sup>16</sup> Though she had personally respected the man, she felt a duty to include the fact that, at one stage of his career, he had been found guilty of sexual harassment and suspended from duty:

When he died, we reported this [in the obituary], and there was an outcry from family and friends. My response was that we had done a balanced story; it was just one paragraph, the twelfth, in a seventeen-paragraph obituary. Our job is to answer questions, not raise questions. We can’t have the reader say: ‘Isn’t that the fire chief who was in trouble?’<sup>17</sup>

Joe Simnacher, at the *Dallas Morning News*, takes a similar approach when editing his obituaries page:

If there’s been a transgression, I try to put it in while keeping it in perspective. I had a complaint about a [church] minister who had transgressed, and I’d included this in the obituary. A reader rang up to complain and I said: ‘Well, if he didn’t want it in the paper, he shouldn’t have done it.’<sup>18</sup>

In Washington, the prodigious output of the *Post* – and the consequent brevity of its obituaries – does generate a comparatively boilerplated rendition. Room is found for consideration of unprepossessing character traits, however, when so demanded. Such was the case with Sarah McClendon, a journalist who reported Washington politics for nearly sixty years. Her obituary in the *Post* said that at times she had ‘been known to give rudeness a bad name’.<sup>19</sup>

A modern departure from ‘the old *nihil nisi bonum* code’ is noted by Marvin Siegel, in the introduction to his obituary anthology, *The Last Word*.<sup>20</sup> While he finds that the obituary writer is no longer required to eulogise, Siegel notes also that the tendency towards candour is tempered by a concern for fairness of appraisal. The quality of perspective, as applied by Simnacher in Dallas, is recommended accordingly:

While the obituarist is now permitted to use anecdotes and details that may not always reflect the subject in his best light, he is not issued a license to kill the subject a second time by settling scores, or gossiping, or permitting unnamed sources to assail someone's character. The law says that a dead man can not sue for libel, but a fair-minded obituarist seeks a moderate, reasonable tone anyway, remembering that among his readers will be bereaved family members and friends.<sup>21</sup>

Despite that assurance, a leading journalism ethicist finds reason to be concerned about the editorial emphasis and the degree of detail encountered in some obituaries. Professor Jay Black, co-editor of America's *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, argues that, in assessing a life which has been not entirely flawless, a newspaper might carry two reports. One, on a news page, could refer to the flaws. The other, on the obituaries page, could either circumvent them or place them in less prominent relief:

I have never been quite comfortable with the obituary as a place to dredge up the dirt...[because] it's the end of it. There's no way the subject is going to have the opportunity to respond. This is it.<sup>22</sup>

He expressed concern, in this regard, when shown two *New York Times* obituaries of recent vintage. One of those related the troubles of Charley Pell, a former University of Florida football coach, who had flouted the rules on player payments. That episode led to dismissal and despair, as his *Times* obituary, published in May 2001, so unsparingly recalled:

No other college would hire him, so he sold real estate and insurance, developed shopping malls and processed oil sludge. All those ventures went bad. In 1994, after he tried to asphyxiate himself, he was found to have clinical depression.<sup>23</sup>

In that instance, Black questions the necessity to describe so explicitly the suicide attempt:

I'm not comfortable with that. The journalism world is full of information that doesn't need to be passed on. To me, that's journalism with an attitude, journalism that says 'I have a piece of information and therefore I'm going to share it.'<sup>24</sup>

Charles Strum, the *New York Times* obituaries editor, maintains in response that, as an obituary is a news story, the essentials of news writing would have been violated by any engagement with mild euphemism:

In any news story, if you say ‘He had tried to take his own life’, what the hell does that mean? Did he try to shoot himself, stab himself, jump off a roof, stick his mouth over a tailpipe?...Either tell me what’s going on or avoid it altogether. Your job as a reporter is to answer my questions. It’s always a news story. It’s not about covering up or making nice. All we write are news stories, and if it’s not that it’s a tribute or a cover-up.<sup>25</sup>

The second obituary considered by Professor Black was that of Senator Harrison Arlington Williams, who had resigned in 1982, following conviction on bribery and conspiracy charges, after twenty-three years representing New Jersey in Congress. Williams had been a wartime pilot, a steelworker and a lawyer, and was the only New Jersey Democrat to be elected to four Senate terms. Later, after serving his three-year prison sentence, he was active in the administration of drug treatment programs. Though his *New York Times* obituary, published in November 2001, included all this material, it was his involvement in corporate corruption, and his problems with alcohol, which dominated the headline and the narrative.<sup>26</sup> Black finds this form of posthumous appraisal unreasonable, again arguing that a fairer assessment might be obtained by virtue of two reports:

If this is how he is to be remembered, it concerns me as just a citizen that this is the lasting image created by the newspaper. I constantly wonder why there is not a place to separate out those elements which are newsworthy, but perhaps scurrilous or negative, from the rest of the elements. After finishing with most of the negative [in the Senator Williams obituary], you have a fairly straightforward accounting of the man’s life, which was significant – he was elected to one of the top positions in the country....I don’t find much social utility in seeing the obituary used for so much of the negative to be dredged up.<sup>27</sup>

Charles Strum concedes that ‘in some cases, particularly in short obituaries’, it can be unfair to concentrate on misdeed to the exclusion of other factors.<sup>28</sup> However, he strongly rejects the ethicist’s argument in the Senator Williams case:

Harrison Williams was a corrupt senator from a state with a history [of corruption]. The Abscam scandal [in which he was involved] was one of the biggest local news stories of the time, and the professor who thought this emphasis was wrong was full of shit. There's no other way to write this story...Harrison Williams was caught on tape, he was taking the money. Harrison Williams was a drunk, a corrupt drunk, and actually a very nice guy. But it coloured his entire career. It was not a momentary indiscretion.<sup>29</sup>

Far removed from Manhattan, in distance and demography, a similar view is held by Clara Garcia, of New Mexico's *Valencia County News-Bulletin*: 'Our first job is to report the facts. If someone did something wrong, that's part of their life history and that's what we're reporting on.'<sup>30</sup> Within the New York and the New Mexico dialogue, the repeated references to reporters and to stories is of significance. It strengthens the matter of judgment that, in the United States, obituary writing owes a greater allegiance to the discipline of the news desk than to the licence of the 'essay tacked onto a tombstone'.<sup>31</sup> This persuasion continues to worry Professor Black:

If we use the traditional definitions of news, pursuing the most abnormal aspects of people's lives, and put those in the lead and in the cutline [caption] of the photo and in the headline, even Jesus wouldn't fare very well.<sup>32</sup>

### 1.3 Of villains and heroes

Though the leading obituary pages of the United States do not appear interested in boundaries of the type favoured by the British broadsheets, they are willing to include those who have undermined society by acts of criminality. Once more, as Kay Powell of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* explains, the news value is the driving force:

I approach an obituary as a news story. It's just as legitimate to write about them [villains] as about anyone else. We take a very democratic approach to obituaries...you are not automatically included if you are head of a company or a public official and you are not automatically excluded if you are a criminal or whatever.<sup>33</sup>

The rendition of such histories can be bleak. *Los Angeles Times* readers, for example, were given an explicit account of the life and death of a career criminal who had published a memoir of prison life:

Jack Henry Abbott, whose prison writings were turned into the best-selling book *In the Belly of the Beast* and made him the temporary darling of author Norman Mailer and other members of the New York radical chic literati, hanged himself Sunday in his prison cell.<sup>34</sup>

At the death of Myra Hindley, the moors murderer, both the *New York Times* and the *Boston Globe* elected to print the syndicated obituary from Associated Press. The *Los Angeles Times* wrote its own, drawing on files and wire services, but experienced some in-house difficulty along the way. The task was initially assigned to a staff writer, Elaine Woo. According to the week-end obituaries editor, Myrna Oliver, however, Woo refused the assignment, saying that for personal reasons she felt unable to compose an obituary of a child-killer.<sup>35</sup> Oliver therefore had to do the job herself.

The capacity of the contemporary obituary for such liberality of subject selection has worried Dianne Eicher and Joe Bullard, who write an opinion column in Colorado's *Rocky Mountain News*. In May 2003, they attacked the *Denver Post* for having published obituaries of a squatter, of a fringe-dweller who 'enjoyed spray-painting things', and of an armed and 'severely intoxicated' man shot in a confrontation with police.<sup>36</sup> Under the heading '*Post* has questionable obit priorities', they drew attention to the generous amount of column space devoted to these obituaries:

[T]he point is that space in newspapers is limited. Every day the *Post* makes choices about who to memorialize in its news obits, and it's likely that many worthy people get left out. Given those constraints, we would argue there are simply some people who don't warrant their 15 minutes of fame – or their 15 inches of space.<sup>37</sup>

The solution to such differences of opinion, according to Black, the journalism ethicist, is for obituary pages to carry policy statements:

I think there are ethical considerations, and I'm struck by the approach used by *Time Magazine* when it selects its Person of the Year. It may very well be the most notorious newsmaker of the year, but *Time* will also explain its thinking. I don't see the obituary page explaining its thinking...one has to do one's own deconstruction of the page to understand the value system. It would be nice if there were a policy statement on the obituary pages, a policy statement in which there's a public declaration of how life values and death values are judged. It would probably tone down some of the criticism.<sup>38</sup>

At Colorado State University, Garrett Ray agrees. As a former newspaper editor, and later a professor of journalism, he finds that

newspapers on the whole are woefully inadequate at explaining what they do – not just with obituaries but about everything. We would be a lot better off if we routinely ran explanatory notes on policy...[and] it makes sense to do that with obituaries. It makes particular sense now, when papers are changing their style of writing them.<sup>39</sup>

Matters for editorial judgment are much less vexed when the obituary recounts a life of triumph over adversity; American journalism nurtures a capacity for discovering heroes. Elaine Woo, three months after her ethical impasse with Hindley, wrote a long and lyrical chronicle of Harold H. Wilke, a church minister born without arms, who had achieved national renown as a crusader for the disability rights movement. The obituary was illustrated with a photograph of Wilke accepting, in his toes, a ceremonial pen presented by President Bush in 1990. In the text, the incident becomes a symbolic anecdote:

[A]s President George H.W. Bush handed out the ceremonial pens, Wilke deftly removed a loafer and stuck out his foot to receive one, which he slipped into his shoe. Later, while seated next to First Lady Barbara Bush, he deposited it in his pocket with his toes. He was greeted with a roar of approval from the assembled guests.<sup>40</sup>

It was the absence of a leg, rather than an arm, which brought Angel Wallenda to the obituaries page of the *New York Times*, in another instance of posthumous hero acknowledgment. Wallenda, a victim of sustained child abuse, had literally run away to join the circus, marrying at the age of 17 into a family ‘famous for its aerialists and acrobats’.<sup>41</sup> She became a wire-walker, then developed cancer and had her right leg amputated. Nevertheless, she returned to the high wire, appearing at charity benefits. As is often the fashion in American obituary composition, the writer, Lawrence Van Gelder, chose to illustrate his subject’s character by the inclusion of a quote:

‘When I’m way up in the sky, walking on a thin line with a fake leg, people look up at me and really pay attention....They see that I’m using everything I’ve got to live my life the best I can. When people think about that...some of them see how much better they can live their own lives.’<sup>42</sup>

## 1.4 The non-pursuit of gender balance

Chapter Two has considered the incidence of subject selection by sex in major United States newspapers, noting that there has been a history of male dominance. As is the case in Britain, American editors are in general opposed to the notion of a calculated process to address that imbalance. In Los Angeles, Myrna Oliver prefers not to interfere with natural selection: ‘It just happens...we do not go out and say “Oh, we had a white guy yesterday, so we have to have a black woman today”’.<sup>43</sup> Joe Simmacher, of the *Dallas Morning News*, takes an identical stance: ‘There’s no deliberate attempt. It seems to be working by itself. It’s a natural balance that seems to be occurring.’<sup>44</sup> In similar vein, Atlanta’s Kay Powell reports ‘no deliberate policy’.<sup>45</sup>

Twelve interviews were conducted, with editors and writers, as part of the American field research for this thesis; in ten of them, the question of gender balance arose. While that total is too small for any valid quantitative conclusion, it is still of interest to note that in only one instance was there any indication of a deliberate policy of positive discrimination. That occurred in the interview with Richard Pearson, obituaries editor (until mid-2003) of the *Washington Post*:

It’s the kind of thing that if it’s a tie, then it goes to a woman or the minority group or whatever. I think I can justify that. Say you have two Washington lawyers, and one’s a black woman and one’s a white guy. It was probably tougher for the woman – so she wins.<sup>46</sup>

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## Part Two: The discipline of newspaper style

The ubiquitous nature of the obituary in American newspapers at large is noted by the standard journalism text *Reporting for the Print Media*:

Newspapers in small towns try to publish an obituary for everyone who dies in their geographical area....Few stories are so likely to be clipped, pasted in scrapbooks and mailed to friends.<sup>47</sup>

The author of that text, Fred Fedler, of the University of Central Florida, advocates the use of anecdotes and the avoidance of ‘eulogies, euphemisms and sentimentality’.<sup>48</sup> He also prescribes a template, containing twelve essential points for reporters to pursue in compiling information:



Identification (full name, age, address)  
Time and place of death  
Occupation and employment history  
Other major interests and accomplishments  
Honors, awards and offices held  
Educational history: schools attended and schools graduated from  
Membership in [*sic*] churches, clubs and other civic organizations  
Military service  
Year and place of birth and marriage  
List of surviving relatives  
Religious services  
Other burial and funeral arrangements<sup>49</sup>

In terms of comparative newspaper style, the last two points on that list present a feature of obituary composition considered more important in the United States than is the case in both Britain and Australia. Two of the major newspapers selected as the focus of this thesis, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and the *Los Angeles Times*, see them as worth inclusion. In so doing, they are displaying both their residual ‘local paper’ characteristics and the American obituary’s concern for contemporaneous publication.

Other authorities on the basics of the craft also define funeral-related factors as significant. The Poynter Institute’s template specifies ‘donation information’ and ‘funeral information’;<sup>50</sup> Garrett Ray, of Colorado State University, expands that recommendation by listing ‘visitation information’ along with ‘place of burial’ and ‘memorial information’ [preferred charities or institutions for donations].<sup>51</sup> The ‘visitation’ factor, a condolence ceremony which should not be interpreted as possessing divine properties, is of particular relevance in the South, as this chapter in its discussion of Atlanta’s obituary style will demonstrate.

American vocational guides agree with the need for disciplined application, in line with sentiments expressed by Britain’s Leslie Sellers within Chapter Six. ‘Style is important, but accuracy is the top priority in an obituary,’ says the Poynter Institute.<sup>52</sup> Fedler’s text talks about consistent adherence to the rules of news writing.<sup>53</sup> The impression overall, from a sustained examination of obituary publication in the United States, is that its practice is driven by reverence for the formula of press reporting. It is reliable, frequently authoritative, generally dispassionate, inclined often to be earnest, and less idiosyncratic than the British model. Once more, its allegiance to the principles of news writing, rather than to those of the essay, is manifest.

## 2.1 Lead and attribution

Fedler's *Reporting for the Media* offers this advice on the construction of a news story's opening thrust:

The first paragraph of a news story is called the 'lead'...the most important part of a story – and the most difficult to write. Traditionally, the lead summarizes an entire story so that readers can decide at a glance whether they want to read it. In this way, readers do not have to waste any time or effort. And – even if they read only the lead – they will receive a capsule account of the entire story.<sup>54</sup>

This formula is applied extensively to obituary composition in the United States, driven by the allegiance to news writing and the attendant dislike of both the 'stand-first' and the 'go-last'. The *Washington Post*, with its annual output of 6,000 obituaries, adheres to it rigorously:

Pablo Ruiz-Salomon, 60, a former supervisory social worker who spoke out against failures in the District's child welfare system and who helped organize fellow workers into an advocacy group to promote children's interests, died June 4 at Washington Hospital Center. He had liver cancer.<sup>55</sup>

So too, for the most part, does the *New York Times*:

Art Cooper, who in nearly 20 years as editor of GQ magazine helped to transform it into a showplace for literary journalism, died yesterday at New York Hospital. He was 65.<sup>56</sup>

The *Los Angeles Times* on occasions adopts a slightly less slavish approach, allowing itself a little creativity in the lead. In this example from October 2002, the first paragraph contains the building blocks of name, age, cause of death and demographic description, yet avoids Fedler's 'capsule account':

Harry Hay, who died Thursday of lung cancer at 90, earned an unusual distinction as a founder of the gay liberation movement and a member of the Communist Party, which banned homosexuals.<sup>57</sup>

A variation of approach is adopted by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. It frequently uses what journalism texts call the 'delayed lead', a process described by Sally White, in her text *Reporting in Australia*, as 'a device to catch the reader's attention

by...using an anecdote or by setting up a compelling image'.<sup>58</sup> This policy allows Atlanta obituaries to begin in a softer, more creative form, as was twice demonstrated in the edition of 25 May 2002:

Frances Lerer had the gift of tongues. English, Spanish, German, French, classical Greek and Latin – she could speak them all fluently.<sup>59</sup>

From his flights over the treacherous Burma-to-China 'Hump' during World War II to his battles with prostate cancer and melanoma, Hal Falkenberg was a study in courage.<sup>60</sup>

In each instance, the formulaic components were delayed by several paragraphs until the forces of anecdote and image had been satisfied.

In those circumstances where corroboration of an obituary's *raison d'être* is considered necessary, the opening paragraph will include an attribution, a form of words which links the fact of death to an informed source. This was notably the case in New York's convulsions of September 2001. The *New York Times* adopted, on occasions, such constructions as these:

Berry Berenson Perkins, a photographer and eclectic fashion plate of the 1970s before she settled into marriage with the actor Anthony Perkins, was killed on Tuesday, a passenger on American Airlines Flight 11, which was the first jetliner to strike the World Trade Center, a spokeswoman for the family said.<sup>61</sup>

Christian Adams, a prime promoter of German wines as deputy director of the German Wine Institute, a quasi-governmental organization, died on Tuesday aboard the hijacked plane that crashed in southwestern Pennsylvania, the institute said.<sup>62</sup>

Attribution of that type can also be applied in the event of misadventure, when the circumstances demand an official statement. Such was the case in Atlanta in April 2002, following a fatal accident. In this instance, the *Journal-Constitution* attributed an explanation of the cause to a representative of the coroner's office:

Jeremy Classen, a 10<sup>th</sup>-grader, died accidentally Tuesday when a window fell on his neck and he was asphyxiated, according to Mark Bishop of the Cobb County Medical Examiner's Office....Returning from a friend's house, Jeremy found himself locked out of his house without his key, so he crawled in a window 'like he'd done a hundred times', Mrs [Tami] Classen said.<sup>63</sup>

In Britain, as illustrated by the ‘contaminated body’ case study of Chapter Six, the obituary resulting from such an occurrence would carry, at the most, a line or so of cause description. There would certainly not be any use of an attributed statement, as was the case in Atlanta. As White advises, in *Reporting in Australia*, ‘Spontaneous news events need verification skills...in order to be reported properly.’<sup>64</sup> The *Journal-Constitution* followed that course, published a contemporaneous account of what was demonstrably ‘spontaneous news’, and labelled it as an obituary. It is worth noting also that, while factual observations on character traits are often indicated by the quoted opinion of authoritative sources in the United States, such tactics are rarely used in the British model. The application of this technique in the context of the American obituary provides further evidence that a news mindset prevails.

## 2.2 Names and ages

American obituary pages demonstrate a uniform enthusiasm for reporting the age of their subjects, to the extent that it is frequently included in headlines. The *New York Times* of 5 June 2003, by way of example, carried a total of three obituaries. These were the headings: ‘Mickie Most, Record Producer and Pop Impresario, Dies at 64’; ‘Pierre Restany, 72, Formulator of New Realism School in Art’; ‘Robert D. Cross, 79, President of 2 Colleges’.<sup>65</sup> In their study of 9,325 *Times* obituaries from 1993 to 1999, Ball and Jonnes found that only one had omitted the age of its subject.<sup>66</sup> Kay Powell, reflecting on the publication of a similar number of obituaries since her appointment at the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, can also identify a solitary instance of age omission:

One woman had always tried to look like Elizabeth Taylor and had lied about her age, to the extent that even her children didn’t know. So we didn’t have it in [the obituary].<sup>67</sup>

A measure of respect for the dead, to the extent of attaching honorifics to their names, is found in three of the four newspapers analysed. At the *Washington Post*, this practice is pursued solely in obituaries; for the remainder of the paper, house style decrees that the surname stands alone. Richard Pearson, the former obituaries editor, has associated the custom with the region’s cultural antecedents: ‘The idea is that because they’re dead we should show some respect. There’s still this Southern thing that the dead deserve that.’<sup>68</sup> Further south, in Atlanta, the same tradition – expressed by Powell in the same language – survives: ‘It’s a very Southern thing. It’s the only place in the paper that you see courtesy titles used. In the South, it’s just like that. My friends’ children call me “Miss Kay”.’<sup>69</sup>

It applies in Manhattan too. The *New York Times* used an honorific in its 1991 obituary of Richard Speck, the killer of eight student nurses in Chicago, in the manner that it would adopt in all obituaries:

Mr Speck had been taken to the hospital after suffering chest pains...at the nearby State Correctional Center, where he was serving eight consecutive terms of 50 to 150 years each.<sup>70</sup>

According to the obituaries editor, Charles Strum, the same form of posthumous reference would be applied in an obituary of David Berkowitz, the ‘Son of Sam’ serial killer sentenced in 1977 to 365 years’ jail. ‘Berkowitz would always get one [an honorific],’ he says, ‘unless he was on the sports page, playing for the Yankees.’<sup>71</sup>

The one dissenter among the four major newspapers studied in this thesis is the *Los Angeles Times*. After the use of given name and surname in the opening paragraph, style demands that all subsequent references are by surname only. In thirty-one years at the paper, Myrna Oliver has encountered just one departure from this practice. It occurred in the obituary of ‘Buffy’ Chandler, a member of a founding family and renowned for acts of public beneficence: ‘Second, third, one-hundredth reference, she would be “Mrs Chandler”.’<sup>72</sup> There had been considerable debate, at the obituaries desk, following the death of Mrs Walt Disney, who also enjoyed a reputation as a philanthropist. Eventually, convention won; she became ‘Disney’.

### **2.3 An obsession with cause**

As Chapter Two noted, in comparing elements of British and American practice, the *Los Angeles Times* obituary of Charles Henri Ford, the poet, attributed his death to ‘causes associated with aging [*sic*].’<sup>73</sup> The point both bemuses and amuses Oliver:

My rule of thumb used to be 75 [as a limit on attributing cause], but our editor-in-chief, John Carroll, about a year ago demanded that we always state the cause of death. Sometimes it’s ludicrous...I have even written that so-and-so died of natural causes associated with ageing. No-one has questioned me on that.<sup>74</sup>

A determined pursuit of cause is standard practice in the United States. Obituary research rules at the *Arizona Republic*, a newspaper not given to dalliance with sensationalism, demand it unless the subject is over 90. ‘I always ask what it said on the death certificate,’ says the *Republic* obituarist, Connie Sexton.<sup>75</sup> If the reason is simply not discernible or obtainable, an obituary is quite likely to state ‘no cause was

disclosed’ or ‘the exact cause of death was not announced’; the latter was applied in the *Los Angeles Times* obituary of Gertrude Ederle, the first woman to swim the English Channel.<sup>76</sup> She was 98. Those phrases, too, are used at the *Washington Post*, which has an effective solution to the difficulty, discussed in Chapter Two, concerning AIDS-related death:

We say ‘He had AIDS’, rather than died from it, because there’s always some secondary cause. More and more, we find that people insist on defining AIDS...after we’ve told them that we want a truthful, straightforward cause of death and we don’t necessarily have to run an obituary [if they refuse]. We tell them to take a day to think about it, and then to call us back.<sup>77</sup>

The *Journal-Constitution* varies this slightly to ‘complications from AIDS’.<sup>78</sup> It seeks a cause of death in each obituary, even for the oldest of subjects. This determination, said Kay Powell, was rewarded in the instance of a man who had died at the age of 91: ‘Rather than assuming old age as the cause, we checked – and found he died in an accident delivering Meals on Wheels, which added another dimension to the story.’<sup>79</sup>

That extra dimension was also discovered in pursuing the circumstances of magazine editor Art Cooper’s death, for the *New York Times* obituary already considered in the section of this chapter which discusses the encapsulation of prime facts in the lead. A detailed, but by no means undignifying, description of his last lunch in a familiar location ensued: ‘Mr Cooper died of complications from a stroke he suffered during lunch on Thursday at the Four Seasons, his favourite restaurant.’<sup>80</sup>

While Myrna Oliver, in Los Angeles, is perplexed at times by the relentlessness of her newspaper’s policy on finding a cause, she does acknowledge the degree of reader interest: ‘I do think that people want to know. They judge their own health and longevity by reading obituaries.’<sup>81</sup> She finds an ally on this point in Professor Black, the journalism ethicist: ‘I am always curious when I read the local paper and I see that someone younger than me has died. I think “What brought that about?”’<sup>82</sup> He condones the reporting of AIDS-related cause on the grounds that a full explanation is sometimes necessary so that the lifestyle of the subject is better understood by readers. In this regard, Black cites the case studies of an AIDS researcher who ‘died because of a needle prick’ and of the tennis player Arthur Ashe, whose death was caused by a tainted blood transfusion.<sup>83</sup>

Black, however, is concerned about explicit reporting within an obituary of suicide because ‘describing...[it] in some detail might motivate others’.<sup>84</sup> That objection would be stifled by the imperative of news writing, as already indicated within this chapter during discussion of the *New York Times* and its revelation of a former football coach’s attempt at asphyxiation. It does appear that the larger American newspapers are inclined to be direct in the matter; the *Denver Post* typifies the process by its willingness to report that a subject ‘died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound’.<sup>85</sup>

Smaller papers, living in much closer proximity to their readers, take a more circumspect approach. Suicide is ‘never reported’ in obituaries appearing in New Mexico’s *Valencia County News-Bulletin*, according to Clara Garcia, because ‘our community is very sensitive’.<sup>86</sup> Although the official policy of the *Point Reyes Light* in California does permit such disclosure, it is disguised ‘for reasons of taste’, says Larken Bradley.<sup>87</sup> She quotes a recent circumlocution: ‘He had been despondent in recent months over the loss of his health. Period.’<sup>88</sup>

## 2.4 Those who are left

The language of Evelyn Waugh’s *The Loved One* creeps into the dissertation. *News Writing and Reporting for Today’s Media*, by Itule and Anderson, offers this information:

The *Findlay* (Ohio) *Courier*, like many newspapers, provides details of visitation. Its policy states: ‘In addition to the hours of visitation, we will include the hours that the decedent’s family will be at the funeral home.’<sup>89</sup>

‘Visitation’, as indicated earlier in this chapter, is the term applied to a reception at which a bereaved family is available to accept condolences. The ‘decedent’ might also be there, lying in state. One of the more spectacular demonstrations of this practice had its origins in an obituary published by the *Journal-Constitution* on 6 June 2000 (a Tuesday):

Donald Trimble, the owner of Donald Trimble Mortuary, which conducted more than 800 funerals a year, was also noted for his lavish parties, entertaining 600 to 1,000 people at Christmas and on the Fourth of July. Funeral plans Saturday [*sic*] will be announced by Donald Trimble Mortuary. Mr Trimble, 58, of Decatur [Georgia], died Sunday of liver failure at Emory University Hospital....Visitation is 9am–9pm Thursday at his residence, 2960 Hampton Place.<sup>90</sup>

Later that month, *Jet*, a magazine aimed at an African-American readership, carried a three-page report on the consequence of the obituary's announcement. There were two photographs of the queues and another two of the late Mr Trimble lying in his bed, with his glasses placed on an open bible by his side. Chedonna Trimble-Holston, his niece, was quoted as saying: "The first day we had more than 1,000 people and the second day we had more than that. We had to start turning people away."<sup>91</sup>

The *Journal-Constitution's* enthusiasm for inclusion of a paragraph on forthcoming funeral arrangements is a persuasive factor in its determination to publish obituaries in a hurry. A sense of urgency, driven by a policy of printing details of public funerals, is also found at the *Los Angeles Times*. Revealing another 'local paper' characteristic, the *Times* often compounds the image by concluding with a paragraph of 'memorial' information, as happened in the obituary of the gay activist Harry Hay: "Donations in his name may be made to the Southern California Library for Social Studies and Research, 6120 S. Vermont Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90004."<sup>92</sup>

The closing stages of American obituaries are magnanimous in terms of devoting space to surviving family. Offspring, and their home towns, are named; siblings are frequently accorded similar recognition; grandchildren are enumerated. Even Charley Pell, the fallen football coach given a cheerless posthumous appraisal by the *New York Times*, was despatched with the accompaniment of generous familial recognition in that same obituary:

He is survived by his wife; three children, Charles Pell Jr. of Birmingham, Ala., Sloan Pell Farrell of Huntsville, Ala., and Carrick Pell of Shreveport, La.; and two grandchildren.<sup>93</sup>

Truman Butts, a Georgia engineer who had travelled the world repairing power generator turbines, received the extended version, including siblings, in the *Journal-Constitution*. It serves as an indicator of the importance attached to surviving family members in the composition of American obituaries:

Survivors include his wife, Grace Winchester Butts; another son, Thomas Butts of Macon [one son had already been quoted in the narrative]; a daughter, Debra Lane of Lithia Springs; two brothers, Crayton Butts of Augusta and Jabe Butts Jr. of Walhalla; three sisters, Agnis Butts of Gaffney, S.C., Louella Bolt of Walhalla, and Ello Strickland of York, S.C.; nine grandchildren and one great-grandchild.<sup>94</sup>



The major newspapers are prepared to name same-sex surviving partners too, as occurred in Harry Hay's *Los Angeles Times* obituary: 'Hay is survived by his partner, [John] Burnside.'<sup>95</sup>

This pattern of intimacy with survivors does not extend, however, to allowing them an editorial role in the published product. Garrett Ray, at Colorado State University, advises obituarists not to seek clearance from bereaved relatives or partners of material intended for publication. The editors interviewed for this thesis endorse the thrust of this argument:

I [Ray] have no problem calling people back to clarify, but I think I would not normally submit the text to them because each of us wants to be an editor. I'd tend to do it by phone rather than submitting the text because, instead of having one editor, you'd have a family of editors. You'd find yourself in a series of rewrites by the time you got everyone's approval.<sup>96</sup>

## 2.5 Alacrity is the essence

In Porter Shreve's novel *The Obituary Writer*, a newly appointed obituarist consistently tries to translate his raw material into a form suitable for immediate publication by his newspaper.<sup>97</sup> Elaine Showalter, in the *Guardian*, adds this observation to Shreve's realistic fiction:

American obituary writing...remains primarily a news item rather than an aspect of *belles lettres*. Lapses of days or even weeks between a death and an obituary are routine in the UK, while, in the US, timeliness is all-important.<sup>98</sup>

At the *New York Times*, discussion about contemporaneous publication is another cue for Charles Strum's mantra: 'We have no option but to publish instantly. They [obituaries] are news stories, as competitive as anything else in the paper.'<sup>99</sup> As already seen in this chapter, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and, though in a more selective manner, the *Los Angeles Times* are both intent on including funeral information in advance. This, inevitably, inspires alacrity.

