HERALD ANGELS?

So: Is the Fairfax media empire worth saving?
Mike Ticher spoke to eminent Fairfax old boy
Tom Fitzgerald.

Tom Fitzgerald was financial editor of the Sydney Morning Herald from 1952 to 1970. He was publisher and editor (with George Munster) of the influential journal Nation from 1958 to 1972. His 1990 Boyer lectures have been published as Between Life and Economics (ABC Books).

A lot of the arguments against Packer taking control of Fairfax seem to have been based on the virtues of Fairfax in particular, rather than the need for diversity in general. Would you agree that there's been a certain amount of mythologising of Fairfax?

Well, let me say this first of all. In principle, I would not be opposed to some break-up of the Fairfax empire, providing the components went into reasonably independent hands. To keep the empire intact, is not, in my view, necessarily an important social consideration. There are people who say that in these days of rugged competition and changes in the media structure, and with a powerful person like Murdoch in the land, you may have to have such a big organisation—and that's open to discussion. The other point is this: people are probably, and not without justification, relating the history of the Fairfax companies over the last 10 years, when James Fairfax had control, and indeed in the subsequent years since James has gone, when there was much more pluralism, much more freedom of editorial opinion and so on, than there had been for most, if not all of the previous history of the Fairfax family.

How would you characterise the behaviour of the Fairfaxes as proprietors in your time. Was there any significant way in which they were different from the Packers and from Murdoch?

I think they were. In my time, the single most important person was the late Sir Warwick Fairfax. He gained directorial ascendancy as a young man, and kept it for the best part of 50 years, and indeed in the latter years, he had more absolute power than he'd ever had before. He, in turn, was subject to influence from others, particularly the very strong manager he had, Rupert Henderson, until he was more or less obliged by Warwick Fairfax to retire, in 1965. Henderson was a very strong-minded man, had his own views, which did not always coincide with those of Warwick Fairfax, and one of the advantages to a person like myself working in the place in those years (1950-70) was this splendid scope for a variety of opinions and discussions, largely because of Rupert Henderson.

So that did exist even before James took over?

Yes, it did, but not to the same extent. You asked me whether there was any distinctive feature of the Fairfax family as newspaper proprietors. I'm inclined to believe that people expected certain responsibility. I think they had grown to believe that people expected certain standards from Fairfax, which they perhaps wouldn't expect from other papers, and I think this to some extent did affect their outlook. James Fairfax was a remarkable example, I think, of this kind of family attitude. And James had the full support of all the other members of the family, with the exception of his father's last wife [Lady Fairfax] and perhaps of Sir Warwick himself. This I thought was an interesting evolution of this sense of responsibility.

One of the things that people would have expected from the Fairfaxes was that they would produce solidly Liberal papers. That seems to be forgotten now to some extent.

Yes. In my time, and indeed before, you could call the Sydney Morning Herald a politically conservative paper, but with some qualifications—as in 1943, when the Sydney Morning Herald did not support Curtin and Labor, but it certainly did not support the opponents of Labor either.

But the other thing is that, given the quality of the editor, such a fine intelligent editor as John Pringle, for example, you would get a lot of criticism of the conservative parties and the conservative leaders, whatever the Herald's final advice to its readers was on voting day. It was much more prepared to do that, on an intelligent level, than, say, the late Sir Frank Packer would do in the Telegraph, and that's not to mention the great independent record of the Melbourne Age, which was a more lower-case liberal, a less conservative paper, throughout most of its history, before the Fairfaxes came in.

Would you agree that there is such a thing as a 'Fairfax ethos', and if so, what is it, what does it mean?

I think the accumulation of tradition and history, memories of the Herald's stance at several crucial moments in Australia's history, did tend to give the family not only a sense of quiet pride, but also a sense of serious responsibility. I think they had grown to believe that people expected certain standards from Fairfax, which they perhaps wouldn't expect from other papers, and I think this to some extent did affect their outlook. James Fairfax was a remarkable example, I think, of this kind of family attitude. And James had the full support of all the other members of the family, with the exception of his father's last wife [Lady Fairfax] and perhaps of Sir Warwick himself. This I thought was an interesting evolution of this sense of responsibility.

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A lot of the criticism of Packer has been on an almost personal level, that he is the wrong sort of person to be in charge of a newspaper. Assuming that the way in which proprietors influence newspapers isn’t just in their individual interference into particular editorial stances, or in particular stories, how is it, would you say, that the ‘ethos’ of the proprietor is transmitted to the journalists and editors?

That’s a very complicated issue, and of course I don’t have any direct experience of working with Packer. To some extent, of course, Herald employees are more comfortable with the regimes they have known. To have strangers come in is never very pleasant. As I say, there were times when the Fairfax dominator, Sir Warwick Fairfax, could be autocratic and extreme, there were occasions when he acted more in the way that we think a Packer might act.

I don’t suppose that really answers your question. But there’s no doubt that a journalist working with a proprietor, generally has a fair idea of those subjects where his own opinions will not please those of his proprietor, and he has to accept that in whatever way he decides. In my own time I had more than one showdown with the proprietor, conducted really through Rupert Henderson. And on the whole I found it left me with reasonable conditions. I don’t see how you can avoid that. Nor can I say this, that in my view, any given editor, taken at random, is necessarily a better judge of what a paper’s opinion should be, than a proprietor. Why should it be so? Warwick Fairfax, given the restrictions in his upbringing, the sheltered life he led, was an extraordinarily intelligent man. Furthermore, Warwick Fairfax probably wrote some of the best editorials that ever appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald. He was a very good writer on his day.

