



INTO THE LION'S DEN

In the second extract from his biography of Graham Perkin, **Ben Hills** explains how the renowned *Age* editor changed the paper forever by hiring women as journalists.

AFTER his appointment as editor of *The Age* in 1966, Graham Perkin had no trouble hiring a cadre of young, enthusiastic, educated people who better reflected the mood of the times. With intelligent, relevant, challenging newspapers like *The Age* around, journalism had become sexy.

It also did not hurt that in 1967 the full bench of the Industrial Commission had handed down a huge and historic pay rise. Suddenly, those ink-stained wretches had joined the professional classes; instead of being paid not much more than factory workers, senior journalists were getting as much as backbench politicians.

Universities began hiring old hacks and offering degrees in journalism. Journalism was no longer a job; it had become a career. In the 20 years from 1970 to 1990, membership of the Australian Journalists Association almost doubled, to 11,000. These were, with hindsight, journalism's golden years.

School-leavers, and even university graduates like Michelle Grattan (who had been tutoring in political science at Melbourne University), were now joining the kids from blue-collar backgrounds in the queue for a job at *The Age*. No longer were suspicions of socialistic sympathies enough to get you turned away. Catholics and Jews and people from immigrant backgrounds joined the staff. And there was another radical change: for the first time in its history, *The Age* began taking on women as journalists.

Previously, the only women on the paper had been the social types who put together the "women's pages". But Perkin understood that Melbourne's demographics were



THE AGE
UNDER
PERKIN

changing, and that he needed more women on his staff to better reflect the paper's changing readership. In his rather prudish way, he disapproved of the inevitable shenanigans — he once sacked a young librarian who was having an affair with one of his senior, married pundits, and he wrote disapprovingly that he had "one pregnant, single journalist on the radio news desk".

Nevertheless, Perkin would eventually hire more women than all his predecessors put together. Although no one would call him a feminist — he gruffly tried to talk his own daughter out of a career in newspapers, claiming it would make her too "tough" — *The Age* did move with the times under his editorship, in both small and significant ways.

The honorific "Ms" was used for the first time, though not without a spirited debate in the paper's letters pages and a great deal of harrumphing from *The Age's* traditional readers. Accent replaced the women's pages, and began to tackle previously taboo subjects such as the pill. And in the run-up to the watershed election of 1972, *The Age* published a survey of politicians' responses to questions which had been compiled by the Women's Electoral Lobby on "women's issues" such as abortion.

Michelle Grattan was 25 and already established as an academic when she was hired as a D-grade reporter rather than as a cadet

because of her advanced age. She proved to be one of Perkin's stalwarts. She is now the doyenne of the Canberra press gallery having reported from the national capital for almost 40 years.

Mary Craig — poached from *The Herald* just a couple of years earlier — was one of the most flamboyant people ever to breeze through *The Age's* news room. A tall, elegant woman with long brown hair, she habitually dressed in high heels, silk, and a picture hat, and sometimes carried a puppy in her handbag. She covered fashion for the paper in a forthright and unconventional style — she once rowed with Perkin when he objected to her reporting a fashion parade in blank verse — before she jetted off overseas. Eventually (via Hong Kong, Laos, and Bahrain) she wound up in Borneo, where she converted to Islam and married a tribal prince before retiring back to Victoria, with her memories, to practise natural healing.

Some of those first female recruits at *The Age* found the boozy, blokey atmosphere of the news room a bit intimidating. Margaret Gee, a slim and pretty blonde whose parents had a farm near Beechworth, survived her interview with Perkin in spite of auditioning in a hot-pink hippie-style silk dress she had tie-dyed herself.

On her first day at work, she was shown around by one of the more old-school editors. "I remember saying to the man who was giving us the royal tour of the editorial floor, 'How come there's not many women here?' And he said, 'Butterfly, in between their periods, their boyfriends, and their nervous breakdowns we don't get much work out of women here.' That was my introduction to *The Age* and I thought, 'That's bloody great.'"

Gee was only 17 when she was

BREAKING DOWN THE BARRIERS



Michelle Grattan



Jennifer Byrne



Mary Craig

hired as a first-year cadet, and she struggled to find the relevance of doing the dogsbody work on the shipping rounds and real-estate sales results; she failed shorthand, and skipped the journalism lectures at RMIT. Her social life at the paper was another, more successful, story. Says Gee: "It seemed like a very predatory environment. I had never had so much attention from so many men in such a short space of time. It was both flattering but also intimidating [and] at times extremely aggressive. Both the married men and the single men were hitting on Jenny and me."