'We don't do obituaries after a month has gone by,' said Richard Pearson, of the *Washington Post*, interviewed in June 2003.<sup>100</sup> Pearson died on 11 November of the same year; his obituary appeared two days later.<sup>101</sup>

## 2.6 Posthumous illustration

As is the case in Britain, the American obituary has in recent years developed a bold pictorial treatment. Some of those narratives quoted and summarised in this chapter were, in their original incarnation, most handsomely illustrated. Frances Lerer, of multi-lingual prowess, was depicted by the *Journal-Constitution* dancing with her husband;<sup>102</sup> the *New York Times* photograph of Art Cooper, the former magazine editor struck down over lunch at his favourite restaurant, has him standing, arms folded, suited and smiling in corporate confidence;<sup>103</sup> Harry Hay, of Gay Liberation memory, is wearing a double row of beads, with what appears to be a bronze figure of classical connection in the background, in his *Los Angeles Times* obituary.<sup>104</sup>

On occasions, and when the space is there, the pictures assume dominance. The *New York Times* published a retrospective of Alfred Eisenstaedt's photography to accompany his obituary in 1995; it included his signature study, the sailor and the nurse kissing in Times Square on VJ Day, fifty years earlier (Figure 7.1).<sup>105</sup> This indulgence does not seem to occur, however, at the *Washington Post*. Its determination to maintain that record of 6,000 obituaries a year leaves no room for generosity of illustration.

The most remarkable posthumous photograph encountered in research for this thesis appeared in the *Miami Herald* of 13 September 2003. Alexander Harris, 33, described as a 'rising hip-hop mogul for Miami's Xela Entertainment Group' had been shot to death 'in a fashionable barbershop'.<sup>106</sup> The photograph shows Harris's body at the Grace Funeral Home. It is positioned in the driving seat of his yellow Lamborghini, wearing a red San Francisco 49ers football jersey, a baseball cap and sunglasses, dead hands on the wheel.

## 2.7 Paid obituaries

Aimée Thanatogenos, the mortuary hostess of Waugh's *The Loved One*, a satire on the more extreme aspects of America's funeral industry, offers these services to the clients of Whispering Glades:

Our crematory is on scientific principles, the heat is so intense that all inessentials are volatilized....Normal disposal is by inhumement, entombment, inurnment, or immurement, but many people lately just prefer insarcophagusment. That is *very* individual.<sup>107</sup>

# Alfred Eisenstaedt, Photographer of the Defining Moment, Is Dead at 96

By CHARLES HAGEN

Alfred Eisenstaedt, the German-born photographer whose pioneering images for Life magazine helped define American photography, died on Wednesday while vacationing on Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts. He was 96 and lived in Manhattan.

Over a career that lasted more than 50 years, Mr. Eisenstaedt became famous as the quintessential Life photographer, producing more than 2,000 picture stories and 90 covers for the magazine. He was especially renowned for his ability to capture memorable images of important people in the news, including statesmen, movie stars and artists.

Still, his most famous photograph is not of a celebrity, but of the joyful celebrations in Times Square on V.J. Day, Aug. 14, 1945, when Japan's surrender brought the end of World War II. The picture, which shows an exuberant American sailor kissing a carn-



Alfred Eisenstaedt on an assignment in Aberdeen, Scotland, in 1983.

In a dancer-like dip, summed up the euphoria many Americans felt as the war came to a close.

The photograph was published on the cover of Life and quickly became a classic example of pictorialism. In recent months it has been widely reproduced in conjunction with the 50th anniversary of the war's end.

Another of Mr. Eisenstaedt's best-known images is a 1931 shot of Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi propaganda minister, glaring at the camera. "Here are the eyes of hate," the photographer wrote later.

Far more lighthearted is a series of photographs from 1943 of the awestruck faces of Partisan children watching a puppet show. A shot of the bare feet of an Ethiopian soldier in 1932 during the Italian invasion of that country made emphatically clear the uneven terms of the conflict.

Born in 1898 in Inzochau in Prussia (now Tczew, Poland), Mr. Eisenstaedt moved with his family to Berlin in 1906. He served in the German Army in World War I and in the 1930's began working as a freelance photojournalist while employed as a button and belt salesman.

He turned to photography fulltime in 1932, when he was assigned to cover the Nobel Prize ceremonies in Stockholm for a German publication. Six years later, after Hitler's rise to power, he emigrated to the United States.

In 1936, his extraordinary involvement with Life began. One of the four original photographers hired by the magazine (the others were Margaret Bourke-White, Thomas McEvay and Peter Steeghs), Mr. Eis-



A puppet-theater audience witnessing the slaying of a figure in 1952 in the Tuileries in Paris.

A sailor and nurse in Times Square on V.J. Day in 1945, Eisenstaedt's best-known work.

Marlene Dietrich, Anna May Wong and Leni Riefenstahl in 1928 at the Reiman Art School Ball in Berlin.

He became known at the magazine for his candid shots taken with a Leica camera. He had begun using the underivative 35-millimeter camera from almost any assignment. Among the many celebrities he photographed were figures as diverse as Churchill, John F. Kennedy, Charlie Chaplin, Marilyn Monroe, George Bernard Shaw and Marlene Dietrich.

His mastery of the Leica allowed him to capture his subjects in unguarded moments, creating a sense of intimacy. In a picture from 1947, for example, the physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer puffs on a cigarette as he stands in front of a blackboard covered with mathematical formulas.

Though he was not considered a great visual stylist, Mr. Eisenstaedt was almost invariably able to communicate the essence of a story in a single image. The photographer's job, he once wrote, is "to find and catch the surprising moment," and time and again he succeeded.

The stories his pictures tell are often touched by a gentle humor. A 1948 shot at a waterski school in St. Morris, Switzerland shows a headwater in black tie and tails floating with a full tray of glasses resting delicately on his fingertips. In a picture taken in 1959 in Ann Arbor, Mich., a high-stepping drum major in shiny boots and tall shako leads a ragtag parade of children across a campus lawn.

Corred Capa, founder of the International Center of Photography in New York City and a longtime photographer for Life, praised Mr. Eisenstaedt's skill as a photojournalist. "He knew exactly what he was looking for in a story, and where to position himself" to get the most telling picture, he said yesterday.

"His use of the 35-millimeter camera was superb," added Mr. Capa, who organized three shows of Mr. Eisenstaedt's work at the International Center of Photography. "And he appreciated light, he hardly ever used artificial light. His influence is with all of us."

Called Elsie by his friends, Mr. Eisenstaedt was legendary for his energy and enthusiasm. He kept an office at Life up to his death and visited the magazine nearly every day. "He told me, if I don't see you, I'll die," said Gordon Parks, the film director and photographer who worked with Mr. Eisenstaedt at Life for more than 20 years.

David Friend, director of photography and news media at Life, said that Mr. Eisenstaedt's work "embodied what Life magazine stood for."

"His photographs and his personality were upbeat in spirit," he said. "What we remember of Elsie's work are the joyous moments."

In response to Mr. Eisenstaedt's death, Life has opened a home page on the Internet devoted to his images, including his cover shots and outtakes from various other stories. Mr. Friend said it can be reached at <http://craft.nor.com/life/eisenstaedt.html>.

Mr. Eisenstaedt was the author of many books, including "Witness to Our Time" (1960), "The Eye of Eisenstaedt" (1979), "Eisenstaedt's Guide to Photography" (1978) and "Eisenstaedt: Germany" (1981). His work was included in exhibitions throughout the United States and Europe.

He received many awards and honors, including the Presidential Medal of Arts and the Infinity Master of Photography Award, given by the International Center of Photography in 1983. He was named "Photographer of the Year" by the Encyclopedia Britannica and the University of Missouri School of Journalism.

He continued to work until shortly before his death. In 1993 he photographed President Clinton, Hillary Rodham Clinton and their daughter, Chelsea, on Martha's Vineyard.

When he died, Mr. Eisenstaedt's name was on the list of the Reiman Art School Ball in Berlin, in part because of the attention to his photographs of the V.J. Day celebrations. He was on the tip of the tongue, he said.

Kathy Kaye, a South African whom Mr. Eisenstaedt had married in 1949, died in 1972. No immediate family members survive.

## J. S. Garon, 71, Literary Agent Who Saw Talent Others Didn't

By ROBERT MCG. THOMAS JR.

Jay S. Garon, a New York literary agent who transformed his career and the world of publishing with a single call to a Mississippi lawyer in 1967, died on Tuesday at St. Clare's Hospital in Manhattan. He was 71 and had homes in New York, Florida and Key West, Fla.

His lawyer and friend, I. Don J. Lefkowitz, said the cause was a pulmonary embolism.

A one-time Hollywood character actor from Fall River, Mass., who became a radio, television and theatrical producer in New York before opening his literary agency in the 1950's, Mr. Garon had his share of successes, among them a diet book by the actor James Cagney, recommended by Betty Lamarr, and a stream of romance novels by writers like Patricia Matthews and Janet Louise Roberts.

But nothing had prepared Mr. Garon — or anyone else — for what happened in 1967 when he received three unsolicited chapters of a first novel by an obscure Mississippi law yer.

As it happened, the lawyer had sent the chapters to some 30 agents he had found in a list in his local library before he got to Mr. Garon's name. "What set Mr. Garon apart was that he alone found the manuscript worthy enough to call the author, John Grisham."

Over the next several years author and agent would make publishing and movie history as Mr. Garon negotiated multimillion-dollar publishing and movie contracts for a string of Grisham legal thrillers like "The Firm," "The Client" and "The Pelican Brief."

Mr. Garon became one of the few agents to deal with both book publishers and movie producers. Not



Jay S. Garon

that it took that much to sell a Grisham book to Hollywood. Mr. Garon regularly negotiated multimillion-dollar movie rights for books Mr. Grisham had not yet written.

For a while, it appeared that the agents who had passed on Mr. Grisham's first novel had been more perceptive than Mr. Garon. Some 15 publishers turned down before Mr. Garon found an obscure house to bring it out in 1969, and only then as a paperback original that had moderate sales until Mr. Grisham's later success propelled it, too, to the best-seller lists.

In the end Mr. Garon had the best of both worlds: the movie rights to the book, "A Time to Kill," for \$5 million.

He is survived by his companion, Gary Sullivan, and a sister, Estelle Superior of Fall River.

## Edwin H. Rian, 95, Minister Who Held Posts in Education

By WOLFGANG SAXON

The Rev. Dr. Edwin H. Rian, whose ministry was mainly devoted to education, including 15 years as assistant to the president of Princeton Theological Seminary, died on Tuesday at the Pacific Region Health Care Center in San Diego. He was 95 and lived in San Diego.

In a career that spanned more than half a century, he was president or vice president of six institutions.

Dr. Rian was a leader of the fundamentalists who broke away from the main body at the Princeton seminary and formed the Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia.

He later served on the Westminster board, but left in 1960 to join the Christian University Association as general secretary. The next year he re-entrained the Presbyterian Church of the U.S.A.

Edwin Harold Rian was born in Minneapolis, graduated from Princeton University in 1927 and was ordained a Presbyterian minister at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1930. He then studied at the University of Berlin, and the University of Marburg in Germany as a Princeton Fellow.

After his stint at the Christian University Association, he held administrative posts at Trinity University in San Antonio, Beaver College in Jenkintown, Pa., Jamestown College in North Dakota and the Biblical Seminary in New York. He then worked at the American Bible Society and as an education consultant before becoming the secretary of James McCord, president of the Princeton seminary, in 1967.

Dr. Rian's wife of 52 years, Marian Schall Rian, died a year ago. He is survived by three daughters.

## Rabbi Isaac Lewin, 89, Teacher Of Jewish History at Yeshiva U.

By WOLFGANG SAXON

Rabbi Isaac Lewin, a scholar of Jewish history and the history of Jewish law who after spells for Orthodox Jews before international bodies, died yesterday at Mount Sinai Medical Center. He was 89 and lived on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

Rabbi Lewin was professor emeritus of Jewish history at the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Yeshiva University. He taught at Yeshiva from 1944 until his retirement 13 years ago.

His writings were published in English, Hebrew, Yiddish, Polish and German. He was an architect of the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion, which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1981.

For this, he was elected the United Nations World of Peace.

Rabbi Lewin was born in Wierzbica, near Cracow, was ordained as a rabbi in Poland in 1935 and received a law degree two years later. He served two terms on the City Council of Lodz, Poland's second-largest city.

He arrived in the United States in 1941 and worked for the rescue of Jews left behind in Nazi-occupied Europe. After World War II he promptly went on a relief mission to help Holocaust survivors and displaced persons.

After the war, he became the spokesman for the Agudat Israel World Organization before the United Nations Social and Economic Council. A collection of his addresses there and in other international forums was published in 1962.

He was the editor of "These I Will Remember," two volumes in Hebrew of biographies of Jewish leaders who perished in World War II. He was among a delegation of Orthodox rabbis who obtained a 1981 agreement from the Polish Government to help restore the Jewish cemeteries that were neglected since the war.

The city of Warsaw presented his Golden Eagle of Merit in 1982. In 1984, honoring him for promoting international relations and cooperation among peoples.

At Yeshiva, he also served as principal of Jewish studies at the university's high school for girls.

Rabbi Lewin is survived by two sons, Nathan Lewin of Washington and Rabbi Nathan Lewin of Manhattan, and two granddaughters. His wife of 43 years, Peggy Sternberg Lewin, died in 1986.

## Ralph Pomerance, Architect, 87

By WOLFGANG SAXON

Ralph Pomerance, whose architectural firm, Pomerance & Bretners, designed more than 400 buildings, died on Wednesday at his home in Manhattan. He was 87.

Born in Manhattan, Mr. Pomerance was a graduate of the Carnegie Institute of Technology. He opened his own office in 1932 and two years later became a partner with Simon Bretners in an architectural practice that continued until both men retired in 1983.

The firm designed a number of homes notable for their flat roofs, large plate glass windows and open floor plans, a heralded example being the Knoll II. Pomerance designed for his family in Oak Coll, Conn. One client, the Swedish Pavilion at the 1939 New York World's Fair, was designed in collaboration with the Swedish architect Sven Markelius and earned Mr. Pomerance a decoration from the Swedish Government.

Mr. Pomerance was a former chairman of the Housing Authority in Greenwich, Conn., and was a fellow of the American Institute of Architects.

He is survived by his wife, Marilyn, a daughter, Pamela Steiner of Cambridge, Mass., two sons, Stephen of Boulder, Colo., and Brian of Washington, a stepson, Paul Selig of Mountain Lakes, N.J., a stepdaughter, Eileen Halvaday of Baltimore, four grandchildren, and six stepgrandchildren.

THE FRESH AIR FUND: 15TH SUMMER

Figure 7.1 Pictorial retrospective. Children enthralled by a Paris puppet show, 1963; VJ Day in Times Square, 1945; Marlene Dietrich, Anna May Wong and Leni Riefenstahl at a Berlin ball, 1928; the eminent photographer himself, 1983; seminal images from the career of Alfred Eisenstaedt illustrated his New York Times obituary. (New York Times, 25 August 1995)

‘Her full face was oval,’ says Waugh of Aimée, ‘her profile pure and classical and light. Her eyes greenish and remote, with a rich glint of lunacy.’<sup>108</sup> With, for the most part, a straight face and apparent sanity, the paid obituaries of today offer both a reprise of, and a variation on, Aimée’s theme. These are in essence extended death notices, often celebratory in tone, strangely endearing in spirit, and wonderfully remunerative to the host newspaper. The family of Sara Adelaide Hallack bought two full columns of *Dallas Morning News* classified advertising space to relate the life story of her ninety-three years. It appeared twice, on successive days in June 2002, at a total cost of \$US2,700.<sup>109</sup> Such munificence is not uncommon in the Bible Belt. Further north, however, Alana Baranick of Ohio’s *Plain Dealer* has noted a comparative frugality:

I think that for most Clevelanders, from what we call the Rust Belt, it is more significant to [just] tell readers about...the funeral. For Southerners from the Bible Belt, it is often more important to proclaim that the deceased went to heaven and to give readers directions to the Pearly Gates, using typical born-again jargon for the steps of salvation.<sup>110</sup>

The choice of expression is frequently, as Baranick suggests, ornate and declamatory. The *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* carried this, on the Reverend Gregory Wayne Spencer:

Dr Gregory Wayne Spencer, 46, surrendered his life into the arms of Jesus on Tuesday, June 24, 2003. He was the owner and founder of Gregory W. Spencer Funeral Directors...and the pastor and founder of The Church at Philadelphia....Friends are asked to assemble at 2.30pm Monday on the lawns of the Travis Avenue Baptist Church as the Spencer white glass horse-drawn chariot, led by the Spencer Celebration Band, arrives with the golden solid bronze couch of Dr Spencer....His civic involvement was...Alpha Theta Sigma Chapter of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Epsilon Nu Delta Mortuary Fraternity, Master mason for the Pride of the South Lodge Chapter #324 and Pride of Texas Chapter 16....Dr Spencer was the founder of R.O.C.K. House (Residents of Christ Kingdom – a chemical dependency renewal center), member of the Progressive Gents Social Club and executive producer of ‘By His Grace’ television ministry on Daystar Television Network....He was a psalmist and composer of 220 religious songs...recorded on CD.<sup>111</sup>

A more clinical rendition of his life and death included these factors: his honorary doctorate was awarded by a college subsequently forced to close for 'lack of competence'; he was suspected of leaking damaging information concerning rival funeral operators to a state investigation agency; he had secured 'about 99 per cent' of the Fort Worth market and was trying to break into the Dallas market; he was 'hog-tied, strangled, gagged and shot in the back of the head in a motel room a few blocks from his church'.<sup>112</sup>

Cornelia Bostick Harbison of Lynchburg, Virginia, was said in her *Charlotte Observer* paid obituary to have been 'an avid tennis player' and to have 'maintained a strong desire to be contacted by aliens';<sup>113</sup> the surviving family of Alice Salazar of Salt Lake City, Utah, included '19½ grandchildren and 1½ great-grandchildren';<sup>114</sup> and John Payne, who wrote (and possibly paid for) his own obituary in North Carolina's *Winston-Salem Journal*, declared: 'If you're reading this right now, I guess I'm dead....I've got some bad news for you...just as I had always suspected, God is a Republican.'<sup>115</sup>

Amid the obfuscation and the flummery, there are some strong statements about endeavour and endurance and compassion. Tessa Lyn Harrington, aged 18, of Utah, graduated from high school in June 2002, survived the surgical removal of a brain tumour of 'tennis-ball size' that July, and died in December, donating organs for transplant (Figure 7.2).<sup>116</sup> Jackie Dobbins Cobb, of Georgia

became ill while helping her daughter, Amy, set up her new home in Catania on the island of Sicily...[and] because of her final act of love, two young people in Italy...have been given a second chance for life, and a third person will regain his/her eyesight. All this from a...woman described by her Italian physicians as 'a lady of honor'.<sup>117</sup>



Though these paid notices are inclined at times to engage in the language of *The Loved One*, actually using ‘inurnment’ and ‘inhumation’, their presence is not necessarily dismissed by journalists; worthwhile ideas can emerge for development into news obituaries or features.<sup>118</sup> This was the case in June 2002, when Steve Blow, of the *Dallas Morning News*, based one entire Wednesday morning column on the conflicting obituaries of Melodi Dawn Knapp, a Texas nurse who had ‘died and killed three others while going the wrong way on a...freeway’.<sup>119</sup> Blow’s interest had been stimulated by the appearance of two separate obituaries, with references to two funerals and carrying markedly different photographs. The *Morning News* columnist found that ‘The story is one that’s familiar in the gay and lesbian community; one parent who can accept a child’s homosexuality, and another who can’t.’<sup>120</sup>

In Cleveland, Alana Baranick supports the existence of paid obituaries because they ‘are a great source of revenue, relieve the reporting staff of extra responsibilities, and appease the family who want the obit to run exactly as they wrote it’.<sup>121</sup> The revenue-raising aspect is noted too by *U.S. News & World Report*: ‘[F]or many newspapers, charging for obituaries may be the only way to avoid following their readers to the grave.’<sup>122</sup> Joe Simmacher, *Dallas Morning News* obituaries editor, emphasises the appeasement angle: ‘No problem...it gives them [the bereaved family] the freedom to say things that can’t be said in the news formula.’<sup>123</sup>

The objections, discussed already in Chapter Two, are based on concerns about entrusting the management of the ounce in history to advertising departments. The process of maintaining an accurate record is threatened accordingly, say critics of the paid obituary phenomenon: ‘Making sure whatever appears in news columns is accurate and complete...historically and traditionally the ethical function of editors...is being circumvented by this practice.’<sup>124</sup> Jim Sheeler, whose work has been published by both the *Denver Post* and the *Rocky Mountain News*, epitomises the legitimate obituarist’s commitment to historicity: ‘I seek out the evidence of awards. I check with the military on [the award of] Purple Hearts and I check with universities on degrees.’<sup>125</sup>

There is indeed evidence that, by contrast, the paid obituary can be manipulated for a variety of purposes. Some readers of the *Sacramento Bee*, in northern California, rang the paper in late November 2003 to enquire about the content of a notice which had appeared in three successive editions. It said that Paul Jackson, a shipping pilot, had

collapsed and died while guiding a container vessel along Oregon's Columbia River. According to the paid obituary, he had fallen on the control mechanisms, causing the ship to plough into 'the combination Sardine Canning & Dynamite Factory on the wharf, resulting in a huge explosion and raining sardines all over the town'.<sup>126</sup> An investigation by the *Sacramento Bee* staff ombudsman found that, although the death was real, the sardine storm was a hoax. The pilot's son confessed to inventing it because, he said, other obituaries in the paper had looked 'boring'.<sup>127</sup>

A more divisive purpose was apparent in a series of notices placed in the *Hartford Courant*, Connecticut, as 'a microcosm of the Middle East conflict'.<sup>128</sup> It began with a paid obituary for a Palestinian woman, with no connection to Hartford, who had been killed by an Israeli soldier. Gale Courey Toensing, a local newspaper correspondent of Palestinian-Lebanese descent living in Connecticut, admitted that she had placed it 'as a political statement'.<sup>129</sup> The Jewish community responded with paid obituaries for two Israeli women killed by a suicide bomber. Though the affair appeared to have ended by November 2002, it plainly left the *Courant's* general manager worried. 'If we were overwhelmed with a number of these types of obituaries, then we'd have to address the motive,' he said.<sup>130</sup>

To conclude matters for judgment concerning the paid obituary, some reflection on the internet version is required. It is now possible to lodge an obituary, in perpetuity, on a commercial website. The mechanism was first attempted by dotcom companies which emerged in the late 1990s; most failed in the industry turmoil of the time. One venture which appears to have survived, however, is Washington's National Obituary Archive (a private venture), which offers to carry an obituary for \$US39.95 'when the purchaser supplies documentation of the death and our staff has verified the necessary information to our satisfaction'.<sup>131</sup> The online sales pitch declares:

With the advent of the World Wide Web, the age-old death announcement has grown from a briefly noted farewell to an enduring, multifaceted memorial. At the National Obituary Archive, an obituary can be a dynamic, illustrated life story written by family members, funeral directors, professional writers or historians. Friends and relatives are invited to participate by adding their own tributes, a favorite snapshot or a Guestbook entry.<sup>132</sup>



Interviewed in 2002, Michael Putzel, an executive of the company, said a contract had been signed with a consolidated funeral group that, so he hoped, would produce a thousand listings a month.<sup>133</sup> In the longer term, there were hopes too of incorporating video clips of the deceased, some of which might carry both sound and vision. First, though, technical developments were necessary to ensure that the standard home-based computer bandwidth became ‘more capacious’.<sup>134</sup>

## **2.8 A codicil to life**

The health of the obituary in the United States is such that a Dallas-based organisation, the International Association of Obituarists, has, since 1999, held an annual conference on the art. Its influence has spread to the extent that the 2003 conference was attended by delegates from Britain, Canada, and Australia, as well as eleven American states. The founder, Carolyn Gilbert, has designed what she calls an obituary kit, a detailed document which can be used as a record of information for subsequent publication. Gilbert recommends that the kit should be regarded as a codicil to a will:

It’s a good exercise for a family to go through – ‘What was the most important thing you did in your life?’ or ‘What was the funniest thing?’ or ‘What was the most unusual thing?’ We, as children and grandchildren, have only known our parents and grandparents for the length of our lives. They had a lot going on before that....It’s a document that can be helpful at the end of life.<sup>135</sup>

The association also presents workshops for the development of obituary writing. Garrett Ray, of Colorado State, supports those initiatives because

The obituary, when done well, is a tool that both reveals and creates a sense of community – the way we are linked by the stories we tell and the lives we see that are lives of both purpose and tragedy. It makes us aware of our common humanity...it’s part of what defines our social mores by saying ‘These lives are important, these tasks that people did had value, these tragedies that people endured courageously have meaning for others.’ It helps us understand what life is all about.<sup>136</sup>

## Conclusions

The American obituary is shaped by the imperatives of news rather than by the variables of Britain's 'essay tacked onto a tombstone'. It has a persistent measure of briskness, and has been said therefore to be business-oriented in tone; some occasional dalliance with artistry of expression is still to be found, however.

Reporting of the subject's life and character, often based on the quoted observations of authoritative sources, is favoured in the United States. By way of contrast, British practice is more inclined towards using the tenor of the obituary itself as an instrument of judgment. Further differences are detectable in the American concern for defining a precise cause of death, publishing contemporaneously, and including extensive lists of surviving family members. In some instances, even in major cities, there is a pressing concern to print details of forthcoming funeral arrangements. Through this persuasion, a 'local paper' flavour emerges; perhaps, with the absence of competition, this is hard for the publisher to resist.

Explicit reporting, particularly in New York, has become accepted; obituaries disclose errors and misdeeds as much as achievements, include unfettered reference to death from AIDS-related illness, and are written, where it is found to be necessary, on those who have undermined society. There is often too, however, an element of old-fashioned respect for the dead; the morning papers of New York, Washington and Atlanta all apply honorifics.

Paid obituaries, though subjected to some criticism because of their capacity for inaccuracy, have provided newspapers with a substantial revenue stream. Writers and editors interviewed for this thesis accepted their usefulness, acknowledging in particular their ability to generate ideas for news obituaries and to provide an alternative avenue of expression. In a recent development of this process, opportunities have emerged for the lodging of permanent obituaries on commercial websites. The complexity and intrigue of the paid obituary phenomenon is such that it surely justifies a scholarly study in its own right.

Australia's obituary pages, as Chapter Five has established, draw on the wire services of both Britain and the United States. With the operating mechanisms and ethical questions of each of those sources now addressed, consideration of contemporary practice on Australian newspapers is ready to be advanced.

## chapter eight

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### Part One. Contemporary obituary practice (Australia): content analysis

*I have just had 18 whiskeys in a row. I do believe that is a record.*

---

Dylan Thomas (*Famous Last Words*)<sup>1</sup>

Numbers can say a lot. Numbers, examined discerningly, disclose a great deal about a newspaper's obituary policy. As this thesis has an Australian emphasis, an additional mechanism has been applied in considering contemporary practice within Australia itself: a content analysis to generate quantitative data. In the first half of 2002, seven Australian newspapers were publishing obituaries in dedicated, defined sections.<sup>2</sup> A total of 1,433 obituaries, printed on those pages between 1 January 2002 and 30 June 2002, was logged and then analysed to determine the following factors:

#### Quantitative data

Author/source	Staff member, professional contributor, amateur contributor, newspaper or agency wire service.
Demographic selection	Occupation or identity of subject.
Age specified	Incidence of inclusion of age in text or precise indication of age by publication of birth/death dates.
Cause of death specified	Incidence of inclusion in text.
Dominant reference	Style adopted, after introduction, for referring to subject. (Honorific or title plus surname/family name, surname only, given/nickname only, he/she, full name, mix of styles.)
Male/female incidence	Subject selection (by gender comparison).
Obituary length	Space occupied in column centimetres (by gender comparison).

Those 1,433 published obituaries offered significant enlightenment on contemporary practice in Australia. The findings, when considered on a paper-by-paper basis, are presented according to the historical order in which these titles introduced their obituary practice in the period since 1993 (as described in Chapter Five). Results have been rounded to the nearest whole percentage point. It should be noted also that this content analysis, for reasons of congruence and logical comparison, is drawn from the

columns of defined obituary pages. It avoids any consideration of tributes or celebrity obituaries on news pages, and it does not address necrology as defined under the news story category in Chapter One.

## **Qualitative information**

In addition, each obituary was considered against a list of qualitative questions, in line with issues of definition raised in Chapter One. The list comprised:

- inclusion of character sketch and/or anecdote.
- tone – with regard to candour, warmth, hagiography or hostility.
- source material – use of interview or eulogy extract.
- language – personal, sentimental or dispassionate approach by the writer.

Where appropriate, these questions were discussed with editors at each of the newspapers (with the exception of the *Age*, where the obituaries editor declined to be interviewed). Editors were also invited to respond to specific findings from the quantitative study.

## **1.1 Author/Source**

### **1.1.1 *Herald Sun***

The *Herald Sun*, which had started Australia's obituary revival in July 1993, has continued to display a commitment to the genre. In the first six months of 2002, it published 337 obituaries – the highest individual total recorded in this review of practice by seven newspapers. The obituaries desk at Melbourne's morning tabloid relied heavily on agency material, as Figure 8.1 indicates. Wire services, as they are known in the industry, were the source of 196 of those obituaries (58 per cent). As it is not *Herald Sun* practice to print a credit for obituaries originating from those sources, this factor is described in Figure 8.1 as 'anonymous agency', to achieve consistency of expression throughout these quantitative results.

