

Perkin, the right man for his Age

BIOGRAPHY

BREAKING NEWS: The Golden Age of Graham Perkin. By Ben Hills. Scribe. 536pp. \$59.95.

Reviewer: **JACK WATERFORD**

Graham Perkin is, rightly, a legend in Australian journalism, but of a different age, in every sense of the word. He transformed a staid and boring paper, living in the 1950s, into an exciting, gutsy and modern newspaper for the 1970s. That newspaper has had trouble surviving him, a part of its problem being, in effect, that it still lives in the 1970s of Perkin.

Whether he would be right for a newspaper these days is a moot question, though there can be no doubt that he was born for journalism and was capable of infinite adaptation. The question is more, perhaps, whether he would, today, have got his feet in the door.

Crispin Hull, a former editor of this newspaper, and I both began our careers in journalism at about the same time, in the early days of revolutions started by a new generation (one up on us) of journalists such as Perkin. Perkin knew intimately, in ways we never quite did, of the literal journalistic foot in the door.

Crispin and I often joke with each other that it is unlikely that, in the modern age, either of us would have selected either of us into our profession. Nor, I suspect, the young Perkin against the modern graduate. More fool us.

Perkin and co had post-war philosophies, were ambitious, brainy and street-smart, generally not graduates but generally (as today) of the smartest quintile of the population in an era where going to university, even for this quintile, was not of the norm.

Newspapers were very much the community's primary source of information about what was happening – locally, regionally, nationally and internationally – and, generally, had a sense of mission about informing and educating the community. Perkin died young in October 1975 at the height of his powers and at a particularly dramatic moment – the day after completing a shrill, splenetic and rather pompous

Cromwellian leader which began “We will say it straight and clear and at once. The Whitlam government has run its course; it must go now, and preferably by the honourable course of resignation.”

Perkin had by then earned his reputation and his heart attack, whether by stress, lifestyle or the frenetic pace of the news of the day. But the enduring part of his legend is based not only on what he was but what he might have been. He was only 45 when he died.

A shift was being planned for him out of the hurley-burley of daily editorship into what would have been rather more staid newspaper management. In a further career he might well have resembled another great Australian newspaperman, Keith Murdoch, a man who, like Perkin, except 40 years before, travelled abroad to see what newspapers were doing elsewhere and who adapted the lessons successfully to Australian conditions.

Ben Hills, the author of this biography, was a fine reporter put by Perkin on *The Age*'s Insight team, focused on investigative journalism, a form of crusading disclosure reportage.

It was an Australian first, but a straight copy of something Perkin had seen in Britain on a scholarship visit there. It was one of a host of innovations from elsewhere that Perkin studied and later implemented in Melbourne once he became editor and began clearing out an uncommonly cobwebbed and rusty organisation, eccentrically owned, managed, and, until then at least, edited.

Although Perkin transformed *The Age*, he can claim little reputation as the originator of anything, even in Australia. Indeed, at about the same time, there were editors of equal calibre doing things as interesting, sometimes more so, elsewhere without the self-conscious self-regard of *The Age* lot. Yet *The Age* team was good, and its influence and the Perkin legacy endures in a way that other adaptations and individuals do not.

Adrian Deamer and Maxwell Newton at

The Australian, John Pringle, at *The Canberra Times* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and John Allen, here, were also leading change in papers, and with similar effect. Broadcast media, particularly television, had been undermining the primacy of the newspaper as a source of news. Newspapers were adapting by expanding the range of their coverage, in giving more analysis and opinion, and in covering more and more of what came to be called lifestyle. The tone became more personal and more chatty, generally less solemn.

Perkin described the change as going behind the old Four Ws – who, where, what and when – to Why and How and What Next?

That the shift was occurring just when, as it were, the baby boomers were “coming of age”, at a time when the Menzies generation was dipping out of politics, and at a time when a host of old verities – political, social and even sexual – were under attack, was no accident. Perkin recognised change and the need for change by newspapers, even if he was much of and more formed by the older generation than the new, and thus, at times, a little flustered by many of the changes happening.

The cohort of journalists who worked with, and were recruited by, Perkin are formidable, and reverent about the late, great leader who not only spurred their careers but established the “fact” of *The Age* becoming, under Perkin, one of the 10 greatest newspapers of the world. It thus seems impertinent to remark that *The Age* is, perhaps properly, very parochial, very Melbourne and very up itself. It was before Perkin; it was, in a different way, with Perkin; and has been, in different ways, after Perkin.

Editors, including colleagues and admirers of Perkin, and owners have since wrestled with what modern managements describe as a “culture problem”. Yet if the culture ought to be different because of time and serious change in newspaper

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economics, a good deal of modern *Age* culture comes out of the Perkin days.

Perkin would be appalled to think himself responsible for what *The Age* critics think a tendency to luvviness, soft leftism and pandering to the cafe scene. He was very unluvvy, essential Tory and “manly” rather than politically correct. He is closer to some of the better and tougher disclosure pieces by journalists such as Andrew Rule.

The real genius of Perkin was more in his personality and qualities of leadership than directly in his ideas, his writings (though he was an able wordsmith) or in his view of what newspapers were all about.

He was, as Ben Hills puts it, “a big, bluff, cyclone of a man”. He could inspire, and he could chide. He could roar and rant, but also sing and make people want to please him. He could also be unfair, and ungracious, but he was neither a worrier nor a grudge-holder.

His view of the limitations of editorship, including of the subordination of the editor's views to those of the owner, now seem somewhat quaint and deferential, but this, perhaps, might illustrate how much things have changed since his time.

Another way of regarding that change is to remember that *The Age* of Graham Perkin was published in “hot metal,” with technology that could have been readily understood by John Caxton. There was not a computer to be seen. Google had not even been imagined.

Many journalists have lived through the transition, even if they are by now at least in their 50s. Perkin, who would now be 81, could have survived it too, character and disposition intact, but not a few of his ideas and approaches would now be fundamentally different, addressed to our age.

Perhaps his legend is starting to dim, as the generation of journalists of his own vintage, or those of the one after whom he recruited, dominated and beguiled, go into retirement, and as his old newspaper seems increasingly becalmed.

The industry for which he worked honours his reputation with an annual award of the Graham Perkin Australian Journalist of the Year, but the very history of the sponsorship of that award, of great prestige, perhaps underlines how much the modern newspaper business, and its custodians, has become detached from the business or the mission of newspapers 35 years ago. The owners of *The Age* no longer have either financial or moral ownership of the award, and would not, it seems, give access to *The Age* records for this fine biography. I suspect the reason is not so much antipathy to the author or the task, but because no one knows where the records are. They don't seem to care much.

Jack Waterford, editor-at-large of *The Canberra Times*, was the Graham Perkin Journalist of the Year in 1985.

