

Nothing succeeds like a tale of excess and expenses

Stories of journalistic scoops aren't as much fun as those of epic misses

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IT is not surprising, given the nature of the business we're in, that journalists love telling yarns. Anywhere in the world, put a gaggle of journalists together in a bar, add liquor, and chances are you'll soon be rollicking with laughter at the absurdity of the game and its practitioners.

Ben Hills has produced a serious work in *Breaking News*, his book on Graham Perkin, the legendary editor of *The Age*, but he has leavened it with some scattered gems of journalistic excess — or otherwise.

Take the story of Russell Hill, a

late-stop sub-editor on *The Age* in 1956. The paper had gone to bed, as had Russ. Well, he had nodded off, as you do in the wee small hours while the presses roll and you wait until near dawn in case something important happens.

Russ was suddenly woken by the clang of teleprinter bells — they had an alert system in those days of ringing five bells for a big breaking news story — and tore a snap off the printer.

Egypt's Colonel Nasser had annexed the Suez Canal — a move that would take the world to the brink of World War III.

"So what?" Hill thought. "It's already in Egypt, isn't it?" And he went back to sleep.

That is almost as big a miss as *The Age's* front page in 1939. True, the front page was filled with advertisements in those days, but still, a small pointer to "Britain Declares War — See Page 10" does seem to be a trifle underdone.

Missing stories was not unusual for *The Age* in its moribund days. Hills tells how a country correspondent's hopeful filler alerted editors to a rather big story happening overseas.

The story said that flags in Mildura were flying at half-mast

as a mark of respect for the king.

"The king?" Hills writes. "Dead? Burrowing frantically through a file of overlooked cables one of the subs discovered that while they had been knocking back beers down at the pub, George VI had died."

Hills writes vividly of conditions at the old *Age* building in Collins Street.

It was a Dickensian place, complete with cages for carrier pigeons on the roof.

There was little furniture — most of it had been broken up and used as firewood to keep the subs warm through Melbourne's freezing wartime winters. Rather than buying new furniture, a two-bar radiator was installed as a concession to modern times.

The place was infested by rats. Hills describes how printers would amuse themselves between editions by pelting slugs of metal type at them as they scuttled through the rafters. A direct hit was rewarded with a mighty cheer.

Management dealt with the issue, not by spending on a pest exterminator, but by buying a cat.

Editors were notoriously distant from their reporting staff.

Keith Sinclair, Perkin's predecessor, tended to his editorials behind doors closed and closely guarded by a Rottweiler-like secretary. Hills quotes reporter Peter McLaughlin: "The only time you could talk to Sinclair was when he went to the toilet. You'd wait 30 seconds and say 'OK, he should be well and truly placed in the urinal; he can't get away now' and you'd go and see him."

There are other yarns about being on the piss, so to speak. Hills tells of theatre critic and leader writer Geoffrey Hutton, who enjoyed a glass or three before he started work, followed by, perhaps, a three-bottle lunch.

Hutton's approach to leader writing was simple. "A good leader should contain one fact the editor does not know," he would proclaim. "Two would be presumptuous."

Hills tells of an evening when a cadet rushed into the pub to tell Hutton that "Mr Sinclair says your leader is too one-sided and wants you to come back to the office to rewrite it."

"Without missing a beat," Hills writes, "Hutton said to the cadet, 'Do you have a notebook?' He nodded. Then would you take this

down as a last paragraph: 'On the other hand'."

Jack Darmody, the ex-boxer with a ferocious face, a gentle heart and a prodigious appetite for beer, features strongly in tales about drinking and reporting. He drank his expenses before he got to Vietnam as a war correspondent and sent Perkin a cable: "Wish to extend stay stop please send more money", to which Perkin replied "No more money stop please extend copy."

When he got home Darmody procrastinated on filing his expenses so Perkin hauled him into his office and did it for him — "typing up the usual fictions which paymasters expect".

When he finished Perkin pulled the expenses form out of his typewriter too roughly and it crashed from its trolley to the floor. Darmody told the startled reporters outside Perkin's office that he threw the typewriter at his boss.

Hills tells a tale of former opposition leader Billy Snedden playing a practical joke on Edward St John, the rebel Liberal MP who took on the Holt government over the sinking of HMAS *Voyager* after it collided with the aircraft car-

rier Melbourne. Snedden posed as the editor of *The Times* in London and phoned St John at 2am to commission a 2000-word article on his principled stand against his own government.

St John slaved through the night to complete the assignment and sent it to *The Times* where it was received with great puzzlement and was, of course, spiked.

This may seem far-fetched, but in those days you could get away with things like that, especially if you had a good contact book.

I recall one monstrous night in Sydney in the 70s when, in the company of some now very senior newspaper executives, Gus de Brito, a South African with an ear for accents and idiom, posed as the editor of *The Times of India* and phoned prime minister Billy McMahon at his home at midnight to seek an appointment.

He got it, too. Billy was ever so happy to oblige. We never did find out what happened when the appointed hour came and no one from *The Times of India* turned up at the PM's office.

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