The next highest source of *Herald Sun* obituaries was 'staff writer' (39 per cent). The job is done by the paper's cadet journalists, each of whom is assigned to it for three months. They pursue ideas generated by death notices, maintain contact with funeral directors, re-write material contributed by bereaved families and friends, and edit the incoming material from Australian Associated Press (AAP) and the other wire services. In short, this obituaries desk is run by a journalist of the most junior rank – a

factor which seems not to perturb management. Kim Lockwood, editorial online training manager, said the *Herald Sun* had established a certain tradition in this respect:

Since its inception [in 1993] it's been a cadet's job – a first-year cadet's job. By that, I mean a cadet in their first year. They might be [classified as] a third-year cadet if they have a university degree....There's no special training because it's just a potted personality piece and they're supposed to know how to do those.<sup>3</sup>

On seven occasions in the January–June period, the *Herald Sun* published unedited, or lightly edited, obituaries from amateur contributors (2 per cent), and credited them as such. Another four were from professional contributors (1 per cent). The pattern at this newspaper, however, is very much that of a staff-written obituary accompanied by two short pieces off the wires. Lockwood confirmed the presence of that formula: ‘The standard format is a main obituary plus two side-bars, and 99 per cent of the time the main [one] is someone in the Victorian community.’<sup>4</sup>

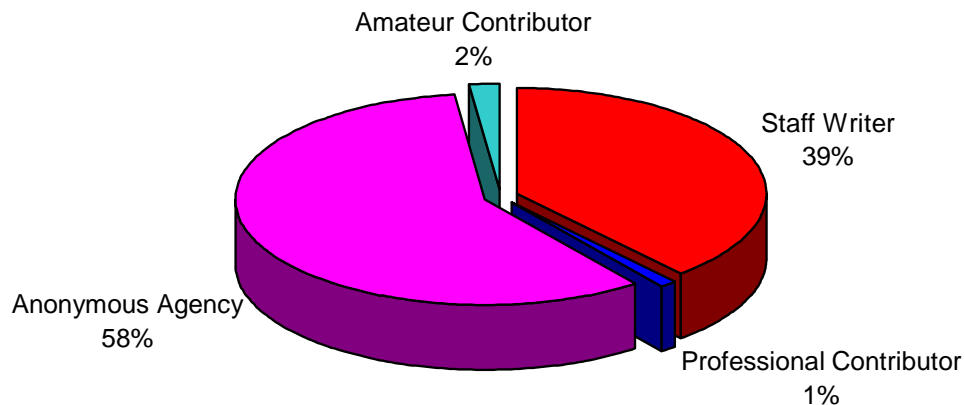


Figure 8.1 Author/source – *Herald Sun*

### 1.1.2 *The Australian*

Unlike the *Herald Sun*, the *Australian* does credit its individual wire service sources. The dominant force in this respect – indeed, in its obituary selection in general – was its London companion in the News Limited-News International empire, the *Times*, which provided sixty-two (44 per cent) of the 140 *Australian* obituaries. This gave a certain British tinge to the overseas component. A total of just ten (7 per cent) came from other agencies or emerged as the result of staff-agency collaborative effort. The

obituaries editor, Graeme Leech, conceded that he is an admirer of the British style: ‘Rupert Murdoch once said “Americans just can’t write.” I wouldn’t go that far...[but] I do find there’s more depth in their [the British] obituaries.’<sup>5</sup>

The second most employed source was ‘staff writer’ (thirty-one, or 22 per cent). In this respect, the *Australian* followed sound professional practice by assigning specialist writers to obituaries of prominent identities. This meant, for example, that political analyst Mike Steketee wrote the obituary of former prime minister Sir John Gorton, sports correspondent Andrew Ramsey obituarised former South African cricket captain Hansie Cronje, and the obituary of Catholic priest-cum-journalist Denis Madigan was written by religious affairs editor James Murray.

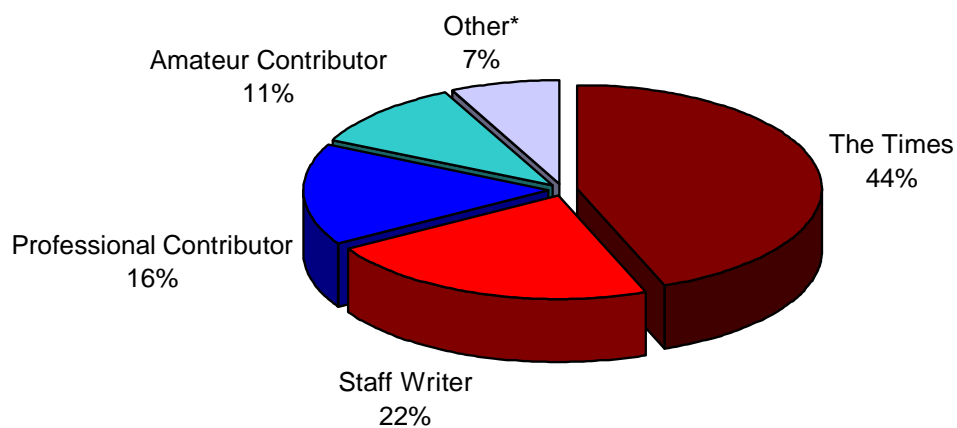
The *Australian* also commissions professional contributions. As Figure 8.2 indicates, twenty-two obituaries (16 per cent) from authors in this category were published. Their number included Australia’s most prolific freelance obituarist, Philip Jones, media commentator Mark Day, political writer Mungo McCallum, and Peter Coleman, who wrote the obituary of his former co-editor at *Quadrant* magazine, Heinz Arndt. Coleman, with his intimate knowledge of the circumstances, was one of the few obituarists to explain with precision the cause of Arndt’s death, which occurred shortly after that of a former Australian National University vice-chancellor, Sir Leslie Melville:

deeply shaken...he was invited to deliver a tribute to his old friend at Melville’s funeral. As the troubled Arndt drove to the service, he apparently had a heart attack and crashed his car.<sup>6</sup>

In similar vein, the obituary of Melville himself had been written for the *Australian* by his biographer, Selwyn Cornish, with input also from Graeme Leech.<sup>7</sup> Despite the authoritative content of the Arndt and Melville obituaries, their appearance came at a time when the *Australian* itself was starting to lose its own stamp of authority in obituary publication at large. The Melville piece was published on 8 May 2002 (a Wednesday). The Arndt piece – the next obituary to appear in the *Australian* – was published the following Tuesday, 14 May. A marked decline in frequency was apparent in the six months under review. Thirty-three obituaries were published by the national broadsheet in January 2002, and another twenty-nine in February. In May, the total was a comparatively slender fourteen, and in June sixteen.

It is true that Australia's so-called summer 'silly season', with its customary absence of political news, does traditionally allow greater space in newspapers for feature material, and that this might have contributed to the January and February obituary count. Nevertheless, it would appear that, by the middle of year, obituaries were out of favour at the national broadsheet. Obituaries editor Leech would say only that there were 'a number of factors affecting space'.<sup>8</sup> Such factors were to become even more acute. In the immediate aftermath of the Bali bombing of late 2002 and during the Iraq invasion of early 2003, 'Time & Tide' (the title of the *Australian's* obituary section) was appearing just once or twice a week. Indications, by the end of 2003, for a return to vigorous and frequent appearance were not promising.<sup>9</sup>

'Amateur contributor' accounted for the remaining fifteen obituaries (11 per cent). The prestige of a national newspaper attracted a number of contributors of note, one of whom was Australia's Minister for Employment, Tony Abbott. He contributed a piece on a former Speaker of the New South Wales State Parliament, James Cameron.<sup>10</sup> It was well written and, as was the case in Coleman's obituary of Arndt, displayed an impressive knowledge of its topic. Given the apparent political consanguinity of writer and subject, however, perhaps the *Australian* could have fostered greater perceptions of objectivity by assigning the obituary itself to a staff correspondent and then attaching Abbott's reminiscences as a personal observation.



**Figure 8.2** Author/source – *The Australian*  
 \*Associated Press, *Miami Herald*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Economist*,  
 Staff/Agency Combined

### 1.1.3 *The Age*

The uneasy co-existence of amateur material – often strongly sentimental in tone – and the professionally crafted obituary is a recurring feature of Australian practice. It has been found to be particularly the case at the *Age*, where ‘amateur contributor’ was, by a considerable measure, the most common single category. Material submitted by readers accounted for 108 (33 per cent) of the 323 obituaries published. Obituaries of this type often gave the appearance of having been edited with the lightest of touches, as examples from this *Age* contributors’ Department of Silly Endings would suggest:

I would not be at all surprised if Toby is looking down at us, sipping a whisky, chatting away to the Queen Mother sipping her gin, and discussing the Albury Gold Cup.<sup>11</sup>

Jack will be a great acquisition for the heavenly dairy farm. No doubt he will form a discussion group. He will also be a boon to the holy football team, being able to cast his perceptive eye over new arrivals and select the best recruits.<sup>12</sup>

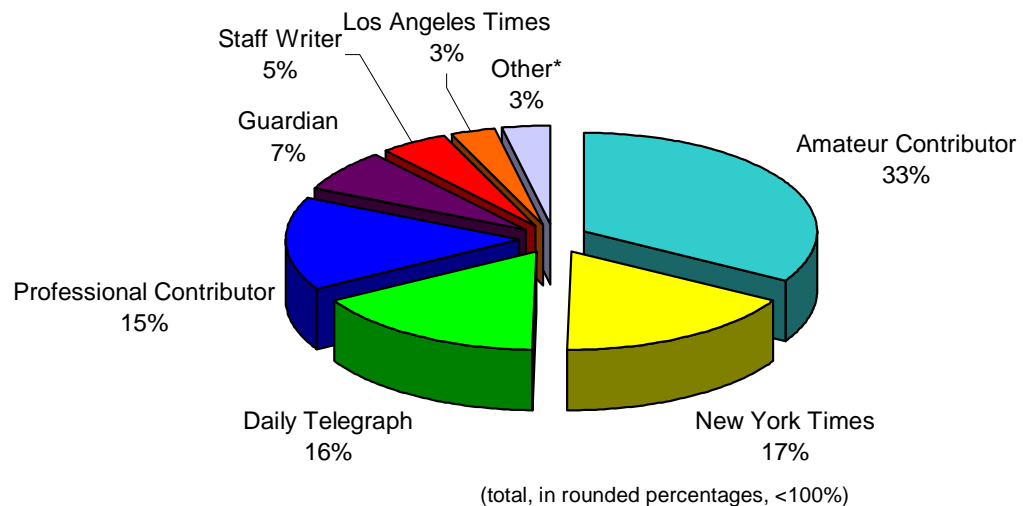
As stated in the preamble to this chapter, the obituaries editor of the *Age* declined a request for an interview, citing ‘private and professional reasons’.<sup>13</sup> It has not been possible, therefore, to establish in detail the newspaper’s policy on the selection and handling of amateur contributions. A clue to prevailing practice, though, can perhaps be found in an interview conducted (by the author of this thesis) in February 2001 with the acting obituaries editor at the *Age*, Dhana Quinn. Her comments were subsequently included in a paper delivered at the Macquarie Style Council, held that year in Sydney. Quinn, in comparing local practice with that pursued by major syndicated sources, is quoted as saying: ‘The *Daily Telegraph* writers wouldn’t have to go back to the [bereaved] family and say “Are you happy with this?”, but I do.’<sup>14</sup> A further indication is found in the transcribed notes from that interview. Quinn describes the obituary columns as working ‘like a letters page’.<sup>15</sup> The inference to be drawn from her remarks is that the *Age* sticks closely to what amateur contributors have written.

Chapter Five has addressed the potential for conflicting style when a newspaper chooses to publish reader compositions of gauche construction and syndicated obituaries from sources of high quality. In terms of content analysis, however, it can be reported at this juncture that the chances of its occurring at the *Age* were high,



given the obituary page's healthy usage of syndicated material. Preferred sources of this type were: the *Daily Telegraph* (16 per cent), the *Guardian* (7 per cent), the *Los Angeles Times* (3 per cent), and 'other agency' (3 per cent). The last-named included material from the *Washington Post* and Associated Press. 'Staff writer' accounted for only 5 per cent, compared with the *Australian's* 22 per cent in this category.

As Figure 8.3 also shows, another 15 per cent of *Age* obituaries in the first six months of 2002 came from professional contributors. Their number included: journalists Tom Carey, John Farquharson, Anne Latreille and Denis Warner, and writers Philip Jones, Susan Hudson and Don Charlwood. When these are added to the sizeable body of amateurs, the mix becomes an eclectic one; the obituary section, as a consequence, assumes an unpredictable character and standard.



**Figure 8.3** Author/source – *The Age*  
 \*Combined Agency, Anonymous Agency, *Washington Post*, Associated Press

#### 1.1.4 *The Sydney Morning Herald*

Figure 8.4 indicates that nearly three-quarters of the *Sydney Morning Herald's* total of 269 obituaries came from three sources: *Daily Telegraph* seventy-three (27 per cent), 'amateur contributor' sixty-eight (25 per cent), and *Guardian* fifty-four (20 per cent). At face value, this would suggest that *Herald* readers were confronted by just as awkward a mix as that found in the *Age*. However, an important variation in editing technique often avoided this difficulty. Many of these amateur contributions were, and continue to be, presented under the tag of 'Untold Stories'.

In a regularly published message, the section editor solicits such material; on the page itself, it is presented as being a celebration of a life without fame – but a life nevertheless worth reading about. With this overt admission of a point of editorial difference, the shift in style from *Telegraph* or *Guardian* to amateur composition does not present readers with too great a continuity gap. Typical of this feature in the period under review was the ‘Untold Story’ of 21 March 2002, in which the fortitude of Edna Johnston was recalled. This story, when no longer untold, was at times bleak:

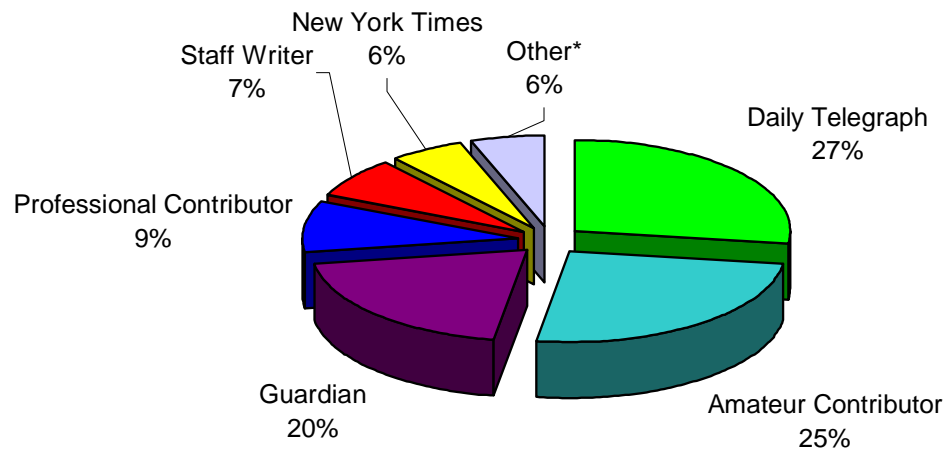
she was the result of a rape. Her mother was but 16 when she was attacked by two men in the house she worked....She said of her mother, ‘She was weak – she put me in a home.’<sup>16</sup>

The source of this obituary, delivered without hesitancy or euphemism, was Edna’s son, Bob Meadley. His mother had lost her first husband at sea during World War II to a torpedo attack. Her second husband died in the 1970s; yet she shrugged off these reverses to live to 84 and lead a productive life. A much younger ‘Untold Story’ subject was David Swinnen, who died, aged 16, of metastatic sarcoma. His mother wrote of the dying boy’s experiences on a bush holiday: ‘Watching grey kangaroos steal his breakfast or a kookaburra kill his sausage, he was in his element.’<sup>17</sup> The secret, according to Suzy Baldwin, obituaries editor at the *Sydney Morning Herald*, is in working a raw idea into a shape suitable for a metropolitan newspaper:

The amateur contribution is enormously important. It’s more important than I would like it to be. At the same time, I am enormously grateful for it because...[without it] I wouldn’t have a lot of local obituaries. Most of the ‘Untold Stories’ require a huge amount of work. I sometimes ask for the eulogy...nearly always, that’s where the good stories are. Usually what I say to the family is this: ‘Listen, if I am adding in or reworking this, I’ll check facts with you – but that’s it.’ Facts I will check, but to be quite honest I hate running things past families.<sup>18</sup>

Eulogies, then, can be valuable source material. But, for reasons of contrasting definition (as discussed in Chapter One), they need surgery before a successful adaptation to obituary can be achieved. This reliance on the ‘amateur contributor’ category is caused in part by Baldwin’s isolated existence at the *Sydney Morning Herald*. She is employed to work four days a week, produce six obituary sections (Monday–Saturday), and also has to edit a reader forum called ‘The Heckler’.

As well as having no journalists assigned to obituaries, and limited time for doctoring contributed material, there is little money to spend either. Baldwin admits that she has ‘virtually no budget’.<sup>19</sup> The six-month content analysis reflected that situation, with modest use of ‘professional contributor’ (9 per cent) and ‘staff writer’ (7 per cent).

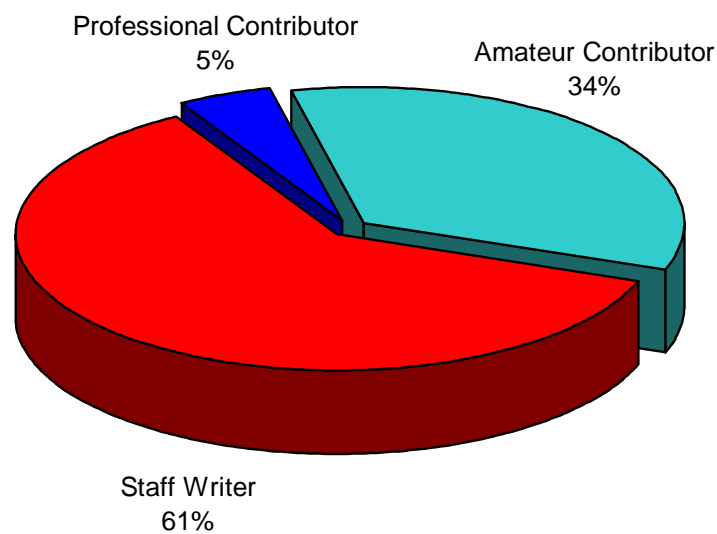


**Figure 8.4** Author/source – *The Sydney Morning Herald*  
 \*Associated Press, *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, Reuters, Combined Agency

### 1.1.5 *The Advertiser*

Adelaide’s daily newspaper publishes a deliberately parochial obituaries page. The philosophy behind this, according to a former obituaries editor, Tony Love, is to achieve ‘a real kind of social justice...[through] celebrating little heroes’.<sup>20</sup> The page appears once a week, on Saturdays. In the first six months of 2002, the *Advertiser* printed 108 obituaries; sixty-six (61 per cent) were written by staff and thirty-seven (34 per cent) by amateur contributors. Though the remaining handful, as Figure 8.5 demonstrates, did come from the ‘professional contributor’ category, the low-key, intimate flavour was maintained. These contributors were not paid a fee and, in each instance, they were writing about a close relative or friend. Typical instances of this practice were found in journalism academic John Wallace’s obituary of his father, Dr Frank Wallace,<sup>21</sup> and music critic Elizabeth Silsbury’s obituary of arts writer Harold Tidemann.<sup>22</sup>

The ‘staff writer’ category offered a cross-section of *Advertiser* news department identities. This group of obituarists included the obituaries editor of the time, a rural affairs specialist, the arts editor, the motoring editor, a politics writer, an entertainment reporter, and the health correspondent. Love’s celebration of ‘little heroes’ was immediately apparent from the pattern of headline content. Typical examples, from the period under review, were these: ‘A role model for a generation of girls’,<sup>23</sup> ‘A role model for rural youth’,<sup>24</sup> ‘Pioneer queen of the pizza bar’,<sup>25</sup> and ‘Heart and soul of a parish for 105 years’.<sup>26</sup> The governing mood is one of unashamed small-town journalism, delivered for the most part in a mildly reverential tone with, as Chapter Five has found, tendencies towards hagiography.



**Figure 8.5** Author/source – *The Advertiser*

Throughout the period under review, the *Advertiser* page solicited reader involvement: ‘Readers are invited to contribute obituaries. These should include the dates of birth and death, and a photograph.’<sup>27</sup> One repercussion has been a frequent unevenness in style. The contributed obituary of Dr Ernest Hailsworth, for example, began in a singularly pedestrian manner, in step with practice encountered at the *Age*:

Gordon, as he was known, was educated at Ashton Grammar School and the University of Leeds, from where he graduated with First-Class Honours in Chemistry. He was subsequently awarded a PhD and, on the basis of his pedological studies in New South Wales, received the Doctor of Science degree at the University of Leeds.<sup>28</sup>

The career of Dr Hailsworth had been one of achievement and distinction in the study of soils, recognised by international appointments and honours, but the obituary continued in its dry rendition of a curriculum vitae in paragraph form. There was no attempt to satisfy the recommendation on obituary writing, reported in Chapter Two, that

[t]o get nearer the character of the person is the aim now, to delve behind the curriculum vitae and, by description and anecdote, convey what the lamented...one was really like.<sup>29</sup>

In marked contrast, the obituary immediately below this contributed piece was written by a staff reporter whose work is more commonly associated with the entertainment industry. It celebrated, in deft discourse and controlled pathos, the life of a fish café proprietor:

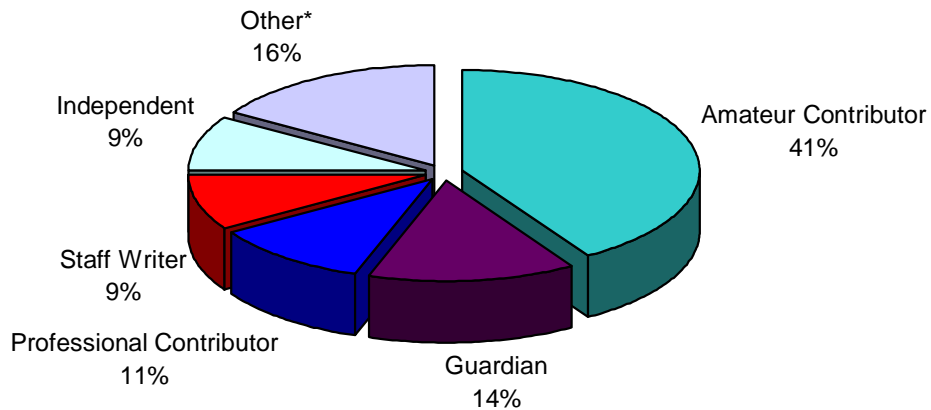
In the kitchen from 8.30am each morning until the end of evening service, always dressed in his apron, with old pants tucked into his socks, Diakou was happy. There was never a complaint in the kitchen, even when cancer took hold of his lungs.<sup>30</sup>

That *Advertiser* obituary was notable for one other factor – inclusion of cause of death. Discussion on this topic, and on the general reluctance of Australian newspapers to embrace it, will be addressed later in this chapter.

#### **1.1.6    *The Canberra Times***

As Chapter Five has established, there are *Canberra Times* obituaries and there are Jack Waterford obituaries. Waterford was editor-in-chief of the newspaper throughout the six-month content analysis, but did not contribute an obituary during that period. If he had, the findings might have well have shown some variation – for Waterford's obituaries are both colourful and candid, and often quite different in style from the usual content of the page. As it is, this section appears each Friday and offers for the most part a mix of wire service material and gentle, literate, parochial homily.

Waterford's views on the art have already been considered. The page in the first half of 2002, *sans* Waterford, contained fifty-six obituaries, twenty-three of which (41 per cent) carried the by-lines of amateur contributors. The remainder (Figure 8.6) came from a remarkably varied list of sources, including the *Independent*, the *Guardian*, Associated Press, Australian Associated Press, and Press Association.



**Figure 8.6** Author/source – *The Canberra Times*  
 \*Australian Associated Press, Associated Press, Press Association, Anonymous Agency

A detailed scrutiny of the ‘professional contributor’ category indicates that the *Canberra Times* published four obituaries by the newspaper’s former deputy editor, John Farquharson. He has developed a speciality in obituarising people of prominence from politics, the public service and the armed forces – lives which often are of particular interest in a government town such as Canberra. The British system of commissioning writers with expertise in defined fields, as has been discussed in Chapter Five, is something Farquharson would like to see practised with more vigour in Australia:

I think the more professional freelance people that can be used, the better it would be for our obituaries. It’s something that I think Australian newspapers haven’t fully woken up to.<sup>31</sup>

The point will be made, in Part Two of this chapter, that Australian newspapers are simply not willing to allocate sufficient resources to obituary writing, either in funds for specialist writers or in staff appointments. Farquharson, in Canberra, and Philip Jones, in Melbourne, are in effect Australia’s sole freelance specialists in the field. London’s *Daily Telegraph* has three for the British Army alone – one of whom specialises in the obituaries of those from the ‘other ranks’ (i.e. non-commissioned personnel).<sup>32</sup>

One more point needs to be made about *Canberra Times* obituary publication at this juncture. In this instance, the content analysis covered five months rather than six. The page goes into recess throughout the month of January to make way for a feature entitled ‘Summer Living’. Under that title, death might sit uncomfortably.

### 1.1.7 *The West Australian*

Perth's morning newspaper was the only one in the group not to print, with a by-line, any amateur contributions. Raw material was supplied by readers, but – under the policy of obituaries editor Patrick Cornish – it was all extensively rewritten:

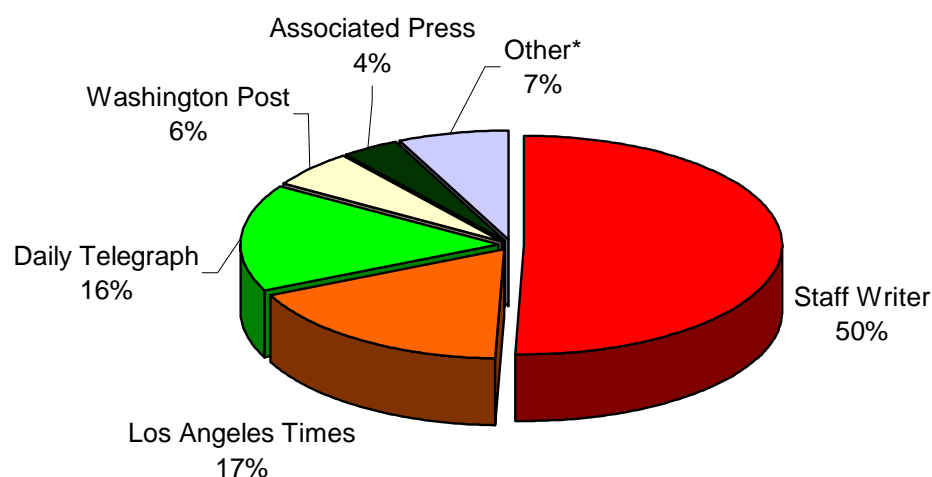
I 'Cornish' these things in a rather forceful way. I want my page to talk about freedom, love and war and those things. I want my personality to come through.<sup>33</sup>

Cornish expressed a vehement criticism of those newspapers which publish, often with a by-line, amateur contributions:

They don't allocate [to the obituary] a feature writer or even a reporter as often as I might have expected them to...they don't put in the 'person-hours' that the *West Australian* does. There's too much family-driven drivel, sentiment rather than journalism...and it's simply not good enough.<sup>34</sup>

Two senior journalists, Rod Moran and Michael Day, write occasional obituaries as well, making 'staff writer' by far the largest single category (50 per cent) at the *West Australian*. The total of 200 published between January and June in 2002 also contained significant American content. Figure 8.7 shows that fifty-three obituaries (27 per cent) were from three United States wire services: *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, and Associated Press. Cornish sees this as offering diversity, especially in providing a contrast to the main obituary of the day, which is generally of local character.

While there is a conscious effort to avoid Anglo-centricity, he also acknowledges the quality of *Daily Telegraph* obituaries – and translated that admiration into running thirty-two of them (16 per cent). He has, on occasions, commissioned material from professional contributors too; in the review period, this occurred twice. The fee limit, in keeping with the general lack of resources which besets Australian obituary publication, is about \$200. 'We get a bit stingy after that,' Cornish said.<sup>35</sup>



**Figure 8.7** Author/source – *The West Australian*  
 \*Agence France-Presse, Australian Associated Press, Reuters, Press Association, Professional Contributor

Generous selection of the *Los Angeles Times* wire service endows the *West Australian* page with a strand of obituary writing encountered infrequently in Australia. (The only other newspaper to use this source during the first half of 2002 was the *Sydney Morning Herald*, with four *LAT* obituaries.) Perth in that period, therefore, read about entertainers and producers – for such is the Los Angeles forte – along with an innovative piece on the life of a lexicographer:

Regrettably, unfortunately, lamentably and mournfully, Robert Chapman is deceased, demised, departed and dead. The son, boy and male offspring of a typewriter mechanic, he once drove trucks, then studied poetry and mediaeval literature before editing the timeworn, antiquated, irreplaceable Roget's International Thesaurus.<sup>36</sup>

## 1.2 Demographic selection

Tables appearing in this section indicate the demographic description of obituary subjects, as indicated in the newspaper text. Each list contains a summary of leading groups, by number.

### 1.2.1 *Herald Sun*

Identities from the arts and sport dominated the obituary columns of the *Herald Sun*. Nearly one-third (ninety-nine) of the 337 obituaries came from those areas, headed by writer/author/screenwriter with twenty-six. The actor/entertainer category supplied another twenty-three obituaries to this composite group during the six-month study,



followed by sport (twenty-one), musician/composer/conductor (seventeen) and television producer/film director (twelve). Figure 8.8 shows the leading categories by demographic description.

Writer/author/screenwriter	26
Actor/entertainer	23
Sporting identity	21
Musician/composer/conductor	17
Politician	15
Scientist	12
TV producer/film director	12
Journalist/editor	12

**Figure 8.8** Demographic selection (leading categories) – *Herald Sun*

Melbourne’s ‘family newspaper’ also displayed a persistent strain of egalitarianism on its obituaries page. What Figure 8.8 does not show is the spread of the remaining 199 obituaries over a range of occupations that included: military (nine), academic (seven), corporate executive (seven), clerk/administrator (six), manager/overseer (six), medical practitioner (five), police officer (five), union leader (four), driver (four), priest/minister of religion (four), student (three), factory worker (three), cleaner (two), and spy (one). In six instances, the demographic description of the subject was not clear. The list also included nine women variously described as ‘homemaker’, ‘mother’, and ‘matriarch’. Patrick O’Neil, a cadet journalist assigned to obituaries during the 2002 survey period, found a demonstrable link between his newspaper’s traditional readership base and its obituary selection policy:

It’s the whole sense of the paper...the *Herald Sun* is geared at the ordinary person, rather than highbrow sort of people. *Herald Sun* readers like the fact that anyone can be in their obituaries. You don’t have to be a CEO [chief executive officer] or a movie star. I think there’s something really nice about that. It’s a good opportunity to tell the stories of unsung heroes.<sup>37</sup>

### 1.2.2 *The Australian*

The readership contrast between the national broadsheet and the Melbourne tabloid was reflected, in microcosm, on their respective obituary pages. Figure 8.9 indicates that the *Australian* was more inclined to write about (and for) politicians, academics and corporate executives than entertainers and sporting identities. Those three favoured demographic groups supplied forty of the 140 obituaries.

