



Biography

BREAKING NEWS

Ben Hills

Scribe, 536pp, \$59.95

Tribute to editor

Review by Eric Beecher

Why would anyone want to read – or indeed write – a long and meticulously researched book about a 1970s newspaper editor at the very juncture in history when the whole idea of newspapers is under assault?

It's a question Ben Hills addresses on the first page of this formidable biography, *Breaking News: The Golden Age of Graham Perkin*. His contention that Perkin was the finest Australian editor of his century and changed forever the way Australians thought of quality newspapers is almost certainly right.

But that isn't the only reason why this book is important, 35 years after its subject died of a sudden heart attack at the peak of his grand

career. Its timing is salutary precisely because newspapers are now fighting for their lives in the internet age, as their classified advertising rivers of gold migrate online and their readers are seduced by a stream of disruptive electronic alternatives to newsprint.

Viewed in that context, this is much more than a story of the editor who transformed *The Age* in Melbourne into the gold standard of modern Australian broadsheet journalism over the past half century. It is a parable: of how an ambitious and decent newspaper can enrich its community and how a great editor can be the inspiration for powerful journalism that makes a difference to society.

If ever such editors and newspapers were needed, it is now. But as revenues decline and competitive

pressures pile up, the focus of most publishers is on cost reduction and slick marketing, not on investing even more money and resources to make their papers better, as Perkin's proprietors did so successfully at a time when there was no internet threatening to eat their lunch.

Certainly it was a quieter world in 1966, when 36-year-old Perkin, the son of a country baker who grew up in Victoria's dusty Mallee region, found himself installed in the editor's chair of *The Age* – "a fusty, conservative institution that had barely got used to having news on the front page," as Hills describes it, that was "on the brink of bankruptcy".

Over the next nine years Perkin transformed his newspaper into one of the best in the world, applying ideas and techniques he cherry-picked on visits to London and

who inspired a newspaper's golden age

America as part of his super-charged career path. In an era of dull, grey newspapers covering – many would argue – a dull, grey country, this "big, bluff cyclone of a man" was a pioneer in reinventing the whole notion of the Australian broadsheet newspaper.

He dragged his paper's political coverage out of its 19th-century straitjacket and made it interesting. He invented the paradigm for investigative journalism in Australia. He relentlessly built a talent pool of writers, columnists and cartoonists and gave them unprecedented freedom and editorial space to be creative. He introduced accountability to newspapers, publishing corrections as frequently as he could because he believed – in a way most Australian newspapers still don't – that your readers trust you more, not less,

when you admit your mistakes. And he created an open, ideas-infested newsroom atmosphere that must have seemed like Mars to the older journeymen journalists whose practices hadn't changed much since the turn of the century.

Taking over this Victorian institution two years after the launch of *The Australian*, Rupert Murdoch's ambitious national newspaper experiment that itself was a breath of fresh air in a stultified media environment, Perkin understood that unless papers such as *The Age* caught up with the changes taking place in their readers' lives and minds, they would become redundant.

"We are trying to produce a different kind of newspaper," Perkin said in 1969. "A popular newspaper of great quality and breadth. Our paper will look at the whole world, at all people.

It will attempt to spread understanding and encourage decency, discourage inhumanity and attack prejudice." This seemingly simple and obvious philosophy launched a liberal tradition that has underpinned the worldview of *The Age* – and more latterly its Fairfax stablemate, *The Sydney Morning Herald* – for several decades.

It's a worldview that, almost 40 years later, appears faintly naive but entirely honourable, yet is derided with increasing frequency by the shrill columnists and editorial writers on the majority of Australian newspapers owned by Murdoch, who demands populism and profits draped by a facade of respectability and good intentions. It's hardly surprising, therefore, that Perkin responded to a lucrative offer in 1973 from Murdoch to run his Aus-

tralian newspaper empire with the words: "Why should I work for you? Your career is littered with the carcasses of dead editors."

Hills, himself a distinguished alumnus of Perkin's *Age* who led the paper's legendary Insight investigative team in the 1970s, has written a fascinating book that should inspire journalists and enlighten anyone who wants to understand how journalism, seriously applied, can make the world a better place. If you can't find it on the biography shelves of good bookshops, try the anthropology section. Sadly, in a world of diminishing quality newspapers, that's probably where it best fits.

Eric Beecher is the publisher of cricket.com.au and a former *Herald* editor. He began his career on *The Age* under Graham Perkin.