This relationship between a proprietor and an editor is one which I find a very complicated one. Of course the journalists as a group want freedom, they must want freedom to express themselves. Now, if they give absolute powers to the editor, as a single person, the question arises as to how much that is preferable to giving it to a proprietor. I’m not questioning that it probably is preferable, on almost every occasion. But I read recently in an Age editorial, that the editor of the Age had taken it upon himself to either reject or to insist on amendments to signed articles by some of his commentators in the Age. Fair enough; it may be that everything was done with absolute goodwill on both sides, I don’t know. But, in principle, there is one man deciding. As to whether it’s better to have the editor or the proprietor, as a former journalist I’m inclined to say it’s better to have the editor, but I have known some editors much less intelligent than the proprietor.

That raises the question of editorial charters. Do you think they can be really effective in restricting a proprietor who is determined to interfere?

Charters are very important, it’s a great new development. But I’m no more able than you to offer an opinion on that; I’ve never seen them in action. I have little doubt that the AIN group seems to me to be the calibre of people who would observe it.
In your own area of economics, would you agree that in the last few years the Herald hasn’t offered as diverse a range of views as it might have done?

Well, I wouldn’t single out the Sydney Morning Herald, because I’m afraid that kind of question can be raised about at least one other prominent paper. I’ve got to be very careful here. I have a different point of view from the present economics writers, the major ones. Not only on the Sydney Morning Herald, but on The Australian too. Much less so with the Age. But I do agree that that’s a fair comment, and frankly, I believe that in the days of Sir Warwick it might well have been quite different.

Was it really so different in your day?

Oh yes. Circumstances were different, and therefore one cannot simply abstract the attitudes of Warwick Fairfax and Rupert Henderson from economic conditions in the 1950s and 1960s, and say that that’s what they would do now. But with all that careful qualification, I have no doubt that those two men in their prime would take a very different view of the behaviour of this Labor government, and of Keating, who has got away with extraordinary assumptions, claims, assertions. I don’t think that would have stood up at all the way it has now. You may wonder whether I’m implying that highly intellectual proprietors and top managers are a bit lacking these days, and I’m inclined to raise that question as a possibility.

Do you think there’s any alternative as far as ownership goes to simply hoping for better individual proprietors?

Well, of course money calls the tune. There is an overwhelming case for diversity, as much diversity as possible, and I don’t think we have enough of it, already, let alone if Fairfax goes in certain directions. I think the only hope is in diversity. Powerful as the big media barons are, they are not all-powerful. Public opinion can

I find it quite nasty that pontificating journalists of a rightwing view (though some of them don’t know how rightwing they are) take great umbrage if, say, the ABC, presents viewpoints that are different from theirs. It seems to me that, given the enormous dominance of conservatism in the print media, particularly in Sydney, the fact that the ABC gives a certain amount of opportunity to differing views is highly desirable. And the last people who should be fussed about it are those who have this daily platform to put their own dogmatic views. It’s really extraordinary that this attitude is not only allowed, but even, in a vague sort of way, has some intimidatory effect. It’s ridiculous.

MIKE TICHER is a member of ALR's editorial collective.


Will Jock, minister in training, marry his fiancee Sigrid, or be seduced into the Bohemian scene of Sydney in the 1890s? Will Denise, a university student in the swinging 60s, solve the unspoken secrets of her grandmother’s love letters? What was the result of the fateful relationship between Sigrid’s friend, Ellen, and the original father of her daughter, and will similar problems trouble the relationship of Denise and her West Indian lover?

It is the 1960s in Penelope Nelson’s new novel, Prophesying Backwards, and Sigrid and her granddaughter Denise talk about the past while Sigrid listens to the famous ABC radio series Blue Hills. Intentionally or not, the appearance of a soapie in the first paragraphs of the book sets the tone for the novel—an easy-to-read potboiler with a 90s overview of the social issues involved.

Throughout the novel, two characters in Blue Hills, a part-aboriginal man and a white woman, are worried about whether their child will be a black ‘throwback’ or whether the man’s blackness can be ‘bred out’. Prophesying Backwards uses this serial as a frame for writing about how society’s inequalities in dealing with differences in race and sex have blighted three heterosexual relationships: Sigrid and her fiancé Jock, Ellen and William, and Denise and Ralston.

Unfortunately, the novel’s opening quote—’The past must be revisited, but with irony, not innocently—offers more than Nelson delivers. By writing in the voices of both Sigrid and Denise she also offers a complex perspective of past and present. Many writers—Salman Rushdie, Jeanette Winterson, Peter Carey—have successfully used multiple voices to question mainstream versions of history, with its tendency to assume a ‘national’ point of view, but Prophesying Backwards does not. Instead of exploring ambiguity, Nelson writes the past as a kind of mystery story, to which Denise, by studying the letters, provides the ‘right’ answer. Denise is rewarded by being able to progress with her life, while Sigrid ekes out her last years with brittle candied memories, refusing to admit the betrayals of her past.

The novel plays upon the continuity between Sigrid and Denise’s own relationships, ultimately focussing on sexual ahead of racial oppression. While Jock betrays Sigrid, Denise’s West Indian lover also betrays her to the patriarchal posturing which underpinned the protests for racial equality by the Bohemian Sydney Push in the 1960s. This continuity,