Politician	15
Academic	14
Corporate executive	11
Musician/conductor	9
Journalist/editor	9
Sporting identity	8

**Figure 8.9** Demographic selection (leading categories) – *The Australian*

There was one factory worker too. In this instance, however, the humble occupation listed in the ‘stand-first’ descriptive summary above the introductory paragraph was irrelevant – for this was the obituary of Nancy Crick. She was a pro-euthanasia campaigner whose proclaimed intention to commit suicide had created public debate. When she did end her life at her home on Queensland’s Gold Coast, the story was a front-page ‘splash’ in many newspapers. Melbourne’s *Herald Sun* reported:

Mrs Crick, 69, overdosed on drugs, watched by 21 family and friends, who now risk jail sentences for their deliberate act of disobedience. The crowd sipped tea and champagne and ate sandwiches arranged by Mrs Crick as she took a fatal overdose of drugs ordered on the Internet. They clapped as the 27kg grandmother washed down the barbiturates with a Baileys liqueur to intensify the poison, and took three drags on a cigarette. Mrs Crick died about 20 minutes later, setting the scene for a test case on assisted suicide laws....Assisting a suicide is against the law in all Australia states.<sup>38</sup>

Extensive though this coverage was, the *Australian* was the only newspaper (in the seven analysed) to publish a defined obituary. It was written by obituaries editor Graeme Leech with a measure of candour that matched Crick’s own capacity for directness:

Nothing in Nancy Crick’s life prepared her for the attention she would receive once she had announced that she would end her life before it was claimed by bowel cancer. Until she discovered that she had a mortal disease in 1999, Crick’s life was a carefree but mundane round of bingo [a gambling pursuit], pokies [slot machines], socialising and enjoying her growing family, which this year was blessed with a great-grandson.

After she had resolved early this year to commit suicide, she became the centre of a political, religious and social debate about euthanasia....She told *The Weekend Australian* with characteristic bluntness in March: ‘So I go in [for surgery], and when I wake up seven hours later I’ve got no arsehole and a colostomy bag on me.’...She had gone from being fit, fun-loving and active to a 27kg shell in almost constant pain....[C]oncerned that friends and relatives who were present during her last moments could be prosecuted for assisting her suicide...[s]he made copies of her front door key to help muddy investigations about who was in her house at the time.<sup>39</sup>

The *Australian*, in its ‘stand-first’, had also described her as a ‘voluntary euthanasia advocate’. It was that factor which elevated an otherwise unremarkable factory worker to obituary status in the national newspaper.

### 1.2.3 *The Age*

Further obituary-based evidence of contrasting editorial policy was found in considering the demographic mix published by the *Age*. Melbourne’s morning broadsheet differed significantly from its tabloid opposition newspaper, the *Herald Sun*, by giving priority in selection to business executives, medical and dental practitioners, educators, journalists and scientists. They accounted for nearly one-third (106) of the 323 obituaries. As indicated in Figure 8.10, ‘sporting identity’ did not even achieve double digits; only seven in this category were accorded obituaries by the *Age*. The law also achieved slender representation, with just four.

Corporate executive	20
Medical/dental practitioner	20
Teacher	17
Academic	17
Journalist/editor	16
Scientist	16
Artist/sculptor	15
Actor/entertainer	12
Military	11
Priest/minister of religion	10
Writer/author/poet	10

**Figure 8.10** Demographic selection (leading categories) – *The Age*

#### 1.2.4 *The Sydney Morning Herald*

Given that Australian obituaries departments are essentially one-person affairs, it is conceivable that the preferences and prejudices of the incumbent editor are manifested in subject selection. Before becoming obituaries editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Suzy Baldwin worked as an actor and fashion model, took an Honours degree in English at the University of Sydney (a thesis on Spenser's 'The Faerie Queene'), and was executive editor of *Vogue Australia* and deputy arts editor of the *Herald*. Reflections of this rich and varied career path are, arguably, found on her obituaries page. Top of the selection table in the survey period were academic (twenty-five), actor/entertainer (seventeen), journalist/editor (fourteen), and author/writer (thirteen).

Figure 8.11 also shows that, unusually for an obituaries page, the *Sydney Morning Herald* had a significant 'rag trade' factor. There were nine obituaries in the 'designer/model/other fashion industry' category.

Academic	25
Actor/entertainer	17
Journalist/editor	14
Author/writer	13
Politician	12
Corporate executive	11
Medical practitioner	10
Scientist	9
Designer/model/other fashion industry	9

**Figure 8.11** Demographic selection (leading categories) –  
*The Sydney Morning Herald*

At the bottom of the list of 269 *Herald* obituaries, there were some diverting moments of minimalism: career criminal (two), chatelaine (one), and dilettante (one).

#### 1.2.5 *The Advertiser*

Minimalism and egalitarianism ruled here. In the 108 recorded *Advertiser* obituaries, not one classification achieved double-digit status. As Figure 8.12 shows, 'sporting identity' headed the list with nine, followed by 'teacher' with seven. It then slipped into a series of even more modest individual totals, reflecting former editor Love's belief that the page serves to confer 'a real kind of social justice...[through] celebrating little heroes'.<sup>40</sup>

This pattern is reinforced by the newspaper’s governing policy that ‘major identities rank an obit in the news pages’.<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, the business and political leaders who dominate the obituaries pages of the *Australian* and the *Age* are given their posthumous acknowledgment in another part of the *Advertiser*. The Saturday morning obituaries page in Adelaide is more likely to offer, as was the case in the first six months of 2002, ‘Brighton stalwart’,<sup>42</sup> ‘Hills identity’,<sup>43</sup> and ‘Marching coach’.<sup>44</sup>

Sporting identity	9
Teacher	7
Actor/entertainer	6
Volunteer/community worker	6
Restaurateur	6
Priest/minister of religion	5

**Figure 8.12** Demographic selection (leading categories) – *The Advertiser*

### 1.2.6 *The Canberra Times*

The *Canberra Times* total of fifty-six obituaries was too limited a sum for any defined patterns of demographic selection to present themselves. One omission, from Figure 8.13, worth comment is that of ‘politician’; just two in that category appeared on the obituaries page. The explanation for this is that the national capital’s morning newspaper, as discussed under 1.1.6, publishes its dedicated obituaries section on Fridays only. The death of a political figure, by definition, generally commands immediate publication. If such a death were to occur at any stage between the Friday of one week and the Wednesday of the following week, the *Canberra Times* would run the obituary on its general news pages.

Actor/entertainer	10
Academic	6
Scientist	5
Military	4
Medical/veterinary practitioner	3
Artist	3
Public servant	3

**Figure 8.13** Demographic selection (leading categories) – *The Canberra Times*

### 1.2.7 *The West Australian*

In his book *Western Australia in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, obituaries editor Patrick Cornish strove to offer

a stage to voices...but whose voices? A range of people, some household names, others known only to their own households, were invited to the tableau of recall.<sup>45</sup>

In July 2000, a year after the book's publication, he was invited to run the newly created obituaries page – and saw an opportunity to stage a similarly equitable tableau. Prior to that, obituaries had been published at random on the general news pages:

They tended towards the establishment...[but] I was very keen to make sure that we covered so-called ordinary people. I made it clear that we would strike a blow for democracy.<sup>46</sup>

The strength of that blow is measured in the spread of demographic types encountered in *West Australian* obituaries during the first six months of 2002. As Figure 8.14 indicates, the total of 200 was divided exceedingly small.

Writer	8
Scientist	6
Sporting identity	5
Teacher	5
Law	4
Community leader/worker	3
Priest/minister of religion	3
Artist	3
Singer	3
Corporate executive	3

**Figure 8.14** Demographic selection (leading categories) – *The West Australian*

The complete list offers a plethora of single entries, including: diver, crane driver, railwayman, philanthropist, sailmaker, astronomer, accountant, homemaker, and schoolboy. The last of those was, in its own modest way, indicative of Australian journalism's growing willingness to publish obituaries of the young. The content of this obituary is discussed further under 1.4 Cause of Death.

### 1.3 Age specification

Standard texts on journalism training stipulate that an obituary should always include its subject's age. Fedler's *Reporting for the Print Media* lists 'Identification (full name, age, address)' as the first of twelve points for inclusion.<sup>47</sup> Itule and Anderson, in *News Writing and Reporting for Today's Media*, offer this advice:

The reader should never have to use arithmetic to figure out the age of the deceased (obit writers should not merely give the date and place of birth). Reporters must be careful when computing ages....For example, a person is born Feb. 15, 1940, and dies Feb. 1, 2000. That person would be 59, not 60. A common blunder is to merely subtract 1940 from 2000 to come up with 60.<sup>48</sup>

Mencher's *Basic News Writing* begins its obituary instruction with this ruling: 'Obituary Essentials – Name, age, address and occupation of the deceased'.<sup>49</sup>

The *New York Times* agrees. As Chapter Seven has reported, the definitive study by Ball and Jonnes found just one obituary in which the age was omitted.<sup>50</sup> That degree of fastidiousness was often ignored by the seven Australian newspapers studied. The *Canberra Times* alone recorded a perfect score; age was specified in all its fifty-six obituaries. Two others came close. The *Australian* omitted it once in 140 obituaries, presumably because the age of the subject on that occasion, British comedian Spike Milligan, had already been included in news coverage of his death. The *Age* nearly demonstrated suitably eponymous perfection, but erred arithmetically in its obituary of Esther Ocloo. The text declared she was 83; the published dates of birth (4 April 1919) and death (8 February 2002) indicated 82.<sup>51</sup>

The incidence of age specification at the remaining four newspapers ranged from 65 per cent (the *West Australian*) to 93 per cent (the *Advertiser*). This finding does not necessarily mean that those papers ignored the factor of life span altogether; it was more a case of lacking clarity. The *West Australian*, for example, frequently offered incomplete details of birth and death, without precise dates and on occasions omitting any reference to a month. The accompanying text often failed to state an age either. This practice, in a variety of permutations, was identified in seventy of its 200 obituaries. It was not, however, a record which worried the obituaries editor:

I don't put the date in because we've had confusion on that – people can't agree if it [date of death] was the 25<sup>th</sup> or the 26<sup>th</sup>. I don't put in the age because it's redundant. People should be able to work it out for themselves. As with any other feature, does it matter if he was 71 or 72?<sup>52</sup>

Age was unclear in thirty-two of the 269 *Sydney Morning Herald* obituaries, and not stated at all on two occasions. Editor Suzy Baldwin concedes a deficiency: 'We should [give the age]. If we don't, that's an oversight.'<sup>53</sup> The reason for her newspaper's 87 per cent age specification score could generally be attributed, as was the case with the *West Australian*, to imprecision.

The obituary of former flight engineer George Congreve, for example, failed to supply the month of birth; he could have been either 97 or 98. The piece was contributed by his daughter, who might reasonably have been expected to have known.<sup>54</sup> Sydney socialite Joan Bode's obituary was similarly vague in detail. The 'stand-first' information, immediately under the headline, told readers only that her life span had been '1911–2002'; so was she 90 or 91? There had been, at any rate, a certain timeless charm about her:

she was the most unworldly of women...credit cards, faxes, invoices and anything electrical or mildly mechanical were beyond her interest.<sup>55</sup>

Perhaps no-one had been courageous enough to ask Mrs Bode her age. That might also have been the case in South Australia, when Ailene Fisher, a former opera singer, died. The *Advertiser* printed the date of her death but made no reference either to age or year of birth.<sup>56</sup> Similarly incomplete in detail were the obituaries of Joy Whaley, who had established a refuge in Timor for child victims of war,<sup>57</sup> and Dorothy Pfeiffer, a volunteer worker for stroke victims.<sup>58</sup> The Pfeiffer obituary did offer the virtue of unavoidable omission, quoting her sister thus:

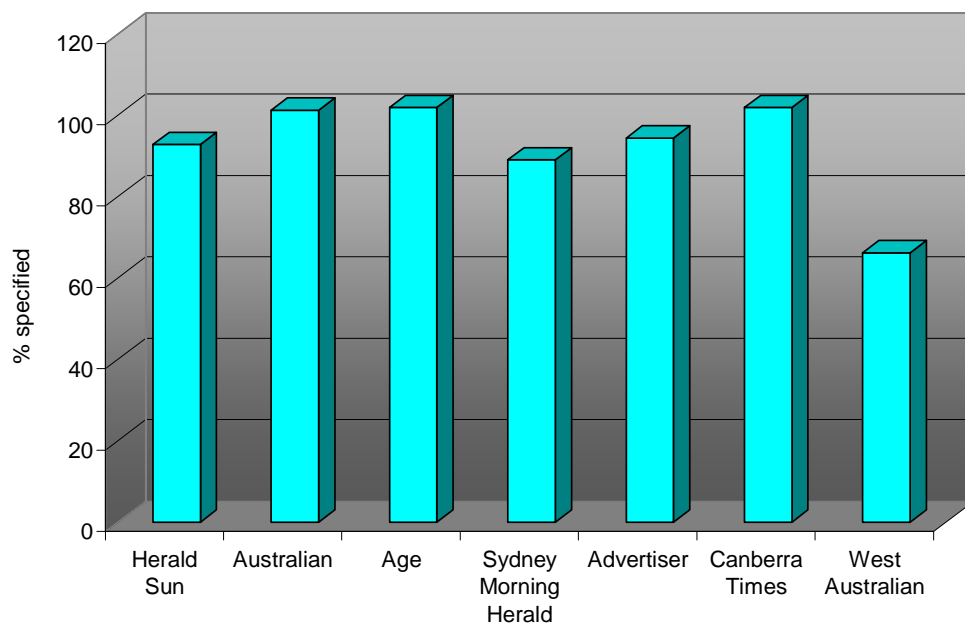
She always forbade me to reveal it to anyone...there was the unwritten law that family members were not to reveal her age. Strict orders. We even left it out of the death notice in *The Advertiser*.<sup>59</sup>



In all, the *Advertiser* specified age in 100 (93 per cent) of its 108 obituaries, as Figure 8.15 shows. Apart from the ageless trio, there were five instances of incomplete birth/death dates.

	Total	Age specified/ Life span indicated
<b>Herald Sun</b>	337	307 (91%)
<b>Australian</b>	140	139 (99%)
<b>Age</b>	323	323 (100%)*
<b>Sydney Morning Herald</b>	269	235 (87%)
<b>Advertiser</b>	108	100 (93%)
<b>Canberra Times</b>	56	56 (100%)
<b>West Australian</b>	200	130 (65%)

\*Incorrect age calculated in obituary text



**Figure 8.15** Age specified: incidence of inclusion

Melbourne's *Herald Sun* recorded a 91 per cent age specification rate; there were thirty instances in its 337 obituaries of imprecise information in that regard. Twenty-nine of those were syndicated pieces, and had been subjected for reasons of space to some heavy sub-editing. It was unfortunate, though, that one such obituary was that of Herbert Johnston. In 1912, he was a teenage crewman on the *Carpathia* and had subsequently lived long enough to be recognised as 'the last *Titanic* rescuer'.<sup>60</sup> The omission of his age, however, rather compromised the achievement.

## 1.4 Cause of death

Mencher's *Basic News Writing* includes cause of death under the heading 'Obituary Essentials' for American journalism, quoting the city editor of the *Cincinnati Post* as saying: 'It's my philosophy that you treat the obituary the same as any other news story.'<sup>61</sup> Interviewed at the *Age* in February 2001, however, acting obituaries editor Dhana Quinn reported a sharp contrast between the United States and Melbourne in both practice and philosophy:

The *New York Times* will always put in cause...[and] we put it in if it's from overseas. But if a contributor leaves it out, then that's their wish.<sup>62</sup>

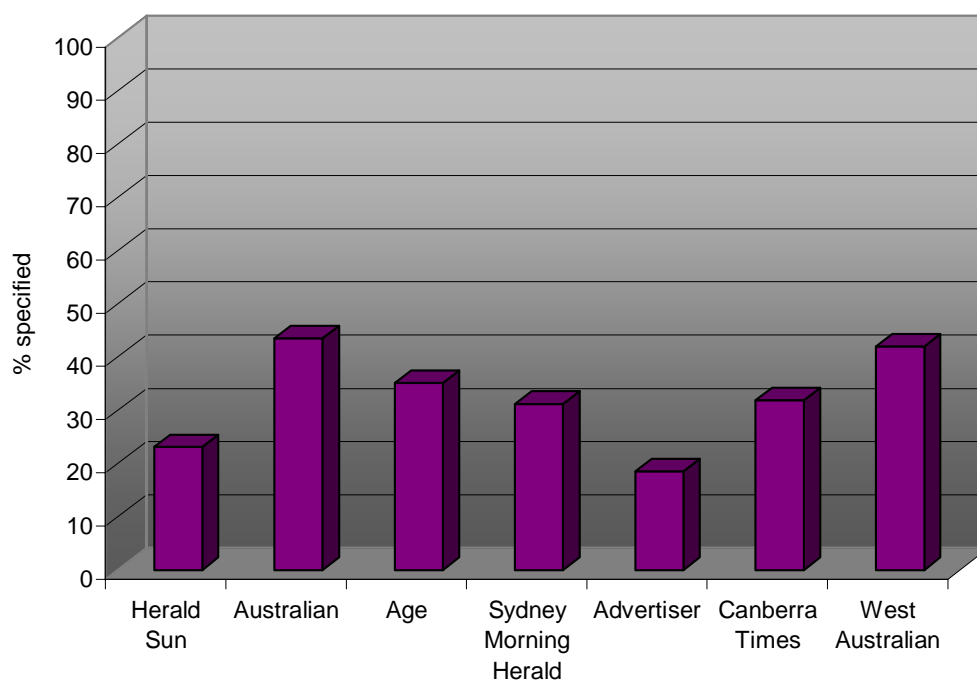
Because of this, and for related reasons concerning amateur contribution at the time of her appointment, Quinn regarded the obituary as 'not really journalism'.<sup>63</sup> During the first six months of 2002, the *Age* specified the cause in 108 of its 323 obituaries (33 per cent). That was fractionally under half the *New York Times* rate of specification, for Quinn's observation on *Times* practice was, in reality, somewhat inflated. Ball and Jonnes, in their study of 9,325 obituaries published by that newspaper, found cause of death was given in 6,234 instances (67 per cent).<sup>64</sup> The thrust of Quinn's argument has some validity, however. Australian newspapers plainly do not agree with Mencher's injunction that cause is an essential component and, because of this, cannot be said to be treating the obituary in the same manner as they would any other news story.

Australian obituaries editors frequently pursued a compassionate line during the six-month study period. 'We tend to defer to the sensibilities of the family,' said Cameron Ross, at the *Canberra Times*, where cause was specified in 30 per cent of the obituaries published.<sup>65</sup> The unofficial code of practice at Melbourne's *Herald Sun* (22 per cent) was similarly deferential:

We had one yesterday about a woman who died in her 30s, and you always think 'Goodness, why?'...and near the end it said she was killed in a road accident. We probably ask the relatives, the suppliers of the material, whether they want the cause to be included. If they say no, of course we have to honour that.<sup>66</sup>

Figure 8.16 presents the data and a comparison of the results in columns, ranging down from a high of 41 per cent (the *Australian*) to a low of 18 per cent (the *Advertiser*):

	Total	Cause specified
<i>Herald Sun</i>	337	74 (22%)
<i>Australian</i>	140	58 (41%)
<i>Age</i>	323	108 (33%)
<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>	269	80 (30%)
<i>Advertiser</i>	108	19 (18%)
<i>Canberra Times</i>	56	17 (30%)
<i>West Australian</i>	200	80 (40%)



**Figure 8.16** Cause of death specified: incidence of inclusion

The disparity in incidence recorded by the *Australian* and the *Advertiser* can be linked to their rate of amateur contribution and to their demographic selection. Just 11 per cent of *Australian* obituaries were credited to readers (Figure 8.2), while the *Advertiser* recorded 34 per cent in this category (Figure 8.5). In terms of demographic selection, the *Australian* obituaries page was dominated by politicians, prominent academics, and corporate executives (Figure 8.9); the *Advertiser*, with its policy of ‘celebrating little heroes’,<sup>67</sup> was more interested in, teachers, volunteers and community workers (Figure 8.12). Garrett Ray, of Colorado State University, draws on his experience as a former president of the International Society of Weekly Newspaper Editors in detecting the intimacy that can exist between contributor and writer:

Typically, obituary writers ask for the cause of death and, if the family provides the information, it is printed. However, they will not push for this information and will generally accede to the family's wishes....Community newspapers also can separate the story of a violent death from the obituary itself. The news story tells of the murder, suicide or traffic accident; the obituary may omit the cause of death.<sup>68</sup>

At the *Sydney Morning Herald* (30 per cent), obituaries editor Suzy Baldwin recalled with some amusement a redundant American wire service assertion that 'a woman had died unexpectedly at 93'. Nevertheless, she conceded a certain imperative should be pursued where possible:

I always quite like to have the cause of death, just because people usually ask. Even if people in their 60s go 'trotters up', that does seem a bit early to me. You want to know what somebody died of. I will always push for it. Always.<sup>69</sup>

According to Patrick Cornish, obituaries editor at the *West Australian* (cause specified, 40 per cent), the need to be explicit can often be decided by the peculiarity of the circumstances – as determined by the age of the subject or the place of death:

If a 17-year-old dies, it's more incumbent on me to give a cause of death than if it's a 77-year-old. If the person is over 80, I'd rarely bother about it unless it's relevant to the story. If it's a chap [of that age] who had a heart attack while at his favourite fishing ground off Carnarvon, it goes in. Squeamishness on the part of the family is another factor. I always ask and then decide whether to put it in or not.<sup>70</sup>

At times, a little artifice is needed to soften the impact of the page. The *West Australian* will, for example, disclose cause of death by recounting 'a last trip to Byron Bay while suffering terminal cancer'.<sup>71</sup> Some delicate manoeuvring was demanded for the obituary of the youngest subject encountered in this six-month content analysis, Alistair Stewart, 13, of Perth.<sup>72</sup> Subsequently, it was found that he had died of myocarditis (failure of the major heart muscle), but this cause had not been established at the time of the obituary's preparation. Cornish elected simply to print that he had died of 'natural causes' because

the parents didn't know...[and] we weren't going to wait for a specific cause. But I had to be careful to remove any suspicion that it was suicide or it was drugs.<sup>73</sup>

It is in this notoriously difficult area of obituary editing, death of the young, that Mencher's text book insistence on inclusion of cause becomes questionable. That question, extended to all age groups, is further discussed in Part Two of this chapter.

## 1.5 Dominant reference

This section of the content analysis addresses a critical element of journalism style: how the seven Australian newspapers in the study referred to their obituary subjects. The sample of 1,433 obituaries was examined to determine, in each instance, the dominant reference – the form of words preferred for mentioning the subject, after the first use of the name in full. Five possibilities were considered:

- Surname only
- Honorific (or other formal/courtesy title)
- Given/nickname
- He/she
- Mix (of any of the above)

Newspapers, by tradition, apply rules of style with rigour. News Limited, publisher of three of the papers selected for this analysis, explains why in its Australian guide on the topic:

This book does not seek to impose conformity or discourage individuality. It tries to establish uniformity – though in the appropriate context there may be good reason for breaking the rules. Flexibility exists. However, papers with wide variations in style from day to day or page to page look undisciplined or confused, so break the rules sparingly.<sup>74</sup>

On the question of how writers should refer to people, the guide offers this advice:

### ***Honorifics***

*Mr, Mrs, Ms* to all except participating sports men/women, artists, actors, authors, musicians, convicted criminals and the long dead (*Hitler, Lincoln*). [There appears to be no ruling on medical or academic titles.]

Usually omit the honorific at first reference: 'Union secretary *Les Allout* says...', thereafter *Mr Allout*.

Drop them in columns, comment pieces and descriptive writing.

Try to find out whether a woman wants to be *Ms, Miss* or *Mrs*.<sup>75</sup>

In Britain, the *Guardian* style book agrees with the thrust of those principles but applies one variation which achieves significance within the terms of this study:

***Honorifics***

On news and comment pages: Tony Blair or Sir Bobby Charlton at first mention, thereafter Mr Blair, Sir Bobby etc....Use surnames only after first mention on all sports stories, in arts-related news stories...and for those who are dead.<sup>76</sup>

The ‘for those who are dead’ dictum bestows upon *Guardian* writers an unequivocal authority to adopt the ‘surname only’ construction if they so wish. It is a power which they – and, for the greater part, other obituarists serving the quality end of the British press – generally apply. The *Times*, by way of further example, follows the same ruling in its style guide:

**Appellations:** on news pages, though not on features and sport, almost every surname should be granted the courtesy of a title. The exceptions are: convicted offenders, the dead (but not the recently dead, except in obituaries) and...cases where common usage omits a title.<sup>77</sup>

Chapter Seven has already made the point that American obituaries maintain for the most part a formality of tone, eschewing the more epigrammatic observations of the British model. It may well be, therefore, that this approach has fuelled a measure of sympathy in the United States for honorifics. They appear in the obituaries of major regional newspapers and in those of the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*. One of the standard journalism texts, Fedler’s *Reporting for the Media*, describes this practice as ‘a sign of respect’.<sup>78</sup> Itule and Anderson, in *News Writing and Reporting for Today’s Media*, agree: ‘Few newspapers use courtesy titles...on second reference in news stories, but many do so in obits.’<sup>79</sup> In short, the obituarists of America are encouraged to avoid any suggestion of brutality of reference in posthumous appraisal. As will be demonstrated, some Australian newspapers appear to be driven by a similar concern.

**1.5.1 *Herald Sun***

This member of the News Limited group applies with vigour the ‘flexibility exists’ clause from its corporate style guide. The obituary of Tony LoRicco<sup>80</sup> illustrated the prevailing inconsistency, a point conceded by the newspaper’s editorial online training manager, Kim Lockwood:

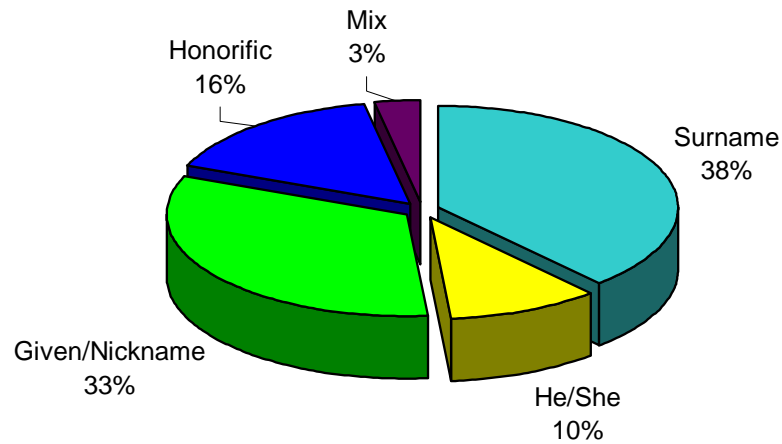
It jumps around a bit. This one is badly written and badly subbed [edited] because we've got 'Tony, Tony, Tony, Tony, Mr LoRicco, Mr LoRicco, Mr LoRicco, Tony, Tony, Tony, Tony'. That's bad. One or the other, but not both. I might have to point that out.<sup>81</sup>

Lockwood explained that, in line with his company's style guide recommendations, the first reference should in that instance have been 'Tony LoRicco', with 'Mr LoRicco' used in subsequent references. However, his own preference for local obituaries was use of the given name because it 'makes the person seem more familiar'.<sup>82</sup> He admitted that the question of dominant reference was complicated by variations within the in-house convention. If a prominent sporting identity died, an article on the sports pages would favour use of the surname, an inquest report on the general news pages would probably apply an honorific, and the obituary would adopt the first name or possibly even a nickname.

Figure 8.17 demonstrates the fragmented *Herald Sun* results. By a small margin, 'surname only' (38 per cent) was the most common form of dominant reference within obituaries. This finding related, almost in entirety, to syndicated material from overseas. The 'surname only' style is preferred by those sources, and the *Herald Sun* chose not to change it. However, with such a high incidence of amateur contribution, it is axiomatic that an intimate manner of subject reference should emerge too; the 33 per cent 'given/nickname' factor can be attributed to that.

News Limited's style guide makes the point that 'wide variations in style from day to day or page to page look undisciplined or confused'.<sup>83</sup> In this regard, the *Herald Sun* obituaries page during the first half of 2002 was often at fault. Gregorio Fuentes, a fisherman said to have been the character study for Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, was 'Mr Fuentes' once and 'Fuentes' four times;<sup>84</sup> Joan Hoare, a 'mother and volunteer', was 'Joan' eight times and 'Mrs Hoare' six;<sup>85</sup> William Hughes, a builder, was 'William' throughout,<sup>86</sup> but Jack Waters, a union leader whose obituary appeared on the same page on the same day as the Hughes piece, was consistently 'Mr Waters'.<sup>87</sup> On 21 January, each of the three published obituaries adopted a different form of dominant reference.

Some surprisingly informal references appeared on occasions too. A physicist of international repute, elected to fellowship of the Australian Academy of Science, was simply 'Geoff';<sup>88</sup> a veteran politician who had served four terms as a minister in Victoria's State Parliament was 'Tom'.<sup>89</sup>



**Figure 8.17** Dominant reference – *Herald Sun*

### 1.5.2 *The Australian*

As shown in Figure 8.18, the *Australian* applied a consistent approach – the most consistent, in that regard, encountered in the six-month study. ‘Surname only’ was the dominant reference in 87 per cent of *Australian* obituaries, a style inherited in part from its frequent use of the *Times* wire service (Figure 8.2). In addition, obituaries editor Leech is an advocate of this form. He rejected the argument, implied by American educational texts, that use of the surname alone conveys a suggestion of posthumous brutality:

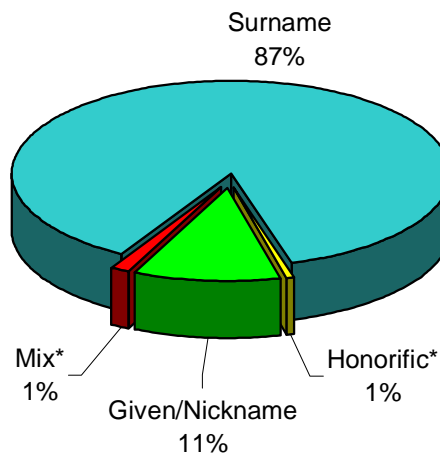
I can’t see any brutality at all...to suggest that it’s brutal is to come to the conclusion that, when it comes to an obituary, you have to be very gentle because somebody’s dead. It’s not brutal at all. There’s a different style regarding news and regarding features [including obituaries].<sup>90</sup>

The *Australian* did divert from this course on occasions, however. Figure 8.18 shows that 11 per cent of its obituaries used ‘given name’ as the dominant reference, largely attributable to the style preferred by contributors. Philip Jones had ‘Viola’ as the dominant reference in his obituary of Lady Viola Tait, widow of Sir Frank Tait, the theatrical entrepreneur;<sup>91</sup> Harold White, a prominent identity in primary production, was ‘Harold’;<sup>92</sup> Barbara Collins, a leader in the Country Women’s Association, was ‘Barbara’;<sup>93</sup> Peggy Young, a librarian and writer, became just ‘Peggy’.<sup>94</sup> It is significant that three of that ‘given name’ quartet are obituaries of women. Do



contributors find it unacceptably harsh perhaps, despite what the editor might say, to refer to female subjects by surname alone? This, as discussed in Chapter Six, is indisputably the case at the *Daily Telegraph* in Britain.