Gee admits that she felt out of her depth amid the bustle and belabouring of the news room, and could not handle the pace and the pressure — she left the paper after Perkin's death for a quieter life as a TV columnist on *The Australian Women's Weekly* magazine. But she is still in awe of Perkin: "He looked like a lion king prowling around his territory. He had beautiful eyes, and he had this intensity about him. He was always there; you'd see him in the mornings, in the afternoons, in the evenings. I remember thinking, 'He can't have much of a home life. His poor wife must be very lonely.'"

Even now, more than 30 years later, she looks back on her time there as the most special years of her life: "[Perkin] made you believe in yourself. *The Age* was like a club that you could not join — you had to be invited to be there, he chose you and [you felt that] there must have been something a little bit special about you to be chosen. Many of the people that he chose went on to be extremely successful as authors, journalists, publishers, public-relations people, politicians, editors."

The "Jenny" who Margaret Gee mentioned is Jennifer Byrne, one of the most celebrated of all the alumni of Perkin's *Age*. After leaving the paper, she launched into a new career in television, presenting Channel Nine's *Sunday* program (where she won a Logie), reporting for the *60 Minutes* current affairs programme, and — more recently — hosting the ABC's *First Tuesday Book Club*. Byrne started as a cadet

at *The Age* on the same day as Gee. The granddaughter of Victoria's then-governor, Sir Dallas Brooks, she was just 16 and decided to try journalism for a "gap year" before taking a law course at Melbourne University. Rejected by *The Herald* and *Weekly Times* because she could not name Pakistan's prime minister, she applied to *The Age* and was ushered into Perkin's office. She recalls a terrifying figure: "He looked a bit like Perry White as far as I was concerned. He had that big jaw. I was 16. He was forbidding... like a big lion and he sat behind this big desk, and he was gruff, kindly but gruff. What I remember clearly is he didn't ask me anything about Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto. He asked me, 'Why do you want to be a journalist?' and I think I said, 'Because I'm very nosy.'"

When Byrne first walked through the news room in her miniskirt there was a commotion around the subeditors' table, where hard-boiled old grafters in eye-shades, with roll-your-own cigarette stubs glued to their lower lips, undressed her with their eyes while making guttural noises. Perkin, red-faced with anger, half-stood from his chair at the head of the table and rested his fists on the desk, glowering around. "That is a 16-year-old who has come directly from school to join our staff," he growled. "She's not just young, she is the governor's granddaughter, so we owe her respect. And, more to the point, the first man that lays a hand on her loses his job."

For once, an edict of Perkin's was totally ignored. "It had no effect," Byrne laughs, and recalls: "It was on for young and old. I suppose it was predatory, but I was desperately ready to be predated on, so I never felt that I was being taken advantage of... Like a lot of women who went through that period, I had a degree of impatience with this because (1) where do most relationships start? In the workplace. And (2) to me it's all about power, [and]

Graham Perkin (centre) with members of the mostly male staff in 1971. From left, Claude Forell, Roger Aldridge, Michael Richardson, Les Tanner, Percy Beames, Ben Hills, Bruce Grant, Nancy Dexter and Geoffrey Hutton.

I never felt exploited... But, most important, did I feel that my career was going to be advanced by sexual favours being given? No, not once, so to me it was not an issue... Remember, I came out of 13 years of all-female education. There couldn't be enough testosterone for me, really."

Perkin might have said publicly, in his earlier years as an editor, that journalism was a craft best learned on the job but privately he came to understand that his new breed of reporters would need more than rat-like cunning, a plausible manner, and a slight literary ability. He encouraged all his cadets to enrol for studies at university — Gee wound up doing sociology; Byrne, politics and philosophy at Melbourne University. And when, rather unexpectedly, they passed, he honoured his promise to take them for a slap-up lunch at the swanky Lazar's restaurant — where they flirted with him shamelessly, and totally without success.

More than the study and the dull slog of the shipping round, Byrne remembers the excitement of being in that news room, of being invited to join Perkin's posse as they descended into the bowels of the building late at night to make last-minute changes on the stone and watch the great presses begin to roll.

"I thought it was the most exciting thing. I loved that smell, the smell of the ink and the soot, and the metal and the clanking... the heat and the smell and the noise was fantastic."

"I will never be that girl again; it will never be that time again; it was incredibly potent, it was like the sorcerer's cave. I just remember it as being magical, and he was the head of the magic."

This is an edited extract from *Breaking News: The Golden Age of Graham Perkin*, by Ben Hills, published by Scribner at \$59.95. TOMORROW: Part 3: Taking it to the top.