

TAKING IT TO THE TOP



In the early '60s, *The Age* was looking aged and arthritic. In the final extract of his biography of Graham Perkin, **Ben Hills** tells how the legendary editor turned it into one of the world's great newspapers.

THERE are a lot of things Graham Perkin's *Age* would be remembered for — dogged investigative reporting leading to the downfall of crooks and governments alike, bravely backing the election of the first Labor government in a generation, the passionate pursuit of causes such as care for the intellectually handicapped.

But when he took on the job in 1966 of revitalising the aged and arthritic newspaper that David Syme's "Thunderer" had degenerated into, Perkin's priorities were the hiring of a cartoonist, a columnist, and a comic strip. The odd trio would be Les Tanner, Phillip Adams, and *The Wizard of Id*.

The paper had not had a staff cartoonist for at least 30 years. Leslie Mervyn Tanner was a small, wiry man with a quiff of dark hair, a nose nowhere near as hooked as he drew it, and eyes that sparkled with mischief. Tanner was a knockabout Sydneysider who had been a member of the Communist Party in his youth.

He had cut his teeth on Frank Packer's *Bulletin* magazine, lampooning Bob Menzies ("All jowls and eyebrows") and his treasurer, Arthur "Artie" Fadden, whom Tanner always drew like a bulbous Billy Bunter, with two protruding buckteeth. When Fadden complained about this to Packer, Packer gave him the name of his dentist.

Packer was not so amused early in 1967, when Tanner produced a cartoon attacking the Victorian premier, Henry Bolte, over the hanging of Ronald Ryan, the last man to be executed in Australia. In fact, he was furious. Packer was a great enthusiast for capital punishment. He ordered all 40,000 copies of the magazine to be recalled from the newsagents and destroyed.

This brutal piece of proprietorial censorship did Tanner no harm at all — overnight he became nation-



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The appointment of
GRAHAM PERKIN

THE AGE UNDER PERKIN

ally notorious, and shortly afterwards there was a deep voice on the telephone inviting him for a chat, chap, at Sydney's Wentworth Hotel. Perkin was looking for a great cartoonist, someone who would challenge the pomposities and pretences of Establishment Melbourne, and make it clear to the community that *The Age* was no longer the voice of the Liberal Party. Tanner had not long been ensconced at his drafting table when the Victorian Liberals met for their annual conference, and decided to re-endorse capital punishment as party policy.

Tanner drew Bolte as a hideous grinning gargoyle standing on a scaffold with a hangman's noose around his neck. "It's good to know our platform is still solid," said the caption. Its publication set the scene for a mighty confrontation between the paper and the government.

It was not just hanging — *The Age* would take on Bolte over the environment, over planning, over corruption in the public service and the police, and over the handling of anti-apartheid and anti-war demonstrations. It was a return to the great tradition of David Syme. The journalism was innovative — but it was the relentless ridicule that Tanner dished up nearly every day that infuriated Bolte the most.

Early on, hoping to charm his adversary, the wily old farmer invited Tanner to his office at Parliament House, where the two of them polished off an entire bottle of whisky one afternoon. Tanner stag-

gered back to the office and slumped at his desk, scribbling away at another savage caricature of Bolte. "I think I've finally got the ears right now," he mumbled.

Tanner's appointment signalled the paper's transformation from an unattractive mass of inky columns of type, interspersed with barely decipherable photographs, to a clean and modern-looking paper with a powerful emphasis on graphics and design.

After Tanner came a stable of illustrators and cartoonists who would win the paper as many awards as its wordsmiths. Often, rather than use a hackneyed photograph of a political leader, Perkin would commission John Spooner to draw one of his vivid and powerful caricatures, and splash it as the main illustration on the front page. Ron Tandberg's minimalist single-column cartoons, in which half-a-dozen lines and a biting caption often tell more than a column of opinion, began to liven up the paper. Michael Leuning's fey and whimsical menagerie of characters such as Vasco Pyjama and Mr Curly won him a loyal following (and a designation as an Australian Living Treasure). Peter Nicholson and Bruce Petty (who both joined *The Age* the year after Perkin's death) continued Tanner's tradition of edgy social commentary and total disrespect for their elders and betters.

Phillip Adams, Perkin's second must-have, brought an irreverent, iconoclastic strain of humour to the paper. "Columnists were rare then — it wasn't like now, when the whole f---ing paper's full of them," he says. "Everyone wrote a very focused column on politics or whatever. I couldn't see why that was the limit of it, so I started writing on anything and everything that came to mind... discussions on philosophical matters, existentialism, Egyptology... whatever."