The *Australian* obituaries editor's dislike of courtesy titles was reflected in the low (1 per cent) result for that category. A knight and a priest were the only subjects to be accorded that style of dominant reference.



\*(rounded percentages: slice thickness variation caused by actual percentages of 1.4% and 0.7%)

**Figure 8.18** Dominant reference – *The Australian*

### 1.5.3 *The Age*

Examination of *Age* results (Figure 8.19) does indicate a link between ‘surname only’ (55 per cent) and the combined wire service total as a source of obituaries (46 per cent, Figure 8.3). At the same time, frequent use of amateur contributions (33 per cent) plainly led to a significant occurrence of ‘given/nickname’ (40 per cent). On occasions, that propensity for the familiar or the diminutive did compromise the newspaper’s professional credentials – as demonstrated by these extracts from two obituaries published by the *Age*:

Mum was born...at Benalla on June 12, 1918. She was the third child of James and Sophia Martin. Two of Mum’s sisters died at a very early age, but May and Kath [presumably surviving sisters] were at her funeral. Mum’s home was Emoh ruo, two miles south of Devenish and within three miles of her last resting place. Aunt May still lives in the original home....We know this is Mum’s worldly end but Kathy, John, Buddy, Lis, Poss, Marie and I are comforted by the fact that we can truly say Mum treated us equally.<sup>95</sup>

Dr Jim called twice daily, otherwise Jock lived out his last month in Vito's living-room, the open fire was going, sometimes the television, the sea was within view, family and friends were admitted according to a cosmic amalgam of Vito's wisdom and Jock's wishes.<sup>96</sup>

No attempt was made to help the reader by interpreting those names (apart from 'Mum' and 'Jock', the subjects of the obituaries).

In the broad sweep of its obituary publication, the *Age* exercised a greater degree of control by virtually eliminating the courtesy title. It emerged only in the obituaries of a knight, a dame, a monsignor, and a doctor.

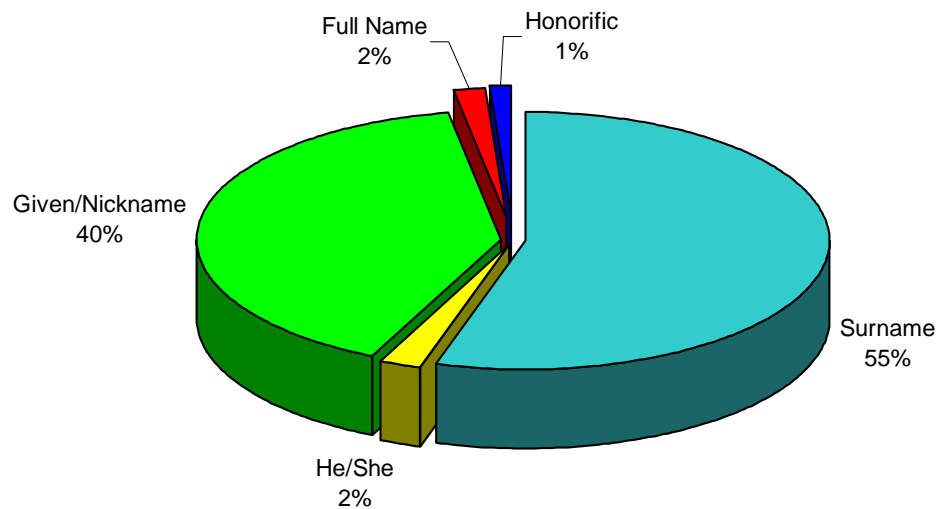


Figure 8.19 Dominant reference – *The Age*

#### 1.5.4 *The Sydney Morning Herald*

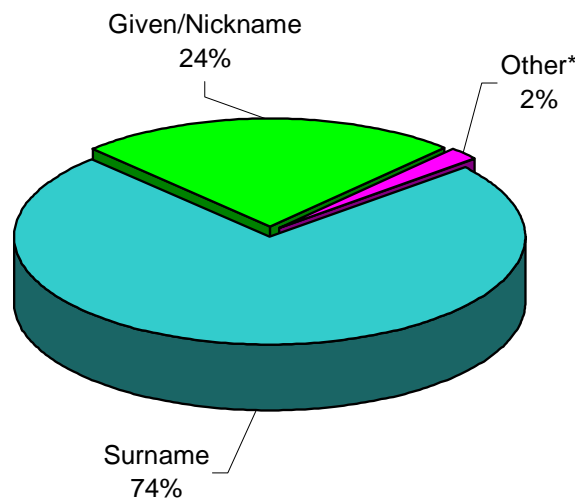
Britain's *Daily Telegraph*, pursuing a form of chivalry with its 'full name' treatment of female subjects (see Chapter Six), finds an acolyte in Suzy Baldwin, obituaries editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*:

I must say, I find calling them just by their surnames pretty brutal. You see, women – unless they've been in the [armed] forces or are in nursing – virtually never refer to each other by their surname, whereas men will often do that.<sup>97</sup>

Her sentiments do not apply solely to female obituary subjects:

I fight with the subs [sub-editors] on this. In 'Untold Stories' I like to use the person's first name because they're written by friends and rellies [relatives]. So if it's a grandma, it's 'Grandma', and if it's a dad, it's 'Dad'. That, I insist on.<sup>98</sup>

Accordingly, amateur material – particularly that appearing as ‘Untold Stories’ – is likely to contain a ‘given/nickname’ dominant reference. A nexus emerges: Figure 8.20 shows a 24 per cent incidence of ‘given/nickname’ and 74 per cent incidence of ‘surname only’. Figure 8.4 (Author/source – *Sydney Morning Herald*) indicates 25 per cent ‘amateur contributor’ with the remaining 75 per cent accounting for staff writers, professional contributors and wire services combined. As occurred at the *Age*, courtesy titles were rare. The *Herald* preserved their use only for a dame, a knight, and the wife of a knight.



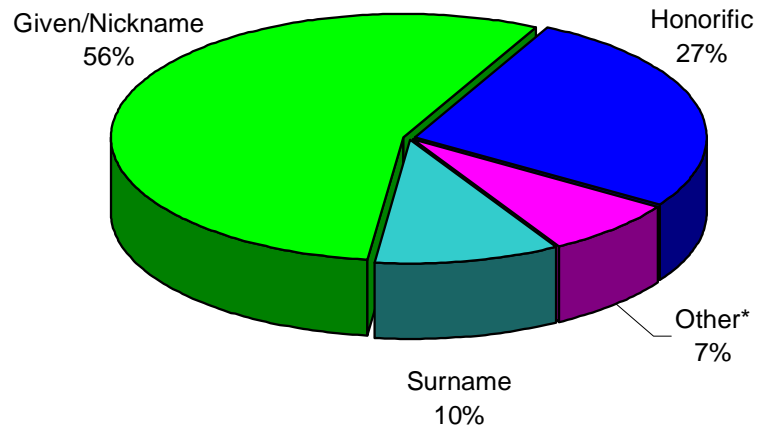
**Figure 8.20** Dominant reference – *The Sydney Morning Herald*  
 \*honorific, mix, both names

### 1.5.5 *The Advertiser*

The Adelaide newspaper offered an assortment of the familiar and the formal. Figure 8.21 shows a preponderance (56 per cent) of ‘given/nickname’ dominant reference over ‘honorific’ (27 per cent) and ‘surname only’ (10 per cent), with an amalgam of other constructions completing the picture. There were times when a single page contained a number of formats. On 16 February 2002, by way of example, the five published obituaries offered: three ‘given/nickname’ dominant references, one ‘surname only’, and one ‘surname-honorific’ mix. One of the ‘given/nickname’ obituaries was that of the first female federal MP from South Australia, Catherine (‘Kay’) Brownbill.<sup>99</sup> This style of writing was apparent too at other stages of the research period in the obituaries of an erstwhile South Australian Agent-General (London), Max Scriven,<sup>100</sup> and an eminent scientist in the field of snake venom research, Professor Struan Sutherland.<sup>101</sup>

Those distinguished Australians had been obituarised in the *Advertiser* as, respectively, ‘Kay’, ‘Max’, and ‘Struan’. The obituary of Professor Sutherland was noticeably well written, with an authoritative assessment of his career. However, he was presented to readers, through the dominant use of his given name, in a casual, even intimate, way. The same finding presents itself in the Max Scriven obituary. He, as well as having being his state’s trade and investment representative in London, had flown bombers in World War II and, in civilian life, had risen through the state public service to become head of the Department of Premier and the Cabinet. Though his obituary talked about ‘Max’, two other obituaries which appeared on the same page that day used courtesy titles. One of these was of a schoolteacher; the other was of a clay pigeon association official.

This thesis is not necessarily arguing for or against the adoption of the honorific, especially in obituaries of local composition (though it does harbour reservations about the indecent familiarity caused by excessive use of the diminutive or nickname). What is of greater concern is the haphazard regard for core principles of consistency in style.



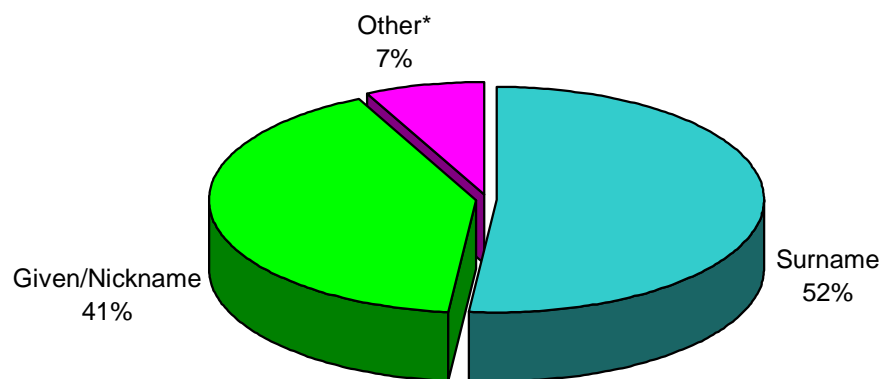
**Figure 8.21** Dominant reference – *The Advertiser*  
\*he/she, mix

### 1.5.6 *The Canberra Times*

When an editor relies heavily on reader contributions, as is the case at both the *Advertiser* and the *Canberra Times*, some familiarity of expression becomes inevitable. Consequently, as Figure 8.22 demonstrates, Canberra’s morning newspaper also displayed a significant ‘given/nickname’ incidence (41 per cent). The obituaries editor, Cameron Ross, attributed this to his belief that the obituary is ‘more

intimate' than the news story and can therefore take a comparatively relaxed approach in style.<sup>102</sup> In his case, this tolerance extends only to the given name; use of a nickname, he said, would be 'a bit twee'.<sup>103</sup>

Some *Canberra Times* contributors did prefer to take a formal approach. There was, accordingly, some appreciable flow of dominant references – from those sources, as well as in the wire services – towards the 'surname only' category (52 per cent). Once again, though, inconsistency emerged. In common with practice encountered at the *Advertiser* and the *Herald Sun*, the *Canberra Times* adopted a marked informality at times in obituaries of prominent individuals. A former president of Australia's leading ex-service organisation, Brigadier Garland, was simply 'Alf';<sup>104</sup> an economist of considerable distinction, described as 'a visionary academic', was 'Heinz';<sup>105</sup> a former deputy head of the Capital Territory Health Commission was 'Helen'.<sup>106</sup>



**Figure 8.22** Dominant reference – *The Canberra Times*  
\*honorific, mix, full name

### 1.5.7 *The West Australian*

Instinct, not style, governs the dominant reference process pursued by Patrick Cornish, obituaries editor at the *West Australian*. Like Ross, at the *Canberra Times*, Cornish sees the obituary as presenting a case for flexibility:

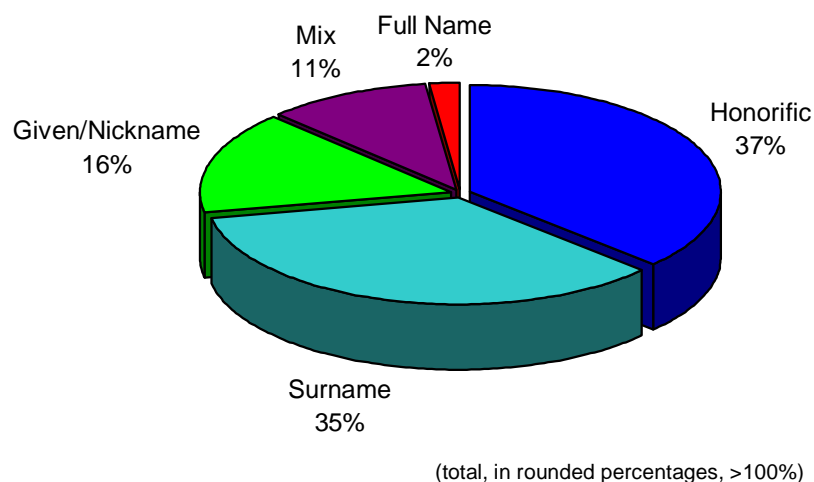
It's a feature, it's colour. I don't think the readers mind that variation. I don't write the stuff for the subs [sub-editors], or for the journalists for that matter. A little old lady who made the scones is 'Myrtle'.<sup>107</sup>

Figure 8.23, in accordance with that approach, presents a variegated image. ‘Honorific’ led with 37 per cent, the highest incidence of this category in the seven-newspaper study,<sup>108</sup> ‘surname only’ (for the most part, a product of wire service material) was close behind (35 per cent). However, with an obituary writing style that is rich in application of the anecdote, the *West Australian* also applied ‘given/nickname’ with some enthusiasm (16 per cent). An in-text mix of dominant reference was detected in another 11 per cent of its obituaries.

The obituaries editor of the *West Australian* said it was ‘not entirely fair’ to compare his page’s style with that of major national or international newspapers because

we’re more like a local paper. We do have local sensibilities to concern us more than does the *Australian* or the *New York Times*. I don’t mind that. I just accept it as part of the territory.<sup>109</sup>

That comment can be applied to the topic of dominant reference, and to this chapter’s findings on demographic selection and inclusion of cause of death too. Perth re-runs material originating from the major syndicating sources of Britain and the United States, but its home-grown obituaries – appearing, nearly every day, on the same page as the imported product – do have a different type of voice. This voice is accompanied by chorus of given names and courtesy titles.



**Figure 8.23** Dominant reference – *The West Australian*

## 1.6 Gender balance

The Literature Review (Chapter Two of this thesis) has discussed American studies on gender balance, or imbalance, found in newspaper obituary publication. There is a clear and sustained pattern of bias towards males. Ball and Jonnes, in a large-scale study of the *New York Times* over six years in the 1990s, found that male subjects accounted for 83 per cent of the obituaries published in that time.<sup>110</sup> Two decades earlier, Kastenbaum *et al.* had reported a similar imbalance at the *New York Times* (80 per cent male to 20 per cent female) and the *Boston Globe* (81 per cent to 19 per cent).<sup>111</sup>

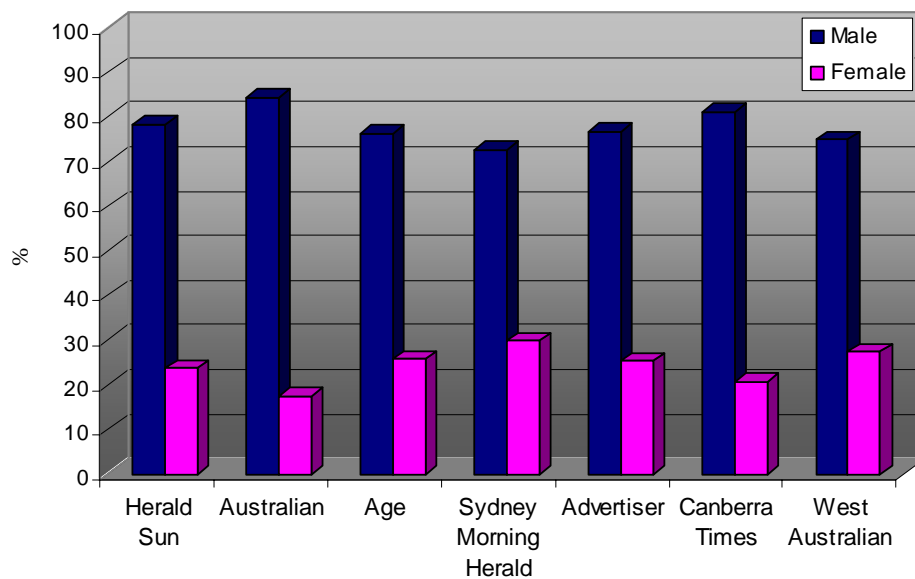
Moremen and Craddock's 1997 research produced further evidence that males dominated the obituary columns: *New York Times* (88 per cent male to 12 per cent female); *Los Angeles Times* (81 per cent to 19 per cent); *Miami Herald* (76 per cent to 24 per cent); *Chicago Tribune* (71 per cent to 29 per cent).<sup>112</sup> The only study with results which, to some extent, countered this pattern was that by Spilka *et al.* in Colorado in the late 1970s. They found that the *Denver Post* and *Rocky Mountain News* each recorded a male-female comparison of 59 per cent to 41 per cent.<sup>113</sup>

This dissertation's content analysis of seven Australian newspapers, published between 1 January 2002 and 30 June 2002, disclosed a male incidence ranging from a low of 72 per cent (*Sydney Morning Herald*) to a high of 84 per cent (the *Australian*). It is possible that the results for the *Australian* reflect editorial decisions taken at the *Times*; there are indications of a flow-on effect, generated by the *Australian's* reliance on the *Times* wire service for 44 per cent of its obituaries published during the six-month period. It is worth recalling a passage from Chapter Six in which the deputy obituaries editor of the *Times* dismissed any notion of engaging in positive discrimination towards the selection of women as obituary subjects:

There is a difficulty about women's achievement. It's simply the case that there are no great women musicians, mathematicians, and all kinds of other things. They don't exist.<sup>114</sup>

Figure 8.24 presents the data and a comparison of the results in paired columns:

	<b>Total</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>
<b><i>Herald Sun</i></b>	261m 76f	77%	23%
<b><i>Australian</i></b>	117m 23f	84%	16%
<b>Age</b>	244m 79f	76%	24%
<b><i>Sydney Morning Herald</i></b>	193m 76f	72%	28%
<b>Advertiser</b>	82m 26f	76%	24%
<b><i>Canberra Times</i></b>	45m 11f	80%	20%
<b><i>West Australian</i></b>	148m 52f	74%	26%



**Figure 8.24** Male/female subject incidence

At the *Canberra Times*, which recorded a female incidence of 20 per cent, the obituaries editor, Cameron Ross, also found that questions of news value outranked that of gender balance:

I can honestly say it [gender balance] is not an issue. I don't consciously think we must have more women. If they're worthwhile we cover them, but we don't make judgments as to giving a [specified] gender more space. It's a judgment on news value only.<sup>115</sup>



However, a different view emerged at the *West Australian*. The obituaries editor, Patrick Cornish, referred to his own editorial

philosophy on gender, to try to redress the imbalance. I'd noticed the *Daily Telegraph* in London was probably about fourteen-to-one male-female. I said 'We've got to try harder than that', not only for political reasons. I did a survey on the year before [2001] and we were about six-to-one. The figure you've just quoted me [74% against 26%] says it's now three-to-one. So clearly I'm getting there.<sup>116</sup>

At the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the obituaries editor, Suzy Baldwin, finds some solace in her newspaper's 'Untold Stories' feature:

It's much more difficult to get female obits, and that's the reason I'm very keen on 'Untold Stories'. You find a lot of 'Untold Stories' are about women. The trouble is [elsewhere], often what women do isn't what people think is deserving of an obituary.<sup>117</sup>

A societal attitude to that effect was detected too by Del Ambrosius, a journalist based in Bunbury, Western Australia's second largest city, 175 kilometres south of Perth. She contributes obituaries to the *West Australian* (where the editor, as this content analysis has shown, is trying to increase his newspaper's record of female subject selection). Ambrosius, though, has found it rare for people in her news region to propose women as potential subjects:

It seems to be a thing that men don't even think about...you know, I can't remember ever being approached by a man to write an obituary about anyone, not just about a woman. It's something that men don't think about, or maybe it's something personal that they don't want to address...death and emotion, and being able to talk about things. All the calls I get are from women, and they're almost all about obituaries for men. It's almost as if people don't see women's lives as being important...[they tend to think] 'That was just Mum.' In obituaries, I have pretty well always interviewed a woman.<sup>118</sup>

Her main regret is not simply one of unequal representation on the obituaries page, but of an imperfect historical and cultural record. ‘Places like this are changing rapidly,’ she said. ‘In writing about a life, we’re also recording vital bits and pieces of historical information. If we don’t record that life, then it’s lost for ever.’<sup>119</sup>

When women do appear on Australia’s obituary pages, however, it would appear that they command their fair share of available space. Figure 8.25 shows the average length of male and female obituaries in the review period (expressed in column centimetres, based on a standard 10-em width). At five of the seven newspapers, female obituaries were slightly longer on average than male obituaries.

	Total	Average length (m)	Average length (f)
<i>Herald Sun</i>	261m 76f	28cm	32cm
<i>Australian</i>	117m 23f	111cm	95cm
<i>Age</i>	244m 79f	68cm	59cm
<i>Sydney Morning Herald</i>	193m 76f	89cm	94cm
<i>Advertiser</i>	82m 26f	47cm	52cm
<i>Canberra Times</i>	45m 11f	77cm	81cm
<i>West Australian</i>	148m 52f	54cm	65cm

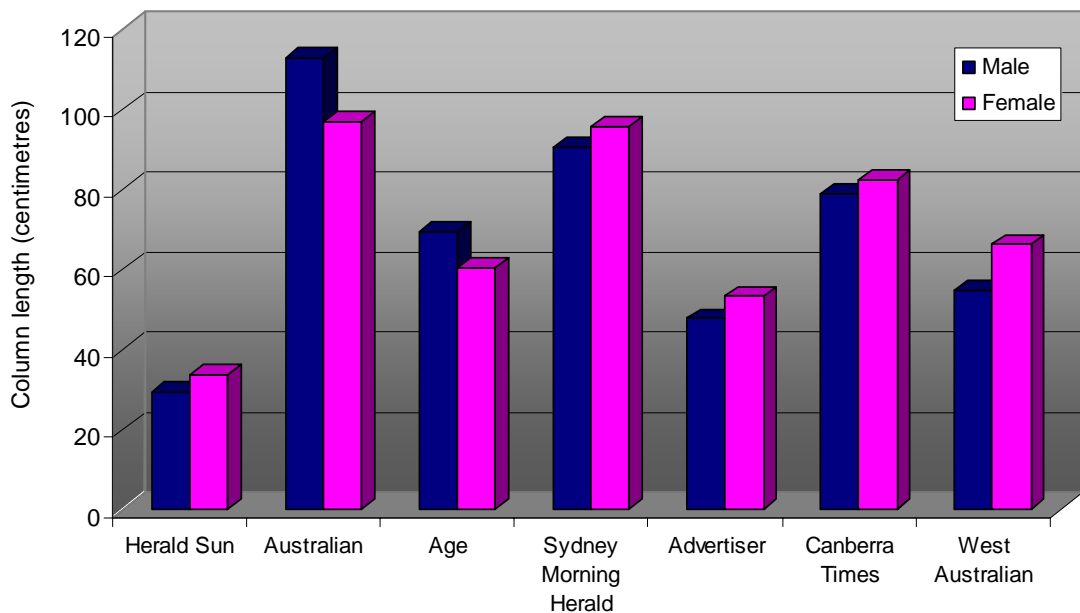


Figure 8.25 Obituary length – male/female average

## 1.7 Postscript – *The Courier-Mail*

In February 2003, nearly eight months after the conclusion of this study's major content analysis, Brisbane's *Courier-Mail* introduced an obituaries page. The reason for this editorial decision has already been discussed (see Chapter Five). To complete the analytical picture of obituary publication by Australian newspapers, it is appropriate at this juncture to consider *Courier-Mail* content too – though as a postscript, in isolation. As a different time frame is involved, a direct comparison with findings from the other seven newspapers would be invalid. The data and discussion points which comprise the closing segments of this chapter have been generated, therefore, by a discrete content analysis of *Courier-Mail* obituaries appearing over a six-month period: 17 February 2003 (the date of the first obituary page) to 15 August 2003.

### 1.7.1 Author/Source (*The Courier-Mail*)

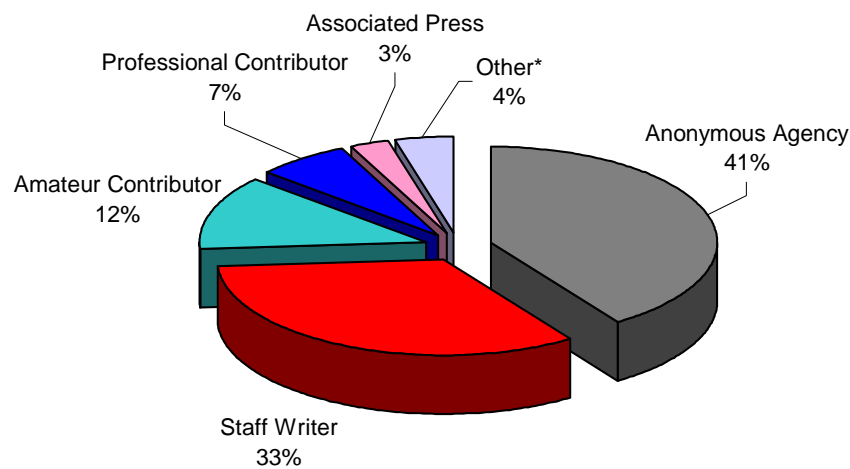
The senior associate editor of the *Courier-Mail*, Greg Chamberlin, has encouraged a wide range of staff members to contribute obituaries. During the six-month review period, this policy resulted in a 33 per cent 'staff writer' component. Among those writers were a *Courier-Mail* columnist, sports reporters, a senior political journalist, regional representatives, and (as discussed in Chapter Five) the arts editor. Although, as Figure 8.26 indicates, accumulated agency material was another significant source (accounting for 48 per cent of *Courier-Mail* obituaries), Chamberlin was not satisfied with the standard of Australian service:

I'd like to see far more obituaries of prominent or interesting Australians provided through our own agency, AAP [Australian Associated Press]. At present, AAP too often just reports the death and adds tributes in the form of quotes. Not enough effort is made in terms of biographical information and anecdotes. We see the contrast with overseas material, where sometimes Australian newspapers will receive half-a-dozen or more obituaries and updates on the same person, delivered via AAP. Papers which carry a regular obituaries page will [therefore] often include overseas material, particularly as a second piece, because good Australian material is not readily available.<sup>120</sup>

He cited as an example the syndicated obituaries of Australia's first Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, W.C. ('Billy') Wentworth. AAP's version did not achieve, in Chamberlin's view, the standard of those written by the British wire services.

Brisbane’s daily newspaper published a total of 234 obituaries, with at least one (and generally two) appearing each weekday for the duration of the study. This record of continuity only occurred, though, after some stiff editorial resistance against the intrusion of classified advertising, particularly the Monday ‘Law List’. Chamberlin, as acting obituaries editor (and as a former editor of the paper), apparently had the fibre to ensure the page’s six-month survival. He conceded that it had not necessarily been a harmonious experience: ‘We have had a couple of shit fights about it.’<sup>121</sup>

Figure 8.26 shows the range of authors and sources which sustained that record.



**Figure 8.26** Author/source – *The Courier-Mail*  
 \*Knight-Ridder, Agence France-Presse, *Sunday Star* [NZ], Reuters, *Daily Mail*

### 1.7.2. Demographic selection (*The Courier-Mail*)

Australia’s eighth daily obituaries page began with a staff-written tribute to a Methodist minister who ‘preached the Gospel to all who would listen’.<sup>122</sup> Its rather earnest tone, and its flawed practice throughout of referring to ‘the Rev Nash [*sic*]’, did suggest that dull times might lie ahead. In the event, the first month established a pattern of demographic variety which was to endure (see Figure 8.27). Among the obituary subjects in those formative weeks were: an Aboriginal leader, a former coach of Australia’s national soccer team, a criminal of some notoriety, and an 84-year-old ‘lawn bowls identity’ who died when ‘attacked by a shark while taking his constitutional dawn swim in the canal behind his [Gold Coast] home’.<sup>123</sup>

Chamberlin expressed the hope that, with Queensland’s significant indigenous population, the newspaper would be able to develop its publication of Aboriginal obituaries. There had been difficulties, however, because of relatives’ insistence on editorial control.<sup>124</sup>

Actor/entertainer	24
Sporting identity	21
Musician/composer/conductor/songwriter	14
Politician/political aide	14
Corporate executive/entrepreneur	13
Writer/author	10
Priest/minister of religion	10
Military	10

**Figure 8.27** Demographic selection (leading categories) – *The Courier-Mail*

The military group included the obituary of Mick McGuinness, a veteran of the Australian Army’s Queensland Pigeon Corps. He was posted with forty of his birds to Papua New Guinea in World War II to provide communication in a region where mountains and humidity interfered with more modern methods. His story offered an intriguing capsule of campaign history:

Two pigeons would be released...carrying the same message or map folded and strapped to their legs...in case one was shot down, and many were....Two of the pigeons were awarded the Dickin Medal for bravery, the animal equivalent of the VC.<sup>125</sup>

### **1.7.3 Age specified: incidence of inclusion (*The Courier-Mail*)**

Age was specified in 219 (94 per cent) of the 234 obituaries. Readers, however, were often required to engage in some calculation, owing to the paper’s preference for presenting dates of birth and death in a ‘stand-first’ box without, in most instances, a statement of age in the text. On two occasions, the *Courier-Mail* had trouble calculating its own sums; in those instances, the in-text figure appeared to conflict with the ‘stand-first’ information. At times, the year of birth was given without a precise date; when this occurred twice on the same page (9 May 2003), the stature of the *Courier-Mail* as a newspaper of record – the image sought by its editor (see Chapter Five) – was affected accordingly.

#### 1.7.4 Cause of death specified: incidence of inclusion (*The Courier-Mail*)

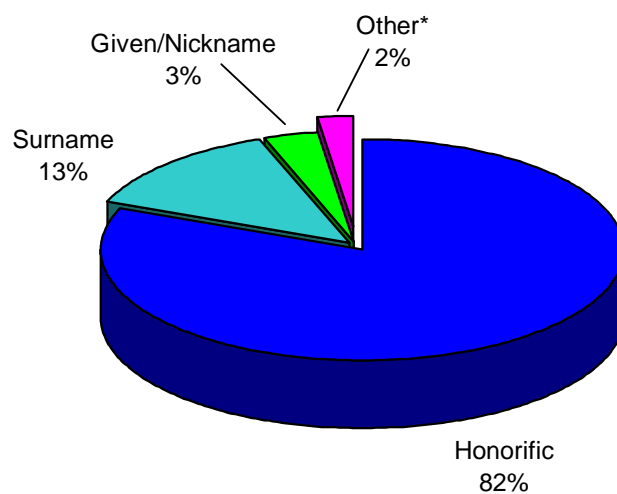
Cause of death was specified in seventy-three (31 per cent) of the *Courier-Mail* obituaries. The policy, for the most part, was to disregard it in local compositions when the subject was 70 or older. It was apparent, though, that the paper pursued cause with some vigour when the circumstances were unusual. A married couple in their late 70s, victims of a family murder-suicide, had their life and death outlined on the obituaries page,<sup>126</sup> and a club executive's fatal white-water rafting accident in Zimbabwe was described in detail.<sup>127</sup>

#### 1.7.5 Dominant reference (*The Courier-Mail*)

As Figure 8.28 shows, use of the honorific was by far the most popular (82 per cent) form of dominant reference. According to Chamberlin, this pattern was set in place by the courtesy title accorded the clergyman in the first obituary published on the new page:

The first obit...was a former minister of the Uniting Church, very well known in his active years, and when the sub-editor who handles most of our obituaries edited subsequent pieces it seemed appropriate that the honorific be maintained. There's no written instruction; it just happened that way.<sup>128</sup>

This practice was applied to the majority of syndicated material too; Figure 8.28 shows a 'surname' incidence of only 13 per cent.



**Figure 8.28** Dominant reference – *The Courier-Mail*  
\*he/she, full name

### 1.7.6 Gender balance (*The Courier-Mail*)

In the total of the 234 *Courier-Mail* obituaries, 189 (81 per cent) were of men and forty-five (19 per cent) of women. That finding is almost identical to figures determined in recent studies of the *New York Times*, *Boston Globe* and *Los Angeles Times*, as reported earlier in this chapter. On average, women's obituaries were slightly longer (64 column centimetres) than men's obituaries (61 column centimetres).

## Conclusions – Part One

Although Australian newspapers have responded to the obituary revival with enthusiasm, some imperfections and contradictions in style are apparent. In this context, the question of amateur contributions assumes significance, particularly as in some instances this source was responsible for at least a third of the obituaries published. Egalitarianism in subject selection and rapport with readership are undeniably virtues, but too much indulgence in terms of expression is permitted. One editor, committed to the cause of rewriting such submitted material, was highly critical of others who were less rigorous. He accused them of printing 'family-driven drivel, sentiment rather than journalism'.<sup>129</sup> The point has been made that inconsistent style and erratic expression can severely compromise a newspaper's status.

Cause of death, seen as important in American obituary writing, was treated with much caution in Australia. The highest incidence of including this factor was recorded by the *Australian* (41 per cent of obituaries); the lowest by the *Advertiser* (18 per cent). Reliance on amateur contributions was a major reason for this pattern.

Some erratic practice was detected in specifying the age of obituary subjects. Too often, readers were expected to calculate this for themselves or were left in confusion when their newspapers offered incomplete details or omitted reference to age altogether.

The six-month content analysis, in examining gender balance, found a sustained bias towards males. At its most extreme, this was demonstrated by the *Australian*: 84 per cent male to 16 per cent female. The *Sydney Morning Herald* recorded the highest female incidence (28 per cent). Overall, the results from this study were in line with obituary gender balance found in recent American research.

This examination of content has also identified a number of questions about contemporary execution of the obituary art in Australia: questions of technique, of resources, of sentiment, and of standards. These, as matters arising from the content analysis, will form the core of discussion in the following part of this chapter.

## chapter eight

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### Part Two. Contemporary obituary practice (Australia): matters for judgment

#### 2.1 Strengths and achievements

The content analysis of obituary publication by eight Australian newspapers, when studied in conjunction with the findings of earlier chapters, has indicated a number of accomplishments, along with some anomalies, since the revival of 1993. In judging those matters, the structure again adopted is that of, first, a consideration of publication principles, and, second, a reflection on questions of style.

##### 2.1.1 Publication principles

###### Egalitarianism

###### **Obituary**

Today the famous \_\_\_\_\_ died:  
press and TV people have gathered  
and word's come in that across the circuit  
the greats of the sport have spoken out  
in sadness and regret at his unfortunate passing.  
He dominated the field for a time,  
was widely praised as athlete and gentleman,  
won a great deal of money from tournament play  
and endorsements. There's talk already  
of speedy induction into the Hall of Fame.  
Millions across the world are mourning –  
his name will live on,  
memory will keep him alive in our hearts.

(Oh yes – and Mrs \_\_\_\_\_,  
67, of Reading, Pennsylvania;  
wife, mother, waitress, babysitter.  
Death has undone her also.)

– Timothy Myers<sup>1</sup>

The determination of Australian obituary pages to pursue egalitarianism in their subject policy would seem to address the poet's theme. Part One of this chapter has established the existence of a general willingness to publish obituaries of Australian citizens, regardless of their social stratification; that practice fits the 'human interest' criterion of core news values, as defined by Len Granato in his *Reporting & Writing News*.<sup>2</sup>



Granato finds that

Human-interest stories are usually about everyday people who are interesting in themselves or who do interesting things. Examples are personality spotlights on people who are not celebrities, such as the woman who has farmed her land for 70 years...[and] the man who collects farm machinery....Readers can identify with people in such stories.<sup>3</sup>

While there are suspicions that some Australian obituary pages apply the criterion without consistent discrimination, and will on occasions publish a contributed piece of dubious interest simply because it is a convenient way of filling space, the national record as a whole must be regarded as both honourable and commendable. There is plainly merit in a declared intention, as reported earlier in this chapter, to implement ‘a real kind of social justice...[through] celebrating little heroes’.<sup>4</sup> The ‘Untold Stories’ of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the anecdote-endowed obituaries of the *West Australian* demonstrate, in particular, the potential for narrative strength associated with this policy.

### **The vignettes of Bali**

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Eighty-eight Australians died as a result of the bomb detonated by Islamic extremists in October 2002 at a Bali night club.<sup>5</sup> Over the following ten weeks, three Australian newspapers – the *Australian*, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and the *Age* – each published a series of vignettes of the victims. As was the case in ‘Portraits of Grief’, at the *New York Times*, there was a departure from the conventional principles of obituary; the accent instead was on a brief but evocative character sketch, free of chronology. The *Australian* printed seventy-five in its series, entitled ‘Life Cut Short’; the *Sydney Morning Herald* printed fifty-three, with ‘As We Remember Them’ as its main title;<sup>6</sup> the *Age* printed forty-one of its ‘Australian Lives’.

These initiatives gave the spirit of obituary a fresh presence. The quality of writing was uniformly improved too; although readers were encouraged to ‘send their memories of a person they knew’, the hand of the professional re-write was apparent in each series.<sup>7</sup> The *Age*, accordingly, was able to begin its vignette of Justin Lee this way:

Justin Lee was known as an uncoordinated dancer. So when he got up to dance with his new wife, Stacey, at his wedding reception in North Geelong in February 1999, everyone was expecting a basic two-step. They were in for a big surprise. No-one knew the couple had been taking secret lessons before their big day. ‘They did this really lovely bridal waltz and everyone just couldn’t believe it – they were absolutely stunned that he could dance,’ says younger brother Randall.<sup>8</sup>

In line with the growing practice of Australian obituary publication at large, all three papers displayed a willingness to select youthful subjects. Chloe Byron, an *Australian* ‘Life Cut Short’, was a ‘bright and cheerful 15-year-old...the best female surfer in Bondi Longboard Club’.<sup>9</sup> Abbey Borgia, featured by the *Sydney Morning Herald*, was even younger:

‘She was only 13,’ said her best friend, Robert. He said it so simply, but looked so surprised. As if it couldn’t, shouldn’t, happen to anyone that young. Robert is 13 too. He lived down the road from the Borgias in a little street in Tempe, not so much a thoroughfare as a communal backyard.<sup>10</sup>

It represented, in sum, a sustained and unusual dedication of resources to the craft of obituary. The performance of the *Australian*, in securing life stories of seventy-five of the eighty-eight victims, was a singular achievement.

### **International flavour**

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As demonstrated by the content analysis, Australian obituary pages contain – often to a significant degree – syndicated material from sources overseas. Though there are occasions when the reliance on the wire services does appear to be misplaced (a point which is argued later in this chapter), it must be conceded that a breadth of vision is supplied too. The *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Herald Sun* and the *West Australian* each enriched its readership by carrying, in 2002, a powerful example of the obituary as a document of social attitude. In this instance, the life story was that of Ruth, Lady Khama, widow of Botswana’s first president.

The *Guardian* version, selected by the *Sydney Morning Herald*, told of the ructions caused in 1948 when Ruth Williams, an Englishwoman who had driven ambulances during the war, announced her betrothal to Seretse Khama, ‘a handsome black African’ who was a tribal chief-in-waiting in the British colony of Bechuanaland.<sup>11</sup> They were married in a registry office after the clergyman who had originally agreed

to officiate ‘lost his nerve’; Ruth Khama was sacked from her job at an insurance office; her father ‘turned her out of the house’; the South African prime minister described the marriage as ‘nauseating’; and connivance by successive British governments led to Seretse Khama’s banishment from his homeland for eight years.<sup>12</sup>

Suzy Baldwin, obituaries editor at the *Herald*, welcomes the global view which this form of syndication provides. The Khama obituary served a particular purpose, in that it demonstrated, for Baldwin, ‘just how distasteful I think xenophobia is’.<sup>13</sup> In Western Australia, Patrick Cornish, who published the *Daily Telegraph* version of the Khama story, believes that his readers ‘have much to gain’ from exposure to British and American obituaries.<sup>14</sup> He therefore tries to find room for at least one, from either of those sources, each day. The quality of the writing alone is, at times, persuasive – as the *Canberra Times* must have found when it decided to devote more than a column of its page to the American ‘agony aunt’ Ann Landers, as seen by the *Independent*:

Hitherto, advice columnists, as they are called in America, were prissy and dainty, tiptoeing around contentious issues and often wrapping replies in swathes of euphemism....To a husband who complained of his wife’s lack of attention, she told him not to lose hope, insisting that ‘Many are cold, but few are frozen.’ A Miss Icarus who wrote saying she wanted to marry her fiancé’s father was told simply, ‘Drop Daedalus.’<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps most seductive of all is the story, often unearthed by the British broadsheets, of aristocratic eccentricity, particularly when a nobleman’s occupation is at apparent odds with his ancestral calling. A Sydney morning in April 2002 was graced by the *Herald* re-print of a *Daily Telegraph* classic in this mould. It told of the 11<sup>th</sup> Earl of Kingston (nickname, ‘Thuggers’), who in 1967 had ‘embarked on a life of hectic socialising’ after inheriting £100,000 and who later complained that his income from a £600,000 trust fund was ‘not enough if you drink’.<sup>16</sup> The obituary dispassionately related the inglorious dénouement, when ‘he would often eat at a café in Willesden [an unfashionable London suburb]. Last year, he was to be found judging a pole-dancing competition at a night club in Ealing.’<sup>17</sup>

## Candid rendition

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When the inclination and resources are so disposed, the Australian product has a quality of candour and originality to equal that encountered in the better realisations of the internationally syndicated model. That strength was exercised in the obituary of David Lewis, an adventurer and doctor, written by Colin Putt. The *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age* each published it at length in November 2002. It told its tale simply, clearly, and honestly:

David Lewis is dead. Into his long life he packed as much adventure and achievement as any man, but he will be most remembered for making known the traditional systems of navigation used by the Pacific peoples....After the war, married and working as a doctor in London...he seemed then to have left the Pacific and the mountains behind, but...his marriage broke up and he was set adrift. Lewis would admit later to having been often married, and to numerous less formal relationships. Throughout this life he was an enthusiastic, happy, unashamed womaniser, but he was as much seduced as seducing.<sup>18</sup>

Bernard King, a celebrity chef and television talent show judge, was said to have ‘managed to offend contestants and viewers alike’ and to have worried that every dish presented by the British queen of the kitchen, Nigella Lawson, would ‘have a trailing hair through it’;<sup>19</sup> the Reverend Peter Bennie, a warden of St Paul’s College at the University of Sydney, was remembered for ‘dismissing the fellows with a contemptuous wave of his hand as a clique of Erastian lawyers’;<sup>20</sup> and James Anderson, a ‘hard man’ who made a career of King’s Cross vice, died when ‘he caught an infection after feeding rosellas’.<sup>21</sup>

As the recognition of ‘Big Jim’ Anderson would indicate, Australian newspapers are at times willing to publish obituaries of individuals who have undermined society. The candour was so pronounced in the obituary of Christopher Skase, written by Australian Associated Press and published in the *Age*, that *Smithsonian Magazine*, reviewing contemporary practice, was moved to comment on its explicit expression.<sup>22</sup> The *Age* began the posthumous appraisal of the fugitive entrepreneur with this:

To those closest to him, Christopher Skase was a man of vision, a creator of prosperity and a persecuted victim of witch-hunting governments. Alternatively, he is remembered as a scoundrel, a thief, a liar and a coward.<sup>23</sup>

The words were unsparing too in Janet Fife-Yeomans's February 2003 obituary of Julie Cashman, in the *Australian*. They noted, remorselessly, that she had been described as 'crooked as a three-dollar bill'.<sup>24</sup> That remorselessness was reprised in another *Australian* 'Time & Tide' account, four months later, of Jason Moran, 'one of the Melbourne underworld's most feared and violent standover men'.<sup>25</sup> The writer, Adrian Tame, recalled Moran's propensity for spectacular road rage and bloody revenge; it was further evidence of the obituary art's broader, and darker, canvas (Figure 8.29).

## Violent job with lethal payday

**Obituary**  
**Jason Moran**  
 Criminal. Born Melbourne, 1967. Died Melbourne, June 21, aged 36.

**I**T happened at one of Melbourne's busiest intersections before the term road rage had been coined. Jason Moran was driving one of his expensive, late model cars when another driver cut him off. As the two vehicles glided to a halt at the lights, Jason climbed out of the driving seat.

His trademark dark glasses, expensive suit and shaven head marked him as someone successful — a stockbroker maybe. The wheel brace clutched tightly in his right hand told a different story.

As Moran approached the other vehicle, he smashed the tool across the windscreen with one sudden, violent movement. Most of the glass ended up inside the vehicle in the lap of the by then very frightened driver. His ordeal wasn't over. Moran opened the driver's door, pulled the man on to the road and, with a series of viciously educated blows, punched him to the tarmac.

Moran returned to his car, unruffled and relaxed, as if he had just exchanged a few pleasantries with an old mate. This incident, part of the carefully constructed legend surrounding one of the Melbourne underworld's most feared and violent standover men, reveals a great deal about Moran, who died at the weekend in a hall of bullets in front of his six year old twins, daughter Memphis and son Christian.

For a stark, no self-respecting career criminal would involve himself in such a high risk attack on a square-head law abiding member of society over a right, imagined or otherwise. But Moran's temper regularly over ruled his intellect. That's why his half-brother Mark was known as the brains of the family and Jason as the muscle educated at state school, he left early, having attained very modest results.

Second, no criminal charges eventuated from the incident. Someone almost certainly warned the victim: you don't report your dealings with the Moran family, however bloody and trusting they are. It was his background with this family that ensured Moran would never aspire to anything other than a life of crime. He and Mark were the third generation of a brood feared even in Melbourne's most hardened criminal circles.

Still in his early teens, Moran announced his arrival on the scene with a death notice for legendary gunman Brian Kane after he was murdered in an inner-city hotel in the early '80s. "To Uncle Brian from your little mate," it read.

The death notice he composed for Mark, gunned down outside his luxury Essendon home in June 2000, was very different. "This is only the beginning, it will never be the end. Remember, I will never forget," were the threatening words Moran chose to commemorate his dead sibling. Moran was in jail at the time of the funeral and sat with his guards on special release, head in his hands at the back of the church, as Hells Angels in full colours trooped in to pay their respects.

Moran earned his own colours around the mean streets of Melbourne's western suburbs, graduating to membership of the Carlton Crew, a group of flogging gangsters. But it was during his first term behind bars when he earned respect for the ease with which he handled the violent environment.

As he and Mark grew older, their names, particularly Jason's, became linked with that of Alphonse Gangitano, a leading drug dealer and standover man who liked to be known as the Robert De Niro of Melbourne's "Little Italy", the restaurant stretch of Carlton's Lygon Street, where he held court.

Moran was with Gangitano when the pair smashed up a nightclub in King Street, leaving several patrons and staff bloody and broken from blows from pool cues.

Jason was serving his 30-month sentence for this outrage when Mark was murdered. Gangitano



**Feared:** Standover man Jason Moran was known as the muscle in his family

were in the back of a passenger van with a group of children, including the twins. The assailant emptied a shotgun and pistol into the two men, leaving them dying in front of the children.

Police believe the usually ultra-cautious Moran's guard would have been down at the time — the underworld code once forbade the involvement of children and families in vendettas.

The shooting was at least the 15th unsolved murder in the past five years, all believed to be part of the same vicious circle of payback killings.

Believed to have made as much as \$5 million from his drug dealing and standover activities, Moran, once called football champion Wayne Carey as a character witness in a court case.

Moran is survived by his partner Trisha, and Memphis and Christian, Adrian Tame

**Figure 8.29** The unforgettable. Jason Moran's life story demonstrates the changing character of the obituary page. The rogue element in society need no longer be consigned to the 'forgotten dead' identified in Chapter Two's literature review. (*Australian*, 25 June 2003)

### The obituary as social history

The Australian obituary art, when practised with fortitude, clearly deserves recognition as the ounce in history. At the death of Diana, Lady Mosley in August 2003, the British wire services responded in their predictably competent manner; the *Sydney Morning Herald*, however, chose to print an obituary by one of its own freelance contributors, Mark McGinness. It was, said his editor, superior to any of the syndicated products.<sup>26</sup> He wrote of ‘the last woman alive who knew both Hitler and Churchill intimately’, of her early years as one of the six Mitford girls, of her first marriage to ‘a gentle and dreamy scion of the Beerage [*sic*]’, and of her subsequent imprisonment and voluntary exile as the wife of Sir Oswald Mosley, leader of the British Union of Fascists.<sup>27</sup> The period of wartime internment was delivered with particular assurance:

After some time, and the intervention of Churchill, the couple were allowed to share prison quarters. Sex offenders (‘because they are so clean and honest’) were sent to do their housework. The prisoners were allowed to grow produce in the sooty soil; Diana remarked that she ‘never grew such *fraises de bois* [wild strawberries] again’. So, despite the horrors, the Mitford magic seemed to work; as one of the warders remembered, ‘Oh, we’ve never had such laughs since Lady Mosley left.’<sup>28</sup>

The obituary as a social indicator of life in the Australian theatre was portrayed with a similar measure of adroitness by Rodney Fisher, in writing of Gwen Plumb. Readers of the *Australian* were served a diverting history lesson on the radio serials of the 1940s, the popularity of traditional pantomime, the birth of Sydney’s Old Tote Theatre Company, and the first television ‘soaps’.<sup>29</sup>

Students of the fashion industry in Australia and New Zealand would find enlightenment by reading the *Sydney Morning Herald* obituary of Hall Ludlow. Diana Masters, who modelled Australia’s ‘Gown of the Year’ designed by Ludlow in 1959, related his initial difficulties in an Australasian society more comfortable with a blue singlet than *haute couture*.<sup>30</sup> In 1945, she wrote, Ludlow’s first patron had

ordered her 15 seamstresses not to giggle about him because he was a man, and the first man in the country [New Zealand] who wanted to make dresses. The Labour Department made her put in another lavatory.<sup>31</sup>

## Cause and effect

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At some newspapers, particularly those so-called ‘family newspapers’ which seek to maintain a reader-reporter rapport, the precise specifying of cause of death can be too harsh for the bereaved. Such was the case in the deaths – and the June 2002 *Herald Sun* obituaries – of David Lucas and Aaron O’Keefe in Melbourne. The obituary of Lucas, aged 18 and described in the ‘stand-first’ as ‘loved son, footballer’, contained an allusion to an ‘accident’.<sup>32</sup> That of O’Keefe, also 18 and described as ‘loved son and sportsman’, offered no clue at all to the cause. Instead, it took the form of a racking *cri du coeur*, an unsigned and extended death notice rather than an obituary in form:

The sorrow in our hearts is great, but the strength we gain, from having known and loved Aaron, is greater. He would want us to remember him fondly, but also to use the positive insight into the human condition which he has shown us as a constant source of inspiration....He was inspirational, humble, easygoing, generous and considerate, but above all he was our Aaron.<sup>33</sup>

At no stage in the text was there any identification or interpretation of the ‘our’, the ‘we’, or the ‘us’. The reporter assigned to the *Herald Sun* obituaries desk at the time, Paula Beauchamp, recalled that the family had been so deeply distressed that a discussion about newspaper style and inclusion of cause of death would have seemed heartless. ‘In the end...I was willing to go with what they wanted,’ she said.<sup>34</sup> Neither of the obituaries had been able to broach the fact that the two young men had been killed together in a traffic accident three months earlier, and that an inquest had found ‘excessive speed’ the cause.<sup>35</sup> The O’Keefe family, well known in Melbourne’s football community, had previously lost a child to sudden infant death syndrome. In a seasonal feature about the effects of the road toll six months later, they told the *Australian* that their continued grief had prevented any celebration of Christmas.<sup>36</sup>

Omission of cause is perhaps less easy to justify when the subject is middle-aged and when the events leading to death are unusual. Neil Roberts, 47, an artist, was killed by a train when trying to rescue his dog. His obituary in the *Canberra Times* gave a measured, yet explicit, account;<sup>37</sup> so did the *Sydney Morning Herald*’s:

Neil Roberts lived as lovingly, heroically and unpredictably as he died....Siddha [the dog] ran out onto the track as a train was rounding the bend. Possibly hearing the train, but believing he still had time, Roberts tried to scoop the dog from the track. They both died instantly.<sup>38</sup>

In Adelaide, however, the *Advertiser* elected not to include the circumstances of Roberts's death, leaving readers with an appraisal of a life but no clue as to its apparently premature interruption.<sup>39</sup> The same finding could be made of the *Canberra Times* in its obituary of David Adamson, a 'vibrant, energetic and popular' veterinary surgeon.<sup>40</sup> This winner of Australia's 'Small Animal Practitioner of the Year' award had died at 55; no attempt was made to explain the reason for the end of that vibrancy, energy and distinguished achievement.

Candid inclusion of cause, when delivered without euphemism or circumlocution, can enrich both the force of the obituary itself and the substance of the character sketch it contains. The *Herald Sun* succeeded in those measures, albeit in idiosyncratic style, with its obituary of Ian McKiggan, a Royal Australian Air Force research officer whose cancer was attributed to radiation exposure at the Maralinga atomic weapon tests:

Chemo [*sic*] was something to get over quickly, to get back to the amber fluid. 'Leukemia?' he said once, scornfully. 'It's cringing in a corner. Leukemia's licked.' It was, too. He blew raspberries at the Grim Reaper for years. His optimism was boundless, and his taste for the good things of life was barely diminished. He lasted as long as he did, and far longer than he should have, because life was emphatically worth living.<sup>41</sup>

Leukemia, contracted perhaps from the effects of nuclear testing or theatre of war, was also discussed openly by the two amateur contributors who wrote the *Sydney Morning Herald* obituary of Michael Aroney, a surgeon. The writers were his daughters, and they used this opportunity to convey the cause and to seek an explanation for it:

Only further research will show if the lymphatic leukemia which cut short his life could have been the result of his probable exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam or to the patients he operated on in Boston who had returned from Bikini Atoll in the early '60s after exposure to radiation from American nuclear testing.<sup>42</sup>

The *Age* offered candour, a dignified economy of expression, and an engaging anecdote in describing the cause of Paul Kennedy's death. This was an amateur contribution too, with the writer in this instance being Kennedy's niece:



At 52 years of age, Paul Kennedy had a stroke on the beach at Eden. He had just surprised his wife of 31 years, Kate, by producing a billy [a cooking implement] from his pack and making a cup of tea for her. He was taking a break because he had been under intense pressure working on the Academic Management System project at RMIT [Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology]. The stroke killed him.<sup>43</sup>

The stroke killed him. Those four words, in their simplicity and directness, demonstrate that it is possible to specify the cause of death in an obituary without necessarily raising accusations of an affront to grief or an assault on privacy.

### **Taste and maturity**

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The task of the obituary editor demands acute diplomacy, in securing and relaying a reasoned account, when the cause of death is suicide. In this regard, Patrick Cornish has developed a form of expression which serves as an exemplar of both clarity and restraint. Devoting his page on 22 August 2003 to the story of John Ince (Figure 8.30), a nurse and part-time actor, he wrote:

What united all these people, at the theatre [for his last performance, in *Godspell*] in March and April, was an appreciation of the talents evident in John's life. What united them again, less than three months later, was astonishment that he should have chosen to end his life, just before his 32<sup>nd</sup> birthday.<sup>44</sup>

His obituary of Lisette Nigot, a former lecturer in French at the University of Western Australia, offered an even more straightforward statement of cause:

Lisette Nigot took her own life, a month before her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. 'I am terminating my life now because I want to have control over my death,' she wrote.... 'I do not intend to wait till it is too late to die with dignity.'<sup>45</sup>

Those words appeared in the *West Australian* four months after her death. There have been other instances of cautious, deliberate response to suicide. The *Age*, at the death of a university lecturer, delayed publishing his obituary for nearly six months; it acknowledged his depression while noting also that 'his optimism, strength and determination seemed capable of withstanding any challenge'.<sup>46</sup> The *Advertiser*, when a prominent businesswoman killed herself, waited for three months. Her family, said the Adelaide obituaries editor of the day (in 2001), had needed that interval before they could participate in a public expression of their loss.<sup>47</sup>

## A coat of many colours

### John Hastings Ince

Born: London, July 1971  
Died: Perth, June 2003

*Prepare ye the way of the Lord  
Prepare ye the way of the Lord*

AS THE audience for *Godspell* settled into their seats at Subiaco's Regal Theatre, enjoying the prologue that launches the show, a trumpet sounded and actor/singer John Ince moved towards centre stage. This was the moment he had waited for. "Prepare ye . . . , bringing together three key strands of his life: music, theatre and expression of religious faith.

His five performances as John the Baptist and three as Judas Iscariot — a dramatic but much smaller role — were enjoyed not only by fans of the 1970s musical based on the Gospel of St Matthew but also by many who had got to know and like John in the 18 months since his arrival in WA from England.

There was his close friend, Vernon, and colleagues from Hollywood Hospital palliative care centre, where his rousing singing at staff barbecues complemented his sterling work as a nurse. Purple suits were among his louder attire but his professional tone was always gentle and supportive.

Also at the Regal were fellow worshippers from St George's Cathedral, where he had been an "excellent" server, says Theresa Harvey, Canon Pastor. This role entails such tasks as carrying candles and the processional cross, assisting the celebrant at the altar, and swinging the incense carrier.

There were members of the Gilbert and Sullivan Society of WA, who had laughed at his spoof performance as Prince Victor of Kleptomaniac at last year's Christmas party.

From other parts of John's "amazing multi-coloured dreamcoat" of a life were vegetarians, Shakespeare buffs and members of the Cornish Association of WA, for people who are either from Cornwall or have links with England's far south-western county.

What united all these people, at the theatre in March and April, was an appreciation of the talents evident in John's life. What united them again, less than three months later, was astonishment that he should have chosen to end his life, just before his 32nd birthday.

Among the many groups attending his memorial service in the cathedral — the music he had chosen included *Let It Be* and *The Day Thou Gavest, Lord, Has Ended* — was the Cornish Association, who had been delighted when he joined in February last year and told about his early life in Cornwall.

His father, Dr John Ince, became the county's first consultant obstetrician/gynaecologist in 1944. His mother, Pat, was a midwife who had worked with the doctor for many years and married him after his first wife's death.

John's cousin, Jane, who lives in WA, says his father spent a lot of time with him in pre-school days, taking him to many church services and other functions which would instill a fascination with the ceremonial and spectacular aspects of Christianity.

The boy's love of drama grew through theatre outings with his mother. If a pair of tickets could be had for *Phantom of the Opera* in London, for example, she would seize the opportunity. The television character *Dr Who* had no greater fan than John. At school his flair for drama and singing was noticeable; at St Euny church in Redruth he was a chorister and server.

The natural course was to study drama and religious knowledge at Brunel University in London, where he passed with first-class honours. Thwarted in two attempts to become a priest, he switched to nursing, training at King's College and St Thomas hospital in London.

Palliative care, for the terminally ill, never struck him as a gloomy field of specialisation.

On the contrary, he saw it as a way of closest possible connection with patients and their families.

Impressed by his mother's glowing reports of WA, following her visit from Cornwall to Jane — her niece — John decided to accompany his mother on the next trip. Perth, he decided, was where he wished to settle. "John loved the open way of life in Perth," his mother wrote in an obituary for her local paper in Redruth. "He was happy in his work and enjoyed amateur dramatics and choral groups."

Jane says the cousin who was godfather to her daughter, Sophie, was "one in a million, colourful, vibrant and warm. He had the ability to make everyone feel important and explore their creative side."