As for *The Wizard of Id*, you only have to look at *The Age*'s comic strip

A CARTOONIST, A COLUMNIST AND A COMIC STRIP



Les Tanner



Phillip Adams



The Wizard of Id

of the day, *Curly Wee and Gussie Goose*, to see why Perkin was desperate for a change. Excruciatingly twee and dated, it had been originally commissioned by the *Liverpool Echo* in the 1930s. By the 1960s, it was on its last legs, dull, puerile, and pointless, like much of the rest of the paper. *The Wizard of Id*, on the other hand, although it depicts life in a fictitious feudal kingdom 1000 years ago, had a modern, mordant edge to its humour and was aimed at a more sophisticated, adult audience.

By the time he took the chair, most of Perkin's A-team was already in place, including, in particular, two of the three men on whom he would rely most during his nine years in the job, his closest friends and colleagues: Creighton Burns and Greg Taylor.

Burns was a university don who had been lured into journalism two years earlier with the offer of a job as *The Age*'s south-east Asia correspondent, covering the war in Vietnam.

Taylor was born with printer's ink in his veins. His father had been a journalist on the *Hobart Mercury* and then news editor of the ABC in Victoria. Taylor was to become the production genius of the triumvirate, the man who oversaw *The Age*'s transformation into a slick, modern-looking newspaper.

Burns, although his father was also a journalist, came from a very different background. Four years older than Perkin, he had served in the navy during the last two years of the war, and then pursued a career in academia, winning a Rhodes scholarship and gaining first-class honours in philosophy, politics, and economics at Oxford University. He had been a reader in political science at Melbourne University for a decade when, in 1964, he was offered the job of foreign correspondent based in Singapore.

Some months after he was appointed editor, Perkin brought Burns back to Melbourne to write columns as the paper's diplomatic and defence correspondent, and then moved him into the office next door as assistant editor. If Taylor was the paper's chief engineer, then it was the urbane and worldly Burns who gave *The Age*'s leadership team

intellectual credibility — it was to his office that visiting ambassadors and generals would be ushered for an off-the-record chat over whisky on the rocks.

The final important change that Perkin made was to expand the paper's editorial/comment pages to a daily double-page spread and introduce a new daily features page.

On November 16, 1966, just 26 days after his appointment, a new morning paper hit Melbourne's doorsteps, the most radical transformation *Age* readers had seen since news first appeared on the front page 25 years earlier. The revamped *Age* had new content, a new design, new writers, a huge expansion in the number of columns of news, and a new overseas bureau (a Tokyo correspondent was added to *The Age*'s already-

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extensive stable of foreign correspondents, based in London, Singapore, and Washington; and "stringers" in New Delhi, Port Moresby, and Jakarta). *The Age* bought the rights to republish articles from five of the world's great newspapers: *The Sunday Times* and *The Observer* in London, and *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times-Washington Post* news service in the US.

And, Perkin promised his readers, there would be more to come. The new masthead; new, airy design; bolder, cleaner typefaces (the discordant jumble of sans serif Tempo and spindly Bodoni would be replaced by neo-classical Century Modern Bold); and splashy pictures and graphics introduced

Graham Perkin at the editor's desk at *The Age* in 1971.

the following year would complete *The Age*'s transition from a stuffily boring and out-of-touch 19th-century "paper of record" to a state-of-the-art newspaper that would, within a couple of years, be rated one of the ten best in the English-speaking world.

So, how well would Perkin's team perform? His editorship spanned the most tumultuous decade Australia would see in the second half of the 20th century. The war in Vietnam, the Indonesian invasion of East Timor, the advent of the first federal Labor government in a generation and the end of the Bolte era in Victoria, the drowning of a prime minister, the death of more than 60 people in Tasmanian bushfires, the Wave Hill stockmen's strike, and the advent of Aboriginal rights — on these, and a hundred other major stories, *The Age*'s coverage began to eclipse that of its rivals, as its circulation growth shows.

Under Perkin's editorship, after an initial rocky couple of years, the paper increased its circulation by a remarkable 22 per cent — to more than 220,000 — and he set it on a trajectory which would not peak until six years after his death. No other "quality" broadsheet has ever approached this performance.

Many of the raw young recruits Perkin hired and trained went on to become big names in journalism. No fewer than eight — Les Carlyon, Michelle Grattan (the first woman to edit a major Australian daily), Eric Beecher, Mike Smith, Michael Gawenda, Peter Smark, Mark Baker, and Neil Mitchell — would go on to edit either *The Age* or another metropolitan newspaper.

Michael Willsee became the doyen of TV current affairs; Phillip Chubb, an award-winning documentary filmmaker; Jennifer Byrne, a star of the Nine Network's *60 Minutes*; and Neil Mitchell (after a stint editing *The Herald*), Melbourne's highest-rating radio-show presenter.

This is an edited extract from *Breaking News: The Golden Age of Graham Perkin*, by Ben Hills, published by Scribner at \$59.95.