When theatre director Trevor Patient held auditions for *Godspell*, at King Street Arts Theatre in December last year, he could have prayed for the likes of John Ince. "I was seeking singers, actors, acrobats, jugglers . . . this was going to be one of the more zany *Godspells*," he recalls.

Since the cast were required to act out parables, it would help if some could speak in tongues, literally rather than spiritually. John's resumption of his boyhood West Country accent, to play the father in *The Prodigal Son* segment, was a hoot.

"He had the knack of making us all laugh. Finding and playing a plastic trumpet whose one note happened to be the one desired. But also sometimes singing an octave higher than the composer designed. John was the kind to open up to people instead of bottling up his emotions. He auditioned for the Blues Brothers, which was recently at The Playhouse and Concert Hall, and would have played one of the policemen."

On the weekend of June 21-22, John seemed in good spirits, according to all reports by those who saw him at the cathedral and more generally in the company of friends. He had not missed any shifts at work.

Less than 48 hours later, early on Tuesday, June 24, the day on which Christians celebrate the feast of John the Baptist's nativity, he died at home in Shenton Park, in the flat he had once shared with friends.

A handwritten note included instructions for a funeral service from a Celtic liturgy book found in his room. The dress code was: "Black is fine but no boring conventional suits! Colours and fancy dress welcomed! Make it fun!"

Theresa Harvey carried out his wish to take the cathedral service and urged everyone to follow his "fun prescription" as much as possible. "John has done it again!" is how she began her welcome address. "As ever with John, we are surprised, challenged and outside our comfort zone, this time, with feelings of outrage, grief, bewilderment, confusion . . ."

"We have come here because of our affection, respect and love for a man who saw life through a different lens from many of us. That was part of his appeal and it is part of what enabled him to make this decision."

Balloons were released at a later gathering at King's Park.

After a cremation in Cornwall, half the ashes were placed next to those of John's father who had died when his only son was six. The other half will be brought to Perth and thrown, as John's final note specified, in the sea off Swanbourne.

One of his friends and admirers, Dr Peter Simpson, recalls sitting next to him in the cathedral when a man leaned over the pew and spoke. He was the widower of a lawyer who died of motor neurone disease last year. "You nursed my wife," he explained. "I want you to know how much I appreciated everything you did for her. And for me."

In John's mother's garden in Cornwall, plants grow out of a pair of purple boots once worn by the man of many colours.

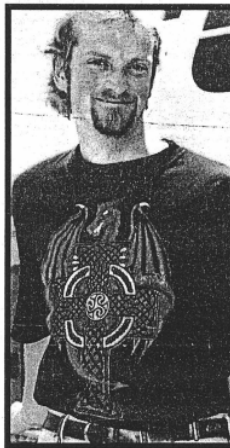


Figure 8.30 Delicate theme. A note of 'astonishment that he should have chosen to end his life': John Ince's obituary in the *West Australian*. While the fact of his suicide was conveyed with clarity, the words used to report it were selected judiciously. (*West Australian*, 22 August 2003)

A delay of such proportion might seem at variance with the essential purpose of a newspaper, the conveying of topical information. In the instance of the obituary, though, some tolerance can surely be entertained for negotiation and reflection. The end of the life story is not, by definition, going to change. This maturing process is practised, in particular, by the *Age*: its obituary of Jane Scally, an interior designer, waited just under five months;<sup>48</sup> of Joan Dickson, a patron of the arts, just over five months;<sup>49</sup> and of Charles Wain, a country doctor, nearly eight months.<sup>50</sup> It should be noted that in each of these instances, there was no indication of suicide or suggestion of pervasive trauma. It seems, rather, that the circumstances for completing the history demanded their full season, and the editor was content to sanction it. Hugh Massingberd and Andrew McKie, of London's *Daily Telegraph*, have both conceded in interviews for this thesis that a delay of six months can be acceptable. Perhaps, in a time of frantic news service 'sound bites', the occasional contemplative obituary is not such a bad thing.

### **2.1.2 The discipline of newspaper style**

#### **Words of quality**

---

The job of an editor at an Australian newspaper's obituary department is a solitary affair. Interviews for this thesis have disclosed that regular support, in the form of written contributions by staff members, is found at just two of the papers studied: the *Courier-Mail* and the *West Australian*. Even then, most of the writing in Perth is by the obituaries editor. The only other indication of editorial assistance is in the occasional pieces by specialist writers at the *Australian* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*. The position at the *Herald* offers a revealing comparison when its staffing is weighed against that of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, a publication of similar character serving a region of similar population size. Kay Powell, obituaries editor at the *Journal-Constitution*, has a staff of two full-time writers and one part-time writer. As the first part of this chapter has disclosed, Suzy Baldwin, at the *Herald*, does the job alone and has to edit a daily reader forum entitled 'The Heckler'.

When the opportunity is there, however, and when some dollars are made available to commission a contributor of quality, *Herald* obituaries achieve sophistication of style. This happy union produced, in November 2003, David Marr's appraisal of Manoly Lascaris, life partner of Patrick White, the novelist. The opening paragraph, so often in journalism an indicator of the standard that is to follow, offered this felicitous construction:

Manoly Lascaris, an urbane man of great strength, was the original of all the dark Greeks in Patrick White's novels, and fragments of his Levantine family's history – their fabled descent from Byzantine emperors and their ruin in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – appear in nearly every novel White wrote after the two men met one afternoon in wartime Alexandria.<sup>51</sup>

In a political reflection, Jim Cairns, a former deputy prime minister and guiding force of Australia's moratorium marches of the 1970s, was accorded an obituary of elegance and restrained power by both the *Herald* and the *Age* (the two newspapers are owned by the Fairfax publishing house). Paul Ormonde, a Melbourne author who wrote Cairns's biography, was commissioned into service for the joint project, and delivered a work of impressive authority:

In 1977, he [Cairns] left politics to write and to lead the Down to Earth movement....His many later books were unedited and privately published. They were a serial analysis of his fundamental doctrine of sexual liberation as the key to a non-violent society. He sold them personally at suburban markets. Few people read them. Cairns had become an isolated figure pointing to a world beyond the reach of conventional and political processes.<sup>52</sup>

From his biographical research, Ormonde was also able to relate the strangely haunted relationship which existed between Cairns and his mother, who had contracted syphilis from his father:

An erroneous fear of contagion was the reason that she never kissed or cuddled him....When she became bedridden in her later years, she obliged him to visit her regularly, often at considerable inconvenience to him, right up to her death in 1965. Their greeting was a handshake.<sup>53</sup>

The manifestation of professional obituary practice, when intent and energy and expense allow, does have the power to spring from the page. The anecdote was delivered with dexterity by Philip Jones in writing of John Paterson, a 'diastrophic dwarf' who achieved high rank in public service.<sup>54</sup> At an early court appearance, as a research officer, Paterson was ordered by the judge to stand while addressing the bench. 'I am, sir,' he replied.<sup>55</sup> John Farquharson applied the same technique, with an equal measure of skill, in his *Age* obituary of Alexander Borthwick, a diplomat:

With his clipped speech, chivalry and great sense of humour, he was also good at the throwaway line. An instance of this was when the Duke of Edinburgh asked him whether his family of nine meant he was a good Catholic. 'No,' Alex replied, 'just a careless Anglican.'<sup>56</sup>

There was the story, in the *Age* too, of Phyllis Baumgarten, a Melbourne teacher who had been a member of the wartime resistance movement in her native Denmark. Susan Hudson, a freelance contributor, told of Baumgarten's loss of an arm in a childhood accident, of her subsequent courage in carrying messages in her prosthesis, her 'nightmare escape' from the Gestapo, and how – late in life while on holiday in Bali – she had hidden some money in the arm, 'just in case'.<sup>57</sup>

Talent, however, is too often itself secreted by another form of resistance: an unwillingness, by newspaper management, to channel resources towards obituary pages. Australian departments at large, not just that of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, are notably under-staffed and under-funded when compared with those of Britain and the United States. David Bowman, formerly editor-in-chief of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and now a contributing obituarist for London's *Daily Telegraph*, is dismayed by what he encounters in Australia:

There is indeed too much stuff from overseas. I haven't the slightest doubt that this is entirely a matter of resources; the overseas stuff is so much cheaper than paying journalists....There need to be enough full-time obit journalists to develop and rewrite amateur contributions as necessary, and to initiate the most significant work. And, of course, the budget should also be big enough to allow commissioning where advisable.<sup>58</sup>

The quality of original writing on Australia's obituary pages assumes, therefore, an intermittent strength. When the resources are denied, the professional is discomfited by the amateur, the urbane by the suburban.

### **Sensitivity on survivors**

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The existence of same-sex surviving partners has, gradually, come to be acknowledged in obituaries. In considering this question of style in the Australian context, it is first worth recalling the blend of awkwardness and avoidance which followed the death, in February 1999, of Don Dunstan, a flamboyant premier of the state of South Australia in the 1960s and 1970s. London's *Times* offered a hint of candour:

Dunstan's sexuality and private life were a source of intrusive fascination. His mood was often camp, and the famous pink shorts [worn at a session of parliament] were taken by many as an arrogant affirmation of his sexual inclinations.<sup>59</sup>

The *Times*, however, chose to ignore the fact, well known in Dunstan's home state, that the former politician – though twice married, once divorced and once widowed – had a male partner. It closed the obituary by saying he was survived by 'two sons and a daughter from his first marriage'.<sup>60</sup> The *Canberra Times* referred to 'the children of his [first] marriage...and two grandchildren';<sup>61</sup> the *Sunday Age* listed the same survivors.<sup>62</sup> A cryptic grouping appeared in the *Australian*, at the end of an obituary by Peter Ward, a professional writer who had been Dunstan's executive assistant for seven years: 'He is survived by his first wife, Gretel, daughter Bronwyn, sons Andrew and Paul, and by Stephen Cheng.'<sup>63</sup>

The identity of Mr Cheng was explained, eventually, to Australian newspaper readers by the *Advertiser*, the morning paper of the state capital, Adelaide. Though the *Advertiser* itself had ignored him in five days of posthumous print, its columnist Samela Harris offered enlightenment on the sixth day:

Something was missing at the Don Dunstan Memorial Service yesterday. That 'something' was any mention of Stephen Cheng, Don Dunstan's partner in life and business. In the theatre foyer later, people who knew Don, and many who didn't, expressed their sadness at such an omission.<sup>64</sup>

Four days before that, however, it had been Philip Jones, writing for a British audience in the *Guardian*, who told the tale free of furtiveness: 'He is survived by his first wife, his daughter, two sons, grandchildren and his companion Stephen Cheng.'<sup>65</sup>

Obituary composition for Australian consumption has since, perhaps, advanced apace. Editors interviewed for this thesis displayed a general inclusiveness of intent; Patrick Cornish, of the *West Australian*, took the mood of catholicity even further by saying that he would try to identify the significance of a 'long-term companion' in the body of the text.<sup>66</sup> Both the *West Australian* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* strive for this construction, in referring to all survivors, so that they can finish with a literary flourish. Suzy Baldwin, at the *Herald*, practises this where possible because: 'I regard it [the obituary] as a feature, and I prefer to end with a proper sentence, a sense of an ending. I'll put the survivors further up.'<sup>67</sup>

Though the published lists of surviving family members and partners, in Australian obituaries, are generally much briefer and less detailed than those favoured by the American press, extended references do sometimes appear. Cameron Ross, of the

*Canberra Times*, says he would countenance the inclusion of grandchildren's names 'if it's not a huge list'.<sup>68</sup> Of even more significance, though, has been the occasional preparedness of editors, as favoured by Cornish, to elevate same-sex partners to a textual position of prominence. Such an instance occurred in 2001, two years after the Dunstan hesitancy, in the *Age* obituary of Ian Williams, where the opening paragraph was illuminating in this regard:

his life changed drastically in early 1974 at the age of 26, when he had a serious car accident at Chiltern, which left him a quadriplegic. In 1976 he met his life-partner, John Porter, and they lived together...for the next 25 years.<sup>69</sup>

The second paragraph then discussed the difficulty, experienced at that time, in finding acceptance 'of disabled people having sexual relationships', particularly in a homosexual alliance.<sup>70</sup> The obituary proceeded to report Williams's subsequent advocacy on behalf of the disabled and his presidency of South Australia's gay counselling service. His partner, who submitted this piece to the *Age*, was given a by-line and an explanatory end-credit.

In this area of discussion, it is of relevance to observe also that the obituaries of Manoly Lascaris, one of which has been noted previously in this chapter for its quality, were published solely because of his relationship with a man of distinction. As the *Australian* said:

He was not a shy man but preferred to stay in the background...[Patrick] White was the star and the genius in the relationship...Lascaris regarded himself as secondary to the main act.<sup>71</sup>

That overt display of worldliness in subject choice provides further evidence of the obituary's evolving sophistication. Done well, it is the most mature of the journalism arts, as Ari Goldman, a Columbia University professor of journalism, has found: 'I came to realize that, like youth, obituary writing is all too often wasted on the young.'<sup>72</sup>

## **2.2 Inadequacy and inconsistency**

In its pursuit of matters for judgment within British and American contemporary practice, this thesis has offered a critical voice where merited. From observation and interview in Britain, it has addressed a somewhat antiquated treatment of women, the intrusion of subjectivity in some signed obituaries, and an occasional incidence of

disorder in style. In the United States, the process has disclosed an engagement with reportage to the detriment of creativity, some cluttered lead paragraphs, and unnecessarily detailed lists of surviving family.

The regime of observation and interview in Australia has, deliberately, attempted to present a rounded view; the strengths and achievements considered in this chapter are evidence of that approach. In addition, the denial of operating resources has been acknowledged as a limiting factor. There is, nevertheless, a welter of inadequacy and inconsistency too; those deficiencies warrant their own informed and measured commentary.

### **2.2.1 Publication principles**

#### **A cultural gap**

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The readiness of Australian obituary editors to use internationally syndicated material has, earlier in this chapter, been applauded for its ability to confer quality and vision. At times, though, their pages are filled by accounts which appear to be of minimal relevance to Australia. A demonstration of this cultural gap's materialisation is found in the 11 October 2001 edition of the *Age*, when 126 column centimetres of space (more than two entire columns) was devoted to the *Washington Post* obituary of Herbert L. Block, a cartoonist who won a Pulitzer Prize in 1942.<sup>73</sup> For an Australian audience, this was arguably about five times as long as was necessary.

In the same vein of over-subscription, both the *Sydney Morning Herald* (170 col. cm.) and the *Age* (111 col. cm.) dedicated the greater part of an obituaries page to Britain's Lord Wilberforce, 'the former senior lord of appeal', who died in February 2003.<sup>74</sup> The *Herald* chose the *Daily Telegraph* wire service; the *Age* preferred the *Guardian*'s. Wilberforce's decisions, indisputably, endured as 'precedents in key areas of civil and criminal law' but it was doubtful that Australian readers were necessarily intrigued by much of the legal and historical minutiae, given its persistent British complexion.<sup>75</sup>

The gap assumes another perspective, and becomes more pronounced, if the subject is Australian, yet the obituary has been composed abroad. Two sporting examples, both from the cricket field, sustain the argument. When Ernie Toshack, a member of the 'The Invincibles' (the name popularly bestowed upon the Australian squad which toured England in 1948), died in May 2003, the *Australian* published a substantial



obituary.<sup>76</sup> The end-credit attributed it to ‘The Times and agencies’.<sup>77</sup> In fact, all except the last paragraph, which contained the names of Toshack’s wife and daughter, came from the *Times*; no effort was made, it would seem, to secure an appraisal by a former player in Australia or by a staff sports writer.

This easy acceptance of the British product occurred again in July 2003, at the death of Doug Ring, another member of that 1948 squad. The *Age* plucked the *Telegraph* obituary off the wire.<sup>78</sup> It supplied, as would be expected from the *Telegraph*, a detailed assessment of his playing days. What it entirely ignored, however, was Ring’s significant later career in Melbourne, as a cricket administrator and as a presenter on a commercial television sporting program. A reader’s letter, justifiably, found fault with the newspaper’s strange Anglo-centricity: ‘What is going on? Your obituary for the cricketer Doug Ring,...who lived all his life in Melbourne, was reprinted from the *Telegraph* of London.’<sup>79</sup>

#### **An absence of military authority**

As has been established, an excessive condoning of amateur contributions can undermine the authority of an obituary page. This inadequacy is found, in particular, when amateurs try to write on a military theme, as has occurred in some contributed obituaries of recent times.

The *Age* obituary of Allan Box, a military historian, was flawed by the misspelling of *Gallipoli*, the film dramatisation of the campaign which inspired Australia’s annual remembrance of sacrifice in war.<sup>80</sup> It rendered it as *Galipolli*. Mr Box’s obituary was also poorly written, by ‘a colleague and friend’, with this *non sequitur* (and intrusion of a hideous neologism) presenting one of the more egregious instances of ill-advised expression: ‘He so took to heart Australia’s military heritage that he once collapsed while giving an Anzac Day address, and was helicoptered to Melbourne.’<sup>81</sup> Logic, editing, proofreading and vocabulary appear to have collapsed too.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* compromised its standing with an obituary, by contributors, of the film-maker Richard Mason. Their text, in describing his wartime experiences, stated: ‘He had enlisted in 1944 on his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday and, after jungle training at Kanangra [*sic*], was sent to Cowra POW camp as a guard.’<sup>82</sup> The jungle training centre is, in reality, at Canungra, in south-east Queensland; a routine check with the Australian War Memorial’s information section or with military public relations would have established the spelling.

In Melbourne, the *Age* was hopelessly at sea with its dismal obituary of Captain Stanley Darling, DSC and two Bars. Captain Darling won his Distinguished Service Cross, and its Bars, for sinking three U-boats while serving as a frigate commander. His obituary was contributed by a nephew, 'drawing on naval records and family recollections'; its subject was described, throughout, by two diminutives, 'Uncle Stan' and 'Stan'.<sup>83</sup> There were many deficiencies in the delivery: 'Stan', according to the text, had begun his naval life as 'a reserve's [*sic*] cadet' (ungrammatical and nonsensical reference to the Royal Australian Naval Volunteer Reserve); his anti-submarine patrols were said to have taken him to the 'Faroes [*sic*] Islands' (correct form is 'Faroe Islands' or 'the Faroes'); he 'joined the Second Escort Group' in 1944 (his *Daily Telegraph* obituary, written by a specialist on naval history, refers to this force as the 'Second Support Group' and, therefore, calls into question the accuracy of 'Escort'); an exclamation mark, that dire instrument of social club newsletters, is used to convey the drama of a successful attack on a U-boat; though Darling's submarine kills are described, there is no specified linking of any of them to his decorations.<sup>84</sup>

The poverty of amateur writing will be discussed again, at the end of this chapter. Before leaving the 'Uncle Stan' obituary, however, it is worth reflecting on two singularly unfortunate paragraphs within its narrative. There is this, as part of an attempt to describe post-war events: 'His portrait is hung in the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, in recognition of his services, but he never saw it that way.'<sup>85</sup> The meaning of that recollection is elusive. There is also, as the lead, this:

Stanley Waldron Darling was born in Bellerive, Tasmania. His father, William, was a surveyor and town planner in Hobart and a skilful yachtsman. His mother, Ethel, was one of Tasmania's first women justices of the peace.<sup>86</sup>

That is as wooden as his father's dinghy. The *Daily Telegraph's* syndicated obituary began rather more engagingly: 'Captain Stan Darling, who has died aged 95, was a much decorated U-boat hunter, and Australia's most successful ocean-racing navigator.'<sup>87</sup>

### **Missed opportunities**

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The selection of obituary subjects often gives the appearance of being as haphazard as the standard of amateur composition. Some of the omissions, in particular, suggest the presence of imperfections in contemporary practice. Elizabeth Bond, a prominent Melbourne broadcaster of the 1960s and 1970s, received an appropriately generous obituary in the *Age*, yet did not appear on the *Herald Sun*'s page;<sup>88</sup> Father Gerard Brosnan, priest for thirty years at Melbourne's maximum security prison, made the obituaries page of the *Herald Sun* but not that of the *Age*;<sup>89</sup> an obituary of Peter Costigan, Lord Mayor of Melbourne 1999–2001, appeared in the *Australian* but both the Melbourne-based papers restricted themselves to reports on their news pages;<sup>90</sup> a former world champion surfer, Stuart Entwhistle, who died in Sydney of skin cancer, was ignored by all newspapers.

In each of those instances, an opportunity for the essence of the obituary art – namely, its capacity to provide an instant biography of immediate social relevance – was neglected. That neglect occurred again in Melbourne following the death of Edmund Rouse, an owner of media enterprises in Tasmania jailed for trying to bribe a member of parliament. His fall from grace had been related in a graphic obituary for the *Australian* by Bruce Montgomery:

In June 1989, Rouse, then chairman of a company that owned a Tasmanian daily newspaper, two television stations, radio stations and timber interests, tried to overturn the result of a state election. The election of five Australian Greens, who would wield the balance of power, did not suit him....Through an intermediary, he tried to bribe Labor MP Jim Cox, a former employee, with \$110,000 payable over four years to defect to the Liberals on a no-confidence motion. Cox blew the whistle.<sup>91</sup>

The *Canberra Times* printed the Australian Associated Press version, written by Don Woolford, who quoted a former Tasmanian state premier as likening Rouse's fall to a Greek tragedy.<sup>92</sup> Rouse also had held significant media interests in Melbourne, and spent his final years there after serving eighteen months of his three-year sentence, with his Commander of the British Empire award revoked. Neither Melbourne paper, however, pursued the prospect of an obituary. Perhaps the relatives just did not send one in.

### Missing pages

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Some obituary pages have to endure the intermittent disregard of their own publishers. By December 2003, ten years after the first acts of revival, three of the eight Australian newspapers with a designated page were labouring under that treatment.

Part One of this chapter has already discussed the pressure on editorial space which has seen 'Time & Tide' reduced to a weekly feature of the *Australian*. In Canberra, the *Times* was maintaining its regular Friday enactment of the art, though – as Chapter Five has reported – there were signs of a gradual decline in the number of obituaries appearing on that page. Chapter Five also addressed the disorder which afflicts 'This Life', in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. At its best, with boldness of design and quality of expression, 'This Life' is a page of some stature. That virtue is diminished, however, by its recurrent eclipse as a result of pressures on column space (usually, it would seem, occasioned by events of the bread-and-circus variety). A depressingly spectacular occurrence was recorded in the week beginning Monday, 3 November 2003: there were two obituaries that day, none at all on the next four days, and one on the Saturday.

The events which had, apparently, contributed to that hiatus were the finals of the rugby world championship and the running of Australia's major horse race of the year, the Melbourne Cup. In those circumstances, some reduction in space could be expected; the page's demise on four successive days, though, was surely a rather extreme measure.

Elsewhere, publication was more predictable. In Adelaide, the *Advertiser* continued to compile its Saturday homilies; in Melbourne, the *Age* and the *Herald Sun* were subjected, at worst, to the odd disappearance when classified advertising experienced an overspill. The *West Australian* in Perth and the *Courier-Mail* in Brisbane remained strong and consistent, with the latter – in the flush of an industrious first year – increasing its number of obituaries through the introduction of an international summary.<sup>93</sup> In sum, it was enough to suggest that, for five Australian newspapers, the revival had developed indications of survival too.

## 2.2.2 The discipline of newspaper style

### Indiscipline

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The point about a lack of resources at Australia's obituary desks has been firmly, and fairly, made. It remains the case, nonetheless, that unacceptable standards are too often condoned in the indulgence granted to amateur contributions.

The *Herald Sun* lost all sense of discipline in permitting Pat Dobson, in an obituary of her brother, Kevin, to say that his marriage 'was truly one made in heaven'<sup>94</sup>. It also allowed a double rendition of a clichéd (and redundant) adverb: 'Kevin and Lyn [his wife] worked tirelessly for the club....Kevin was a member of Highett RSL and worked tirelessly.'<sup>95</sup> The headline caught the contagion of the moment: 'Tireless worker with common touch'.<sup>96</sup>

The *Age* displayed inadequate control in Abigayle Carmody's obituary of Robyn Bellham ('aka Jedda Bellerjee'), with a triple serving of 'unique':

When Robyn's family and friends gathered to celebrate her life, a myriad stories and anecdotes were shared that wove a rich picture of a unique life....Robyn used her unique style in her acting, directing and teaching....It was in this unique style that she gave herself the name Jedda after visiting Jedda Rock in the Northern Territory.<sup>97</sup>

'Untold Stories', on the *Sydney Morning Herald* page, do at least proclaim – as Part One of this chapter has noted – an admission of editorial difference through their overt labelling. The 'Untold Story' construction presented on 1 February 2002, however, might with advantage have remained unpublished. It took the form of a laborious parody, purporting to have come from the 'Celestial News Service', and to be offering the posthumous reflections of a former journalist and newsagent:

Barry (Bazza) Duncan, a *Central Western Daily* journalist for many years, then newsagent in Orange, died on January 8, 2002. This is his final report, published first in his old newspaper. HEAVEN – Tuesday – All hell broke loose when I arrived here today on a white cloud which I'd smudged slightly with hands blackened from handling a few million newspapers over the years. Consternation! Would there be enough Guinness in stock? Red wine? Tobacco? A big enough audience for a stream of bad jokes?<sup>98</sup>

Use there of the nickname draws attention once more to the six-month content analysis finding of a frequent informality in referring to obituary subjects. When this practice is combined with dubious expression, the tolerance of readers is strained unduly:

I have felt proud and honoured to share a long relationship with the remarkable woman I have always known as 'Nana'. I cannot believe that I will never see her again....Nana's world was a magical world filled with quiet and simple pleasures of life....Whenever I sit down for a cup of tea, Nana will be with me in my heart, and when next I climb a tree to rescue an injured bird, Nana will be holding the ladder.<sup>99</sup>

That was an extract from the main obituary printed by the *Age* on 28 November 2000. Brett Smith (a man of 39, according to the end-credit) had been allowed to share his lament, in the public forum, with repeated use of a diminutive reference for his grandmother. It is a questionable technique, and is rendered all the more so by inconsistency on the part of the newspaper. Within three weeks of Mr Smith's 'Nana' panegyric, the *Age* published an obituary of the soprano Rhonda Bruce. It was written by her husband, yet its style was rigidly formal, consistently using her surname alone: 'Bruce was born in Bendigo....Bruce sang the sacred solo....Bruce spent two seasons with the English touring company "Opera For All".'<sup>100</sup> Each obituary, it should be noted, was written by a close family member, yet applied marked contrasts in tone and in style of address.

What, then, is wrong with a pronounced form of personal reference or reminiscence? An answer can be found by considering the obituary of Luke Harrop, from the *Australian* of 15 January 2002. Harrop was a professional triathlete, and had been killed when struck by a car while cycling. An obituary was submitted to the *Australian* by Andrew Fraser, the director of Australia's national triathlete series, who was much affected by the incident itself and by the grief of Harrop's family and friends. The words chosen, however, were of a form more suitable for a funeral oration than the obituary page of a national newspaper:

Our friend Luke has been taken away from us and no one on this planet can reason why....He was a contender for a place in the Australian team for the Commonwealth Games and the World Championships. But we all know he will be there somewhere with those Aussie teams, cheering on his buddies, just like he was watching them on Sunday when the élite athletes cycled a lap of honour at 12pm – the exact time of his death. We will all miss you, champ!<sup>101</sup>

After studying that obituary, Garrett Ray, of Colorado State University, offered the following critique:

I think an obituary should be something different from a eulogy. The eulogy is the highly personal, emotional, reflective, whitewashed treatment that is given at the funeral. A newspaper is something else. There's a lot that is good in this one because it's written by someone who knows the business that this kid was in. It gives the obituary a lot of authority, but it also includes a lot of clichés. 'Our friend Luke has been taken away. We'll all miss you, champ.' Was Luke my friend? No. He was a friend of the author. There does need to be some professional detachment – not coldness, but enough detachment so that we see the person a little bit more from a distance rather than from the perspective of a weeping friend.<sup>102</sup>

Tim Bullamore, of the *Times*, found it 'far too folksy', adding that his newspaper had prohibited the assertion of 'will be missed', or its variants, for reasons of redundancy. 'When Osama bin Laden dies, he'll probably be missed by somebody,' he said.<sup>103</sup>

#### **An excess of sentiment?**

Andrew Field, writing in the *Courier-Mail* in 1997 when Australia's obituary revival was but four years old, drew attention to the prevalent sentimentality and subjectivity:

We lack a tradition of serious newspaper obituaries. It's one of the things, like pubs, that evidently didn't transplant altogether successfully from England....Major Australian obituaries are almost without exception 'appreciations'. Friends and family are encouraged to write them.<sup>104</sup>

Interviewed for this thesis five years later, Philip Jones, who writes obituaries for newspapers in both Australia and Britain, agreed:

I feel there is some pressure in the Australian press – particularly with Fairfax [*Age* and *Sydney Morning Herald*], less so with News Limited [*Australian*] – to be a bit sentimental. I try to resist it, but there is always that unspoken pressure all the time. That's part of Australian culture, isn't it? It's the same in those sessions on ABC Television, 'Australian Story' [a documentary series]. I doubt that an older culture would get away with it. For London, I'm much more head-on, much more objective, fact-fact-fact. I don't go in for 'loved by all who knew her'.<sup>105</sup>

Others do. June Griffith, who dedicated 'more than 35 years...[to] furthering the interests of women's golf in Australia', was accorded this tribute in a piece supplied to the *Age* by another golfer:

Never one to burden others with her own problems, she was a genuine and caring friend to many and took a sincere interest in the welfare of all she knew. She was a great example to all who knew her and will be sadly missed.<sup>106</sup>

Patrick Cornish, of the *West Australian*, proclaiming his commitment to editorial surgery for contributions of sentimental resonance, dismissed that passage as ‘the honeyed words of a celebrant’;<sup>107</sup> Garrett Ray, in Colorado, found fault with ‘the somewhat cloying, over-the-top kind of clichéd conclusions’.<sup>108</sup> At the *Los Angeles Times*, Myrna Oliver challenged the entire notion of publishing obituaries written by readers:

It diminishes tremendously the authority of the paper...makes it a bulletin board for whatever people want to say. It makes me wonder whether if the chamber of commerce gives them a press release, would they print it *verbatim*?<sup>109</sup>

Probably not, but unabridged presentation of personal sentiment in the public domain endures; the boundaries that should define obituary are not drawn with sufficient precision, in Australia, to prevent sentimental journeys.

### **Eulogy and hagiography**

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The voice adopted by the eulogists and hagiographers, though expressing beliefs honourably entertained, is not the voice required of a newspaper; yet, with such indistinct borders, eulogy and hagiography are seemingly encouraged to intrude. Andrew McKie, obituaries editor of the *Daily Telegraph*, has defined the line of separation:

I have no objection to saying ‘She was brave in the face of her final illness’, but there is a danger with all of those phrases that one’s going to lapse into cliché. The place for that [sort of expression] is the funeral eulogy, not an obituary. Show, don’t tell, is a very good rule for journalism.<sup>110</sup>

An enactment of McKie’s dictum is practised by Trevor Beetson, a former Dean of Winchester, the *Telegraph*’s specialist writer of clerical obituaries. In the introduction to his eminently readable anthology *Priests & Prelates*, Beetson argues:

Hagiology – the lives of saints which portray them as without stain or blemish – has always been a hindrance to the Christian cause, for it overlooks the fact that unlimited virtue is more likely to repel than to attract, to discourage than to encourage, the sinful pilgrim on his journey through life. Significantly, canonisation as a saint does not require perfection.<sup>111</sup>



‘But I say, have they not heard?’ wrote Paul, to the Romans. ‘Yes verily, their sound went into all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the world.’<sup>112</sup> On the recurring evidence of the Australian obituary pages, the words of McKie and Beetson have not been heard with sufficient clarity at this end of the world, especially by some contributors from religious communities. Those correspondents lapse – and are allowed to lapse – into a form of expression inappropriate for secular consumption. A graphic demonstration of this indulgence occurred when the *Sydney Morning Herald* permitted an unidentified member of Sydney’s Jewish community to dominate the obituary page of 2 January 2003 with a rambling, esoteric tribute to a rabbi from Bondi Junction’s Central Synagogue:

How indeed to give expression to the life of a spiritual colossus in Sydney Jewry, one whose ministry has spanned four generations...[a] man whose name is revered the length and breadth of this town and beyond...who can be termed a legend in his own lifetime and one who was *anav me-od*, exceedingly humble, more than any person that I knew....In Psalm 91 we declare (verse 11): ‘Angels will direct you and protect you in all your ways.’ We may rest assured that those angels have embraced the pure soul of *Reb Yaakov ben Meir Wolff* in paradise where he joins his beloved wife, Else, in eternal rest.<sup>113</sup>

The compositions of a Loreto sister and a Mercy sister, each writing of a colleague who had died, further illustrate the point:

She started from the premise that all life is holy and that God is to be found in the depths of ordinary situations and in the hearts of ordinary struggling human beings. She had the capacity to embrace ordinary reality with an extraordinary faith, hope and love, and to reflect back to us the beauty and wonder of our simply being alive. Her death was sudden and unexpected. Her congregation, family and friends were not ready to let her go. But the moment had come for her to pass from this world to the Father. (*Sydney Morning Herald*)<sup>114</sup>

Deirdre died surrounded by the love of her family, her religious sisters and close friends. ‘I am blessed,’ she said, ‘that my illness has resulted in the expressions of affection and insights that could be passed by in the humdrum of life.’ She loved life in both its humdrum and exciting modes, but, educator to the end, she also bore calm and steady witness to her steadfast hope in the God of life and love eternal. (*Age*)<sup>115</sup>

Jim McCue, of the *Times*, looked at the last of those sets of words and found that – however sincerely the sentiments might be held by their author – it did not necessarily enlighten readers about the ‘individual’ qualities of the subject: ‘They’re just saying something from rote,’ he said.<sup>116</sup> An obituarist would be better advised, in his view, to seek ‘the exceptional’ characteristics of a life.<sup>117</sup>

Contributions from, and about, the laity are too often similarly indulged, their transition from obituary to eulogy aided by loose gate-keeping and flimsy sub-editing. These four selections, published between November 2001 and November 2003, help bring this line of argument towards its close. It should be understood, once more, that these are not instances of quoted direct speech, presented as statements of tribute. Each appeared on the page as the newspaper’s own assertion:

He died following a sudden heart attack, and he will be sorely missed for his inspirational leadership. He will also be missed as a strong family man who dedicated his love to his precious wife, his children and his loving grandchildren. (*Australian*)<sup>118</sup>

No mother has ever had a closer, more meaningful relationship with her son as Wendi has had with Aaron. (*Age*)<sup>119</sup>

We students received the best years of her life. She not only taught us – she loved us. (*Advertiser*)<sup>120</sup>

Forty-five years after his marriage, it was a pleasure to see the admiration in his eyes when he gazed at his wife Gladys. (*Herald Sun*)<sup>121</sup>

The sense of loss, in each instance, is profound; it is not the intention of this thesis to ridicule or disparage. Expressions of intimate emotion and of subjectivity to that degree, however, should more properly be directed to a newspaper’s ‘Personal’ classified advertising columns. They fail to satisfy the tenets of journalism. In addition, as this final transgression demonstrates, the sensation of misplaced sentiment is not assisted by the presence of unchecked solecism:

Over the last days in particular, as friends tended to Thelma’s immediate needs, there was a real feeling of lesbian community in action, all of us doing our best to support one of our lesbian sisters to die peacefully at home with her partner of 17 years...in the way she wanted. Thelma was always an enthusiastic participant in any political activity in which she was involved. She was generous, compassionate and unassuming. The lesbians and women [*sic*] of Victoria shall [*sic*] miss her unique contribution. (*Age*)<sup>122</sup>

This abuse of the obituary really has to stop.

## Conclusions – Part Two

In the ten years since its 1993 revival, Australia's realisation of the obituary art has developed a significant presence. Eight newspapers have a section dedicated to its practice, and at five of them – six, on those days when the *Sydney Morning Herald* is in the mood – the allocated column space is generous. Those columns offer a variety of content too, owing to the willingness of editors to publish what they see as the best of the British and American product. In addition, when effort and expenditure allow, Australian obituary composition has demonstrated a quality of expression which matches that of the syndicated material.

Too often, however, some newspapers place a reliance on amateur contributions of questionable standard. Light, indulgent editing adds another dimension to this unfortunate phenomenon. The outcome is, frankly, embarrassing; such contributors are permitted to engage in excessive sentiment and subjective reflection, to repeat in print the words of eulogy, and to wallow in funereal cliché. Their composition would better be directed at the classified death notice or paid obituary; it does not warrant consideration as journalism.

British and American practitioners of some note, when confronted by those inadequacies, have expressed a measure of surprise. The overall impression generated after these ten years – and as this thesis moves to its summary of argument – is that Australian obituary lacks maturity in form. In the light of that, remedial action would surely be justified. It is time perhaps for the International Association of Obituarists, identified in an earlier chapter as a provider of specialist training in the United States, to extend its portfolio to Australia. That notion, along with other strategies aimed at improvement in standard, will be discussed in the chapter of summary.

## chapter nine

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### Directions for Australian obituary practice

*Hee hath not lived, that lives not after death.*

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George Herbert (*Outlandish Proverbs*)<sup>1</sup>

#### Towards the optimum obituary

The obituary imposes a potent fusion of demands and opportunities on the writer. It requires incisive research, so that the ounces of history are fairly reckoned; it provokes questions which can be satisfied only by the most persistent interviewing, to establish reliable narrative and engaging anecdote. The results of those processes must be reported with accuracy for the obituary to justify consideration as a legitimate, if instant, exercise in biography; an accurate account ensures also that the bereaved are not distressed by the publication, in perpetuity, of errors. In addition, at the time of its realisation the product should be delivered with felicity and, where necessary, candour. By the virtue of all this, on the obituary page the dead can live.

A belief that the thematic concern is more with life than with death, assuming thereby a vital enactment of historical record, has been encountered frequently in these chapters. Offering a variant of Churchill's 'end-of-the beginning' wartime speech, Peter Davies, chief obituaries writer at the *Times*, is a proponent of that argument:

There is nothing else in journalism, to me, that has the total satisfaction of writing an obituary. You are writing a piece of contemporary history. It's got real life and permanence in it. A lot of news stories are, after all, only position papers on something that's breaking or is going on. They're not the last word. Of course, an obituary isn't the last word – but it's the first of the last words.<sup>2</sup>

In attempting to shape those words, practitioners have inherited a legacy of astute obituary. It was fashioned by John Nichols of the *Gentleman's Magazine* and by Benjamin Franklin of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, then polished by Harriet Martineau at her Lake District sanctum and in the omnisciently anonymous columns of the *Times* and the *New-York Times*, with and without its hyphen. Colin Watson kept it alive while the *Times* endured a year-long interregnum during the final episodes of Fleet Street's industrial anarchy, publishing on return an eight-part collection which

serves as an exemplar of the craft. Readers were grateful. ‘When they republished [reappeared], they did a survey of readers to find out what they’d missed the most. Letters to the Editor were first and the obituaries were second,’ recalls Maurice Dunlevy, of the University of Canberra.<sup>3</sup>

Next came the British revival of the 1980s, with new directions invented by Hugh Massingberd and new pictorial policies inspired by James Fergusson, accompanied by trans-Atlantic manifestation through what Chapter Seven has called ‘a groundswell of vigorous practice across the states of the Union’. There are indications too, as Chapter Five has revealed, of a determination by Australia’s first obituary practitioners of the modern era to replicate the quality of the revived British model. Work was to be commissioned, energy and wit nurtured, regularity of appearance assured.

After ten years, however, it would seem that a curate’s egg has been served.<sup>4</sup> This dissertation’s comprehensive, and often sympathetic, consideration of Australian obituary practice finds it palatable only in parts. By their own admission, editors do not have the money to commission regularly writers of quality; syndicated wire service material, sometimes of tenuous relevance, is permitted an unreasonable presence within the culture; pages evaporate under the overworked excuse of ‘pressure on space’. The cause of contemporary history is contaminated by incomplete, inaccurate assertion; erratic composition and inadequate editing are antipathetic to the forces of life and permanence. Straddling those unhappy circumstances is an even greater repudiation of the obituary publishing inheritance, the roopy writing and indulgent editing which too often characterise and abet the amateur contribution.

This closing chapter summarises the flaws of the present and, in reflecting on the experience of identifying them, proposes a seven-part regime of remedial mechanisms for future application.

### **1. Impose editorial control**

One of the more ill-advised pursuits has been the disgorging of amateur contributions without exercising a full measure of control, for such memoirs are not necessarily reliable. Chapter Two, in reviewing contemporary fiction, referred to Brad Leithauser’s novel *A Few Corrections*, which has as its theme a dissection of that unreliability.<sup>5</sup> In advocating tighter editorial management as the first remedial

mechanism, it is worth examining in more detail the lesson offered by Leithauser, for life has been known to imitate art. *A Few Corrections* begins with this obituary from the imaginary *Oracle*, published in Restoration, an American township of the author's invention:

CHAPTER ONE

RESTORATION—Wesley Cross Sultan, 63, of 2135 N. Westhampton, died suddenly in Lyon Hospital in Stags Harbor, of heart failure. He worked for Great Bay Shipping for 42 years, chiefly in sales. He began his career in the Stags Harbor office, and after stints in Kalamazoo and Cincinnati, Ohio, he finished his career back at Stags Harbor. He retired two years ago in order to pursue full-time his civic pursuits. He was an active member of the Rotarians, the Restoration Chamber of Commerce, the Stags Harbor Betterment Society, and the Thumb of Michigan Prosperity Council. He was also active in the Restoration Episcopal Church, where for many years he sang in the choir.

He was born in Restoration and was a graduate of the old High School on Cherrystone Avenue. He was the son of the late Chester Sultan, the well-known businessman, and the grandson of Hubert Sultan, who served as the mayor of Restoration from 1908 to 1912. Old-time Restorationists will recall Sultan Furniture on Union Street, founded by Hubert and presided over by Chester until he closed its doors in 1935.

He was married twice. His first wife was Sally Planter (Admiraal), now of Grosse Pointe, formerly of Restoration. They were divorced in 1964. He leaves his wife, Tiffany, and their two daughters, Jessica and Winnie; a son, Luke Planter, of New York; a brother, Conrad Sultan, of Miami, Florida; and a sister, Adelle De Vries, of Battle Creek.

**Figure 9.1** The beginning: the central character of Leithauser's novel is dead, and his obituary enshrines in print a fabricated life history.<sup>6</sup>

In Leithauser's plot, that obituary has been submitted by the sister (actually, though she will not admit it, half-sister) of the deceased central character. Throughout his life, her half-brother had been a serial deceiver. His obituary, composed so that it avoided family embarrassment and maintained the myths, had the effect of enshrining a fabricated history. Each chapter of *A Few Corrections* begins with progressive emendation of what the *Oracle* has printed, so that by Chapter Thirteen this is the changed face of the novel's obituary:

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

and the Commodore Hotel in Stags Harbor, and 27 Arrow Road, Gastaw,

RESTORATION—Wesley Cross Sultan, 63, of 2135 N. Westhampton, died suddenly in Lyon Hospital in Stags Harbor, of heart failure. He worked for Great Bay Shipping for 42 years, chiefly in sales. He began his career in the Stags Harbor office, and after stints in Kalamazoo and Cincinnati, Ohio, he finished his career back at Stags Harbor. He retired two years ago in order to pursue full-time his civic pursuits. He was an active member of the Rotarians, the Restoration Chamber of Commerce, the Stags Harbor Betterment Society, and the Thumb of Michigan Prosperity Council. He was also active in the Restoration Episcopal Church, where for many years he sang in the choir.

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He may have left other children as well.

62 the Silk and Satin Saloon

was effectively fired two years ago but claimed to be retiring

attended but did not quite graduate from

three times. His first wife was Klara Kuzmak, He then married with whom he had a son, Wesley Jr.

a nominal

from whom he was formally separated at the time of his death,

Figure 9.2 The end: the heavily sub-edited *Oracle* obituary reveals the 'reality' of its subject's life and death.<sup>7</sup>

In the case of Australian newspapers more real than Leithauser's *Restoration Oracle*, should bereaved relatives or friends, particularly those unfamiliar with the discipline of journalism, be allowed to contribute obituaries? The answer, to employ a literal interpretation of a rather battered Evelyn Waugh aphorism, is 'up to a point'.<sup>8</sup> The supply of intimate knowledge is both essential and expedient, especially when the resources of an obituaries desk do not run to the engagement of a researcher. Sydney's impoverished staffing, when compared with Atlanta's, has demonstrated that necessity. It is, though, in the treatment of amateur offerings that three of the Australian papers – the *Age* often, the *Herald Sun* sometimes, and the *Advertiser*

occasionally – are remiss. Tedious opening paragraphs are entertained, technical inaccuracies overlooked, and hyperbole countenanced. Why, one wonders, should the obituaries page become an editorial repository of the vapid and the oleaginous? The first remedial mechanism prescribed is this: impose the same measure of editorial control found in other parts of the newspaper.

## **2. Separate sentiment from obituary**

Garrett Ray, a professor of journalism quoted in this thesis, agrees that a newspaper is failing in its responsibilities if it permits the more egregious varieties of amateur composition to appear without being substantially re-written. In an industry journal article, he has reported a prominent American obituarist as arguing: ‘It’s like saying “We’re not going to cover the council meeting this week. Mayor, why don’t you write the story and we’ll put it in the paper”?’<sup>9</sup> Ray laments in particular the tendency of such obituaries to be ‘filled with broad clichés and overly sentimental language – suitable, perhaps, for a eulogy at the memorial service, but not as a source of public information’.<sup>10</sup>

From his article, it is apparent that this practice is found at some of the smaller regional newspapers in the United States. Ray’s criticism is arguably even more valid in the Australian context, in that capital city newspapers – which, by definition, should know better – sanction at times the broadest of clichés and the extremes of sentiment. Chapter Eight contains a litany of excesses. The subjects of obituaries are ‘missed’, grandchildren are ‘loving’, the lost friend was ‘genuine and caring’; readers are asked to share naïve speculation about supposed activities in an afterlife. A niche industry in sentimentality has emerged in the obituaries of some who pursued a religious vocation. The examples presented in that chapter, with their language of the pulpit, appear ill-suited to the columns of secular journalism. There is no reason why writing on a religious theme should not be robust and plainspoken; *Priests & Prelates*, an anthology of *Daily Telegraph* obituaries, provides a persuasive line of proof in its collected eighty-nine clerical lives.<sup>11</sup> Strunk and White, in their miniature classic *The Elements of Style*, find solace in the scriptures themselves:

Rich, ornate prose is hard to digest, generally unwholesome, and sometimes nauseating. If the sickly-sweet word, the overblown phrase are a writer’s natural form of expression, as is sometimes the case, he will have to compensate for it by a show of vigor, and by writing something as meritorious as the Song of Songs, which is Solomon’s.<sup>12</sup>



The second remedial mechanism, in urging a separation of obituary and sentiment, proposes these strategies: understand the definitions within death literature; regard the eulogy as a potentially useful communiqué, but do not inflict its content *verbatim* on readers; omit needless words.<sup>13</sup>

### **3. Exercise coherent and consistent style**

All newspapers publish style guides, but some Australian obituary pages treat them with disdain; evidence of their cavalier attitude is found in the Chapter Eight content analysis. The author of this study, on the strength of his twenty years in journalism, understands that there are delicate questions at play here. The bereaved can be both effusive and evasive at interview, at once demanding and diffident in shaping the content of the obituary itself. Those factors do not excuse, however, the lack of discipline; grammatical atrocity and erratic practice are too often condoned. The style point most abused is, as the content analysis has demonstrated, the form of expression chosen for referring to the obituary's subject. Courtesy titles are mixed with surname and first-name constructions; nicknames and diminutives intrude; formality and informality co-exist in uneasy juxtaposition.

Third remedial mechanism: apply cohesiveness and coherence to the obituary page. Object lessons are immediately available through the wire services.

### **4. Study international practice**

Material of dubious relevance, described in this thesis as constituting a cultural gap, does at times compromise an Australian obituary page's authority. Nonetheless, international influence must, in general, be seen as beneficial to readers and to client newspapers. The major American sources, though a little dry at times, do pursue a rigorous discipline and a concern for factual representation; the British broadsheets offer a blend of appraisal and anecdote which, in its more euphonious renditions, has been described as 'an essay tacked onto a tombstone'.<sup>14</sup>

It is the author's view that Australian newspapers, particularly (for reasons to be explained shortly) the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Age*, could take Canada's *Globe and Mail* as their model. A middle way, presenting characteristics of the British and American approach yet with a Canadian flavour, is discovered in this Toronto daily. Its page usually follows a pattern of: a staff-written obituary of a Canadian subject; a syndicated piece (from either the United States or Britain); an 'In Brief' column containing two or three edited obituaries from wire services, plus two short historical features entitled 'Died This Day' and 'From the Archives'. The edition of 5 December 2003, in pursuing that format, presented Adhémar Dion (father

of Celine Dion, the Canadian singer) and David Hemmings (the British actor) as its main obituaries. The accompanying 'In Brief' column offered cameo obituaries of a French Canadian actor and a New York musician; the life of William Smith (1728 - 1793), a chief justice of Quebec, was recalled under 'Died This Day' (Figure 9.3).<sup>15</sup>

THE GLOBE AND MAIL  
FRIDAY, DECEMBER 1, 1995

# Obituaries

**ADONIS DION 1923-2003**

## Papa Dion led the family band

Along with wife Thérèse was the rock on which Celine built a superstar career

**By Allan Rock**

In a home filled with music, a young man in a white shirt and a young woman in a black dress were dancing to the music of Papa Dion. The young man was Celine Dion, the young woman was Thérèse Dion, her mother. They were in a room in the basement of their home in Ste-Foy, Quebec, where Celine had just released her first album, *Forces*. The room was filled with the sound of a band playing live. The band was Papa Dion and his family. They were the rock on which Celine built her career.

Thérèse Dion, 72, was the matriarch of the family. She was a singer and a pianist. She was the one who taught Celine to play the piano. She was the one who encouraged Celine to sing. She was the one who supported Celine when she decided to pursue a career in music. She was the one who was there for Celine when she needed her. She was the one who was the rock on which Celine built her career.

Celine Dion was born on March 21, 1968, in Ste-Foy, Quebec. She was the youngest of five children. She was raised in a family of musicians. Her father, Raymond Dion, was a singer and a pianist. Her mother, Thérèse Dion, was a singer and a pianist. She was the one who taught Celine to play the piano. She was the one who encouraged Celine to sing. She was the one who supported Celine when she decided to pursue a career in music. She was the one who was there for Celine when she needed her. She was the one who was the rock on which Celine built her career.

Celine Dion's career began in 1982 when she released her first album, *Forces*. It was a success. It was a breakthrough. It was the start of a career that would take her to the top of the charts. She would become one of the most successful artists in the world. She would become a global phenomenon. She would become a household name. She would become a superstar. She would become a legend. She would become a rock on which Celine built her career.

Celine Dion's success was not just a result of her talent. It was also a result of her family. It was the support of her family that allowed her to pursue her dream. It was the love of her family that gave her the strength to overcome adversity. It was the faith of her family that kept her going when the odds were against her. It was the rock on which Celine built her career.

Celine Dion's family was a source of pride for her. It was a source of strength for her. It was a source of love for her. It was the rock on which Celine built her career. She would always be grateful to her family for their support and love. She would always be grateful to her family for being the rock on which she built her career.

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Celine Dion and her mother Thérèse Dion.

**ADONIS DION: He was always there for her**

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### IN BRIEF

**William Smith, 1728-1793**  
Chief justice of Quebec

**Suzanne Gauthier, 76**  
Quebec actress goes international

**David Hemmings, 1941-2003**  
The boy beauty from Blow-Up

**William Smith, 1728-1793**  
Chief justice of Quebec

**Suzanne Gauthier, 76**  
Quebec actress goes international

**David Hemmings, 1941-2003**  
The boy beauty from Blow-Up

**DAVID HEMMING 1941-2003**

## The boy beauty from Blow-Up

**By Jane Warrick**

David Hemmings, a British actor, was known for his role as the boy beauty in the film *Blow-Up*. He was born on May 7, 1941, in London, England. He was a handsome young man with a charming smile. He was known for his role in *Blow-Up*, which was a breakthrough for him. He was also known for his role in *The Sandlot*. He was a talented actor and a great person. He was a role model for many young people. He was a true gentleman. He was a true professional. He was a true artist. He was a true hero. He was a true legend. He was a true star. He was a true icon. He was a true inspiration. He was a true role model. He was a true hero. He was a true legend. He was a true star. He was a true icon. He was a true inspiration. He was a true role model.



David Hemmings in *Blow-Up*.

**DAVID HEMMING: He was always there for her**

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### FROM THE ARCHIVES

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Chief justice of Quebec

**Suzanne Gauthier, 76**  
Quebec actress goes international

**David Hemmings, 1941-2003**  
The boy beauty from Blow-Up

**How to Reach Us**

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Figure 9.3 Global model. Canada's *Globe and Mail* offers a model for Australian obituary pages seeking improved fortunes: a blend of its own and syndicated material, historical features, and a guaranteed appearance six days a week. Above all, it has a proprietor (Lord Thomson of Fleet) known as a 'guardian angel' of obituary publication. (*Globe and Mail*, 5 December 2003)

In design, the *Globe and Mail* page is much like the *Sydney Morning Herald's*. Unlike the erratic behaviour displayed by the Sydney paper, however, its appearance six mornings a week (Monday – Saturday) is assured. In complexion, it pursues the assortment of local, national and international obituaries favoured by the *Age*. Unlike the *Age*, it does not entertain the notion that reader contributions might appear *virgo intacta*. Unlike, so it would seem, both those Australian newspapers, it also has what Colin Haskin, the obituaries editor, has described as ‘a guardian angel’.<sup>16</sup>

That divine protection is supplied by Lord Thomson of Fleet, erstwhile owner of the *Times* and at the time of writing (2004) holder of a 40 per cent interest in the *Globe and Mail*. He has long displayed a passion for obituaries. ‘I’m the only reporter who gets calls from Lord Thomson,’ said Haskin, in an interview for this thesis. ‘He loves them.’<sup>17</sup> With support of that magnitude, Haskin can afford to take a vigorous and patriotic line in publication, avoiding the peril of cultural alienation: ‘On quiet days, I would rather run an obituary on a Canadian who no-one’s heard of than an American or a Brit that no-one’s ever heard of.’<sup>18</sup> Toronto, therefore, presents a role model worthy of imitation. Remedial mechanism four: learn from international example.

## **5. Build resources**

The miserable funding of Australian obituaries desks has been thoroughly discussed. There is, though, an accessible source of revenue which could be of financial benefit to newspaper operations at large: adoption in Australia of the paid obituary. Classified death notices in newspapers throughout the nation have, in recent years, become noticeably larger and more decorative; the inclusion of photographs and artwork is not uncommon. On occasions, an entire column is devoted to an individual notice. The paid obituary is but a progression of this custom, and would afford these advantages: provision of a more appropriate setting for the published sentiments of the bereaved; clearer definition of the obituary pages as authentic journalism; generation of funds; with specified channelling of revenue, the building of resources for overhaul of obituary practice, notably in commissioning writers of quality.

Jack Waterford, editor-in-chief of the *Canberra Times*, has noticed a trend in his newspaper’s advertising to more ornate death notices. As a result, he finds that a form of paid obituary has already started. His obituaries editor, Cameron Ross, is in favour of their introduction:

It's an interesting idea, probably something we could foster and make a reasonably lucrative field for the *Canberra Times*. There's no reason to think that it wouldn't work. I think it's probably a good idea....Our circulation has been fairly static over a number of years and I suspect one of the reasons for that is that the *Canberra Times* hasn't involved itself in the community as it probably ought to have done. This would be one way of achieving more reader involvement.<sup>20</sup>

There has, rightly, been some concern about the accuracy and the language of the paid obituary phenomenon in the United States; its critics question the veracity of its content, its occasional saccharine terminology, and the potential for manipulation of its message by extremists and pranksters. Similar doubts, however, could be expressed about some of the reader contributions published in Australia under the banner of journalism. The argument is settled, in the view of the author, by the judgment of American obituary editors whose pages exist in close proximity to the paid variety; they find the arrangement entirely manageable, to the extent that they welcome the voice given to the bereaved and the generation of ideas for their own editorial initiatives. Colin Haskin, at the *Globe and Mail*, has welcomed their emergence in Toronto too:

I'm a great supporter of the paid obituary. It's human nature...they [readers] should be allowed to say what they want to say. They get to mention all the grandchildren and all the nurses involved.<sup>21</sup>

Given the rapaciousness of Australian newspaper proprietors, it is surprising perhaps that this opportunity has not been grasped already. Their advertising departments have exploited a surge of community enthusiasm for Valentine's Day messages; the fond expression of remembrance, in the form of a life history, might well be similarly remunerative. For reasons already argued, it would serve too the interests of the editorial obituaries page.

The fifth remedial mechanism proposed, therefore, is this: consider the commercial potential of the obituary, and develop resources and its stature accordingly.

## **6. Serve the causes of culture and history**

St Paul, whose letters have already disclosed a certain prescience in the context of the contemporary obituary, offered this counsel to the Thessalonians: 'But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep.'<sup>22</sup> It is but a mild misrepresentation of Paul's intent to transfer that text to a further consideration

of obituary practice. There is a belief, held by obituarists interviewed for this study, that their work is of social importance, a shield against ignorance and cultural vandalism.

Del Ambrosius, of Western Australia, expressed the concern that newspapers were increasingly obsessed with ‘quick-grab picture stories’; the obituary, she said, was a ‘rite of passage’ which countered that trend by its capacity to sustain collective memory.<sup>23</sup> In Melbourne, Philip Jones argued that his writing was ‘contributing to history’.<sup>24</sup> Stephen Hume, the *Vancouver Sun* obituarist, added to the line of argument in these words: ‘The obituary provides a tangible, documented sense of connection with people who are no longer here. It’s through the obituary that the past lives.’<sup>25</sup> In her 1996 doctoral dissertation, quoted in Chapter Two, Rachel Larson has noted that obituaries can be used to explore ‘the changing values of Americans of any era’.<sup>26</sup>

Such ideals are not helped, however, by trivial observation and impoverished writing of the kind too often found in Australia’s obituary pages. The legacy of Nichols and Franklin and Martineau, the journalism of Ambrosius and Jones and Hume, and the scholarship of Larson all deserve wider acknowledgment. As a sixth remedial mechanism, the observation of that heritage, linked to an awareness of cultural and historical responsibilities, is recommended.

## **7. Education**

It is apparent from the better illustrations reported in these chapters that Australian obituary pages – when resources, mood and opportunity allow – are capable of high standards in contemporary practice. Performance, though, is unpredictable; there is not the assurance and authority of delivery that one finds daily in the *Telegraph* or the *Globe and Mail*. It is as if the obituaries are regarded, within the hierarchical structure of some newspapers, as disposable. There is abundant evidence in this dissertation that such an attitude prevails at: the *Sydney Morning Herald* (where publication is unpredictable), the *Australian* (where publication is infrequent), the *Age* (where, if senior management had a greater regard for the obituaries, staff writing would be encouraged), the *Herald Sun* (where obituaries are entrusted to a cadet journalist), and both the *Advertiser* and the *Canberra Times* (a page just once a week).

Some continuing education would address each of those questions. Editors at executive level are overdue, so it seems, for reinvigorating with the spirit which inspired Paul Kelly, at the *Australian* in 1993, to follow the example of the London broadsheets. Writers would benefit from exposure to the professional satisfaction which obituary composition can hold. Inexperienced reporters require better role models than those generally available at present.

The solution to those deficiencies can be found by considering the lead set by journalism training in the United States, which is well advanced with that process. Text books of some antiquity have published sections on the obituary; successive editions of a standard work in the field, Itule and Anderson's *News Writing and Reporting for Today's Media*, have devoted an entire chapter to it.<sup>27</sup> Practical assignments are, as a consequence, included in university courses.

In the realm of industry initiative, continuing education has been offered by the New England Newspaper Association, dating back at least to 1987. *Editor & Publisher*, in December that year, advocated attendance at an obituary writing workshop in Marlborough, Massachusetts.<sup>28</sup> Topics included 'ways to select staff to write and edit' obituaries; selection of national and international material; 'how to handle embarrassing information'; and the inclusion of cause of death.<sup>29</sup> All those subject headings would appear to have pronounced relevance in Australian practice today. A symposium run as part of the 1998 National Newspaper Association, held in Reno, Nevada, addressed the need to 'capture life' on obituary pages.<sup>30</sup> In addition, there is the Dallas-based International Association of Obituarists, which has organised study programs for journalists in Virginia, New York and Mexico.<sup>31</sup>

The last in this series of remedial mechanisms, accordingly, is: develop, through in-house processes or industry organisations, specialist training in the appreciation and practice of the obituary. At the conclusion of his interview for this thesis, Alan Oakley, usher of the obituary revival in Australia, invited the author to help train his company's cadet journalists in the craft. It would be a start.

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## Chapter Five

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## Chapter Six

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## Chapter Seven

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## Chapter Eight, Part One

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## Chapter Nine

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